



Marrying Max

Nell Dixon

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Dedication

For my husband, who always believed in me.

Chapter One

Max stared at the house then glanced back down at the sheet of paper in his hand. He couldn't possibly be in the right place.

"The house itself is an architectural gem, offering the perfect family environment." He read the letter from Ginny, his former secretary, out loud in disbelief and looked up once more at the facade in front of him. "This is never going to work."

Stone gargoyles peered down from their ledges and nooks. Curved and curly fascia boards with peeling paint sat on top of the bright red bricks like melted icing on a particularly ugly cake.

Max shook his head. "All this place needs are some bats around the turret and a storm cloud on top!" Right on cue, the dark grey sky which had threatened rain all morning decided to oblige.

What on earth had Ginny been thinking of when she had suggested this place as a suitable home for his niece? Even if Thea Sinclair was the Mary Poppins-like paragon of virtue Ginny had kept boasting about, there was no way his sister would allow him to bring his little niece, Emily, to live here.

Convinced he was wasting his time, he tugged impatiently on the large brass angel bell next to the front door. No one appeared from inside to answer the unmelodious clanking.

Stepping back a pace, he surveyed the blank windows. The house appeared empty—Ginny's friend had obviously forgotten he was coming. Annoyed at having driven so far in vain, he turned towards his car. The summer shower had rapidly developed into a fully-fledged downpour

when a small boy in shorts and a tee shirt raced round the corner of the building and cannoned into Max's legs.

"Can you come and help Thea? Only she's stuck!"

Bemused, Max followed his young guide around the corner to a sash window on the side of the house. A feminine pair of damp, denim-clad legs waved wildly in the air as their owner attempted to free herself from the weight of the frame. The sash had closed firmly on her bottom, trapping her half in and half out of the window.

"Are you trying to break in or get out?" Max addressed the rain-soaked bottom. The rest of its owner was inside the house. A muffled reply and more agitated leg waving answered him.

"The wind blew the door shut and we got locked out. Thea thought she could squeeze in through the study window but the frame slid down and her bum is too big," explained the small boy helpfully. "I'm Tom, I live next door."

Max groaned. He hadn't made a horrible mistake. He should have recognised Tom from the hundreds of photos Ginny had shown him when they had met at his office last week. This house was Stony Gables and this must be the bottom half of his hostess.

Mentally cursing Tom's mother and her bright ideas, Max seized the sash and managed to pull it upwards a little so the weight of the frame was off the woman's back. Immediately, the legs disappeared inside the house with a crash and an agonized shriek.

"Are you all right?" He tried peering inside through the glass but couldn't make anything out in the gloom. Rainwater dripped off his hair and the end of his nose. What had started out as a fine summer's day had soon turned into a cold, wet one and he was soaked to the skin.

"I'm fine, come round. I'll open the front door," a disembodied female voice called.

Max couldn't see where she had gone.

"You're very wet," Tom announced.

"So are you," Max replied grimly and followed his little helper back around to the front of the house. The young woman waiting to greet them

on the step was not the cardigan-wearing, middle-aged spinster he had pictured from his chat with Ginny.

Instead Theodora Sinclair appeared to be a slender young woman in her mid-twenties, who in addition to possessing shapely denim-clad legs and a rather delectable bottom, also had a cloud of wild, blonde curls and silver toe rings on her bare feet.

Thea surveyed the two dripping-wet people in front of her with dismay. So much for her carefully planned welcome. She tugged her tee shirt down to cover the gap above the waistband of her jeans and thought ruefully about the sedate new summer dress she had hanging upstairs in her bedroom. The wet and cross-looking man in front of her would never want to stay here or hire her to help him care for his niece now. It was typical of her luck to stuff things up, and her knees hurt from where she had crash-landed onto the study floor.

"Come in, I'll find some towels. Tom, go through to the kitchen." Biting her lip in despair, she ushered them both inside.

"I'm so sorry about this." She bustled around the large old-fashioned kitchen, pulling towels from the wooden airer in the scullery. "Tom followed me outside and a gust of wind caught the door." She peeped at the stern face of the sodden man in her kitchen. Perhaps he would see the funny side. "I forgot the sash weights in the study window weren't balanced right. Every now and then it slides itself shut. I must have knocked it when I climbed through." She blinked at her guest, looking hopefully for a glimmer of understanding. "Silly sort of thing, could happen to anybody."

She laughed nervously. *Shut up Thea*, she told herself. Her guest wasn't smiling.

"It happens to you a lot, Thea," Tom added. "Like when you fell off the veranda roof rescuing Action Man's parachute and when Mum's geese got out and chased you."

Thea enveloped Tom's head in a towel and began to rub vigorously at his short spiky hair. "I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself properly—I'm Theodora Sinclair. I presume you must be...?"

The formidable man paused in his drying. "Max Richardson." He began to unbutton his wet shirt, which clung to his broad shoulder blades. Oh sugar, it *was* him. Her last wild hope that he might have been a passing double-glazing salesman died.

"I take it you were expecting me today?" He didn't sound as if he were very sympathetic about her mishap with the door and the window.

"Yes, Ginny said you'd be here about eleven. Everything's all ready."

He lifted one dark eyebrow as if he questioned this assurance and, peeling off the wet shirt, he draped it over the back of one of the scrubbed-pine kitchen chairs.

Thea knew she was staring at the well-developed muscles of his chest, but her power of speech seemed to have deserted her. Ginny had said her former boss was good-looking but she hadn't said *how* good. Only when his hands moved to the waistband of his trousers did Thea manage to utter a squeak of protest. He wouldn't, he wasn't. He *couldn't*.

Frowning, Max fumbled in his pocket and, pulling out a set of car keys, he tossed them over to her. "Would you mind getting my holdall from the boot of the car? I'm freezing cold."

Flustered, Thea watched, horrified, as he unzipped. He was.

"Are you going to take your pants off too?" Tom enquired innocently from his cosy cocoon of towels. Thea grabbed the keys and fled crimson-faced into the rain towards Max's gleaming silver Mercedes.

Tom watched with avid interest as Max dropped the saturated trousers onto the tabletop and wrapped a large towel around his waist over his shorts.

"Thea's face was all pink. Did you know you could ask your mummy to buy you pants with pictures on them?"

Max sighed. His former secretary, Ginny, whilst more tactful, was just as plain speaking and Tom clearly took after his mother.

“Would you like a biscuit?” Tom pointed at a tea tray on the dresser, which was all set out ready with cups and a plate of cookies. “Thea bought chocolate ones specially. Mummy told her you liked them.”

“Mummy seems to have said a lot of things,” Max observed. Where was that Sinclair woman? He began to feel uncomfortable standing in a strange kitchen wearing just his boxer shorts and a towel.

Tom helped himself to the cookies. “Thea’s not very good with cars. She only drives a bike. Do you like bikes?”

Thea panted back into the kitchen. “I had a bit of trouble with the key.” She proffered him the large navy holdall.

Tom looked at him meaningfully and popped another biscuit in his mouth.

“No biscuits, not before lunch!” She dived to recover the half-empty plate and glared at the unrepentant Tom.

“Would you like a cup of tea or coffee?” she asked, a flustered expression still on her face.

“If you could show me to my room I’d like to get some clothes on first.” Once he had some dry clothes on he would be able to make his excuses and escape from this madhouse.

“Oh yes, of course. I’ll take you upstairs.” Thea Sinclair’s face was now as pink as the skimpy tee shirt she wore and she scuttled into the hall and up the carved wooden staircase like a startled rabbit.

The house was as eccentric on the inside as it was on the outside. A great stuffed grizzly bear wearing a tie and a Panama hat stood next to the grandfather clock in the tiled hallway, and at the top of the landing a wall painting gave the impression you were entering through a stone archway into open countryside.

“I thought you might like the Blue Room, and then your niece could have the little bedroom in the tower. It’s the next door down—it was my room when I was small. It’s perfect for a little girl.” She opened the white panelled door. Max stared; he could see why it was called the Blue Room.

The walls, the ceiling, the curtains, the carpet and even the hangings on the carved-oak four-poster bed, which dominated the room, were all blue.

“There’s a nice view of the garden.” Thea had crossed over to the large sash window, which had a window seat in the deep bay. “And there’s a door through here into the bathroom.” She led the way over to another door and flung it open.

Max peered inside to discover an enormous claw-footed, cast-iron bath amidst the rest of the Victorian plumbing. He thought longingly of the power shower and streamlined minimalism of his warehouse-conversion flat.

“It all looks lovely, thank you.” He struggled to be polite—his hostess had clearly tried hard to make the room look inviting with fresh towels and a posy of flowers.

Thea looked relieved, her face lighting up at his praise.

“I’ll leave you to get changed and I’ll go and put the kettle on.” The door clicked shut behind her and Max sank down on the edge of the bed.

Glumly, he surveyed his surroundings. Stony Gables had sounded like such a good idea when Ginny had suggested it. His former secretary could normally be relied upon to show good judgment and finding a suitable family home for rent owned by a nursery teacher in need of a temporary job was a miracle indeed. For his niece’s sake, he had to make the arrangement with Thea work somehow and he was out of time and options.

He hauled his bag towards him and took out a pair of jeans. His trousers were almost certainly ruined thanks to the drenching he had received outside. Pulling on his dry clothes, his mind ran back over the last conversation he’d had with his younger sister.

“She can’t stay with you! It’s ridiculous, Max. I know you love Emily and she’d be happy, but you have no idea how to care for a child her age twenty-four hours a day.” He heard the sob in Julia’s voice and knew how desperate his sister was.

“But Julia, you’ve admitted she’d be happier staying with me rather than with Great-Aunt Nettie while you’re away.” He tried to reason with

her. Julia and Paul's marriage had degenerated into a war zone and Emily was caught up in the no-man's-land in the middle.

"Where would she sleep? Who would care for her while you're at work?" His sister rounded on him fiercely. "You can't have a little girl sleeping in that one-bedroomed museum of a flat of yours—and don't tell me that my child is going to be cared for by a stream of your girlfriends. It would be different if you were settled or had a house."

Max was forced to concede some of her argument. "What if I rent a house? A nice family home? I'll work partly from there and take time off. I can engage a proper nanny for Emily so she'll be well cared for. She'd love it, Julia, it would be like a real holiday." He waited with bated breath for his sister's response.

Julia's husband had been transferred abroad with his job for the next eight weeks and Julia intended to use the time travelling with him to resolve their marriage problems.

"I don't know, Max, it's expecting a lot of you. I mean, you're hardly Mr. Commitment." He knew she was wavering and pressed ahead with his case.

"At least let me find somewhere and you can have a look. You aren't due to leave for a few weeks. It's got to be better than Emily staying with Aunt Nettie."

Eventually after much persuasion she had agreed, which was why he was now here at Stony Gables. He zipped the holdall back up and sighed. Seeing Emily suffer while her parents bickered in front of her like two dogs with a bone reminded him of his own childhood only too well.

He was ten years older than Julia and remembered vividly the nights he had spent sitting on the stairs with his arm around his baby sister, comforting her while their parents fought. He couldn't bear to see little Emily go through the same thing alone.

Thea could hear Tom's clear voice as she walked back downstairs and she automatically speeded up. If he had answered the door after everything she had told him about talking to strangers...

"I'll strangle the little monkey," she muttered.

To her relief, it was Tom's mother's light laughter she heard as she drew nearer the kitchen door. Ginny smiled at Thea as she entered the room.

"Tom told me you'd gone upstairs with a man who was only wearing his pants!"

Tom gave Thea an innocent grin from his chair by the Aga, a ring of chocolate round his mouth. Thea explained what had happened while she made a pot of tea. Ginny smiled ruefully and shook her head.

"Oh, Thea! I thought we had it all planned out so beautifully. Trust you to muck it up!"

"I can't help it. Things just seem to happen to me." She leaned her bottom on the rail fronting the Aga and took a sip of her tea.

"I see you didn't change your clothes, either." Ginny frowned at Thea's tatty jeans and skimpy midriff-revealing tee shirt.

"I was going to! I just hadn't anticipated getting wedged in a window." Despite everything, Thea caught Ginny's eye and burst out laughing. Her friend tried to look cross but failed miserably and joined in with Thea's giggles.

"You are hopeless, Thea. You need this job, remember? Your new post at the day nursery doesn't start till September and you have to get the repairs done to this place if you want to stay here."

Thea sobered up in an instant. "I know—and I am grateful for everything you've done for me, Ginny." Her friend would never know how much she appreciated the help and support Ginny had given her during Thea's father's long illness.

The kitchen door squeaked open and Ginny turned her head to smile a welcome. "Max! How lovely to see you. Thea was just telling me what happened to her."

Max bent to kiss his former secretary on the cheek. "I gathered that from the laughter I heard on the stairs," he remarked dryly. He still didn't appear to have found the situation funny.

Thea busied herself with the teapot, her hands trembling. "I made you a cup of tea. Help yourself to sugar and cookies..." Her voice trailed off as she noticed the empty plate and the wide-eyed expression on Tom's face.

"Oh boy, it's time we went. Come on, Tom, you've annoyed Thea long enough today. Thanks for looking after him, Thea. I'll leave you two to talk and make all the arrangements for Emily's stay." As she spoke, Ginny hauled her son out of his comfy chair, shoved his freshly dried clothes back on him and marched him out of the door.

"So." Thea indicated one of the scrubbed pine chairs which stood around the circular table in the corner of the kitchen. "Ginny said you were interested in renting the house for a short time and in employing me as housekeeper and nanny for your little niece." She sat herself down on the chair opposite him and took a sip of her tea.

It was hard to tell what he was thinking. He didn't look any less intimidating in jeans and a casual top than he had when she had opened the front door to see him standing there in a designer shirt and trousers.

Guiltily, she hoped nothing bad would happen to them while they dried out on the top of the Aga. She had melted all the buttons on a brand-new top a few weeks ago when she had inadvertently put it on the hot plate.

"I'm not sure how much Ginny has told you about the circumstances, Miss Sinclair, but my niece has been having a difficult time lately and I'm looking for a home with a nice family atmosphere while her parents are away." He seemed to be picking his words with care.

"Stony Gables would be perfect then." Thea jumped in eagerly. "This is a lovely family home and I'm sure you'd both be really comfortable here. There's a neighbour's pony in the field at the bottom of the garden and lots of room to play. I have a study off the lounge, which you can use to work from, as well."

"I'm sure you love your home very much, Miss Sinclair, but I'm just not sure it's quite..." He tailed off, looking a little uncomfortable.

“Oh please, call me Thea. I’ll show you round and you’ll soon see. I’m a very good cook too—and I’m a trained nursery teacher, so your niece would be in good hands while you were at work.” In her eagerness to convince him she wiggled forward to the edge of her chair, accidentally slopping a little of her tea onto the tabletop as she leaned forward to expound her case. She willed him on mentally to say yes and agree to employ her while she tried to hide the puddle of tea with her mug.

“Miss Sinclair—Thea, I’m sure you have glowing references and Ginny has sounded your praises to the rafters—”

“But?” There had to be a but, she could tell. Perhaps her house was too old and shabby for him. Judging by his clothes and the very fancy car outside, she knew he must be used to the best of everything. Her heart sank—she had been counting on the income his stay would bring.

He paused and appeared to be weighing his words with care. “You have a seven-foot-tall stuffed grizzly bear wearing a tie and a hat in your hall.”

She stared at him. What kind of a criticism was that?

“My sister is being very particular about the arrangements she makes for Emily. She leaves for the Far East in less than two weeks, so I haven’t much time left to find a suitable home. I’d already been looking for quite a while when Ginny suggested here.”

Thea frowned. What was he trying to say? He didn’t like her house but didn’t have much choice left was what it sounded like.

“My home may be old, Mr. Richardson, but you’ll see it’s very clean and comfortable. I’m sure your sister will be quite happy to leave Emily here when she goes away with her husband.”

“Please, call me Max. It’s very important to me that Julia does decide to trust me with Emily’s care. The only other viable arrangement is that she stays with her father’s elderly great-aunt, who is very kind and well meaning but is also extremely deaf and has a large moustache. Emily is terrified of her.”

Thea sighed and rested her elbows on the table. “Ginny said your home was unsuitable for Emily to stay there.”

He nodded and took a sip of his tea. "It's a one-bedroom apartment in a warehouse conversion in the centre of the city."

"And there's no Mrs. Richardson or future Mrs. Richardson to help you take care of Emily?" Thea met his gaze square on. She hadn't noticed a ring.

"No, and nor is there likely to be," he declared vehemently.

Thea flushed and opened her mouth to speak as his dark brown eyes scorched into her skin.

"I'm not gay either, before you ask," he added, preempting her next question. "I just don't believe in marriage."

Thea wondered what had happened in his life to make him so cynical, *unless* he had thought she was asking out of personal interest. He had a big opinion of himself if that was the case. She barely knew him!

"Well, I'd better show you around so you can think about things." Decidedly nettled, she rose from the table and carried her empty mug over to the sink, glad of an opportunity to allow her hot cheeks to cool. Rinsing her mug and standing it on the draining board, she noticed the peeling paint on the window frame as if through fresh eyes. Critical eyes.

She had to convince Max Stony Gables would be a good home for Emily. She needed the money his rent and her wages would bring. It would mean she could get the house painted and the heating fixed, the plumbing redone and the roof repaired. She allowed herself a blissful little daydream of all the things she could do with the cash, before squashing her tiny fantasy flat. There was no point in thinking about all her plans if it looked like he was about to say "Thanks, but no thanks" and go on his way.

Some forty minutes later, having toured the house from attics to cellar, Max found himself standing rather dazedly back in the kitchen where they had started. Thea had talked nonstop on her tour and that, combined with the fact this was the oddest house he had ever been in, made him feel more than a little disorientated.

She smiled at him, her long silver earrings swinging as she awaited a response to the question she had apparently just asked. Max suspected he knew how Alice must have felt when she fell down the rabbit hole.

He had to admit that, despite his misgivings about the strange contents of the house, it had a quirky kind of charm. In many ways it was much better than any of the other properties he had already seen. He had scrutinized Thea's references before leaving London, so he knew there was no problem there, plus Ginny had recommended her very highly.

"I'm sorry, I was thinking."

She smiled. "I asked if you would like some lunch."

"Yes, thank you." He sat at the table while Thea buzzed about the kitchen, humming softly to herself. While she busied herself preparing the meal, he tried to pin down why he was so reluctant to admit to himself that this house would make a good home for him and Emily.

Thea was a pretty young woman, but definitely not his type. So why did he find her long, slim legs and wild hair so attractive? His tastes ran more to elegant brunettes like Gabby, his last girlfriend.

But would Julia be happy to entrust Emily's care to someone as scatterbrained as Thea appeared to be? She might be a highly qualified teacher with lots of experience—Ginny trusted Thea with her beloved Tom—but from her dress sense and rambling conversation, she seemed to be as eccentric as her home.

"Here you go." She slid a large plate of salad and quiche in front of him. "Would you like a glass of wine?"

"Yes, thanks. This looks very nice. Did you make the quiche yourself?"

She poured him a large glass of white wine. "Yes, and I grew the salad stuffs and made the bread. I grow a lot of my own things here, it's healthier."

It certainly tasted good. She sat opposite him and began to eat, her silver blonde curls luminous around her small face.

“So how long have you been renting out rooms here? Ginny said you normally did bed and breakfast for business travellers.”

She nodded, her long earrings twinkling in the light from the window. “I moved back here twelve months ago to care for my father while he was ill. I needed to be with him twenty-four hours a day, so I gave up my job and my flat to move back home.” A shadow passed over her face. “After he died, I inherited Stony Gables and a heap of debt. I used my savings to pay off as much as I could and I got a few repairs done on the house. I’ve a new job lined up in the autumn at the local nursery school, but in the meantime the B-and-B business helps pay the bills.”

He sipped his wine and regarded her thoughtfully. There was much more to Thea than he had originally thought. He wondered if she had given up some man as well as her home and career. Irritated by the direction his thoughts had taken, he forced himself back on track.

“It must be quite difficult living in a house this size on your own. You’ve never thought of selling it and buying something smaller?” It seemed the logical thing to do. A house this size plainly needed far more upkeep than a young, single nursery teacher could provide.

She laughed, her blue eyes sparkling. “Sell Stony Gables? Never! Although the estate agent in the village keeps trying his best to persuade me.”

“This house means a lot to you then?” He smiled; he couldn’t imagine anyone being sentimental about a piece of property. His youth had taught him nothing was forever, so there was no point in becoming attached to anything or anyone.

“Of course.” Thea stared at him, her eyes as round with astonishment as Tom’s had been earlier when she had confiscated the cookies. “This is my home. My great-grandfather had this house built to his own design.” Sipping her wine, she added, “I had such a happy childhood here, I know Emily is going to love it.”

“I hope so. Right now Emily could do with a nice period of uncomplicated childhood.” A pang of envy shot through him—if only his and Julia’s childhood had been as idyllic.

Thea's expressive blue eyes warmed with concern. "When do you expect her to come and visit?"

"I'll ask Julia and Emily to come down tomorrow. Paul's already left for Singapore so it's all up to Julia to finalize the arrangements for Emily. I just have to phone her and confirm the arrangements. If she approves we'll go ahead with the rental agreement." Unexpectedly he felt reassured by Thea's ready sympathy for Emily's situation.

Thea stood and began to clear the plates. "In that case, I'll prepare a room later for your sister to stay in while she's here."

Watching her stack the crockery, Max hoped he had done the right thing. He had to persuade Julia he was more than capable of caring for Emily. He just had to pray Thea and Stony Gables would manage to work their quirky charm on his stubborn and single-minded sister.

Chapter Two

After lunch, Thea tidied up the kitchen and folded the laundry while Max went off to the study to telephone his sister and confirm the arrangements for her visit.

It felt a little strange having Max in the house. Her other bed-and-breakfast clients had been business people who had arrived in time for a late supper, retired to their rooms with their laptops, emerged in the morning to eat a hearty breakfast and had then departed.

She hoped she wouldn't regret the arrangement with Max. It had sounded perfect when Ginny had suggested it as the ideal solution to both their problems, but having Max around was subtly disturbing to her senses. She hadn't spent this much time in close proximity on her own with a man since her ex-boyfriend, Jon, and *that* particular memory didn't please her at all.

Thea sighed, absentmindedly twisting her bracelets around on her wrist. If only her father had left a little money to help with the upkeep on Stony Gables she wouldn't need to have strangers in her home.

"And if wishes were horses then beggars would ride." She laughed out loud, remembering one of her father's favourite phrases. Her smile faded as she recalled the last few traumatic months of his illness. She tried to look on the bright side—at least having Max stay here would only be for a short time and she looked forward to meeting Emily. She loved having children around. It was why she had gone into teaching as a career.

Thea smiled to herself. She looked forward to the day when she could have her own children running around Stony Gables and hoped she could give them the same kind of loving childhood she had enjoyed. The

money Max had offered to pay her as salary and the sum he had assured her was the market rate for renting a property similar to hers would help bring her dreams one step closer to reality by enabling her to stay in her home.

The insistent ringing of the telephone jolted her out of her reverie.

“Thea, I forgot to remind you and Max about tonight. You are both still coming to dinner, aren’t you?” Ginny’s light, clear voice sounded a shade distracted.

“Well, I can’t speak for Max, but yes, of course I’m coming.” Thea felt a little guilty—in all the excitement of the day she had forgotten about her friend’s dinner party. The invitation had been issued a week ago when Max had first arranged the appointment to visit Stony Gables.

“I know Max won’t have forgotten,” Ginny declared confidently. “I need a bit of moral support. Laurence has invited most of the local great and good. He wants to build up some support before he raises the subject of relocating the surgery.”

Thea grinned. Ginny’s husband, Laurence, the local GP, had the power to lure the birds from the trees. She was sure that was where Tom had inherited a large part of his charm.

“I promise I’ll be there.”

“On time?” Ginny enquired. Thea laughed. She had been half an hour late for her friend’s last dinner party, arriving after everyone had finished the soup, thanks to an unexpected puncture in her bike tyre on her way over.

“I promise. I’ll even wear a dress and posh up.”

Ginny laughed. “Okay, you’re off the hook. At least Max can bring you in his car tonight so we’ll be spared the sight of you covered in bike oil!”

Thea joined in with her good-natured teasing, before going to tell Max about the phone call and pass on Ginny’s reminder.

He was busy in the study, setting up his laptop on her father’s old cherrywood desk. Hesitantly, she tapped on the half-open door, scolding herself mentally for feeling like an intruder in her own home.

“Ginny just rang to see if we were still going to her dinner party tonight.”

He looked up from the computer, frowning as if he didn’t have a clue what she’d been talking about.

“You are still going, aren’t you? Ginny seemed certain you were. Tonight’s very important to her and Laurence—I think she’s counting on us for moral support.”

“What? Oh yes, of course.” He smiled at her and Thea’s breath caught a little in her throat at the sudden change in his features. He looked so different when he smiled, younger and less severe. Intuitively, she knew this man carried an awful lot of emotional baggage and if she were wise she would steer clear. The trouble was, she had never been wise when it came to her fellow human beings and their problems.

Thea’s lame ducks.

She heard her father’s voice as clearly as if he were standing beside her. The number of times she had turned up with a person or animal and their tale of woe. She smiled a little at the memory.

“I erm, I’ll leave you to it then. Help yourself to tea or coffee. If you want anything I’ll be in the garden.”

Max waited till Thea had left the room then pushed the laptop away from him with a sigh. He didn’t really feel at all like going out to a dinner party this evening and socializing with a group of people he hardly knew.

Interlocking his fingers, he placed his hands behind his head and leaned back in the chair. Looking out through the window, he realised it was the same one he had freed Thea from a few hours earlier. The room itself was pleasant and well proportioned but decorated in the same eclectic and eccentric style that characterized the rest of the house.

The white Adams-style fireplace had a collection of shells, feathers and tiny fairy dolls on the mantelpiece. The bookshelves were crammed with photographs and trinkets as well as books. Most of the photographs were of Thea as a little girl—smiling at the seaside, skipping in the garden, eating an ice cream at a fair. Others showed her with her

parents, grinning confidently at the camera. The later pictures had Thea alone or with her father. Max wondered what had happened to her mother.

The conversation with Julia a few minutes earlier had not gone well. She had seemed preoccupied with joining Paul in Singapore and hadn't appeared at all convinced the arrangements Max had made for Emily would work. In desperation, he had fudged the truth a little in an attempt to convince her.

"Thea's house is perfect for Emily, Julia. She's a nursery teacher and really good with kids."

"I'm sure she is, but it's you I'm more concerned about. How do I know the minute I'm on that plane you won't be rushing back off to the city and Gabby or one of the other women you might be seeing?"

Max bit his tongue at the implication in his sister's tone that he was some kind of irresponsible womanizer. "Thea is a very special person and I love Emily. I'd never make an arrangement involving her that wouldn't work."

His sister latched onto the first six words in his sentence: *Thea is a very special person*. "Wait, does this mean you've finally met a woman you might settle down with at last?" The tone of her voice changed and in a weak moment Max blurred the truth. Suddenly after a few more questions, she seemed much more willing to bring Emily to Stony Gables.

The snag was, she now thought there was a relationship between himself and Thea. Why was nothing in life simple? What difference did it make to the arrangements for Emily anyway? He would never for the life of him be able to understand women. Thinking furiously, Max pulled the laptop back towards himself. Once he'd got his work sorted out he would go and find Thea and inform her of the extra request he now had for his stay at Stony Gables.

Thea was a little surprised to see Max coming down the path towards her vegetable garden carrying two mugs of tea. Immersed in her weeding

while the ground was still soft, she had forgotten she had a guest. Straightening up, she wiped her muddy hands on the back of her jeans and took the drink from him gratefully.

“I thought you might like a cup of tea. That looks like thirsty work.” He nodded at the half-filled barrow of weeds.

“Mmm, the warm weather and rain showers have made everything shoot up.” She took a sip of her tea. “Did you get your computer all set up?”

“Yes, no problems at all. Thank you.”

Thea looked down at her grimy hands and nails. “I’d better finish off soon and try and clean up if I’m to look respectable for tonight.”

Max followed her gaze. “I don’t suppose there’s a manicurist around here?”

“DIY only,” she said and swallowed the last of her tea. Max took the empty mug from her and she expected him to go back up to the house, but he appeared to be rooted to the end of her row of runner beans.

“Did you want something?” She picked up the handles of the wheelbarrow, ready to move her load to the compost heap. He raised his free hand and scratched the back of his head, a faintly embarrassed expression appearing on his face.

“I, er, spoke to my sister earlier.”

Warily, Thea set down the handles of the barrow. *Please don’t let her have changed her mind.* “Was everything all right?”

Max definitely looked sheepish now and appeared reluctant to meet her gaze. “Fine. That is, she’s still coming and she seems happier about leaving Emily with me now, but...” He broke off with a forceful sigh, and looked straight at Thea. “It’s just she—and I swear it wasn’t really anything I said—but she thinks we’re a couple.”

Thea knew she was staring but her brain struggled to take in what he had just said. “What do you mean, she thinks we’re a couple? How can it not be something you said?”

“I said you were a very nice person and she took it the wrong way.”

“Then why didn’t you put her right?”

Max squirmed like a fish on a hook. He reminded her of Tom when he had been caught out doing something he shouldn’t.

“I should have, I know, and I’m sorry. But she just was so much happier about Emily staying here when she thought you and I were engaged.”

“Engaged!” The word came out as an incredulous squeak. Thea sank down on the low stone wall which bordered the vegetable garden. “If Ginny hadn’t vouched for you I would swear you were insane! You let your sister believe we’re not only a couple but that we’re *engaged*?” She searched his face for some sign that the whole thing was some kind of joke, but his serious demeanour told her he wasn’t.

