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DAPHNE CLAIR

Claiming His Bride

Mills & Boon Modern

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«HarperCollins»

Clair D.

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Four years ago Sorrel fled to start a new life and left her fiancé, Blaize, standing at the altar with no explanations. But now she's back, and as beautiful as ever. And seeing her again brings back all his memories—especially his desire....The reason Sorrel left was that she loved Blaize too much—and she believed that he didn't love her. But she's not prepared for how much he seems to hate her now! Or to want her...

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His eyes were diamond-hard, his fingers inflexible on her waist.

Owed him what? The chance to show the world she hadn't broken his heart? That he didn't care how she'd trampled his pride? “You should be thanking me,” she said. “Our marriage would have been a mistake.”

“I thank heaven daily.” His hands tightened on her as he moved them into a turn, and she had to clutch at his shoulder to keep her balance.

He whirled her around a couple of times, making her giddy, his arms hauling her close. This time he didn't slacken his hold. His lips close to her temple, he murmured, “Relax. I can't do to you here what I'd like to do. You're perfectly safe.”

“What you'd like to do?” she echoed, a shiver of apprehension mingled with strange excitement traveling down her spine.

He tilted his head back, allowing a few inches of space between their bodies as he looked down at her, shocking her with the animosity glittering in his eyes. “Wring your pretty, damned spoiled little neck,” he said, almost matter-of-factly.

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® and over fifty all told. Her other writing includes nonfiction, poetry and short stories, and she has won literary prizes in New Zealand and the United States.

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

Claiming His Bride

Daphne Clair



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CHAPTER ONE

SORREL should have known that Blaize Tarnower would be at her cousin's wedding.

Subconsciously she might have hoped that Elena and her parents wouldn't invite him, or that he'd have the grace to decline.

But then he probably hadn't expected her to be here. Possibly no one had told him that after four years Sorrel Kenyon had come home to New Zealand.

She hadn't seen him inside the church, but while the bridal party posed on the steps for photographs, she turned to make her way to her parents' car, and there he was, directly in her path.

Tall, dark, and not exactly handsome but certainly striking with his jutting cheekbones, commanding nose and firm mouth, he surveyed her with dispassionate steel-grey eyes.

The woman clinging to his arm looked inquiringly up at him. Peripherally Sorrel noticed her blue eyes, milk-and-roses complexion and perfect features, shaded from the summer sun by an elegant broad-brimmed hat that matched her eyes.

'Sorrel,' Blaize said, his deep voice even and almost bored. 'So you actually made it to a wedding.'

Disconcerted at the subtle sting in his words, she didn't immediately react.

The woman said, 'Sorrel?' Her blue gaze was curious beneath finely shaped brows, and maybe Sorrel imagined that the pink-tipped fingers tightened on the expensive cloth of Blaize's suit. 'Like a horse? For the colour of your hair?'

'It's a herb,' Sorrel said mechanically, accustomed to people querying the origin of her name. Her jade-green eyes were still held by the enigmatic male gaze that she sensed was hiding animosity.

'A bitter herb,' Blaize's voice was laced with underlying mockery, 'though the flowers look sweet.' Then, as if remembering the manners instilled in him by a meticulous mother and the most prestigious school in Wellington, he introduced her to his companion. 'Sorrel Kenyon, Cherie. And this is Cherie Watson.'

For a moment Sorrel had thought he was using the French endearment, and an unwelcome pang attacked her heart.

Cherie placed a languid hand in the one Sorrel extended to her, almost immediately withdrawing it. 'Nice to meet you.'

Sorrel smiled, her manners every bit as ingrained and practised as Blaize's. 'You too,' she lied politely.

Blaize's glance flicked her, a small movement at the corner of his mouth doubting her sincerity. He knew her far too well.

Cherie said suddenly, as if making a discovery, 'You must be Blaize's business partner's daughter?'

Blaize answered for her. 'Yes, Sorrel is Ian's daughter.' The grey gaze inspected her again, from the untameable auburn curls, over the amber silk suit with a nipped waist, and all the way to the high-heeled shoes she seldom wore now because most men didn't equal Blaize's height. 'You're looking... well.'

The faintest spark briefly lit his eyes, a tiny ember of desire, but it was enough to stop both Sorrel's breathing and her heartbeat for a moment, until the blood came rushing back to her body and weakened her limbs. She took a secret, deliberately controlled breath to steady herself. 'So are you.'

She couldn't help looking her fill, taking in the small changes.

His cheeks looked leaner; perhaps he had lost a little weight, although he appeared fitter than ever, his body lithe and toned in the formal clothes that conformed to it superbly. His thick black hair was shorter, very disciplined, and his mouth was firmer than she remembered, uncompromising, but perhaps that and the coldness in his eyes were due to her presence.

He hadn't forgiven her.

