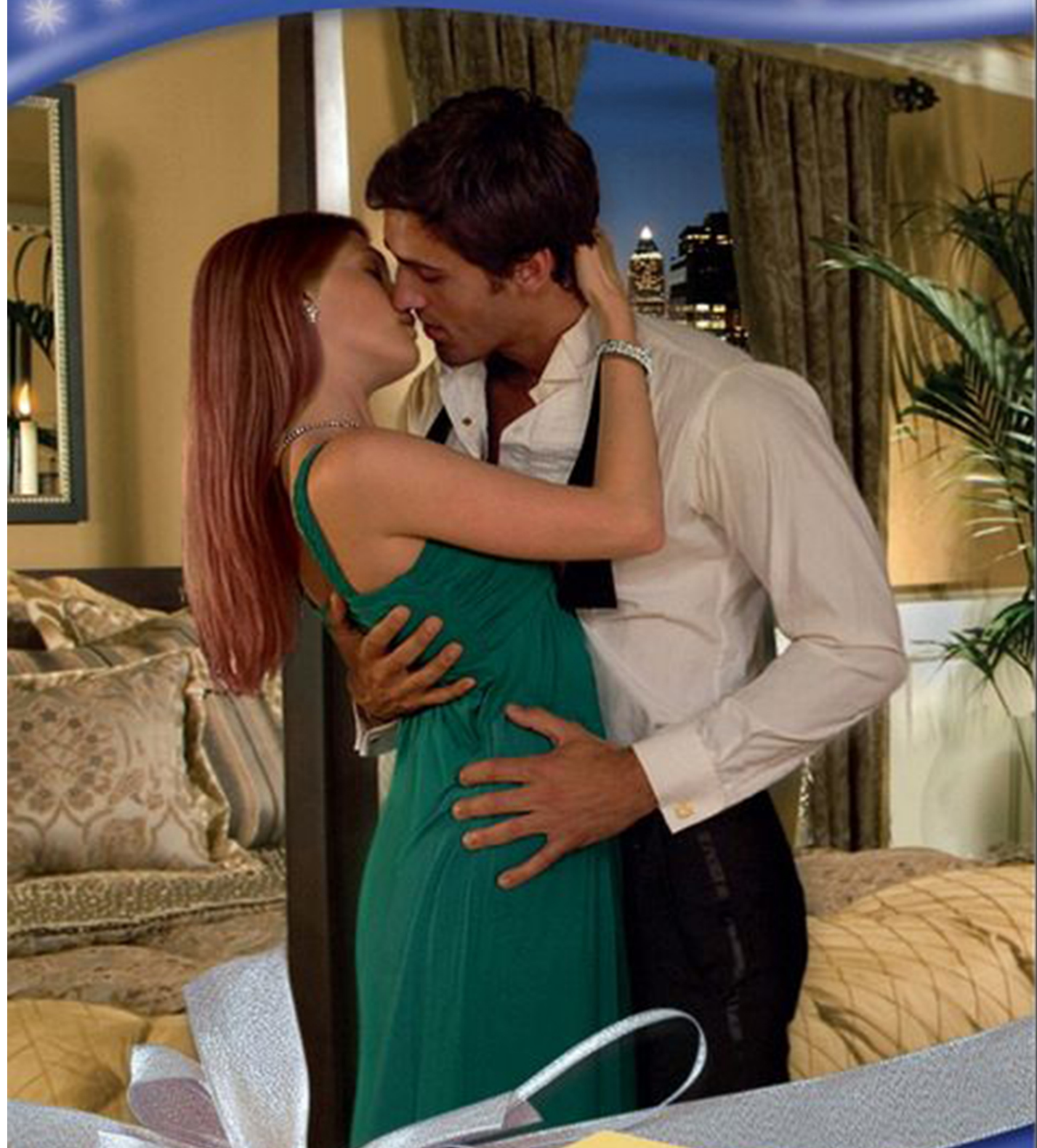


Marriage: For Business or Pleasure?

Nicola Marsh



MILLS & BOON®
MODERN
Heat™

Nicola Marsh

Marriage: For Business or Pleasure?

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Wedlocked: Rogue Billionaire, Contract Wife Brittany Lloyd faces the deal of a lifetime...with the ex who broke her heart – Italian tycoon Nick Mancini. Little does she know that her rebellious bad boy is now a multimillionaire... Nick can't believe his eyes! His red-haired wildcat is now a businesswoman, with designer suits to match. She needs his help...and he wants her. So he proposes a convenient marriage – strictly business, of course! But wickedly sexy Nick is planning a red-hot wedding night to remember: there's nothing on his agenda but pure pleasure!

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'Funny, witty and sensually enticing, TWO-WEEK MISTRESS by Nicola Marsh left me laughing at the antics of her characters while enjoying the sensuality of this novel.'

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'Don't what? Don't remember the past? Don't admire the gorgeous woman you've become?'

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'Or don't do something as crazy as this?'

Before she could blink, he hauled her into his arms and kissed her.

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Their lips clashed in a frantic, hungry union, a fusion of tongues, a meshing of desire that left her reeling.

She should have been immune to him by now. She should have pushed him away and laughed it off as a quick reacquainting peck between friends for old times' sake.

Should have, should have, should have... As she stood on tiptoes, leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his neck, her resolve to push him away melted just as it had ten years earlier, when she'd acted on all the bottled-up feelings she'd harboured for him for years.

Nicola Marsh has always had a passion for writing and reading. As a youngster, she devoured books when she should have been sleeping, and later kept a diary which could be an epic in itself! These days, when she's not enjoying life with her husband and sons in her home city of Melbourne, she's at her computer, creating the romances she loves, in her dream job. Visit Nicola's website at www.nicolamarsh.com for the latest news of her books.

Nicola also writes for Mills & Boon® Romance.

**Marriage:
For Business
Or Pleasure?**

BY

Nicola Marsh



www.millsandboon.co.uk

With thanks to Laurie Schnebly, for being a great teacher and for getting me to ask my characters *why?*

Chapter One

THE rented SUV swerved on the dusty, potholed driveway of the Mancini place and Brittany Lloyd bit back a curse.

Her average driving skills had little to do with the state of the road or the unwelcome memories assailing her and everything to do with the naked man bent over a thresher.

Semi-naked, technically, as her gaze riveted to the tantalising expanse of bronze, broad back glistening in the scorching Queensland sun.

The muscles shifted, bunched, slid, as he straightened and thrust hands into back pockets of ripped, faded denim, and as her greedy gaze strayed to his butt she suddenly wished she hadn't stayed away so long.

Ten years in London had been a sane choice, a safe choice considering what she'd been running from, but seeing this hot guy on her first morning home reinforced no place on earth bred guys like Jacaranda.

She should know.

She'd fallen in love with one, had given him her heart, her virginity and her loyalty.

More fool her.

As she righted the car and approached, the guy half turned and this time the SUV sheered straight off the driveway and almost straight into a ditch.

The engine stalled, spluttered, died, as her white-knuckled hands gripped the steering wheel, shock and joy and mindnumbing lust slamming into her, leaving her powerless to do anything but watch *him* approach.