He sat on the wall next to her. “I’m sorry, Thea. But Emily needs some stability so much at the moment and Julia was never entirely happy about her staying with me.” He wriggled uncomfortably on the cold stone. “It’s my own fault in a way. Julia and I had such a miserable childhood. Our parents fought constantly and we were the weapons.” A dull red flush crept above the collar of his shirt and he dug his thumbnail into a clump of moss on the coping stone. “I told you earlier, I don’t believe in marriage. I would never want a child of mine to go through what I went through. That’s why when I see Emily suffering I just want to protect her while Julia and Paul sort themselves out.” He shot her a sidelong glance, appearing uncomfortable at sharing so much with a virtual stranger.

“I haven’t got a good longevity record with relationships. I don’t want anything permanent or serious. Julia thinks this means I don’t have the commitment needed to care for Emily while she’s away.”

“And do you?” Thea interrupted. “Do you have the commitment?”

His dark brown eyes met hers for a long moment and her pulse speeded up while her face warmed under the intensity of his gaze.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to make Emily happy.”

“Even lie to her mother?” Thea questioned.

His face clouded and he stood abruptly. "You're right. I don't know what I was thinking of. When she gets here I'll tell her the truth."

He turned on his heel and marched away back up towards the house. Thea sighed and took hold of the wheelbarrow handles again. Today certainly hadn't turned out to be one of your average days. It wasn't every day you got engaged then dumped by a virtual stranger all before the six o'clock news.

Max strode back up the path leading to the house. What had he been thinking? The engagement idea was crazy. Why would Thea want to go along with it? She was right, of course, about lying to Julia. Yet in the circumstances it had seemed such a harmless deception to allow Julia to think there was more to his renting Thea's home than just a business arrangement.

The difficulty now was how would it all affect Emily? He rinsed the mugs under the kitchen tap. He would just have to try his best to persuade Julia when she arrived that he was still the best person to leave Emily with. His heart sank—it would be an almost impossible task once he confessed the truth.

He glanced through the window to see Thea coming along the path, her wild hair blowing in the light breeze that had sprung up from nowhere. Her jeans were covered in streaks of mud and her tee shirt had risen up, exposing her slender, flat stomach. He swallowed hard. Thea Sinclair was an attractive young woman; it wouldn't physically have been a hardship to pretend he was engaged to her.

Thea felt Max watching her even before she reached the back door. She paused on the step, conscious for once of her untidy and grubby appearance. Hastily, she ran her hands through her wayward hair in a vain attempt to make it lie flat. What must he think of her? She kicked off her muddy sandals outside the back door and went through into the scullery to wash her hands.

"I want to apologise to you. I don't know what I was thinking." Max leaned on the doorframe between the two rooms.

A twinge of pity pulled at her conscience. He looked so downcast. She dried her hands on an old towel. "That's okay. I know you were only thinking of Emily. I'm sure Julia will see it was just a misunderstanding."

"What time do we have to be at Ginny's?" He changed the subject, clearly regretting his earlier confidences.

"Half seven for drinks, eating at eight. I don't know how many people she's invited." Thea looked at her nails and groaned. "I suppose I'd better try and do some emergency work on my hands. Ginny wants to make a good impression tonight."

"She said something about Laurence relocating his surgery." Max stood back from the doorframe to allow Thea to pass through.

"Yes, I think a few people had complained about the plans so Laurence wants to get as many influential people on his side as he can. He really needs a bigger building—they're so cramped where they are." She paused by the hall door. "I'd better go and start to get ready, I'll see you later."

* * *

Max was waiting for her in the lounge when she came back downstairs. He looked amazingly tall, dark, and debonair rising out of her shabby chintz armchair as she entered the room.

"You look very lovely, Thea." There was genuine admiration in his tone and she felt a rosy glow of pleasure.

She had made a special effort for tonight, telling herself it was for Ginny (although a tiny bit of her admitted it was sheer feminine vanity to show Max that she could look good). The dress was one of her favourites, a soft sheer material in a pastel, delicate floral print with a jagged hemline. She had left her hair loose, pinning up the sides with a couple of flowery clips.

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” she said, and cringed inwardly at how naff she sounded. Boy, was she out of practice at this relationship stuff.

He smiled at her. “Your coach awaits then, Cinders, but you’ll have to direct me. I know Tom said he was next door but I gather that means a few miles away by road.” He offered her his arm and, feeling a little shy, she picked her bag up from the table and accepted.

Max’s car was as luxurious on the inside as it had looked from the outside. Sliding into her seat and attempting to look graceful, Thea blushed as she remembered how she had struggled to work the key fob earlier in the day.

“Tom informed me that you ride a bike. He didn’t say if it was a motorbike or a cycle.” Max started the engine and Thea smoothed her dress down to try and cover more of her legs.

“Cycle,” she replied as they pulled away. “I don’t think I’d be very safe on a motorbike.”

He flashed a smile at her. “From some of the things Tom was telling me, you may be right.”

Her cheeks glowing now like two hot coals, she directed him the short distance to Ginny’s home. Ginny lived closer to the village in a large, modern bungalow. Several cars were already on the drive as Max pulled up.

“Looks as if everyone’s here already,” Max commented.

Thea groaned. “Oh no, that’s Henry’s car.” She nodded in the direction of a small red sports car parked at the top of the drive.

Max paused as he opened the car door. “And he is?”

Thea pulled a face as she climbed out. “You remember the estate agent I told you about, the one who wants me to sell Stony Gables? That’s Henry, we were at school together.”

Max closed the car door and clicked the fob to lock it. “I take it you don’t like him very much.”

Thea sighed. "Henry's all right, I suppose. He just manages to annoy me every time we meet, and he's a bit *too* handy with his hands if you know what I mean."

Max gave a low rumble of laughter. "Henry the octopus!"

Thea grinned. "You've got it. He's been finding new premises for Laurence though, so that's why Ginny's invited him."

Thea accepted Max's arm again and he escorted her up the drive to the front door. Her heart raced as she rang the doorbell, but Max appeared perfectly calm and relaxed.

"Thea, Max. Come in, both of you." Ginny's husband, Laurence, swept them inside, shaking hands with Max and kissing Thea on the cheek.

"Tom's waiting in his bedroom for you, Thea. He wanted you to pop in and see him before he went to sleep," Laurence whispered in her ear as he relieved her of the thin shawl she had brought with her for the journey home.

"I'd better not disappoint him then." She smiled at Max and slipped away upstairs to Tom's room.

Tom lay in bed doing a very unconvincing impression of being fast asleep. "I thought you weren't coming," he grumbled sleepily. Then, sitting upright, he added, "You look nice. Like a sort of fairy with no wings."

Thea laughed and ruffled his spiky hair. "I suppose that's a compliment. Anyway, it's time you went to sleep."

Scowling, he slid back down under the covers. "Will you tuck me in, Thea?"

Smiling, she bent down and pulled the quilt up for him, then bent farther to retrieve Action Man from the floor. She would love a little boy like Tom. Moments like these made her realise just how much. Maybe if things had worked out differently in her life when her father had first become ill...

"Thanks, Thea." Tom snuggled down under his covers.

“Night, Tom.” She closed the door behind her and made her way back downstairs to the conservatory, which ran along the back of the house. Ginny waited for her, a glass of white wine in her hand.

“Thanks for doing that, Thea. Hopefully he’ll go off to sleep now. Here, I poured you a drink. I think you know everyone here.”

Thea accepted the glass and took a sip before looking around the room. “Yes, I think so.”

“I had to ask Henry, sorry.” Ginny looked suitably apologetic. “At least you’ve got Max with you tonight, so maybe he’ll leave you alone.”

As if drawn by a magnet, Thea looked back across the room and straight into Max’s dark brown eyes. The corner of his mouth quirked upwards and he raised his glass slightly in her direction. Blushing, she turned away.

Ginny disappeared back into the kitchen muttering something about soup and her place was rapidly filled by an all-too-familiar figure.

“Now, where have you been hiding? I’ve been looking out for you.”

“Hello, Henry.” Thea sidled away. Henry always managed to stand a little bit too close for comfort.

“I’ve still got people interested in that house of yours when you see sense and decide to sell.” He nudged her arm playfully with his elbow and moved a little nearer. Thea began to glance around for an escape route.

“There you are, darling. Ginny said to tell you supper’s ready.”

Thea gasped as she took a step back, right into Max. He claimed her glass from her shaking hand and, slipping his arm around her waist, announced, “Shall we go through?”

Leaving Henry open-mouthed in her wake, Thea allowed Max to steer her away and into the dining room.

“You looked as if you needed rescuing.” Max’s low voice tickled against her ear. Thea became very aware of the lean, muscular length of his body against her back.

“Was it so obvious?” She felt rather than saw him smile.

“Probably just to me.” He pulled out a dining chair so she could sit. Flustered, she sat and shook out her napkin, vaguely aware of the rest of Ginny’s guests filing in for dinner.

Max took the seat opposite her, his handsome face intense in the flickering candlelight of the dinner table. Dragging her gaze away from his, she noticed Henry was seated farther down the table between the vicar and the chairwoman of the parish council. His round, puffy face had a distinctly put-out appearance and he directed a malevolent glare in Max’s direction.

The evening had begun to take on a surreal note where Thea was concerned, as her world seemed to shrink until all it held was the handsome man sitting opposite her.

Max found it difficult to concentrate on the dinner-party conversation. For some reason all his senses appeared to be on red alert and attuned to Thea in her flirty, diaphanous dress. Several times Laurence had to repeat something he had said and Ginny gave him curious looks.

It came as a relief when the meal ended and Ginny invited them all back out into the conservatory for coffee and brandy. Before he could follow Thea, Ginny buttonholed him and drew him discreetly to one side.

“Is something going on between you and Thea?” She had a look on her face that Max knew all too well. The one that told him resistance was futile.

He held his hands up in a gesture of self-defence. “Nothing, I swear. We’ve only just met.” His conscience gave a guilty twinge.

“Mmm.” Ginny didn’t look convinced.

“Thea’s a very attractive girl.” Max could feel embarrassment creeping like a tide around his collar.

“Yes, and she’s not the kind of girl you usually go for. She’s not the kind you can love and leave—she’s a forever girl. Marriage, family, the works. So unless you’ve changed your spots, don’t mess her about, Max.” A worried frown creased Ginny’s forehead. “She won’t thank me for

saying so, but she's had her fair share of heartaches these past few years."

"I hear you, mother hen. I'll be good." He kissed her cheek and went out into the conservatory, wondering what Ginny would have thought if she had heard the conversation he'd had with Thea that afternoon.

His eyes automatically sought out Thea's slim figure. She was engrossed in conversation with Laurence and the parish-council chairwoman, whose name he had completely forgotten. Perhaps the warning from Ginny had come at the right time. It would be easy to become involved with Thea.

Max chatted to the vicar and his wife for a while before noticing that Henry had worked his way around the guests and had managed to trap Thea by the door which led out to the garden. From the flushed expression on Henry's face and the way he swayed on his heels, Max guessed Henry had drunk more of the wine at dinner than was good for him.

Picking up Thea's shawl, Max edged away from his companions to draw closer to her.

"It's very kind of you to take an interest, Henry, but I really don't want to sell Stony Gables, *especially* not to some property developer."

He could hear Thea's voice now above the music and the chatter.

"The offer's there, remember. And if you're nice to old Henry I'm sure I can get you a great sale." Henry leaned in over Thea and stroked the bare flesh at the top of her arm.

Max gritted his teeth and clenched his fist around the silky fabric of the shawl.

"I'm not selling, Henry." Thea lifted Henry's hand away from her arm.

"Perhaps you'll rethink when you start getting all the bills for the repair work that mausoleum needs," Henry sneered.

Max moved closer so Thea could see him. Her eyes met his in an unspoken request for help.

“Max, darling. Is it time to go already?” As Henry turned to see him approaching, Thea sidled away to slip her arm around Max’s waist. A leap of electricity ran up his spine as she leaned into him, her soft curves moulding to his body in a perfect fit.

“Goodnight, Henry,” she added sweetly.

Max gave a curt nod in Henry’s direction and draped the shawl over Thea’s shoulders. “We’d better say goodbye to Ginny, darling.”

Her sparkling blue eyes, wickedly innocent, gleamed up at him.

“Of course, I’m sure she’ll understand we need an early night.” The meaning implicit in the husky note of her voice brought a fresh flush to Henry’s face. Max felt his own temperature start to heat and he wondered if Thea had any idea how sexy she was.

Within a few minutes they had said their goodbyes and were escaping out of the front door into the cool air of the summer night.

“Whew! What a relief! Thanks, Max. Henry gets worse every time I see him.” Thea turned to smile at him, the pale skin of her arms gleaming in the moonlight.

Her smile vanished when she looked at Max’s face. “I’m sorry. I guess that was pretty two-faced of me after what I said to you about deceiving Julia this afternoon.”

They crunched across the gravel to the car, the lights flashing as Max unlocked the doors. Climbing into her seat whilst trying to keep her dress from riding up, Thea asked, “Will it really make much difference to your sister if you tell her we’re not engaged?”

Max slid the key into the ignition and glanced across at Thea. Her pretty face was screwed up in concentration and she twisted a loose tendril of her hair around her fingers.

“I don’t know. Julia’s very emotional at the moment and she just sounded so much happier when she thought I was in a committed relationship. How she’ll take it when I tell her the truth, I just don’t know.” He started the engine.

“I see.” Thea was silent for the rest of the short drive back to Stony Gables. Then, as Max swung the car onto the drive at the front of the

house, she announced, “All right, I’ll do it!” with the air of a woman who had made a momentous decision.

Max stared at her, bemused. “What are you going to do?”

“Help you out, of course! I’ll do it. I’ll be your pretend fiancée.”

Chapter Three

Thea turned in her seat to look him in the face, enthusiasm for the idea bubbling up inside her. “I’ll pretend to be engaged to you so you can persuade Julia to let Emily stay here,” she explained.

Max cut the car engine. “I thought you said it would be a deceitful, wild idea that would never work.” He didn’t sound keen.

Thea broke off eye contact and fiddled with the thin silver strand of her bracelet. “I’ve been thinking about it and I changed my mind.” She had expected Max to be delighted but, judging by the silence that met her last remark, he appeared to have had second thoughts about the plan. The excitement drained out of her as quickly as it had fizzed up. Great, now she looked like a fool, as usual.

“I know how much you care for Emily, and when I said goodnight to Tom earlier it made me realise how I would feel if she were my niece. I would want to do anything I could if I were in your shoes.” Tucking Tom into bed had also reminded her of the feelings she’d had when her own plans for the future had crumbled during her father’s illness. Plans which had included a fiancé and a wedding and a family.

Max sighed and unclipped his seatbelt. “I don’t know, Thea, I can’t see how it could work. We hardly know one another. It was stupid of me to even suggest the idea.”

“It worked on Henry,” Thea protested, knowing in her heart that convincing a drunken man at a dinner party was hardly the same as fooling Max’s sister.

“I think we just confused him.” The corner of Max’s mouth curved into a lopsided smile.

"I suppose you're right." She felt deflated by his rejection of her offer. For a few wild moments she had really believed they could carry it off. She had even started to feel excited about it.

"I appreciate the offer, though." Max gave her hand a gentle squeeze, sending a shiver of pleasure through her body. Hastily, she pulled away and opened the car door. What was the matter with her tonight? Two glasses of wine and she had thrown herself at a stranger. Perhaps some fresh air would help her regain a little perspective.

The stone gargoyles either side of the front door were silhouetted in the moonlight as Thea fumbled in her bag for the door key. She could smell the perfume from the yellow climbing roses her father had planted years ago as a present for her mother. The rain of the morning had intensified the strength of their scent in the warm night air.

"Would you like a coffee?" She managed to extricate the key and undo the lock. *Max is a guest, get a grip on yourself, Thea.*

"That would be nice, thanks." He followed her down the hall to the kitchen, only pausing to pick up her shawl for her as it slid from her shoulders onto the floor.

The kitchen light dazzled after the darkness of the hallway. Thea dumped her bag on the table and switched on the kettle. Max folded her shawl and placed it next to her bag.

Thea busied herself with finding the mugs and opening the coffee tin, her hand shaking a little as she spooned it into the mugs. Max crossed to the fridge and passed her the milk, his fingers brushing briefly against hers. Her heart gave a leap at the contact and a warm wash of colour crept into her cheeks.

"What time will Julia and Emily arrive tomorrow?" She was pleased her voice sounded steady, even if her hands weren't.

"Providing Julia doesn't get lost, probably around eleven." Max cradled his mug between large capable hands, his dark eyes focused on the contents.

Thea took a sip of her coffee. "I expect she's anxious to get everything settled and reassure herself about leaving Emily here." She looked at

Max. He stood, as she herself often did, leaning with his back against the warm rail of the Aga. "I'm sure everything will work out."

He smiled at her bleakly. "I hope you're right. I'd hate Emily to have the kind of childhood Julia and I had. That's why making this arrangement work is so important."

A pang of sympathy went through Thea at the sadness behind his words. She felt certain this was the key to why he had declared himself opposed to marriage. Seeing his sister's marriage hit problems would have reinforced his views, as well as sending his protective instincts into overdrive.

Thoughtfully, she took another sip of her coffee and shoved the warning voice in her head back into its closet.

"Max is a very private person, Thea. Don't go trying your psychoanalysis stuff on him. Believe me, it won't work," Ginny had warned her.

"I suppose I was lucky. I guess I had the kind of childhood most people would dream of." She peeped at him from beneath her lashes to see what kind of effect her words had, hoping to find some clues to how his mind worked. "I hope I'll meet someone special one day and have a family of my own." Immediately, she wished she could take the words back. Had he picked up on the wistful note that had crept into her voice? If he had, then she had just given a great impression of a sad, old spinster desperate to land a man.

Max snorted. "I've seen too many marriages go wrong to fall for that happy-ever-after rubbish. Most relationships start to fail before all the wedding cake has been eaten."

Thea stared at him. No one could be that cynical. "What about all the good relationships, all the people who celebrate their golden wedding anniversaries?"

He shook his head, and swallowed the rest of his coffee. "When you think of all the weddings that take place, most don't make five years, let alone fifty."

“But what about love and romance?” No wonder he had said there wouldn’t be a Mrs. Richardson. Okay, so Thea’s romances hadn’t worked out up to now, but that didn’t mean she had given up hope. Although for a while it had been a close-run thing.

“It’s good for fairytales, but not real life,” he said.

“Well, I think you’re wrong. If you carry on thinking like that you are going to find yourself a lonely old man one day.” Thea drank the rest of her coffee and placed her cup on the draining board. Contrarily, she didn’t want to continue the conversation any more. *But you started it*, her conscience muttered.

Max wished he hadn’t stated his views so harshly when he saw the look in Thea’s eyes. From the horrified expression on her face when he had said he didn’t believe in love or marriage, he might as well have declared himself a mass murderer. *What are you so concerned about anyway?* his conscience jibed. *You were only telling the truth. You were becoming much too attracted to her anyway. Ginny warned you, Thea isn’t like Gabby and the other women you’ve dated.*

“I guess our wedding’s off, then?” He tried the joke, hoping to coax a smile in place of the frown on her pretty face.

Thea shook her head, her deep blue eyes grave. “I’m turning in. We’ve a busy day tomorrow. Goodnight, Max.”

He watched her slip out of the kitchen door and listened as she walked up the stairs. “Well, you messed that up nicely!” he announced out loud to the empty kitchen, before switching out the light to follow Thea up the stairs.

* * *

When he woke the next morning, it took Max a few minutes to remember why he couldn’t hear any traffic noise and why the room was bathed in a watery pale blue light. Memories of where he was and what

he was doing there came flooding back, and he sank back against the pillows with a groan.

Glancing at his watch which he had propped up on the oak chest next to his bed, he realised it was still early. He listened for a moment, trying to work out what had disturbed him. Then he heard the noise again, somewhere nearby. “A cockerel?” Tom had said something about chickens.

The rest of the house was silent—Thea must not be an early riser. He gazed around the room, wincing at the decor. It was no good; he was too restless to go back to sleep. Climbing out of bed, he pulled on his joggers and decided to go for a run.

Thea took a determined grab at Fred the cockerel’s legs as he made a bid for freedom.

“Got you! Stupid bird, what do you have to make all that noise for? Anyone would think I was murdering you instead of collecting the eggs and cleaning your bedroom.” She popped him back inside the run and secured the gate. Fred surveyed her sulkily from the hen-house roof and Thea pulled a face at him. Usually, she left it till a little later to let Fred and his three girlfriends out to play, but she was anxious to get all her mucky chores done early. She didn’t think she could face another humiliation like Max’s arrival yesterday.

Today she was determined. She would be poised, welcoming, the perfect hostess. Absentmindedly, she pulled a piece of straw from her hair. Who was she trying to kid? She had never been poised. She wondered what Julia would be like, and little Emily. Poor child, Max was right about warring parents being tough on children. Thea had seen enough of the results in her classroom.

She hoped Fred hadn’t disturbed Max. Leaning on the wire mesh fencing of the chicken run, she stared dreamily at the hens. Max seemed such a nice guy. It was a shame he had such fixed ideas about relationships. In his own way, he needed help as much as Emily and Julia did.

“You’re up early.”

Surprised, Thea shot round to discover Max watching her from by the large oak tree. It looked as though he had been out running—his tee shirt was streaked with sweat and he panted from the exertion of the exercise.

“You startled me!”

“I’m sorry. You looked miles away.”

Even sweaty and rumpled he looked good, while she must resemble a scarecrow, judging by the amount of straw that had stuck to her tee shirt and jeans. She probably didn’t smell too great either.

“I was getting some of my jobs done early. Did Fred wake you up?”

He grinned. “If Fred is the cockerel then yes, he did. It’s fine though, gave me a chance to go for a run.”

“I suppose Stony Gables must be very different from where you live.”

“There aren’t too many chickens in the centre of London—not live ones anyway.” Max smiled at her.

“Breakfast will be ready in about an hour if that’s okay, I have to finish off here and take a shower.” How did he always manage to catch her when she looked her worst?

“Sounds great. I need a shower myself.” He jogged off back towards the house as Thea reached for her broom to tidy up the area outside the chicken run.

* * *

An hour and a half later, she had finished her messy chores, showered and changed. It had been difficult deciding what to wear. She didn’t want Julia to think she had tried too hard or for Emily to feel nervous around her. At the same time, she wanted to look smart, like the kind of woman you’d feel happy to leave your child with.

Eventually, she had decided on her new navy trousers and a pretty white shirt with frills on the front. Her hair, as usual, had proved to be its terminally untameable self, so she had pulled it back from her face

and plaited it. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she thought it made her look about twelve years old. Still, at least it was neat and tidy.

Max appeared to approve of her nursery-teacher look when he came downstairs for breakfast.

"You look nice." He sat opposite her at the kitchen table and poured himself some coffee from the pot. Unused to compliments, Thea felt the colour creep into her cheeks at the warmth in his eyes.

"Thanks. So what's the plan, then?" she asked, buttering a slice of toast and taking a bite.

"Plan?" Max looked puzzled.

"The one for when your sister arrives. You have to tell her we're not engaged or even a couple and at the same time convince her to leave Emily with you. I think that calls for a plan."

Max sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "*That* plan! I hoped I'd think of something this morning while I was out running."

"And?"

He groaned. "Nothing. Not even a glimmer of inspiration." He glanced hopefully at her. "How about you?"

"Well..." She looked at him over the top of her coffee mug. "Maybe we don't have to tell her we're not engaged."

Max opened his mouth to speak but Thea held up her hand to stop him before he could interrupt. "I mean, unless she actually asks us, we could just say nothing."

Max stared at her for a moment. "Lie by omission, you mean?"

"No. Well, yes. Well, sort of. If she asks we come clean, but by then Emily will be settling in and Julia can be persuaded this is the best place for Emily to stay."

"You really think that's a plan?" he asked.

"Do you have anything better?" Thea took another large bite of her toast and waited for his response.

"Actually, no. I don't." He grimaced and stirred his coffee.

"Well, I guess that means we wing it then," she declared.

He looked at her for a long moment. "This is never going to work."

Thea shrugged. "Neither of us can think of anything better and we both said we didn't deliberately want to lie to Julia, so what else can we do?"

"Okay, I agree. We'll just wait till she gets here and see how everything goes."

Thea lifted her mug and chinked it against his. "To Operation Emily."

* * *

The morning dragged by, even though Thea kept busy polishing, hoovering and baking, while listening out all the time for Julia's car. Max had disappeared into the study to work on his laptop, but the tense expression on his face when she took him a cup of tea told her he was as nervous as she was.

When the sound of a car pulling up on the drive finally made itself heard, Thea almost missed it. She ran back downstairs just as Max skidded into the hall, his dark eyes anxious as his gaze met Thea's. Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, Thea continued more slowly down the last few stairs and opened the front door with Max at her side.

A young woman emerged from an expensive four-wheel-drive car. Opening the front passenger door, she lifted down a small child. Max slipped past Thea and strode across the gravel to greet them. Thea followed him at a slight distance, a shiver of apprehension running down her spine.

Julia was dark-haired like Max, but she was as small and slender as he was tall and muscular. She looked fragile, as if a gust of wind would blow her away. Her eyes, also brown like her brother's, were shadowed and lined from stress.

Max had swept Emily up into his arms and the child clung to his neck as if her life depended on it, her small face revealing a mix of excitement and fear.

Julia gave Thea a wan smile as she approached. "You must be Thea. I've been looking forward to meeting you ever since Max finally had the decency to tell me about you."

"It's nice to meet you too. And Emily."

The little girl stared at her with huge, solemn eyes. Thea felt her heart going out to her; she looked so small and scared. Max's soundless plea for help rang as clearly in Thea's mind as if he had voiced it out loud.

"Come into the house and I'll make you a cup of tea. I expect Emily would like a drink of juice." Thea led the way towards the house, asking Julia questions about her journey as they walked into the hall.

"A bear!"

Thea turned. Emily still clung to Max's neck, her eyes wide with astonishment as she looked at the stuffed grizzly in his Panama hat.

"He looks funny."

Thea bit back the urge to smile. Max appeared relieved and Julia stunned at the unexpected discovery.

"This is Mr. Smith, he's a very polite bear." Thea introduced him and encouraged Emily to shake his paw.

Emily giggled. "I like him."

Thea was surprised to see Julia wiping away a small tear from the corner of her eye.

"I haven't heard her laugh for weeks," Julia whispered, her pale face distraught. Impulsively, Thea took Julia's cold hand in hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze as she took them through into the kitchen.

Max carried Emily to the window to show her the view of the garden and to tell her about the little pony that lived in the neighbouring field. Thea could feel Julia's eyes burning into her back as she filled the kettle and popped it on the hob to boil.

"You're very different from how I imagined you," Julia said.

"Oh?" Feeling a little guilty, Thea poured Emily some apple juice and opened the biscuit tin.

"I thought you'd be more like Gabby and some of the other women Max has dated. To be honest, I was so nervous about meeting you."

Max didn't seem to have heard his sister's comments as he set Emily down and came over to the table to take a seat. Turning to fill the teapot with the boiling water, Thea wondered about the kind of women Max dated. From things Ginny had told her in the past, Max liked sophisticated, elegant and undemanding women. Blushing at where her thoughts were leading her, she tucked the escaping strands of her hair behind her ears and concentrated on making the tea.

"How did you two meet?" Julia accepted her cup of tea and turned to help Emily with her juice.

"Ginny introduced us." Thea crossed her fingers behind her back. She wasn't telling a lie, she just wasn't going to say they'd only met yesterday. Julia glanced at Thea and then at Max, a puzzled expression on her face.

"It must have been fairly recently."

"Well, you know what they say, when you meet someone and everything just seems right," Max chipped in. Thea wondered if he had his fingers crossed too.

"I can honestly say I think I made quite an impression on our first meeting," Thea said. Max choked on his cup of tea and turned it into a cough.

"When can I see the tower? Uncle Max said I've got a princess's bedroom." Emily plonked her empty glass back on the table and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Well, why doesn't Uncle Max take you to see your room and you can see if there's anything you want to play with while Mummy finishes her tea?" Thea suggested. Emily looked as if she longed to explore her new surroundings.

"Great idea. Come on, pest, let's go and explore." Max led Emily out of the kitchen, leaving the two women alone.

"I was so pleased when Max told me the news and now I've met you I feel much happier about Emily staying with you both. I can see you're a natural with children."

Guilt settled on Thea's shoulders like a heavy cloak. Julia looked at her. "I hope you didn't mind me mentioning Gabby's name earlier. Paul, my husband, is always telling me I need to be more tactful."

"It's okay, Max told me about her." Thea shuffled her feet under the table. Who was Gabby? This would be harder to pull off than she had first thought.

"I'm glad he's met you. I think you're just the kind of person Max needs in his life."

In spite of her guilty conscience, Thea was intrigued, but before Julia could say anything else Emily came bursting back into the kitchen to seize her mother's hand.

"Mummy, come and see, come and see!"

Julia gave Thea an apologetic smile and allowed her daughter to lead her out of the kitchen. Thea stood up to put the empty mugs on the draining board.

"Thank you for doing this." Max's voice sounded sudden and very close to her ear. She hadn't heard him come back in. "It's the first time in weeks I've seen Emily look happy."

Thea turned to face him. He stood *very* close to her. A crackle of electricity fizzled through her bones at his proximity. She fiddled with the tea towel on the edge of the drainer.

"Julia seems like a really nice person." All of a sudden, her brain turned to mush and all she could think of was how close Max's lips were to hers. He had a nice mouth, very kissable.

"She's not bad, for a kid sister," Max murmured, as his lips met hers. A charge of sensations zoomed around her body and her knees were like cotton wool. Unbidden, her arms slid around his neck, pulling him down closer to her, her fingers caressing the hair at the nape of his neck.

"Whoops, sorry! I didn't mean to interrupt!"

