

The Timber Baron's Virgin Bride
Daphne Clair



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Серия «Mills & Boon Modern»

Аннотация

Wife by contract Rachel Moore has been in love with dark-hearted tycoon Bryn Donovan for years – ever since they shared one illicit night together. But Rachel is only the hired help... Little does she know, she's Bryn's chosen bride! Rachel's overjoyed – until she discovers the millionaire's proposal is a convenient one. She knows he must continue the Donovan dynasty, and, believing she can't give him a child, Rachel flees. But Bryn will not rest until he finds her and demands what is rightfully his!

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She certainly was different from the rather gauche innocent who sometimes appeared in his dreams.

Bryn had to quell an impulse to exact a sweet revenge on her lovely mouth even as it mocked him.

There was an intriguing dislocation between the Rachel Moore he remembered and the Rachel he'd met today. Now and then a glimpse of the ardent, uncomplicated girl peeked through the cool reserve of the woman, arousing in him a capricious desire to probe deeper and find out just how much she had really changed.

Daphne Clair lives in subtropical New Zealand, with her Dutch-born husband. They have five children. At eight years old she embarked on her first novel, about taming a tiger. This epic never reached a publisher, but metamorphosed male tigers still prowl the pages of her romances, of which she has written over thirty for Harlequin Mills & Boon, and over sixty all told. Her other writing includes non-fiction, poetry and short stories, and she has won literary prizes in New Zealand and America.

Readers are invited to visit Daphne Clair's website at www.daphneclair.com

THE TIMBER BARON'S VIRGIN BRIDE

BY
DAPHNE CLAIR

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CHAPTER ONE

“RACHEL?” BRYN DONOVAN’S grey-green eyes sharpened as he met his mother’s cornflower-blue gaze.

Black brows drawing closer together, he sat slightly forward on the dark green velvet of the wing-chair that, like most of the furniture in the room, had been in the family for as long as the big old house. “You don’t mean Rachel Moore?”

Pearl, Lady Donovan spread her hands in a surprised gesture. Her slight frame seemed engulfed by the wide chair that matched the one her son occupied on the other side of the brass-screened fireplace.

“Why not?” Her mouth, once a perfect cupid’s bow, today painted a muted coral, firmed in a way Bryn knew well. Behind the scarcely lined milk-and-roses complexion and artfully

lightened short curls was a keen brain and a will of solid iron.

Bryn said, "Isn't she rather young?"

His mother laughed as only a mother can at a thirty-four-year-old man whose name in New Zealand's business and financial circles engendered almost universal respect. The nay-sayers were mostly competitors jealous of the way he had expanded his family company and increased its already substantial fortunes, or employees who had fallen foul of his rigidly enforced standards. "Bryn," she chided him, "it's ten years since her family left us. Rachel is a highly qualified historian, and I'm sure I told you she's already written a book—in fact, two, I think."

He could hardly tell her he'd tried to expunge all information about the girl from his mind.

Pearl pressed on. "You know your father always intended to write a family history."

"He talked about it." It had been one of the old man's planned retirement projects, until an apparently harmless penchant for the best wines and liqueurs had wreaked a sudden and fatal revenge.

"Well—" the widow's prettily determined chin lifted—"I want to do this as a memorial to him. I thought you'd be pleased." A suspicious sheen filmed her eyes.

Bryn's reputation as a hard-headed though not unprincipled businessman wasn't proof against this feminine form of assault. His mother had emerged from a year and a half of grieving to at last show real interest in something. Her expression today was less strained and her movements more purposeful than since his

father's death.

That Rachel Moore's barely seventeen-year-old face under a halo of soft, unruly dark hair, her trusting brown eyes and shockingly tempting, too-young mouth occasionally entered Bryn's dreams, and left him on waking with a lingering guilt and embarrassment, was his own problem. He couldn't in conscience pour cold water on his mother's new project.

He said, "I thought she was in America." Rachel had gone to the States for postgraduate study after gaining her MA in English and history, and had since been teaching university students there.

"She's back." Pearl looked pleased. "She's taking up a lectureship in Auckland next year, but she needs something to tide her over for six months or so because of the different semesters from America. It's ideal, and so nice that we can get someone who isn't a stranger to do this for us. She can stay here —"

"Here? Aren't her parents—" The former estate manager and his wife, who had helped with housekeeping, had left to go sharemilking in the lush green fields of the Waikato district when their daughter started her university studies there. Bryn had vaguely assumed the only contact with his own family since then had been a yearly exchange of Christmas cards and family news. But his mother had always been an inveterate telephone user.

"She's with them now," Lady Donovan told him, "and ready to start in a week or two. She'll need access to our family records,

and I wouldn't let them go out of the house." Her expression became faintly anxious. "Of course it will cost, but surely we can afford—"

"No problem," he assured her, reluctantly conceding a rare defeat. "If she wants the job." With any luck Rachel might turn it down.

Pearl gave him her sweetest smile. "Her mother and I have it all arranged."

Rachel had told herself that in ten years Bryn Donovan would have changed, perhaps lost some of his thick, dark hair, developed a paunch from too many business dinners, his aristocratic nose reddened and broadened by the wine imbibed with those dinners if he took after his father. Not that Sir Malcolm hadn't also worked hard and been generous with the fruits of his labours—his knighthood owed as much to his contribution to the national economy as did his public philanthropy.

But his only son and heir was as good-looking as ever.

As she alighted from the bus in Auckland she immediately spotted him among the dozen or so people waiting to greet other passengers or to climb aboard. As if they recognised a man who required more space than ordinary mortals, he seemed to stand apart from those milling around him.

Jeans hugged his long legs. A casual black knit shirt hardly concealed broad shoulders and a lean torso that showed no sign of flab.

If anything had changed much, it was that his habitual understated self-assurance had morphed into a positively commanding presence. Something fluttered in Rachel's midriff and she hesitated on the bottom step of the bus before stepping onto the pavement.

Bryn's eyes seemed silvery in the afternoon light as he inspected the arrivals. When the sweep of his gaze found her and she started towards him, she saw a flash of surprised recognition.