Again she felt that shaft of dismay. No more than she deserved, she supposed. A man who'd been left at the altar wasn't likely to regard the woman who had done it in a charitable light, even after four years. Her own parents had not stopped blaming her for the embarrassment she'd caused all of them.

Cherie said, 'I heard you were living overseas—Australia?'

She sounded almost accusing.

You've no need to worry, Sorrel could have told her. If Blaize had ever loved Sorrel at all, she had effectively put paid to any chance of a future with him. Instead she said, 'I have been. But Elena is my favourite cousin.'

'So you're just visiting?' Cherie persisted.

Sorrel hesitated. Her job in Melbourne was interesting and she liked the city, liked Australia, but always there was the tug of home.

When her plane had taken a sweeping turn over Cook Strait, giving a breathtaking view of the rugged Marlborough Sounds with the bush growing down to the water, and then honed in between the hills to the notoriously tricky runway at Wellington, she'd felt tears prickling at her eyes, a rush of memories entering her mind. Bush walks without fear of snakes; beaches where sharks seldom bothered the swimmers, and children ran barefoot in the sand; steep, winding streets with houses perched on impossible slopes in crazy tiers, looking down on the white wakes of the inter-island ferries as they headed out of the harbour.

'I may stay,' she said now, possessed by a perverse impulse, 'if I can get a job.' Hearing her own words, she realised that in the back of her mind she'd been considering the move ever since she'd landed, shaken by that wave of homesickness.

'What sort of job are you looking for?' Blaize asked, forcing her to turn to him.

'I haven't begun to look yet. I only arrived a couple of days ago.' Just in time to visit Elena, join in the flurry of preparation, and satisfy herself that the younger girl knew what she was doing.

'Your parents told me you've been working in a department store.'

'I'm in charge of the women's fashion section.'

'A pretty high-powered job, they said.'

'Yes, but if I'm to move up further it would be into administration, and I like having my own department—being hands-on.' She was making conversation, plugging the awkward silence with small talk. Changing the subject, she asked, 'How are your parents?'

'Very well,' Blaize answered. 'Dad's enjoying his retirement.' Paul Tarnower had handed over his business partnership after a health scare some years back, leaving his son to carry on the home appliance manufacturing company with Sorrel's father. 'They're on a European cruise right now.'

'I know. My mother's quite envious.'

Cherie tugged at Blaize's arm. 'Darling, shouldn't we be congratulating the happy couple?'

The bridal party was moving down the steps into the crowd of well-wishers.

'I guess so.' Blaize gave Sorrel a formal nod. 'Excuse us?'

As they moved away Sorrel became conscious of covert glances directed at her. Many of the guests had been invited to her own aborted wedding to Blaize, in this very church. She'd exchanged a word or two with some of them, braving their veiled curiosity and stiff smiles. But her cousin would understand if she reserved her congratulations for a more private time.

Sorrel was grateful that Elena had accepted her preference not to be a bridal attendant. Probably she had been aware of the potential irony.

Of all the people left in the lurch by Sorrel's disastrously late change of heart, only Elena, still in the lavender lace bridesmaid's dress that they had chosen along with Sorrel's wedding gown, had at least tried to understand and sympathise. So when she'd sent an invitation along with a personal plea to be there on her special day, Sorrel had found it impossible to refuse.

Resuming her interrupted path to the car, she was joined by her parents, and with a sense of relief climbed into the back seat for the short journey to the reception lounge.

‘A pretty wedding,’ her mother said. Checking her appearance in the mirror behind the sun visor, she adjusted her hat, exclusively designed to match the equally smart aqua dress that draped her over-slim figure. ‘Thank goodness nothing went wrong, but then Elena was always a sensible girl.’

Wincing, Sorrel reminded herself not to be hypersensitive, but the comparison was implicit. Even her father had muttered something earlier about hoping this wedding would proceed without a hitch.

She wanted to ask how long Blaize had been seeing Cherie Watson, and what their relationship was. Mentally she practised inquiring in a detached, mildly interested tone. But, dreading the inevitable reproach that would accompany the information, she held her tongue. Four years ago she had forfeited any right to inquire into Blaize’s private life.

Instead, she gazed out at the harbour as the car followed the road curving around Oriental Bay.

The windy city was notorious for the southerlies that swept up from the choppy waters of the Strait and buffeted the hills. But today the air was clear and still, the sun casting a soft light over buildings huddled close together between the hills and the shimmering blue water.

No place was as beautiful as Wellington on a fine day.

At the reception lounge it was a relief to find that she and her parents had been seated two tables away from Blaize, but although he had his back to her he was within her line of sight. She couldn’t block out the view of his dark head, often bent close to the blonde one next to him.

When the speeches started she saw Blaize drape an arm along the back of Cherie’s chair, his fingers touching her shoulder, while his other hand toyed with a wineglass between toasts.