Thea sprang back at the sound of Julia's voice from the doorway and she turned to see Max's sister and his little niece watching them with bright-eyed curiosity.

Heat flooded through her from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes. *Of all the embarrassing situations to be caught in.* She was sure from the stunned expression on Max's face when he saw his sister standing in the doorway, that kissing her had definitely not been a part of some premeditated scheme to convince Julia the engagement was for real. Even more cringeworthy was the way she had been kissing him back. He would think she was a desperate spinster out to hook a husband.

Boy could he kiss though. It had been a while since she had kissed anyone but she couldn't remember feeling like this before, even when Jon had kissed her, and she had planned to marry him.

Chapter Four

Max groaned inwardly, hoping Thea wouldn't think he had timed his kiss deliberately, although he was a little hazy about who had been kissing whom.

Thea tugged on one of her earrings as she edged towards the door, her face pink with embarrassment. She was clearly keen to put some distance between them.

"I'll, erm... I, er, just have to go and check on something." Rosy-cheeked, she made her escape through the back door into the garden.

"I'm sorry," Julia said, entering the kitchen. "I didn't mean to embarrass you both." For the first time in ages her eyes were bright and alert, her eager expression more like the old Julia, before all her problems with Paul had begun.

Max hoped it was a good sign. "That's okay. What do you think? Do you like it here?"

Julia laughed. "Now, do you mean do I like it *here*? Or is that a way of asking if I like Thea?"

"I like it here, Uncle Max. I like my bedroom and the toys." Emily's dark eyes were serious as she emerged from her mother's side, clutching a battered old rag doll.

Julia looked lovingly at her small daughter. "Would you like to stay here with Uncle Max and Thea instead of going to Auntie Nettie's house?"

Max's stomach flipped over with apprehension.

Emily nodded and cuddled the doll close to her. "I like being with Uncle Max and Thea's pretty."

Max exhaled in silent relief. A degree of deception had to be worthwhile if it meant Emily was happy.

“Well, we’ll see. And, for what it’s worth, big brother, I do like Thea. I like her very much.” Julia smiled as she spoke and Max hoped the spectre of Aunt Nettie had receded.

“Thea wears rings on her toes,” Emily pointed out, her lips pursed as if she wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or not.

“She likes pretty things. Did you find the big box of old jewellery she put in your room?” Max steered the subject away from Thea’s dress sense. He knew she’d made a special effort for today, but her outfit on the day he’d arrived and the flimsy dress she’d worn last night might perturb Julia’s rather conventional sense of fashion. His sister’s need for their mother’s approval as a child had stifled most of Julia’s creativity and led to a legacy of a need for order and convention that had become an absolute set of rules.

Emily nodded enthusiastically. “And there’s a whole pile of dressing-up things.”

“Thea certainly knows how to appeal to a little girl’s heart,” Julia observed. “She’ll be a great mother when you two start your own family.”

Max’s subconscious kicked in response to the image that popped into his mind of Thea with a child on her lap. A child with dark brown eyes—a child of his.

“We’d better bring the bags in from the car,” Julia suggested.

“I’ll bring them in for you.” Max followed them outside, his mind still whirling from the thought of Thea as the mother of his children.

Max had a very curious expression on his face, Thea observed, when he rejoined her in the kitchen as she prepared lunch for them all.

“How do you think everything’s going?” she asked as she drained the baby new potatoes at the sink.

“Emily really likes it here.” His voice sounded cautious.

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it? Pass me that knife, please.” It was a good job he wasn’t standing too close, her nerves still felt a little jumpy from his kiss.

“Julia still thinks we’re engaged, and I don’t think we can risk telling her the truth now. She’d never trust me again, let alone leave Emily here.”

“I suppose finding you kissing me probably didn’t help.” Thea sliced a knob of butter onto the potatoes in the serving dish.

“You kissed *me*!” Max sounded indignant.

“I seem to remember *you* starting it!” The cheek of the man, trying to foist the blame onto *her*. Although her cheeks grew a little warmer as she recalled him pulling her close, his strong arms encircling her body...and her enthusiastic response to his touch. He certainly knew how to kiss a girl. *He’s probably had lots of practice*, she thought waspishly.

“Well, whatever, the damage is done now,” he pointed out.

“You always propose in the most romantic ways.” Thea bustled past him and began setting the table. The humour in the situation struck her and it was all she could do to stop her lips twitching with laughter. Poor Max looked so flustered. Did he think she expected him to honour the engagement in some way?

“Thea, this is not funny.” Max glared at her.

Immediately, she sobered. “No, it’s not, but I don’t see we have much choice except to continue pretending.”

Max fingered the corner of a linen napkin. “If we’re going to carry on with this we have to make it more convincing.” He avoided her gaze.

Thea stared at him. “What do you mean?” She had a pretty shrewd idea what he meant but he had to be kidding—*didn’t he*?

“We’ll have to act more like a couple. You know...” He glanced at Thea. “Holding hands, kissing and—” a long pause, “—stuff.”

He obviously hadn’t enjoyed kissing her. Thea felt as if he had thrown a bucket of cold water over her. She wasn’t that bad a kisser—was she? The look on his face and the tone of his voice suggested he couldn’t think

of anything that could be more unpleasant than holding hands, kissing and doing *stuff*—whatever *that* was—with her.

“I see.” She knew the tone of her voice was cold enough to make the iceberg that sank the *Titanic* seem cosy, but Max didn’t appear to notice.

“It’s only while Julia’s here. She’s anxious to get Emily settled so she can join Paul in Singapore. It shouldn’t be too hard.”

Thea wasn’t sure if he had spoken to her or to himself. Indignation crackled down her spine and she banged the last plate down onto the table.

“Well, while you steel yourself for the task ahead I’ll go and sound the gong for dinner.” Not trusting herself to remain in the same room with him for a moment longer, she whisked off into the hall and vented her feelings on the dinner gong at the foot of the stairs.

Fortunately for Thea, Julia and Emily kept the conversation flowing during lunch. Max was so overly solicitous, offering her the salt and passing her the wine, she felt like shoving his head face-down into the potato dish.

“When are you going to show me your ring, Thea? You have such pretty taste in jewellery I expect it’s really lovely.” Julia looked pointedly at the bare space on Thea’s engagement finger.

“Ring?” Thea stared blankly at Julia till a kick on her ankle from Max jogged her brain back into gear.

“Oh, my engagement ring? Well, I haven’t actually got one yet. We looked at some together but it’s hard to choose.” She scrabbled around in her mind for an excuse, and hoped Julia couldn’t tell she lied. “We haven’t had much time and, well, you know.” She petered out.

Julia looked horrified. “Max, you must get her a ring! Tell you what, why don’t you both go into town this afternoon and have a good look round while I help Emily unpack and settle in?”

“Oh, but we couldn’t! I’d feel like such a bad hostess.” Thea looked meaningfully at Max, willing him to think of a good reason why they shouldn’t follow Julia’s suggestion. She couldn’t let Max buy her a ring—it was ridiculous.

"If you're sure you and Emily will be all right here on your own this afternoon, then I think that's a great idea."

Thea couldn't believe her ears. She'd expected Max to back her up, not to go along with the idea. What was he playing at?

"We'll go straight after lunch then, darling," Max said, topping up Thea's wineglass. His dark eyes warned her against protesting too much.

"Can't wait," she said through gritted teeth, and raised her glass in a tiny salute, which went unobserved by Julia and Emily.

"You could get a ring like this one. It's really pretty." Emily proudly showed off a huge plastic ring with a clear stone on the top. "If you press it, it flashes. Look." She demonstrated the ring's magical ability to flash green and red.

"I think that's lovely, Emily. I can only hope that there'll be another one like that in the shop," Thea remarked, thinking a ring like Emily's would be entirely appropriate for a fake engagement.

As soon as dessert was finished, Julia leapt to her feet and began to clear the dishes.

"You two go. I'll do the dishes." She waved away Thea's protests. "I'll enjoy spending time with Emily and helping her settle. Besides, it's important to get a ring. It makes things more official, then later on when you get back we can plan the party." Julia beamed at them.

"Party?" Max looked at Thea's thunderstruck expression.

"To celebrate your engagement, silly!" Julia tutted as she carried the dishes over to the sink.

"Why do we need a party?" Max intercepted his sister as she returned to the table to collect another load of dishes.

"Well, you have to do something to celebrate. It's not every day you get engaged, and to be honest, brother dear, I didn't think you would ever settle down and commit to one woman." Julia swept past, leaving Max floundering in her wake.

"I don't know if Thea and I want a party. We were planning on keeping everything very low-key." A sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach warned him his sister wasn't going to let the idea drop.

Julia raised her eyebrows. "Low-key! You must be joking. I'm sure Thea will want to meet all your friends and colleagues. I bet you haven't had a chance to introduce her to everyone yet."

"Well, no, but—"

Julia didn't give him the chance to finish. "Then a party will be perfect. Thea can meet everyone at the same time." She grinned at Thea.

Thea looked as dazed as Max felt.

"Julia, I'm not sure about this. Wouldn't it be better to wait a while?" He tried to think of an excuse to dissuade his sister. The problem was, once Julia got an idea in her head she was very difficult to sway.

"What for?" Julia stared at him, her eyes round with astonishment.

"Look, we'll discuss this later when we come back from town."

Julia looked disappointed and Thea attempted to console her. "It's a lovely idea, Julia, and very kind of you. Max and I'll think about it while we're out."

Julia shrugged and continued to clear the table but Max could tell from the rigidity of her shoulders that she was pretty put out by his lack of enthusiasm for celebrating his engagement.

Thea was unusually quiet as they got into Max's car to drive to town. Her small face looked deep in thought and a frown puckered her forehead.

"I'm sorry about the party idea. I'd forgotten about Julia's passion for observing all the social niceties." He started the car engine.

"Oh, well. I suppose if we'd really thought this through we should have expected something like this."

Glancing at her, he noticed she twiddled her long silver earring absently between her fingers. She always appeared to play with her jewellery whenever she had something on her mind.

“Where is the best jeweller’s shop?” They were already at the outskirts of the small market town nearest to Thea’s village.

“There’s only one. It’s near the church, not far from Henry’s estate agency.” She directed him to the car park at the back of the church. As he parked the car and switched off the engine, Thea turned towards him.

“Max, we don’t have to buy a proper ring. It seems so silly when Julia will have gone in a couple of days.” The worried frown was still creasing her forehead.

“And what will she think if we go back and you have something that looks like it came out of a cracker?” he asked.

“That I have bad taste?” Thea suggested feebly.

He shook his head. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m sure I’ll be able to sell it afterwards if you don’t want to keep it. As far as I’m concerned, it’ll be a small price to pay to make Emily happy.”

The jeweller congratulated them both profusely when Max asked to see the selection of engagement rings. Standing by the glass-topped counter while the jeweller unlocked the display cabinets, Thea wondered what it would be like to be standing there with a man she loved for real. To be choosing a ring she would wear with pride and pleasure for the rest of her life, like she had thought before when she was with Jon...

The jeweller placed the burgundy velvet pads and their glittering contents on the counter with a reverent air and Thea forced herself to concentrate on the task in hand. Ordinarily, she loved to buy jewellery. Some women loved shoes but Thea’s addiction, when she had any money, was silver and gold.

“Which one do you like best, Thea?” Max had already rejected two trays as being too cheap.

Thea hesitated. She felt guilty Max had been coerced into buying her a ring. Only a few hours ago he had let it slip how awful it had been to kiss her, and she knew his beliefs about marriage—this must be a real ordeal for him.

“The sapphire one is quite nice.” She indicated a small sapphire ring with a diamond surround. Max threw her a shrewd glance and Thea knew he wasn’t going to fall for her ploy of choosing one of the more affordable rings on the tray.

Bending closer to the rings, he unerringly selected the one she really coveted, a beautiful square-cut emerald that glistened alone on a fine platinum band.

“Try this one.” He slid the ring over her finger and they both admired it as it twinkled in the bright lights of the shop.

“Oh, Max, I couldn’t.” The protest came out as a whisper as she watched the light reflecting off the clear green stone.

“We’ll take this one,” Max said, and the jeweller started to put away the other trays of rings. “It’s perfect and it’s you, Thea.”

His dark eyes locked with hers and for a fleeting moment Thea forgot all about the jeweller smiling benevolently at them from behind the counter. She forgot all about the engagement not being real, all about Max not being really in love with her.

“Thank you.”

His lips brushed hers and the world tilted on its axis.

“You’re welcome.” His voice sounded husky and she turned away quickly as the jeweller cleared his throat. The man slid the little box where the ring was normally kept into a small bag.

The warm afternoon sunshine greeted them as they stepped back outside onto the high street. Max slid the ring packaging into his jacket pocket. Thea turned the emerald on her finger and admired it.

“I still think this was a bit over the top, Max. The sapphire ring would have done just as well.”

He paused and took her hand in his to examine the ring, his warm capable fingers sliding around hers. “No, it had to be this one. It looks beautiful on you.” His face had an odd expression, almost wistful, as he too looked at the ring. A frisson of awareness moved along Thea’s skin from where he still held her hand, and she swallowed hard.

“Emily will be disappointed it doesn’t flash.”

“She’ll get over it.” Max smiled and before Thea had realised what he intended, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

“I guess this makes us official then,” Thea murmured. Her heart hammered against her ribcage, making the simple act of breathing extraordinarily difficult.

“I guess so.”

It was like being in a wonderful dream bubble. No one else on the busy high street existed except her and Max. He carried on holding her hand as they strolled along in the summer sunshine back towards the car.

“Max!”

The bubble popped and Thea looked to see who had called his name. From the displeased look on Max’s face, it was clearly someone he had no desire to see.

A tall, elegant woman sashayed towards them, making a beeline for Thea’s fake fiancé. “Max, darling! I didn’t expect to run into you in this little town.” The woman swooped in and air-kissed both his cheeks, forcing him to relinquish his hold on Thea’s hand.

“I could say the same for you, Gabby.”

Thea surveyed the woman in front of her. So this was Gabby, Max’s ex-girlfriend. Her stomach plummeted—the girl was gorgeous. There was no other word for her. Her sleek dark hair looked as if it had never had a fight with a hairbrush. She had large dark eyes, flawless skin and a perfect figure. To Thea’s surprise, as she stood looking at Gabby’s beautiful clothes and shoes, she thought she had never disliked someone so much in her life.

“I told you I was looking for a little weekend place in the country, silly!” Gabby purred.

“I don’t believe you’ve met Thea.” Max slid his hand back into Thea’s and gave her a warning squeeze. “Thea, this is Gabby. Gabby, this is Thea, my fiancée.”

Thea watched the play of emotions on Gabby's beautiful face. The woman couldn't have looked any more stunned if she had been slapped. It took her a full minute to assimilate what Max had said, and Thea almost felt sorry for her.

"Well, congratulations." Gabby dived on Thea's hand to look at the ring, as if she had to see it with her own eyes in order to believe it. She looked at Thea incredulously then turned her attention back to Max.

"I had no idea, this is such a surprise. Have you known each other long?" The look Gabby gave Thea made her aware of every single fault in her appearance. The new trousers and pretty shirt she had thought so smart that morning suddenly seemed creased and tatty when viewed through the other woman's eyes.

Max was as expressionless as a poker player. "When you meet the right person, you just know."

Gabby's eyes widened. "You've changed," she said.

"Love does that." Thea couldn't stay silent any longer, sharp little spears of jealousy prodding her into speech. "We have to go. Julia and Emily will be waiting for us. It was nice to meet you, Gabby." She hoped she didn't sound too insincere.

She doubted if Gabby had found it a pleasure to meet her. From the way her lip had curled on seeing Thea's clothes and her wayward hair, it was plain she thought Max had gone stark-raving mad.

"I expect we shall be meeting again soon, as we're going to be neighbours," Gabby announced, a triumphant gleam in her eyes when she noticed Thea's surprise.

"You've bought a house here?" Max sounded as surprised as Thea. His jaw was set ominously, and although to a casual bystander he would have given the impression of a man having a pleasant chat, Thea knew him well enough by now to know it was a sign of real displeasure.

"Just renting for a little while. I like to get a feel of a place and with the weather so nice I thought I'd be able to make the most of the summer."

Max raised one eyebrow. "I hope you like country life then, Gabby. You might find it a little quiet after the city."

Max was so wound up Thea could feel the tension humming through his frame from the touch of his hand alone.

"Oh, I shall have some friends down from London, and give a few dinner parties. You and Tina will come, of course." Gabby flashed them a self-satisfied smirk.

Thea knew Gabby had got her name wrong on purpose, but forced herself to paste on a smile, determined not to let the other woman get the upper hand.

"I wouldn't count on us." She made a show of clinging onto Max's hand. "I'm sure you'll understand, being newly engaged, we like to spend our time together. Alone, just the two of us."

Max's lips flickered upwards at the corners. Thea suspected it had been a long time since anyone had called Gabby's bluff, and Max found it an amusing experience.

Walking away from Gabby with Thea's slender hand still in his grasp, Max began to laugh.

"You don't think I overdid it?" Thea asked as they rounded the corner of the church.

"No, you were great."

"I wondered if I'd gone too far. I got the impression you weren't very pleased to see her." The latter part of Thea's sentence came out in a bit of a rush and he had to bend his head to catch what she said.

"Gabby and I dated for a while, but it's like I told you, I'm not planning on getting married to anyone. I thought Gabby felt the same but then she started hinting about moving in and accepting invitations for us as a couple, so we broke up." He sensed Thea turning his reply over in her mind. Quite why he felt uncomfortable about that, he wasn't sure, but somehow he did.

"She's very attractive."

Max looked at Thea. "Yes, she is."

But Gabby was a clone of all the other women he had ever dated. Tall, slim and elegant with a wealthy background. Women who were discreet, enjoyed lunches and dinners out and a partner to escort them to the latest theatre or gallery opening.

He couldn't picture Gabby ever getting up at six o'clock to clean out a chicken run and, of course, Gabby would never have got stuck in a window with her rear end on view for the entire world to see. He remembered mentioning to Gabby his intention of caring for Emily while Julia was away. Her cold indifference to Emily's welfare had been the prompt he had been waiting for to end their relationship.

They stopped by the side of the car. Thea still appeared to be deep in thought.

"How long do you think it'll take for word to get around?" Max unlocked the car door and Thea got in.

"What, about our engagement? Probably a couple of days, I suppose. Nothing's a secret for very long around here." She froze as she pulled down her seatbelt. "Oh, no!"

"What's the matter?" He rubbed his head—her anguished cry had made him bump it on the roof as he climbed in.

"What are we going to tell Ginny?"

She had a point. Ginny would never swallow the story of their engagement being the real thing. Plus, if she spoke to Julia, which she inevitably would as they were good friends, they would be well and truly rumbled.

"We'll have to tell her the truth. That it's all pretend," Thea wailed.

"We'll call at Ginny's house on the way home and try and get her and Laurence on side."

Thea nibbled on her lower lip, her blue eyes troubled. "I hate having to ask Ginny and Laurence to lie."

Max wasn't looking forward to it either. He guessed his former secretary would have a lot to say on the subject when they broke the

news, and most of it would be directed at him. He glanced at Thea as they drove towards Ginny's house, his eyes drawn to the emerald ring sparkling on her slender finger.

How had a simple misunderstanding mushroomed into all this? He sighed, remembering the look on Thea's face when he had placed the ring on her finger. For a split second he had forgotten the engagement was fake and a sense of rightfulness about the situation had engulfed him, momentarily sweeping him away into Thea's romantic fantasyland.

He had to get a grip. *Marriage is for idiots*, he reminded himself. This pretend engagement was for Emily's benefit only. Once Julia and Paul had sorted their marriage out and Emily was settled, he would be out of there. Back to London and the peace and quiet of his flat, back to his normal life. Turning in to Ginny's driveway, he suppressed the thought that resuming his *normal* life seemed very unappealing.

Chapter Five

Any hopes Thea had been entertaining about Ginny being sympathetic to their plight appeared to evaporate as Max explained what had happened. Several times during the telling of the story, Ginny glanced first at Thea, then at Max, and then at the glittering emerald on Thea's finger, as if she couldn't bring herself to believe what she had heard. The worst of it was, Thea didn't blame her.

They were sitting in Ginny's sunny conservatory. The ceiling fan whirred gently in the background and a soft breeze blew in through the open French doors.

"What were you both thinking of?" Ginny demanded. "I expect Thea to come up with harebrained schemes like this, but *you*, Max!" She shook her head in disbelief.

"We didn't plan this," Thea protested. How come she had got the blame anyway? It was mostly Max's fault—Emily was his niece after all—and he had been the one to mislead Julia originally.

"Now, that I can believe!" Ginny scoffed.

"Will you help us?" Max's dark eyes betrayed his anxiety. Thea stroked the cool, comforting silver strand of her earring while she waited for Ginny to come to a decision.

"Ordinarily, I'd say you should both come clean and tell Julia the truth, but..."

Thea waited with bated breath for her friend to continue. They couldn't tell Julia, not now. It had all gone too far.

Ginny glanced at them both. "Max is right about Emily. I don't think it would be fair to upset her, and Julia is stressed enough already."

“Oh thanks, Ginny.” Thea leaned over and hugged her friend.

“That doesn’t mean I approve, and I hope you’ll get things straightened out as soon as everything settles down,” Ginny warned.

“Well, Julia’s leaving in a few days. She wants to fly out and join Paul as soon as she’s got Emily settled in.”

Ginny considered Max’s statement. “And this party you mentioned, when is she thinking of holding that?”

Max groaned and ran his hand despairingly through his hair. “I hoped she might not have the time before she left, but knowing Julia, she won’t rest till she’s organised something.”

“Maybe she’ll settle for a dinner party instead?” Thea suggested. “We could go to The Limes. You know the place, Ginny. The new bistro that’s opened in town.” Thea sat up on her cane chair. Dinner would be much better than a party. She could cope with a dinner.

Max leaned forward in his seat. “She might go for that. It would be easier to arrange at short notice.” He smiled at Thea and her heart gave a disconcerting leap, unsettling her senses.

Ginny looked at her watch. “Tom and Laurence will be back from the park in a minute. I’ll tell Laurence once Tom is out of earshot!”

“Good idea. I remember the last time Tom overheard something he shouldn’t have.” Thea grinned at Ginny. “Is Mrs. Dawes talking to you yet?”

“That bad, huh?” Max shook his head and reached out a hand to pull Thea to her feet, sending a tingle of excitement through her skin. “Come on, we’d better go. Julia and Emily will be waiting for us.”

Ginny followed them to the front door. “Are you sure this is just a pretend engagement?” Ginny’s whisper in Thea’s ear as she stepped out of the door made her turn around.

“I’m doing this for Emily,” Thea murmured as Max strode off down the drive.

Ginny frowned. “I don’t want to see you get hurt. Don’t fool yourself into thinking any of this is real. Max isn’t the marrying kind, Thea.”

Thea hugged her friend, a little stab of pain piercing her heart. “I know. He told me.”

Max clicked the key fob to open the car door and waited for Thea to join him. He wondered what Ginny had said to make Thea frown. He watched as she called goodbye and promised to phone as she made her way down the gravel drive to join him at the car.

“Is everything all right?” he couldn’t resist asking as they pulled out of the driveway.

“Yes, fine.” Thea looked a little flushed and Max had the uncomfortable feeling Ginny had given her a warning of some kind.

Perhaps that was a good thing. Kissing Thea this morning had been far too pleasant. Ever since he had seen her rounded, denim-clad curves wedged in the window he had felt as if he were on some crazy roller-coaster ride that he couldn’t get off.

Julia and Emily were in the garden when they arrived back at the house. Emily was on Thea’s old garden swing, exhorting her mother to push her higher as she whizzed back and forth, her small face glowing with pleasure.

Scenes like this made a little deception a low price to pay, Max thought as he and Thea walked down the path towards them. Fun was something that had been missing from Emily’s life for some time now.

“Watch me, Uncle Max!” Emily yelled. Julia, too, had a smile on her face. Some of the tension which had been weighing her down on her arrival appeared to have lifted.

Julia looked eagerly at Thea’s hand and Max saw her lift her fingers to show his sister the ring. He squashed the tiny feeling of guilt which crept into his heart when he saw the joy on Julia’s face as she congratulated Thea. It wasn’t going to be as easy to end this pretend engagement when the time came as he had first thought.

“I’m so glad you found something you liked. It’s beautiful. Now you’ve just got to have a party to show it off!”

Max met Thea's direct blue gaze and cleared his throat. "We talked about that, and there's not much time to organise things—"

Julia interrupted. "But you've got to have a party!"

"We thought maybe a dinner instead might be easier to arrange at short notice," Thea said. "There's a lovely new bistro opened in town and you could help me work out who to invite. It wouldn't be so much work and it'd still be fun. What do you think?"

Julia smiled. "You're right. There isn't much time before I leave. That sounds like a great idea."

"Can I go?" Emily had been listening to the conversation and her face lit up at the mention of the word "party".

"This will be a little late at night for you, sweetie," Julia said.

Emily's face fell and Thea stepped in quickly to add, "But I'll arrange a special party for you when Mummy has gone on her holiday."

"Do I get a new dress?" Emily asked hopefully, and her mother laughed.

"I suppose that's fair," she said and lifted Emily from the swing.

"And will Daddy come?"

All at once the lovely sunny afternoon was eclipsed and Julia hesitated for a moment before answering. "I expect we'll both be back before you know it."

Max looked at Thea, knowing she had picked up on the tiny quaver in Julia's voice.

"I think I know a little girl who's probably ready for her tea," Thea said. "How about Uncle Max giving you a piggyback up to the house to wash your hands while I go and make us some sandwiches?"

Emily beamed and ran over to Max, holding up her arms ready to be lifted onto his shoulders. Thea slipped her arm through Julia's and Max left them to follow behind as he raced up the path with Emily on his shoulders, making her squeal with pretend terror as he ran.

"Are you all right?" Concerned, Thea looked at Julia's pale face.

Julia sighed. "I'm okay. I just hope when Paul and I meet up we can sort ourselves out. We've both said some terrible things to each other over the last few months and poor Emily has felt it more than either of us realised." She looked to be on the verge of tears and Thea felt torn as she heard Emily's innocent laughter ahead of them on the path.

"I'm sure you'll work things out."

"I hope so, for Emily's sake, if not ours."

Max raised a questioning eyebrow as they clattered in through the back door of the kitchen where he and Emily were washing their hands at the sink. Thea answered him with a barely perceptible nod as she filled the kettle ready to make tea.

Max took the hint, and scooping Emily into his arms, he carried her giggling into the lounge with a promise to show her Thea's video collection.

"I don't know what you must think of the family you're marrying into, Thea. I suppose Max has told you all about our childhood?" Julia accepted the mug of tea Thea offered her and stared sadly out of the window.

"He told me a little," Thea said guardedly.

"You know, he always swore he was never going to get married or have children. He seems to have changed so much since he met you."

Thea's conscience nipped her and heat flooded into her cheeks. Julia sipped her tea.

"That's why I didn't want to leave Emily with him. It sounds awful, but when we were little Max always looked after me. He always sorted out my problems." She turned to Thea, her eyes dark with anguish. "I have to sort this one out for myself."

Thea frowned. "But Max loves Emily." She still didn't quite understand. She could see why Julia wanted to be independent, but there was still a piece missing from the jigsaw. There had to be more to Max's reluctance to commit.

"Yes, but I wasn't sure if he was up to handling the twenty-four-hour-a-day responsibility of caring for a child her age. Max has shut himself

off from his emotions for such a long time, Thea. I wasn't sure if just spending a few hours with her every weekend was enough preparation." Julia sighed. "I shouldn't have worried, since he's met you the change in him is more than apparent."

Thea blinked. She didn't think she was that good an actress, or Max was that good an actor, for that matter.

"It's the way he looks at you all the time, and he's much less uptight when you're around." Julia bubbled on, oblivious to Thea's stunned silence. "I can see he's mad about you."

More like mad at me most of the time, Thea thought. She pulled the bread from the bread bin, ready to start making sandwiches.

"Oh, by the way." Julia blushed. "I hope I'm not going to embarrass the two of you here, but this morning when I was upstairs—" she stopped and put her hand on Thea's arm, "—I couldn't help noticing, and it's very sweet of you but I'm a realist and I know what modern relationships are like."

Thea stared at her, bewildered. "I'm sorry?"

"What I'm trying to say is you and Max needn't have separate bedrooms on my account."

Thea was so startled she nicked the end of her finger with the bread knife. Dazed, she watched the bright red trickle of blood run over her nail and plop onto the work surface.

"I could see Max had moved into the blue bedroom in a hurry, so I moved his things right back into your room. I would feel awful if you two felt you had to be apart because of me."

Thea sucked the end of her cut finger and looked incredulously at Julia. "That's very kind of you, but really, we don't mind. We were thinking of Emily." She improvised desperately, wondering how she could break the news to Max that he would be sharing her bed. The thought of being in the same room, let alone in her *bed*, sent tingles up her spine. She would have to think of some other arrangement and fast.

"Oh, it's all right. I told Emily you and her Uncle Max were getting married and you were going to be her aunty. She understands." Tutting

over the cut on Thea's finger, she added, "Where do you keep your plasters?"

Julia rummaged in the dresser drawer Thea had indicated, returned triumphantly with a dressing, and got to work on the cut.

"There, that's better. I'll give you a hand, then after tea we can draw up a list for the dinner party and book the table."

All the while she cut the bread and washed the salad, Thea kept trying to think of a way out of sharing her room with Max. When she had started letting rooms for bed and breakfast, she had taken one of the smaller bedrooms for herself. This meant there was room for her double bed, a wardrobe and a small chest of drawers, but not much else.

Once tea was over and Julia had taken a tired Emily upstairs to bathe her and put her to bed, Thea thought she had better break the news about the bedroom arrangements to Max.