He didn't move, except that his mouth curved slightly into a controlled smile as he watched her approach, while his eyes appraised her jade-green linen jacket over a white lawn blouse, the matching skirt that skimmed her knees, and the Brazilian plaited leather shoes she'd worn for travelling.

He seemed to approve, giving a slight nod before raising his eyes again to the dark hair she'd tamed into a tight knot, which she hoped gave both an illusion of extra height and a mature, businesslike appearance.

Only when she came to a halt in front of him did she notice the incipient lines fanning from the corners of his eyes, a faint crease on his forehead.

"Rachel," he said, his voice deeper than she remembered. "You look very...smart."

Meaning, she supposed, she was no longer the hoydenish teenager he remembered. "It's been a long time." She was glad her voice sounded crisp and steady, befitting a successful woman. "I've grown up."

“So I see.” A spark of masculine interest lit his eyes, and was gone.

Rachel inwardly shivered—not with fear but an emotion even more perturbing. Ten years and he still affected her this way. How stupid was that?

“Your mother...?” she inquired. When Mrs Donovan— Lady Donovan now, Rachel reminded herself—had said on the phone, “But of course we’ll pick you up in Auckland... No, you can’t struggle onto another bus to Donovan’s Falls with your luggage... and a computer, too, I suppose,” Rachel hadn’t thought “we” meant Bryn.

“She’s waiting for us at Rivermeadows,” he told her, “with coffee and cakes.”

Once they’d collected her luggage and were on their way out of the city in his gleamingly polished BMW, Rachel removed her gaze from the mesmeric, sun-sequined blue of the Waitemata harbour’s upper reaches alongside the motorway and said, “Thank you for picking me up. I hope it hasn’t inconvenienced you.”

“Not at all,” he replied with smooth politeness.

“But you don’t live at home—I mean, at Rivermeadows now, do you?” she queried, keeping anxiety from her voice. Hadn’t her mother said something about Pearl “rattling around alone in that huge house”?

“I have an apartment in the city,” he confirmed. “But since my father died I’ve been spending most weekends with my mother,

and occasionally staying during the week. I suggested she move out of the place, but she seems attached to it.”

The Donovan estate had once been the centrepiece of a small, scattered rural community, but even before Rachel and her family left, it had become an island of green amongst creeping suburbia, not far from a busy motorway.

“It’s only half an hour or so from the city,” Rachel reminded him. “Does your mother still drive?” She recalled Pearl Donovan had adored her sporty little cherry-red car, sometimes driving in a manner that caused her husband and son to remonstrate, at which she only laughed, saying they had the common male prejudice about women drivers.

A frown appeared between Bryn’s brows. “She’s hardly left the house since my father died.” He paused, then said with a sort of absentminded reluctance in his tone, “Maybe having you there will be good for her.”

If he wasn’t overjoyed, it wouldn’t have been Rachel’s preferred choice, either. When her own mother, so pleased with herself, said she’d found the perfect temporary job for her newly arrived daughter, Rachel had to hide dismay on discovering it was at Rivermeadows.

She’d covered it by saying, “It’s...um...so far away from you and Dad.” To which her mother replied logically that it wasn’t nearly as far as America.

Unable to find a more convincing excuse, especially as the hourly rate was way beyond what she could expect from any

other temporary position, Rachel saw no choice but to accept. She didn't intend to sponge on her parents for months.

Hoping she'd mistaken Bryn's decidedly unenthusiastic tone, she said, "I'm looking forward to seeing Rivermeadows again. I have some wonderful memories of it."

He cast an unreadable glance at her that lingered for a tiny moment before he switched his attention back to the road.

Rachel turned to look out of the window, trying not to think about one particular memory, having sensibly persuaded herself that he'd have forgotten the incident entirely. It might have been a defining moment in her young life, but while she'd been a bedazzled teenager with an overflow of emotion, even back then Bryn was already a man, someone she'd always thought of as one of the grown-ups.

She said, "I was sorry to hear about your father." Risking a quick look at Bryn, whose expression now appeared quite indifferent, she added, "I sent a card to your mother."

He nodded. "His death was hard on her."

The frown reappeared, and Rachel said softly, "You're worried about her."

"It's that obvious?"

About to say, *Only to people who care about you*, she stopped herself. He'd think she was presuming on an old acquaintance, and rightly so. Devoutly she hoped he had never realised how closely she'd watched his every movement or expression for a whole year or more every time he came near.

Since then she'd become a different person, and maybe he had too. At twenty-five he'd been handed full responsibility for a new sector of the Donovan business, Overseas Development. And he'd run with it, done spectacularly well at bringing the Donovan name to the notice of international markets and establishing subsidiaries in several countries. Now he was in charge of the entire company. No wonder he gave the impression of a man who had the world securely in his fist and knew exactly how to wring from it every advantage.

The house was as Rachel remembered it, a beautifully preserved, dormered two-storey mansion of white-painted, Donovan-milled kauri timber, dating from the late nineteenth century. Its upper windows were flanked by dark green shutters, and a rather grand front veranda extended into a pillared portico.

Old oaks and puriris and the magnificent magnolia that bore huge creamy, fragrant cups of blossom, cast their benign shadows over the expansive lawn and gardens, and the half circle of the drive was still edged with lavender and roses.

Bryn stopped the car at the wide brick steps leading to the ornate front door sheltered by the portico. Almost immediately the door opened and Pearl Donovan, wearing a pale lemon, full-skirted dress, stood for a moment, then hurried down the steps. Rachel went to meet her and was enveloped in a warm, scented hug, her cheek kissed.

"How nice to see you!" Lady Donovan stepped back with her hands on Rachel's shoulders to inspect her. "And you've grown

so lovely! Isn't she lovely, Bryn? Quite beautiful!"

Bryn, having removed Rachel's luggage from the car, had his hands full, the laptop case slung over one shoulder. "Quite," he said. "Where do I put her stuff?"

"The rose room," his mother told him. "I'll go and put on the kettle now, and when you're settled, Rachel, we'll have coffee on the terrace."

