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AMERICAN *Romance*®

THE BLACKSHEEP'S ARRANGED MARRIAGE

Karen Toller Whittenburg



Mills & Boon American Romance

Karen Toller Whittenburg

The Blacksheep's Arranged Marriage

«HarperCollins»

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PETER BRADDOCK: The youngest Braddock brother puts honor to the test and lives up to the proud Braddock legacy! The Braddock blood ran fierce and true in Peter Braddock. Yet his scandalous past kept the youngest Braddock sibling from feeling he really belonged in the elite society his family ruled. Perhaps that's what made him defend shy, awkward Theodosia Berenson—the ugly duckling debutante—and landed him in trouble that led to a marriage proposal! Thea knew Peter felt honor-bound to propose. But the perpetual wallflower couldn't say no to the man who stirred her secret fantasies. Though she tried to hide her tender feelings, one kiss revealed a shocking desire between them. Would the spark ignite a fire—and lead two lonely hearts home? Billion Dollar Braddocks: Born to a legacy of wealth and power, three handsome brothers discover that love is the ultimate privilege.

Содержание

“Don’t offer me something you’re not willing to give.”	6
MILLS & BOON	7
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	8
Books by Karen Toller Whittenburg	9
Contents	10
Prologue	11
Chapter One	16
Chapter Two	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

“Don’t offer me something you’re not willing to give.”

Peter knew his grin was inappropriate. But to see Thea so resolute, to hear the determination in her voice, surprised and pleased him. What could she possibly ask for that he wouldn’t be willing to give?

“If you want me to stay and keep you company, Thea, all you have to do is say so. We can play cards, or you can show me how to sketch. There’s no reason for you to be alone tonight if you don’t want to be.”

Her eyes narrowed, but he saw the way her hand trembled before she gathered a fistful of comforter into a tight ball within her palm.

“I don’t want to be alone, Peter, but...”

“Fine,” he said, wanting her to know she could ask him anything, trust him with her feelings. “I’ll stay and we’ll—”

“But...” She interrupted his reassurance, made his heart beat a little faster with the sudden fire in her dark eyes. “If you stay, we’re not playing cards or...or anything like that.” Her voice quivered. “Peter, I want...I want a...a wedding night.”

Dear Reader,

Once again, Harlequin American Romance has got an irresistible month of reading coming your way.

Our in-line continuity series **THE CARRADIGNES: AMERICAN ROYALTY** continues with Kara Lennox’s *The Unlawfully Wedded Princess*. Media chaos erupted when Princess Amelia Carradigne’s secret in-name-only marriage was revealed. Now her handsome husband has returned to claim his virgin bride. Talk about a scandal of royal proportions! Watch for more royals next month.

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This month, and every month, come home to Harlequin American Romance—and enjoy!

Best,

Melissa Jeglinski

Associate Senior Editor

Harlequin American Romance

The Blacksheep’s Arranged Marriage

Karen Toller Whittenburg



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To Paula and Genell,

for lending me the courage to be brave

and

For Alitza,

whose enthusiasm has made writing

“The Braddocks” such a delightful experience.

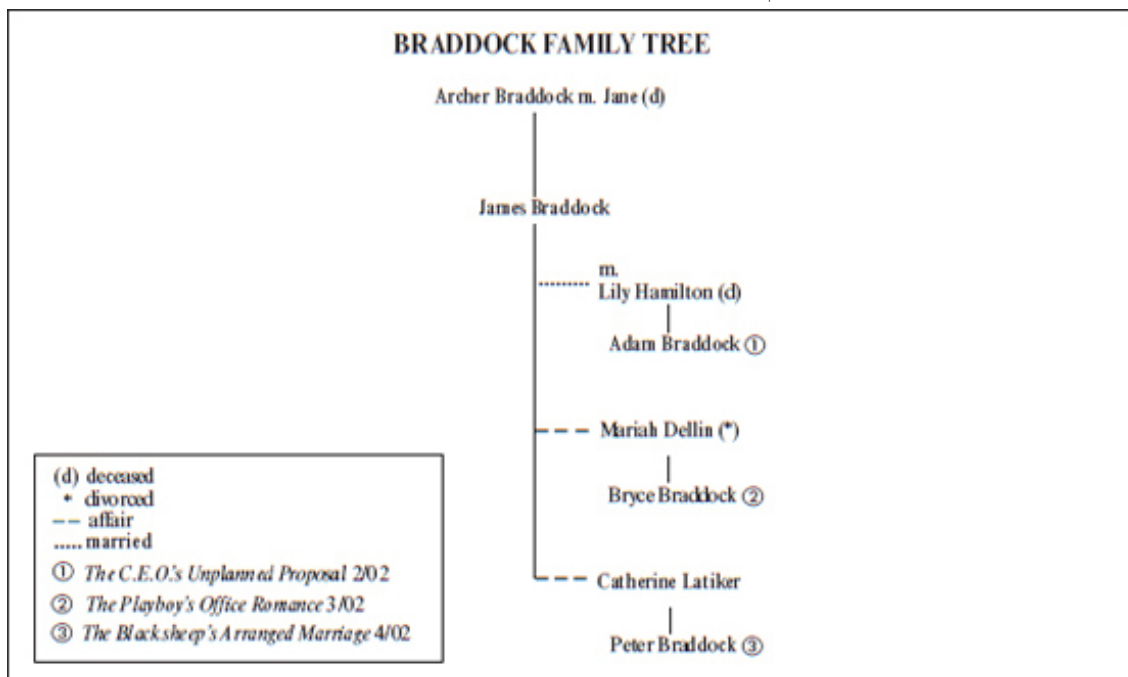
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Toller Whittenburg is a native Oklahoman who fell in love with books the moment she learned to read and has been addicted to the written word ever since. She wrote stories as a child, but it wasn't until she discovered romance fiction that she felt compelled to write, fascinated by the chance to explore the positive power of love in people's lives. She grew up in Sand Springs (an historic town on the Arkansas River), attended Oklahoma State University and now lives in Tulsa with her husband, a professional photographer.

Books by Karen Toller Whittenburg

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528—WEDDING OF HER DREAMS
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708—THE SANTA SUIT
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877—HIS SHOTGUN PROPOSAL
910—THE C.E.O.’S UNPLANNED PROPOSAL†
914—THE PLAYBOY’S OFFICE ROMANCE†
919—THE BLACKSHEEP’S ARRANGED MARRIAGE†



Contents

[Prologue](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Epilogue](#)

Prologue

Archer Braddock had attended many a wedding over the course of his lifetime, but none that pleased him more than this one. His Prince Charming of a grandson had finally met his Sleeping Beauty and today—this moment, in fact—they were facing each other in the First Methodist Church of Sea Change, Rhode Island, exchanging vows Archer had thought he might never live long enough to witness.

“Will you, Bryce Archer Braddock, take Lara Danielle Richmond to be your wife? Will you love her, honor her, comfort and keep her, keeping yourself only unto her for as long as you both shall live?”

And Bryce’s voice rang out, confident and true, in the holy place. “I will.”

It seemed only yesterday that Archer had stood in this same church, in front of family and friends, promising to love and honor his beloved Janey. But it had been more than fifty-four years since that day. Good years that had flown by in the blink of an eye. And today he sat alone, widowed, clutching the cherrywood cane that had been a gift from his dear wife and blinking back a mist of memories.

Beside him, his only son, James, sat still as a statue. Perhaps he, too, was pondering the marriage vows and examining his own experiences with them. Archer had only ever been married once. James had made and broken wedding promises many more times than that. It troubled a father’s heart to see his son still grasping for an elusive happily ever after. Especially now that James’s two oldest sons, Adam and Bryce, had found love and the perfect match for their proud hearts.