"But she can't... She hasn't..." Max looked as shell-shocked by this new development as Thea had been. A frown creased his forehead, the exasperation evident on his face.

"She can and she has. I've been trying to think of a way out of it, but I've drawn a blank so far." Thea began to resign herself to the inevitable. She couldn't see any way of changing rooms without arousing Julia's suspicions and since she would be gone in three days' time, it didn't seem worth rocking the boat. Since Emily's bedtime was early, providing they got up before she woke each morning, they could probably move back into separate rooms then.

"I'm so sorry, Thea. I'll sleep on the floor or something," Max said.

Thea laughed. "In my room! You'd be lucky if we ever managed to straighten you out again if you tried that on the amount of floor space I've got!"

The sound of Julia's feet on the stairs brought the discussion to a halt, leaving Thea wondering how she had managed in the space of two days to get engaged to a total stranger and be sharing her bedroom with him. Even with her reputation for calamities, this had to be some kind of record.

Julia had brought her notebook downstairs, and Max could see from the glint in her eyes that it would be useless to raise the subject of the bedrooms with her.

“I thought if we worked out roughly how many people you planned to invite then we could book the table.” Julia sat on the settee and flipped open her notebook.

“I’ll fetch us a drink,” Thea suggested. Max felt as if he needed one. A large scotch would have been just the ticket but he hadn’t noticed anything that strong in Thea’s cupboards.

“By the way, I placed the announcement in *The Times* while you were out. So it should be in tomorrow’s edition.” Julia sounded very pleased with herself. “I knew you wouldn’t remember, Max, but these things are important.”

“Julia, I thought I’d told you we wanted things to be kept—”

Thea interrupted. “Max means thank you, Julia. It’s a very kind thought.”

The world had gone mad! Or rather *his* world had gone mad. His work colleagues at the office would be laughing their collective socks off when they heard he was engaged. His partner, Richard, always called him the last bachelor in London, his antipathy towards marriage was so well known.

Thea placed the tray of drinks she was carrying on the low coffee table. Her hair had escaped from the plait she had been wearing and floated in golden wisps around her face, the light from the window making it gleam in the evening sun.

She looked tired, Max noticed guiltily. She had worked hard getting the house ready for them all, cooking and cleaning everywhere. Refocusing on the conversation, he realised Julia had asked Thea about her family, if there was anyone she wanted to ask to the dinner party.

“My mother died when I was a teenager and I lost my father a few months ago. There isn’t anyone else.” Her blue eyes clouded and Max

wished he sat close enough to hug her and chase the sad expression away.

"I'm sorry." Julia bit her lower lip. "We lost our dad a few years ago too, not long after he and mother finally divorced. Mother lives in Australia now, with husband number four."

Thea couldn't hide her surprise. "I didn't know."

"We don't hear from her very often. Unless she wants money or a favour." Max hadn't intended to sound so harsh but from the look on Thea's face he knew she had noted the bitterness in his tone.

"She's only ever seen Emily once and that was when she was born. She doesn't like to think of herself as being old enough to be a grandmother," Julia explained.

"That is so sad. She's missed out on such a lot."

Max could see Thea was completely perplexed by his mother's attitude to Emily. "Mother doesn't see it like that. She only kept up the loving-parent act long enough to win custody of us from Dad, then she dumped us both at boarding school while she went off on her merry way." Unconsciously, his hands had balled into fists at the memory.

His eyes met Thea's and he could read the reflection of his own pain in their clear blue depths. A choky little sigh from Julia broke the silence.

"I'm just going to check on Emily." Julia bolted into the hall with a stricken face, leaving Thea and Max alone in the lounge.

"Do you think we should go after her?" Thea looked concerned.

"It's best to leave her alone. Julia has never really accepted Mother's total lack of interest in either of us as anything other than a weapon to beat Dad with. That's why this trouble between her and Paul has hit her so hard."

"And why she worries so much about Emily?" Thea questioned.

Max sighed—how had this conversation got started? The air in the room seemed to weigh down on his lungs, making it hard to breathe, and he knew he had to get outside. *Running away?* his brain questioned.

He stood abruptly. "I need to go outside for a while, get some fresh air."

Thea appeared to hesitate before asking, "Would you like company?"

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak. She uncoiled herself from where she had been sitting with her legs tucked beneath her on the settee and followed him outside.

Max wasn't sure where he was going. All he knew was that he needed fresh air and open space. Any discussion involving his parents' doomed marriage had the same effect on him now as it had done in the past when he was an adolescent.

Thea seemed to understand, and walked companionably at his side without speaking while he marshalled the mixture of emotions whirling around inside his head into some sort of order.

Thea thought hard. A lot of pieces of the complicated puzzle of Max's life appeared to be coming together. No wonder he held such strong views against love and marriage. Thea could see, too, why he had been so willing to put himself through this crazy deception for Emily and Julia's sake.

She didn't care to look too closely at her own motivations for going along with Max, however much she might try to convince herself it was merely the need to repair Stony Gables.

"One of these days, Thea, you'll take on more than you can handle." Her father's words resonated in her mind. Over the years a procession of people and animals had found their way to Stony Gables, courtesy of Thea's tender heart.

Fred the rooster and his harem of lady chickens had arrived after their elderly owner had been taken to hospital. Then there was the three-legged cat no one had wanted, and even Mr. Smith, the well-dressed bear in the hall, had been rescued from a skip. Thea smiled to herself as she remembered the journey, cycling home with the huge bear tied to her back.

“This way.” They had reached the end of the path, so Thea led the way over the stile into the field. The shady riverside walk was one of her favourite places and she had spent many happy hours in her childhood sitting on the low stone bridge farther upstream which spanned the shallow water.

The evening sun sent rays of golden light between the branches and in the fields the rabbits began to emerge cautiously into the long grass to hop about.

“It’s so quiet here.” Max, too, watched the wildlife as they strolled along, side by side.

“Apart from the birds,” Thea teased. The birds were kicking off the evening chorus and down by the water’s edge the sound magnified into an orchestra of birdsong.

“I’m sorry I dragged you into all this, Thea.” He glanced at her, his dark eyes giving nothing away.

“I don’t recall being dragged.” She offered him a half smile.

“Well, maybe dragged was the wrong word, but you know what I mean.”

They stopped by the stone bridge and Thea sat herself down on the edge, her legs dangling over the water which gurgled and splashed below.

“My father always used to tell me I was a sucker for a sob story.”

Max seated himself beside her on the bridge and picked idly at the yellow lichen on the top of the masonry. “Is that why you’re doing this? Because you feel sorry for us?”

Thea sensed she would have to tread very carefully. “I need your rent money to make repairs to Stony Gables. You’ve probably noticed some of the plumbing is a little on the ancient side, not to mention the paintwork needs doing and the roof and chimneys need repair.” She sighed at the thought of the costs involved.

Max flicked a small pebble into the stream below. “I’m glad you don’t see me as a charity case.”

He probably thought she was a real hard-hearted Annie now. *One of these days, Thea Sinclair*, she thought to herself, *you have got to learn a bit of tact*. She always managed to say or do the wrong thing whenever she was in a one-to-one situation with an eligible man. *Not that Max is an eligible man*, she backtracked hastily, *he's just a...* She glanced at him and found her brain had trouble deciding exactly *what* kind of man Max was, if he wasn't eligible. *Too nice-looking for his own good*, she thought wryly. *Too nice-looking for her good*.

Conscious that she was staring, she dropped her gaze to concentrate on the patterns in the water where it flowed over the stones of the riverbed.

"Are the repairs the reason Henry was putting so much pressure on you at Ginny's dinner party?"

Thea hadn't realised Max had heard so much of that evening's conversation. "When my father died, the house had to be valued as part of the estate. Henry saw the surveyor's report and obviously he realised if he could persuade me to sell, there was a large profit to be made." She scowled at the memory.

"Charming man, your friend Henry." Max's fingers brushed against hers where she gripped the edge of the stonework.

"He's all heart." To her surprise her voice sounded breathy and her blood pounded in her veins. Max traced a lazy finger along the line of her jaw to tilt her face, so she was forced to lift her head and look into the deep chocolate brown of his eyes.

His lips grazed hers, sending a shiver of delight through her bones before his mouth claimed possession. Only her precarious position on the parapet of the bridge kept her grounded as her body responded to his, melting away all her good intentions about keeping her distance.

The sound of children's voices in the distance broke the spell and as Max lifted his head from Thea's, she saw the shutters close over his emotions and knew he was already regretting the impulse to kiss her. Shakily, she took a deep breath. Two could play at that game. Pride pushed her to act as though nothing had happened.

“We’d better go back to the house. Julia will wonder where we’ve gone and I need to see to the chickens.” She slid down from the bridge with as much dignity as she could muster, spurning the hand he offered to help her.

Marching back to the house in stony silence, it wasn’t until they got there that Thea remembered she was supposed to share her bedroom—and her bed—with this man tonight.

Chapter Six

Max found Julia in the kitchen making a cup of tea.

“Where’s Thea?” Julia’s eyes were pink around the rims and her usually neat hairstyle looked uncharacteristically tousled.

“She stopped by the run to take care of the chickens.” Max hesitated. He didn’t know what to say to his sister to make her feel better. He hadn’t known what to say to Thea down by the river, either. The thought occurred to him that Thea would know exactly what to say to Julia. Thea had a real gift for talking to people and her easy tactile nature made her good company to have around. Apart from when, like now, she was mad at him.

Julia sniffed, and concentrated on pouring her tea. “Would you like a cup?”

Max reached for one of the big brightly painted mugs that stood all along the top of the dresser.

“I’d love one if you’re offering.”

Julia poured him some tea and went to the fridge for the milk. “I made a list of guests for you and Thea to invite to the dinner party. It’s really only Ginny and Laurence, me, and some of the staff from your office. I didn’t think Thea would want to meet any of your old flames.”

“It’s a little late for that.” Max could have bitten his tongue off as soon as he’d said the words. Julia’s face lit up with interest and she set the milk bottle back on the table with a thud, a single drop plopping out onto the surface.

“You never said anything about that. Who was this and when?”

Max resigned himself to the inevitable and told Julia about bumping into Gabby in the high street. Julia pursed her lips when she heard Gabby had rented a property in the village.

“I wouldn’t have thought there was much to interest Gabby in the countryside.”

The subject matter made Max feel distinctly uncomfortable. Julia had never made any secret of her disapproval of his lifestyle in the past. While Gabby and his sister had met a few times socially, Max knew Julia had not been impressed by her.

For some reason, although his former girlfriend had always appeared to be very nice to Julia, the feeling had never been reciprocated. Yet Max had always thought they should have had a lot in common. Like Julia, Gabby was attractive, intelligent and well groomed with good social connections.

If anything, it was Julia’s meeting with Thea that Max had held misgivings about. Thea’s wild hair, unconventional habits and wacky fashion sense should have meant Julia disapproving of her on sight, but instead the two of them seemed to really like each other.

Julia put the milk back in the fridge. “Well, I’m going to have an early night. This country air’s making me sleepy. Say goodnight to Thea for me, will you?”

Max gave his sister an affectionate goodnight peck on the cheek and sat at the old pine table to wait for Thea. When she came in from dealing with the chickens they had to figure out what they were going to do about the sleeping arrangements for the night ahead. Uneasily, he realised he was drumming his fingers on the table and discovered he wasn’t as blasé as he had thought about sharing Thea’s bed.

Thea took her time down by the chicken run. What on earth was she going to do about tonight? If she was honest with herself, she had to admit that sharing a bed with Max held a certain charm. Not that she intended doing anything about it but physically he definitely appealed to

her senses and when he touched her, she fizzled up inside like a firework.

But how were they going to manage without him noticing how he made her feel? The door of Julia's room was right across the landing from Thea's, so they couldn't go sneaking about in the middle of the night like naughty children. There was only one solution she could think of that might work. It would still mean Max would technically be in her bedroom but thankfully not in her bed.

If only the weather weren't so hot. It had been so sticky during the last few nights she had been sleeping nude under a sheet. *That* wasn't something she planned to do tonight, especially if she had a roomie.

Her cheeks grew warm as her mind replayed the images of Max when he had stripped off his wet clothes in her kitchen the day he had arrived. As she reached the back door, she took a deep breath. "You are a grown woman, Theodora Sinclair. It's not like you haven't seen a nearly nude man before, so get a grip!"

Intent on going straight to the sink to wash her hands, she didn't bother to switch on the light.

"I thought you'd decided to stay down in the henhouse for the night with Fred instead of coming back here."

Thea jumped. In the darkness of the kitchen she hadn't noticed Max sitting at the table.

"You startled me!" Drying her hands quickly on the towel, she reached over and flicked the electric light switch.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you jump. Julia's gone up to bed. She said to wish you goodnight."

Thea wished her heart would stop racing. Being alone with Max was too disturbing to her senses for comfort. Since he had kissed her down by the stream she had felt as nervous as a kitten.

"I thought you'd be in the lounge, watching TV or something." She hoped he hadn't heard her giving herself that little pep talk outside the door.

"I thought I'd wait for you to come in. It was getting dark outside, so I wanted to make sure you were all right."

The husky note of concern in his voice fused her brain, and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. It had been a long time since a man had shown any consideration for her welfare and the intensity of Max's gaze made her feel quite flustered.

"Had any good ideas about this room sharing?" Max's dark eyes locked onto her face.

Thea licked her lips. "Erm, I..." Her voice sounded squeaky and she wished he would stop looking at her like that. "Well, sort of, you'll be a bit cramped but I think it'll work."

Max sighed. "I guess that means we're using another of your famous plans."

Thea stared at him. He made her nervous. "What do you mean?" Her throat was as dry and scratchy as sandpaper and her stomach felt as if it were playing host to a ballroom full of butterflies.

Max leaned back in his chair and locked his hands behind his head. He still watched her closely. "I think we have to go with the *wing* it option," he said.

Uncomfortable under his gaze, Thea turned and filled the kettle from the tap. She was all too conscious of her rosy cheeks. She popped the kettle on the hot plate and hoped he hadn't noticed her hands shaking. Max pushed his chair aside and walked over to the Aga, carrying his empty mug.

"If you're making tea, I could use another cup."

The air between them crackled with invisible energy and Thea swallowed with difficulty.

"Thea, I know this is hard on you and I want to tell you how much I appreciate everything you're doing to help us. I was out of line earlier when we were by the river. It's been an unusual day. What's this plan you've come up with?"

The kettle started to whistle and her hands shook as she picked up the potholder to lift it off the plate. She was relieved when she managed to pour the boiling water onto the teabags without spilling it everywhere.

“Well, like you said this morning, if we’re going to be convincing then I guess we have to look the part. So, we have no choice except to let Julia think we’re sleeping together. In my room there’s a walk-in closet, I think if I rearrange some things you could sleep in there. It’s not very big and there’s no window so we’ll have to keep the door open.” She hoped her brainwave about the closet would put a little space between them.

Max added the milk to the mugs and stirred the tea. “Okay, I’ll give it a go. We just have to keep remembering all this pretence is for Emily’s sake. Do you want to go up first and get ready?”

Thea knew he was trying to make the whole business of their enforced intimacy as painless as possible for her and she appreciated his thoughtfulness, but the comment about remembering their engagement was pretence stung. After all, he had kissed her first, so perhaps it was him who needed to remember it was all pretend.

“I’ll see you later then,” she said and shot upstairs, mentally scolding herself for being too cowardly to challenge him about the kiss.

The air in her bedroom was still and heavy and even with the sash window pushed up as far as it would go, there wasn’t a breath of wind to stir the soft cotton fabric of the curtains.

Julia had placed Max’s bag and his clothes on the old wicker rocking chair that stood in the corner of the room. Thea’s room was one of the bedrooms in dire need of decorating. The wallpaper was old and faded with a mark under the window where the damp came through in the winter. Lack of space meant her double bed was pushed up against the wall with just a narrow strip of threadbare carpet showing between it and the door.

Thea placed her mug on top of the dresser and looked despondently around the room. There wasn’t a lot of space for her in there without squeezing all six foot three of Max in as well. She wondered how long he would be downstairs.

The closet smelt musty, which was why she didn't use it to store her clothes. She opened the door cautiously and peered in. The last time she'd gone in there to find something a huge spider had run out and gone under her bed and she'd had to spend half an hour hunting it down to get rid of it before she could go to sleep.

Eyeing up the narrow floor space, she reckoned if she moved the junk most of Max would fit in, if he hadn't been so tall it wouldn't have been as difficult. She heaved a sigh. He would have to have the door open and sleep with his feet sticking out into her room.

Moving quietly so as not to disturb Julia, she moved the boxes of photographs and bric-a-brac out of the closet and onto the top of her wardrobe, keeping her eyes open all the time in case another spider lurked ready to pounce. Once everything was safely shifted she crept over to the blue room and sneaked some bedding back to her own room. Fortunately for Max one of the things in the cupboard was an ancient camp bed, so at least he wouldn't be forced to lie on the floorboards.

She felt so hot and sticky after making up the camp bed and moving her possessions, it would be heaven to dive into her little bathroom and take a shower. There was no lock on the bedroom door and the bolt on the bathroom had so many layers of paint over it she doubted if it would ever draw. The thought that Max might walk in on her sent her thoughts scattering in all directions.

Remembering she couldn't shut Max in the cupboard, Thea took a snap decision and rummaged in a drawer for something suitable to wear in bed. "A girl has her pride," she muttered, stuffing her shortie nightshirt with the sad puppy picture on the front to the bottom of the pile.

Finally, she emerged triumphant with a pretty broderie-anglaise vest-style top and matching shorts—an unworn Christmas gift from a few years ago. Thea eyed them up in the lamplight and hoped they would still fit.

Standing under the lukewarm shower in her tiny bathroom, Thea tried to listen out for Max coming upstairs. She had to get dried and in

her nightclothes before he arrived or she would never be able to look him in the face again. Much to her relief, the camisole set, although a little tight around her bottom, still fitted. At least she looked decent and the set was fairly cool to wear. Thea smiled to herself as she brushed her hair, willing to bet her last pound that Gabby didn't wear a cartoon-print nightshirt in bed.

Max couldn't concentrate on the television. He flicked between the channels trying to judge when would be the best time to go upstairs to Thea's room. He hoped she would be in her bed and fast asleep when he got there. That way he could creep in quietly and it would probably be less embarrassing for both of them.

It was typical of Julia to land them in this mess although, to be fair, if they hadn't deceived her in the first place it wouldn't have been a problem. In other circumstances he would have liked to have been sharing Thea's bedroom, or even better, Thea's bed, with her warm lender body close to his. He swore softly under his breath, knowing he had to stop thinking like this.

Thea was the marrying kind and he wasn't, it was as simple as that. It would be cruel to lead her on when he could make no promises to her, and he liked her too much to do that. He shouldn't have kissed her earlier, either. However much they both tried to pretend it was all part of an act, he knew from the look in Thea's eyes when his lips had touched hers that the spark of attraction he felt towards her was more than reciprocated.

No matter how hard this room sharing would be, he owed it to her not to take advantage or make her feel uncomfortable. He shifted restlessly in the armchair. He had the feeling it was about to be a long and sleepless night and not just because he would be spending it in Thea's bedroom cupboard.

Max thought Thea was asleep as he undressed quietly in the dark, stripping off his jeans and shirt, keeping just his boxer shorts on. It was red hot, as if all the heat in the house had risen during the day to settle

in this one small room. In the dim light he could see the door of the closet standing open and the end of the camp bed sticking out.

Moonlight streamed in through the open curtains, illuminating Thea's bed and the bare skin of her arm where it lay on top of the sheet. What was she wearing? In his efforts to keep quiet and not disturb her, he tripped over his shoe and stubbed his toe on the camp bed. He cursed under his breath as Thea rolled over to face him, her expression unreadable in the moonlight.

"I'm sorry. I was trying not to disturb you." He sat on the edge of her mattress and rubbed his toes.

"It's okay, I was awake anyway. It's so hot tonight."

He wondered if she felt as awkward as he did. "Erm, is it all right if I go and get in?" That had to be a first, asking a woman if he could get into a bed as politely as if he were at a dinner party and requesting she pass him the salt.

"If you want to sleep tonight, you don't have much choice." Thea shifted under her sheet and he got off her bed quickly.

"What do you think they would have done in this situation in Victorian times?" He inched his way onto the camp bed and prayed it would take his weight. It didn't appear to be in very good repair.

The canvas creaked underneath him and he held his breath.

"Didn't they used to put a bolster—one of those long, lumpy pillows—down the middle of the bed? In between the couple?" she said.

He could make out her features now in the silvery light. Her eyes were watching him, dark and mysterious.

"Got a bolster handy? This thing feels a bit unsteady."

She gurgled with laughter. "No bolsters, you're staying right there mister. Do you think Julia would notice if we got Mr. Smith to chaperone?"

"I think Emily would notice if that bear went walkabout. She's really taken with him." Thea's toe ring gleamed in the moonlight as she

wriggled her bare foot free from under her sheet. He guessed her joking was a way of hiding her nervousness.

“Are you okay down there on that camp bed? I’m afraid it might be a bit uncomfortable.”

“I’ll manage, don’t worry.”

Thea didn’t speak for a moment. She just shifted restlessly, her bedclothes riding up to reveal more of her bare legs in the moonlight. Max could feel little beads of perspiration trickling down the length of his back. He was hot, tired and uncomfortable on the antique camp bed.

“Goodnight then, Max.”

Her legs moved again and a sensual mental image of Thea’s feet sliding up his legs made him stifle a groan with the pillow and twist over onto his stomach to bury the throbbing sensation in his groin. He wasn’t going to get much sleep tonight, that was certain.

Thea gazed out of the window at the stars twinkling away in the deep blue velvet of the night sky. Max made a peculiar, muffled groaning noise as he adjusted his position on the camp bed. She hoped he didn’t snore. *Relax!* he’d said. How on earth was she supposed to relax when she kept picturing him in those snug-fitting, white shorts? It was enough to make any girl feel weak at the knees. This was crazy. She was crazy.

She twisted a strand of her hair around her finger, thinking. Max was an attractive man. Okay, so he was a *very* attractive man, and he was a good kisser. He loved his sister and his little niece. He was kind, caring—darn it, he was perfect.

The kind of man she had always dreamed of meeting, except he didn’t believe in marriage, commitment and all the values she held to be important. He was afraid to risk his heart, to expose himself to any kind of relationship that wasn’t merely superficial. She had made the mistake in the past of confusing lust with love and she wasn’t going to go down that route again.

Thea sighed softly. Trust her to be attracted to Mr. Commitmentphobe. She twiddled the alien weight of the engagement ring round on her finger. Maybe he might change his mind...

"Thea, not everyone feels the way you do. You have to accept you can't change everyone," her father had counselled her on so many occasions when one of her ducks had failed yet again to turn into a swan. Her eyes filled with tears. Sometimes she still missed him so much.

* * *

The sound of someone moving around in her room woke Thea the next morning. Opening her eyes she was treated to a view of Max wearing just his boxers, attempting to stuff the camp bed and the bedding away out of sight inside the closet.

"Morning."

He turned at the sound of her voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." He gave the bed a last push and shut the cupboard door.

At the sound of small feet running along the landing, Thea leaned out of her bed and grabbed his arm. "Quick, sit here." She pulled him down beside her in the nick of time. She barely had chance to register the frisson of electricity between them as he tumbled backwards onto her bed before the bedroom door burst open and Emily ran into the room. Her arms were full of dolls and teddy bears, which she flung onto the covers. Climbing up after the toys, Emily wriggled between them and beamed happily at their startled faces.

"Morning, Uncle Max, morning, Thea. Do you want to play with me? Mummy's still asleep and it's all sunny and nice outside."

Max groaned and slumped back on the pillows.

Her mind still whirling from Max's proximity, it took Thea a moment to pull herself together enough to answer.

"Tell you what, Emily, how about Uncle Max making me a cup of tea and getting you a mug of milk and later on after breakfast, he can come down to the river with us and we'll see if we can catch some fish?" It

would give Thea the breathing space she needed to decide how to tackle Max. It was all a bit too much with him tucked under the sheet next to her.

Emily clapped her hands together with delight. "Go on, Uncle Max. It'll be lots of fun." Her big brown eyes were shining with excitement. Max sighed and reached for his jeans.

"Actually, Max, Emily and I'll have breakfast in bed this morning. You'll find the trays in the bottom of the dresser. Toast and jam will be lovely." Thea settled back against her pillows and smiled sweetly at him as he pulled the stiff denim material up his legs.

Instinctively, she eased the sheet up higher. The sight of Max bare-chested with his hair tousled and a faint line of stubble on his jaw wreaked havoc. The sight of him fighting with the camp bed had been more than enough for her heart.

"Can we really have breakfast up here in bed?" Emily asked. "Mummy won't let me at home. She says it makes a mess." For a moment her small face looked anxious.

"Well, here you're on holiday and this is a special treat to start your stay." Glad of the distraction, Thea reassured her and smiled when the little girl beamed and began arranging her toys on the bed ready for the unexpected treat.

Max looked at Thea as if he would have liked to say something, but instead he slipped out of the bedroom and Thea heard his footsteps pad away down the stairs. Her mind whirled all the while he was gone as Emily busily chattered to her teddy bears.

How come Max had this kind of effect on her? And more importantly, why did she like it so much? It was the answer to the last question which tried her the most.

Max came back upstairs a few moments later carrying a wooden tray with little extendable legs.

"Tea, toast and jam." He flipped the legs open and set the tray carefully on the bed. It was only set for two.

“Aren’t you eating breakfast, Uncle Max?” Emily beat her to the punch.

Max smiled at his niece. “If I’m to go fishing with you and Thea later, I have to go downstairs and get some work done first.”

Thea relaxed a little. She hadn’t thought about the possibility of Max rejoining her and Emily when she had suggested breakfast in bed. It had just been a quick way to put some space between them by sending him down to the kitchen. Surely he didn’t think she wanted him to come back to bed with her, did he? Her face felt as if it were on fire.

Max rummaged in his bag for a few things. “I’ll use the other bathroom, it’ll be quicker.”

Thea felt so embarrassed she could hardly bring herself to look at him. “Fine, Emily and I’ll be down later.”

Max moved towards the door.

“I want a kiss.” Emily wriggled off the bed, narrowly managing to avoid upending the breakfast tray, and held up her arms.

Max grinned. “I’m only going for a shower and to get my work done.” He ruffled Emily’s hair and stooped to kiss the top of her head.

“You haven’t kissed Thea,” Emily pointed out accusingly, as Max’s hand reached for the doorknob. Thea’s heart skipped a beat as he turned around and came back to where she lay propped up on the pillows. His eyes met hers and he kissed her gently on the lips. She tasted coffee and raw male, then he was gone and Emily had clambered back onto the bed.

“I love Uncle Max, don’t you, Thea?”

Thea stared shakily at the closed bedroom door. “Yes, I think I do, Emily,” she answered slowly and this time she wasn’t faking it.

Chapter Seven

Max stood in the shower, scrubbing fiercely at his skin with the soap. He had to put some distance between himself and Thea. Waking up this morning in her bedroom had just been too much, and Emily's innocent reminder to kiss his *fiancée* had almost finished him.

He closed his eyes and let the warm water trickle down between his shoulder blades. He had to find a good excuse to escape for a few hours, something that wouldn't arouse Julia's suspicions. He turned off the water and reached for a towel. He needed a few hours back in his own world, away from the crazy Alice-in-Wonderland effect this house and Thea had on him.

As he moved to grab his jeans from the bathroom chair, he spotted his excuse. Clothes—that was it. He needed to move more of his clothes down here. He couldn't keep re-wearing the few things he had brought with him. Padding over to the mirror, he got out his shaving kit. He could spend the morning fishing with Emily then go back to London and pack up some more of his things—perfect.

After breakfast, Thea packed a simple picnic lunch into a wicker hamper. Julia had cried off the fishing trip to make phone calls and sort out last-minute details before leaving for Singapore. Max stayed closeted in the study for much of the morning, so Thea spent her time supervising Emily and thinking over her feelings about the events of the previous night.

"Uncle Max!" Emily slipped down from where she knelt on a chair at Thea's side and rushed across the room. "Thea's made a picnic, we're

going to take nets down to the stream and paddle in the water while we catch fish.”

Max swung her up into his arms. “Sounds like fun.” He tried to recall the last time he’d been on a picnic. It was probably the annual school picnic just before he had left boarding school for college. Memories flooded back—the smell of the grass, the freshly painted white lines on the running track, the familiar sick feeling when he realised yet again that there was no one there to watch him race.

One of his school’s traditions had been for all the boys’ families to be invited for a founder’s day celebration every June. There was a mass picnic, sports, and a tour of the school. His mother had never attended because the date usually clashed with several others in her busy social calendar and by then his father had been too ill. He had never been on this kind of picnic, a simple family outing. There had never been any family outings at all.

“Where’s Julia?” He had only seen his sister fleetingly, when she had popped into the study to mouth something at him about inviting his colleagues for the dinner party tomorrow.

“She’s busy sorting out a few things for when she leaves.” Thea fastened the hamper and smiled at Emily. “So we’re going to give her some peace while we go and have fun.”

A loud clanking noise sounded from the front door. Emily put her hands over her ears and Thea went to see who had rung the bell.

“Hi, Thea, you couldn’t do me a favour and have Tom for me, could you? I know it’s short notice but Laurence is desperately short of staff at the surgery this morning and he has to meet the planners later.” Ginny looked frazzled. Tom stood at her side, hopping hopefully from one foot to the other. “I wouldn’t ask, but Laurence really could use my help.” There was an unaccustomed note of panic in Ginny’s voice. The last time Thea could remember her friend getting this anxious was when she had been pregnant with Tom. Laurence must really need Ginny’s help for her to be so flustered.

