



THE BRIDE'S BABY

Liz Fielding

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Liz Fielding

The Bride's Baby

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The wedding of the season! Events manager Sylvie Smith is organizing a glittering fund-raising event: a wedding show in a stately home. She has even been roped into pretending to be a bride... a bride who's five months pregnant! The bride everyone is talking about! It should be every girl's dream to design a wedding with no expense spared, but it's not Sylvie's. Longbourne Court was her ancestral home, and she's just discovered that the new owner is Tom McFarlane—her baby's secret father. Now Tom's standing in front of her, looking at her bump...

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The bride everyone is talking about!

It should be every woman's dream – organising a glittering wedding show at a stately home. But for events manager Sylvie Smith, it's a total nightmare! Not only is she being forced to wear a wedding dress to the event, but she's also five months pregnant. She just has to hope no one asks her who the father is...

Then Sylvie bumps into the new owner of the stately home, Tom McFarlane, her baby's secret father! They haven't spoken since *that* sizzling encounter, but now Tom's standing in front of her, looking at her bump, and Sylvie knows her secret's out...!

Sylvie turned to find her way blocked by six and a half feet of broad-shouldered male and experienced a bewildering sense of déjà vu.

A feeling that this had happened before.

And then she looked up and realized that it was not an illusion. This had happened before—except on that occasion the male concerned had been wearing navy pinstripe instead of gray cashmere.

“Some billionaire...” her friend had said, but hadn’t mentioned a name. And she hadn’t bothered to ask, pretending she didn’t care.

She cared now, because it wasn’t just “some” billionaire who’d bought her family home and was planning to turn it into a conference center.

It was Tom McFarlane, the man with whom—just for a few moments—she’d totally lost it.

The man whose baby she was carrying.

The Bride's Baby
Liz Fielding



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LIZ FIELDING was born to travel. She made it to Zambia before her twenty-first birthday and, gathering her own special hero and a couple of children on the way, lived in Botswana, Kenya and Bahrain—with pauses for sightseeing pretty much everywhere in between. She finally came to a full stop in a tiny Welsh village cradled by misty hills, and these days allows her imagination to do most of the traveling. When she's not sorting out the lives and loves of her characters, she works in the garden, reads her favorite authors and spends a lot of time wondering What if...? For news of upcoming books and more, visit Liz's Web site at www.lizfielding.com.

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CHAPTER ONE

SYLVIE SMITH checked the time. Her appointment had been for two o'clock. The time on her laptop now read two forty-five—because she hadn't just sat there in the luxurious reception of Tom McFarlane's penthouse office suite twiddling her thumbs and drinking coffee.

Chance would have been a fine thing.

The message couldn't have been plainer.

She was the enemy and so she'd been left to twiddle her thumbs without the courtesy of a cup of coffee to help fill the time.

Not a problem. Her nerves were already in shreds without adding a surfeit of caffeine to the mix. And she hadn't twiddled her thumbs either. She didn't have time to waste thumb-twiddling. Didn't have time to waste, full stop.

Instead she'd occupied herself finalising the details of an Indian-style wedding she was coordinating for a supermodel. She'd even managed to track down an elephant that was for hire by the day.

She'd also soothed the nerves of a fading pop diva who was hoping to revive her career with a spectacular launch party for her new CD.

All of which had helped to keep her from dwelling upon the approaching meeting. When—if—it ever happened.

She knew she was the last person in the world Tom McFarlane wanted to see. Understood why he'd want to put off the moment for as long as was humanly possible. The feeling was mutual.

The only thing she didn't understand was why, when he'd been so obviously avoiding her for the last six months, he was putting them both through this now.

She checked the time again. Ten to three. Enough was enough. Her patience might be limitless—it was that, and her attention to detail, that made her one of the most sought-after event planners in London—but her time was not.

This meeting had been Tom McFarlane's idea. The very last thing she'd wanted was a meeting with a man she hadn't been able to get out of her mind since she'd first set eyes on him. A man who had been about to marry her old school friend, and darling of the gossip mags, Candida Harcourt.