Standing on either side of Bryce and Lara, Adam and Katie, as best man and matron of honor, shared smiles and private glances, their eyes bright with happiness and the adventures they’d already shared in the three months they’d been married. No announcement had been made as yet, but Archer thought their excited whisperings and happy glow might mean he would be a great-grandfather before another summer rolled around.

Of course, Lara’s four-year-old nephew, Calvin, had already bestowed that title upon him—called him “Grrranbad,” which was Cal’s abbreviated version of “Great Grandad Braddock.” Already Archer loved his new nickname and the newest addition to the family. He loved the laughter and joy this one small boy had brought into Braddock Hall, and into these twilight years of his life. And in a few months, when Lara and Bryce completed their adoption of Cal, it would be official. Archer would, at long last, have a great-grandson. He wasn’t sure how James felt about suddenly becoming a grandfather, but for his part, Archer was tickled right down to his seventy-nine-year-old toes.

At this minute, in fact, he was getting almost as much enjoyment out of watching Cal restlessly toss the ringbearer’s pillow up and down, as he was in watching Bryce and Lara share their first kiss as man and wife. If only Janey could have been here with him, Archer would have deemed this the happiest day of his life. Of course, he’d thought the day Adam married Katie was the best. But now, to have a second grandson wed in the same year... well, life just kept getting better, that was all there was to it. So much good fortune in one lifetime. Archer was unspeakably grateful for all his blessings and more confident than ever that some things were simply meant to be.

Like he and Janey.

Like Adam and Katie.

Like Bryce and Lara.

Like Peter and the as yet unidentified young lady who was somewhere out in the world awaiting her knight in shining armor.

Archer feared this last Braddock match might be the most difficult of the three. Peter had come into the Braddock family circle late and, there was no doubt, he’d brought some heavy emotional baggage with him. Despite the whole family’s best efforts to make him feel wanted and included,

Peter hadn't seemed to feel he belonged, had never seemed to think he quite fit in the midst of the Braddock family. Even now, at twenty-seven, he acted at times as if he believed he still had something to prove, as if there were some test of honor he was required to pass before he could lay a legitimate claim to the history and honor of the Braddock name.

Archer only hoped Ilsa Fairchild could work one more miracle and find the right woman for Peter. Someone who could, perhaps, soften the rough edges of his prodigal heart and help him believe he was, indeed, a fine and worthy young man. It didn't seem likely any of the lovely debutantes he usually preferred had that kind of patience, but if there was one out there, Archer knew Ilsa Fairchild would find her.

He knew now it had not been a mistake to engage a professional matchmaker of uncommon perception, high ideals and an amazing record of success stories. Having heard discreet whispers about her abilities, he'd approached Ilsa, calling himself all kinds of an old fool for believing she could help his grandsons find their own true loves. But she'd taken on the task with her usual ladylike flair and produced two surprising, but delightful, matches. Now only Peter remained.

And James.

Archer knew better than to mention his son to Ilsa as a potential client. She claimed all she did was study, observe and assist a truly seeking heart, but that it wasn't in her power to work miracles. James, who was perpetually engaged to one unsuitable younger woman or another, didn't require the services of a matchmaker, in Ilsa's stated opinion, so much as he needed a good therapist.

But Archer loved his son and he knew, in his heart of hearts, that what James needed and wanted most, was the love and respect of a woman like Ilsa. And there were signs even an old man couldn't miss. Ilsa's interest in James, James's interest in Ilsa, despite how hard each of them tried to disguise the attraction. Archer wasn't blind to his son's flaws, but he didn't believe James was beyond redemption, either. Far from it. And as a father, Archer wasn't above introducing a few matchmaking possibilities himself. Just because James was a fool about women didn't mean he wouldn't recognize the real thing when it was right in front of his nose, and Archer intended to make every effort to place Ilsa right in front of James's nose as often as possible.

After all, he'd watched Ilsa work her discreet and delightful magic on both Adam and Bryce and he'd learned to recognize a good possibility when he saw one. Ilsa and James were a good match. All they needed was the opportunity to recognize that for themselves.

Music purred through the sanctuary as Bryce and Lara came down the aisle, all smiles, as husband and wife. "Ah, Janey..." Archer sent the thought winging heavenward, sharing this precious, long-awaited moment with his dearest wife and friend. "It's a good day for the Braddocks. A very good day."

ILSA FAIRCHILD kept her eye on Theodosia Berenson throughout the wedding reception at Braddock Hall. Not a particularly difficult task, since Thea had left the periphery of the outdoor party only twice so far this evening, both times to fetch a drink for her grandmother. What hold did old Davinia Carey have over her granddaughter? Ilsa wondered. And why did Thea continue to live on at Grace Place with her grandmother, when she was over twenty-one and possessed a sizeable fortune of her own? It was a strange relationship and it bothered Ilsa a great deal, mostly because of a persistent, nagging impulse to set up an introduction of possibilities between Thea and Peter Braddock.

Such a match would never work, would never even get past the initial setup. Not in a million years. But something drew her thoughts to Thea every time she set her mind to finding a love match for Peter. She was losing her touch, obviously. And Ilsa did not enjoy the feeling. Not that every match she set up worked out. Not that she believed every possibility would result in a fairy-tale ending. Life wasn't that orderly and sometimes what might have been the perfect match under one set of circumstances, turned out to be entirely wrong under another set. But this time her instincts seemed to be leading her in a completely wrong direction right from the start, and that hadn't happened before. Ever.

Certainly the Braddock men had been her biggest challenges in years. They were all handsome, all intelligent, all wonderful young men, heirs of a proud and prosperous New England family. They were gentlemen, born and reared, possessed of the same old-world manners and charm as their grandfather and their father. Adam had been a relatively easy match—almost anyone could have seen the sparks of attraction that flew between Katie and Adam the minute they met. It had taken only a little ingenuity and a bit of luck to set their hearts onto the same path. With Bryce, it had taken longer, required some serious study, but the tension that sizzled in the air between he and Lara was unmistakable. Once Ilsa recognized it and realized their hearts had already chosen each other, it was relatively easy to bring their possibilities into focus.

But Peter was different, tougher in ways Ilsa couldn't quite divine. And her intuition, which rarely led her astray, kept turning her in the direction of Thea Berenson, the definitive ugly duckling.

Maybe it was time to take on an apprentice. Training someone in the intuitive arts might help Ilsa refocus her own abilities, sharpen her perspective, and—if nothing else—at least, give her someone with whom she could discuss ideas. Since Adam's marriage to Katie, business at IF Enterprises had increased markedly, and just since the announcement of Bryce's engagement, she'd had private referrals from as far away as South Carolina. Not that she intended to advertise or expand her business outside of New England, but perhaps it was time to think about the future and a time when she might not find matchmaking such a delightful endeavor.

"No frowning now, Ilsa." Archer came up behind her and steadied himself with his cane. A handsome man for all of his seventy-nine years, Archer had become her friend during these past months as the two of them had talked, planned and hoped to find a match for each of his three grandsons. "Not when Bryce and Lara are so happy. Not on their wedding day."

"Who could frown while watching Calvin? He's having a perfectly grand time, isn't he?" She offered the smile he'd requested with hardly any effort at all. "A bonus for you, Archer. A great-grandson, as well as another lovely daughter-in-law."

"A bonus, indeed," Archer agreed. "But Janey is whispering to me right now that you're the one who deserves a bonus." He pulled an envelope from his inside coat pocket and extended it to her. "You've more than earned it, Ilsa."

She looked at the envelope. "A lovely gesture, Archer, but I can't accept that. I've only done what you hired me to do, and my fees are the only compensation necessary. Besides, there's still Peter left."