"No problem, he'll be company for Emily. We're going fishing in the stream and having a picnic." Thea never minded looking after Tom. She loved his funny ways and it would be nice for Emily to have a playmate her own age.

Tom let out a whoop of delight and Ginny sighed with relief. "I'll be back as soon as I can. I really appreciate this, Thea."

Tom had already gone to the kitchen and was busy telling Emily about the delights of the river when Thea joined them.

"I gather we've an extra one." Max nodded towards Tom.

"Ginny has to go and help Laurence at the surgery. I think it's a bit of a crisis." Thea felt surprisingly self-conscious as she gathered up the towels and picnic things. She had dithered about wearing her shorts, but as she had spent the night wearing far skimpier garments she had decided practicality was the order of the day. Now though, with Max looming over her, she wished she had covered up a bit more.

"Right, have we got everything? Sunhats, sun cream?" Thea asked.

Emily and Tom nodded eagerly, their baseball-capped heads bobbing up and down.

"Can I get the nets from the hall?" Tom bounced about by the door.

"I'll help." Emily was keen to assist.

The two children trotted off to collect the fishing nets, coming back in seconds with two small nets on long poles and a couple of brightly coloured plastic buckets. Tom had also put the Panama hat which belonged to Mr. Smith, the bear, on over the top of his baseball cap. Seeing Max's puzzled expression, Thea whisked the hat from Tom and popped it on her own head at a jaunty angle.

"Mr. Smith lends it to me for expeditions, otherwise I get a pink and peeling nose," she explained, attempting to look dignified and wishing she had something to wear that was a little more flattering.

Laden down with bags, they called goodbye to Julia and set off down the long path to the river. Tom and Emily ran on a little way ahead. Thea could see the nets bobbing about wildly in the air and hear the distant sound of their childish laughter.

Max fell into step beside her. "I have to go back to London later today. I need to move more of my things down here and there are a couple of things I need to check up on at work."

Thea peeped at him from under the brim of her hat. "Will you be away long?" She wanted to know if he would be gone overnight, but couldn't bring herself to be so direct. If she was honest with herself, she wasn't sure if she wanted him to say yes or no.

"It depends. I might have to stay over." His voice sounded studiously neutral. Suddenly, the bright, sunny morning seemed to lose some of its charm for Thea and ludicrously, she couldn't help feeling a bit depressed.

At the end of the day though, Max had employed her to do a job. He had hired her home and her skills as a nanny, and however lovely his kisses might be and however nice it was to play make-believe, the truth was he wasn't in the market to play happy families for real. If he found out she harboured any kind of romantic feelings towards him, the whole thing would become a disaster.

"Tom! Keep to the path and watch the nettles," Thea called as the erratic fishing nets bobbed temporarily out of sight.

Max offered her his hand to climb over the stile. The touch of his lean, strong fingers in her palm was an agony of delight. They trailed behind the children along a different path from the previous night, following a small tributary leading away from the main river.

The path narrowed to a walkway only wide enough for one person at a time as it wound its way in between tall, swishing clumps of grass. Thea was forced to walk in front of Max until the track opened out into a small meadow where the stream gurgled, shallow and flat, between large rocks.

Tom already stood at the edge of the bank, leaning perilously over the water and pointing out something to Emily. As soon as they saw Thea and Max, both children came scampering over, breathless with excitement to tell about what they'd seen.

"I saw a fish, Uncle Max! A real one and he's down there by the rocks and Tom says we can paddle and go and catch him and—" Emily couldn't get her words out fast enough.

Max looked at Thea. "Is it safe to paddle?"

Tom had already pulled his socks and shoes off. Max knelt to pick them up.

"Perfectly, it's very shallow here. The water's cold, though." She helped Emily take off her socks and sandals. "Why don't you go and join them while I set out the rugs for the picnic?" The two children were already shrieking and splashing in the water. Thea smiled. "I guess any fish within a two-mile radius will have disappeared by now."

Max gazed at Tom and Emily as they paddled ankle-deep in the stream, picking their way over the pebbles that littered the bottom.

"Max?" Thea prompted. He seemed lost in a world of his own.

He turned to her and blinked. "I've never done this kind of thing before." He sounded lost and uncertain, his usual confidence gone as he glanced back longingly at the children in the stream.

Thea swallowed, she guessed it had cost him a lot in pride to make that kind of admission. He was uncomfortable whenever it came to talking about his past.

"You never went on picnics?"

Max shook his head and pulled at a blade of grass. Thea's heart lurched. She longed to pull him into her arms and hold him tight, seeing in the tough grown-up man the hurt little boy he had once been.

"The only times we ever went anywhere as a family were when Mother deemed it an important social occasion. You know—weddings, christenings, stuff like that." He snapped the head off a poor unsuspecting daisy.

Thea looked across at the children playing happily together in the shallow water. "That's why we need to make things different for Emily. That's why we're going through this whole fake engagement, so she won't grow up with those kinds of unhappy memories."

Instinctively, she placed her hand over his, willing him to accept the truth of what she had said. Max's hand stilled his massacre of the daisies and for a fleeting second, she glimpsed the raw emotion in his eyes before he drew away from her and rose to his feet, brushing blades of grass from his jeans.

As he walked away from Thea towards the stream, Max struggled to fit the lid back on the memories of his childhood. He glanced back at Thea, sitting on the rug under the tree, her long, bare legs dappled by the shade of the leaves and her pretty face hidden from view under her ridiculous hat.

Kicking off his trainers and socks, he ventured into the stream. Tom and Emily roared with laughter at his expression when the cold water lapped around his ankles.

"Uncle Max, come and help me catch a fish." Emily handed him one of the brightly coloured plastic buckets as she balanced on one of the flat grey stones that protruded above the surface of the water.

Thea walked down to the edge of the stream. "Smile everyone—I want to take some pictures." Emily grinned as she posed for a photo while Tom pulled funny faces.

"I didn't know you'd brought a camera," Max said, wading towards her.

"I thought Julia might like to take some pictures with her, or she can email them to Paul before she goes. I expect he's missing Emily and this way he'll know she's happy and enjoying herself."

Max's heart gave a squeeze. He hadn't thought of how Paul might be feeling. If he were Emily's father, he would want to know she was safe and happy. He caught himself up with that thought. He wasn't a father and never planned to be.

"Can you still feel your feet?" Thea teased, looking at where he stood in the icy water.

Shaking his head, he climbed out of the stream onto the grassy bank. Thea still smiled at him, her blue eyes warm and compassionate.

“Come and get a towel to dry yourself off. I’ll give the children a few more minutes then we’ll have lunch.” Thea walked away, back towards the shade of the tree.

Max took a moment to admire the view as he followed her. Thea really had a very delectable bottom. Memories of her curvy hips illuminated by last night’s moon made him bite his lip and he flung himself down hard on the rug. Seizing a towel, he rubbed fiercely at his wet feet, picking off the stray bits of grass stuck to his skin.

Thea began to unpack the contents of the hamper, fetching out bottles of fruit juice for the children. Max watched as the strap of her bright blue vest slid off her shoulder and she pushed it back up with a distracted air. He rolled over on the rug and averted his eyes.

The children rushed over as soon as they noticed the picnic hamper was open.

“We’re starving, aren’t we, Emily? Oh wow, watermelon!” Tom plunged a hand into the basket then, catching sight of Thea’s mock severe frown, withdrew it, looking guilty.

Thea laughed, and started to share out the food from the hamper. Max watched her thoughtfully as she joked and played with Emily and Tom, whilst he ate the delicious crusty bread and fresh cheese she had provided. Julia’s comment about Thea making a wonderful mother floated back into his mind and began to niggle away at his subconscious.

With the warm sun and the country air, Max soon found his eyelids growing heavy. Tom went back down to the stream to look for fish while Emily and Thea made daisy chains on the rug. Closing his eyes, Max lay back in the sunshine and allowed himself to relax.

It seemed only minutes later that he could hear Emily giggling and Thea’s soft voice shushing her as something tickled his chin. He opened his eyes to see Thea’s laughing face close to his as she held something tickly by his neck.

“What are you...?” Max struggled to sit up and discovered he was festooned in daisy chains. Emily was helpless with mirth, rolling around on the rug roaring with laughter till she gave herself hiccups.

“Sorry, Max. We couldn’t resist it.” Thea was as bad as Emily, her face wreathed in a smile as open and sunny as the afternoon. Max grinned. He guessed he must look pretty funny all covered in daisies.

“We were just testing to see if you liked butter.” Emily hiccupped and pointed to the buttercup in Thea’s hand. “You hold it under your chin and if your chin goes all yellow then you like butter,” she explained helpfully.

Max took the flower from Thea. “Like this?” he asked, holding the tiny flower under Thea’s chin.

Her eyes became large and wide. The sweet fullness of her mouth drew him like a magnet as he moved the buttercup away. Suddenly her lips were parting beneath his with a sigh and he lost all sense of where he was in the fascinating exploration of her kiss.

“Ugh, kissing! Yuk!” Tom had come up from the stream to see what all the laughter was about and stood pulling disgusted faces at them. Thea immediately turned very pink and flustered, gabbling about having been there long enough and how they should go back to the house in case Ginny had arrived to fetch Tom.

Thea suspected Max hadn’t been entirely truthful when he had told her why he needed to return to London. All the same, perhaps a break from one another’s company might not be a bad idea. Max’s kisses played havoc with her willpower.

Max had made light of Tom’s teasing earlier by chasing him and pretending to throw him in the stream, a game which Emily soon begged to join. Thankfully, Thea had been left in peace to pack up the picnic things and compose her feelings before they all walked back to the house.

The emerald ring on her engagement finger winked accusingly at her as they made their way along the path. How could she have been so stupid as to allow her feelings to become involved with a man who had repeatedly warned her he didn’t do *happy ever after*?

Maybe she was plain stupid. Her father and Ginny had both warned her often enough in the past about allowing her heart to rule her head. She glanced along the path ahead where Max was comparing strides with Tom. There had been a few boyfriends in her past whom she had thought for a few weeks might turn out to be *the one*, but invariably as soon as she had started to think that way, they had made the “let’s be friends” speech.

“Thea, when the right man for you comes along, you’ll know it,” Ginny had once counselled her as she had dried her tears after yet another disastrous date. *“You get too serious too soon. Life isn’t like the movies, not everything has a happy ending.”*

Thea knew Ginny was right, though she didn’t like to think she was that naive. Yet she had fallen head over heels for Jon, her last boyfriend. Until her father’s illness, she had been sure he was the one. If he had proposed to her back then she would have accepted in a heartbeat, and she had been so sure he’d been planning to propose. Just went to show how wrong you could be about someone. When her father had become ill and it was obvious that he couldn’t continue to live on his own, Jon had shown his true colours.

“Thea, you can’t give up everything and go home! Can’t someone else look after him? Surely there are hospices and places like that where he could go and be looked after?”

Jon’s concern had been how her decision would affect *him*. There had been no thought for how she had felt seeing her beloved father slowly losing his memories and dignity to Alzheimer’s, the illness that had first robbed him of his sanity and finally of his life.

What was wrong with wanting to find a partner to love and who would love her for the rest of her life? Someone to grow old with, to raise a family with? Jon had been so selfish, and so cold. She stared unhappily at Max’s back. How had she managed to fall for Mr. Wrong yet again, and more heavily than she had ever thought possible?

Julia and Ginny were sitting on the wooden bench outside the back door of the house. A quick glance at Julia’s face told Thea she had been

crying again. Ginny looked tired and pale too, although her face lit up as the children came racing along the path towards them. Julia also brightened perceptibly as Emily sat next to her and started to tell her about the day's adventures.

Sitting down on one of the chairs next to the bench, Thea fanned herself with the Panama hat. Even with Max carrying the picnic hamper, it had still been a hot walk from the riverside.

"I think we could all use a drink," Max suggested and took the hamper into the house, reappearing a few minutes later with a tray full of glasses and a large jug of fruit juice.

"Did you have a nice time?" Julia asked, as he placed the tray down on the rickety wooden table.

"They were kissing!" Tom announced in tones of deepest disgust. Julia laughed but Ginny looked at Thea and raised an enquiring eyebrow.

"Sounds to me like a successful outing," Julia said.

"Yes, doesn't it," Ginny added. Thea's face burned peony hot.

Max glanced at his watch. "I'd better shower and change if I'm to make it back to London tonight in time to call into work."

Julia frowned. "Surely you don't have to go back now? Emily and I have only just arrived and already you're dashing off."

"I need to move some more of my things down here and I have a couple of things to attend to at the office. I'll only be gone overnight."

"You'd better be! It's your engagement dinner tomorrow and I'd like to see a little more of you before I have to leave." Julia didn't look happy.

Thea picked up her glass and swirled it to make the ice cubes spin. Lifting the tumbler to her lips to take a sip, she almost choked on the contents at Julia's next suggestion.

"Well, if you're going to be there overnight why don't you take Thea with you? You could go out to dinner or see a show. Emily and I'll be fine here till you get back. It would be a nice break for you both." Julia relaxed back happily on the bench and smiled at them. "You won't get

much time alone together once I've gone, so think of it as a child-free respite. Trust me, you'll need it."

Thea felt conscious of Ginny watching her as she coughed on the juice she had inhaled instead of swallowed. She replaced her glass on the table with a hand that wasn't quite steady.

"That's a nice thought, Julia, but I couldn't. I mean, there's the chickens and..."

"Oh, I can take care of Fred and his girlfriends," Ginny piped up. "I agree with Julia, it would give you both a break and Julia and I can have a nice girly evening together."

Thea stared at her friend. What was going on? Ginny knew this engagement was a put-up job, so why was she pushing them together?

"I was only going to pack up a few more things and call in at the office. There won't be much time for anything else."

Max didn't want her tagging along, Thea realised. His expression suggested he'd rather have his teeth drilled than take her to London with him.

"Nonsense, you can always pop out to that little Italian restaurant round the corner from your apartment and have dinner." Julia looked at her brother closely. "Anyone would think you didn't want Thea to go with you."

"Of course I want her to come. I just thought it would be a bit boring for her." To Thea's ears, his protestations sounded hollow and she swallowed the feeling of disappointment that he didn't want her company. Julia, however, seemed satisfied with his response.

"Well, you'd better go and pack a few things, Thea, if you two are going to miss the traffic," Ginny added, sipping her drink.

"Will you bring me back a present?" Tom had been stalking a butterfly with the fishing net while they had been talking and Thea hadn't realised he'd been listening to the conversation.

The general laughter that greeted Tom's question appeared to dispel some of the tension that Thea could feel emanating from Max.

“We’d better go and pack then.” Max placed his glass on the tray and walked around to stand behind Thea, his hand coming to rest on her bare shoulder. A ripple of awareness spread from the cool touch of his fingers over her warm skin and breathing normally became supremely difficult.

Struggling with her composure, she tried to play her part. “If you two are sure it’s all right?” she queried, looking at Julia and Ginny.

“Go and enjoy yourselves! It’s only one night,” Ginny pointed out.

Max’s hand tightened imperceptibly on Thea’s shoulder. She knew, like her, he had reacted to Ginny’s mention of *the night* and Thea couldn’t help but wonder what tonight’s sleeping arrangements would be now the ball was in Max’s court.

“Okay then.” She smiled brightly for Julia’s benefit and tried to look like a woman eager to spend the evening being wined and dined by her loving fiancé.

Max released Thea’s shoulder. His palm tingled where it had been in contact with her smooth, soft skin. Physically being so close to Thea was like walking in a minefield. She stood and he could smell her perfume, already as familiar to him as the scent of his own aftershave. His mind whirling, he struggled to make chitchat with his sister and her friend before following Thea into the house.

She had gone upstairs, presumably to pack her overnight bag. Max hesitated by the bottom stair and debated if he should go and talk to her. He raked his fingers through his hair. So much for escaping for a few hours. Deciding against approaching Thea, he climbed up the stairs.

It hadn’t escaped his notice that Julia looked as though she had been crying again earlier. He felt sure one of the reasons she wanted both himself and Thea out of the house was so she could have a married women’s heart-to-heart with Ginny.

He walked into the en-suite bathroom in the blue bedroom and turned on the shower. If only Julia would confide in him the way she had always done when she was younger. Now though, she turned away,

telling him the problem was between her and Paul and she had to sort things out on her own.

He changed quickly then ran back downstairs to the study to collect the documents he needed to drop into the office. A tap on the door made him turn to find Thea waiting for him with a small overnight bag in her hand.

“I’m ready whenever you are.”

Her fair hair was tied back loosely at the nape of her neck and her eyes had the unhappy expression of a woman expecting martyrdom. She had changed from her shorts and vest into a pastel flowered sundress so short she looked as if she had borrowed it from Emily.

Picking up his briefcase, he felt mean for wanting to get away from Stony Gables. None of this was Thea’s fault, but the last thing he had expected when he had arrived here was to find himself engaged to a stranger, coerced into sharing a bedroom with her and, what was worse, discovering he was earth-shatteringly attracted to her.

Chapter Eight

An hour later, Thea prowled cautiously around Max's apartment. The journey from Stony Gables had taken longer than expected and getting snarled up in the late-afternoon traffic didn't appear to have improved Max's health or his temper. He had spoken very little on the way into the city, merely pointing out some of the landmarks when he learned she had only visited London a few times.

The delay in reaching the huge converted warehouse where Max's penthouse apartment was situated had meant him dropping her off then rushing straight out again to get to his office before his colleagues went home for the evening. So now she was here on her own.

"Make yourself at home, I'll be back soon," Max had said as he had sprinted out of the door.

The view from the window was spectacular enough, *if you like urban landscapes*, she thought as she slid open the patio door to step out onto the steel balcony which ran along the width of the apartment. A galvanised tub with a dispirited plant made an effort to show a touch of greenery, otherwise the balcony was bare except for a couple of uncomfortable-looking mesh chairs and a matching table.

They had entered the building through a gated courtyard with security codes and even the reception into the building was accessed via a swipe card. Thea shivered despite the warm summer air. It felt, to her, like entering prison. She turned to look back inside the apartment. The rooms were huge, from what she'd seen so far, with stripped wooden floors and exposed brickwork on the walls. Solid metal beams ran across the high ceilings, adding some architectural interest to the rooms and revealing the building's industrial past.

Thea could see why Julia hadn't felt it would be a good place for Emily to stay. The lounge was sparsely furnished in true minimalist style and the kitchen was a triumph of black granite surfaces and gleaming chrome. There was nothing homely or personal about the apartment at all, as far as Thea could tell, and a small child like Emily wouldn't have much freedom to play.

Thea wondered how long Max would be gone. He hadn't suggested she meet his colleagues on this trip, but wait instead until the formal dinner party tomorrow night. Perhaps he was ashamed of her. He had made his disapproval of the sundress she had changed into for the journey clear by the look on his face when she had tapped on the study door at Stony Gables. Sighing, she smoothed her hand over the cool granite surface of the kitchen worktop.

It wasn't her fault she didn't dress like Gabby. Thea's smart half of her wardrobe consisted mainly of the practical black or navy trousers she wore for work and a variety of shirts. Her off-duty clothes tended to be cheap and cheerful, designed to lift her spirits and make a divide between what she thought of as her working life and her personal life.

She frowned at her distorted reflection in the gleaming chrome of Max's space-age kettle. Maybe her dress was a little too short and a little too bright. Glancing around at the monochrome colour palette of Max's apartment, she felt as incongruous as a sunflower on an ash heap.

The sound of a key in the lock alerted her to Max's return and she turned towards the door that led from the lounge to the square hallway. He paused in the doorway. It felt awkward knowing he didn't really want her staying here with him.

Noticing the open patio door, he asked, "What do you think of the view?" He walked over to the angular leather couch and put his briefcase down.

"It's a bit like looking at an anthill with all those people scurrying around. I didn't realise you were so close to the river."

They sounded like two people at a house viewing rather than a man and a woman who had just spent a night sharing a bedroom.

He started to loosen his collar, eager to shrug off the formal office-wear which was too warm on such a hot, sticky day. Thea's mouth dried as he undid the top buttons of his shirt then pulled a tie from his pocket, placing it on top of the briefcase.

"Did you get yourself a drink?" Slipping off his shoes, he padded over to the large fridge hidden inside one of the tall kitchen cupboards.

Thea shook her head even though Max wasn't looking in her direction. Her pulse fluttered wildly and all her senses were heightened by his presence. Accompanying Max on this trip was a big mistake. "I wasn't too bothered. I'd like one now though, if you're having one."

He glanced at her and wrenched open the fridge door. "There's beer, beer, or beer," he announced after surveying the contents.

"Then I guess I'll have beer." She smiled nervously. "Is that all that's in there?"

He popped off the top and handed over a small bottle. "Pretty much. I don't do much cooking and I forgot to tell my housekeeper to stock up."

"The cornflakes might taste interesting in the morning," Thea joked.

Max took a long drink from his bottle. "Listen, about tonight. I'm happy to take the couch." He nodded towards the black leather settee where he had deposited his belongings.

Heat crept up her neck and into her cheeks. She had seen the master bedroom during her tour of the apartment while Max was out. A mental picture of his king-sized bed with its kingfisher blue cover flashed before her and she spilled a few drops of lager onto the granite work surface.

"It's okay, I can check into a hotel or something for the night." She swallowed. Her mouth seemed so dry her tongue appeared to be glued to her palate.

Max frowned. "What if Julia found out? Or someone else? It would blow everything. We can't take the risk." He took another sip from his beer bottle.

"Well, let me take the couch then. I'm shorter than you so I'll probably fit better," Thea offered. Her heart beat so wildly she was sure it was audible.

"If anyone gets the couch, it'll be me. You're my guest." Max shot her an end-of-discussion glance.

"Only because Julia left us with very little choice," Thea responded. "You didn't really want me to come with you, did you?"

Max froze, the bottle halfway to his lips. "Was it that obvious?"

She couldn't read his expression, although it looked as if he was concerned he might have upset her.

"It's all right, I wasn't offended. I can understand that you need a little space after the last few days." She took a deep breath. "That's why I don't mind taking the couch. After all, you had the camp bed last night."

His brown eyes narrowed. "I don't see the point of us standing here all evening arguing over who sleeps where," he said finally. "It's a big flat and we have to carry on sharing a bedroom at your house at least until Julia catches her plane, anyway."

Thea leaned against the kitchen units for support. Her knees were shaking and despite her best efforts, her voice sounded squeakier than she would have liked. "What are you saying? You are kidding, right?"

Max shrugged his broad shoulders. "We can talk about it later." He drained the last of his beer and stowed the empty bottle in the recycling basket under the counter. "It's a beautiful evening. Let me show you around a little, then we can go and try that restaurant Julia was burbling about."

Oh help! Maybe he wants more than just to share a room. She had got in way too deep.

Thea looked so pretty and vulnerable standing there in her too-short, too-bright sundress that suited her so well. Heaven knew why he had hinted they share his bedroom tonight. It was madness, yet the words had fallen out of his mouth unchecked and although he knew he should regret saying them, he didn't.

She looked at him for a moment, her blue eyes shadowed and uncertain. Putting down her drink, she gave him a faint smile.

“Okay. I’d like to see more of the city up close.”

He took her for a walk in the small park near his apartment. It was busy, with people out walking, mothers pushing strollers, people jogging or rollerblading, and lovers walking hand in hand along the leafy pathways. He enjoyed strolling along with Thea. She was a good companion. The thought worried him and he was glad when they reached the riverside.

The river was busy with tourist boats chugging up and down the water as they ferried passengers between the landmarks of the city.

“It’s amazing to think we were paddling this morning in the stream and the water was so clear.” Thea stared out over the dark, murky river at the hustle and bustle and shivered.

“Are you getting cold?”

She shook her head. “Someone walking on my grave.” She flashed him a smile. “That’s what my father used to say.”

Max’s heart clenched, and he automatically slipped his arm around her shoulders. Thea leaned her head against his shoulder and he smelt the soft floral perfume she always wore. The combination of the delicate fragrance and the sound of the river water slapping against the bank as the boats passed by stirred a chord buried deep in his psyche. Closing his eyes, his mind slipped back to an earlier time, shortly after leaving school and starting university.

He hadn’t thought about Laura for years. He thought he had successfully erased her from his memory. A cold, sick feeling of betrayal swept through him. She had been blonde, like Thea, with wide blue eyes.

What a fool he’d been. Max swallowed hard. He had been young and naive. It had been loneliness, he realised now, that had made him an easy target for a girl like Laura. He had discovered too late she had been another predator, like his own mother. A woman who deliberately sought out men with wealth and connections, using them to further her own ends. A well-meaning friend had warned him but he had refused to believe the truth, until Laura herself had spelled it out at Henley Regatta when she had left him for a wealthier prospect.

“Max?”

He opened his eyes. Thea looked up at him, her gaze troubled.

“It’s cool here. Let’s walk on.” He kept his arm around her slim shoulders and she made no move to escape. It led him to wonder about Thea’s motives for agreeing to play along with the phony engagement. Was she another Laura? He knew she was desperate to stay at Stony Gables, but how desperate? Was she using the undeniable physical attraction between them to try to make the engagement real?

As they took the path leading away from the river, Max moved his arm from Thea’s shoulder. Thrusting his hands deep into his jacket pockets, he avoided looking at her. Now he had released the doubt genie from the bottle, he started to replay all of Thea’s actions in his mind, questioning her motivation for agreeing to go along with the deception.

Max’s emotional withdrawal stung more than the mere physical removal of his arm from her shoulders. Thea wished she knew what went on inside his troubled mind. She had always prided herself on her perceptiveness and her ability to tune into other people’s feelings and emotions, but with Max her gift seemed to have deserted her.

Defiantly, she raised her chin and quickened her walking pace a little. The easy, comfortable atmosphere between them had gone and despite the warm evening, the hairs on her arms felt goose-bumpy.

“We should go and see if the restaurant Julia suggested has a table free.” Max’s tone sounded casual and she knew he was simply being polite.

“If you like.” Thea kept her voice offhand. She didn’t feel very hungry now. Resisting the urge to cross her arms in a defensive move, she forced herself to look relaxed as she walked along. All the while her mind whirled away, worrying about the evening ahead.

The gates from the park out onto the road were in sight and there were more people around now the busy city nightlife had begun to spring into action. Young women in groups all dressed up for an evening out passed them by as they emerged onto the street. Thea began to feel

uncomfortable. Suppose she wasn't dressed properly for the restaurant Julia had recommended? That would be so embarrassing.

"If you'd rather not go out for dinner I'd be quite happy with a takeaway instead," she offered.

"We're here now." Max glanced at her, his sharp eyes assessing her. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, it looks lovely." The restaurant did look nice and it didn't appear to be terribly formal, as she had feared. Max frowned and pushed the door open for her to walk through. The nerves of her stomach were doing a version of cabaret but the restaurant interior was air conditioned and cool against the warmth of her cheeks.

Thea knew she was hopelessly out of practice at all this. After her father had become ill she hadn't dated, and Jon had never taken her anywhere more exciting than his local bar. The whole business of getting dressed up and heading out for a night at a wine bar or a restaurant had been left behind, along with her girlfriends, when Jon had entered her life.

Max had a quiet word with the waiter and they were led to a table for two on the far side of the restaurant. Although it was early in the evening, Thea noticed most of the tables were occupied.

"It seems very popular here."

Max followed her gaze. "The food has been good whenever I've been here before." He turned his attention back to the menu. Thea wondered if he had eaten there with Gabby. Most of the customers appeared to be young couples like themselves. She suppressed a sigh. The big difference seemed to be that the other customers were enjoying themselves.

The waiter returned, notepad in hand, and Thea realised she hadn't even looked at the menu.

"Thea, what would you like?" Max asked.

"Oh, I'm still deciding, you go first." Already, she was making an idiot of herself and they hadn't even got to the starters yet.

Max looked faintly surprised but gave his order.

"I'll have the same." Thea closed her menu and handed it back to the waiter. She didn't have a clue what she had asked for, but since she liked most Italian food, she figured it didn't matter. She was too tense to eat any of it anyway.

All these couples looking so happy in each other's company, how did she and Max appear to them? Her engagement ring glittered in the lamplight and guilt settled like cement in her stomach.

"So, what shall we talk about? And don't say you choose!" He smiled at her and Thea guessed he was trying to make amends for whatever it was that had triggered his change of mood when they had been by the river.

She fiddled with the knife nearest to her side plate. "Tell me about your work. Ginny said your company had diversified into lots of different fields since she stopped working for you."

The waiter reappeared and uncorked a bottle of wine, leaving it to breathe on the table before moving away.

"I don't know that you'll find it very interesting, but basically we specialise in hunting out investment opportunities. Property development, rentals, failing companies, those kinds of things. I head up a small team—they're the people Julia has invited to dinner tomorrow along with their partners." Max leaned back in his chair. "Your turn now, tell me about your job."

"It's not as exciting as yours. Before Dad became ill I was teaching at a nursery school. I'd worked my way up to be deputy head of the unit. The job I'm due to start in September is a teaching post at the nursery in town. It's funded by a children's charity so it should be interesting."

"Isn't it a bit of a climb down careerwise?"

Thea could feel his dark eyes scrutinising her face. "I suppose so but I love teaching and, as Tom told you, I don't drive. There aren't that many jobs available that I could apply for, I was lucky this one came up."

"But if you sold Stony Gables and moved nearer to the city..."

The wine waiter reappeared to pour the wine for Max to taste, interrupting the rest of his sentence. Thea waited until the waiter had left them again.

"I like living at Stony Gables, it's my home. My new job sounds very interesting and I'm sure I'll learn a lot from it." She bit her lip, aware she sounded defensive.

"I know how much your home means to you. I'm sorry, I was just curious. You didn't want to return to where you were working before your father's illness?" Max took a sip of his wine.

"I had to give up the job. Dad was ill for over twelve months so they couldn't keep the post open. My flat was rented so there was nothing to go back to." In spite of her efforts, she heard the wobble in her voice.