All she wanted was his cheque so that she could settle outstanding bills and put the whole sorry nightmare behind her.

She closed down her laptop, packed it away, then crossed to the desk and the receptionist who had been studiously ignoring her ever since she'd arrived.

'I can't wait any longer,' she said. 'Please tell Mr McFarlane that I'll be in my office after ten o'clock tomorrow if he has any queries on the account.'

'Oh, but—'

'I should already be somewhere else,' she said, cutting short the woman's protest. Not strictly true—her staff were more than capable of dealing with any crisis involving the CD launch party, but sometimes you had to make the point that your time—if not quite as valuable as that of a billionaire—was still a limited commodity. And maybe, on reflection, he'd be as glad as she was to avoid this confrontation and just put a cheque in the post. 'If I don't leave now—'

The receptionist didn't answer but a prickle of awareness as the woman's gaze shifted to somewhere over her right shoulder warned her that they were no longer alone.

Turning, she found her view blocked by a broad chest, wide shoulders encased in a white linen shirt. It was open at the neck and the sleeves had been rolled back to the elbow to reveal brawny forearms, strong wrists.

A silk tie had been pulled loose as if its owner had been wrestling with some intractable problem. She didn't doubt that, whatever it was, he'd won.

Despite the fact that she'd spent the last six months planning Tom McFarlane's wedding, this was only the second time she'd actually seen him face to face.

Make that forehead to chin, she thought, forced, despite her highest heels, to look up. She'd known this was going to be a difficult afternoon and had felt the need to armour herself with serious clothes.

The chin was deeply cleft.

She already knew that. She'd seen photographs long before she'd met the man. Tom McFarlane wasn't much of a socialite, but no billionaire bachelor could entirely escape the attention of the gossip magazines, especially once his marriage to the daughter of a minor aristocrat—one who'd made a career out of appearing in the glossies—had been announced.

The cleft did nothing to undermine its force; on the contrary, it emphasised it and, for the second time, her only thought was, What on earth was Candy thinking?

Stupid question.

From the moment she'd bounced into her office demanding that SDS Events organise her wedding to billionaire businessman Tom McFarlane, Sylvie had known exactly what Candy had been thinking.

This was the fulfilment of her 'life plan'. The one with which, years ago, she'd enlivened a school careers seminar by announcing that her 'career plan' was to marry a millionaire. One with a house in Belgravia, a country estate and a title. The title was negotiable; one should apparently be flexible—the size of the bank account was not.

Why waste her time sweating over exams when she had no intention of going to university? Students saddled with overdrafts and loans held no interest for her. All her effort was going to be put into perfecting her natural assets—at which point she'd performed a pouty, cheesecake pose—and making the perfect marriage.

Everyone had laughed—that was the thing about Candy, she always made you laugh—but no one had actually doubted that she meant it, or that she was capable of achieving her goal.

She'd already looked like coming close a couple of times. Maybe, rising thirty, she'd realised that time was running out and she'd jettisoned everything but the core plan although, inflation being what it was, she'd upgraded her ambition to billionaire.

A better question might have been, What on earth had Tom McFarlane been thinking?

An even dumber question.

It was a truth universally acknowledged that a smile from Candy Harcourt's sexy mouth was enough to short-circuit the brain of any man who could muster more than one red blood cell. She might have bypassed her exams but she hadn't stinted on the midnight oil when it came to enhancing her career assets which were, it had to be admitted, considerable.

Gorgeous, funny—who could possibly resist her? Why would any man try?

And while Tom McFarlane might give the impression that he'd been rough-hewn from rock—and eyes that were, at that moment, glittering like granite certainly added to the impression of unyielding force—she had absolutely no doubt that he was a male with red blood cells to spare.

Something her own red blood cells had instantly responded to with the shocking eagerness of a puppy offered something unspeakable to roll in.

As their eyes had met over Candy's artfully tumbled blonde curls, the connection had short-circuited all those troublesome hormones which had been in cold storage for a decade and they'd instantly defrosted.

She was not a puppy, however, but a successful businesswoman and she'd made a determined effort to ignore the internal heatwave and stick to the matter in hand. Fortunately, the minute he'd signed her contract, Tom McFarlane—who obviously had much more important things to do—had made his excuses and left.