Rachel followed Bryn up the staircase to one of the big, cool bedrooms. The door was ajar and Bryn pushed it wide with his shoulder, strode across the carpet to a carved rimu blanket box at the foot of the double bed covered in dusky-pink brocade, and deposited the suitcase on top of the box, the smaller bag holding her reference books on the floor. "Do you want your laptop on the desk?" he asked. "Although you'll probably be working in the smoking room downstairs."

It was many years, Rachel knew, since anyone had smoked in what was really a private library, but it retained its original name within the family.

She nodded. "Thank you," she said, and Bryn placed the computer on an elegant walnut desk between long windows flanked by looped-back curtains that matched the bed cover.

He looked about at the faded pink cabbage roses that adorned the wallpaper. "I hope you'll be comfortable," he said. Obviously he wouldn't have been.

Rachel laughed, bringing his gaze to her face. His mouth quirked in response, and the skin at the corners of his eyes

crinkled a little. "My mother's right," he said. "You have grown up beautiful."

Then he looked away. "Your bathroom's over there." He nodded to a door on one side of the room. "You'll have it to yourself. If you don't find everything you need, I'm sure my mother will provide it. I'll see you downstairs."

He crossed to the door, hesitated a moment and turned. "Welcome back, Rachel."

She heard his soft footfalls on the hall runner, then on the stairs, still muffled but faster, as though he were hurrying away from her.

After freshening up and exchanging her shoes for cool, flat-heeled sandals, Rachel went downstairs and crossed the big dining room to the French windows that led onto the brick-paved terrace.

Bryn and his mother were sitting at a glass-topped cane table. A large tray held cups and saucers and a china coffee pot with matching milk and sugar containers.

Bryn got up immediately and pulled out another cushioned cane chair for Rachel. The grapevine overhead on its beamed support shadowed his face, and dappled his mother's dress.

While Lady Donovan poured coffee and talked, he sat back in his chair, looking from her to Rachel with lazy interest that might have been feigned. There was a vitality about Bryn, a coiled-spring quality that didn't fit easily with leisurely afternoon teas. He curled his hand around his cup as he drank, and his eyes

met Rachel's with a hint of amusement as his mother opened a barrage of questions about life in America.

When their cups were empty Rachel offered to help clear up. But Pearl, who had insisted Rachel was old enough now to call her by her given name, shook her head. "I'll deal with these. We haven't brought you here to do housework. Bryn, take Rachel around the garden and show her the changes we've made."

Bryn, already standing, raised an eyebrow at Rachel and when she got up put a hand lightly under her elbow, his fingers warm and strong.

"Who does do the housework?" she asked him as they descended the wide, shallow steps that brought them to ground level. Surely it was too much for one person.

"We have a part-time housekeeper." He dropped his hand as they reached the wide lawn. "She comes in the afternoon three times a week but doesn't work weekends."

They crossed the grass, passing the solar-heated swimming pool that had been retiled in pale blue, refenced with transparent panels and was almost hidden among flowering shrubs. Their feet crunched on a white-shell path winding through shrubs and trees underplanted with bulbs and perennials and creeping groundcovers.

The Donovans had allowed Rachel and her brothers free rein in the garden on condition they didn't damage the flowerbeds. She had loved playing hide-and-seek, stalking imaginary beasts, or climbing the trees, and knew all the hidden places under low-

hanging branches or in the forks of the old oaks and puriris.

“The fish have gone,” she said as they walked under a sturdy pergola—a recent addition—smothered by twining clematis, into an open space paved in mossy bricks. Two rustic seats invited visitors to admire a bed of roses instead of the goldfish pond she remembered.

“Too much maintenance,” Bryn told her, “and mosquitoes loved it.”

Wandering in the shade of tall trees, they eventually came to a high brick wall. Where there had once been a gate giving access to the house her family had lived in, an arched niche held baskets of flowering plants.

“You know we leased out the farm and cottage?” Bryn asked her, and she nodded, hiding a smile. Only someone who’d lived in a mansion could have called the estate manager’s house a cottage.

The path veered away from the wall towards an almost hidden summerhouse, its tiled roof moss-covered and latticed walls swathed in ivy geranium and bare winter coils of wisteria.

Rachel hoped Bryn hadn’t noticed the hitch in her step before they walked past it. She didn’t dare look at him, instead pretending to admire the pink-flowered impatiens lining the other side of the path, until they came to another pergola that a star jasmine had wound about, bearing a few white, fragrant blooms.

Rachel touched a spray, breathing in its scent and setting it trembling.

A lean hand reached past her and snapped the stem.

She looked up as Bryn handed the flowers to her. “Thank you,” she said, suddenly breathless. They stood only inches from each other. His eyes were on her face, his expression grave and intent and questioning. She ducked her head to smell the jasmine and, turning to walk on, brushed against him, her breasts in fleeting contact with his chest.

Heat burned her cheeks, and when Bryn caught up with her she kept her gaze on the jasmine, twirling the stalk back and forth in her fingers as they walked.

And because she wasn't looking where she was going, a tree root that had intruded onto the path took her by surprise and she tripped.

Bryn's hands closed on her arms, his breath stirring a strand of hair that had fallen across her forehead. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Thanks.” Her bare toes stung but she didn't look down, giving him what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

He drew back, checked her feet and hissed in a short breath.

“You're bleeding.” He released her arms to hunker down, his hand closing about her ankle. “Lean on me,” he ordered, lifting her foot to his knee so she had no choice but to put a hand on his shoulder to balance herself.

“I'll bleed all over you,” she protested. “It's nothing.”

His hand tightening as she tried to withdraw her ankle, he glanced up at her. “Looks painful,” he said. “Let's get you back to the house.” Standing up, he placed a firm hand under her elbow

again. Inside, he steered her to the downstairs bathroom and, ignoring her claim that she could manage on her own, sat her on the wide edge of the deep, old-fashioned bath and found a first-aid kit in a cupboard. He let her wash her injured foot, then patted it dry with a towel, dabbed on disinfectant and wrapped a toe plaster around the wound.

“Thank you,” she said, picking up her discarded sandal and standing as he put away the first-aid box. She’d dropped the jasmine on the counter next to the washbasin and he picked it up as he turned to her again.