"Yes, yes." Archer looked toward the dance floor, where his grandson was dancing with a willowy blonde, under a canopy of tall trees, discreet lighting and a starlit sky. "There's still Peter." He turned again to Ilsa, his smile gentle with the pleasures of a long life well spent. "I know I'm not supposed to ask, but any prospects for him as yet?"

"I've had a thought, but..." She shook her head. "No, I don't think it's right. He'd never get past who she is."

Archer watched the dancers in silence for a moment or two. "Peter does have a fascination with the debutantes. The bluer the blood, the better he seems to like them. I'm afraid trying to work one of your introduction of possibilities with someone outside of that inner circle may prove difficult." His lips curved with a very gentlemanly smile. "Of course, you've already proven yourself to be a miracle worker, Ilsa."

"I'm having serious doubts about my ability this time." She paused, hating to ask, but needing to know. "Can you tell me something about Peter's life before he came to live with you, Archer? Not now, but perhaps we can have lunch one day soon and you can give me a little better understanding of him."

With a soft sigh, Archer inclined his head. "Of course. That would, I think, shed some light on the man he is now. I will tell you that we didn't even know Peter was in the world until he was nine. By that time, his mother had told him so many different things about this family, I honestly think he

believed we were royalty or some such nonsense. If Janey hadn't immediately set about to demystify the family history to make him feel a part, I'm not sure Peter would ever have felt he belonged with us." Archer shifted his weight and brought his old eyes back to her. "I'm sure you know some of the story. We tried to keep the circumstances out of the newspapers, but it was quite a scandal at the time."

"I heard some things," Ilsa said, because it was true. "But because I knew James, I always believed there was a great deal more to the story than the newspapers printed."

"James swears he never knew about the boy," Archer said, his gaze steady on hers. "Janey and I believed then...and now...he would have done something to prevent the tragedy had he known."

"James may be guilty of poor judgment when it comes to choosing a wife, but I know he genuinely loves his sons."

Archer's smile emerged with a touch of youthful glee. "I imagine you've noticed Monica's conspicuous absence today."

Ilsa didn't want to show too eager an interest in those details, although she was dying to know what had happened between James and his latest fiancée. "I did wonder where she was."

"Colorado," Archer said with satisfaction. "Day before yesterday, she left in a huff. At James's request."

A whisper of excitement stole through Ilsa for no good reason. "I'm surprised she didn't at least stay for the wedding."

Archer chuckled. "She would have if James hadn't been adamant about her leaving sooner rather than later."

"A lover's quarrel, perhaps?"

"More like an unholy war. He was unhappy with her from the start and I never thought he'd go through with the marriage, anyway. But the important thing is, Ilsa, that James is no longer engaged to be married and I think this could be the perfect opportunity to make an introduction of possibilities for him."

That Archer had illusions of making a match between her and his son was no secret to Ilsa. What she hadn't bargained for was the unexpected thrill of anticipation she felt at the possibility. "I believe I've said this to you before, Archer, but matchmaking is not a precise science and does hold more than its fair share of disappointments."

He smiled, undaunted. "One of the wonderful things about being an old man, is that fear of disappointment isn't much of a deterrent. But there, I don't wish to embarrass you. I simply would like to give you this bonus check before I go out there and persuade my new granddaughter-in-law to shuffle once around the dance floor with me." He extended the envelope to Ilsa again with a look that asked her to take it without further protest.

"Keep the check, Archer," she said. "At least until we see if I can even come up with a suitable possibility of a match for Peter. At the moment, I'm beginning to doubt my own better judgment."

Archer regarded her for a moment, then tucked the envelope back into his jacket pocket. "As I occasionally have told my grandsons, 'Trust your instincts. God gave them to you for a reason.' Or as Janey put it so much more eloquently, 'Follow your impulse. You never know when one may turn out to be exactly, exquisitely right.' And now, Ilsa, my dear, if you'll excuse me, there's a beautiful bride, who is, I believe, saving a dance for me."

Ilsa watched him, marveling at what a courtly appearance he made as he moved through the crowd, never asking for the space to maneuver with his cane, but rather commanding it by the simple measure of a smile here, a word of greeting there. Her glance turned again to Peter, dancing now with Thea Berenson. A duty dance. Anyone looking at the mismatched couple could see that. Peter was nothing if not a gentleman. And Thea was, to her core, a lady.

Follow your impulse.

She let the possibility float as she watched Thea look everywhere but at the man who was holding her at a respectful distance, doing his best to initiate some conversation. And having little

success with it, too. Ilsa caught sight of James, moving through the crowd toward her. Stopping to chat along the way, but catching her eye to let her know she was his destination.

Her heart picked up a silly rhythm of anticipation and she tried to force her thoughts back to Peter and Thea. Thea and Peter.

But James came closer and she began to smile without having any intention of doing so. For the moment, at least, she'd just have to set aside her reservations about a match for Peter Braddock and concentrate all her energy on not falling victim to his father's considerable charm.

Chapter One

Peter tried on half a dozen shirts before he found the right one.

He didn't want to look too formal, because that might make her uncomfortable. He didn't want to look too casual, because that would make him uncomfortable. He didn't want to wear anything too plain and have her thinking he'd dressed down in an attempt to match her, because that could be awkward, as well. But finally, he buttoned up the green Armani silk shirt and grabbed the matching tie, looping it around his neck and tying it in a neat Windsor as he trotted down the stairs, his jacket slung across his arm.

He did not want to be late for this date. No, sir.

What he wanted was to skip it altogether.

But he was descended from a long line of gentlemen and standing up a lady just wasn't anything a Braddock would ever do. Even if he wanted to. Even if his grandfather hadn't specifically asked him to do this one small favor for an old family friend. Peter couldn't see that Davinia Carey was anyone's friend, but that was beside the point. His grandfather had asked him, and Peter couldn't refuse—wouldn't even dream of refusing—this single, simple request.

So he would escort Theadosia Berenson—the nightmare date of all time—to Angela Merchant's wedding and pretend there was no place he'd rather be and no one else he'd rather have at his side.

It was a small enough price to pay for all the Braddock family had given him. A home, when he had nowhere else to go. A family, when the only one he'd known fell apart at the seams. A name to take pride in, when he was marked by shame and scandal. He owed everything to Archer and Jane Braddock. And to his father, James. They'd saved his life, made a man of him. And a gentleman, at that.

Which was the reason Thea would never know she wasn't his dream date for the evening.

He took the last two steps in one bouncy stride, loving the savvy click of his heels as they struck the marble floor.

"Peter?"

Slinging his jacket across his shoulder, he walked quickly to the door of the library, where Archer and James sat before a fire, the first of the season though—it seemed to Peter—more for ambiance than warmth, even now. An ivory chess set was on the table between them, the game clearly heating the normal father and son tensions. James had been at Braddock Hall for nearly five months now, longer than any of his sons could remember him staying in the past and, having recently broken his engagement, he was in the restless stage of being newly single again.

Peter recognized the signs, knew his father didn't miss Monica as much as he missed the idea of himself with the young and beautiful Monica. But it was a good thing the relationship had ended when it had. Peter didn't have any use for women like the ones his father invariably chose, and Monica had been the worst of the lot. So far.

"Where are you headed?" James asked, studying the chessboard before carelessly moving his pawn.

"To Newport. Angela Merchant's wedding is this afternoon at four." He smiled at his grandfather, proud to have been asked to perform this one small good deed. "I'm on my way to pick up my date."

Archer didn't smile back, looked slightly guilty even as he moved to block James's bishop.

"Which beautiful blonde are you taking to this wedding?" James frowned absently as he studied the chessboard and Archer's bid to check. "The lovely Lindsay? The delicate Daphne? The ethereal Emily?"

"Today," Peter said in his most courtly tones. "It's my privilege to be escorting Miss Thea Berenson."