Just thinking about those ten long minutes left the silk of the camisole she was wearing beneath her linen jacket sticking to her skin. But she'd got through it then and she could do it again.

It was part of the job. As an event planner she was used to handling awkward situations—and this certainly came under the heading of 'awkward'. She just needed to concentrate on business, even if, feeling a little like the space between the rock and the hard place, it took all her composure to stiffen her knees, stand her ground, keep the expression neutral.

'If you don't leave now?' he prompted.

'I'll be in trouble...' Wrong. She was already in trouble, but with the hardwood reception desk at her back and the rock blocking her exit she was stuck with it. Reminding herself that drooling was a very bad look, she summoned up a professional smile and extended a hand. 'Good afternoon, Mr McFarlane. I was just explaining to your receptionist—'

'I heard.' He ignored the hand. 'Call whoever's expecting you and tell him he'll have to wait. You're mine until I say otherwise.'

What? That was outrageous but the glitter in those eyes warned her that provocation had been his intent. That he was waiting for the explosion. That he would welcome it.

Not in this life, she thought, managing a fairly creditable, 'She. Delores Castello,' she added, naming the pop diva. 'So you'll see why your request is quite impossible.' She wanted this over and done with, not dragged out, but when a man started tossing orders around as if he owned the world, it was a woman's duty to stand her ground and prove to him that he did not.

Even if the knees had other ideas.

'I do have a window in my diary,' she began, flipping open the side pocket of her bag.

If she'd hoped to impress him with her client list the strategy signally failed. Before she could locate her diary he said, 'What's impossible, Miss Smith, is the chance of you getting another chance to talk me into settling your outrageous account.'

Sylvie grabbed her bottom lip with her teeth before she said something she'd regret.

The man was angry. She understood that. But her account was not outrageous. On the contrary, she'd worked really hard to negotiate the best possible cancellation deals, pushing people to the limit. She hadn't had to do that but she had felt just the smallest bit responsible for what had happened.

She would have told him so if her lip hadn't been clamped between her teeth.

'Your call, Miss Smith,' he prompted, apparently convinced that he'd proved his point. 'But if you walk away now I promise you you're going to have to sue me all the way to the House of Lords to get your money.'

He had to be kidding.

Or, then again, maybe not.

Glacial, his voice went with the raw cheekbones, jutting nose, a mouth compressed into a straight line. It did nothing to cool her. Like a snow-capped volcano she knew that, deep beneath the surface, molten lava bubbled dangerously. That if she wasn't careful the heat would be terminal.

Tom McFarlane was made from the same stuff that centuries ago had driven men across uncharted oceans in search of glory and fortune. He was their modern equivalent—a twenty-first-century legend who'd worked in the markets as a boy, had been trading wholesale by the time he'd been in his teens, making six-figure deals by the time he'd left school. His first million by the time he'd been twenty. The expression 'self-made man' could have been invented just for him.

He was the genuine article, no doubt, but, much as she admired that kind of drive and tenacity, his humble beginnings had made him a very odd choice of mate for Candy.

He might be a billionaire but he had none of the trappings of old money. None of the grace. He wasn't a man to sit back and idle his time away playing the squire.

There was no country estate or smart London town house. Just a vast loft apartment which, according to an exasperated Candy, was on the wrong side of the river.

Apparently, when she'd pointed that out to him, he'd laughed, ridiculing those who paid a fortune for a classy address to look across the river at him.

She'd been forced to hide a smile herself when Candy had told her that. Had thought, privately, that there had to be billionaires out there who would be less abrasive, easier to handle.

But maybe not quite so much of a challenge.

The chase might have been chillingly calculated but Sylvie was pretty sure that when the quarry had been run to earth and the prize claimed, the result would have been hot as Hades.

Maybe Candy was, when it came right down to it, as human as the next woman and had fallen not for the money, but for the testosterone.

The fact that Tom McFarlane had exactly the same effect on her, Sylvie thought as, not waiting for her answer, he turned and walked across reception to the wide-open doors of his office—leaving her to follow or not, as she chose—did not make her feel one whit better.

