

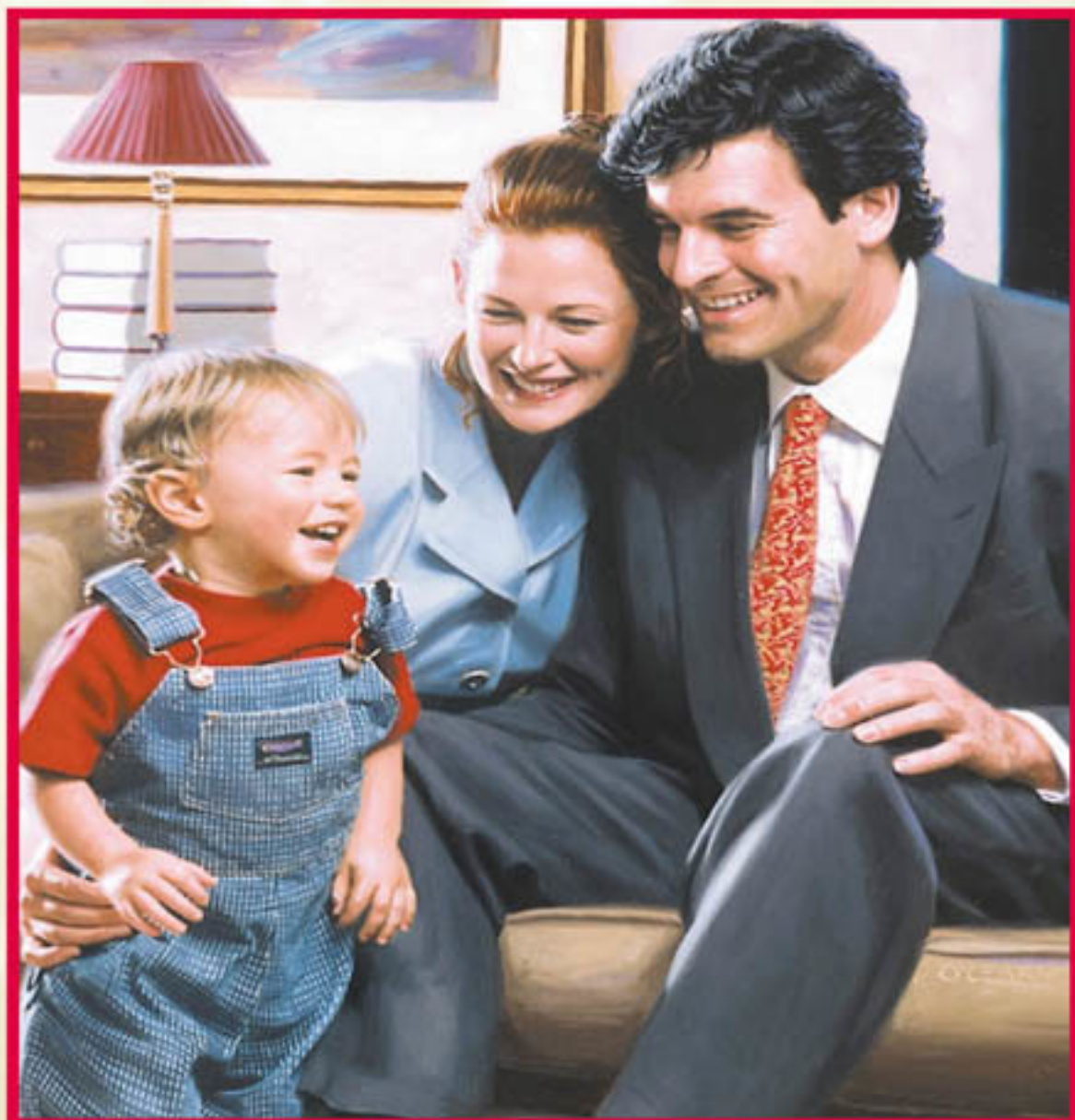


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THE BOSS'S BRIDE
Emma Richmond



Emma Richmond

The Boss's Bride

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The Boss's Bride / E. Richmond — «HarperCollins»,

The whole village was baffled: was she Adam Turmaine's wife, girlfriend or the baby's nanny? Actually, Claris Newman was Adam's assistant. But her job description had temporarily changed. In between faxing and typing, Claris was now looking after Adam's baby godson, Nathan. If being a stand-in mom was a twenty-four-hour job, living with her boss was just as demanding—even if he was irresistibly attractive. Eventually baby Nathan would go home to his own mom and dad, but Claris and Adam had developed a taste for parenting. Now they were thinking about trying it for real!

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“You’re the only person I’ve ever employed who answers me back.”

“And is that why I’m still here?” Claris asked.

“Probably.” Returning his attention to the baby, Adam handed him a plastic shape, which promptly went into his mouth. “I don’t know whether he’s hungry or just teething.”

“Both, I expect. It’s time for his lunch, anyway.”

He shouldn’t have kissed her, he thought as he watched her unpack the baby’s lunch. It had made her wary, and that wasn’t what he wanted at all. Not that he was entirely sure what he wanted. He knew only that the delightful Miss Newman was seriously disrupting the calm waters of his normally agreeable existence. A new experience for him. As was the baby. They had both given him thoughts he didn’t normally have....

Emma Richmond was born in north Kent, England, during the war, when, she says, “farms were the norm and freeways nonexistent. My childhood was one of warmth and adventure. Amiable and disorganized, I’m married with three daughters, all of whom have fled the nest—probably out of exasperation! The dog stayed, reluctantly. I’m an avid reader, a compulsive writer and a besotted new granny. I love life and my world of dreams, and all I need to make things complete is a housekeeper—like, yesterday!”

Books by Emma Richmond

HARLEQUIN ROMANCE®

3580—A HUSBAND FOR CHRISTMAS

The Boss’s Bride

Emma Richmond



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PROLOGUE

WITH an air of profound boredom, Adam Turmaine wandered over to an old print hanging above the hall table. Extending one finger, he touched it to the bottom right-hand corner. 'What does that say?'

Clariss leaned closer and informed him drily, 'Treasury of Mechanical Music.'

'Most appalling writing I've ever seen in my life. What am I doing here?'

'Waiting to meet your aunt.'

Removing his gaze from the ancient map of Rye, he gave his companion a long look of contemplation. 'Do I have an aunt?'

Clariss's lip twitched.

'I'll take that as an affirmative, although why you would think I'd be even remotely interested in meeting a distant relative, I can't imagine.'

'Because she's family?' she guessed. 'Because there have been anonymous phone calls hinting that her financial advisor is ripping her off?'

'What a singularly disgusting expression, and you really must stop trying to fit me with this mantle of concern for other people's affairs,' he drawled as he returned his attention to the map. 'How long have you worked for me?'

'You know how long I've worked for you.'

'Then you should know by now that I'm not in the least family-minded.' Turning, he gave her a warm smile. 'You'd better point her out to me.'

'Adam! You must know what your aunt looks like!'

'Must I? Why?'

Eyes full of amusement, she merely looked at him.