Not a flicker of emotion crossed Nick Mancini's face as he reached the car, leaned tanned, toned forearms on the open window and gave her a casual nod.

'Hey, Britt. Long time no see.'

A casual greeting, without rancour or bitterness; then again, she'd been the one left to pick up the pieces when he'd ended it.

The greeting and his lack of emotion didn't do justice to what they'd shared, what they'd given up and she'd be damned if she showed him anything other than the same lackadaisical nonchalance despite her jack-hammering heart and clammy hands.

'Ten years, give or take.'

She wanted him to acknowledge the time they'd spent apart, wanted him to ask how she'd been, wanted him to finally explain why he'd opted out.

Instead, he shrugged, her gaze drifting to those bunching muscles of their own volition, all too aware of how he'd filled out in the last ten years.

He'd been lean rather than muscular back then and now...She wrenched her gaze away from his impressive pecs and focused on his face.

Nick the teenager had been good-looking, cocky and a rebel.

Nick the man was drop-dead gorgeous in a rough-around-the-edges way, still cocky and, if she read him right, still out to prove to the world he didn't give a damn.

By the smug grin lifting the corners of an all too kissable mouth, she'd read him just right.

'What brings you by?'

'Business.'

Something solid, tangible and guaranteed to keep errant emotions at bay no matter how much she wanted to ask him 'what the hell happened to us?'

She'd hoped to avoid him, had hoped to do business with his father but she'd been a fool. This place was in Nick's veins, of course he'd be here doing a hard day's work, working longer and tougher and harder than all his employees.

‘Business, huh?’

His caramelised-toffee eyes narrowed and she wished he’d stop staring at her as if she had a dirt smudge on her nose. He’d always had the ability to see into her soul and right now that was the last thing she needed.

She needed to stay focused. Her promotion depended on it.

‘I’ve got a proposition for you.’

He straightened, all six feet two of lean, hard muscle, and smiled that bad-boy smile she remembered so well, the smile that had haunted her for months when she’d first arrived in London, pining away for her first love#the same love who had turned down her offer to come with her, to build a life together.

‘I just bet you have, Red.’

He opened the car door and she stepped out, wishing she could hide her blush, knowing it would do nothing for her freckles and hating herself for caring so damn much.

‘No one’s called me that in years,’ she muttered, thankful her hair bore more coppery-blond streaks these days than the fire-engine red she’d grown up with.

‘That’s a shame.’

He reached out, twisted a stray strand around his finger.

‘They obviously don’t know you as well as I do.’

She pulled away quickly before she did something stupid, such as stand there and let him twist her around his finger and not just by the hair. ‘You don’t know me at all.’

Ignoring the glint in his eyes, which seemed a richer, deeper toffee than she remembered, she glanced at her watch, hoping he’d get the hint.

‘Is your father here? I need to discuss this with him.’

His eyes clouded, darkened, as pain twisted his mouth. ‘Papa died. Guess the news didn’t make it all the way to London.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, suddenly ashamed she hadn’t kept in touch with news from home.

Not that the thought hadn’t crossed her mind on occasion but then, he hadn’t been the reason she’d fled Jacaranda.

‘Are you really?’

She noticed the angry lines fanning from the corner of his mouth, the indentation between his brows, aging him beyond his twenty-eight years.

He’d never looked at her like this back then. Uh-uh. He might have been a rebel but he’d never been brooding or angry, far from it.

A decade earlier he’d only ever looked at her with adoration and desire, and for a brief moment she wished she could turn back time.

‘Of course I’m sorry. Everyone around here loved Papa.’

‘You’re right.’

Swiping a hand across his face, he erased the tenseness. ‘Though I’m surprised your old man didn’t say something. You can’t ride a Harley in this town without people lining the roads for a parade.’

His gaze flicked over her and she clenched her hands to stop from smoothing her Dolce and Gabbana suit. His eyes glowed with appreciation but she didn’t miss the slight compression of his lips, as if her favourite designer suit didn’t impress him one bit.

‘Despite your fancy new clothes, surely you remember how it is around here?’

He was trying to bait her, just as he always did and, damn him, she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing exactly how much she remembered, most of her memories centred on him.

‘I’ve been busy the last ten years so forgive me if taking a stroll down memory lane hasn’t been high on my list of priorities.’

‘Busy, huh?’

She expected him to ask about her career, wanted to show him how far she'd come, how far they could've made it as a couple if he'd accompanied her.

Instead, he stood there, a semi-naked god totally at ease with his surroundings, the sheen of sweat and dust adding to his rugged appeal rather than diminishing it.

Clamping down on the mental image to run her hands over that glorious bare chest, she cleared her throat.

'I work twenty-four-seven. Being a senior exec at London's top advertising company takes up most of my time.'

'What, no time for play?'

His teasing smile slammed into her, the familiarity of it making her gasp.

She didn't play, not any more. Her play days had stopped when she'd hightailed it out of this town and never looked back.

Work helped her forget...everything.

Work proved how far she'd come.

Work gave her the hard-fought independence she'd clawed her way to the top for, an independence that guaranteed she'd never have to look back.

Biting back a pithy retort, she ducked into the car and grabbed the Manila folder from the passenger seat.

'What I do in my spare time isn't your concern. I'm here on business.'

'Whatever this business proposition of yours is about, you'll be dealing with me.'

He fixed her with a probing stare, a potent stare that sent a ripple of unease through her.

'And just so you know, I'm nothing like my father. I drive a hard bargain.'

She almost banged her head on the door jamb as his silky voice slid over her. So much for a quick, clean presentation to Papa Mancini. The thought of doing business with Nick, let alone considering whatever bargain he might demand, had her flustered.

And she never got flustered, not any more. Some of the gang at work called her the Ice Princess behind her back and she liked it. Emotions got her nowhere and she'd learned to control her fiery temper along with the rest of her wayward emotions during the long, hard graft in the big city.

As she handed him the folder their fingertips touched and despite the length of time they'd been apart, her heart jackknifed. Wretched organ. She shouldn't feel anything where Nick was concerned, especially not this strange *déjà vu* that had her dreaming of stepping closer and running a palm down his bare chest to see if it felt half as good as she remembered.

She took a steadying breath, ignoring the host of unwelcome feelings this man resurrected.

'There's a lot we need to discuss. Why don't we head inside so you can put on some clothes and we can do business?'

She'd made a fatal error in judgement, knew it the second his lips kicked up into a sexy, familiar grin that never failed to take her breath away.

She shouldn't have mentioned his state of undress, shouldn't have drawn attention to it, and as if of their own volition her eyes drifted south, riveted to that muscular expanse of temptation less than two feet away.

He was so bronze, so broad, so breathtaking and when she finally dragged her gaze away her knees shook.

'You sure you want me to get dressed?'

Damn him, he'd called her on her faux pas. A gentleman would've ignored her slip-up. Then again, since when had Nick been a gentleman?

Jacaranda's answer to James Dean had had girls swooning and fathers reaching for shotguns since he'd hit puberty and she was a fool for expecting anything other than bluntness from the guy who'd once rocked her world.

'Nick, don't.'

She held up a hand, about as effective as a cockatoo trying to ward off a charging emu.

‘Don’t what?’