On the contrary.

But if Candy had thought she'd got him where she wanted him, she'd been fooling herself.

She might have momentarily brought him to heel with her silicone-enhanced assets but he wasn't the man to dance on her lead for long.

Unlike his bride, however, Sylvie wasn't in any position to cut and run when the going got tough. This wasn't 'her' money. Her account was mostly made up of invoices from dozens of small companies—single traders who'd done their job. People who were relying on her. And, sending a stern message to her brain to stay on message, she went through the motions of calling her very confused assistant and explaining that she would be late.

The call took no more than thirty seconds but, by the time she'd caught up with him, Tom McFarlane was already seated at his desk, a lick of thick, dark brown hair sliding over the lean, work-tempered fingers on which he'd propped his forehead as he concentrated on the folder in front of him.

An exact copy of the one that must have arrived in the same post as his bride's Dear John letter. The one he'd returned with the suggestion that she forward it to the new man in his ex-bride-to-be's life.

Except he hadn't been that polite.

She'd understood his reaction. Felt a certain amount of sympathy for the man.

She might honestly believe that he'd had a lucky escape, but obviously he didn't feel that way and he had every right to be hurt and angry. Being dumped just days before your wedding was humiliating, no matter who you were. Something she knew from first-hand experience.

She and Tom McFarlane had that in common, if nothing else, which was why she understood—no one better—that an expression of sympathy, an 'I know what you're going through' response, would not be welcome.

If she knew anything, it was that no one could have the slightest idea what he was feeling.

Instead, she'd tucked the account and the thick wad of copy invoices into a new folder—one of the SDS Events folders rather than another of the silver, wedding-bells adorned kind she used for weddings—and had returned it with a polite note reminding him that it was his signature on the contract and that the terms were payment within twenty-eight days.

She hadn't bothered to remind him that five of those days had already elapsed, or add, After which time I'll place the account in the hands of my solicitor...

She'd been confident that he'd get the subtext. Just as she'd been sure that he would understand, on reflection, that coordinating a wedding—even when you were doing it for an old school friend—was, like any other commercial enterprise, just business.

She'd hoped for a cheque by return. What she'd got was a call from the man himself, demanding she present herself at his office at two o'clock the next day.

She hadn't had a chance to tell him that her afternoon was already spoken for since, having issued his command, he'd hung up. Instead, she'd taken a deep breath and rescheduled her appointments. And been kept waiting the best part of an hour for her pains.

When she didn't immediately sit down, Tom McFarlane glanced up and she felt a jolt—like the fizz of electricity from a faulty switch—as something dangerous sparked the silver specks buried in the granite-grey of his eyes. The same jolt that had passed between them on their first meeting. Hot slivers of lightning that heated her to the bone, bringing a flush to her cheeks, a tingle to parts of her anatomy that no other glance had reached since...no, forget since. She'd never felt that kind of response to any man. Not even Jeremy.

What on earth was the matter with her?

She'd never done anything at first sight. Certainly not love. She'd known Jeremy from her cradle. Actually, that might not have been the best example...

Whatever.

She certainly didn't intend to change the habits of a lifetime with lust. Mixing business with pleasure was always a mistake.

But it meant that she understood exactly what Candida had been thinking. Why she hadn't settled for some softer billionaire. Some malleable sugar daddy who would buy her the country estate and anything else she wanted...

'I'd advise you to sit down, Miss Smith,' he said. 'This is going to take some time.'

Usually, she and her clients were on first name terms from the word go but they had both clung firmly to formality at that first meeting and she didn't think this was the moment to respond with, Sylvie, please...

And since her knees, in their weakened state, had buckled in instant obedience to his command, she was too busy making sure her backside connected securely with the chair to cope with something as complicated as speech at the same time.

He watched as she wriggled to locate the safety of the centre of the chair. Continued to watch her for what seemed like endless moments.

The heat intensified and, without thinking, she slipped the buttons on her jacket.