'It's been years, Clariss,' he excused himself. 'The last time I saw her was at my uncle's funeral.' Glancing into the reception room behind her, he encountered several pairs of eyes all looking at him. They smiled in disconcerting unison. He didn't smile back. 'Who are all these people?'

'Local dignitaries, I think. It's only natural they would want to meet you.'

'Is it? Have I ever evinced an interest in meeting a complete stranger?'

'No,' she denied drily.

'Then I can't imagine why they should. We only arrived a few days ago, and already I'm expected to visit...'

'Colonel Davenport,' Clariss put in helpfully.

'Colonel Davenport,' he agreed. 'A man I do not know, have never to my knowledge met, and whom I have no desire to meet, but who seems to think it imperative I concern myself with local vandalism.'

'That's because he doesn't know you,' she murmured, tongue in cheek.

'But you do,' he informed her softly, 'which makes it all the more amazing that you seem to expect me to concern myself in my aunt's affairs. And what colossal cheek on my part it would be to assume that she's incapable of looking after her own investments.' Halting, he suddenly gave a small frown. 'On the other hand...'

Clariss waited.

'My memory of her, which I would be the first to admit can sometimes be faulty—'

'Selective,' Clariss put in.

'—is of a fluttery woman who couldn't string two sentences together.'

'I expect you made her nervous.'

He looked genuinely astonished. 'Why on earth would I make her nervous?'

Clariss gave a wry smile. 'Do you have any other relatives?'

He pulled a face. 'What a sobering thought. I had hoped I didn't have any.'

'You don't mean that...'

'I don't?' Adam asked in surprise.

'No. So now come and meet her. You can't stand out in the hall all evening—' Breaking off, because she knew her employer could do just that if he had a mind to, she added, 'Please?'

Adam sighed. 'Very well, but I do wish you would curb this enthusiasm you have for pitching me into situations I have no desire for.'

'I pitch you? You were the one who accepted the invitation.'

'I didn't understand the details—oh, God, who's this?'

Turning quickly, Claris stared at a very large lady in puce who was emerging from the rear of the hall. The woman halted, beamed, and then held out both hands as though greeting a long-lost friend. 'Mr Turmaine!'

Adam deftly avoided an embrace.

'I had no idea you'd arrived!'

And someone's head was going to roll, Claris thought in amusement, for that little oversight.

'I'm your hostess. Mrs Staple Smythe.'

Claris could see a rude comment coming, so she kicked Adam's ankle. Hard.

He grunted something.

'And is this your wife?'

'I don't have a wife,' he denied coldly.

'Oh. Only we assumed...'

'Yes?' he queried hatefully.

'Nothing, it's not important,' she denied hastily. 'But please don't stand out here being shy. Come and meet everyone.' She gave Claris a look of query, and when neither of them enlightened her she gave another awkward smile and turned to go into the room.

'Shy?' Adam queried, sotto voce.

She gave a little choke of laughter and urged him in their hostess's wake.

'Your aunt Harriet is here,' she continued, 'and longing to meet you again. She's such a dear friend...'

'Is she?' he enquired, in a tone of voice that made it quite clear that he found such a friendship totally incomprehensible.

Slightly unnerved, she halted. 'Let me get you both a drink.'

It was left to Claris to thank her. 'It wouldn't hurt you to be nice,' she reproved Adam.

'Yes, it would. She's the sort of woman I most dislike.' Scanning the crowded room, he finally pronounced, 'I think my aunt's the one in grey.'

'Then go and talk to her.'

'And then we can go home?' he asked hopefully.

She merely smiled, knowing very well that he would go home when he wanted, exactly when he wanted, with no care as to whom he offended.

He took his drink from his hostess's hand, and before she could launch into further conversation walked away.

'He's gone to talk to his aunt,' Claris explained mildly.

'Then he's heading in the wrong direction,' she said waspishly.

Claris gave another little choke of laughter. 'It's a long time since he's seen her.'

Handing Claris her drink—a rather watery-looking white wine—she said almost petulantly, 'I don't know who you are.'

Claris felt momentarily sorry for her hostess, who had obviously had such high hopes of Adam Turmaine, but Adam behaved as he wanted to behave, with no thought for anyone's feelings but his own. She wondered if she ought to warn her. 'I'm Claris Newman,' she explained, really rather

unhelpfully, she knew, but her boss did so abhor anyone knowing his business. And that included the role his assistant played in his life.

Before Claris could even attempt to minimise the hostility her hostess was obviously feeling, she broke in hurriedly, 'Will you excuse me? I naturally need to circulate.'

'Of course.' With an amused light in her eyes at her dismissal, Claris watched Mrs Staple Smythe forge a way to Adam's side. Foolish woman. She was only going to open herself up to more snubs. Adam hated pretension. But then, Adam hated a lot of things, especially parties, which made it all the more amazing that he had actually volunteered to come to this one.

Carefully moving to a nearby corner, where she would be out of the way, she watched her employer. He was a tall, slim man, with a languid elegance. Working for him was better than watching a play. A townie at heart, Claris hadn't been sure she was going to like living in the country, and after meeting these people tonight she was even less sure. On the other hand, if she hadn't come with him to this small village near Rye she would have had to leave him, and she really didn't want to work for anyone else. Which, on the face of it, seemed crazy. Spoilt by reason of his vast wealth, he was selfish, and mocking, but he set her challenges that no other employer ever had. He also set her heart beating erratically, she thought sadly, and that, quite simply, couldn't be allowed. Wouldn't be allowed.

With a rather self-mocking twist to her mouth, she moved her gaze to the others in the room. She thought they looked a self-important lot. Not that she would probably have much to do with them.

Various people came up, introduced themselves, asked her questions, which she evaded, and then, thankfully, she was left alone—so that they could talk about her. She wasn't being paranoid; she could tell by the sidelong glances she kept receiving that she was being discussed. She felt amused rather than alarmed, and dismissed the matter from her mind.

Adam was now talking to a woman in blue—hopefully the aunt. A young slender woman with dark hair stood beside them, staring at Adam as though he was the answer to all her prayers. Perhaps he was. The woman in blue broke away, and headed towards Claris.

Here came the inquisition. There was always an inquisition. On the rare occasions she accompanied Adam to a function, usually to pick someone's brains for him, interrogation had always been part of the evening. Almost paranoid about his privacy, Adam deliberately never explained their relationship, and people found it hard to understand how such a good-looking, successful man could have such a drab for his escort. Lips twitching into a smile at her analogy, she stared down into her drink. She wasn't a drab, but then neither was she a great beauty. Her copper hair tended towards ginger rather than beech trees, her fair skin was freckled, and her wide grey eyes held amusement rather than mystery. But she was clever. Which was why Adam employed her.

'And you are?' a haughty voice enquired, and Claris looked up quickly. The woman in blue stood in front of her. She was a handsome woman, a little on the thin side, perhaps, but elegant. Certainly not the nervous babbler that Adam had remembered. If indeed this was his aunt.

'Claris Newman,' she introduced herself. 'Are you Mrs Turmaine?'

'Yes. How well do you know him?' she demanded bluntly.

'Well enough.'

'Is he permanently fixed down here?'