James's frown turned dryly cynical. "Fine, don't tell me who you're taking."

"I'm escorting Thea," Peter repeated. "I'm picking her up at Grace Place and taking her to the wedding. As my date."

James looked up then, his eyes—so like Peter's own—narrowed suspiciously. "You asked Thea Berenson to be your date to Angela Merchant's wedding?" he said incredulously. "Is this your idea of a joke?"

"No, sir," Peter said, offended by the question, even though he knew most everyone would think what James was clearly thinking now. It was one thing to dance with someone like Thea at a social gathering. That was considered the mark of a gentleman. But to ask to escort an acknowledged wallflower to an event, to make it into an actual date, was another thing entirely. In the unwritten laws of chivalrous behavior, it was considered misleading, unkind and nothing a gentleman would ever do unless he had a genuine interest in the lady. Which, of course, Peter didn't. But Archer had made the request and Peter wasn't going to apologize to anyone for acceding to it. "I not only asked," he told James with an easy smile, "but was accepted. That's usually a prelude to a pleasant evening, as I fully expect this one to be."

James looked at Peter thoughtfully, then his gaze swiveled to Archer. "Is this your idea of a joke? Thea Berenson? Come on, Dad. You don't honestly think she and Peter could ever..."

"I honestly think Peter should go now before he's late," Archer said, with an upward glance that barely met Peter's eyes before skittering away. "Davinia is a stickler about punctuality."

Peter frowned, wondering at his grandfather's odd tone. Surely, Archer didn't believe Thea was that bad. She wasn't much to look at, true. She didn't have much to say for herself, either. And she wore clothes more suitable for a prim nineteenth century schoolmarm than a twenty-first century debutante. But Peter had never thought she was as hopeless as most people seemed to think. He'd certainly never thought of her as the ugly duckling some of his friends considered her to be.

Which didn't mean he was looking forward to the evening. Quite the contrary. But he didn't think it would be unbearable, either, as his father clearly did. And he didn't believe Thea had any misconceptions about his reason for asking her out. They were attending the event together because their grandparents had decided they should. End of story. "Grandfather's right. I should go. It wouldn't do for a Braddock to be late for a date...no matter who it is or what the circumstances."

"Peter," James said, his gaze narrowed firmly on Archer. "I think you ought to know that your grandfather has been engaging in some match—"

"—hopeful contemplation," Archer interrupted firmly, "that you and Miss Berenson will have a perfectly lovely evening. And that you will be, as you always are, a perfect gentleman."

"I believe you can safely count on that." Peter tossed the keys to his BMW roadster and caught them with confidence. "It's the one thing you can always count on your grandsons to be. Good night, Dad. Grandpop," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast."

Peter turned and started out, then paused to flash a grin over his shoulder at James. "Oh, and Dad, watch out for your queen. Looks like Grandpop is just about to turn her into a damsel in distress."

THEA CREPT ALONG THE tree limb, keeping a firm grip on the branch with one hand and pausing every few inches to scoot the down comforter bundled beneath her so she wouldn't scratch her bare thighs on the rough bark. She'd jerked the comforter from her bed without a thought as to how slippery it would be, just as she'd climbed out on this limb without stopping to consider that she was a wee bit underdressed for tree climbing. But it was too late for second thoughts at this point. She was several feet up in the old oak, straddling the down-filled comforter for all she was worth and wishing she had never rescued the calico kitten from an untimely end in the first place.

Ahead of her and one narrow branch above her head, the kitten yowled out a fearful screech of a sound. "Would you quit that, Ally?" Thea said softly. "If Grandmother finds us in this tree, it'll cost you at least eight of your nine lives, and you don't have that many left." It would mean a stern lecture for her, too, but Thea didn't imagine the kitten would care much about that. As dearly as she loved

all of her pets, none of them seemed to appreciate the sacrifices she made in order to keep them in the manner to which they'd become accustomed.

Inching forward just a bit farther, she lifted a tentative hand up to the little calico, which fuzzed and arched her back in fright, before backing up another few inches along the tree limb.

"Come on, Ally. I'm here to help. Honest." She coaxed the kitten with low, soothing tones, as she hugged the comforter with her thighs and scrooched farther along the oak branch. "How many times do we have to go through this drill before you trust me to get you back inside?"

The kitten meowed plaintively, her tawny eyes rounded in distress, her claws clenched on the tree like tiny anchors. Thea calculated the distance from where she was to where the kitten was, and back to the attic window from where she'd started this rescue mission. Grace Place, her grandmother's childhood home, loomed large and sullen beside the leafy old oak, the open attic window the only inviting element in the otherwise hulking structure. But a home was more than stones and mortar. Grace Place was all the home Thea had ever known, her grandmother all she knew of family. The house really wasn't so bad. It had potential and someday, when her grandmother was no longer around to protest every change, Thea imagined it would look very different with gardens of bright flowers and shutters painted a soft cream, instead of stark black. Inside the house, she'd replace the heavy draperies with open-weave curtains, which would welcome every drop of sun, warming the rooms with natural light, instead of conserving every degree of artificial heat within by keeping the outside weather out.

But someday wasn't today.

Today was Angela Merchant's wedding day and, if Thea didn't get this silly kitten out of the tree, get herself inside and dressed, she was going to miss one of the biggest social events of the season. Not that she'd mind in the least. But her grandmother wouldn't hear of such a thing, which meant Thea was going to the wedding, by gum or by golly.

If only Davinia hadn't decided that this time Thea required an escort....

Like a bad omen, she heard the distant throb of a powerful engine and her heart picked up the throaty rhythm, adding in a ragged, anxious beat. Peter Braddock was on his way to get her. By the sound of it, he was nearly at the gate, which meant he'd be ringing the front bell in ten minutes. Or less.

She entertained a fleeting thought of staying up in the tree and hoping no one would find her. But that was merely wishful thinking. Monroe always found her, no matter how well she thought she was hidden. Thea frowned meaningfully at the kitten. "This is it, alley cat. Either you come with me now, or you'll have to get yourself down. What's it to be?"

She extended her arm as far as possible and coaxed in low, persuasive tones, "Here, kitty, kitty. Come on, kitty...."

The calico seemed to sense her last chance and, crouching low on the limb, made a tentative move toward Thea's outstretched fingers. "That's right," Thea coached. "Just a little bit farther..."

The low purring of the sports car's engine slowed, indicating it had reached the gate. Peter was probably buzzing in even now and once the gates swung open, it wouldn't take him two minutes to reach the house. Thea knew it was now or never, so she made a grab for the cat. Catching hold of one furry leg, the whole scrabbling, scratching ball of fur came tumbling into her arms and tried to climb her shoulder. "Stop it, Ally," she said, trying desperately to calm the kitten and maintain her grip on the tree branch. But her balance was off and the down comforter was slip-sliding dangerously. All Thea could do was hold on to the cat as she tipped to the side and fell, shielding the kitten with a last-minute hunching of her shoulders.

She hit the ground in a rolling thud, thankfully cushioned by the soft bulk of the down comforter, and clambered to her feet, still holding on to the kitten and ignoring the sharp ache in her hip. The engine had revved again, preparatory to sweeping around the curving drive to the house, and she knew her window of opportunity was fading fast. If she didn't get in the house immediately, Peter Braddock was going to drive up and see his date for the evening clad only in her silk slip. Leaving

the comforter pooled at the base of the tree, Thea made a wild, limping dash for the back of the house, praying fervently that Monroe had left the door to the servants' quarters unlocked and that Peter Braddock would turn out to be extremely nearsighted.