Only when she was completely still and he was certain that he had her attention—although why it had taken him so long to realise that she couldn't possibly imagine; he'd had her absolute attention from the moment she'd set eyes on him—did he speak.

'Have you sacked him?' he demanded. 'The Honourable Quentin Turner Lyall.'

She swallowed. Truth, dare... She stopped right there and went for the truth.

'As I'm sure you're aware,' she said, 'falling in love is not grounds for dismissal. I have no doubt that the Employment Tribunal would take me to the cleaners if I tried.'

'Love?' he repeated, as if it were a dirty word.

'What else?' she asked. What else would have made Candy run for the hills when she had the prize within days of her grasp?

She had Tom McFarlane, so presumably she had the lust thing covered...

But, having dismissed her question with an impatient gesture, he said, 'What about duty of care to your client, Miss Smith? In your letter you did make the point that I am your client.' He regarded her stonily. 'And I imagine Mr Lyall did go absent without leave?'

Oh, Lord! 'Actually, he... No. He asked me for some time off...'

He sat back, apparently speechless.

'Are you telling me you actually gave him leave to elope with a woman whose wedding you were arranging?' he said, after what felt like the longest pause in history.

This was probably not a good time to give him the 'dying grandmother' excuse that she'd fallen for.

When Candy had borrowed Quentin for bag-carrying duties on one of her many shopping expeditions it had never crossed Sylvie's mind that she'd risk her big day with the billionaire for a fling with a twenty-five-year-old events assistant. Even one who'd eventually make her a countess. He came from a long-lived family and the chances of him succeeding to his grandfather's earldom before he was fifty—more likely sixty—were remote.

And, while she'd been absolutely furious with both of them, she did have a certain sympathy for Quentin; if a man like Tom McFarlane had succumbed to Candy's 'assets', what hope was there for an innocent like him?

But, despite what she'd told Tom McFarlane, when Candy had finished with Quentin and he did eventually return, she was going to have explain that, under the circumstances, he couldn't possibly continue working for her. Bad enough that it would feel like kicking a puppy, but Quentin was a real asset and losing him was going to hurt. He had a real gift for calming neurotic women. He was also thoroughly decent. It would never occur to him to go to a tribunal for unfair dismissal.

Maybe it was calming Candy's pre-wedding nerves—she had gone into shopping overdrive in those last few weeks—that broad sympathetic shoulder of his, that had got him into so much trouble in the first place.

Tom McFarlane, however, having fired off this last salvo, had returned to the folder in front of him and was flicking through the invoices, stopping to glance at one occasionally, his face utterly devoid of expression.

Sylvie didn't say a word. She just waited, holding her breath. Watching his long fingers as they turned the pages. She could no longer see his eyes. Just the edge of his jaw. The shadowy cleft of his chin. A corner of that hard mouth...

The only sound in the office was the slow turning of paper as Tom McFarlane confronted the ruin of his plans—marriage to a woman whose family tree could be traced back to William the Conqueror.

That, and the ragged breathing of the woman opposite him.

She was nervous. And so she should be.

He had never been so angry.

His marriage to the aristocratic Candida Harcourt would have been the culmination of all his ambitions. With her as his wife, he would have finally shaken off the last remnants of the world from which he'd dragged himself.

Would have attained everything that the angry youth he'd once been had sworn would one day be his.

The good clothes, expensive cars, beautiful women had come swiftly, but this had been something else.

He hadn't been foolish enough to believe that Candy had fallen in love with him—love caused nothing but heartache and pain, as he knew to his cost—but it had seemed like the perfect match. She'd had everything except money; he had more than enough of that to indulge her wildest dreams.

It had been while he was away securing the biggest of those—guilt, perhaps for the fact that he'd been unable to get her wedding planner out of his head—that she'd taken to her heels with the chinless wonder who was reduced to working as an events assistant to keep a roof over his head. How ironic was that?

But then he was an aristocratic chinless wonder.

The coronet always cancelled out the billions.

When it came down to it, class won. Sylvie Smith had, after all, been chosen to coordinate the wedding for no better reason than that she'd been to school with Candy.

That exclusive old boy network worked just as well for women, it seemed.