'Why don't you ask him?'

'I did. He said to ask you.'

Claris merely looked at her.

'Hmph. What's this I hear about a baby?'

'I don't know,' she denied. 'What is it that you hear?'

A look of aggravation crossed her face. 'You were seen arriving with one.'

'Was I?'

'Yes. Is it his? Are you sleeping with him?'

'Are you always this rude?' Claris countered.

‘In love with him?’

‘None of your business,’ she reproved, without inflexion.

Turning, Mrs Turmaine stared across the room at her nephew. ‘Time he was married and settled down. Good-looking men who play the field are usually bad news.’

Were they? To whom? Claris wondered. After sipping her drink, which was awful, she wedged it onto the crowded table beside her. Moving her eyes back to Adam, she considered his aunt’s statement. Yes, he was good-looking—no, she mentally denied, the man was devastating, but not necessarily bad news. He could sometimes be very rude. Must run in the family. His aunt was even ruder. He could also be aggravating, kind, and thoughtful. He also had a great deal of charm. When he cared to use it. His dark hair was thick, with a slight curl, his brown eyes direct. He was clever and challenging, and generous when he wanted to be. And, no, she wasn’t in love with him. She was attracted to him, she admitted, and it was an attraction she fought every minute of every day, but she was not in love. Any more than he was in love with her. The thought that it might even be conceivable brought a warped smile to her face. She wasn’t even sure that he was capable of loving. He was fond of his godson, which was the only reason he had moved to the house outside Rye—so that he could care for him whilst his parents were in hospital recovering from a horrendous car crash. His London apartment was totally unsuitable for a baby; the baby’s home was in Norfolk, and too far for easy access to the hospital, so they had come to the house he owned in the village of Wentsham. Little Nathan was probably the nearest he’d ever come to loving another human being. By his own admission he had no desire to marry, have children of his own...

‘What does he do?’

Wrenching her attention back to his aunt, Claris asked with deliberate vagueness, ‘Do?’

‘Yes, do. It surely can’t be a secret!’

‘No-o,’ she denied, ‘but I would prefer that you ask him yourself.’

‘I know he owns property,’ Harriet said crossly, as though it was some sort of sin.

‘Yes.’

‘And an electronics firm.’

‘Yes.’

‘And land. He’s extremely wealthy.’

‘Is he?’ asked Claris, who knew almost down to the last penny how much he was worth.

With eyes as direct as her nephew’s, Harriet Turmaine stared at Claris for some moments in silence. ‘It’s none of my business what he does, but I’ll give you a word of warning. This is a small community—old-fashioned, some might say—but if the baby’s yours, and he’s the father, and if he’s intending to stay here, he’d do better to marry you. I shan’t live in his pocket,’ she promised bluntly. ‘It’s not my way. No need to worry that I’ll interfere. Couldn’t if I wanted to. Don’t like people much.’ With an abrupt nod, she walked away.

Interesting, Claris thought. Related to Adam by marriage, not blood, astonishingly, she seemed very much like him. With a small smile, Claris made her way towards her employer, who was looking bored. She raised her eyebrows at him and amusement leached into his eyes.

‘Bored, Claris?’ he asked naughtily.

She gave him a look of mild derision and removed the glass from his hand. ‘Say goodbye to your hostess,’ she instructed him.

His amusement deeper, he went to do so.

‘Always does as he’s told, does he?’ a soft voice asked from beside her, and she turned to look at the young woman who had been talking to him.

‘Not always, no,’ she denied pleasantly. ‘It was nice to have met you,’ she added, by way of dismissal.

‘But you haven’t.’

‘No,’ Claris agreed.

‘I’m Bernice Long. Harriet’s niece. Her sister’s daughter. I expect we’ll meet again.’

It sounded like a warning. ‘Yes. Goodnight.’ A small smile on her mouth, she made her way towards their hostess, who had one hand resting rather intimately on Adam’s sleeve.

‘Thank you for a pleasant evening,’ Claris murmured, and Mrs Staple Smythe turned with a look of irritation.

‘I’m sure I don’t know why you have to leave so soon. You’ve only just arrived.’

‘Yes, but we don’t like to leave the baby too long.’ As an exit line, it was as good as any. With a last smile, she walked out. She wanted very badly to laugh.

‘A ghastly evening,’ Adam commented as they stepped outside.

‘Yes. I don’t think we endeared ourselves.’

‘Were we meant to?’ he drawled.

She laughed. ‘And if that is a sample of Rye hospitality...’

‘It isn’t, and this isn’t Rye. It’s a small village. Probably inbred,’ he commented indifferently as he headed towards the gate.

‘Well, you would know. You were born here.’

‘But I haven’t lived here since the age of eight. And eight-year-olds, my dear Miss Newman, aren’t known for their perspicacity.’

‘No,’ she agreed as she walked with him along the narrow lane. The well-manicured, immaculately hedged lane. Twenty or so detached houses and a small general store seemed the sum total of the community. Adam’s house was the last one on the right-hand side. Not that it could be seen behind its high brick wall, but that was where it was, and where she would be living for the next few months.

They walked in silence for a few moments, and then she asked curiously, ‘What was she like?’

‘Who?’

‘Bernice Long. The young woman you were talking to.’

‘I wasn’t aware I was talking to anyone.’

In other words, Claris thought wryly, mind your own business. ‘What did you think of your aunt?’

‘I don’t think I thought anything,’ he denied. ‘Why the remark about the baby?’ he asked, in the sort of voice that had often reduced past secretaries to tears. He’d had a great many secretaries, or so she’d been told. None of them had lasted very long.

‘I was being naughty,’ she said simply.

‘Then I would appreciate it if you would learn to contain it, and not make injudicious remarks.’

‘It wasn’t injudicious,’ she denied, without offence. ‘Your aunt had already asked me about it.’

‘And you told her?’

She slanted him a glance of derision.

‘Sorry,’ he apologised.

‘Accepted. She said she didn’t intend to live in your pocket.’

‘I’m very glad to hear it.’

‘But I suspect the same couldn’t be said of Mrs Staple Smythe.’

‘Then you had best make sure my pockets are always unavailable, hadn’t you? And don’t sigh.’ With one of his quicksilver changes of moods, he promised humorously, ‘I’ll let you look after the baby tomorrow.’

‘How kind. Sadly, I will be unable to take you up on your generous offer. If you want your printer replaced, I shall have to go to London and bully someone.’

‘Bully them over the phone.’

‘But it works so much better face-to-face,’ she informed him softly as she pushed open the narrow side gate that led into the extensive grounds. ‘Anyway, I have to see the letting agent about my flat.’ She thought it might also be wise to try and change the sub-lease from long-term to short.

In case she needed a bolt-hole. Having met the residents, she wasn't entirely sure she was going to like living in Wentsham.

CHAPTER ONE

THE Secret Garden, Claris thought humorously as she all but circumnavigated the red-brick wall before finding the rear entrance. Pushing open the gate, she stepped quietly inside. Enchanted, she halted to stare about her. Trees, shrubs, ancient statuary, and a flowering vine that scrambled unchecked over an old pergola. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the heady scent of honeysuckle. The sun was warm on her face, and for the first time in days she felt at peace. She hadn't even known this part of the garden existed, but then, she thought wryly, the last few hectic days hadn't given her much time for investigation.