He stared at her hand as if he wanted to grab it and she quickly let it drop.

‘Don’t remember the past? Don’t admire the gorgeous woman you’ve become?’

The heat in his eyes scorched her, captivated her, held her spellbound.

‘Or don’t do something as crazy as this?’

Before she could blink, he hauled her into his arms and kissed her.

The kisses they’d shared as teenagers had been exploratory, tender and achingly poignant. Yet there was nothing remotely sweet or gentle about his mouth crushing hers now.

Their lips clashed in a frantic, hungry union, a fusion of tongues, a meshing of desire that left her reeling.

She should’ve been immune to him by now. She should’ve pushed him away and laughed it off as a quick reacquainting peck between friends for old times’ sake.

Should’ve, should’ve, should’ve, as she stood on tiptoes, leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his neck, hanging on as if her life depended on it.

As he softened the kiss, plying her with a skilled precision he’d never had as a young man, her resolve to push him away melted, just as it had ten years earlier when she’d acted on all the bottled-up feelings she’d harboured for him for years.

She’d idolised him all through the endless teenage years and he hadn’t glanced in her direction until she’d turned eighteen, thrown herself at him and been wonderfully surprised when the bad boy of Jacaranda had returned her interest. They’d gone steady for exactly six months before things had come to a head at home and she’d been forced to flee.

She hadn’t told Nick about her humiliation, wanting him to need her for who she was, not following her out of some warped sense of pity. So she’d tried to convince him to run away with her. And she’d failed. Not just failed, he’d pushed her away with a callousness that had shattered her heart.

So what the heck was she doing, kissing him like this?

As her common sense belatedly kicked in Nick broke the kiss, untangling her hands from behind his neck and setting them firmly at her side before glaring at her, as if she’d been the one to instigate their clinch in the first place.

‘Don’t expect me to be sorry for that,’ he said, running a hand through his dark wavy hair, sending it in all directions.

‘I gave up expecting anything from you a long time ago.’

She shrugged, aiming for nonchalant while her insides churned, and ran a finger along her bottom lip, wondering if it looked as bruised as it felt.

He’d kissed her...and she’d liked it!

So much for the Ice Princess. Looked as if her hardfought emotion-free veneer had melted the minute he’d liplocked her.

Nick muttered a curse and turned away from Brittany before he made another blunder and hauled her right back into his arms.

She felt good, better than he remembered and he had a damn good memory when it came to this woman.

She’d been the one for him.

And he’d sent her away.

He’d had no choice, but a day hadn’t gone by when he hadn’t replayed memories of the red-haired hellion who’d captured his heart without trying.

Here she was, just as incredible as he remembered.

And he was drawn to her as uncontrollably as ever. For the spell she’d cast over him had never been simply caused by her blue eyes, porcelain skin and waist-length auburn hair that begged a guy

to run his fingers through it. Nor did it have anything to do with her lithe body, with enough curves to turn a guy's head.

No, Brittany Lloyd possessed a more elusive charm, something that drew him surer than spicy tomato meatballs.

Class.

Something he'd craved his entire life, something he'd set about gaining the last few years but she'd been born with, and no amount of mixing in the right circles or business success could buy what she had, in spades.

'About this business proposition?' He turned back to face her, surprised by the vulnerability he glimpsed in her eyes. Hell, it was just a damn kiss, no big deal.

'All in there.'

She pointed at the Manila folder in his hands, stared at it as if it were a ticking bomb ready to detonate.

He weighed it in one hand, tapped it against his palm, gauging her reaction.

'Jeez, why don't you just open it?' She exploded, just as she used to in the good old days and he grinned.

'Good to see you've still got that fiery temper beneath all that polish.'

He looked her up and down, admiring the subtle changes to her appearance: the gold streaks in her now shoulder-length hair, the svelte body packed with more curves than a racetrack, the elegant wardrobe. As a teenager she'd been pretty. As a woman, she was stunning.

With a confident toss of that luscious hair, she fixed him with a newly acquired haughty grin.

'Actually, you're the only one who seems to bring it out in me. Now, back to business?'

Curiosity ate at him. To bring her back here, this precious business deal of hers had to be important. In that case, he wanted to be one hundred per cent appraised of the situation before he started discussing anything with her.

He raised an eyebrow, rattled the folder and gestured at his bare torso. 'I don't do business like this. Where are you staying?'

To his delight, she blushed, her gaze lingering on his chest a few seconds too long. 'The Phant-A-Sea in Noosa.'

Oh, this just got better and better.

'But I don't expect you to drive all that way just to meet me. We can do this here#'

'I was heading into town after I'd finished up here anyway. Why don't I meet you there around five? We can discuss this over drinks.'

'That won't be necessary#'

'But it will.'

He leaned closer, her awareness of him evident in the widening of her pupils, the tip of her tongue darting out to moisten her bottom lip, and his gut clenched with how badly he still wanted her.

Maybe he should tell her the truth now and be done with it.

But then, where was the fun in that?

'Give me some time to clean up, take a look at your proposal and we can discuss it over a Shirley Temple.'

He scored another direct hit with reference to her favourite drink back then, her lips compressing into an unimpressed line.

'This isn't some trip down memory lane. This is business.'

His glance strayed to her lips, lush and pouting, before sweeping back to her eyes, registering the shock of arousal that made a mockery of their *business*.

'So you keep saying. Business. Ri-i-ight.'

To his surprise, she laughed. 'You haven't changed a bit. Still the charmer.'

She was wrong, dead wrong.

He'd changed and, come five o'clock, she'd discover exactly how much.

Propping on the bonnet, he crossed his ankles. 'Is it working?'

'Nope, I'm immune to rebel charmers these days.'

'Pity.'

His glance slid over her, taking in every delicious curve, earning another blush.

'How long are you in town for?'

'For as long as it takes.'

She'd gone cold again. Retreating back into the business at hand...

His glance swept the distant cane fields he loved so much, encompassing the sugar cane that was as much a part of him as his Italian heritage, wondering what she'd make of him once she discovered *his* real business these days.

Would she be impressed? Probably, though in all fairness what he did or where he came from had never been an issue with her.

They'd been friends before lovers in the old days, travelling on the same bus to school every day even though she'd attended the private grammar school and he'd gone to the local high school.

She'd pretended to ignore him at first so he'd done his best to rile her with constant taunts about everything from her shiny shoes to her long red pigtails. And when her fiery temper had sparked her into retaliating by ramming his bike with hers, their friendship had been cemented.

She'd never given a damn about the gaping hole in their social circles: the richest girl in the district hooking up with the Italian working-class farm boy.

But other people had. He'd heard the whispers, the innuendos, about her slumming it with him before she got married to a suitable man.

He'd let it taint what they had, had ended it for good before things got out of control. But he'd never forgotten how dating her had made him feel. Simply, he'd wanted to be a better man for her.

All ancient history, and as he refocused he knew that impulsive kiss was a stupid move.

He didn't do impulsive any more. Every decision he made was carefully weighed, evaluated and executed with the utmost precision. He wasn't at the top of his game these days for nothing.

Pushing off the car, he tapped the bonnet.

'You better get going. Give me a chance to finish up here and meet you later.'