Instead of handing it to her he tucked the stalk into the knot of hair on top of her head, gave her an enigmatic little closed-mouth smile, then ushered her out with a light touch at her waist.

Pearl came out from the kitchen, saying, “Are you staying, Bryn? I’ve got a nice bit of pork in the oven.”

He checked his watch. “For dinner, thanks. But I’ll be off after that.”

Noticing the sandal in Rachel’s hand, and the dressing on her toe, Pearl said, “Oh! Are you hurt?”

“Just a stubbed toe,” Rachel said, and after assuring his mother she was fine, left Bryn to explain while she went upstairs to unpack.

When she came down again he and Pearl were in what the family called the “little sitting room”, as opposed to the much larger front room suited to formal entertaining.

Bryn held a glass of something with ice, and Pearl was sipping

sherry. Bryn rose and offered Rachel his wing-backed chair, but she shook her head and sat on the small, ornate sofa that with the chairs completed a U shape in front of the brass-screened grate.

“A drink?” Bryn said, still on his feet. “I guess you’re old enough now.”

“Of course she is,” Pearl said. To Rachel, she confided, “He still thinks of you as a little girl.”

“Not so, Mother,” he told her, but his eyes, with a disconcerting gleam in their depths, were surveying Rachel. “Although,” he drawled, dropping his gaze to her feet, “the plaster does seem like old times.” Transferring his attention back to her face, he teased, “You had a hair-raising sense of adventure as a kid.”

Quickly she said, “I’ve grown out of that. I’d like a gin and bitters if you have it, thanks.”

Without further comment, he crossed to the old kauri cabinet that served as a drinks cupboard and disguised a small refrigerator. After making the drink he dropped a half slice of lemon into the glass before presenting it to her.

Pearl asked what Rachel thought of the garden, and when complimented said, “A local man comes once a week to keep it tidy and I potter about with the flowers. We’ve leased out the farm, so there’s only the grounds around the house to look after. Bryn suggested *selling* the place—” she cast him scandalized glance that he received imperturbably “—but I hope to have grandchildren some day, and keep the place in the family. After

all, Donovans have lived here since it was built. And owned the land even before that.”

“It’s a wonderful place for children.” Rachel didn’t look at Bryn. His older sister had moved to England, was living with another woman and, according to Rachel’s mother, had declared she never intended to have children. Obviously Bryn was in no hurry to carry on the family name. At thirty-four, he still had time and with his looks and his money, probably plenty of choice.

The thought gave her a foolish pang. She wondered if he had a girlfriend, and shook her head impatiently to dislodge the thought.

Bryn said, “Something wrong, Rachel?”

“No. I thought—a moth or something...”

“Maybe some insect you picked up from the garden.”

He got up and came near, looking down at her hair. Pearl finished her drink and rose from her chair. “I’ll go and check on our dinner.”

“Can I help?” Rachel asked. But Bryn was blocking her way.

“No, no!” Pearl said. “You stay here. I have everything under control.”

Rachel felt Bryn’s touch on her hair. “Can’t see any creepy-crawlies,” he assured her. “When did you grow your hair long?”

“Ages ago,” she told him. “While I was at university.” It was easier than trying to find someone who could make something remotely sophisticated of her unruly curls.

Instead of returning to his chair, he sank down on the sofa,

resting his arm on the back of it as he half turned to Rachel. “How is the toe?”

“Fine. I told you, it’s nothing.”

“You always were a tough little thing.” His mouth curved. “It’s hard to believe you’re the same scrawny kid with the mop of hair who used to run about the place in bare feet, half the time with skinned knees or elbows.”

“Children grow up.”

“Yes. I had noticed before you—” He stopped abruptly, staring moodily at the screened fireplace. His voice altered when he spoke again, sounding a little strained. “What happened, before your family left—I’m sorry if I hurt you, scared you, Rachel. I was...” He raked a hand through his hair and turned to look steadily at her. “I wasn’t myself. And that’s no excuse. But I do apologise.”

Rachel bowed her head. “Not necessary. It wasn’t just you.”

“You were barely out of high school. I should have—I *did* know better.”

“Well,” she said, lifting her head and making her voice light and uncaring, “that was a long time ago. I’m sure we’d both forgotten all about it until today.” Her gaze skittered away from him as she uttered the words.

One lean finger under her chin brought her to face him again. “Had you? Forgotten?”

In ten years Rachel had acquired some poise. Her smile conveyed both surprise and a hint of amused condescension.

“Men *so* like to think they’re unforgettable,” she said kindly, taking his hand from her chin and laying it on his knee. “Of course it all came back to me when I saw you.” She patted his hand before withdrawing hers. “Just as if I were seventeen again, with a schoolgirl crush on an older man.” Ignoring the twitch of his brows at that, she shook her head, laughing lightly. “Such a cliché, it’s embarrassing.”

His jaw tightened. A glint appeared in his eyes as he looked at her searchingly, and for a moment she held her breath, before he gave a short laugh of his own. “All right,” he said. “I guess I’ve got off lightly, at that.”

Rachel rather thought she had, too.

At dinner Bryn asked Rachel about her work in America and her research and writing experience.

She realised she was being grilled about her qualifications when he said, “This is a bit different, isn’t it? How long do you think you’ll need to complete it?”

“I hope to produce a first draft in three or four months,” she said. “You have so much raw material, it gives me a head start. I won’t have to begin by hunting for all the sources I need.”

Bryn looked at Pearl. “Do you know exactly what’s there?”

Pearl shook her head. “Supposing we found some old family scandal! Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“You may not find it fun if you do,” Bryn warned.

His mother looked only slightly quashed. “Oh, don’t be stuffy, darling! We don’t want some dull list of births, deaths and

marriages and profit-and-loss accounts.”

Rachel said, “I’m sure there’ll be plenty of interesting events to colour the bare facts. By the way, do you have a scanner and printer, or is there someplace I can access one? I don’t want to handle old documents more than necessary.”

Bryn said, “When do you need it?”

“At a guess, in a few days, when I’ve had time to see what’s here.”