Looking after Adam's business interests was a difficult enough job. Adding a fourteen-month-old baby to the equation made it almost impossible. Before moving to Wentsham, she had wondered how hard would it be. Hard, was the answer. She had sort of assumed that a one-year-old would sit quietly and play with his toys—when he wasn't asleep, that was. Not true. Nathan was active. So was Adam. Apart from helping out with the baby, he had expected her to set up his office in the house so that everything ran smoothly to beg, plead, sob, in order to get another phone line put in immediately, and then, hastily and exhaustingly, remove everything from the baby's path. A one-baby demolition derby, that was what Nathan was. She must have run miles just chasing after him to prevent an accident. Not that she'd had to do it all herself. Adam was trying to be practical. He was also desperately worried about his friends, Nathan's parents. Paul was still in a coma, Jenny in and out of consciousness but seemingly unaware of what had happened. Jenny's parents, who had been in the car with them, weren't on the critical list, but it would be weeks before they could be discharged. Which left only Adam, and herself, and his housekeeper to look after the baby.

Reluctant to move on, Claris spent another few moments just listening to the gentle buzzing of the bees in the honeysuckle, the call of a lone blackbird, and then began following the narrow, meandering path towards the small gate she could see ahead of her. Opening it, she stepped through into the garden proper. The manicured lawn, courtesy of an excellent gardener, looked almost emerald after the morning's rain. A riotous profusion of flowers bordered each side, spilling lazily across the paths, and led the eye towards the old red-brick house before her. Grays Manor. Envy was as foreign to her nature as greed, but this house generated it in her. The first time she had seen it she had wanted it to be hers. Dream on.

With a wry smile she began walking along the path, past the French doors that stood slightly open, until she came to another wrought-iron gate. Pushing it open, she entered the paved courtyard. A vintage car stood before the old stable block. A pair of long legs protruded horizontally from the left-hand side—and the baby was crawling determinedly towards a cat that was lazily sunning itself beside a tub of geraniums.

'Hello, pumpkin,' she greeted softly, and the baby, presumably knowing he was about to be thwarted, increased his pace towards his goal. With a laugh in her eyes, she walked across to the car and gently touched her foot to one protruding leg. And no one would ever know, she thought pensively, how such a small action could set her heart beating into overdrive. With no hint of how she was feeling in her voice, she asked quietly, 'Should that baby be crawling out here unattended?'

There was the thump of a head hitting the bottom of the car, a curse, and then the rapid emergence of the mechanic. Dark tousled hair, a filthy face, hands covered in black grease, one of which held a spanner. Dark eyes surveyed her with languid interest before he turned his head to watch the baby.

'He's investigating,' Adam drawled. 'He won't come to any harm. Lydia's watching him, and you're late.'

'Traffic was bad,' she said mildly. Checking to see that the housekeeper really was watching him, she walked on. Some days were better than others. Some days she could get through all

their working hours without actually wanting to touch him. And some days she couldn't. With a determination she sometimes found quite frightening, she firmly dismissed the matter.

Reaching the side door of the house, which stood open, she walked quietly inside. A feeling of age enveloped her, of centuries past, and she breathed in the heady aroma of polish and musk and antiquity. A baby-gate was fixed incongruously across the bottom of the beautiful staircase.

'I love this house,' she murmured.

'You can't afford it,' Adam said from behind her.

'Yet,' she said softly, and he laughed.

Turning, she watched him wiping his hands on an oily rag. She wasn't quite sure which was doing the best job of transferring the grease. 'I forgot to take the device to open the front gates,' she informed him, 'and so I had to leave my car in the lane and walk round the back.'

He grunted.

'But if I hadn't done that, I wouldn't have found the secret garden. It's beautiful.'

'It's a mess.'

She smiled again. 'You have no soul.' Her heels clipped on the tiled floor as she walked into the room on the left, and then she halted. Boxes littered the floor; files were stacked on the desk, the chair, and on one of the filing cabinets. Paper spewed from the fax machine and the computer was buried beneath the pink sheets of the Financial Times. Turning, she gave Adam a look of admonishment.

'Neville sent down the rest of the papers I needed,' he told her indolently as he leaned in the doorway. 'I'll clear them away later.'

'Your accountant knows very well that the information is on disk,' she countered mildly. 'We don't need paper.'

'I do. What did they say?'

'Two weeks.'

He waited, eyes amused.

She gave a slow smile. 'You know me too well.' In fact, he didn't know her at all. There was a clunk from behind him, and they both turned to look. With a little tsk, Adam bent down to remove the radiator cap from the baby's fist. 'No,' he said firmly.

Nathan beamed at him and crawled energetically towards Claris. Using her legs as an aid, little fingers pinching into the flesh, causing her to wince, he climbed to his feet and stared up at her. His scrutiny was as intense as hers. And then he laughed and tugged on her skirt. Dropping her large handbag, she bent to scoop him up and into her arms, and then gave a little grunt of pain as he dug his feet into her waist and proceeded to try and climb higher. All attempts at restraint failed.

'You're a pickle,' she told him. 'And don't pull my hair.'

'Dib, dib.'

She grinned, and he suddenly lunged forward, mouth open to reveal a row of tiny teeth. Quickly jerking backwards, she gently placed him back on the floor. 'Piranha,' she scolded.

'How well do I know you?' he prompted.

'Well enough to know that your replacement printer will be here tomorrow.'

'And if it wasn't?' he asked softly.

'Then the order would be cancelled and we would go somewhere else.' There was a slithering sound and she turned quickly to see the pile of files on the chair slowly topple.

Adam was faster, and scooped the baby out of the way of the avalanche just in time. She took Nathan from him before he could get grease all over the baby, and put him down the other side of the desk. Like a needle to a magnet, he headed straight for the bookcase.

'And?'

'And I would make very sure that their reputation suffered,' she added as she headed in the same direction. 'I'm a very good—negotiator.' The bookcase wasn't fixed to the wall, and she held

it steady as the baby hauled himself upright and put one foot on the bottom shelf—from where the books had all been removed. Yesterday. In haste. ‘Did you really expect me to fail?’

‘No. You’re a very resourceful lady.’

‘Clever,’ she corrected with a grin. ‘The word is “clever”. No,’ she added softly.

Nathan looked at her, looked at the bookcase, thumped to his bottom and went to investigate the wastepaper basket instead.

‘We’ll have to—’ she began.

‘We?’

Pursing her lips, eyes alight with self-mockery, she corrected, ‘I will have to get someone to screw it to the wall. I called in at the hospital,’ she added quietly. ‘No change. I said you’d be in later.’

He nodded.

Her eyes on the baby, she said, ‘He’s adjusted very well, hasn’t he? It’s only when he wakes up...It breaks my heart,’ she added softly, ‘to see the look of expectancy on his face, as though this time it will be his mother, but then he smiles...He’s such a happy baby.’

‘I thought you didn’t like babies?’ he mocked softly.