'Fine.'

He opened the car door for her and watched as she buckled up. Déjà vu hit and an irresistible impulse came over him in spite of all the resolutions he'd just made. He leaned in quickly through the open window.

'Hey, Red?'

'Yeah?'

He grinned and tweaked her nose just as he used to. 'You kiss even better than I remember.'

Before she could respond, he straightened, chuckling at the instant indignation sparking her beautiful eyes as he strode towards the farmhouse.

Chapter Two

BRITTANY pressed her hands to her flushed cheeks as Nick strode away.

The man was a menace.

In less than ten minutes he'd managed to unbalance her, unhinge her and undermine her.

As for that kiss...she thunked her head on the steering wheel, twice, for good measure.

Not only had she stood there and let him do it, she'd responded! Like a woman who hadn't been kissed in a very long time.

Which in all honesty was probably true considering she'd been so focused on the managing director position coming up for grabs she hadn't dated in yonks.

But that didn't excuse her eager response, nor did the total and utter meltdown she'd experienced the second his lips had touched hers.

'Ice Princess my butt,' she muttered, releasing the brake and sending gravel flying before heading back down the drive.

Sneaking a peek in the rear-vision mirror, she wasn't surprised to see Nick staring over his shoulder with a grin as wide as the Sydney Harbour Bridge plastered across his smug face.

She clamped her lips shut on a host of expletives and headed for the main highway.

In a way, she was glad he'd suggested they meet at her hotel to discuss her proposal. She'd be much better prepared to face him again in the cool elegance of the Phant-A-Sea's front bar than inside the cosy farmhouse that held a host of memories.

Wonderful, heartfelt memories of sitting across from him at the handmade wooden dining table, tearing into steaming *ciabatta* hot from the oven, dipping it into olive oil and balsamic vinegar, licking the drips off each other's fingers...

Cuddling up on the worn chintz sofa, watching old black and white Laurel and Hardy movies and laughing themselves silly.

Clearing the family room of its mismatched lounge chairs and scarred coffee table stacked with newspapers and magazines so they could dance body to body to their favourite crooning country singer.

The memories were so real, so poignant that her eyes misted over and she blinked, caught up in the magic of the past when she should be focused on the future.

Her future as Managing Director of Sell depended on it.

Come five o'clock, she'd make sure Nick Mancini with his sexy smile and flashing dimples and hot body knew exactly the type of businesswoman he was dealing with.

Brittany sipped at her sugar-cane juice as she glanced around the Phant-A-Sea's bar.

She'd stayed in some gorgeous hotels around the world but this one was something else. From its sandstone-tiled entrance to its pristine whitewashed exterior, from its cascading waterfalls to the stunning umbrella-shaped poincianas lush with flamboyant crimson flowers, it beckoned a weary traveller to come in and stay awhile.

As for her beautiful room with its king-size bed and six-hundred-thread-count sheets, double shower, Jacuzzi and locally made lavender toiletries, she could happily stay there for ever.

But this wasn't a pleasure trip, far from it.

She needed to seal this deal with Nick. It would give her confidence an added boost to face the other nemesis this journey: her father.

They hadn't spoken in ten years.

But she was here, he now lived in an exclusive special accommodation for the elderly and, as she wouldn't be back, she needed to put the past to rest, say a proper goodbye this time.

She'd taken up yoga in London, was a convert to karma, and wanted to ensure hers was good rather than being dogged the rest of her life for not doing the right thing when she had the opportunity.

Swirling the lime wedge in her juice around and around, she mulled over her dad's anger, his need to control, his escalating abuse before she'd left.

He'd always been domineering but when she'd turned eighteen he'd gone into overdrive. She'd escaped, hadn't looked back, but there wasn't a day went by when she hadn't wondered how different her life would've been if she'd stuck around.

Would she and Nick have married? Would they have a brood of gorgeous, curly dark-haired, dimpled kids?

Swallowing the lump of regret clogging her throat, she glanced up, and the lump expanded to Ayers Rock proportions.

Farm-boy Nick in faded, torn denim and sweat-glistening chest was hot.

Executive Nick in an ebony pinstriped designer suit, crisp white shirt accentuating his tan and a silk amethyst tie was something else entirely.

She froze as he strode towards her, all long legs and designer outfit and dimpled smile.

'Hope you haven't been waiting long.'

He ducked his head to plant a quick kiss on her cheek and her senses reeled as she caught the faintest whiff of his familiar woody deodorant mingled with the sweetness of harvested cane.

Memories slammed into her: snuggling in the crook of his arm under *their* jacaranda tree, lying on top of him along the river bank, nuzzling his neck as they made love...She gulped a lungful of air, several, to ease her breathlessness.

His scent was so evocative, so rich in memories she struggled to remember what he'd just asked her.

Casting a curious glance her way, he sat opposite, his knees in close proximity to hers, and she surreptitiously sidled back to avoid accidental contact.

That was all she needed. As if she hadn't made enough of a fool of herself already.

'What do you think of the hotel?'

She managed to unglue her tongue from the roof of her mouth, take a quick sip of her juice before answering. 'It's gorgeous. There was nothing like it ten years ago.'

His proud grin baffled her as much as seeing him in a suit. 'Phant-A-Sea was built five years ago. Business is booming.'

Taking in the subtle lighting, the understated elegance, she nodded.

'I'm not surprised. I've travelled extensively for business the last six years or so, but haven't stayed in anything quite like this before.'

The mention of business cleared the sensual fog that had enveloped her the moment he'd strutted into the bar, and she glanced at his empty hands.

'Where's my proposal? Did you take a look at it?'

He shook his head, gestured to a waiter who scurried over as if the prime minister had beckoned.

'I prefer to hear this pitch from you first, then go over the details later.'

'Is that why you're in a suit?' she blurted, wishing she hadn't asked when his gaze raked over her own change of clothes. The dove-grey skirt suit was another favourite, never failed to give her a confidence boost and with Nick's steamy stare sliding over her she needed every ounce of confidence she could get.

Before he could respond, the waiter said, 'The usual, Mr Mancini?'

'Yes, thanks, Kyoshi.'

Confused, she flicked her gaze between the two. Nick hadn't as much as glanced at the waiter's name tag, and along with 'the usual' it was obvious he frequented this place.

Strange, considering thriving, cosmopolitan Noosa was a good ninety-minute drive from the plantation and she hadn't pegged Nick for the bar-hopping type.

Then again, she'd been away a decade, people changed, so what did she know?

'You like?'

He glanced down at his suit, leaving her no option but to do the same, and she gulped at the way his chest filled out the shirt, how the fine material of the suit jacket hugged his shoulders.

‘I’ve never seen you in one.’

His eyes glittered with a satisfaction she didn’t understand as he pinned her with a stare that had her squirming.

‘Times change.’

She gripped her glass so tight she wouldn’t have been at all surprised if it cracked and she forced her hand to relax and place it on the table by her elbow.

‘They do. So let’s get down to business.’

Leaning back, he placed an outstretched arm on the back of his chair, the simple action pulling his shirt taut across the muscular chest she’d seen in all its glory earlier that day and she instantly wished for a drink refill to cool her down.