Sylvie Smith. He'd spent six months trying not to think about her. An hour trying to make himself send her away without seeing her.

As he appeared to concentrate on the papers in front of him, she slipped the buttons on her jacket to reveal something skimpy in dark brown silk barely skimming breasts that needed no silicone to enhance them, nervously pushed back a loose strand of dark blonde hair that was, he had no doubt, the colour she'd been born with.

She crossed her legs in order to prop up the folder she had on her knee and for a moment he found himself distracted by a classy ankle, a long slender foot encased in a dark brown suede peep-toe shoe that was decorated with a saucy bow.

And, without warning, she wasn't the only one feeling the heat.

He should write a cheque now. Get her out of his office. Instead, he dropped his eyes to the invoice in front of him and snapped, 'What in the name of blazes is a confetti cannon?'

'A c-confetti c-cannon?'

Sylvie's mind spun like a disengaged gear. Going nowhere. She'd thought this afternoon couldn't get any worse; she'd been wrong. Time to get a grip, she warned herself. Take it one thing at a time. And remember to breathe.

Maybe lighten things up a little. 'Actually, it does what it says on the tin,' she said.

His eyebrows rose the merest fraction. 'Which is?'

Or maybe not.

'It fires a cannonade of c-confetti,' she stuttered. Dammit, she hadn't stuttered in years and she wasn't about to start again now just because Tom McFarlane was having a bad day. Slow, slow... 'In all shapes and sizes,' she finished carefully.

He said nothing.

'With a c-coloured flame projector,' she added, unnerved by the silence. 'It's really quite...' she faltered '...spectacular.'

He was regarding her as if she were mad. Actually, she thought with a tiny shiver, he might just be right. What sane person spent her time scouring the Internet looking for an elephant to hire by the day?

Whose career highs involved delivering the perfect party for a pop star?

Easy. The kind of person who'd been doing it practically from her cradle. Whose mother had done it before her—although she'd done it out of love for family members or a sense of duty when it was for community events, rather than for money. The kind of person who, like Candy, hadn't planned for a day job but who'd fallen into it by chance and had been grateful to find something she could do without thinking, or the need for any specialist training.

'And a "field of light"?' he prompted, having apparently got the bit between his teeth.

'Thousands of strands of fibre optic lights that ripple in the breeze,' she answered, deciding this time to take the safe option and go for the straight answer. Then, since he seemed to require more, 'Changing colour as they move.'

She rippled her fingers to give him the effect.

He stared at them for a moment, then, snapping his gaze back to her face, said, 'What happens if there isn't a breeze?'

Did it matter? It wasn't going to happen...

Just answer the question, Sylvie, she told herself. 'The c-contractor uses fans.'

'You are joking.'

Describing the effect to someone who was anticipating a thrilling spectacle on her wedding day was a world away from explaining it to a man who thought the whole thing was some ghastly joke.

'Didn't you discuss any of this with Candy?' she asked.

His broad forehead creased in a frown. Another stupid question, obviously. You didn't become a billionaire by wasting time on trivialities like confetti cannons.

Tom McFarlane had signed the equivalent of a blank cheque and left his bride-to-be to organise the wedding of her dreams while he'd concentrated on making the money to pay for it.

No doubt, from Candy's point of view, it had been the perfect division of labour. She'd certainly thrown herself into her role with enthusiasm and there wasn't a single 'effect' that had gone unexplored. It was only the constraints of time and imagination—if she'd thought of an elephant, she'd have insisted on having one, insisted on having the whole damn circus—that had limited her self-indulgence. As it was, there had been more than enough to turn her dream into what was now proving to be Tom McFarlane's—and her—nightmare.

A six-figure nightmare, much of it provided by the small specialist companies Sylvie regularly did business with—people who trusted her to settle promptly. Which was why she was going to sit here until Tom McFarlane had worked through his anger and written her a cheque. Even if it took all night.

Having briefly recovered her equilibrium, she felt herself begin to heat up again, from the inside, as he continued to look at her and she began to think that, actually, all night wouldn't be a problem...