“I’ll see to it. If you need Internet access, I’ve set it up in the smoking room because I use it when I’m here.”

Bryn left shortly after dinner. He kissed his mother goodbye and said, “Rachel...a word?”

She followed him along the wide, dim passageway to the front door, where he stopped and looked down at her without immediately speaking.

Rachel said, “You needn’t worry about the book, really. You—or your mother—are paying for it, and have total control over what goes in, or doesn’t.”

He smiled faintly. “I’m sure we can trust your discretion, Rachel. It’s my mother I’m concerned about. She’s always been inclined to go overboard on any new enthusiasm. If she looks like tiring herself out I’d appreciate it if you’d let me know, quietly.”

Years ago she’d have blindly agreed to anything Bryn asked of her. But she didn’t fancy going behind Pearl’s back. “If I see anything to be worried about,” she said carefully, “of course I’ll do whatever’s necessary.”

He didn't miss the evasion. "She's not as strong as she likes to pretend."

"If you think she needs a nursemaid—"

Bryn gave a crack of laughter. "She'd skin me alive if I suggested it."

"Hardly." Her tone dry, she let her gaze roam over his tall, strong body before returning to his face.

He watched her, his mouth lifting at one corner, a faint glow in his eyes. "I wasn't suggesting you add nursemaid to your duties. It's good she has someone in the house anyway." He paused. "This scanner-printer. Any particular specifications?"

"A good OCR programme. It needs to read documents." She told him the make and model of her computer. He opened the door, hesitated, then leaned towards her and touched his lips briefly to her cheek. "Good night, Rachel."

After closing the door behind him she stood for a moment, the warmth of his lips fading from her skin, then mentally she shook herself and turned to see Pearl come out of the kitchen at the end of the passageway.

"What did Bryn want?" the older woman asked.

"Oh, it was about the scanner," Rachel said. Then she added, "And he said he's glad you have someone in the house."

"He worries too much. I love this place, and I intend to stay until they carry me out in a box. Or until Bryn has a family and moves in—should they want to."

"I'm sure he wouldn't want you to leave if he did that."

“His wife might. And I might too by then.” Rather wistfully Pearl tacked on, “If it ever happens.”

By which time Rachel would be long gone, she told herself. Not that it mattered anyway.

CHAPTER TWO

BRYN DROVE OFF feeling oddly dissatisfied with himself. At least they'd brought that old business into the open, and that should have cleared the air between him and Rachel, as well as easing his conscience. He'd sensed a constraint in her from the moment their eyes met at the bus terminal, and he didn't believe her claim that she'd not given any subsequent thought to their last meeting. A soft, rueful laugh escaped him, remembering the deliberate put-down with which she'd denied it. “Rather overdoing it there, honey,” he murmured aloud.

She certainly was different from the rather gauche innocent who sometimes reappeared in his dreams. If she'd never had a similar nocturnal problem he ought to be relieved, but at first he'd felt nothing but chagrin, and had to quell an impulse to exact a sweet revenge on her lovely mouth even as it mocked him.

Instead he'd swallowed the unaccustomed medicine like a man, because she was entitled.

There was an intriguing dislocation between the Rachel Moore he remembered and the Rachel he'd met today. Now and then a glimpse of the ardent, uncomplicated girl peeked through the cool reserve of the woman, arousing in him a capricious desire to probe deeper and find out just how much she had really

changed.

A glance at the clock on the dashboard reminded him his departure was later than he'd intended. He'd been seeing a lot of Kinzi Broadbent lately, and he'd half promised to drop in after delivering the historian his mother had hired to Rivermeadows. But he hadn't even thought to call Kinzi.

Already on the motorway, he didn't want to use his mobile phone. For some reason he didn't feel like seeing Kinzi now. Instead he drove home and phoned her from there, saying he'd stayed for dinner with his mother, was tired and wanted an early night. Although she accepted the excuse, her voice was a little clipped as she wished him a good sleep. He'd have to make it up to her.

Three days later Rachel was in the smoking room, sorting through boxes of old letters, diaries and papers and spreading the contents over the big table—made of a single slab of thousand-year-old kauri—that dominated the space.

The door opened and Bryn strode in carrying a large cardboard box. Absorbed in her task, she hadn't heard the car.

“Your scanner,” he said. “Where do you want it?”

“On the desk?” She stripped off the gloves she was wearing to handle the fragile old documents and hurried to clear a couple of boxes from the heavy oak desk in a corner of the room where she'd placed her computer. “I didn't expect you to deliver it yourself.”

“I wanted to check on my mother.”

“She seems fine. Did you see her on your way in?”

He'd taken a paper knife from a drawer and began slitting the tape on the carton. “Yes, busy watering potted plants on the terrace. She's excited about this,” he said, nodding towards the documents on the table. “How's it coming along?”

“Deciding what to leave out may be a problem. There's such a wealth of material.”

They connected the machine to her laptop and she sat down to test it while Bryn stood leaning against the desk.

A sheet of paper eased out of the printer and they both reached for it, their fingers momentarily tangling. Rachel quickly withdrew her hand and Bryn shot her a quizzical look before picking up the test page and scrutinising it. “Looks good,” he said, passing it to her.

“Yes.” Rachel kept her eyes on the paper. “Thank you. It'll be a big help.”

“Glad to oblige,” he answered on a rather dry note.

Looking up, she found him regarding her with what seemed part curiosity and part...vexation? Then he swung away from the desk and strolled to the table, idly studying the papers laid out there, some in plastic sleeves. Carefully turning one to a readable angle, he said, “What's this?”

She went over to stand beside him. “A list of supplies for the old sawmill, with notes. Probably written by your great-great-grandfather.” Samuel Donovan had built his first mill on the banks of the nearby falls, using a water-wheel to power it. “You

haven't seen it before?"

Bryn shook his head. "I know who's in the old photographs my father got framed and hung in the hallway, they have brass plaques, but I had no idea we'd have original documents in old Sam's handwriting. It's an odd feeling." He studied the bold writing in faded ink. "Intimations of mortality."