‘I didn’t say I didn’t like them; I said I didn’t know anything about them. Has he had his lunch?’

He nodded again.

‘Then I’ll take him up for his nap.’ Scooping up the baby, she walked out. Hitching up her skirt, she climbed over the baby-gate and walked slowly upstairs. And, almost against her will, the feel of the warm, squirmy body in her arms woke something inside that she thought would never again entirely sleep. She’d never had very much to do with babies, and would have said, even as little as a week ago, that she wasn’t maternal. And yet this energetic little scrap was beginning to tug on her heartstrings as no one else ever had.

Gently stroking his hair, she walked into his bedroom and laid him in his cot. ‘Go to sleep,’ she ordered softly as she bent to give him a kiss. Putting a light blanket over him, she smiled into the big blue eyes staring up at her. He was beautiful, and appealing, and he made her want to smile. Even Adam wasn’t immune, though he tried to pretend he was.

Walking across to the window, she drew the curtains. Picking up the baby alarm, she went quietly out. Back in her own room, she changed out of her suit into a loose skirt and top, shoved her feet into flat, comfy sandals, clipped the alarm to her belt, and went down to the kitchen to beg a cup of coffee from Lydia.

The housekeeper wasn’t a great one for chatting, but then neither was Claris. Accepting her coffee with a smile, she walked back to the study. Adam still stood in the centre of the floor, wiping his hands, a look of distraction on his strong face. And the phone was ringing.

Picking up the receiver, she listened, nodded, then agreed quietly, ‘That will be fine.’ Replacing the phone, she scribbled a note in the diary and then glanced at her employer. He had moved to stare through the door into the side garden. ‘Mackenzie will come and see you about the land on Friday afternoon,’ she told him.

He gave an absent nod and began to walk out, no doubt to continue tinkering with his old car. The old car that was entered in the endurance rally to be held the following month. The rally he would now have to miss.

Seconds later he was back.

‘That woman’s out there,’ he informed her, almost accusingly.

Her lips twitched. ‘Which woman?’

‘Puce.’

‘Puce?’ she asked in bewilderment as he headed towards the hall, and then realised who he meant. ‘Oh.’

‘I’m going to have a shower.’

‘Adam,’ she warned.

Ignoring her, he continued out, and she heard his soft footsteps as he ascended the stairs.

Moments later Lydia appeared, to tell her that a Mrs Staple Smythe was here.

With yet another invitation? Claris wondered. Tempted to tell Lydia to get rid of her, she opened her mouth to do so, and then changed her mind. Perhaps she ought to see her, try and get things onto a warmer footing. Alienating neighbours was never a good plan. 'Show her into the lounge, would you, Lydia?' she asked resignedly.

'Tea? Best china?'

'I'm tempted to tell you to use chipped mugs, if we had any, which I don't suppose we do...'

'I'm sure I could manufacture some,' Lydia proposed helpfully.

Laughing, Claris shook her head. 'No, but use the smallest cups you can find. I feel I ought to see her, but I don't want a prolonged visit.' Upsetting Mrs Staple Smythe wouldn't achieve anything, might even do untold harm, and this was why Adam paid her so well, after all: to deal with the minor, and sometimes major irritations in his life. Mrs Staple Smythe, she thought gloomily, was definitely one of the latter ones. But she had clout, Claris had discovered, and if Adam's life was to run smoothly then the Mrs Staple Smythes of this world couldn't be entirely ignored. Unfortunately.

Walking across the hall, she observed the other woman unseen for a moment. She looked as though she were mentally pricing every ornament and picture. The puce of last evening had been replaced by yellow. Pearl studs graced her ears, a pearl choker her neck. Rather overdressed for an afternoon visit.

Claris cleared her throat and walked into the room. 'Mrs Staple Smythe,' she greeted politely. 'How nice of you to call. Won't you sit down? The housekeeper will bring us some tea.'

'Thank you.'

When she was seated, Claris took the chair opposite.

'I thought I saw Mr Turmaine...?' Allowing the question to hang in the air, Mrs Staple Smythe waited.

'He's unavailable, I'm afraid. What can I do for you?'

'I don't imagine you can do anything for me, Miss Newman,' she said with a sweetness that grated. 'It was merely a social call.'

'I see.' And reproof that they hadn't sent a little note to thank her for her party? Deciding that offence was better than defence, Claris added, 'I was just about to pen you a thank-you note. As you can no doubt imagine, having only just moved in, everything has been at sixes and sevens, but there's really no excuse for my tardiness.'

'Your tardiness?' asked Mrs Staple Smythe pointedly, and then gave a silly little laugh. 'I get so confused with all these modern arrangements, people living together. "Partners" they call them now, don't they?'

'Do they?' Claris asked unhelpfully.

Not one whit discomfited, and clearly determined to find out all she could, Mrs Staple Smythe continued, 'Small towns are such a hotbed of gossip. You were seen arriving with the baby, and naturally everyone was—interested.'

'Naturally,' Claris agreed.

Glancing at the baby alarm still clipped to Claris's belt, she asked. 'He's yours?'

'His name's Nathan,' Claris answered naughtily, as though she'd misunderstood the question, 'and here comes Lydia with our tea.'

Smiling at the housekeeper, who could make a clam appear voluble, Claris asked her to put the tray on the small table. Lydia nodded and retreated.

'She isn't local,' Mrs Staple Smythe commented.

'No. Do you take milk and sugar?'

'Milk, no sugar. You come from London, do you?'

'Yes. How long have you lived here?'

‘Oh, for ever,’ she laughed.

‘One of the leading lights?’ Claris asked pleasantly.

‘On the committee, of course. To deal with local matters. It is, of course, traditional for the owner of the Manor to show an interest in local affairs. Naturally, with Mr Turmaine living away, it would have been a little difficult for him to participate. But now that he’s back...’

He’d be expected to, what? Sit on committees? Oh, boy. Wondering how to delicately phrase a warning that Adam was unlikely to do any such thing, Claris slowly poured the tea and handed it over. ‘Does his aunt—participate?’

She looked astonished. ‘Of course not. She lives in Rye,’ she said, as though that adequately answered the question. Seeing Claris’s puzzlement, she elaborated shortly, ‘Wentsham is a separate entity. We have our own way of doing things. Only residents have any say in anything.’

And woe betide anyone who didn’t do as they were told?

‘I would really have preferred to explain all this to Mr Turmaine.’

‘He’s a very busy man,’ Claris managed diplomatically.

‘Perhaps if you could just tell him I’m here?’ she prompted.

‘It wouldn’t do any good, I’m afraid. He left strict instructions not to be disturbed.’

With a sigh that sounded both disbelieving and cross, Mrs Staple Smythe opened her bag, removed a folded piece of paper and handed it across. ‘Perhaps you would make sure he gets it. It’s our summer schedule.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Harriet wasn’t quite sure who you were,’ she continued busily. ‘What role you might play in her nephew’s life.’

‘Wasn’t she?’

Thwarted, Mrs Staple Smythe ground her teeth. ‘No,’ she agreed. ‘I’m not trying to be nosy...’