PETER CAUGHT A GLIMPSE of a scantily clad female form—a rather nice form from what he could see—running around the corner of the house as he drove up. Funny. He'd heard that the only females at Grace Place were old Davinia, Thea and the elderly retainer's plump wife. Apparently, though, there was at least one slim, young and attractive woman on the household staff. Either that, or one of the groundskeepers had invited his girlfriend over for a little afternoon delight. Wouldn't Mrs. Carey have a fit if she knew about that? She'd probably string the man up by his thumbs and post him by the front gates as a warning to anyone else with lascivious appetites who might step foot on her property. Thea's grandmother seemed a regular tyrant, a throwback to another era, an idealist who believed the restraints and restrictions of Victorian England still had a place in twenty-first century America.

Peter turned off the engine of the car, pocketing the keys as he stepped out onto the paved drive. He'd always felt a deal of sympathy for Thea, caught in a life she surely wouldn't have chosen for herself. There were rumors about Thea's mother, Davinia's willful and rebellious daughter. Peter didn't know if the rumors were true or if, in fact, they had anything to do with the tight rein Davinia held on her only surviving grandchild. He didn't have a clue as to why Thea allowed herself to be governed by her grandmother's outdated ideas and ideals. It wasn't as if she had no other recourse. Everyone knew she had considerable assets of her own.

Not that it mattered to him one way or another. He had no intention of giving Thea or her grandmother any grounds for complaint. Not tonight or at any time in the future. He couldn't imagine even a single circumstance under which he'd be tempted to behave as anything other than a perfect gentleman with Thea. She wasn't exactly his idea of a temptress.

The idea of Thea as femme fatale made him smile as he loped up the steps and pushed the doorbell, half expecting to be admitted by a butler straight out of the old Addams Family television series. But the liveried man who opened the thick wooden door looked more like Santa Claus than Lurch. "May I help you?" the butler said.

"I'm Peter Braddock." Peter offered the information with a smile. "I believe Ms. Berenson is expecting me."

"Miss Thea isn't quite ready, sir, but Mrs. Carey would like to greet you in the parlor."

Disguising his reluctance to be greeted, Peter stepped inside the cavernous foyer and blinked in the dusky, dusty light. Grace Place, on first impression, did not live up to its name. Although as his vision adjusted to the gloom, he could see the house might once have been something spectacular. Dual stairways curved up on either side of a large entry and the chandelier hanging from the ceiling was quite simply massive. If lit it would undoubtedly illuminate the entryway with a crystalline light.

"This way, please." The butler walked with a slight hitch in his step to the far side of the foyer, where he opened an ornately carved wooden door to reveal a dim room decorated in a style that hadn't been fashionable for forty years. "Mr. Peter Braddock is here for Miss Thea," he announced, then stepped aside so that Peter could enter the parlor, which was just as dreary as the foyer, if not more so.

Davinia Carey sat like the proverbial spider, in a web of ruffled cushions on a dark green velvet settee. Her hair was crimped and upswept into a tight knot atop her head. It was as black as a raven's wing, which made her face look unnaturally pale in the gloomy light. "Good afternoon, Peter," she said in a voice that made him feel he wasn't standing quite straight enough.

Peter wasn't easily intimidated, but Davinia Carey always made him nervous, as if she was both judge and jury, as though she knew that beneath his GQ facade he was merely a pretender to the throne. "Hello, Mrs. Carey," he replied in a voice that betrayed not one iota of his feelings. "It's very nice to see you again. I hope you're feeling well today."

She sniffed, a sound as eloquent as any words. "Have a seat, Peter."

He glanced around and chose a straight-backed Queen Anne, which was as uncomfortable as it looked, but had the advantage of being a respectable distance from the settee. For some reason, he found himself remembering the night of his first formal dance. He'd been a gawky, awkward kid, barely thirteen, and still terrified he would do something to embarrass the whole Braddock family. He'd made himself sick worrying about the dance and what he should or shouldn't say to the pretty girl who was his date, until Grandmother Jane had taken him aside and offered her wise counsel. "Some day, Peter," she'd said. "You'll meet the woman who will be your wife and you'll realize that her opinion of you truly matters. This is not that day, so stop worrying, relax and simply do your best to have a good time."

Well, today was not that day, either. And with the thought, he offered Davinia Carey a warm and kindly smile. "I've never been to your home before," he said easily. "Grace Place is an impressive estate."

"It's nothing to what it was when I was Thea's age. This house is not as old as Braddock Hall, but my great-great-grandfather, Davis Madison Grace, spared no expense in building it."

Which didn't keep it from looking like a very poor relation now, Peter thought but didn't, of course, say aloud. "I believe Grandfather mentioned this was your childhood home."

The sniff again. This time expressing nostalgia, perhaps, or some old regret for days gone by. "My coming-out ball was as grand as any party ever given at The Breakers, I can assure you. Ask your grandfather. He'll remember." She paused, her eyes narrowing on him. "Grace Place will belong to Theadosia one day."

He didn't know quite how to respond to that, but she seemed to expect a reply, so he said, "Lucky Thea."

"Luck has nothing whatsoever to do with it, Peter. She was born an heiress."

The slight stress on the word was, he felt, not only intentional but intended to remind him that he hadn't inherited the Braddock name and its privileges at birth. He had, in fact, spent the first nine years of his life believing he was the son of another man, a poor man, and hadn't even been acknowledged as a Braddock until he was nine. A lot of people knew that. It wasn't exactly a secret. But no one had ever pointed it out to him in such a coldly calculating way. Davinia Grace Carey was telling him he was not good enough for her granddaughter and it was all Peter could do not to challenge her on it. As if Thea had suitors climbing the walls of this monstrous old house in the hope of winning her heart. Or at least her fortune.

He held the old woman's gaze and didn't politely look away when it grew uncomfortable. "As I said before, lucky Thea."

She drew herself up at that and a haughty smile curved along her thin lips, making her look even more like a spider in no particular hurry to immobilize her prey. "I see that we understand each other, Peter. I'm not sure what Archer had in mind in setting up this assignation between you and Thea. Do you know?"

Peter breathed deeply to maintain his composure. "I believe he hoped we would have a pleasant evening."

"Be that as it may, Thea has been brought up as a lady and I do expect you to treat her as such. You will have her home at a reasonable hour. Not a moment past midnight, and in the same virtuous condition as when she walks out the door with you."

It was becoming very clear why Theadosia Berenson attended social functions alone or accompanied by this harridan of a chaperone. Peter resolved then and there that tonight he would keep Thea out at least five moments past midnight, even if he was so bored by that time the seconds dripped like molasses. "I assure you, Mrs. Carey, my grandmother taught me to be a gentleman at all times, even under the most tempting of circumstances. Believe me, there's no need for you to worry. Thea will be perfectly safe with me."

Davinia frowned at him, obviously unconvinced of his sincerity, but then her gaze went past him to the doorway. "Theadosia," she said. "Come in. How many times do I have to remind you it's not polite for a lady to hover in a doorway? Come in, come in." She extended a veiny hand. "You look lovely, dear. Doesn't she, Peter?"

Lovely wasn't the word for it. Thea looked bedraggled and miserably self-conscious. Her dress fit badly, at best, and covered her from high neck to midcalf in a dreary beige. Her hair was its normal mousey-brown, and looped haphazardly into a frazzled topknot that already showed signs of slip-sliding toward her left ear. The double strand of pearls she wore was too long to be stylish and too big to be simply a nice touch. Matching pearl earrings, too large for her pointy little face, studded her earlobes and were all but lost behind the black-frame glasses that sat halfway down her nose, which obscured her thick-lashed and luminous eyes. Neither jewelry nor glasses did anything to enhance her overall appearance. But if lying to a lady wasn't in any Gentleman's Handbook, diplomacy certainly was.