"There are letters, too." Rachel pointed out a plastic envelope holding a paper browning at the edges and along deep, disintegrating creases where it had been folded. "This one is to his wife, before they were married."

"Dearest one," Bryn read aloud, then looked up, slanting a grin at her. "A love letter?"

"It's mostly about his plans to build her a house before their wedding. But he obviously loved her."

His eyes skimmed the page, then he read aloud the last paragraph. "I am impatient for the day we settle in our own dear home. I hope it will meet with your sweet approval, my dearest. Most sincerely yours, with all my heart, Samuel."

Lifting his head, Bryn said, "Quite the sentimentalist, wasn't he? You'd never have thought it from that rather dour portrait we have."

"That was painted when he was middle-aged and successful and a pillar of the community." The man in the portrait had curling mutton-chop whiskers and a forbidding expression. "When this was written—" she touched a finger to the letter "—he was a young man in love, looking forward to bringing home

his bride.”

“Looks like he’s won your heart, too.” Bryn was amused.

“I think it’s rather touching,” Rachel admitted. Bryn would never write something like that, even if he were headlong in love. “There’s some wonderful stuff here for a historian. I can’t wait to read it all.”

He was studying her face, and said, “I remember you had much the same light in your eyes after your dad bought you a pony and you’d had your first-ever ride. You came bursting in at breakfast to tell us all about it.”

“And got told off for that,” she recalled. Her father had hauled her out of the big house with profuse apologies to his employers. It was then she became conscious of the social gap between the Donovans and her own family, although the Donovans had never emphasised it.

“Do you still ride?” Bryn asked.

“Not for years.”

“There’s a place not far from here where I keep a hack that I ride when I can. I’m sure they’d find a mount for you if you’re interested.”

“I’ll think about it. But I have a lot to do here.”

“Hey,” he said, raising a hand and brushing the back of it across her cheek, “you can’t work all the time. We hired a historian, not a slave.”

She tried not to show her reaction to his casual touch, the absurd little skip of her heart. Her smile was restrained. “I’m

certainly not on slave wages. The pay is very generous.”

“My mother’s convinced you’re worth it.”

“I am,” she said calmly, lifting her chin. She would show him she was worth every cent before she finished this job.

His eyes laughed at her. “You haven’t lost your spark. I don’t doubt that, Rachel. I trust my mother’s judgement.”

“I had a feeling that you have definite reservations.”

“Nothing to do with your ability.”

“Then what...” she began, but was interrupted by his mother coming into the room, offering afternoon tea on the terrace.

“Or actually coffee. Unless you prefer tea, Rachel?”

Rachel said coffee was fine.

A few minutes later over their cups she said, “You really should have the records properly archived and safely stored, in acid-proof envelopes and containers. If you had those I could start doing that as I work.”

“Buy whatever you need,” Bryn said.

“You won’t find anything like that in the village,” Pearl warned. “You’d have to go into the city. I told you, didn’t I, there’s a car you can use?”

“Yes.” It had been one more incentive for Rachel to take this job, not needing to think yet about investing in a car.

Bryn asked her, “You do have a licence?”

“Yes. I need to get used to driving on the left again.”

“You’d better go with her,” Bryn told his mother, and shortly afterwards said he had to leave. The house seemed colder and

emptier when his vital presence was gone.

When Pearl hadn't broached the subject by the end of the week, on Friday Rachel asked if it would be convenient to drive into the city.

"I suppose you don't want to go alone?" Pearl asked.

About to say she'd be quite okay, Rachel recalled Bryn's concern about his mother's reluctance to leave Rivermeadows.

Misconstruing her hesitation, Pearl said in a breathless little rush, "But if you're nervous, of course I'll come."

The garage held a station wagon as well, but the red car that Pearl used to drive had gone, its place taken by a compact sedan.

In the city Pearl directed Rachel to a car park belonging to the Donovan office building, and used a pass card for Rachel to drive the sedan into one of the parking bays.

As they shopped for the things on their list, the older woman seemed ill at ease, sticking close by Rachel's side. After they'd made their major purchases and Rachel suggested they have a coffee and a snack in one of the cafés, Pearl barely paused before agreeing. Waiting for their order to be brought, she looked about with an air of bemusement, as if unused to seeing so many people in one place.

Coffee and the cake seemed to make her a little less tense. Later, as they stowed their purchases in the car, she paused and looked up at the looming Donovan's Timber building. "Why don't we call in on Bryn while we're here?"

"Won't he be busy?" Rachel wasn't sure how Bryn would feel

about being interrupted in business hours.

“We needn’t stay long,” Pearl said. “Just to say hello.”

“I’ll wait for you here.”

“No!” Pearl insisted. “I’m sure he’ll be pleased to see you.”

Less sure, and wondering if Pearl didn’t want to enter the big building alone, Rachel followed her into the marble-floored, wood-panelled lobby.

A silent elevator delivered them to the top floor, where Bryn’s secretary, a comfortably rounded middle-aged woman wearing huge, equally round glasses, greeted Pearl with surprised pleasure and ushered them both into his office. Rachel was warmed by the approving glance he sent her after greeting them both and suggesting they sit down in two deep chairs before his rather palatial desk.

“Just for a minute,” Pearl said, and proceeded with some animation to tell him about their shopping expedition while Rachel admired their surroundings.

Like the lobby, Bryn’s office was wood-panelled, the carpet thick and the furnishings solid and practical but obviously made and finished with expensive care.

The whole building spoke discreetly of prosperity and excellent workmanship—not new but magnificently modernised and maintained without spoiling its original character. While building their little empire from one country sawmill to a huge timber enterprise, and diversifying into paper production and even newspapers, the Donovans hadn’t lost sight of their history.

It was fifteen minutes before Pearl declared they mustn't take any more of Bryn's time. He got up to see them out, Rachel standing back to let Pearl go first. As she made to follow, Bryn closed a hand lightly about her arm, murmuring, "Thank you."

Rachel shook her head to indicate she hadn't done anything, but when he smiled at her she felt a momentary warm fizz of pleasure before they followed his mother through the outer office and he pressed the button for the elevator.

Pearl asked him, "Will we see you this weekend?"

"Not this time, I've made other plans."