Yes, you are, Claris thought.

‘...but it’s a little difficult to know how to deal with you.’ She smiled, as if to take the sting out of her words. ‘You’re his social secretary, perhaps? Act as his hostess?’ The questions were asked with an air of disbelief, as though no one of Mrs Staple Smythe’s standing could possibly understand a man of Adam’s breeding associating with a—nobody. ‘I don’t believe I know of any Newmans. Your family home is where?’

Tempted to laugh outright at the feudality of it all, Claris bit her lip. ‘My family home is in Leicester. And if you’re about to ask me what my father did, or if my parents were married, please don’t,’ she added pleasantly. ‘Don’t let your tea get cold.’

‘No.’ Raising her cup, Mrs Staple Smythe slowly sipped—and tried again. ‘We were all so excited when we heard Mr Turmaine was coming to take up residence amongst us. Such a shame to leave a beautiful old house like this in the hands of caretakers. Mr Turmaine was born here, I believe?’

‘Yes,’ Claris agreed, and knew very well that Mrs Staple Smythe had probably researched the whole family back to William the Conqueror. ‘Did you know his father?’

‘No,’ she denied with obvious regret. ‘And although you obviously think my concerns about who lives in the village very silly, if we don’t find out what people do, what sort of background they have, there is a very real danger that the community will degenerate.’

‘I understand perfectly, and I promise that I will try not to be the cause of any—degeneration. And now, I’m afraid, I really am very busy.’ Standing, she waited for Mrs Staple Smythe to do the same. ‘I’ll make sure Mr Turmaine gets the schedule, but I’m afraid I can’t promise that he will do anything about it. As I said earlier, his free time is rather limited. I’ll see you out, shall I?’

With quite obvious reluctance, she followed Claris into the hall. ‘It’s a beautiful house,’ she commented stiffly.

‘Yes.’

‘Very old, of course.’

‘Yes. Thank you for calling, and for inviting us to meet everyone. Goodbye.’

With nowhere left to go but out, Mrs Staple Smythe rather ungraciously retreated. Claris thankfully closed the door on her.

‘Very masterful,’ Adam complimented from the top of the stairs.

Looking up, she gave him an unsmiling glance. ‘I’ve been taking leaves out of your book. She brought your schedule.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Your schedule.’ Opening the piece of paper she still held in her hand, she quickly glanced at it and then handed it across as he slowly descended the stairs. ‘Dates of the committee meetings I imagine you are expected to attend.’

He crumpled it.

‘I also imagine that Mrs Staple Smythe and her cronies will make life very difficult for you if you don’t—comply.’

‘Then you had best make sure they don’t. Hadn’t you?’ he asked softly. Climbing over the baby-gate, he strolled towards the study. ‘We have a meeting with a systems analyst Friday evening in Rye,’ he tossed over his shoulder. ‘I’ve booked a private room. His name’s Mark Davies, wife Sara. He needs marketing and investment for an apparently revolutionary new system he’s invented. It looks good on paper, but you know more about the technical side than I do. I left the file on your desk. Be ready at seven-thirty, will you? Did you ring Neville back?’

‘No, I’ll do it now.’

‘He has no idea why the disks you sent him don’t work,’ he explained.

‘Probably forgot to switch the computer on.’

He laughed. ‘It surely couldn’t be that simple.’

‘Oh, it could. You wouldn’t believe the idiocy of some people.’

‘He isn’t an idiot. Technology overtook him,’ he added with gentle reproof. ‘Megabytes to some people mean big teeth.’

With a wry smile, she agreed. ‘OK, I’ll be gentle with him.’

‘You’re always gentle.’

‘No,’ she denied softly. ‘I’m not. Mrs Staple Smythe wanted to know if I was your partner.’

‘What did you tell her?’

‘That the baby’s name was Nathan.’

He gave a delighted laugh. ‘And I thought you such a mouse when I first met you.’

‘Appearances can be deceptive,’ she murmured, in a parody of his own drawl.

‘I know,’ he agreed. ‘Oh, how I know. You must never leave me, Claris. Life would be incredibly flat without you.’

‘It might be incredibly difficult with me,’ she countered.

Giving her a sharp glance, his voice very soft, he asked, ‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning stupid women can sometimes be very dangerous. Mrs Staple Smythe is a snob of the worst kind. She expected you to have a suitable wife that she could manipulate.’

‘Instead of which, she found you.’

‘Yes. No background. She’d never heard of the Newmans,’ she added with slight dryness. ‘An unmarried mother...’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘She assumes the baby is mine,’ she explained. ‘Which might have been forgiven if I’d had any semblance of style, and had answered her pertinent questions.’

‘You want to tell her the truth?’

‘No,’ she denied. Not only because she knew how much Adam hated people to know his business, but because Mrs Staple Smythe had put her own back up, and she now didn’t want her to

know. 'But I'll bet you anything you like to name that she will cause trouble. One way or another, I'm going to be punished.'

She didn't know how right she was.

He didn't say anything for a while, merely watched her, eyes slightly narrowed. 'If you can't deal with it...'

'Did I say that?' she queried as she walked across to her desk and switched on her computer.

'No.'

'But when your grass verges remain uncut, when your access is repeatedly blocked...'

'I'm not sitting on any committees, Claris.'

'No,' she agreed. 'But I begin to wonder if that isn't why your father left the house empty all these years.'

'What a pity you can't ask him,' he drawled. 'Unless you can communicate with the dead. Can you?'

'No.'

'Then we'll never know. Do you mind?'

'Mind what? Not being able to communicate with the dead?' she asked flippantly.

'No,' he denied patiently, 'being thought my partner.'

'No, why should I? Do you?'

'No. I'll be at the hospital if you need me.' Pushing open the garden door, he walked out.

Eyes slightly unfocused, Claris stared after him for a moment. No help there. Had she expected it? No, she thought wryly. She was paid to solve his problems, big or small. She suspected this problem wasn't going to be small. And it was all her own fault; she should have treated Mrs Staple Smythe with the deference she clearly expected. Maybe explained that Adam was paranoid about his privacy.

Partner? She gave a half-laugh. She doubted anyone would seriously think her his partner. Not that she wanted to be. The attraction she felt for him was entirely reluctant and very, very unwanted. A complication she didn't need. Adam wouldn't be attracted to someone like herself in a million years, and if he ever discovered how she felt... Dismissing it, suppressing it, she turned away. Funny how things turned out, though. At school all she had wanted out of life was to be a games mistress. She'd done her teacher training, but had then been unable to find a post. Several temporary jobs later, she had discovered a rather bewildering ability in herself to understand computer systems and the stock market. Figures, numbers, information technology, were as familiar to her now as her own face. A far cry from hockey sticks.

She had also discovered that she had an extraordinary talent to make money. One day she would be rich. Not as rich as Adam Turmaine, perhaps, but maybe not far behind. Tempting offers from top companies had come her way, all of which she had turned down. To work for Adam. She still didn't know if she'd been wise. She'd convinced herself she could cope with the attraction she felt for him, and so far she had managed just that. But living in the house with him, being with him constantly, was straining her feelings to the limit.