Peter rose instantly to his feet and offered her a warmly approving smile. "Hello, Thea," he said. "I can't tell you how happy I am to see you. I've been looking forward to this evening for days."

She ducked her head and said, "Hello, Peter," in a voice so soft it practically evaporated on contact with the air.

"Stand up straight," Davinia commanded and Thea straightened like a marionette. "Remember who you are, tonight, Theadosia. Peter has assured me he will take very good care of you."

For a second, Peter caught a glimpse of life in the eyes behind the heavy-rimmed glasses, a flicker of amusement as out of place in Thea's brown eyes as the ray of sunlight tentatively creeping in through a crack in the draperies. "Okay," Thea said in her meek and whispery voice and he decided all he'd seen was a reflection in the lens of her glasses.

"Shall we go?" He was suddenly anxious to get her outside, away from the gloom and suffocating presence of her grandmother, away from the weight of expectations that seemed to press down about them from all directions. "I put the top up on the car so your hair won't get blown all out of...place." He paused, wishing he'd left the top down. She might like to have the wind blowing through her hair for a change, and it wasn't as if her hairstyle relied much on staying in place as it was. "But if you'd prefer, I can put it down again."

"Certainly not," Davinia said firmly. "I've never understood why anyone would have one of those convertibles in the first place. They're dangerous and I can assure you, Peter, that Thea does not wish to arrive anywhere, particularly at a formal affair, looking as if she's had her head in a wind tunnel."

Peter thought she might prefer that to looking as if she'd combed her hair with an egg beater, but since Thea didn't contradict her grandmother, he didn't think it was his place to step in and do it. Gentlemen, as a general rule, minded their own business.

He started to take Thea's elbow, but thought that if she didn't faint from nervousness at his touch, her grandmother might slap his hand with a ruler and remind him that a gentleman never touched a lady without permission. He hedged his bets by moving to the doorway and sort of urging Thea along by example. "Good evening, Mrs. Carey," he said.

"I do hope you have an enjoyable evening," the old woman called after them.

But Peter was almost positive she didn't mean a word of it.

Chapter Two

“Would you like something else to drink?” Peter asked as considerately as if it were the first time he’d posed a similar question instead of the eleventh or twelfth. “More punch, maybe? Or a soda?”

Thea tried to think of a witty reply, some way of refusing his offer that wouldn’t be completely flat and uninteresting. Peter had been so nice, had tried so hard, right from the minute he’d opened the door of his car for her and offered for the second time to put down the convertible’s top. She’d wanted to flash a saucy smile and say, “Yes, please, I love the feel of the wind in my hair. I’ve always thought I’d enjoy driving a convertible. What about letting me test-drive this one? I promise I’ll pay for the speeding ticket, if we get caught.”

But she hadn’t said that. Not even close. She’d mumbled a simple, “No, thank you,” which had pretty much been the extent of her contribution to the conversation throughout the evening, with the occasional “Yes, thank you,” thrown in for variety.

“Would you like to sit here?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Shall I ask the waiter to get you another piece of wedding cake?”

“No, thank you.”

“Are you cold? Would you like to borrow my jacket?”

“No, thank you.”

“Do you want to dance?”

“No, thank you.”

“No, thank you,” she said now because as much as she wanted to say something else, anything else, she simply couldn’t seem to get both brain and tongue working in sync. And, too, she couldn’t bring herself to swallow another mouthful of punch. She was practically swimming in it already. The virgin punch, of course, the one made of sweet fruit juices and some fizzy water, served to the younger guests in lieu of champagne. Peter hadn’t even asked her preference on that count, just indicated to their waiter that they’d both have the punch. Which meant either her grandmother had given him a stern warning about the dangers of drinking and dating, or he’d just assumed she didn’t touch anything stronger than root beer and since she didn’t, he wouldn’t, either.

Or he might simply be afraid of what would happen if she got a little alcohol in her. She’d overheard her grandmother’s embarrassing instruction to him to return her to Grace Place “in the same virtuous condition as when she’d walked out the door.” With a soft sigh, Thea acknowledged there wasn’t a chance in ten million the evening could end any other way. Alcohol or no.

“Dinner was good,” she said, because the Peking duck had been cooked to perfection, and because she was determined to make at least one remark without being prompted.

He smiled, seemingly pleased she’d made even that small effort. “Yes, it was,” he agreed. “I heard they brought in a hot new chef from the West Coast just for the occasion.”

Thea thought “bringing in a chef” smacked of flaunting one’s wealth, something no descendent of Davis Madison Grace would ever consider to be in good taste. “Imagine how far they had to go to find the duck,” she said.

Peter blinked. And then he laughed, startling Thea with the pure sensual pleasure contained in that one throaty sound. She felt the heat of a blush rise in her cheeks, wondered if she’d actually said something amusing or if he was just being polite. Either possibility seemed equally disturbing and produced the exact same effect...freezing her ability to speak all over again.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if they flew them in special delivery from Beijing,” Peter said with a grin. “Her dad once told me he would spare no expense when it came to Angela’s wedding.”

Thea knew Peter and Angela had once been an item in the society columns, and it was no secret that the Merchants had hoped for a match between their family and the Braddocks. There had even been rumors late last year that Peter and Angela were unofficially engaged. Of course, there had been rumors before. About all of the Braddocks. But Thea had mainly only paid attention to the ones about Peter. He was closer to her age, twenty-seven to her twenty-five, and of the three brothers, she liked him the best.

Not that he would know this.

She took a deep breath and decided that as this was likely to be her only date ever with Peter Braddock, she ought to make a legitimate attempt to talk to him. No matter how difficult it was to open her mouth and say the words.

She did know how to talk and she never lacked for conversation when it was just her and her menagerie of pets. She'd been on dates before, too. Not many, true. Fewer, in fact, than she could count on both hands, but enough to know the rudiments of dialogue with a man. If she asked the right question, he'd start talking, then she'd mostly just have to nod and listen from there on in. She was good at listening. It was just getting the conversation started that caused her all the problems.

She wished she had said, yes, and let him walk to the bar and fetch her a soda. At least, then, she'd have had a few minutes to think about what she could say when he got back. But she didn't drink sodas. Bad for her teeth, her grandmother said. Bad for her skin. And no matter what she thought of to say when he returned with the soda, she'd be preoccupied in trying to hide the fact that she wasn't drinking the soda she'd requested he get for her.

Thea shifted in her chair and smoothed her beige silk skirt over her knees. She knew she looked lifeless and drab in the dress, knew it was hardly the height of contemporary fashion, knew even if she were wearing the gorgeous dress Miranda Danville had on at this very moment, she'd still look like the misfit she was. Peter must be wishing he could be anywhere else, with anyone else, doing anything other than sitting with her in this ungainly silence. He had to be counting the minutes until he could take her home.

But none of that bothered her as much as knowing that if she didn't say something soon, the evening would be over and he'd never know she actually had something to say.

"Wait just a minute," Peter said, interrupting her fierce struggle to conquer her inept silence. He leaned close and her senses were suddenly filled with him. His scent was a breezy blend of good soap and men's cologne; his roughly handsome face was near enough for her to see the sensual green of his eyes and the slight scar on the bridge of his otherwise perfect nose; his breath on her skin was warm against her cheek and as soft as a caress; his hand was firm and persuasive as he stood and urged her up out of her chair; his smile was as seductive as a kiss. "You have to dance with me now, Thea. Listen to that. They're playing our song."

She cocked her head to listen, sure he was teasing her, wishing he would either go off and dance with someone else or be content to sit out the dances, wondering why he'd agreed to spend this intolerable evening with her in the first place. She'd noticed the covert glances of other wedding guests, knew most of them were looking at Peter with sympathy and admiring him for being too much of a gentleman to ditch his sad sack of a date and enjoy himself.