Sorrel wished she were anywhere but here. Only for Elena’s sake could she endure it. And pride would keep her here for a decent length of time. She wasn’t going to sneak off as though ashamed of being seen.

She transferred her gaze to her mother, noticing that Rhoda had eaten almost nothing. Surely she was overdoing the constant dieting that seemed to have brought her close to the point of emaciation?

The man next to Sorrel was a friend of the groom. Someone had undoubtedly seated them adjacently so they could be company for each other since he too was alone. Considerate of Elena or her mother, but also vaguely humiliating, underlining Sorrel’s lack of a partner.

He was a pleasant enough man, quite good-looking in a chunky, stolid way, and they managed to contrive the usual small talk. Once the formalities were dealt with and the three-piece orchestra began to play, other couples following the bride and groom on to the floor, he asked if she’d like to dance.

He turned out to be a good dancer, with a surprisingly dashing style. After the first sedate waltz, when the music livened up and some of the older people left the floor, he initiated some adventurous moves, and Sorrel was able to enjoy herself.

She glimpsed Blaize, Cherie’s pale arms wrapped about his neck as she gazed adoringly at him while he returned a lazy smile, his eyelids lowered. They looked like a besotted couple.

Dragging her attention back to her own partner, Sorrel forced a smile to her lips and, exaggerating the swing of her hips, concentrated on the rhythm.

They were being noticed. People gave them extra space and cast admiring looks. Sorrel caught the turn of Blaize’s head, the quick flare of seeming disapproval in his eyes.

Defiantly she laughed, giving her partner the benefit of it, and did a little improvisation of her own, lifting her arms in a teasing pirouette away, wiggling her behind, and throwing a provocative glance over her shoulder before dancing back to him.

He laughed too, grabbed her close, and twirled them round before loosening his hold, hands lightly on her waist while they continued the dance.

The music ended, and she tossed wayward curls from her eyes and tucked the unruly strands behind her ear as she and her partner returned to their seats. The other chairs were empty, her mother and father chatting with Elena's parents at the top table.

Slightly out of breath, she said, 'That was fun.'

'We're good together.' He grinned at her. 'Want to try again?'

'Let me have a breather first.'

'Drink?' he offered. 'What would you like?'

She asked for a dry white wine, and he went off to jostle through the crowd about the bar.

Sorrel toyed with a hibiscus flower laid among greenery in the centre of the table, a frilled pink trumpet with one proud crimson stamen growing erect from its ruby heart, the end trimmed with tiny fine filaments holding the pollen. A few yellow grains speckled the white linen cloth as she turned the flower in her fingers.

'Are you going to tuck it behind your ear?'

Blaize's voice startled her into looking up. He stood with one hand in the pocket of his perfectly cut trousers, the other holding a glass half filled with red wine. 'Which side?' he inquired idly, looking down at her, his eyes under thick black lashes gleaming, speculative.

'I can never remember which side means what.'

'Right for "I'm taken" and left for "I'm free and available", I believe.'

'I'm not available.' She let the flower drop back onto the table. 'Anyway, pink isn't my colour.' Deciding to carry the battle into the enemy camp, she said, 'It would suit Cherie—which side would she wear her flower on?'

'You'd have to ask her...if you're interested.'

'Idle curiosity.' Letting her attention apparently wander beyond him, she asked, 'Where is Cherie, anyway?'

'Touching up her makeup in the ladies' room.' His gaze lingered for a moment or two on Sorrel's mouth, making her conscious that her own lipstick had probably disappeared with the meal and the numerous toasts that had followed.

The orchestra struck a chord, briefly distracting him. Then he looked back at her and, oddly abrupt, said, 'Would you care to dance?'

'With you?' She was startled.

His mouth twitched. 'Who else?' He cast a glance around them. There was no sign of her erstwhile partner. 'Of course with me.' A note of asperity had entered his voice. 'In case you hadn't noticed, a number of people are waiting to see how we react to each other. It might help to kill their curiosity if we don't make a big deal of this.'

Of their first meeting since the cancelled wedding, he meant. Maybe he was right; if they appeared casually friendly any gossip would quickly languish for lack of fuel.

'Someone's bringing me a drink,' she demurred.

'The guy with the fancy footwork?' He sounded disparaging. 'I'm sure he'll wait.' Putting his own glass down on the table, he reached for her wrist and tugged her from her chair. 'We might as well get this over with.'

His grip was strong and he ignored her momentary instinctive resistance to his high-handedness, taking her with him towards the dance floor.

'Charming!' she said. 'I've had more irresistible invitations.'

Surprisingly, he gave a crack of laughter that turned to a wolfish grin as he enfolded her with one arm, holding her hand close to his chest, and began moving to the music. 'You owe me this much at least.' His eyes were diamond-hard, his fingers inflexible on her waist.