Fortunately, the first course arrived, giving her time to regain her composure before Max could ask another question. Thea spread her napkin on her lap and picked up her fork. She thought she had stopped being so sensitive about her past.

Max watched Thea's expressive features covertly as they began the meal. He was certain from her reactions that she had something to hide, but what? He turned the conversation back onto more neutral ground; perhaps if Thea relaxed a little more he might manage to find out her motivations for agreeing to the fake engagement.

"You and your father must have been very close?"

"We were." Thea smiled wistfully. "Mum died when I was fourteen, so it was just me and Dad after that. I suppose it's a similar thing for you and Julia."

Max paused, "I hadn't thought of it like that, but yes, you're right." To all extents and purposes he had been more of a father figure to Julia than a brother. He had always been the one she turned to when she had problems. Except the problems she was experiencing now.

Julia had appeared very anxious for Thea to accompany him on his trip back to the flat. He wondered what she had been discussing with Ginny when he and Thea had returned from the picnic.

He sighed and put his cutlery down on the plate. "Emily seems happier now she knows she's staying with us."

Thea sipped her wine and viewed him cautiously over the rim of the glass, her blue eyes dark and mysterious in the lamplight.

"We just have to keep this charade going till the day after tomorrow when Julia gets on her plane." The sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach at the thought that the fake engagement was almost at an end took him by surprise.

Thea frowned, "We'll have to pretend for a little longer than that or Emily will be upset, although I'm sure we can relax a little."

He sensed that she had almost voiced the words "*stop sharing a bedroom*" and his heart rate speeded up as he remembered the events of the morning.

"I hope Julia works her problems out while she's away," Thea mused.

The waiter reappeared to collect the plates.

"I hope so too. Paul is a nice guy and up till the last few months I thought they were very happy together. Emily adores her father."

The main course arrived and Max took the opportunity to top up the wineglasses.

"Whoa, I'm not used to too much alcohol, I'm out of practice," Thea warned him as he added more to her glass.

"From what Henry was saying, Stony Gables needs a lot of money spent on it. I'd noticed a few problems."

Thea sighed. "Repairs to the roof, the guttering, plumbing and heating and redecoration, that's just the tip of the iceberg. Henry's been pressuring me to turn the house into luxury apartments or sell it to a developer." She pulled a face. "There's no way I'd let them pull it down to build those ugly executive box houses."

Max struggled to hide a smile as he considered Stony Gables' distinctly unlovely appearance.

"I suppose my renting the house will help solve some of those problems." Thea had been telling the truth about money being her prime

motivation for helping him. He was annoyed with himself for feeling disappointed.

Thea nodded enthusiastically, her mouth full of pasta. “Mmm, at least the more urgent stuff like the roof and the heating can be fixed before the winter.”

Sitting and chatting with Max in the intimate atmosphere of the restaurant, Thea began to relax. Her worries over the night ahead slid to the back of her mind as she swapped stories and jokes with Max. Whatever had caused his bad mood earlier appeared to have gone and Thea started to feel as if she was beginning to understand him a little better.

Sipping her coffee at the end of the meal, she became aware the restaurant had emptied and they were one of the last couples remaining in the room. Her attention had been so focused on the charismatic man masquerading as her fiancé, she hadn’t even noticed the other people leaving.

“We should go. I think the waiters would like to go home.” Thea replaced the white china cup carefully back on the saucer—her head had a lovely, slightly woozy feel from a little too much alcohol.

Max looked around. He appeared as unaware of the late hour as Thea.

“You’re right, we should leave. Julia has our engagement dinner planned for tomorrow and we’ll be snoring in the soup at this rate.” He grinned mischievously, lighting his face up and making her heart thump. He called the waiter over and settled the bill, brushing aside Thea’s offer to split the costs with a frown.

The summer night air was still warm as they left the restaurant and set off on the short walk back to the apartment block.

“It’s been a lovely evening.” Thea sighed. Perhaps it was the alcohol but she felt as if she were floating rather than walking down the street. Max had draped his arm around her shoulders once again and the

gesture felt as comfortable as an old shoe. It was almost as if they were a real couple making their way home after a romantic evening out.

As Max tapped the security code into the lock at the entrance of the complex, Thea leaned against the wall. The smooth, hard surface of the brickwork felt cool against the heated surface of her skin. The release buzzer sounded and Thea followed her fiancé into the large open communal hall. Their footsteps echoed, bouncing off the stone-flagged floor as they made their way to the lift.

Max kept his fingers loosely linked with hers as if afraid that breaking contact would break the mood. The lift slid to a halt on the top floor. Thea ran her tongue over lips that felt dry and flaky. Fitting the key into the lock, Max opened the front door of the apartment and stood back to let her go in.

“Would you like another coffee?” He dropped his keys onto the worktop in the kitchen area and turned towards her.

“That would be lovely, thanks.” She didn’t want another drink but it delayed the moment when inevitably they would have to get changed and go to bed.

“Max, I really don’t mind taking the settee tonight.”

He paused, the coffee spoon suspended over the mug. “I understand you’re nervous because we’re alone but I assure you I’m not about to pounce on you. I was only teasing you earlier.”

Heat rushed into her cheeks. “I’m sorry, you’re right. It’s just that everything’s been happening so fast.”

Max put down the spoon and reached across, touching her hot cheek with the tip of his finger. “I know.”

Thea could only stare into his dark eyes, trying to read the confusing mix of emotions showing there.

“I thought I could cope with this fake engagement thing but...” She tried to put her feelings into words, but how could she explain?

“You’ve changed your mind?” Max asked incredulously.

“No, I gave you my word and I wouldn’t do anything that might change Julia’s mind about letting Emily stay.”

“Then what?”

His question hung in the air between them, both of them knowing instinctively what the problem was but neither of them willing to put their feelings into words.

Chapter Nine

The silence seemed to stretch forever. Max waited for Thea to go first. He wasn't sure he could explain what had been going on between the two of them. He wasn't sure if he even wanted to go there. Already in the few days since he had met Thea his whole world had shifted. Everything he thought he had decided about his life, his feelings, and his future had been turned upside down.

"I'm not really sure that I know how to say this, and I might be about to make a real fool of myself." Thea licked her lips again and Max felt his heart turn over.

"You and I want different things from life and I know this engagement is only for Julia's benefit but, well..." Her voice tailed off and she flapped her hands desperately.

"But you're attracted to me and I'm attracted to you, is that what you're trying to say?" He scanned her expression for any trace of a mercenary motive and despised himself for doing so.

Relief flooded across her face, her eyes shining like sapphires against the pallor of her skin. "Exactly! And it's no good."

Thea's logic left him floundering for a moment. "Why?"

She sighed. "Like I said, we want different things from life. You told me you weren't planning marriage, a family or commitment of any kind and I..."

"You want those things," he said flatly. He understood there was a monumental chasm between them over what they both wanted for their futures. "That doesn't alter the fact that I want you and you want me. We can't control who we're attracted to, Thea."

Her face whitened even further and he knew before she spoke that he'd once again managed to say the wrong thing.

"Maybe not, but we can control what we do about it." Her voice sounded stiff.

He raked his hand through his hair and tried to work out what he'd said that had caused her to look so upset.

"You think I'm taking advantage of the situation?"

"Yes, I mean no. I don't know." She folded her arms. "I just think being together in such close proximity isn't good for either of us. Julia leaves soon so I just think we should cool things a little when she's not around."

"I see." He did *see*. What he didn't understand was why he was so irritated by her suggestion. Wasn't that why he'd tried to come back to his apartment, leaving Thea behind at Stony Gables? To put some space between them and give himself a chance to breathe?

He picked up the kettle which had come to the boil some minutes ago and finished making the coffee. Thea had crossed over to the big windows and leaned against the open glass door, looking out across the water at the city lights. He wished he could interpret the expression on her face. Picking up a mug, he then carried it across to her.

She seemed to sense his approach without turning. "You think I'm crazy for wanting a family of my own." Her voice sounded sad.

Max paused, her mug still in his hand. "No, not crazy." He hesitated, trying to find the right words. "You're young yet. I suppose I don't understand the rush. Why you don't have some fun first? You choose to live in that huge house which takes all your time and money and bury yourself away."

Thea rubbed at the bare flesh at the top of her arms as if the night air had suddenly gone cold. "I don't expect you to understand, but I love my life, I love my home. I have a close circle of friends who I can rely on and I'll never be rich from my work but I enjoy it. I just don't have a family."

She half turned to face him and he automatically proffered her the coffee mug. She accepted it almost without noticing what it was he'd given her.

"I'm not scared of being alone, I just want the normal things in life, a partner who loves me and who I love. A family life with children. Before Dad became ill I thought I'd found that person." She paused, struggling with her emotions. "It turned out he couldn't control who he fell in love with." Tears spilled down her cheeks and she dashed them away with her free hand. "I'm sorry."

Max rescued the mug from her trembling fingers and rested it on the nearby coffee table.

"Were you and this man engaged?" He longed to take her in his arms and wipe away the sadness from her face. A surge of jealousy speared him at the thought of this unknown man breaking Thea's heart.

She shook her head. "We'd talked about getting married, made plans together for finding a house. When Dad became ill and it was obvious he couldn't go on living on his own I moved back home to care for him. Jon phoned and visited a lot at first, then as time went on he, well, found someone else—except I was the last person to find out." Thea fumbled in her pocket for a tissue and scrubbed at her eyes. "I felt so stupid."

"No wonder this is so hard on you. I take it you don't see this guy, Jon, any more?" If he ever met this guy he didn't think he would be responsible for the consequences. He passed her a clean folded handkerchief from his pocket.

"He married the other girl."

A jumble of conflicting emotions whirled around in Max's mind. A dark surge of jealousy demanded an answer. "Are you still in love with him?"

"I don't think that's any of your business, Max." Thea gave her eyes another fierce dab with the handkerchief. She picked up her coffee and held it in front of her like a shield, clearly regretting having told him so much about her past. "What about you, Max? Have you ever been in love?"

Thea waited for his answer. She wasn't sure where she'd found the courage to ask the question but her pride commanded an answer.

"I thought I was once." He looked past her, staring out at the night-time cityscape.

"What happened?" Instinctively she knew it was important, another tiny clue to the enigma of Max's complex personality.

"It turned out she loved money more than me. A richer prospect came along and she took off." Max shrugged. "It was a long time ago." His expression closed and became more guarded. She sensed he wasn't prepared to share any more of his past with her tonight.

"Go to bed, Thea. I've got some things I need to finish off on the computer."

She had been dismissed. Anger flooded through her. The sharing of confidences was only going to flow one way. He plainly intended to bury himself in the spare room which was fitted out with every piece of office equipment known to man. Drawing a deep breath to steady her shaking legs, she placed her mug back carefully on the table.

"Goodnight, Max." He didn't answer, seeming unaware of her presence as he stared back out at the night sky, and Thea took herself and her battered pride off to bed.

Closing the bedroom door behind her, she leaned back and tried to calm her racing heart. It was hopeless, he'd made his position clear and he wasn't about to compromise. All she could expect if she chose to become involved with Max was a short affair. For a moment out there she had thought he was about to share with her, to open up a little and begin to expose some of the emotions and feelings he kept buried deep within his heart.

Slipping off her sandals, she walked over to the huge double bed which dominated the room, the polished wooden floorboards cool under the soles of her feet. A little voice nagged at her inside her brain.

So what if that's all he intends to offer you? Maybe you're just in lust and not in love? You've been wrong before, haven't you?

Thea sank down onto the soft blue duvet. Perhaps she should be more flexible. Dismissing the idea as quickly as it had entered her head, she wondered if Max would ever manage to deal with the emotional baggage he carried.

It had sounded as though he planned to stay in his office and work for as long as possible, probably hoping she would be asleep when, or if, he went to bed on that horrid couch. It would have been better if she'd gone to a hotel, then there would have been no need for this ridiculous and embarrassing charade.

Shaking off the thoughts impatiently, she grabbed her nightclothes and stomped into the shower room. One thing she wasn't, she thought as she brushed her teeth, she wasn't a quitter.

The optimistic side of her nature bubbled back to the fore and as she changed into the camisole set she decided there was no point in worrying about things she had little control over. It wasn't as if she could force Max into discussing the issues that coloured his feelings about women and relationships.

Uneasily, she shrugged off the doubts that still niggled at the corners of her mind. She had given her word she would help Max care for his little niece. Julia would be gone soon and Emily's welfare was what was important, not some stupid infatuation she had for Emily's uncle. At the end of the day Max was her employer and maybe she should try keeping that more in mind in future.

Lying alone in the vast expanse of Max's double bed, Thea thought she would never manage to fall asleep—every nerve was on the alert. She underestimated her tiredness however, and she must have long since fallen asleep before Max finally switched off his computer and made up his bed in the lounge.

* * *

Coffee, she could smell coffee. Max tapped on the bedroom door, and Thea pulled the covers a little higher as she struggled to sit up.

“Come in.”

Max carried a tray with a mug and a plate of biscuits.

“Sorry, there’s no toast. I forgot we hadn’t any bread.”

Her heart thumped as she accepted the tray. Staring up at him, she noticed the dark circles under his eyes and wondered how late it had been before he had gone to sleep.

“Thea, I’ve been thinking about last night, about what you said.” Max had his hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans and he appeared ill at ease standing next to the bed. She waited for him to explain—was he calling the engagement off? The palms of her hands grew sweaty with anxiety at the thought, and she scolded herself mentally for being so foolish after the pep talk she’d given herself last night.

“I feel I owe you an apology. I won’t pretend I’m not attracted to you—you know I am. But I realised after our conversation last night that we need to be more circumspect and practical about our arrangement.”

Thea listened to his extraordinary speech with a growing sense of anger and bewilderment. She stifled the little voice in her head that told her she should be pleased he had taken this line, after all, wasn’t it only what she herself had suggested? Max cleared his throat, clearly waiting for her response. Slowly and with deliberate care she slid the tray to one side, annoyance at his easy dismissal of his feelings overriding what, she belatedly realised after she’d opened her mouth, was her common sense.

“Circumspect! Max, you are not addressing a board meeting! You and I are not the proposed merger of two business interests!”

Max took a step back as she slid out of bed, hands on hips to confront him. “I did a lot of thinking too last night and I realised something. Okay, I agree we need to separate our feelings from the task of caring for Emily and reassuring Julia.” She poked him in the chest with her forefinger. “But the feelings we have for one another won’t just go away and, you know, the real difference between us isn’t in the way we see our futures. It’s in the way we see ourselves.”

Waving his hands in a placating motion, Max stepped back again, attempting to avoid her accusatory finger.

“Yes, I want marriage and a family but I’m willing to be open to new relationships. I might have had one really bad experience but that doesn’t mean I judge everyone else the same way. When are you going to be prepared to do that? To share the real you with someone?” She paused for breath. Max looked at her as if she had gone mad.

“So what are you saying? I’m afraid to have a relationship?” The words sounded like a growl and his dark eyes glittered dangerously.

Lifting her chin, Thea stared him down. “Aren’t you?”

“No!” He glowered back at her.

“Prove it!”

“What?” Her demand had taken him by surprise. She could see the pulse throbbing in his temple and for a moment she held her breath, wondering if she had pushed him too far. His eyes locked with hers then to her surprise he started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Oh hell, he probably thought she was desperate to become involved with him now.

“Okay, smarty-pants, and how do I do that?”

“When did you last take a risk? Take a chance? I don’t mean workwise,” she said quickly when he would have opened his mouth and interrupted her. “I mean emotionally. When did you last fight for a relationship?” Phew, she’d managed to explain herself a little better, not that he would like what she had to say.

His dark eyes narrowed and he shot her a hostile glance. Tension hung in the air and Thea’s teeth hurt from clenching them.

“This is ridiculous!” He turned on his heel and stalked out. A moment later she flinched as the apartment door slammed.

“Infuriating, bossy, know-all schoolteacher!” Max muttered as he headed down the stairs, spurning the lift in an attempt to vent his feelings with exercise. When had he last taken a risk? The day he had first met Thea and got himself embroiled in this crazy deception. That was when. She made it sound as if he were some kind of emotional

cripple instead of seeing his suggestion for the sensible, logical, rational proposal that it was.

He paused on the bottom step and ran his hand through his hair in exasperation. What the hell was he doing? In the space of a few days Thea had turned his nice orderly existence on its head. Max slumped against the cool exposed brickwork of the stairwell. They had no choice but to see this farce through to the end. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath.

At least one thing had come out of his argument with Thea. She had been forthright about wanting marriage and a family, and equally frank that she didn't view him as a candidate. *Good!* he told himself. At least that was one less problem to worry about. Wasn't it?

The journey back to Stony Gables was silent except for the music on the car radio. Thea kept her attention fixed on the passing scenery. Max hadn't said much after his return to the apartment. She knew he had been to the gym situated within the complex as he had returned carrying a bag of sports gear, which he had dumped into the washing machine before going into his bedroom and packing a small case of clothes to take down to Stony Gables.

The grey concrete of the motorway scenery gave way to the greener fields and hedgerows which brought them closer to home with each mile that passed. Thea's stomach started to feel uncomfortable as she pictured Emily's and Julia's trusting faces waiting for them on their arrival. There was no way either she or Max was a good enough actor to convince them they had just spent a blissful loved-up night in each other's company. The icily polite silence was a bit of a giveaway, not to mention the body language. Or lack of it.

Max swung the car in through the gates of Stony Gables and slid to a halt on the gravel outside the house. The comforting sight of the stone gargoyles that guarded her front door boosted her spirits. She glanced across at Max as he switched off the engine.

For a moment he paused, slumped towards the steering wheel as if steeling himself for the task ahead. Thea's heart gave an inconvenient twinge of sympathy.

The front door of the house was flung open and Emily came bouncing down the steps towards them, her small face beaming with delight at their return.

"Uncle Max, look at my new dress!" Without waiting for them to get out of the car, she started twirling around in the sunshine. Thea opened her door and climbed out.

Emily paused in her twirling and grinned happily at Thea. "Do you like my dress, Auntie Thea? Mummy bought it for me 'cos she says I can't go to the big party tonight."

"I think it's really lovely Emily—you look like a princess."

Emily smiled and ran to Thea, hugging her with a fierceness that took Thea by surprise.

"Do I get a hug too?"

Thea had temporarily forgotten about Max sitting in the car. He had climbed out and stood watching them with a thoughtful expression on his face. Emily released her grip on Thea and rushed across to Max with a whoop of delight. As she watched them embrace Thea wished she could get Max to understand about families. It was plain to see how much he loved Emily. He'd even been prepared to pretend to be engaged for heaven's sake.

Sighing, Thea turned away and trudged along the gravel towards the open front door. Her interference so far hadn't done much good. If anything, she'd made things worse instead of better.

Julia sat in the kitchen. "I thought I heard the car, Emily couldn't wait for you both to get back." She stood and walked over to the fridge. "I put a jug of juice in the fridge earlier. I thought you'd like a drink when you got back."

"That's really kind of you, Julia. Thank you." Thea was touched by Julia's thoughtfulness. Max's sister, although still pale, looked better than she had done on her arrival at Stony Gables.

"I can't tell you what a relief it is to know Emily will be so happy and contented here with you and Max while I'm away." Julia reached into the fridge for the jug of juice and poured some into a tall glass. "I must admit when Max first suggested looking after Emily I really didn't think it would work out, but since I've met you and seen how at home she is here I can see it's the right choice."

Thea forced herself to smile at Julia as she accepted the glass of juice while guilt about the extent of her and Max's deception settled in her stomach like a lead weight.

"Everyone's coming tonight. Ginny and Laurence and Max's partners and their wives. It should be a nice evening, I called into the restaurant this morning with Emily when we bought her new dress and it's a very attractive venue." Julia slid the jug back into the fridge and came and sat opposite Thea with her own drink. "Emily has dragged Max down the garden to push her on the swing."

Thea squashed a tiny feeling of disappointment and forced herself to relax. "You must be looking forward to seeing Paul again."

Julia sipped her drink. "I am now. I've had time to think things through and the last few times I've spoken to him on the phone I get the feeling that he's been doing some thinking too, so I feel much more hopeful than I've been for a long time."

Thea reached across to squeeze Julia's hand. "I'm so glad."

"I'm pleased Max met you. It'll be lovely having you as a sister-in-law. Have you two given any thought about setting a date for the wedding yet?"

Thea wriggled uncomfortably on her seat. "We haven't really discussed it. I mean, there's no reason to rush into anything." Oh heck, this was getting complicated.

"The vicar was asking Ginny if you'd set a date. I must say I thought your village church looked like a very pretty setting for a wedding."

Thea had always pictured herself marrying at the beautiful twelfth-century parish church. A tantalising vision flashed through her mind of white lace and a horse-drawn carriage decked with flowers, with a

smiling groom who looked suspiciously like Max standing next to the open carriage door.

She was unaware she had drifted off into a daydream till she heard Julia's voice.

"Has Emily let you escape? Sit down and I'll get you a drink. It's thirsty work pushing her on the swing, she'd keep you out there for hours."

Max pulled out the empty chair next to her and sat down. His denim-clad leg brushed against her bare one under the table. A tingle of excitement swept through her even as she moved her leg away.

"Emily's still outside. I think she's planning on doing some watering."

"Oh no! Not in her new dress!" Julia dashed outside.

"You two seemed deep in conversation." Max picked up his drink.

"Apparently, the vicar's been asking Ginny if we've chosen a date yet." Thea braced herself for Max's reaction. Much to her surprise he didn't appear as mortified as she had expected.

"I expect we'll get a lot more comments like that and worse, at dinner tonight." He took a sip of juice. "What did you tell Julia?"

"The truth. That it was something we hadn't discussed yet." She couldn't be sure but she thought his shoulders relaxed a little at her answer. The tension which had hung in the air between them all the way back had lessened slightly and Thea hoped the atmosphere had improved, otherwise the dinner party would be the challenge to end all challenges.

Max placed his glass back down on the table. "I'd better go and get some work done. I promised Emily I would take her down by the river later."

The speed with which he excused himself and the way he didn't quite meet her eyes as he left made her suspect he had used work as an escape from her company.

* * *

He needn't have bothered, she thought. She could take a hint. Glancing back at the house from her position amongst the runner beans at the bottom of the vegetable patch, she wondered if he really was working at his laptop in the study.

"Oh, get over yourself," she muttered and vented her feelings on a stray weed with her gardening fork. All she had to do was get through this dinner party and wave Julia off on her flight tomorrow. She bit down the urge to cry. Who was she kidding? *All she had to do*. It would have been hard enough to pull off if she and Max had still been in tune. Now with this frostiness between them it would be so much more difficult—as if the differences in their lifestyles weren't enough.

Gloomily, she kicked a large stone from the surface of the newly turned soil. They would all be expecting someone like Gabby, poised and sophisticated. She glanced down at her soil-encrusted boots. It was no use, she needed help.

Chapter Ten

“Thea! What on earth are you doing here?” Ginny opened the front door a little wider and, without waiting for Thea to kick off her dusty boots, reached out a hand to pull her inside the hall.

The worried expression on Ginny’s face confirmed Thea’s suspicion that she must look a complete mess. The tears had started to flow as she had cycled along the lane to Ginny’s house and she knew she was never a pretty sight when she had been crying.

“Come through to the conservatory. Whatever’s the matter? You look dreadful!”

Kicking off her boots, Thea allowed Ginny to steer her through to one of the comfortable sofas in the sun lounge. Sniffing miserably, she wiped her eyes on the remains of a tissue from her pocket while Ginny moved a magazine from the seat to come and sit next to her.

“I can’t do this any more. Oh Ginny, you were right! This whole thing has been the most awful mistake.” The way she felt, it would serve her right if Ginny were to say *told you so* and refuse to have anything more to do with the whole scheme.

“What’s happened?” Ginny, ever practical, passed her a box of tissues as she listened to her garbled story.

Finishing her story, Thea sat sniffing while she waited for Ginny’s verdict on what she should do. “I’m not going to be able to carry this off tonight, Ginny. They’ll be expecting someone like Gabby and instead they’ll get me and...”

“And now you’re in love with Max it hurts to go on pretending you have a future together.” Ginny finished the sentence for her, leaving Thea gaping open-mouthed.

“I feel partly responsible for all this. I would never have suggested Max rent your house if I’d thought the two of you would get involved.” Ginny sighed. “But Max has always been so anti-marriage and you’ve never wanted the kind of man who didn’t share your goals.”

“None of this is your fault. It’s mine. I came up with the idea of faking the engagement after Julia got the wrong idea.”

“Yes, but I couldn’t resist a spot of matchmaking by sending you off to Max’s apartment with him. When Tom said you two had been kissing I thought maybe you and Max would get together. I’m sorry, Thea. I shouldn’t have interfered.”

“No, Ginny. You warned me right at the start what Max was like. I guess I just got swept along by my own feelings into imagining I could change him.” Thea pulled another tissue from the box and scrubbed at her eyes. “How am I going to get through tonight?”

“That depends on what you want to achieve. If you’re asking me to help you look like the kind of woman Max’s business partners are expecting to meet, then that’s no problem. You’re a very attractive girl, Thea.” Ginny paused. “If you want advice on Max then I don’t think I’ll be much help. To me he looks like a man who’s head over heels in love when he’s around you but you say that isn’t the case, so I don’t think my judgment’s too good on that call.”

Thea pulled a face. Max might be *in lust* but he had been quite clear about not being in love. “I’ll settle for looking a little more like the kind of woman Max would get engaged to.” *At least I’ll keep my dignity and I can retain some pride.*

Ginny gave her a comforting hug. “Better go and see what I can find in my wardrobe then. There are some lovely things from my pre-Tom days which should fit you nicely.” She gave Thea’s hand a pat. “I’ll never fit in them again, that’s for certain. Come on, we’ll go and sort some out and you can try them on.”

Thea's bike was missing from by the back door. Max noticed it had gone as soon as he and Emily neared the house as they returned from their riverside walk.

"I'm going to show Mummy my caterpillar." Emily danced off with the jam jar full of leaves and the somnolent-looking caterpillar he had persuaded her to take when they had failed in their attempts to catch anything in the stream.

Aimlessly, he wandered back outside and walked around to the front of the house. Thea had been right about the amount of work the house needed. He squinted up at the gutters. Most of them were still the original cast iron and were long past their lifespan, the paint had peeled from the window ledges and some of the sills were rotten.

The sound of Thea's squeaky, old bike at the bottom of the drive drew his attention away from his mental list of Stony Gables' faults. Much to his annoyance, Thea wasn't alone. Crawling alongside her, with the window rolled down, was a familiar sports car.

Thea was deep in conversation with Henry, Max realised as he neared the car. The wicker basket on the front of her bike was full of carrier bags and she had dismounted from the bike saddle to talk to Henry. Her hair blew around her face in the light, late-afternoon breeze and her cheeks were flushed from exertion.

"Thea, Henry."

Thea hadn't noticed him approaching but at the sound of his greeting she straightened and turned around.

"Let me take your bike for you, darling." Max emphasised the last word, causing Thea to flush a deeper shade of pink as he took firm possession of the bike handlebars.

"Max, didn't realise you were still here. Congratulations by the way, I heard about the engagement." Henry leered at Thea. "You've got quite a catch there, old boy. Well, I'd best be off, see you around Thea." With a brief nod, Henry slipped the car into gear and roared away.

“What did he want?” Ever since he had met Henry at Ginny’s house Max had disliked and distrusted him.

Thea fell into step beside him as he pushed her ancient bike up the driveway. “He was just being pleasant for once.”

The scoffing sound that escaped his lips slipped out automatically, bringing a furrow to Thea’s brow. She reached across and took the carriers from the basket on the handlebars.

“Thanks for wheeling the bike up. If you’ll excuse me, I’ve a lot to do to get ready for tonight.”

Her voice sounded stiff and he sensed he had done the wrong thing yet again. As he watched her walk away with her chin held defiantly in the air, he suppressed a growl of frustration. She disappeared around the corner of the house with a final toss of her wild curls, leaving him holding her rusty bike.

Wheeling Thea’s bike back into its usual position outside the back door, his imagination whirled around at the same speed as the bike wheels. Bitterly, he forced himself to face facts. It had been jealousy, pure and simple, which had driven him to storm down the driveway and intervene in Thea and Henry’s conversation.

He didn’t like feeling his emotions were sliding out of his control. He had prided himself for so many years on his mastery of his emotions and the raw rush of annoyance had taken him by surprise.

Thea tipped the contents of the carrier bags out on her bed. Picking up the dress that Ginny had loaned her for the evening, she slipped it onto a hanger and hooked it carefully onto her wardrobe door.

The heart-to-heart talk with Ginny had helped clarify things in her mind and, knowing she had her friend’s support, the evening ahead seemed a little less daunting.

Running into Max on the driveway had shaken her confidence a little. It was typical of her luck that Henry had rolled up just as she had arrived home. Her hands shook as she sorted out the toiletries and cosmetics she had picked up in the village on her way home.

She could hear Julia talking to Emily in the tower bedroom. Ginny had arranged for Emily to stay at her house for the night with Tom while the adults went out to celebrate the engagement. Emily was excited about the prospect of a sleepover and had hatched a good many plans with Tom, which they had discussed in noisy whispers with lots of giggles whenever they were together.

Thea sank down onto her bed. She had never envisaged life becoming this complicated when she had agreed to faking an engagement to Max. In the short space of time Emily had been in the house she had become very fond of the little girl and Emily had become fond of her. What would happen later on when Thea and Max made their announcement that the engagement was off?

Flopping back, Thea lay on top of her quilt and closed her eyes, allowing the familiar sounds of the house to wash over her. Julia was due to leave in the morning then it would be down to Thea and Max to ensure that Emily had a happy and fun-filled stay.