Thea wanted to tell him she'd honestly tried to override her grandmother's insistence that she accept his invitation. She wanted to say that just because his grandfather had coerced him into escorting her, didn't mean she expected him to entertain her. But then, slipping in between her melancholy thoughts, finding a foothold in her memory, the melody and lyrics of the song registered as familiar and coaxed a slow smile across her lips.

"You say it best," the lead singer crooned, "when you say nothing at all."

She glanced up at his face, hoping he wasn't making a joke at her expense. It had happened before. Not with Peter, but...Nothing in his expression suggested anything other than a kind attempt to let her know it was okay, that she didn't have to say anything at all. His smile—the one that was

tucked in at the corners of his mouth and reflected in the true green of his eyes, was merely approving and, perhaps, just a little bit hopeful.

And without a second's warning, she was locked with Peter in a moment that meant something only to the two of them. He was teasing her and, for the first time in her life, Thea felt she was in on a joke. An amazing sense of belonging flooded through her, her throat lost its strangling tightness, and she laughed aloud. Softly, uncertainly...yes. Under her breath for the most part, but still a laugh that came right from the very heart of her.

Peter laughed, too, and looked...well, satisfied. "So, Theadosia," he said. "May I please have this dance?"

"Yes, thank you," she replied, feeling that somehow those three words were really all she needed to say.

IT WASN'T THE BEST TIME Peter had ever had at a wedding. That would have been Bryce's and Lara's wedding last month, with Adam's and Katie's wedding three months before that, running a close second. But tonight wasn't the worst time he'd ever had watching someone else get married, either. That would have been Christina Ephraim's wedding when he was fifteen and so hopelessly infatuated with the bride—his English tutor and drama coach and a sophisticated, beautiful older woman, besides—he'd very nearly embarrassed himself along with the whole Braddock family by sobbing out his heartache during the ceremony.

Luckily, his grandmother had sensed his distress and developed a dizzy spell that required him to step outside with her until her equilibrium—and his composure—returned. He'd always loved Grandmother Jane for that, and because she'd never said a word about it afterward, even though he knew she didn't have dizzy spells. Ever.

Yes, that was definitely the worst wedding he'd ever attended. Tonight, with Thea? Not even close. In fact, if he could just get her to relax a little, they might both actually start to enjoy the evening.

Well, okay, so true enjoyment might be a stretch, but at least he'd have a better time if she wasn't so quietly miserable. He'd never spent this much concentrated effort on a date before and would have been angry about her lack of response if it hadn't been Thea. It wasn't that he felt sorry for her—something about her didn't allow for pity. It was more that he wanted to put her at ease, wanted her to have a good time, wanted this night to be a pleasant evening for her to remember.

Before at other social functions, he'd danced with her because common courtesy demanded it. He'd tried to be charming because he thought her life was a tad lacking in the charm department. But now that he'd been inside Grace Place and felt Davinia Carey's suffocating disapproval firsthand, he wanted to go beyond courtesy and easy charm to show Thea a good time. That seemed important now that he knew he would soon have to take her back to a dark, dreary place where she was told to stand up straight and reminded at every turn to act like a lady. A place where smiles and laughter were probably scarce, and bestowed even less often than any genuine approval.

So if she didn't find talking to him an easy thing to do, he had to consider that a personal challenge, not as some great flaw in her. And as long as they were dancing, the lack of conversation didn't feel so cumbersome. It was obvious she was nervous. And shy. And trying to juggle who knew how many edicts from her grandmother about how she should behave. It wouldn't surprise him in the least if Davinia had spies posted around the country club even now, watching Thea, waiting to report any untoward act or unladylike behavior. No one deserved to be treated that way and he really would have liked to ask Thea why she put up with the old tyrant.

But that would only put her in an even more awkward position and probably put the kiss of death on any further conversation for the night.

As if that would be so different from now.

The best he could do was allow her her silence. So he merely pulled her a little closer and marveled at how well she danced. She always seemed so uncomfortable in social settings, so ill at ease with herself and others, but on the dance floor, she moved almost...well, gracefully. Sometimes,

like now, when she forgot for a minute to be self-conscious, she floated in his arms like a feather. “We dance very well together, Thea,” he said, surprised to realize it was true.

She missed a step and looked up at him, clearly startled and blushing at the compliment, which brought a pleasing hint of color to the smooth ivory skin beneath the oversized glasses. “Oh,” she said. “Then I must be doing it wrong.”

“No, you must be doing it right.”

She shook her head, still looking up at him, and he noticed, maybe for the first time, that her eyes were a warm, rich coffee-brown, fringed with a smudge of dark lashes. “If I’m doing it correctly, no one’s supposed to notice.” She bit her lip, as if so many words in one sentence were a faux pas. “According to Miss Blythe.”

Peter drew back slightly to look at her. “You took dancing from Miss Blythe, too?”

She made a face and ducked her head as she nodded. Her voice, when it came, was quieter even than before, shyer and softer. “I was in your class once.”

He wanted to remember, to call up some long forgotten memory of Thea at what age? Seven? Eight? He hadn’t been more than ten or eleven when his grandmother had enrolled him at Miss Blythe’s. Just for the fundamentals, Grandmother Jane had said and, true to her word, she hadn’t pushed him beyond the essentials of learning the basic steps. He could conjure up a mental picture of Miranda Danville, her blond braids dangling across her shoulders, as she told him to count his steps! He could recall Angela Merchant, her blond curls bouncing down her back, insisting he’d stepped on her toes on purpose! He could remember a whole chorus of pretty little girls, who knew, even then, who they were and who weren’t at all sure this rough and tumble boy belonged in their social strata—even if his newly acquired name was Braddock. They’d changed their minds and found him immensely acceptable by the time adolescence rounded their bodies and added an alluring charm to their flirtation skills.

But he didn’t remember Thea.

“I didn’t take classes with Miss Blythe for very long,” he said, as if that excused it. “I wasn’t exactly star pupil material at that time in my life.”

“You were a natural, even then,” Thea stated. “Even Miss Blythe thought so.”

He laughed. “I’m afraid not. She told me flat out to concentrate on developing some charm because I certainly wasn’t going to get anywhere with my dancing.”

“Did your grandmother know she said that?”

Jane Braddock would have taken the shine right off of Miss Blythe’s fancy dancing shoes if she’d known. “No,” he said with a self-effacing smile. “I didn’t want to take dance lessons in the first place. If Miss Blythe hadn’t said that to me, I might never have decided to prove her wrong. Then where would I be right now?” He pulled her closer. “I’d be sitting on the sidelines, watching you dance with some other man and wishing it were me.”

She stumbled and he caught her, setting her back into the shared rhythm of the dance as easily as if she hadn’t missed a step. “Don’t please,” she said so softly he had to bend his head to catch the words. “You don’t have to charm me. Couldn’t we just...dance?”

A stab of remorse whispered through him like a shameful secret. Thea knew his words were false, recognized his charm for the polished insincerity it was, and was offended by it. As she had every right to be. This date hadn’t been his idea, true. But he didn’t for a minute believe it had been high on her wish list, either. She didn’t want him to pretend. She simply wanted the evening to proceed to its natural end with some little bit of dignity.

“That would be my pleasure,” he said because, whether she believed him or not, that much was true.

“YOU WON’T REGRET THIS, Mrs. Fairchild.” Ainsley Danville hugged Ilsa with one hundred percent pure enthusiasm. “I’m very good with people and I have a real knack for

matchmaking. Even if I do say so myself.” She drew back, her pretty face flushed with excitement, her blue eyes sparkling with anticipation. “Who do you think should be my first client?”