She ducked her head, as if to check the invoice, tucking a non-existent strand of hair behind her ear with a hand that was shaking slightly.

Tidying away what was a totally inappropriate thought.

Quentin wasn't the only one in danger of losing his head.

The office was oddly silent. His phone did not ring. No one put their head around the door with some query.

The only sound for what seemed like minutes—but was probably only seconds—was the pounding beat of her pulse in her ears.

Then she heard the rustle of paper as Tom McFarlane returned to the stack of invoices in front of him and started going through them, one by one.

The choir.

'They didn't sing,' he objected. 'They didn't even have to turn up.'

'They're booked for months in advance,' she explained. 'I had to call in several favours to get them for Candy but the cancellation came too late to offload them to another booking...'

Her voice trailed off. He knew how it was, for heaven's sake; she shouldn't have to explain!

As if he could read her mind, he placed a tick against the list to approve payment without another word.

The bell-ringers.

For a moment she thought he was going to repeat his objection and held her breath. He glanced up, as if waiting for her to breathe out. Finally, when she was beginning to feel light-headed for lack of oxygen, he placed another tick.

As they moved steadily through the list, she began to relax. She hadn't doubted that he was going to settle; he wouldn't waste this amount of time unless he was going to pay.

The 1936 Rolls-Royce to carry Candy to the church. Tick.

It was just that he was angry and, since his runaway bride wasn't around to take the flak in person, she was being put through the wringer in her place.

If that was what it took, she thought, absent-mindedly fanning herself with one of her invoices, let him wring away. She could take it. Probably.

The carriage and pair to transport the newly-weds from the church to their reception. Tick.

The singing waiters...

Enough. Tom raked his fingers through his hair. He'd had enough. But, on the point of calling it quits, writing the cheque and drawing a line under the whole sorry experience, he looked up and was distracted by Sylvie Smith, her cheeks flushed a delicate pink, fanning herself with one of her outrageous invoices.

'Is it too warm in here for you, Miss Smith?' he enquired.

‘No, I’m fine,’ she said, quickly tucking the invoice away as she shifted the folder on her knees, tugging at her narrow skirt before re-crossing her long legs. Keeping her head down so that she wouldn’t have to look at him. Waiting for him to get on with it so that she could escape.

Not yet, he thought, standing up, crossing to the water-cooler to fill a glass with iced water. Not yet...

Sylvie heard the creak of his leather chair as Tom McFarlane stood up. Then, moments later, the gurgle of water. Unable to help herself, she pushed her tongue between her dry lips, then looked up. For a moment he didn’t move.

With the light behind him, she couldn’t see his face, but his dark hair, perfectly groomed on that morning six months ago when he’d come to her office, never less than perfectly groomed in the photographs she’d seen of him before or since, looked as if he’d spent the last few days dragging his fingers through it.

Her fingers itched to smooth it back into place. To ease the tension from his wide shoulders and make the world right for him again. But the atmosphere in the silent office, cut off, high above London, was super-charged with suppressed emotion. Instead, she forced herself to look away, concentrate on the papers in front of her, well aware that all it would take would be a wrong word, move, look, to detonate an explosion.

‘Here. Maybe this will help.’

She’d been working so hard at not looking at him that she hadn’t heard him cross the thick carpet. Now she looked up with a start to find him offering her a glass of water, presenting her with the added difficulty of taking it from his fingers without actually touching them.

A difficulty which something in his expression suggested he understood only too well. Maybe she should just ask him to do them both a favour and tip it over her...

‘Thank you,’ she said, reaching for it and to hell with the consequences. His were rock-steady—well, he was granite. Hers shook and she spilt a few drops on her skirt. She probably just imagined the steam as it soaked through the linen to her thighs as he folded himself down to her level and put his hand round hers to steady it.

Someone should warn him that it didn’t actually help. But then she suspected he knew that too and right now she was having enough trouble simply breathing.

‘I’ve got it,’ she managed finally. He didn’t appear to be convinced and she looked up, straight into his eyes, at which point the last thing she wanted was for him to let go. ‘Really,’ she assured him and instantly regretted it as he stood up and returned to his chair, lean and lithe as a panther.