Owed him what? The chance to show the world she hadn't broken his heart? That he didn't care how she'd trampled his pride? 'Does it matter that much what anyone says?'

'It might matter to the people who care about us. But maybe that isn't a consideration for you.'

Everything he said seemed barbed. ‘You should be thanking me,’ she said. ‘Our marriage would have been a mistake.’

‘I thank heaven daily.’ His hands tightened on her as he moved them into a turn, and she had to clutch at his shoulder to keep her balance.

She flashed him a look, fierce and defensive.

‘Smile,’ he said. ‘We’re on show.’

Sorrel bared her teeth at him, then said contradictorily, ‘I can’t smile to order. And don’t tell me what to do!’

To her annoyance he laughed again. Surely he wasn’t enjoying this?

He whirled her round a couple of times, making her giddy, his arm hauling her close. This time he didn’t slacken his hold. His lips close to her temple, he murmured, ‘Relax. I can’t do to you here what I’d like to do. You’re perfectly safe.’

‘What you’d like to do?’ she echoed, a shiver of apprehension mingled with strange excitement travelling down her spine.

He tilted his head back, allowing a few inches of space between their bodies as he looked down at her, shocking her with the animosity glittering in his eyes. ‘Wring your pretty, damned spoilt little neck,’ he said, almost matter-of-factly.

Her eyes widened, her lips parting, and she missed a step.

Immediately he pulled her back to him, so that she was acutely conscious of the strength and warmth of his body, the movement of the muscles in his thighs as he picked up the rhythm again and she blindly, automatically followed.

There was an unbearable familiarity about being held in his arms, following his lead on a dance floor. Reminding her how terribly she’d missed him for months...years.

Around them other dancers passed by in a blur. Sorrel forced her vocal cords into speech. ‘I know things must have been difficult for you at the time, but you’ve had four years to get over it.’

‘Oh, I’m over it,’ he assured her. ‘You surely don’t imagine I’ve been nursing a broken heart all this time?’

She’d never supposed his heart was broken at all, but she was aware his pride would have suffered. Four years ago his profile in the business and social world had already been high. He’d brought new, fresh ideas and enthusiasm to a firm that was already a byword in New Zealand’s commercial world. And the fact that he was young, single and belonged to a wealthy family was fodder for the more gossipy publications.

‘I’m sure there was no shortage of willing females to help you mend it,’ she said, adding, ‘if your heart suffered so much as a crack.’

Blaize’s expression changed; his eyes narrowed so that she couldn’t read them. ‘You’re right, of course.’ His tone was clipped, neutral. ‘In the scheme of things it hardly rates, at this distance.’

‘Then why are you sniping at me? And why do you want to...wring my neck?’

‘A figure of speech. No man likes to be made a fool of.’

‘I didn’t mean to do that.’

‘You could have told me earlier,’ he said, ‘if you had doubts.’

‘I know. I’ve said I’m sorry.’

She’d said it in a letter too, after she’d fled the scene, knowing that her parents and Elena—and Blaize—would have to deal with the mess she was leaving behind. A letter he had never responded to, not that she’d really expected it. She had asked him to try to forgive her, not expecting that either. But she hadn’t thought he would hold a grudge all this time.

She had never seen Blaize as her enemy, and it hurt that he seemed to bear her active ill will. ‘Do you hate me?’ she asked, her voice low.

‘Hate you?’ The scornful sound he made was clearly an indication that she wasn’t even worthy of that. ‘Of course not.’ But there was no comfort in the denial. ‘Hatred is a waste of energy.’

Implying that he had more important things to spend his on. The small ache in her heart sharpened. Silly, because she'd certainly brought this deliberate indifference on herself.

'Besides,' Blaize said, 'if you're going to stay, we're bound to come in contact now and then. It would make life uncomfortable all round if we couldn't stand the sight of each other.'

'I never said I couldn't stand the sight of you!'

A sardonic curve twisted his lips. 'You just didn't think you could stand it across the breakfast table for the rest of your life?'

'You know it was a lot more complicated than that.'

'I have no idea how complicated it was. Or wasn't. Your letter didn't give me much to go on. Dear Blaize, sorry, goodbye.'

'That's not fair! And not true!' She'd spent hours agonising over what to write.

'Oh, I grant you there were more words, but in essence that's what they said.'

She'd found it hard to express her emotions, muddled as they were, but she'd become increasingly panicky as the wedding approached. And when she tried to tell her mother about her growing doubts Rhoda Kenyon had brushed them aside, assuring her that she too had suffered bridal jitters but they meant nothing, that she'd never regretted marrying Sorrel's father. 'You'll be all right on the day,' she'd asserted.

But Sorrel hadn't been. And at the eleventh hour she had finally found the courage to say so.

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