Ilsa tried not to sigh. “You’ll start in the office and learn about all the paperwork that goes along with this kind of work. And Ainsley, you must keep in mind that discretion is essential. I’d prefer you tell anyone who asks that you’re an associate with IF Enterprises, not a matchmaker. For the record, I seldom, if ever, refer to my business as ‘matchmaking.’”

“I understand completely, Mrs. Fairchild. I am the very soul of discretion.” Her smile bloomed again and Ilsa thought it more than likely the news that she’d hired an assistant would be all over Rhode Island before sundown tomorrow. Perhaps all over New England, as well. But it was done. She’d wrestled with this decision for weeks. Ainsley had been campaigning for the job for nearly a year. Ilsa could only hope having an apprentice would turn out to be a lucky decision, even if it didn’t feel at all like a wise one at the moment.

Ainsley leaned closer. “Tell me, please, Mrs. Fairchild, are you responsible for today’s wedding, too?”

They were both in attendance at the wedding reception for Angela Merchant and Park Overton—now Mr. and Mrs. Park Overton—and Ilsa actually had made an introduction of possibilities for the couple not quite a year ago. But responsible for the wedding? No, she wouldn’t say that at all. “I don’t take credit for weddings, Ainsley. Only for helping someone see possibilities that already existed in the first place. I do hope you’ll keep in mind that no matter how well you do your homework or how sure you are the match you’ve put together is the right one, the whole thing can, and often does, fall apart. Park and Angela are two of the lucky ones. Much of what happens is luck, Ainsley. Once we’ve introduced the possibility of a match, the rest is out of our sphere of influence entirely. So while I don’t believe in taking credit for someone else’s happily ever after, I certainly don’t believe in blaming myself when a match doesn’t work out, either.”

Ainsley nodded, her expression beautifully serious. “I’ll remember that,” she said. “No taking the credit and no taking the blame.” Her irrepressible spirit rebounded with a wide smile. “So how soon can I start? Because I already have someone in mind as sort of a test case. My cousin, Scott, is single and desperately lonely. I have a hunch Julia Butterfield would really like him. He’s sort of rowdy and he’s not a vegan—he eats all kinds of meat—but I think he might change his bad habits if he met the right woman.”

Ilsa kept smiling despite the most pressing impulse to sigh. “First, office procedure, Ainsley,” she reminded her new assistant. “Then we’ll see about letting you work with me on a match.”

“Okay. Gotcha.”

Ilsa reminded herself again that she needed help with her business. And Ainsley had the personality for it. She was cute, she was bubbly, she was optimistic and she had a natural intuition about people, even though it flared a little on the wild side occasionally. But Ilsa did hope this new alliance would work out. She needed an infusion of Ainsley’s enthusiasm. Her own had been flagging lately and this could turn out well for both of them. After all, the whole premise of IF Enterprises was summed up in her own personal motto that Anything Is Possible.

Sipping her glass of wine, Ilsa looked around to see what Peter had done with Thea. They were no longer sitting in the far corner of the room, the spot Thea seemed usually to prefer and which they had occupied since dinner. They might already have left. It was early yet, but...no, there. They were dancing, and despite the fact that Theadosia looked like a maiden aunt, she seemed to be...well, not entirely miserable. Peter didn’t appear to be bored to distraction, although it was hard to tell for sure, and common sense told her he couldn’t be enjoying the evening.

Maybe something would come of this, although she couldn’t imagine what. Or how. Ilsa simply felt badly about her part in putting this mismatch together. Even for just these few hours. She should never have mentioned the impulse to Archer. She should not have heeded his encouragement to follow through on her hunch and set up this one evening of possibility. And she definitely should not have

allowed him to use his influence over Peter and his long acquaintance with Davinia Carey to arrange this date with disaster. What possibility could exist, other than in her imagination, between Peter Braddock and Theodosia Berenson? It was a bad idea that just wouldn't go away.

"Ainsley?" she said on impulse. "What do you know about Thea Berenson?"

Ainsley frowned, studying the question the way she might examine a raw turnip. "Well, some people call her Teddy Bear because she always looks a little fuzzy, if you know what I mean?"

Ilsa did.

"I've heard her called a poor, little rich girl, too, but it would be hard to tell that by looking at her. I don't know what happened to her parents, although it must have been bad because nobody ever mentions them except in hushed-up tones, like it was some big scandal or something. She had a brother, but he died a couple of years ago. Of meanness, my sister said, but I think it was really just a heart attack. No mystery there. The real mystery to me," Ainsley added as if it were incomprehensible, "is why she still lives with her grandmother who is—pardon my frankness, but I have to be honest—the original Wicked Witch of all New England and possibly the world."

There was some truth in the statement, but while Ilsa didn't want to discourage her protégé's observations, she did want to encourage a temperate perspective of others' life situations. "Davinia Carey isn't, perhaps, a warm person, but I believe she has had a rather unhappy life."

"Well, excuse me," Ainsley said without apology. "But that's not a good reason to make Thea miserable."

Also true.

"Why do you think Thea allows someone else to make her miserable?" Ilsa asked, interested in gaining someone else's insight. "If, indeed, she is."

"Oh, how could she not be?" Ainsley said. "I can't imagine why she stays at Grace Place when she can afford to buy a place of her own."

"Maybe her money is tied up in trusts and she can't touch any of it until she's older." Ilsa had a file on Thea—a woefully thin one—but of course, the financial information was private, so all she could do was speculate along with Ainsley. "That's very possible."

"She could get a job. She has a degree from Wellesley, you know. I don't know what she studied, but she could get a job at a museum or something. I sure wouldn't live in that dark old house with that old..." Ainsley let the intended epithet trail away. "With her grandmother," she finished and Ilsa gave her full marks for being a quick learner.

"Maybe," Ilsa said, "Thea is afraid of what will happen if she leaves."

"Maybe with good reason." Ainsley frowned, obviously still studying the oddness of Thea's life. But then, like the sun coming out, her blue eyes went wide and she turned back to Ilsa, the light of conspiracy in her smile. "Holy Toledo, Mrs. Carey didn't hire you to make a match for Thea, did she? I mean, who would you ever find to match up with her?"

A good question, if not quite an accurate observation. "There's someone for everyone, Ainsley."

"He'll have to be a true Prince Charming," she said, her attention returning to the couples on the dance floor, as if she thought she could spot a match for Thea just by looking. "And maybe very nearsighted."

Ilsa let her gaze travel back to where Peter and Thea were still dancing. Not talking. Or looking at each other. But something in the way he held her, something in the way she moved in his arms, something about...

No. Ilsa knew she had to be imagining that indefinable something she felt when she saw Peter with Thea. They could never, in a million years, find the true heart of the other. Even if they were inclined to look.

"Ilsa?" Ainsley's voice had softened to a thoughtful musing. "Have you ever felt that maybe Thea and..."

She didn't finish the thought, left it dangling in the air between them, but the quicksilver clench of knowing caught Ilsa unaware. Peter. Ainsley felt it, too. That something Ilsa hadn't been able to name.

Which didn't mean either one of them were right about it.

"Davinia has not hired me to find a match for Thea," Ilsa said truthfully. "Nor would she. Ever."

Ainsley smiled, secretively at first, but then with blinding self-confidence. "Would you mind if I worked on a possibility for Thea?" she asked. "On my own time, of course, and I won't actually do anything. I'll just sort of think about it, look around for a nearsighted prince of a guy, ponder possibilities in my head. Would that be okay?"

Ilsa knew she should say no. Flat out. But Ainsley couldn't, just by thinking and wondering and imagining, do any harm. Truthfully, she couldn't do any worse than Ilsa had already done if she set out full-tilt to find Thea a match. "As long as you keep in mind that even a matchmaker can't work miracles."

"Gotcha," Ainsley said, although a miracle was clearly what she had in mind.

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