‘I have to say I’m intrigued. This business must be pretty damn special to drag you back here from the bright lights of London.’

Special? How could she begin to explain to him what this promotion meant? The long hours she’d put in over the years? The overnight jaunts to godforsaken places, going the extra yards to secure information, ensuring her pitches were bigger and better than everyone else’s? The endless drive to prove her independence in every way that counted?

Nick wouldn’t get it.

Papa Mancini had doted on him, not having a mum had bonded them like nothing else. Wish she could’ve said the same for her ‘family’.

‘I’ll give you the short version.’

She leaned forward, clasped her hands in her lap and prepared to give the pitch of her life.

Securing the use of the Mancini plantation was paramount to her plans and would assure her that promotion. The current MD had virtually said so. Then why the nagging doubt convincing Nick wouldn’t be as easy as she’d hoped?

‘I work for Sell, London’s biggest advertising company. We’re doing a worldwide campaign for the sugar industry, driven by the mega-wealthy plantation owners in the States.’

A flicker of interest lit his eyes and she continued. ‘I’ll be honest with you, Nick. There’s a big promotion in this for me, a huge one. If I nail this, I’m the new managing director.’

His eyebrows shot up. ‘That’s some title.’

Picking up the boutique beer the waiter had discreetly placed on the table in front of him, he took a healthy slug.

‘So where do I fit into all this?’

She’d got this far. Taking a deep breath, she went for broke.

‘Your place is the oldest sugar-cane plantation in Australia. If I could have exclusive access to it, shoot footage, use some of the history, I’m pretty sure the promotion is mine. That’s it in a nutshell.’

She didn’t like his silence, his controlled posture. She’d expected some kind of reaction, not this tense quiet that left her on edge and wondering what was going on behind those deep dark eyes.

‘I’ve set out facts and figures in the written proposal. How much the company’s willing to pay to use the farm, how many hours it will involve, that kind of thing.’

Her voice had taken on a fake, bubbly edge, as if she was trying too hard, and she eventually fell silent, waiting for him to say something.

When he didn’t, she blurted, ‘Well, what do you think?’

Something shifted in his eyes, a shrewdness she’d never seen before.

‘All sounds very feasible.’

Elation swept through her, quickly tempered when he leaned forward and shook his head.

‘There’s just one problem. I’m about to sell the farm.’

‘Sell it? But where will you live? Where will you work?’

His condescending grin sent a chill of foreboding through her.

‘You still see me as some hick bumpkin farm boy, don’t you?’

She fought a rising blush and lost. ‘Of course not. I just meant that place has been in your family for generations. I don’t get why you’d sell now.’

He gestured all around him. ‘Because my place is here now.’

Confusion creased her brow as she followed his hand. His designer suit, his patronising smile, his cryptic comments, made her feel as if she was left out of some in-joke and the punchline was on her.

‘You belong here?’

She shook her head, knowing if there was one place a guy like Nick belonged, it wasn’t in this ultra-elegant hotel.

He’d always loved the farm, had been proud of his family’s heritage, so what had changed? The Nick she’d known and loved thrived under the harsh Queensland sun, harvesting billets of sugar cane, getting his hands dirty with the machinery he’d loved tinkering with, riding down the highway on his beat-up Harley with the wind in his hair and the devil at his back.

He frowned, his shoulders rigid as he sat back. ‘You find that so hard to believe?’

‘It’s just not you.’

‘It is now,’ he snapped, his control slipping as anger flashed like fire from those dark eyes she’d lost herself in too many times to count.

‘Just because we had a teenage fling, don’t presume you know me.’

That hurt, more than she could’ve thought possible after all this time.

‘It was more than that and you know it.’

Understanding warred with passion before he blinked, obliterating the slightest sign he acknowledged what she’d said as true.

‘Irrelevant to our business now.’

He glanced at his watch and stood up. ‘Sorry, I have to cut this meeting short. I’ve got an interview scheduled.’

‘You want to work here?’

He shrugged, the corners of his mouth twitching.

‘I already do.’

‘What?’

Thankfully, some of her old Ice Princess skills kicked in and prevented her jaw from hitting the floor.

‘Though technically, that’s not entirely right.’

Scanning his face, looking for a clue to what this was all about, she came up lacking.

‘I don’t understand.’

As he nodded to someone over her shoulder and held up a finger to indicate a minute he leaned down, his breath fanning her ear and sending ripples of heat through her. ‘I don’t just work here, I own the place.’

This time, as he strode away, she was sure her jaw did hit the floor.

Nick stared out of his office window on the fifth floor of the Phant-A-Sea, blind to the exquisite view of Noosa beach stretching into national park to the far right.

He’d loved this view when he’d first built the hotel, experienced a sense of immense satisfaction every time he’d sat behind this desk and stared out of the window.

Not today.

Today, whether his eyes were open or shut, all he could see was Britt’s brilliant blue eyes wide with shock as he dropped his bombshell.

He’d expected to feel powerful, proud, even smug, when he told her the truth. So why the let-down, as if he should’ve come clean from the start?

What kind of game was he playing anyway? He didn't have time for them, not these days. On the verge of opening the fifth Phant-A-Sea hotel on Pink Sand Beach in the Bahamas and trying to build clientele here, he didn't have enough hours in the day.

That was why he was selling the farm. At least, that was his excuse and he was sticking to it.

He loved that place, had loved it from the first time Papa handed him a piece of sugar cane to gnaw on as a toddler, and it was as much a part of him as his love of the sea.

But that was part of the problem.

No one around these parts took him seriously as long as he was still connected to it, as long as every time they saw him they saw the rebel farm boy he used to be.

While the Phant-A-Sea was doing big business, he wanted to expand, diversify, take his business to the next level and to do so he needed investors.

If he didn't have the respect and backing of local investors because of his heritage, what hope did he have with the overseas moneymen?

Throw in the constant rumours about his reputation, labelling him as some Casanova playboy who couldn't possibly be serious about business while playing the field, and he was facing an uphill battle.

Not that it daunted him. He'd fought his way to where he was today, had earned an MBA at night while slogging on the farm trying to make a go of it during the days, had worked damn hard to ensure a thriving cane plantation and the biggest, brightest hotel Noosa had seen in years.

He'd fight now too, would show the investors he wasn't some cocky upstart who'd lucked into the hotel business.

Yet the fact he had to part with a piece of his history, a piece of his soul, to prove himself cut deep.

There had to be something else he could do...

Suddenly, he sat bolt upright, a ludicrous, crazy, just plain loco idea shimmering at the edge of his consciousness.

He shoved it away, ignored it.

It didn't bear thinking about, wasn't worth entertaining for one second.

Yet the more he tried to condemn the idea, the harder it came, gnawing at him, demanding to be recognised as a valid solution to his problem.

Slamming his silver ballpoint onto the desk, he pushed away and strode to the window, planting his palms on the sill and dropping his head forward until it hit the glass with a dull thud.

Questo è pazzia.

Papa had used the phrase often and it now echoed in his head, 'this is crazy, this is crazy', making him feel the same way when he'd been caught sneaking a smoke at ten, stealing a kiss from a worker's wife at twelve and losing his virginity to a farmhand's sister at fourteen.