With a little sigh, she picked up the phone and rang Neville at the London office.

'You look nice,' Adam commented.

She crossed her eyes at him.

'You do,' he insisted. 'Purple is perhaps not totally your colour...'

'It's burgundy.'

'Oh.'

She laughed. 'I don't have many eveningy things.'

'Best get yourself some, then. Feeling better?'

She gave him a look of puzzlement.

'You were angry earlier.'

‘Oh, not really angry,’ she confessed. ‘More cross with myself. I encountered Mrs Staple Smythe and one of her cronies in Rye this morning. She—annoyed me.’ She’d more than annoyed her; she’d deliberately parked across Claris’s car in the car park preventing her from leaving. She couldn’t prove it was deliberate, though, and she hadn’t known at first that it was Mrs Staple Smythe’s car.

‘I don’t want to be bothered with it, Claris.’

She gave a small smile. ‘You think I don’t know that? And give that here before you break it.’

He obediently extended his wrist for her to fit his cufflink. ‘What would I do without you?’

‘Find some other poor fool.’

‘Is that how you think of yourself?’ he asked quietly. He sounded abnormally serious.

‘No, and if you don’t hurry up we’ll be late.’

Pulling a face, he turned away to pick up his jacket and slip it on. ‘Did I tell you that Arabella was coming down?’ he asked casually.

‘No,’ she denied drily, and neither by look, nor deed did she let him see how jealousy curled unwanted in her insides. ‘When?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘I’ll take Nathan out for the day,’ she offered. ‘Is she staying the night?’

Amusement in his brown eyes, he shook his head. ‘Don’t know. Ready?’

‘As I’ll ever be. Who’s driving?’

‘You are.’ Handing her her car keys, he escorted her out. ‘How are you getting on with Lydia?’

‘Fine, we understand each other very well.’

‘Good.’

She knew that he meant it. Lydia had worked for him a long time. First in Wiltshire, where he’d lived after leaving university, and then London. He was very fond of his housekeeper, and if you didn’t get on with her, then that was your problem, not hers. Fortunately, Lydia hadn’t taken her in aversion either. She hadn’t taken to Arabella, but Claris didn’t know why. She quite liked the other girl. She hadn’t expected to, but she did. Empty-headed maybe, but pretty and amusing. She and Adam had been seeing each other off and on for ages. She didn’t entirely understand the attraction, but then, it was none of her business.

Parking, as instructed, down by the Quay, she collected her bag and wrap, locked the car, and they walked slowly up Mermaid Street towards the ancient and famous inn. Walking carefully, because of the cobbles, she murmured quietly, ‘I like Rye.’

‘So do I.’

‘I went into the Heritage Centre this morning and sat through seven hundred years of its history. They have the most amazing town model. Sound and light effects to capture the imagination. It was very well done.’

‘Good.’

She smiled and passed through the heavy door he was holding for her.

Adam nodded to the desk clerk, gave his name, and they were directed to a small room at the end of a narrow corridor. Mark Davies and his wife were already there. They both looked nervous.

Two hours and a great many scribbles on the tablecloth later, Adam glanced at Claris, and she nodded.

‘I’ll get my lawyer to draw up details,’ he told the other man.

‘You’ll fund it?’ he asked almost in disbelief. ‘Just like that?’

‘Yes.’ Taking his business card from his pocket, Adam scribbled a number on the back. ‘Ring him tomorrow...’

‘Tomorrow’s Saturday...’ Mark began. Adam just looked at him, and the other man gave a nervous smile.

‘His name’s Andrew Delane. He’ll deal with everything. Don’t discuss it with anyone else.’

‘No.’

With a faint smile, Adam held out his hand, and Mark grasped it as though it was a lifeline. Which it probably was. All his hopes and dreams rested on that handshake.

Taking Claris by the elbow, Adam escorted her out. She turned once to smile at the young couple before she was urged outside.

Instead of turning left, Adam moved her to the right, through a heavy door, and into a small bar at the rear of the inn with a fireplace big enough to roast an ox. Looking round her with interest, she briefly examined the oak beams, crossed swords, and some rather nice carvings, but what seemed bizarre were the rather modern lamps set in the fireplace.

‘What will you have? More orange juice?’ he asked with a rather wicked glint in his eye.

‘Seeing as I’m driving,’ she agreed drily, ‘yes.’

‘Find yourself somewhere to sit.’

Easier said than done; the place was obviously very popular. The door to the garden stood open, and she headed in that direction. A small table became vacant just as she reached it and she hastily sat, her back to the inn wall. Putting her bag and wrap on the other chair, to keep it free, she stared at the other couples who had also chosen the fresh air.

Her mind on the young couple they had just left, she only gradually became aware of the hissed conversation going on between two young women who were sitting somewhere behind her.

‘That’s Adam Turmaine.’

‘Who?’

‘Adam Turmaine! My mother knows his aunt’s cleaner. He’s living with that redhead that just went outside. Unmarried mother with some sort of hold over him. Apparently,’ the first woman whispered, ‘she won’t let anyone see him. Mrs Staple Smythe...’

‘Who?’

‘Oh, you won’t know her,’ she said dismissively. ‘She’s a friend of his aunt, but she was apparently absolutely furious at not getting in to see him. Said the redhead blocked all attempts. Didn’t even tell him she was there!’

‘Perhaps she’s a control freak!’

Control freak? Astonished, Claris leaned even further back, in order to hear better.

‘I wouldn’t mind controlling him,’ the woman’s friend giggled. ‘He is gorgeous!’

‘Perhaps he likes domineering women.’

‘Bondage!’

Claris bit her lip.

‘You never can tell with people,’ one of the girls said sagely. ‘I mean, she wasn’t even pretty.’

‘Well, you know what they say. You don’t look at the—’

‘Linda!’ her friend exclaimed, sounding scandalised, and they both dissolved into muffled laughter.

‘Mum said Bernice...’

‘Who?’

‘Mrs Turmaine’s niece,’ she explained impatiently. ‘Mum said she’d marked him out for herself.’ There was more giggling, and then, ‘Perhaps she’ll try to get rid of her.’

‘How?’

‘God knows. Perhaps she’ll get her aunt to get Mrs Staple Smythe to hire a hit man. She apparently does everything Harriet Turmaine tells her.’

Interesting, Claris thought.

‘Why would she get Mrs Staple Smythe to do it?’

‘Because old SS apparently knows everything about everybody. And if anyone was likely to know of a hit man, she would. Shh, he’s coming.’

Clariss imagined them both smiling at him. She doubted Adam would even notice. Whatever else he was, he certainly wasn't conceited. She doubted he ever considered the fact that women found him attractive. Certainly he never seemed to have considered that his assistant might find him so.

Quickly moving her things, so that he could sit down, she suddenly saw a couple move from another table and hastily got to her feet in order to grab it before someone else could. She didn't want Adam overhearing any interesting conversations.

Her employer didn't even look surprised at her sudden move, merely followed her and sat down.

'Good boy,' she praised.

He slanted her a look of pure mockery.

'Tell me,' she urged almost conspiratorially, 'have you ever considered bondage?'