"Oh—with Kinzi?" She gave him an arch glance of inquiry.

"Yes, actually."

Rachel, her gaze fixed on the rapidly changing numbers signalling the elevator's rise from the ground floor, was relieved when a "ding" sounded and the doors whispered open.

Rachel worked most of Saturday, but Pearl insisted she take Sunday off, adding, "You're welcome to use the car."

"I'll just go for a nice long walk, see what's changed. I need the exercise." Accustomed to working out at a gym, she had neglected her physical fitness since coming here.

Much of the farmland she remembered had been cut into smaller blocks occupied by city workers who hankered after a country lifestyle or whose daughters fancied a pony. The village of Donovan Falls, once a huddle of rough huts about Donovans' long-vanished sawmill, and later a sleepy enclave of old houses with one general store, had grown and merged into

the surrounding suburb.

The little pioneer church the Donovans and the Moores had attended sparkled under a fresh coat of paint. And the falls named for Samuel Donovan, who had used the power of the river for his mill, were still there, the focus of several hectares of grass and trees donated to the community by Bryn's father, a memorial plaque commemorating the fact. People picnicked under the trees, and children splashed in the pool below the waterfall.

Watching the mesmerising flow make the ferns at its edges tremble as the sun caught tiny droplets on the leaves, Rachel wondered what Bryn was doing.

Whatever it was, he was doing it with a woman called Kinzi. At first she'd thought—not admitting to *hoped*—that “Kinsey” might be male, but Pearl's knowing, interested expression had dispelled any chance of that.

On the journey home from their trip into the city Rachel had suppressed a persistent curiosity while Pearl hummed a little tune to herself in brief snatches and engaged in only small bites of conversation. Rachel had an irrational idea that she was mentally counting potential grandchildren.

And there was no reason to feel ever so slightly irritated about that.

In the afternoon she caught up with her family and friends by e-mail, and on Monday was glad to get back to sorting through the Donovan records.

Pearl helped where she could, explaining family connections or identifying people in photographs. But she was outside dead-heading plants when the phone rang. Rachel picked up the extension in the smoking room and answered.

“Rachel?” Bryn’s deep voice said.

“Yes, your mother’s in the garden. I’ll call her.”

“No, I’ll catch up with her later. Everything all right?”

“She’s fine and the work is going well.”

“Did you have a good weekend?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

There was a short, somehow expectant silence. Was he waiting for her to reciprocate and ask how *his* weekend was? The thought hollowed her stomach.

Then he asked, “What did you do?”

Briefly she told him, not supposing he was really interested.

He said, “Next weekend I’ll take you riding. Unless you’ve made other plans.”

“I haven’t thought about it yet—”

“Good. Sunday, around ten. See you then.”

He’d put down the phone before she could refuse. And she didn’t really want to.

He must have mentioned the plan to his mother, because after talking to him that night, Pearl told her, “Bryn said you’re riding together on Sunday. It’ll be nice for him to have a companion. I don’t think Kinzi rides at all.”

“His girlfriend?” Rachel’s voice was suitably casual.

Pearl sighed. “Maybe something will come of it this time. They’ve been seeing each other for quite a long time.”

On Sunday Bryn turned up with a long-legged, green-eyed redhead. Her hair was cut in a short, straight, jagged style that would have cost a modest fortune. A primrose cashmere sweater and skinny jeans hugged a figure that most women would give a whole mouthful of teeth for, and high-heeled ankle-boots brought her near to Bryn’s height. A short denim jacket finished the deceptively casual outfit.

Kinzi gave Rachel a dazzling smile on being introduced and announced she was here to keep Pearl company while Bryn and “Rachel, isn’t it?” went off to “do your horsy thing”. On a rueful note she added, “The only time I got on a horse the brute threw me.” She laughed, a surprisingly hearty sound. “I know about getting back on and all that, but I thought, why should I? You don’t ride, do you, Lady Donovan?”

Pearl shook her head. “It’s kind of you to sit with an old lady, my dear. But not at all necessary. And please, let’s dispense with the title.”

Rachel had to choke back laughter at the uncharacteristic, almost querulous tone of Pearl’s little speech. Meeting Bryn’s slightly pained expression, belied by the amused appreciation in his eyes, she knew he hadn’t missed it, but Kinzi didn’t seem to notice.

Whether his bringing Kinzi along had been her own idea or Bryn’s, Rachel was very sure Pearl Donovan didn’t, and probably

never would, think of herself as an old lady.

Perhaps it was the look she turned on her son that made him say, “Ready, Rachel? We’ll get going then.”

She had put on jeans and sneakers with a sweatshirt and was relieved to see that he, too, was casually dressed, although he wore riding boots.

In the car she told him, “Did your mother mention she had some visitors this week?”

“She asked them to come?”

“I don’t think so. They were passing through, I gather.” Pearl had invited Rachel to join them for afternoon tea, but she’d declined, not wanting to intrude. Afterwards Pearl had seemed quite animated, describing the middle-aged couple as old friends and saying what a nice chat they’d had.

They were the first visitors Rachel had seen apart from Kinzi. Pearl certainly wasn’t doing as much entertaining as she used to. “I think their name was McGill,” she told Bryn.

He nodded. “They used to live in Auckland until they retired to a beach community up north. I don’t think she’s seen them since the funeral. In fact after the first couple of months hardly anyone visited. She hasn’t shown any interest in resuming a social life without Dad.”

“Give her time,” Rachel murmured.

Bryn didn’t look convinced. He wasn’t used to standing by and letting things happen at their own pace.

The place he drove to offered trail rides and treks, as well as

plenty of rolling, open countryside and stands of dark, mossy native bush.

Bryn's big bay gelding seemed pleased to see him, and the owner supplied a pretty, soft-mouthed little mare for Rachel.

They started out at a sedate walk along a broad trail that wound through thick bush, but later when Rachel had got the feel of her mount, enjoyed a glorious gallop across green paddocks under a cloud-dusted sky, ending on a high knoll that overlooked rolling hills and a distant view of the Pacific.