“Focus, Thea,” she told herself sternly. “You’re doing this for Emily.”

Max had taken his clothes for the evening to the blue room, telling Julia he would be under Thea’s feet otherwise while she got ready. She wondered what Max’s colleagues would be like. Julia had told her a little about them and Max had filled her in on a lot of information. Even so, she had an uneasy feeling she was not going to be the kind of woman they would have expected Max to propose to. Although from what Max himself and everyone else had said, they would be astonished he had proposed to anyone at all.

By the time she had showered, applied her make-up and changed into the beautiful pale blue dress Ginny had loaned her, butterflies were dancing in her stomach. Using the potions she had acquired from the chemist, she tamed her hair into a smooth, neat chignon. Surveying herself in the mildew-spotted mirror on her wardrobe door, she hardly recognised herself.

“Very corporate wife,” she muttered, uncertain if she liked her new image.

A knock at the door disturbed her reverie. "Come in."

Max pushed the door open cautiously. "You look very nice." He paused as if uncertain of his welcome. "I wanted to talk to you before we went downstairs."

Thea motioned him into the room and he slipped through the door, closing it behind him.

"I wanted to thank you for going through with this, Thea. I never thought everything would become so complicated. Once Julia's gone hopefully the madness will die down."

Thea swallowed. She could read the underlying text of what he was saying. In other words, once Julia had gone they could stop pretending and begin to pave the way to ending the engagement.

"We'll need to spend a lot of time with Emily," she said. "She's going to miss Julia terribly. They are very close and although Emily seems much happier since she's been here, whenever Julia mentions leaving Emily goes very quiet."

"I've booked a week off work so I can be here to take her out and play with her. I thought it might help take her mind off things."

Thea felt touched that Max had thought about how Emily would cope without her mother. "I'd thought of taking her to Treetops, you know, the amusement park. Tom's told her all about the rides and the animals and she really wants to go. It would give her something to look forward to."

"Okay, sounds good. Treetops it is. We'll take her after Julia's gone. It might cheer her up."

His face still looked grave, as if he wanted to say something else. She hadn't realised while they were talking how close he was to her. Not that there was much choice in the confined floor space of her bedroom.

"We'd better go downstairs. Julia and Emily will be waiting." Thea picked up her small silver evening purse from the bed and waited for Max to open the bedroom door. His eyes met hers and for a heartbeat she thought he was about to kiss her. Instead he suddenly turned away, wrenched the door open and went out onto the landing, leaving her to follow behind.

Thea left the safety of her bedroom feeling shaky, her heart pounding as she joined Max at the top of the stairs.

“Ready to go?” he asked. His voice was cool and controlled and his expression held no trace of the feelings Thea had thought she’d seen a moment earlier. Unable to trust her voice, she nodded an assent and, taking his arm, walked down the broad oak staircase into the hall where Julia and Emily were waiting for them.

“Wow! Thea, you look beautiful.” Emily hovered by her mother’s side, clutching her overnight bag.

Julia stepped forward to hug Thea in a gentle embrace. “You look lovely.” Her dark eyes, so like those of her brother and daughter, looked wistful for a moment, then she smiled and said, “We’d better set off or Tom will have expired with anticipation before we get to Ginny’s house.” Julia smoothed her daughter’s hair affectionately.

Tom was standing by the front door when they pulled onto Ginny’s drive. “They’re here! Mum, Emily’s here!” They could hear him shouting to his parents before they were out of the car.

Laurence came out to meet them and Tom and Emily ran into the house with Tom talking excitedly to Emily as he carried her bag through to his bedroom.

“Ginny’s just finishing getting ready. Come through to the conservatory. We’ve time for a drink before we go to meet the others at the restaurant.”

The conservatory felt pleasantly cool with the ceiling fans whirring gently and the blinds half-drawn to provide some shade from the evening sun. Laurence poured out glasses of Pimms. Julia had volunteered to drive so Laurence handed her a glass of juice.

“The babysitter has just arrived so she’s gone in to the children.” Ginny walked in, still fastening a long gold earring onto her ear. Laurence handed her a glass of juice.

“Aren’t you drinking?” Thea was surprised. Ginny was very fond of Pimms.

Flushing prettily, Ginny took a seat on the sofa next to Julia. Laurence cleared his throat. "This seems as good a time as any for our announcement. Ginny and I are expecting a brother or sister for Tom."

"Oh, that's fantastic!" Thea hugged her friend with delight and kissed Laurence on the cheek. Julia and Max joined in with the congratulations, although from Julia's reaction Thea suspected that Ginny might have already told Julia the news.

Thea couldn't help feeling envious of her friend as she watched Laurence beam with pride at his wife. If anything she now felt even guiltier about deceiving Julia and Max's colleagues.

Max seemed to sense her disquiet and once they had finished their drinks and were walking out to the car he came over to walk with her. Allowing the others to get a little ahead of them, he slipped his arm around her and murmured in her ear, "I know you feel bad about this, Thea, but I promise as soon as possible we'll sort everything out. We're doing this for the right reasons."

"You're right, but I just wish we'd thought it through a little better. Maybe winging it wasn't such a great plan after all."

As he helped her into Julia's car he gave her fingers a sympathetic squeeze.

The Limes bistro was housed in an elegant Georgian building which had once been a coaching inn. Now the inside had been stripped back and the beautiful architectural features of the building glowed in the subdued lighting.

"This looks wonderful," Ginny remarked approvingly. "It was so run-down before." The head waiter recognised Julia and came to greet them with the news that the rest of the party had arrived and were already seated waiting for them.

Thea was acutely aware of the interest her arrival had created as they approached the table. The wives of Max's colleagues all seemed very friendly, although openly curious about her, and to her relief none of them appeared as polished or superior as Gabby.

Julia performed the introductions and Max was soon the subject of much ribaldry from his friends about his surrendering of his eligible-bachelor status.

“Well, Max, I must admit we never thought you’d succumb and join the ranks of the old marrieds like us.” One of his colleagues thumped Max heartily on the back, then winked at Thea. “Still, looks like you got lucky and picked a beauty.”

Thea could feel her cheeks burning up with embarrassment. As the evening wore on she began to feel exhausted. The other women were naturally full of questions about how had they met and when were they planning on getting married, was Max selling his flat, and all kinds of things Thea had no definite answer for. Most of them she could parry with *we haven’t decided yet* or *everything’s happened so fast*, but the strain of trying not to compound their original deception with further lies felt tiring and she was glad when the meal had finished and they were drinking their coffees.

The restaurant was quieter now and the waiters were clearing some of the tables ready for the next day when Thea heard a familiar voice behind her.

“Thea, you didn’t say you were eating here tonight.”

Thea’s heart sank. Turning around in her seat, she saw Henry, swaying slightly on his heels, accompanied by Gabby. An awkward silence fell over the table. It was clear that Max’s colleagues and their wives knew Gabby and were wondering if Thea knew about her too.

“Gabby, Henry.” Max acknowledged them with a terse nod.

“Well, quite a gathering. Is this for anything special?” Gabby directed her question to Max, ignoring Thea completely as if she had never met her before.

“We’re celebrating Max and Thea’s engagement,” Julia remarked coolly, her tone betraying the fact she had no affection for Max’s former girlfriend.

“Ah yes, silly me, I’d forgotten about that.” Gabby’s voice was dismissive and faintly scornful.

Henry leered at Thea. “Hardly recognised you at first, Thea, all scrubbed up—it makes a change from your chicken-cleaning clothes.”

Thea willed the polished elmwood boards beneath her feet to open up and swallow her.

“Fortunately for me, Thea looks beautiful whatever she’s wearing.” Max stared Henry down as if daring him to take another shot at Thea.

“Come on, Henry. We must get going. Good bye Max, Julia, erm thingy.” She wagged her fingers dismissively at Thea then, linking arms, they left. Everyone at the table watched them leave in stunned silence then broke out into inconsequential chatter in order to cover the awkwardness of the moment.

Julia reached across the table to give Thea’s arm a reassuring touch. “Honestly, I’m sorry about that, Thea. I’m so glad you’re going to be my sister-in-law.”

Thea gave her a weak smile. Gabby clearly still had the knives out for her and she could only wonder what Max had ever seen in Gabby in the first place.

As Gabby and Henry made their exit from the bistro Max realised the qualities which had first attracted him to Gabby now seemed repellent. The aloofness and lack of emotional attachment which he had prized because it had meant he was in no danger of falling in love now appeared cold and calculating.

He had been sincere when he had defended Thea. Although Thea looked incredibly lovely and polished this evening he preferred her in the diaphanous, floaty dress she had worn to Ginny’s, her hair wild and loose around her shoulders.

He shifted on his seat. He had no business preferring Thea in anything. He had to start putting some distance between them if they were to get through the next few weeks and end the fake engagement amicably without Thea getting hurt. *Or you getting hurt*, his subconscious muttered.

They dropped Ginny and Laurence off at their home and Julia peeped in on her sleeping daughter before they headed back to Stony Gables.

“I wanted to thank both of you for everything you’re doing for Emily. I’m telling you now because tomorrow I’m going to be too tearful to make much sense when I have to fly off and leave my baby.”

Max glanced across from where he sat in the front passenger seat next to Julia. His sister’s eyes were bright and he knew she dreaded leaving Emily even though she was anxious to see Paul.

“Julia, you know I’m always here for both of you no matter what happens.” Max’s eyes met Thea’s in the rear-view mirror.

“We’ll take good care of Emily. You’ll speak to her on the phone and email her. Then before you know it you’ll be back.” Thea spoke reassuringly.

“I know, but I wanted to let you know how grateful I am to the two of you. You’ve both made so many sacrifices for us.”

It was a good thing Julia wasn’t aware of the full extent of the sacrifices they’d made, Max thought. Julia swung the car in between the gateposts that marked the entrance to Stony Gables and parked next to Max’s car. Under the harsh yellow of the interior light Max noticed a tear slide down his sister’s cheek.

Chapter Eleven

Thea woke early the next morning uncertain of what had disturbed her, then she realised Julia was awake and moving around in her room, the squeaky wooden floorboards betraying her movements.

Slipping out of bed, Thea pulled on her old cotton dressing gown and decided to go downstairs to make a pot of tea. Julia was probably packing the remainder of her things and would almost certainly be glad of a drink.

Thea could hear the kettle whistling as she reached the hall; Julia must have been downstairs and put the kettle on already. Stifling a yawn, Thea pushed the kitchen door open and was surprised to find Max pouring the boiling water into the teapot.

"I didn't hear you get up." Thea hugged her dressing gown more closely around her. He had stayed in the study last night and she assumed he had slept in the blue room without Julia's knowledge as he hadn't come to make up the camp bed.

"I heard Julia pottering about so I thought I'd come and make us all some tea." He offered her a mug.

"I expect she's finishing her packing."

"We're picking up her other luggage on the way to the airport." Max took a sip of his tea, his face sobering as if he had just realised the full implications of what he'd taken on in agreeing to care for his niece.

"I'll take Julia's tea up for her if you like," Thea offered. It was strangely intimate standing in the kitchen wearing nightclothes at this early hour of the morning. She picked up Julia's tea and prepared to leave.

“Thea...”

She turned back to see Max watching her, stubble dark on his chin and an unreadable expression in his dark eyes.

“What?”

“Nothing, it’s okay. I’ll see you later.”

Puzzled, Thea left him in the kitchen and went upstairs to Julia’s room. Julia opened the door and invited her in as soon as she heard Thea knock.

“I brought you some tea.”

“That’s really kind of you. I didn’t disturb you, did I?” Julia looked anxious.

“No, not really. I usually get up early to see to the chickens.”

Julia looked relieved. Her overnight bag was open on the bed and she’d clearly been packing away the last of her things. A small photograph of a man in a silver frame lay next to the bag, waiting to be packed.

“Is that a picture of Paul?”

Thea could see the resemblance to Emily in the shape of his face and the small dimple in his cheek. Julia nodded and sighed as she picked up the picture to place it in her bag.

“He’s going to meet me off the plane when I land. We had a long talk the other day, when you and Max were away. I’m hoping we can work things out. At least we’re talking to each other again and not just shouting at one another.” Julia zipped the bag shut.

“You love each other and you both love Emily, so I’m sure with this time away you’ll manage to sort out your problems.” Thea gave Julia a hug.

“Thank you—knowing Emily will be so happy and well cared for here takes some of the worry away. I don’t mind telling you I secretly hated the idea of her staying with Aunt Nettie but I didn’t know what else to do. That my brother has finally seen sense and settled down is a huge relief.”

Guilt made Thea uncomfortable and she dropped her gaze from Julia's. "We'll look after Emily," she vowed.

Ginny brought Emily home an hour before Julia was due to leave for the airport.

"She's had a great time. I promised her she could sleep over again some other time if you and Max didn't mind," Ginny said as Emily raced into the house ahead of her.

"It's fine with me and I'm sure Max won't mind." Thea led the way to the kitchen and picked up the kettle. "Have you got time for a cup of tea?"

Ginny pulled a face. "Tom and Laurence want to go to the banger car races this morning so I have to get straight back. I'll just nip and say goodbye to Julia if that's okay, and then I really do have to dash."

Ginny passed Max in the kitchen doorway as she headed upstairs to see her friend.

"I hear Emily's back. She was full of stories about Tom's toys and how many spoons of sugar he puts on his cereal when Ginny isn't looking," Max said.

Thea laughed. "That sounds like Tom. It's probably done her good staying there last night. Helped take her mind off Julia leaving today."

"Julia and I will have to leave for the airport soon. Will you be all right with Emily till I get back?" Max checked his watch.

"We'll be fine. I've got some different toys to distract her with if she gets upset, but I'm sure she'll be okay." Thea's experience with children had taught her they were usually far more resilient and sensible than the adults around them expected them to be.

"I'll just check the traffic reports."

Thea guessed Max was concerned for his sister as much as for Emily and, left alone in the kitchen, she busied herself with preparing her baking things. She planned to make jam tarts with Emily as one of her means of distracting the little girl from her mother's leaving.

All too soon it was time for Julia to leave. After a final hug and kiss from her daughter, Julia climbed reluctantly into the car and Max pulled away. Emily waved till they turned the corner at the bottom of the drive and disappeared from view.

“Are you all right, sweetie?” Thea hunkered down so her face was level with Emily’s.

“Will Mummy make my Daddy come home?” Emily avoided Thea’s gaze and instead concentrated on drawing a circle with the toe of her shoe in the dust on the gravel.

“I hope so. I’m sure they’ll be back before you’ve even had time to miss them.” Thea reached out to hold her hands.

“I don’t want Mummy to make Daddy come back if he shouts at Mummy and makes her cry.” Emily’s mouth turned down at the corners and her lower lip started to tremble.

Thea’s heart ached for the troubled little girl before her. “Your Mummy told me only this morning that she and your Daddy weren’t going to shout at each other any more. They both love you very much.”

Emily frowned. “People shouldn’t shout at other people if they love them though. It’s not very nice.”

“No, it’s not, but we all do and say things we shouldn’t sometimes when we’re cross with someone.” Thea squeezed Emily’s hands gently. “Come on, I want us to go and make a special surprise for Max for when he gets back. Will you help me?”

Emily hesitated for a split second. “Is it messy?”

“It can be.”

“Oh goody, Mummy never lets me do messy things at home.” Her face brightened and she allowed Thea to lead her to the kitchen.

By the time Max returned from the airport he was surprised to smell baking in the air and to hear the sounds of giggling. His spirits rose at the sound. He had been concerned that Emily might be inconsolable at

Julia leaving. They had never spent any time apart since Emily had been born.

“Anybody home?” he called as he let himself in through the front door. He walked through the hall and headed for the kitchen. The laughter appeared to be coming from the back garden. A tray of jam tarts stood cooling on the worktop, next to them three larger tarts all decorated with pastry scraps to resemble faces.

Smiling to himself, Max continued on through the kitchen and out into the back garden. “Thea! Emily!”

A jet of water shot over the top of the raspberry canes, followed by a shriek of laughter as a small swimsuit-clad figure ran across the grass in front of him.

“Watch out, Uncle Max!” Emily cried as she ran past to take refuge behind the sundial.

Another jet of water sprayed over the canes, narrowly missing him and causing Emily to gurgle with delight as he was forced to skip sideways in order to avoid a soaking.

“Thea’s got the hosepipe!” Emily called and shrieked as a spray of water found her hiding place.

Thea emerged from behind the raspberry canes. Wearing a shocking pink bikini top and her blue shorts, she looked as wet as Emily. It wasn’t until she came nearer that Max realised he looked far too vulnerable and dry. Too late for him to escape—Thea blasted him with the hose, soaking his shorts and tee shirt.

Emily laughed so hard she rolled around on the grass, holding her stomach.

“Just you wait!” Recovering his breath from the coldness of his drenching, Max took a step forward to grab Thea. Realising his intentions, she stepped backwards and disappeared behind the raspberry canes after aiming a parting jet of water at Max and the hysterical Emily.

Max looked around for a weapon, then spotting Tom’s giant water pistol from the other day, he filled it quickly at the scullery tap. He

motioned Emily to be quiet. They tiptoed around the soft fruit to try to sneak up on Thea who was watering the lettuce bed.

Crouching down beside the raspberries, Max took careful aim. He was rewarded by a startled shriek as the icy jet of water hit Thea firmly in the middle of her back. Emily's squeals of laughter alerted Thea to their whereabouts and Max found himself embroiled in Thea and Emily's water battle.

Finally, when all three of them were thoroughly drenched and he and Emily had wrestled the hose from Thea and squirted her till she'd begged for mercy they collapsed in a giggling heap on the grass.

"I'd better find some towels, Emily's shivering." Thea stood and squeezed some water from the hem of her shorts.

Emily got to her feet and extended her small hand to Max. "Come on, Uncle Max."

Standing, he picked Emily up and placed her on his shoulders where she swayed and clutched at his hair to keep her grip. "Let's race Thea to the scullery!"

He jogged across the back lawn and was rewarded by Emily's whoop of delight as they got to the back door a step ahead of Thea. Lifting Emily from his shoulders so Thea could cocoon her in a warm, dry towel, he took the opportunity to mouth a silent "thank you" to Thea.

Thea blushed and shook her head before throwing another towel to Max and wrapping one over her own wet shoulders before going into the kitchen.

Thea couldn't understand Max's reservations about marriage and children. He would make a great dad—his love and care for his sister and little niece was so obvious, it had to be clear to him he would be highly unlikely to repeat the mistakes his parents had made.

Absent-mindedly, she scrunched her hair dry with the towel while she watched him help Emily change her wet costume for a dry tee shirt and shorts. As if sensing her eyes watching him, Max looked up.

"Is everything okay? You look a bit pensive, did we overdo the water?"

She shook her head. “Don’t be silly. It’s such a lovely, hot day a little cooling down was fine.”

“It was fun!” Emily piped up—fully dressed now, she sat swinging her legs on one of Thea’s pine kitchen chairs, her dark hair curling damply around her face.

“Well, I can see you’ve been busy baking. Who’s the artist who’s made these fantastic tarts?” Max leaned over on the worktop and pretended to steal one of the jam tarts.

“Me and Thea. We made picture pies of me, you and Thea,” Emily announced proudly and pointed out which pie was the picture of Max. “You can eat that one ’cos it’s you.”

Thea grinned as he admired the grimy swirls of pastry Emily had lovingly arranged on the jam tart.

“It looks wonderful. I think I’ll eat it for supper.”

Emily beamed at him contentedly. “Thea took photos and we emailed them to Daddy so he can show them to Mummy when she gets to Singingpore and she’ll know I made them.”

“Clever Thea.”

His gaze was warm with admiration, making her cheeks burn hotter than ever. She turned away to hide her embarrassment. The moment passed and Max went off to change out of his wet clothes.

* * *

The next few weeks seemed to fly past. There were some tears from Emily when she got overtired and missed her parents but Thea felt things had generally gone well. Max slept in the blue room, making sure that Emily didn’t realise he wasn’t sleeping in Thea’s room.

Julia and Paul emailed and phoned regularly. From the snippets of conversation Max reported to Thea from when he’d spoken privately with Julia, it appeared they were working through their problems.

Thea had become accustomed to having Max and Emily around the house and dreaded the moment when they would have to leave. It felt as

if she had a real family life again, the kind of life she'd always wanted. Although Max hadn't kissed her or made any kind of romantic move towards her since Julia had gone, Thea knew the feelings were still there.

Why did she always have to pick the wrong man to fall in love with? One thing was certain, she needed to put a guard on her heart where Max was concerned or she would be left broken-hearted when he moved out.

Max tried hard to convince himself that he looked forward to moving out of Thea's home and her life once Paul and Julia were back. The past few weeks had been surreal, living in a family—at least he supposed this was what a normal family life felt like. Shopping, cooking, playing and enjoying Thea's and Emily's company. None of the arguments, bitterness and devastating loneliness which had marred his and Julia's childhood.

He had always known he would miss Emily when the time came for her to return to her parents. What he hadn't been expecting was how much he would miss Thea. Being engaged to Thea seemed like the most natural thing in the world. He wondered sometimes if Ginny and Laurence had forgotten it was just pretend.

Everyone viewed them as a couple, inviting them out for drinks or dinner and talking as if he had moved permanently into Stony Gables. At a recent drinks party at Ginny's he'd even been asked about the autumn bazaar.

Emily was due to stay for another three weeks, then that was it. Paul and Julia would come home and he would be free to return to London and his bachelor lifestyle. He and Thea would give out the excuse that they'd found they weren't compatible and the fake engagement would be over. He should have been happy but he wasn't.

Then came the phone call from Julia. She and Paul were coming home early. They would be back at the end of the week and would be coming straight down to Stony Gables to collect Emily and take her home.

Emily was thrilled and ran about the house singing happily at the top of her voice.

“This is it then, it’s nearly over.” Thea’s voice wobbled slightly.

“Julia said they’d managed to get a flight for Friday.” Max tried to tell himself this was a good thing. He was getting far too attached to Thea.

Thea bit her lower lip and fiddled with one of her earrings. “I guess we should take Emily to Treetops, then. We promised her we would before Julia came home.”

“Okay, I think the weather’s forecast to be good tomorrow. I’ll square it with the office and we’ll go.”

Thea watched him head back to the study, presumably to contact his colleagues. Two more days of pretending to be Max’s fiancée then Emily would leave, she would hand the ring back, Max would move out and that would be that.

Max would probably be relieved and she wondered if he would contact Gabby again when he returned to London. The last she had heard from Ginny was that Gabby had decided the country life was not for her and had given up her rented house.

Irritably she squashed the thought down and decided to go up to Emily’s room to start sorting her things out ready for Julia and Paul to collect her. Kneeling on the floor of the tower room, she gathered up the scattered costume jewellery and dressing-up clothes to return them to the trunk.

A pile of Emily’s drawings lay on the bedside table. Thea picked them up and began to leaf through them. Julia would like some of them to keep. There was a picture of Stony Gables, one of Peanut, the neighbour’s little pony, and one labelled *Thea and Max* which showed her wearing a wedding dress with yellow hair to her feet, and Max with black hair. Tears sprang unchecked into Thea’s eyes and she buried her head on Emily’s quilt and wept.

The next day dawned bright and sunny as promised. Emily had heard so much about Treetops from Tom she couldn't wait to go. She had a whole list of the attractions she wanted to visit.

"Promise we'll go to the petting zoo and the tree house and the café with the talking parrots," Emily chattered away excitedly, jumping up and down next to Thea as she packed drinks and sun cream.

"Whoa, we'll have to wait and see," Max said, coming in behind them. "That sounds an awful lot to see in just one visit."

The queue to enter Treetops was already quite long by the time they reached the park but Emily didn't appear to mind as she wriggled around on her car seat, trying to peep at the animals and the rides in the amusement area.

Max finally managed to park the car and they went to pay for the tickets. "Isn't this great, Uncle Max? Mummy and Daddy would like it here, wouldn't they?" Emily skipped along happily in between them.

"I'm sure they'll bring you here again when they get back." Thea peeked at Max; he didn't look as if he were enjoying himself at all. Thea suspected it was the first time in his whole life he had ever been in a theme park.

"Where are we going first?" Max studied the plan of the park he'd been given with his tickets.

"The animals!" Thea and Emily answered him in unison.

Max sighed, folded the map up and put it back in his pocket. "Okay, the animals it is, I suppose you want to feed them too?"

Thea and Emily beamed. "Yes, please."

They purchased bags of animal food and made their way round the pens, petting and feeding the donkeys and goats and chickens.

"Isn't this like being at home for you?" Max murmured in Thea's ear as she bent to pet a rabbit.

"Isn't it fun?" Thea answered him. She enjoyed seeing the delight on Emily's face as the animals tickled her palms with their tongues as they licked the food from her hands.

“Fun?” Max looked bewildered.

Thea realised just how out of his depth he was. “Here, feed the goat.” She tipped some feed into his hand.

“No, really. I don’t want to.”

“Go on, Uncle Max—it’s fun, they won’t hurt you.” Emily put her small hand around his wrist to push it towards the goat’s inquisitive tongue.

Thea watched as Max tentatively allowed Emily to guide his hand forward. She knew it wasn’t the feeding of the animals that Max found so hard. It was the whole concept of a family day out. The taking pleasure in one another’s company as a family had stirred long-buried emotions for him that he now struggled to deal with.

“See, Uncle Max. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Little did Emily realise how difficult her Uncle Max did find this, Thea thought.

They made their way from the petting zoo to the next destination on Emily’s list—the tree house. The tree house was a long observation platform, built high up in the trees by the lake aquarium, where there were binoculars and telescopes to watch the animals.

Emily rushed forward to get a good space to watch the otter-feeding which was due to take place on the bank side.

“Are you okay with being here?” Thea murmured to Max once Emily was out of earshot.

“Truthfully, Thea, no, I don’t know. It’s just being here with Emily, playing happy family...” He ground to a halt.

Thea’s heart went out to him. She doubted he knew how to explain what he felt to himself, let alone to her.

“Why don’t you go and get a coffee? I’ll stay here with Emily and we’ll meet you later,” she suggested.

He glanced over to where Emily danced up and down with impatience waiting for them to join her. “I’ll meet you in the café.”

He disappeared into the crowd and Thea went to join Emily with a bright smile fixed to her face and a heavy weight in her heart.

"Isn't Uncle Max going to watch the otters?" Emily looked around to see where he'd gone.

"He's gone to get a drink, sweetie. We'll meet him in the café afterwards."

"He's missing all the good stuff," Emily huffed, but then the keeper appeared with a bucket of fish and Emily was too busy climbing on the rail for a better view to be cross for long.

The otter feeding and talk lasted half an hour and Thea hoped Max would be feeling better as she and Emily made their way to the jungle-themed café. The café was crowded as it was lunchtime and at first Thea couldn't see Max.

Rising fear gripped her as she held Emily's hand and scanned the room for Max's familiar figure. Then to her relief she saw him sitting in a far corner, half hidden by a large animatronics gorilla family.

"There's Uncle Max." Thea and Emily pushed through the crowd to join him at his table. He looked tired.

"You missed the otters," Emily said accusingly as she slid onto the orange plastic chair opposite Max.

"I'm sorry, but hey, I got us a table for lunch."

"Hmm." Emily didn't sound convinced.

"Listen, talking of lunch, how about if I go and get us something to eat and you can tell Uncle Max about the otters," Thea offered before Emily could start asking why Max had missed the show.

"Can I have chips and nuggets?" Emily asked hopefully.

"I suppose so." Thea smiled at her. "I'll be back in a few minutes," she added to Max.

By the time she returned with the lunch trays Max looked more like himself and he teased Emily as he would normally. They spent the rest of the afternoon on the various rides at the park, taking it in turns to ride with Emily on the flying elephants or the whirling teacups.

Max was unusually silent but fortunately Emily was enjoying her day out too much to notice. They stayed until it was almost time for the park to close then, laden down with a giant balloon and a huge bright blue stuffed dolphin, they headed for the exit.

“This has been so great!” Emily struggled to stifle a yawn as she dawdled along the path leading to the car park.

“I think someone’s tired. We’d better get you home and into bed.” Thea opened the car door and strapped Emily into her seat.

“I’m not tired!” Emily protested, but before Max had pulled out onto the main road, she was asleep.

Chapter Twelve

“She’s asleep,” Thea observed, peeping through the rear-view mirror to check on Emily.

“I’m not surprised. We must have walked miles around that place.”

“How are you feeling now?” Thea wasn’t sure how to ask the question. She didn’t want to sound as if she were probing or trying to psychoanalyse him.

“I’m sorry about what happened back there. It just got to me for a moment.” His jawline hardened.

Thea fell silent for a moment while she pondered what to say. “You were very quiet this afternoon,” she said finally.

Max sighed and his shoulders tensed as he gripped the steering wheel harder. “I guess this trip crystallised some things for me. I can’t do the family thing, Thea.”

“Can’t or won’t?” she challenged. “I don’t understand, Max. I know you and Julia had a terrible childhood and I know that it’s left scars on both of you, but you are great with Emily. You would make a fantastic father.” *And husband*, she added silently to herself.

“Thea, I won’t deny that the time I’ve spent with you and Emily has been fantastic, the best time of my life.”

“But?”

He didn’t answer her, instead shaking his head, unable or unwilling to verbalise his feelings. To Thea the message was perfectly clear—whatever his feelings were for her, whatever she thought she’d read into his actions and words over the last few weeks, one thing was certain. He wasn’t in love with her.

Thea was hurt, he could tell from the way her wide, generous mouth had drooped, and her eyes were sad as she gazed out at the scenery. He'd made such a hash of things. The last thing he'd wanted was to hurt a woman he'd come to admire and like so much. Any lingering doubts about Thea's motivations for helping him had been dispelled over the past few weeks. Although Thea might pretend it was all about the money to repair Stony Gables, he knew she loved Emily.