CHAPTER TWO

'FREQUENTLY. Keep a close eye on them, will you?'

'Mark and Sara? Yes, of course. I shall be a veritable aunty,' she promised him.

'He doesn't know how clever he is.'

'Of course he doesn't. He thinks anyone with computer literacy could do what he does. I thought I might make a tape.'

'Tape?'

'Keep up, Adam,' she reproved lightly, 'I've changed the subject. I thought I might make a tape of Nathan's chatter for Paul and Jenny.' With a little smile, she added, 'Doesn't stop, does he? Talking away to himself. Could almost be a foreign language. I thought it might help. No one really knows how much unconscious people can hear or understand.'

'No. You're in a very frivolous mood.'

'Must be the orange juice. Is he a fighter?'

'Paul? Yes, I would say so.'

'Tell me about him.'

'Tell you what? That he's a fitness fanatic? Much good it did him.'

'It will help,' she said gently.

'Yes,' he sighed. 'I find it very hard. I talk to him, tell him about the baby, about how Jenny's parents are doing. Hospitals are such—depressing places.' Sipping his drink, he continued almost absently, 'We've been friends since university. Best man at his wedding. Nathan's godfather. I don't think I can bear the thought that he might never know what Paul was like. Is like,' he corrected hastily, as though even to think the worst might be prophetic.

'Then it will be up to you to tell him, won't it?' she asked gently. 'It's only been just over a week, Adam. A week isn't long for someone to be in a coma.'

'No.'

With nothing further to say on the subject, because there was nothing they could say, and her frivolity quite gone, they both watched a young couple walk out into the garden and take the table Claris had so recently vacated. The husband—boyfriend, lover, whatever—courteously seated his lady, and Claris gave a wry smile. Catching Adam's rather sardonic eye, her smile widened. She knew exactly what he was thinking: that she was thinking he should have done the same. 'No,' she denied softly. 'You don't seat furniture.'

'And is that how you think of yourself? As part of the furniture?'

'It's how I think you think of me,' she corrected.

'And couldn't care less?'

'And couldn't care less,' she agreed, although she wasn't quite sure if that was true. She didn't expect anything of him, and so wasn't disappointed when she didn't get it. It wasn't his fault she found him attractive.

'Do you have a boyfriend?'

Forcing herself to sound amused, she said, 'I've had several.'

'That isn't what I asked.'

Giving in, she shook her head. 'Not at the moment.'

'Don't you want to marry? Have children?'

'Maybe. One day.' At the back of her mind she supposed there had always been the vague idea that one day she would marry, have little ones, but until she had begun looking after Nathan that was all it had been—vague. Nathan had rather changed that, reminded her that her biological clock was ticking.

'You can invite anyone to the house. You know that, don't you?'

‘Thank you,’ she said drily.

He gave a small smile. ‘I don’t know very much about your personal life, do I?’

‘No. Why should you want to? Feeling guilty about burying me in the country?’ And then she realised something she should have realised earlier. ‘That was why you agreed to go to Mrs Staple Smythe’s awful party, wasn’t it? So that I could meet the locals. Make friends.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes,’ she said positively. ‘It was a nice thought.’

‘I don’t have nice thoughts,’ he denied mildly.

‘Yes, you do. What a pity it turned out to be so disastrous.’

‘Mmm,’ he agreed wryly.

A faint smile in her eyes, she reassured him, ‘I’m a big girl, Adam; you don’t need to—consider me.’

‘Be pretty damned selfish not to.’

‘You are pretty damned selfish,’ she retorted, laughing. ‘But thank you for the thought. If I want to go out, I’ll ask.’ Changing the subject again, prompted by the overheard conversation, she said, ‘I didn’t notice any fluttery behaviour from your aunt. Quite the opposite, in fact. You said your memory of her was of a woman who couldn’t string two sentences together.’

‘Must have been someone else,’ he answered, his eyes lighting with amusement.

She wondered if she ought to tell him that Harriet apparently controlled Mrs Staple Smythe, and then decided not to. He had enough on his mind with Paul and Jenny. ‘Heard anything from Bernice?’ she asked naughtily.

He stared at her for a moment whilst he obviously searched his memory, and then a look of enlightenment dawned. Spurious, she knew. Adam’s memory was phenomenal, despite his pretence to the contrary. Details that other people often dismissed as irrelevant he stored in his very fertile mind. It was what made him so dangerous, and so attractive. ‘The young woman at the party? No,’ he denied. ‘Should I have done?’

‘Not necessarily.’ Although if her unknown informants were to be believed he would soon be doing so. Searching his bland face, she teased softly, ‘Don’t want to know why I asked?’

‘I’m sure you’ll tell me if you think it important.’

‘Mmm,’ she agreed amiably. ‘What was your uncle like?’

He pulled a face. ‘I don’t honestly know. He and my father didn’t get on. Rather a self-important man, I think. Judgemental. Why?’

‘Just curious,’ she said mildly. ‘What time is Arabella coming tomorrow?’

‘Don’t know. Want another drink?’

‘No, thanks.’

‘Then let’s make a move.’

Which meant she had probably begun to bore him. Finishing her drink, she stared round her whilst he finished his. They were mostly young couples in the garden, some with their arms round each other, and just for a moment she felt envy. For once the summer air was warm, and as darkness fell it brought an intimacy that felt—sad. Fool, she scolded herself. She had never been a romantic, which was no doubt why she found her unwanted feelings for Adam so hard to put into perspective. Remembering the conversation she had overheard earlier, she began to smile. Control freak. Perhaps she was.

‘Why the smile?’

‘I was wondering if I was a control freak.’

He looked at her, gave a disbelieving shake of his head at her odd behaviour, and got to his feet.

Collecting her things, she joined him. With no need to go back through the inn, they walked out through the garden. ‘Do you remember the first time we met?’ she asked him as they negotiated the uneven cobbles.

‘Vaguely.’

‘You asked if I cried easily.’

‘Did I? How extraordinary.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ she denied. ‘You made them all cry. The Sallys and the Janes...’

‘But not you.’

‘No, not me. I appear to be shout-proof.’

‘I don’t shout.’

No, he just made people feel stupid.

‘Neither do I suffer fools. And some of them were very foolish indeed.’

Yes, so she’d heard. Falling in love with him, trying to attract him, crying when he reproved them over some mistake. He’d had a lot of assistants over the years, both male and female, and none of them had lasted very long. She’d worked for him for six months. Sometimes it felt like for ever, as though she had always known him, known what he was like—and she suddenly had a mental image of herself still working for him when she was an old, old lady. Unmarried, efficient, his right hand. Spinster. Unfulfilled.

‘Keys?’

With a little blink, she hastily fumbled for her car keys. She hadn’t even noticed that they’d reached the car. ‘Sorry—wool-gathering.’

They drove home in silence. Silence inside the car, silence out. Theirs seemed to be the only car on the road. The warm breeze through the open windows was somehow soothing.

Parking by the stable block, she lingered a moment to stare up at the sky. The stars were brighter here, more important, and she stretched her arms up, savoured for a moment the utter tranquillity. A fox barked nearby and she shivered.

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