There they rested the horses and dismounted, removing their helmets to admire sheep-dotted paddocks, blue-green stands of old bush in the folds of the hills, and the deep azure line of the horizon.

A few grey rocks seemed to grow out of the ground before them, and they sat side by side on one with a flat, slightly sloping top. Rachel rested her elbows on her thighs, her chin in her hands. At their feet grasses with plumed seed-heads bent before a sudden breeze that stirred her hair, loosening a few tendrils from their confining knot.

For long minutes neither she nor Bryn spoke. Then Rachel said almost to herself, "I never realised how much I missed New Zealand until I came home."

Bryn leaned forward and broke off one of the grass stalks, smoothing the fluffy seed-head in his fingers. "You don't miss the States?"

"Some things, of course. But my heart is here."

“You’ll miss your American friends?”

“Yes.”

“A man?”

She knew he’d turned to look at her, but kept her gaze on the view. “No one special. If there had been, I suppose it would have been harder.”

Abruptly he said, “Kinzi’s been offered a promotion— a job in Australia.”

She had to look at him then, but couldn’t gauge his thoughts. He was staring at the stalk of grass, twirling it backwards and forwards.

“Is she going to take it?” Rachel supposed some response was expected. “What sort of job? I don’t know what she does.”

“She hasn’t decided.” He tossed the grass onto the ground. “She edits a fashion and beauty magazine, and the Australian owners want her to take charge of several of their publications over there. It’s a big opportunity for her. I don’t want to hold her back.”

“Would she let you?”

“Maybe,” he said, and stood up, looking towards the blue-hazed horizon, his back to her. “If I asked her to marry me.”

With a soundless thud something inside Rachel fell from her chest to her stomach. What was he telling her, and why?

Enough of this conversation. Rachel picked up her helmet from the ground beside her and began walking back to where the horses were cropping the grass. “If that’s what you want,” she

said, “you’d better ask her.”

She strapped on the helmet, jerking it tight under her chin, and grabbed the mare’s reins. The horse turned its head and whinnied as she put her foot into the stirrup and swung her leg over the saddle, then it danced backwards before she’d found the other stirrup.

Bryn caught at the reins and steadied the mare while Rachel took a firmer hold. “That’s your advice?”

She looked down at him, exasperated and oddly angry. “I’m not your auntie,” she snapped. “It’s up to you. Of course if you want to be noble, you could love and let go.” Something stuck in her throat, and she jerked the reins from his hands.

He stepped back, black brows raised, his mouth laughing. Then he strode towards his own horse, vaulting into the saddle.

By the time he set the gelding on the downhill path Rachel’s mare was well ahead, but he soon drew level.

When she broke into a gallop, the big gelding easily kept pace, but they slowed to a side-by-side walk on the wide track through the bush.

“I don’t make a habit of discussing my... affairs of the heart,” Bryn said, a sardonic inflection on the final phrase. “Did I offend you?”

“I’m not offended.”

“Could have fooled me,” he murmured. And then on a note of curiosity added, “Is it a case of female solidarity? Does that weigh more heavily than an old friendship?”

“You and I were never really friends,” she argued. “There was such a difference in our ages.”

“Our families were close.”

“My family were your family’s employees.”

He frowned. “Surely you’re not a snob, Rachel?”

“I’m just stating a fact.”

“Why are you angry with me?” He reached out and brought both horses to a halt, their riders knee-to-knee.

“I’m not angry.” A half truth. She was annoyed with herself for caring about Bryn’s love-life. Some sort of delayed hangover from a silly teenage infatuation. “Only I can’t help you.”

“I didn’t expect it, just thinking aloud, really.”

As if she hadn’t even been there. Or was a mere sounding board.

Once she would have been delighted at his confiding in her.

The mare gave a snort and shook her mane. Rachel felt like doing the same. Instead she let the horse break into a canter until they reached the yards and buildings where they’d started out.

Back at Rivermeadows, they found Pearl had prepared a cold lunch and set a table on the terrace.

Bryn said he’d like a short swim first, and although Rachel declined, Kinzi changed into a tiny bikini that showed off her perfect body. Helping Pearl place meats and salads on the table, Rachel could hear the other young woman’s giggles and little squeals, and Bryn’s laughing voice.

Over lunch Kinzi sparkled, complimenting her hostess on

the salad and cold meat loaf, quizzing Rachel on whether she'd enjoyed riding again, and teasing Bryn about his affection for his horse, calling him "my cowboy", which set Rachel's teeth on edge but brought a half grin to Bryn's mouth, that inexplicably made her mad again.

It was a leisurely meal and when the others repaired to the little sitting room Rachel excused herself, went to her room to get a book and then slipped downstairs again and into the garden. There she found a secluded spot under a weeping rimu that brushed the ground, and settled down to read.

She'd been there for some time when low voices, male and female, alerted her that Bryn and Kinzi were strolling nearby. Not wanting to eavesdrop, she scrambled up, closing the book, and got her hair tangled in the sweeping branches of the tree before she escaped its clutching fingers. She was picking narrow leaves and bits of bark out of her hair when the other two appeared round a bend in the path and stopped before her.

Kinzi giggled, then covered her mouth and said, "Sorry, Rachel. What have you been up to?" She stepped forward and plucked a small bunch of lichen and a twig from Rachel's head. "There," she said, dropping them on the ground.

"Thanks," Rachel muttered. She must look a mess.

Bryn was regarding her with a faint smile, the skin about his eyes crinkling as though he too was trying not to laugh.

"I was reading," Rachel said, "but it's getting cool."

Determinedly she stepped forward, and Bryn moved aside.

She didn't look back to see them walk on.

Upstairs, she brushed her hair and, leaving it loose, lay on her bed and tried to continue reading, but after a while got up and went to the window that overlooked the back garden, staring at nothing.

After a while she saw Bryn emerge from the trees with Kinzi clinging to his arm.

They stopped under the pergola, Kinzi's face turned up to his as she said something that looked like an urgent plea. Then she slid her arms about his neck and kissed him.

Rachel watched Bryn's hands go to the woman's waist, and Kinzi pressed against him on tiptoe, his dark head bent to hers and their mouths clinging together.

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