He pulled the car onto the drive outside Stony Gables and went to lift the still-sleeping Emily from her seat while Thea unlocked the front door.

"Are we home?" Emily stirred in his arms as he carried her into the house.

"Yes, we're back."

"I want Thea."

Slightly surprised, he handed her into Thea's arms.

"Let's get you bathed and in those pyjamas." Thea carried Emily off upstairs and Max went into the study to check for messages. He was a little depressed but not unduly surprised to find a garbled message on the answerphone from his sister.

"We managed to get an earlier flight. I'm calling from the airport now. Don't tell Emily and we'll surprise her tomorrow."

He was pleased for Julia and Paul that they were happy together again but he'd been thinking about how to make his last day with Thea count. How to put things right between them. He wished he could explain to her his fear that he would end up in a relationship like that of his parents, how he had almost made that mistake before. Leaving might hurt her now but he would hurt her a lot more if he stayed.

Maybe he couldn't explain, perhaps Julia and Paul returning tomorrow was for the best. They could collect Emily. He could wave them all off, pack his things and be back in his apartment tomorrow night.

* * *

Julia and Paul arrived late afternoon, Emily was outside playing on the swing in the garden. During her parents' absence she had learnt how to swing herself and no longer needed one of them to push her. Thea worked in the garden talking to Emily as she swung. Max had been in the study when he heard the car.

"Mummy! Daddy!" Emily leapt from the swing to race up the garden path towards her parents. Max watched from the patio with a lump in his throat. Thea set down her watering can and walked up to meet Paul. Max couldn't be certain but he thought she was crying.

Thea swallowed hard. Emily's joy at being reunited with her parents and their pleasure at reclaiming their daughter had made her feel quite emotional. Max had heard the commotion and walked down the path to greet his sister and brother-in-law. Julia looked radiant, a very different person from the frail, emotional woman who had left only a few weeks ago.

"Thea, I'm so glad to see you, come and meet Paul, I've told him all about you." Julia introduced her to the man she recognised from Julia's photograph. Emily was in her father's arms and hugged him for all she was worth while chattering away ninety to the dozen.

"You look so well and so happy, Julia," Thea remarked, smiling.

Julia blushed. "That's part of the news we didn't tell you over the phone. I'm having a baby."

"You're pregnant! Oh, how wonderful!" Thea hugged her.

"Emily's been wanting a brother or sister and when she found out Tom was about to be a big brother, well..." Julia laughed, her dark eyes sparkling as she kissed her small daughter.

Emily was delighted and wriggled out of her father's arms to turn handstands on the grass.

"I guess this news calls for a celebration drink. I'm sure I've got some wine in the fridge." Thea linked arms with Julia and they walked back to the house.

She found the wine and some juice for Emily and Julia. "To Paul, Julia and Emily, congratulations and good health!" Thea noticed that although Max smiled, his eyes were grave. Julia had brought presents for all of them: a watch for Max, a necklace for Emily, and when Thea opened her box she found a beautiful pair of earrings set with emeralds.

"Oh, Julia, thank you but I couldn't possibly accept them."

"Don't be silly. It's mine and Paul's way of thanking you for taking care of Emily. Plus they match your engagement ring so nicely." Julia smiled.

Thea could feel her cheeks heating. She planned to hand Max her ring back as soon as possible after Julia had gone. She had a feeling he wouldn't be staying around Stony Gables for much longer.

Emily had helped her to pack up all her things that morning and the suitcases stood ready to go in the tower bedroom. Thea hated to think of how empty the house would be without her. Emily had helped her water the garden, collect eggs and pet Peanut, the little pony in the neighbouring field. But, lifting her head to meet Max's gaze, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the person she would miss most was Max.

Paul carried Emily's case into the car while Emily hugged Thea hard. "Mummy said you'd come and visit us with Uncle Max. Promise you will."

Faced with the plea in Emily's voice Thea felt she had no choice but to agree. She would love to keep in contact with Julia and Emily but once the engagement was broken they might not want to see her again.

Thea waved till the car was out of sight, grateful for Max's supportive arm around her.

"Are you okay, Thea?"

She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "I'll be fine in a minute. I'll really miss having her around. She's a great kid."

"Yeah, I'll miss her too."

"I'm so happy for them though, it makes everything we've done seem worthwhile." She fumbled in her pocket for a tissue.

“You’ve been great, Thea. I couldn’t have done this without you. Emily’s back to being her old self again and my sister is the happiest I’ve seen her in months.”

“I felt bad when Julia gave me the earrings. I guess you may as well take this back now, there’s no point pretending any more.” Thea wriggled her engagement ring free from her finger and pressed it into Max’s palm.

“No, don’t. I mean you should keep it.” Max tried to give it back but Thea stood her ground.

“No, it’s yours. That was the deal when you bought it.” She tried hard to keep her tone even, as if she were merely concluding a business deal not surrendering all her secret hopes and dreams for the future with the removal of her ring.

“You must want the place back to yourself.” They walked slowly up the drive towards the house together.

Thea didn’t trust herself to speak; he obviously wanted to leave as soon as possible. She shrugged.

“I’m all packed up ready to go. I just have to finish packing some of the things in the study.”

She was right. “I see. Will you contact people and let them know about us? You know?”

“I’ll sort everything out at my end. Ginny and Laurence will support you here.” Max paused by the back doorstep. “I hope we’ll see each other again, Thea. Emily and Julia will want to see you.”

Thea couldn’t look at him. She knew her eyes would betray the pain in her heart.

“I guess that’s it then.” Max disappeared inside the house to finish packing.

* * *

Max sighed heavily and deleted Julia’s email from his computer. If his sister wasn’t leaving him messages on his answering services she was lecturing him by email.

He got up from his office chair and walked across to the window to look out over the busy street. It had been a week and a half now since he'd said goodbye to Thea. A small package of forwarded post stood on the corner of his desk. There was nothing there in her handwriting, though. He knew because he'd checked the contents of the package as soon as his secretary had placed it in his in-tray.

The last ten days had been among some of the worst of his life. Leaving Thea at Stony Gables had been terrible. He had been checking his email, his post, his phone constantly in case she got in touch. Yet why should she? He'd been the one who had left.

He leaned his head against the window frame and stared sightlessly at the traffic. He'd done the right thing, he'd had to leave. Thea deserved someone who could give her the things she wanted, a happy family life, her happy ever after. He couldn't promise her that. He wasn't sure what he did have to offer her, except his heart, and he didn't know if that was enough.

"Thea, you were supposed to go down the snake." Tom took her counter and moved it firmly down the board with an exasperated sigh.

"Sorry, Tom," she apologised. Her mind wasn't on the game—it was somewhere else, wherever Max was.

"You're playing rubbish today," Tom complained.

"I think you've won anyway, Tom. I'm right at the bottom and you're at the top."

"Has Tom beaten you again? That's not like you, Thea." Ginny came into the conservatory in time to hear Thea admit defeat.

"Lost my knack." Thea shrugged and got up from the rug where she had been sitting to play with Tom.

The fine summer weather had broken and rain drummed on the plastic roof above their heads. Thea had come over to amuse Tom while Ginny kept her antenatal appointment with the midwife.

"Are you okay, Thea? You look as if you've lost some weight?" Ginny eyed her critically.

"I'm fine. I miss Emily, it's quiet without her."

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure she's not the only one you're missing?"

Thea felt the telltale traces of red steal into her cheeks. "It was only ever a business arrangement between me and Max. You know that."

"I know you fell in love with him and he looked to me to be the same way over you. According to Julia he's been as miserable as sin since he's been back in London."

Thea shrugged. "Leave it, Ginny, please. It wasn't meant to be."

Ginny sank down on one of the cane chairs with a sigh. "I think you're both as bad as each other."

Thea stared out of the window at the rain. The ache in her heart was painful enough without Ginny mentioning Max's name. She knew her friend meant well but hearing about Max was pure agony. She had given up waiting for the phone to ring or ransacking the post every morning hoping for a message. Anything that said he missed her, that he'd made a terrible mistake and wanted to come back.

It wasn't going to happen. Max wasn't the man for her, however painful it was to admit it.

"Julia wants you to visit them before you start the new job. She says Emily is desperate to see you."

"I don't know. I'd love to see Emily, and Julia too, but, well..." Thea trailed off, leaving the rest of the sentence unsaid. She knew Ginny would join the dots to work out why she would be reluctant to visit.

"If you're worried about bumping into Max, don't be. Julia says he's snowed under with work. Every time she's invited him down lately he's made an excuse. She would have phoned you herself but she thought you might feel awkward."

"I'll call her when I get home. I would love to see them and you're right—I'll be really busy next week when I start at the nursery."

Ginny patted her hand sympathetically. "I'm sorry it didn't work out with Max."

Thea called Julia the same evening. She felt a little guilty that she hadn't called before but she had been unsure of what Julia's reaction might be. In the event she needn't have worried. Julia was delighted to hear from her and insisted that she visit at the weekend and stay for Sunday lunch. By the time she came off the phone Thea felt confident that seeing Julia and Emily would put her one step nearer getting over Max.

* * *

Paul met Thea at the station early on the Sunday morning. All the way there Thea's stomach had been fluttering nervously. What if Ginny had been mistaken? Suppose Max did turn up? Julia still had no idea they had deceived her about the engagement.

Paul put her mind at ease straight away as they climbed into Julia's car. "Glad you've come, Thea. Emily's missed you and Julia was worried you might feel awkward about bumping into Max. Not that it's likely. Julia told him you were coming today but I think he's away for the weekend."

Thea wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed. A tiny bit of her had still been clinging to the hope that he might turn up at Julia's and at least she'd see him again. Still, at least she wouldn't get hurt again if he stayed away.

Emily waited eagerly at the front door for Thea's arrival.

"Come and see my bedroom, I've got lots of dollies, we can play tea parties." She grabbed Thea by the hand and started to tug her towards the stairs.

"Hey, let Thea have a drink first." Julia laughed, leaning forward to embrace Thea in a hug. Emily reluctantly stopped pulling but kept a tight hold of Thea's hand as Julia led the way to the sitting room.

"Sit down, Thea. I'll go and fetch the tea."

Thea sat on the leather cream sofa and Emily jumped up to sit beside her.

“Mummy says you aren’t going to marry Uncle Max.” Emily’s dark eyes were accusing.

“No, Uncle Max and me decided it wouldn’t be a good idea.” Thea tried to think of an explanation that would satisfy Emily’s curiosity.

“Don’t you love him no more?”

Thea wished life were that simple. She was glad when the door opened and Julia reappeared with a tea tray. Julia spotted the slightly guilty expression on Emily’s face straight away.

“Oh Thea, I’m sorry. Has she been asking personal questions?”

“Its fine, Julia, really.”

Emily kicked her feet against the sofa. “I didn’t ask anything personal Mummy, I only asked Thea if she loved Uncle Max.”

Julia raised her eyebrows. “Heaven help us if she thinks that’s not a personal question,” she murmured apologetically.

Emily folded her arms defiantly. “I only wondered because Thea looks sad and Uncle Max is sad too.”

Thea didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Julia poured the tea, a flustered look on her face. “Emily, it isn’t any of our business.”

Emily scowled. “But you said...”

“Emily!” Julia said warningly and Emily subsided.

Thea surmised that she and Max had clearly been a hot topic of discussion in Julia’s household. She accepted a cup of tea and chatted about her journey until Emily left the room to go and find some videos she wanted to show her. As soon as she was gone Julia apologised once more for Emily’s outspokenness.

“I’m sorry, Thea. I know how painful this must have been for you and Max. You looked so happy together.”

Thea swallowed hard. “We just weren’t suited I guess.”

“Sometimes, for someone so smart my brother can be incredibly stupid. He spends so much time sorting out my problems he doesn’t realise he has issues of his own.”

Thea fidgeted on the sofa. She hoped Julia wasn't planning on using this meeting to urge her to reconcile with Max. She could hear voices in the hall. It sounded as if Emily had persuaded Paul to come and join them —she could hear the deeper rumble of a man's voice mixed in with Emily's clear high-pitched tones.

The voices got nearer and Thea heard the words she'd half been expecting and half dreading. "Come on, Uncle Max, Thea's having tea with Mummy."

For an instant Thea thought she'd been set up but the shock on Julia's face showed that, whatever else Julia might have been planning, she hadn't been expecting her brother. Thea only had a few seconds to prepare herself before the sitting-room door opened and the man who had been occupying her thoughts so much for the last few weeks stood before her.

"Hello, Julia, Thea." He bent to kiss his sister's cheek then nodded at Thea before taking a seat on one of the armchairs.

"Max, I wasn't expecting you!" Julia shot to her feet. "I'll just go and fetch another cup." She hustled out of the room, shooing Emily before her, leaving Max and Thea alone.

Max looked tired, Thea thought. Unable to resist, her eyes drank him in, trying to fix a picture of him in her mind.

"How are you?" she asked and wondered how she sounded so calm when her heart banged so hard against her ribs it was a marvel he couldn't hear it.

"I've been better." His words took her by surprise.

"Julia said she wasn't expecting you today. Paul thought you were away for the weekend." She was aware she was babbling.

"She wasn't." He leaned forward and rubbed his head between his hands as if it would somehow clear his mind.

"Then why did you come?"

He lifted his head to gaze straight into her eyes. "Why do you think I came?"

Her pulse pounded and her hands were shaking. "Max, please don't play games with me."

He crossed the room to kneel beside her, taking her trembling hands in his. "I'm not playing games, Thea. I've come to realise over the last few days just what an idiot I've been and how I might have lost the most wonderful and special thing that's ever happened to me. I love you, Thea. I don't want to ever be without you."

He paused to wipe away a tear that threatened to run down Thea's cheek. "Tell me I'm not too late. I had a speech all prepared but it's gone. I guess I'll have to go with your famous 'wing it' plan."

Thea sniffed and blinked to try to hold back the rest of the tears which were brimming. "Max, I..." She couldn't find the words she wanted.

"Thea, I know I've been a fool but I've been doing a lot of thinking since we've been apart. I've been running scared of love for a long time. You were right when you said that, I was just too proud to admit it. I was scared I would end up like my parents and I didn't want that to happen to us, to any children we might have. But seeing Julia and Paul work their problems out and being with you, I realised I'm not them. Thea, I love you, will you marry me?"

Thea could read the emotions running across his face and she knew what it had cost him to finally admit his fears. Unable to speak aloud for a moment, her throat choked with tears, she nodded. Then she was in his arms where she belonged. Tenderly his lips brushed hers, a sweet promise of their future together.

"See, Mummy, they're kissing. You won't have to bang their heads together now." Emily had stolen back into the room and now she smiled happily at them. "Can I be a bridesmaid? I've got a pretty dress."

Epilogue

The wedding took place at the village church eight weeks later. Laurence gave Thea away and Ginny and Julia were matrons of honour while Emily made a very pretty bridesmaid in a peach satin dress. Tom, being Tom, insisted that he wasn't going to be a ring bearer. Instead, he wore his suit with pride along with a pair of sunglasses and told everyone he was Thea's bodyguard.

Max thought he had never seen Thea look more beautiful than she did that day in a simple off-the-shoulder, cream satin dress trimmed with moss green and her wild hair floating free under a circle of peach roses.

As the rose petals rained down on them at the lych gate everyone remarked they had rarely seen a couple so much in love.

About the Author

I'm Nell Dixon, and I was born and continue to live in a small area of the UK known as the Black Country. Happily married to the same man for over twenty years, we have three beautiful daughters, four goldfish and a cactus called Spike. During the day I work full-time as a health visitor in my local community.

In my spare time I enjoy traveling with my family in our touring caravan and exploring the countryside. I have a passion for cathedral architecture and historic buildings. I also enjoy walking, gardening and art.

To learn more about Nell Dixon, please visit www.nelldixon.com. Send an email to Nell Dixon at helen@nelldixon.com or subscribe to her quarterly newsletter at her website.

Look for these titles by Nell Dixon

Now Available:

Things to Do

When an ordinary life suddenly becomes complicated, what can a girl do about it, except make a list?

Things to Do

© 2006 Nell Dixon

Emma Morgan's life has more in common with Dangermouse than Bridget Jones as she deals with the fall-out from her impulsive secret marriage to handsome Caribbean barman, Marco. Her boss is dating her mother, her sister has been jilted, and her best friend is being stalked by his ex-girlfriend.

Emma is so busy sorting out other people's problems, including a dog-napping and a small matter of some missing millions, what else can a girl do to get organized except list some Things To Do?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Things to Do*:

Rob leant on the door frame, his thumb hovering over the bell push.

"You took your time."

"I've only just got home."

"Well, you'd better get a move on; you're not even changed yet."

Rob's monkey suit fitted him well and I had to admit he looked good. Some men are born to wear a tux, aren't they? And Rob was one of them. He also smelt very delicious; a waft of musky aftershave hit me as I squeezed past him to get my costume from the back of the sofa where I'd dumped it.

"Look, I'll only be a few minutes, sit down or get yourself a drink or something."

I escaped inside the bathroom and shut the door. I wouldn't have time to shower or do my legs now. I slipped my uniform off and prayed my legs weren't too hairy. Thank goodness I'd only done them a few days ago; I'd be able to get away with them under tights.

After the quickest wash and touch-up of my make-up in my life, I unzipped the costume bag. Sara hadn't been kidding about the

awfulness of the outfit and, what's more, it looked a very small size twelve.

All right, so I always told everyone I took a size twelve and in some clothes I did. But those were the ones with Lycra stretch or a generous cut, not a skimpy, low necked, lurid pink all-in-one fairy costume.

I cursed under my breath and sucked in my stomach before starting to struggle into the outfit. I heard Rob crashing about in the kitchen.

"When did you last go to the shops? I can't find a single thing in these cupboards."

"There's a can of diet coke in the fridge."

Well, the bottom half of me was in, although I needed to pause for a breather. Heaven only knows what Fiona had been thinking when she ordered this costume for me. Perhaps she had decided to call my bluff over the amount of weight I claimed to have lost so I would be able to fit into the bridesmaid's dress she'd got on order.

Rob hammered on the bathroom door.

"We're late! Fiona's threatened me with dire consequences if we don't get there on time."

"I'm trying; I can't get the zipper to close." Hah, there's an understatement. I couldn't see what I was doing. Even trying to look at my reflection in the bathroom mirror while I struggled with the fastener almost had me pitching myself face forward into the bath.

"Well, come out then and I'll give you a hand." Rob sounded exasperated. I felt pretty ticked off myself. I grabbed hold of the top of the costume in a vain attempt at preserving some shred of dignity and banged the bathroom door open.

Rob took one look at my face and decided discretion might be the better part of valor.

"Turn around and hold your hair up out of the way."

I presented him with my bared back and gritted my teeth as he attempted to tug the edges of the zipper together.

"Ouch!"

"What?"

“That was my skin.” I would have glared at him but given I had one hand holding up the front of my dress and the other hand lifting my hair clear of the zip, it proved a bit difficult.

“It would be a lot easier if you’d stop fidgeting.”

“I can’t help it. It hurts.”

“Look, do you want me to help you or not?”

“Yes.” I didn’t care if I sounded sulky. Who wouldn’t under the circumstances?

Rob gave one final tug on the zipper and I was in. I couldn’t breathe, but I’d done it. I let go of my hair and the top of the costume, took a chance then cautiously straightened up.

“Blimey, Emma!”

The one advantage (or disadvantage) of tight corsetry is it does give the wearer a rather impressive cleavage. In my case, if I turned around too fast I would probably take someone’s eye out.

Rob’s eyes were now transfixed on my bosom and he had to be chivvied along the hall while I grabbed a coat and my bag. The only coat which fitted over the top of the wings sticking out of my back was an old Mac which had last been in fashion when I was in high school.

At least I had a lift. If I’d been out on the street dressed like this I would have been arrested. Rob had parked his car right outside the flat. It had turned frosty and the pavement glittered silver with ice. I tested it with one stiletto, a bit slippery. Rob went out into the road and unlocked the car door. I took as deep a breath as my costume allowed and tottered after him, but as soon as my heels hit the ice I slithered forward. With my arms waving like a dervish in an attempt to keep my balance, I slid towards the car crashing inelegantly into the passenger door.

“Sorry.”

Rob glared at me. “I hope you haven’t damaged the paintwork.”

His car is his pride and joy, he spends an inordinate amount of time and money on caring for, what to my eyes, is an old fashioned inconvenient gas-guzzling go-kart.

I opened the car door and tried to figure out how I could get into the low-slung front seats without doing myself a serious injury. To hell with

dignity, let's face facts; even supermodels struggle to enter and exit those kind of seats without flashing tomorrow's washing.

I resigned myself to the inevitable, closed my eyes and toppled backwards onto the seat, hoping I hadn't really heard the sound of tearing fabric.

The pained expression on Rob's face as I wiggled into position meant I must have demonstrated my complete lack of feminine finesse yet again.

"So, what has Fiona persuaded you to do this evening?" I wondered if Rob might be helping with the raffle. He had the gift of the gab so he'd be certain to sell loads of tickets. Plus, in his tux he looked the part and there would be lots of attractive single females around this evening. Or maybe Fiona needed more men to balance the tables up.

"I'm not sure. She mentioned something about being short of men for the auction."

I stopped trying to fix my hair. "You're going to be one of the bachelors?"

Rob changed lane and slid the car out into the city traffic. "What bachelors?"

"One of Fi's bachelors. In the auction."

The gears crunched and a stream of expletives filled the air.

Forever Again

© 2006 Shannon Stacey

Now Available in Print

Fifteen years ago, Gena Taylor and Travis Ryan were forced into a marriage neither wanted, the price they paid after one night of passion. But what he believed to be a lie forced Travis to walk out of her life shortly thereafter, crushing Gena's dreams of a happily ever after with the only man she'd ever loved.

Fifteen years later, Travis and Gena meet again. Only now, she owns the inn he's considering for his wedding—to another woman. And this time, she's guarding her heart carefully. She's not going to allow him to hurt her—or their daughter.

Despite their resolve to keep things impersonal, the past comes rushing back and feelings they both thought long dead rise from the ashes. But there are other lives at stake now, including that of the child Travis once thought was a lie.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Forever Again*:

Gena heard the crunch of tires on gravel and her gaze flew to the mantel clock. She wasn't expecting anybody else—it had to be them. *Oh my God, they're early.*

After dropping the basket of fresh fruit next to the pastries on the sideboard, she reached up to pat the braid restraining her unruly mass of auburn hair. It would have to do because there was no time to brush it out now.

On her way to the front door she straightened the vase of lilac boughs and laid a pen across the open guest registry book. Butterflies tickled her stomach as she thought about how much this weekend meant to her and her daughter.

Kristen Sinclair, the top news anchor in Boston and something of a New England celebrity, was getting married and she was considering

Gena's bed-and-breakfast for her reception and honeymoon. That not only meant a lot of money, but some good publicity for the Riverside Inn, as well. With Mia's growing collection of college catalogs staring her in the face, every little bit helped.

So she and her daughter had spent the last ten days living and breathing according to their lists. To-do lists, to-buy lists. To-clean lists. Everything was perfect for Sinclair—party of two.

By the time she stepped out onto the porch, Kristen Sinclair was standing in front of a silver Mercedes giving instructions to the person unseen behind the open trunk lid.

Gena recognized her immediately from the television. She was tall, lithe, and had a flawlessly coiffed helmet of bottle-blonde hair. The clothes, which hung perfectly on her body, probably cost more than Gena's entire wardrobe. She ignored the quick pang of envy and smiled.

"Ms. Sinclair, welcome to the Riverside Inn," she said, as she walked to the car and extended her hand. "I'm Gena Taylor."

They heard a muttered curse and what sounded like a head banging against the bottom of the trunk lid.

Ms. Sinclair rolled her eyes in the direction of the car and shook Gena's hand. "It's nice to meet you. We left early to beat the traffic, and there really wasn't any. And if he ever gets his head out of the trunk, I'll introduce you to my fiancé, Travis Ryan."

"Travis Ryan?" Gena repeated as the earth seemed to shift beneath her feet. *It can't be him. It's just a coincidence.*

"He's from here originally," Kristen said over her shoulder as she walked toward the house.

That was no coincidence. *It's really him. My ex-husband wants to have his reception at my bed-and-breakfast? And his honeymoon?*

Gena suddenly felt sick. She remembered feeling that way when she was staring at the pregnancy test, unable to believe it was positive. And then again during the nightmare of bitter, accusatory phone calls between their parents that had ended with a stunned boy and an emotionally wrecked girl standing in front of a Justice of the Peace, repeating vows they didn't mean in toneless voices. And she had felt that way again when he walked out on her, convinced she was lying.

He thought she had lied about having his baby. *So what am I going to do about Mia?*

Travis Ryan kept his head hidden in the trunk, taking deep, ragged breaths to combat his shock and anger.

Gena Taylor. He swore again while rubbing the top of his head. It had taken fifteen years to put her far enough behind him to consider marriage again, and now here he was—right on her doorstep. But there was no way in hell she was hosting his reception.

This entire trip had been a big mistake. He told Kristen again and again he didn't want to get married in New Hampshire. They lived in Boston and their friends lived in Boston. Why not marry there and honeymoon in the Caribbean?

Because it's romantic, she said. Weddings should take place in the bride's hometown. She was a military brat and didn't have a place to call home, so his would have to do.

What she really meant was that it was a better story. More interesting, more newsworthy. She was one of the best at taking an everyday event and making it headline news. All she needed was the angle.

Well, she's got one now, he thought.

He'd convinced himself that Gena Taylor would be long gone, off to make her life somewhere else. She wouldn't stick around after what she'd done, not in this gossip haven of a town. But this was just his luck. Of all the inns in the state, Kristen had to find the one owned by his lying, scheming ex-wife.

She hardly even qualified as that. They had only been married for thirteen days. Thirteen days that he had wandered through in a fog, shell-shocked. Gone were the dreams of playing football at Boston College. Gone were thoughts of frat parties, cheerleaders, and making the big bucks.

He'd been stuck with a girl he didn't really know—with a baby on the way—and he thought his life was over. Until he spotted the panties stained with blood in the laundry basket.

She had actually managed to trap him into marriage by faking a pregnancy.

Not for long. He tossed the panties and his twenty dollar wedding band on the table in front of her and walked out the door. He didn't even pack his things. The divorce was handled by his parents' lawyer and he never saw her again.

Until now. The temptation to get back in his car and go home was strong. But how would he explain this to Kristen? She worked hard, and she had spent the last week looking forward to relaxing and having nothing to do but sit on the porch and think about their wedding. This would definitely ruin her weekend.

Fifteen years was a long time. *She might not even remember me*, he tried to convince himself. But that wasn't likely. A woman probably didn't forget the man whose life she almost ruined.

Gena willed the violent trembling to stop and tried not to think about Mia. She was aware of Kristen admiring the porch of the two hundred-year-old farmhouse, with the handcrafted swing and the fragrant climbing roses, but her focus was entirely on the unseen man behind the car.

For the first few years of Mia's life she had been afraid he would find out about their baby. She thought he would come back and want to see his daughter—maybe even take her away. His parents had moved to Boston with him, but she thought they would stay in touch with old friends. She stayed close to home during her pregnancy, but there were a lot of people in town who knew that Mia was Travis's daughter. But as the years passed and she never heard from him, she started to relax.

Now he was back. But she wasn't a kid anymore. She could handle this. This was business. And it was business she couldn't turn away. There was no possible way the Sinclair-Ryan reception could be held at the Riverside Inn now, but Kristen could still enjoy a relaxing weekend at a B-&-B she'd love to recommend to her friends.

If Travis just plays along. Gena was betting he hadn't told his fiancé about her. They wouldn't have gotten their license yet, so she might not even know she was becoming wife number two. And Gena wasn't about to tell her.

Hopefully Travis wouldn't either. She would welcome him and put the ball firmly in his court. He could either take his fiancé and get back in the car, or stay and make the best of it.

One foot in front of the other, she told herself as she moved around the Mercedes. *I can...*

The thought died the instant she laid eyes on Travis Ryan. For a second she was back in high school again and her stomach tightened just as it always had when she was brave enough to cast a glance in his direction.

Time had etched its passing on his face, but the character lines framing his eyes and mouth only added to his rugged charm. His still impossibly thick golden hair showed no signs of receding, and his eyes were exactly the same brilliant blue she saw every time she looked at Mia. The years had given him a chiseled, confident look that was almost devastating.

At that moment she was thankful for the trunk lid hiding them from Kristen's view. She didn't need a mirror to know that she looked pale and nervous. Far more nervous than having an important guest like Kristen Sinclair merited.

Gena had to clear her throat before she could speak. "Welcome to the Riverside Inn, Mr. Ryan."

Can a free-spirited woman teach an uptight professor what he needs to know about love and faith—outside the classroom?

Meagan's Chance

© 2007 L.C. Monroe

Shattered by her ex-husband's infidelity and her own infertility, Meagan O'Hare is starting over. Tossed in the midst of a family crisis by a flat tire, she meets Adam McCallister. The last thing Meagan wants is to get involved with Adam and his children. It's just a painful reminder of what she can never have—her own family.

Adam couldn't agree more. The son of an alcoholic, Adam desires stability and security for his children. An undisciplined, too attractive woman who wears tie-dye T-shirts is not his idea of the model nanny. His children disagree. They have prayed for someone exactly like Meagan and aren't above giving God a helping hand in getting her.

In less than twenty-four hours, Meagan turns Adam's neatly ordered world upside down. While the children love it, Adam questions the wisdom of his decision to hire Meagan, even temporarily. So—why is the knowledge that she'll be there when he comes home so enticing?

Living in the same house isn't easy for Meagan and Adam as they grapple with a growing attraction and a different way of looking at life. Yet their very differences are the things that draw them together. Can the free-spirited Meagan teach the uptight professor something new about his faith while he leads her to discover something new about unconditional love?

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