Hell, there'd be no way he'd be contemplating something as crazy as this if Papa were alive. The old man had been his conscience in more ways than one.

But Papa wasn't around any more and he owed it to him, to himself, to make the Mancini name one to be reckoned with, to bring recognition for a lifetime's hard work.

Contraccambio. Quid pro quo.

Britt wanted something from him, he wanted something in return.

But would she go for his proposal?

A simple business proposition, something she understood only too well if she'd travelled all this way for the sake of a promotion.

Yet what he had in mind was so...so...

Brilliant.

The businessman in him couldn't fault his proposition, whereas the carefree guy who'd fallen for a red-headed vixen the second he'd first laid eyes on her all those years ago knew that executing his plan wouldn't be simple at all.

Chapter Three

BRITTANY gritted her teeth and rapped at Nick's door.
She'd been summoned.

Of all the nerve...if her promotion weren't so important she would've told him exactly where he could shove his summons.

But the promotion was all that mattered, why she was here, determined to keep a smile on her face and a lid on her curiosity no matter how much she wanted to know how Nick the bad boy had become Nick the billionaire.

The way he'd toyed with her, had dropped the information he was now a hotelier, rankled too, as if it had been one big game to him.

Well, screw him. And his four world-class hotels.

At least she'd come to this meeting prepared. After he'd dropped his little bombshell in the hotel bar she'd hightailed it back to her room and done a quick Internet search on the Phant-A-Sea chain.

What she'd discovered had blown her away.

Nick's hotels were luxury all the way, five-star elegance and beyond. Their breathtaking bedrooms were a signature feature, but all the reviews out there agreed that these classy hotels delivered on their promise#they were a fantasy experience all the way.

She'd been intrigued by the mention of a Caesar room, a Casino Royale room and a Cinderella room, wishing there were pictures to go with the tempting descriptions.

Then again, if she played her cards right, maybe she'd get a first hand look at some of the rooms?

The thought of stepping inside the Jungle Safari room with Nick acting as tour guide brought a scorching blush to her cheeks and she pressed her hands against them, desperately trying to cool them before he opened the door and caught her on the back foot again.

The door swung open and she immediately squared her shoulders, ready for battle.

She'd left home at eighteen, travelled to the other side of the world, lived in a strange city and made a success of her life without using a penny of her father's money.

Making this deal happen with Nick should be a walk in Hyde Park, regardless of the games he seemed determined to play.

'Right on time.'

He stepped aside and gestured her into the room, a huge suite converted into an office, complete with monstrous mahogany desk, leather director's chair and a matching black leather lounge suite designed to make whoever set foot in the giant room at home.

She ignored the comfy-looking sofa and settled for the solitary chair opposite his desk, her back ramrod straight. She wasn't here to get cosy and comfortable, she was here to seal this deal.

Clasping her hands in her lap, she fixed him with a businesslike stare.

'Let's get down to it, shall we? You know what I want. You've had time to study the figures in my presentation. What's your answer?'

To her chagrin he grinned, a wide, self-assured grin of a fat cat toying with a baby mouse.

'It's killing you, isn't it?'

In an instant she knew what he was referring to. He used to tease her about being a nosy busybody all the time, so he'd know how much his bombshell was burning her up with curiosity.

As if she'd give him the satisfaction of knowing it.

Keeping her expression carefully blank, she shrugged. 'You're not the only one who's changed. What you've done in the last ten years, why you chose not to tell me the truth out at the farm, that's your business.'

She leaned forward, tapped her presentation folder sitting in prime position in the middle of his desk.

‘And this is mine, so let’s cut to the chase. Are you willing to make this deal or not?’

‘That depends on you.’

He sat, leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head, stretching the fine cotton of his business shirt tight against his chest, drawing her attention, tempting her to stare, to linger, to envision what he looked like without it.

Not that she had to try too hard. She’d had an up close and personal look earlier that day and a glimpse of that entire bronze, hard chest was burned into her memory bank no matter how many times she hit the mental delete button.

She shook her head to clear it. ‘Of course I want this deal to happen. It’s why I’m here.’

The only reason I’m here, hung unsaid between them as she matched his steady stare, not blinking, not moving a muscle.

To her surprise he broke the deadlock first by reaching for the folder and pushing it towards her with one finger.

‘I’m not interested in your money.’

That got her attention.

‘Pardon?’

He tapped the folder. ‘What your company’s offering in here, the remuneration for use of the farm. I’m not interested.’

Her hopes sank faster than her first attempt at rowing on the Thames as she struggled to come up with a new twist on her pitch, something, anything, to convince him to agree to this deal.

‘But I do have something else in mind.’

She didn’t like the hint of subterfuge in his smoother-than-caramel tone, the gleam of devilry in his toffee eyes.

‘Like what?’

He pushed away from the desk, came around and squatted down next to her, way too close, way too overpowering, way too much.

‘I’ll agree to your precious deal if you agree to mine.’

His silky smooth tone sent a shiver of dread creeping across the nape of her neck, for she had no doubt whatever demands he made she’d be forced to agree.

Hanging onto her cool by a thread, she tossed her hair over her right shoulder and fixed him with her best intimidating glare.

‘Go on, then. State your terms.’

Placing a finger under her chin, he tipped it up, his slight touch sending unexpected heat spiralling through her and slashing a serious hole in her concentration.

‘It’s quite simple. I hold onto the farm for now, give you complete access for however long you need it, on one condition.’

She leaned forward, drawn towards him against her will, his finger less of a guide than her own stupid attraction when it came to this man.

‘Spit it out.’

With his lips a hair’s breadth from hers, he murmured, ‘You become my wife.’

With their lips so close, so tantalisingly close, and the ever-present heat shimmering between them like an invisible thread binding them despite time apart, it took a few seconds for his words to penetrate.

When they did, she jerked back, shock rendering her speechless.

Her mouth opened, closed, as her mind spun with confusion. She could’ve sworn he’d just proposed...

‘You heard me.’

He straightened, and while half of her wanted to clobber him for the ludicrous statement he’d just made, the other half irrationally missed his proximity.

He perched on the desk, towering over her.

‘Marry me. That’s my condition.’

‘Are you out of your mind?’

She leaped to her feet, stood toe to toe with him. ‘What sort of stupid condition is that? Like I’d ever marry you, like I’d agree to#’

‘The idea didn’t seem so distasteful ten years ago. As I recall, you used to love talking about marrying me.’

Heat flooded her cheeks and she clenched her hands to stop from reaching out and strangling him.

‘Come off it, I was young and stupid then.’

‘So you’re old and wise now?’

His mouth twitched and the itch to strangle him intensified tenfold.

‘In that case, you’ll see how much sense this makes.’

‘None of this makes sense!’

Her temper, which she’d learned to control over the years, exploded like a tinder-dry bush touched by a match. ‘You’re insane! You’ve been playing some warped game ever since I saw you this morning and I have no idea why. You pretend you’re still working on the farm, you hide your new job from me, then you come out with this ridiculous proposal.’

She paused, dragged in several breaths and released her hands before her nails sliced into her palms.

‘I came to you in good faith, to try and put a simple deal forward, and what do I get in return? A bunch of patooey!’

‘Patooy?’

This time, his mouth creased into a wide grin and she almost committed murder on the spot.

‘Is that London speak for bullsh#’

‘It sure is and you’re full of it.’

Hands on hips, she leaned into him, shoving her face in his.

‘When did you become such a jerk, Mancini?’

While Nick’s smile didn’t slip, his cool composure cracked a little. The woman he once loved thought he was a jerk and while it shouldn’t matter, it did.

But he wouldn’t dwell on that. The old Britt was still there, under the fancy business suit and blonde-streaked hair; she’d just shown him with that magnificent temper bursting like a tropical thunderstorm.

The old Britt wouldn’t agree to his proposal, while the career-focused woman in sky-high stilettos and a designer suit would if he presented it the right way.

‘Consider this a business transaction, a win-win situation for us both. Nothing more, nothing less.’

He saw a flicker of interest flash across her face at his mention of business before her temper flared again.

‘You’re crazy! Stark raving mad!’

She raked her hands through her immaculately blow-dried hair, sending it into the frizz he remembered. ‘What’s that expression Papa used to say? *Sei pazzo*, you’re crazy, that’s what you are.’

His heart griped as it always did at the mention of his father.

‘You remember that?’

All the fight drained out of her and she slumped back into the chair, deliciously defeated, and he yearned to sweep her into his arms and show her this deal was the perfect solution for them both.

Raising wide blue eyes to stare at him in capitulation, she nodded.

‘I remember a lot of things.’

He waited, captured by the deepening blue, by the emotions shifting like jacaranda blossoms floating on a spring breeze.

He didn't want to feel, certainly didn't want to feel like this, damn it, but when she looked at him with remembrance clouding her eyes and a softening around her lush mouth all he could think about was how incredible she used to feel in his arms.

He didn't want to rehash the past, to taint this deal with emotion, but he couldn't resist asking, 'What do you remember?'

Her tongue darted out to moisten her bottom lip, a simple, unaffected gesture that shot straight to his groin, nothing unaffected about his visceral reaction.

'Like how we used to lie under that jacaranda tree down by the creek and stare up at the clouds and see who could make the craziest shape.'

Her mouth softened some more and he stiffened, shocked by how much he wanted to ravage those lips.

'Like the times you took me into Noosa on the back of your Harley and how we'd choose to picnic down in Noosaville rather than mix with the hobknobs on Hasting Street.'

She gave up moistening her bottom lip in favour of worrying it and he clamped down on a groan.

'Like how you'd look at me with stars in your eyes, as if I was the only woman for you.'

She didn't glance away as he expected her to, didn't push him away when he swept her into his arms and crushed his mouth on hers.

She tasted of lime and sugar, tart and sweet, and he knew she'd been guzzling sugar-cane juice as she used to. She'd been addicted to the stuff back then, just as he'd been addicted to her.

He could never get enough of her and it looked as if nothing had changed as his tongue swept into her mouth, taunting, challenging, savouring her passionate response as she clung to him, her fingers tangling in his buttons as he pulled her flush against him.

This deal was supposed to be purely business but as their kiss deepened to the point of no return he knew he was kidding himself.

What he felt around Britt, how his blood fired when she was in his arms, had nothing to do with business and everything to do with earth-shattering pleasure.

The moment Nick eased off the pressure to kiss his way across her cheek, Brittany froze.

This was where taking a trip down memory lane got her: in the arms of the devil himself.

He'd proposed the most ludicrous deal she'd ever heard in her life and what had she done?

Let him kiss her. Again.

Had responded to him. Again.

She didn't get this, any of it. Business was business but what he'd proposed was...was...well, it was just plain nuts.

Marriage to Nick Mancini in exchange for her dream?

She couldn't entertain the thought for a second, let alone acknowledge the tiny voice that reminded her she'd do anything to achieve her goal.

Well, marriage to Nick didn't fall into the category of anything. It fell into the category of certifiable lunacy.

He set her away from him, his glib smile at odds with the surprising tenderness in his eyes.

'Well, I guess that proves being my wife wouldn't be all bad.'

She summoned her temper, needing it to anchor her threadbare control, that wavered the moment he mentioned the physical benefits to a possible marriage.

'If you think I'd ever agree to your proposal, you're mad.'

He shrugged, stepped away.

'Hey, I'm not the one who wants a promotion. Ball's in your court, Red.'

She hated hearing the nickname only he had ever called her trip from his tongue with familiarity. She hated the blunt truth of his casual statement even more.

She did need this promotion. It was the only way to get closure on a past she'd rather forget.

Studying him through narrowed eyes, she said, 'Not that I'd contemplate your crazy scheme for one second, but if I did, what's in it for you?'

Something furtive, mysterious, shifted behind his steady stare before he blinked, eradicating the enigmatic emotion in an instant.

'It's time I married.'

'Why?'

Why now? Why me? was what she really wanted to ask, but she clamped down on the urge to blurt her questions.

Why he was doing this? Why would he suggest something so outlandish when they shared nothing these days but a residual attraction based on old times' sake?

He shrugged and she hated his nonchalance in the face of something so important. She would've given everything she owned to be married to him once and now he'd reduced it to a cold, calculating business proposition that hurt way more than it should.

'I'm expanding the business, building more hotels in key cities around the world, but overseas investors won't take me seriously because of my age. They see a young, wealthy single guy and immediately think I'm a playboy dabbling in business for fun.'

He rolled his shoulders, tilted his head from side to side to stretch his neck and she stifled the urge to massage it as she used to. He'd always had tense muscles after a hard day's farm work, had relaxed under her soothing hands.

Her palms tingled with the urge to reach out, stroke his tension away. So she balled her hands into fists and swallowed the unexpected lump in her throat. Damn memories.

He rubbed the back of his neck absent-mindedly, oblivious to her irrational craving to do the same. 'Marriage will give me respectability in their eyes, solidify my entry into wider business circles and open up a whole new investment pool.'

She stared at him, so cool, so confident, admiring the powerful businessman he'd become, lamenting the loss of the bad boy who hadn't given a toss what people thought of him.

'That's it?'

He nodded, showed her his hands palm up as if he wasn't hiding anything.

'That's it.'

'Why me?'

It had been bugging her since he'd first laid out his outlandish proposal, why a guy like him with charm to burn would choose her for his crazy scheme. 'Surely the legendary Nick Mancini would have a bevy of babes around here eager to tie you down?'

His eyes glittered as she inwardly cursed her choice of words and rushed on. 'I mean, why me in particular? What have I got to offer?'

'Do you really want me to answer that?'

Her breath hitched at the clear intent in his loaded stare and she took a step back. 'Yes.'

To her relief, he shrugged, the heat fading from his eyes. 'You're a motivated businesswoman. You wouldn't have flown halfway around the world to make your pitch the best if you weren't. And I need that. Someone with a clear vision in mind, a business goal.'

He pinned her with a firm glare. 'Someone who won't cloud the issue with emotion, which is exactly what would happen if I chose a local wife.'

His hand wavered between them. 'This marriage between us is a straightforward business proposal, a win-win for us both. What do you think?'

She thought he was mad, but most of all she thought she was a fool for wishing his preposterous proposal held even the slightest hint of emotion she still meant something to him other than as a means to gaining *respectability*.

Summoning what was left of her dignity, she nodded. 'I'll get back to you.'

‘You do that.’

His confident grin grated. He knew she was buying time to contemplate his marital equivalent of a pie chart.

With her mind spinning, she stalked across the room, head held high, his soft, taunting chuckles following her out of the door.

Chapter Four

‘SO, THE prodigal daughter returns.’

From the moment Brittany knew she’d be returning home she’d been bracing for this confrontation.

However, no matter that she told herself it was ridiculous, no amount of deep breathing, or steeling her nerves, or trying to remember how far in the past it all was could calm her in any way as she faced her father for the first time in ten years. She could feel her hands shaking.

She paused at the entrance to his apartment, one of the few in the exclusive Jacaranda special accommodation home for the elderly.

Not that Darby Lloyd would ever admit to his seventy-two years. He’d had work done on his face several times, had hair plugs to arrest a threatening bald patch and continued to wear designer clothes better suited to a man half his age.

But pots of money or cosmetic work or fancy clothes couldn’t buy health and that was one thing he didn’t have these days.

Five years ago, he’d tried to guilt her into quitting her job and returning to look after him as he grew older and more bitter. He’d nearly succeeded. However, some deep part of her had resisted his pressure. He had been a cruel tyrant who’d controlled her life until she’d come into a small inheritance from her mum when she’d turned eighteen and fled as far from him as she could get. She simply couldn’t go back to the hell she’d left behind.

In her heart, she desperately wanted to be anywhere but in front of the man who would have ruined her life if she’d let him, but her pride wouldn’t let her pay a visit to her hometown and not see him. She was older and stronger#surely she could stand to face him now? She had come here today to prove to herself she’d finally set the past to rest. Working harder, longer, than everyone else might keep the memory demons at bay, but she knew if she stopped, slowed down her frenetic pace, the old fears could come crowding back to fling her right back to the dim, dark place ten years earlier.

And she’d be damned if she let that happen. In a way, she should thank dear old Dad for shaping her into the woman she was today: strong, capable and successful, everything he’d said she’d never be.

But there was more to this visit and she knew it, no matter all her self talk to the contrary.

She was here because of hope.

Hope that he might have changed. Hope that after all this time they might actually have a shot at some semblance of a normal father-daughter relationship.

And if not? Well, she was different now: a woman on top of her career, a woman who depended on no one, a woman a far cry from the victim she’d once been.

She’d vowed back then never to be helpless again, had instigated huge steps to eradicate the confusion and fear, yet as she stood on the threshold to this room trepidation tripped across her skin as the anxiety she’d fought to conquer over the last decade clawed at her belly.

‘How are you, Dad?’

‘Much the same.’

He limped towards her, waving his cane at a seat for her. ‘No thanks to you.’

Taking several deep breaths, she perched on the edge of the chair, willing the dread to subside, hating the vulnerability being this close to him elicited.

She needed to do this, needed to see if there was the slightest chance for them before she returned to London.

‘You look good.’

He grunted in response, wouldn’t meet her gaze, his surly expression putting a serious dent in her hopes for some kind of reconciliation.

‘This place is lovely.’

Another monosyllabic grunt as his frown deepened and her patience wore a little thinner.

‘Dad, I really think it’s time to#’

‘What the hell are you doing here?’

His snarl caught her off guard despite his churlishness, yet it wasn’t his response that saddened her as much as the contempt in his truculent glare.

She’d been a fool to hope for anything other than what she got: more of the same from a boorish man who didn’t give a hoot about her.

‘I’m here on business.’

He showed no interest, seemed bored more than anything else. Faced with his silence she could not help asking him:

‘Don’t you want to know how I am? What I’ve been doing? What I’ve achieved?’

His withering stare clued her into his response before he spoke.

‘I don’t give a damn any more.’

Pain sliced her heart in two, the old familiar questions reverberating through her head: *What did I do wrong? Why did you stop loving me? Could I have done anything differently?*

But she wasn’t the same scared teenager any more.

She had her career skyrocketing all the way to the top and she’d be damned if she sat here and took any of his crap.

Resisting the urge to jab her finger at him to ram home her point, she sat back, folded her arms and looked him straight in the eye.

‘Maybe you should give a damn. That way, you’d know I’m a senior executive at a top London ad firm, that I’m good at what I do and I’ve done it all on my own, no thanks to you.’

She’d come here with some semblance of the idealistic girl she’d once been, but that girl vanished beneath his lack of caring and she wanted to rub his nose in her independence, in her success, in the proof she’d survived despite what he’d put her through.

If she’d thought her outburst would gain a reaction, gain recognition for her achievements, she should’ve known better.

He glowered, drew himself up, resembling the towering giant of a man she remembered as he rammed his cane against the floor.

‘You’re a fool if you think I care about any of that.’

Her heart ached as she stared at the man who was her father biologically but didn’t know the meaning of the word.

She could rant and rave and fling past hurts or present triumphs in his face but what would be the point? Darby listened to no one but himself, which was why he now found himself in this place. No amount of money on offer had induced anyone locally to play nursemaid and she couldn’t blame them.

Slinging her bag higher on her shoulder, she kept her face devoid of pity for the father she’d never had.

‘Sorry you feel that way. I thought...’

What? That the old despot might’ve changed, might’ve mellowed with time and illness? Not likely. If anything, his belligerence had worsened and she’d been crazy to come here, setting the past to rest while hoping for a miracle.

‘Thought what? I’d welcome you with open arms after all this time?’

He snorted, waved his good hand towards the door. ‘Just leave the way you came in.’

She’d cried rivers of wasted tears when she was a teenager for all this man had put her through and there was no way she’d stand here now and allow him to reduce her to tears again.

With a shake of her head, she turned away, ready to walk out and never look back.

‘That’s it, run away again. Though this time, you won’t have a penny of mine to cushion you when you fall.’

Icy foreboding trickled down her spine as she slowly swung back to face him.

‘What did you just say?’

His malevolent grin raised goose bumps on her skin. ‘You heard. That money from your mother? It was a crock. She never left you a cent. That was my money you squandered on your little trip, my money that made sure you didn’t end up in the gutter.’

She staggered, leaned against the doorway for support, her gut twisting with the painful truth.

‘So, daughter dearest, looks like you owe me after all.’

With his words ringing in her ears, she stumbled from the apartment, from the accommodation and made it to her car before she collapsed, slumping over the steering wheel.

She’d thought she’d escaped his stranglehold ten years earlier, had fought hard for her independence, had found safety and confidence in her career.

She’d been wrong.

Right then, she vowed to do whatever it took to pay off her debt.

You owe me...

With the hateful truth ringing in her ears, her head snapped up as she straightened, knowing what she had to do.

There was only one thing that would clear a debt of that magnitude and, right now, gaining her promotion was a necessity.

In choosing between owing her dad a huge amount of money and agreeing to Nick’s outlandish proposal, marrying Nick would be the lesser of two evils.

She’d come.

Nick squinted at Brittany between the spokes of his Harley, trying to read her expression and coming up empty.

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