And twice as dangerous, she thought as she gratefully took a sip of the water. Touched the glass to her heated forehead. Told herself to get a grip....

CHAPTER TWO

‘SHALL we get on?’ Tom McFarlane prompted as he returned to his desk.

Sylvie silently fumed.

Why on earth was he putting himself through this? Putting her through it?

It couldn’t be about the money. The amount involved, though admittedly large, had to be peanuts to a man of his wealth.

It was almost, she thought, as if with each tick approving payment he was underlining the lesson he’d just been handed—the one about never trusting the word of someone just because they said they loved you. Presumably Candy had told him that she loved him. Or maybe, like Candy, he thought of marriage as a business deal, a mutually satisfying partnership arrangement. That love was just a lot of sentimental nonsense.

Maybe it wasn’t his heart that was lying in shreds, but his pride. Or was it always pride that suffered most from this most public declaration that you weren’t quite good enough?

‘The singing waiters?’ he repeated, making sure they were on the same page.

‘I’m with you,’ she said, putting the glass down. There was a dangerously long pause and she looked up, anticipating some sarcastic comment. But he shook his head as if he’d thought better of it and placed a tick alongside the figure.

Her sigh of relief came a little too soon.

‘Doves? Are they in such demand too?’ he enquired a few moments later, but politely, as if making an effort. He couldn’t possibly be interested.

‘I’m afraid so. And corn is not cheap,’ she added, earning herself another of those long looks. She really needed to resist the snappy remarks. Especially as the gifts for the bridesmaids came next.

Candy had chosen bracelets for each of them from London’s premier jeweller. No expense spared.

The nib of his pen hovered beside the item for a moment, then he said, ‘Send them back.’

‘What? No, wait.’ He looked up. ‘I can’t do that!’

‘You can’t? Why not?’

Was he serious? Hadn’t he taken the slightest interest in his own wedding?

‘Because they’re engraved with your names and the date.’ This was cruel, she thought. One of his staff should be dealing with this. Pride was a killer... ‘They were supposed to be a keepsake,’ she added.

‘Is that a fact?’ Then, ‘So? Where are they? These keepsakes.’

Could it get any worse? Oh, yes.

‘Candy has them,’ she admitted. ‘She was having them gift-wrapped so that you could give them to the bridesmaids at the pre-wedding dinner.’ He frowned. ‘You did know about the pre-wedding dinner?’

‘It was in my diary. As was the wedding,’ he added. Caught by something in his voice, she looked up. For a moment she was trapped, held prisoner by his eyes, and it was all she could do to stop herself from reaching out to squeeze his hand. Tell him that it would get better.

As if he saw it coming, he gathered himself, putting himself mentally beyond reach.

She tried to speak and discovered that she had to clear her throat before she could continue.

‘There are cufflinks for the ushers too,’ she said, deciding it would be as well to get the whole jewellery thing over at once. ‘And for you.’

‘Were they engraved with our names too?’

‘Just the date,’ she replied.

'Useful in case I ever manage to forget it,' he said and, without warning, something happened to his mouth. She thought it might be a smile. Not much of one. Little more than a distortion of the lower lip, but Sylvie reached for the glass and took another sip of water.

It sizzled a little on her tongue, turning from ice-cold to lukewarm as it trickled down her throat. If he could do that with something so minimal, what on earth could he achieve when he was actually trying?

No. She didn't want to know. It didn't bear thinking about.

'I'm sure she'll return them,' she said in an effort to reassure him. Once she came back from wherever she was hiding out. She'd be eager to negotiate the sale of her story to whichever gossip magazine offered her the most to spill the beans on the break-up and the new man in her life before the story went cold.

Billionaireless, she would need the money.

'How sure?' he asked, holding the look for a full thirty seconds. 'And, even if she did, what would I do with them? Sell them on eBay?' She opened her mouth but, before she could speak, he said, 'Forget it.'

And, placing a tick against the item, he moved swiftly on.

It was only when they reached the cake that the cracks began to show in his icy self-control.

Candy, to her surprise, hadn't gone for some modern confection in white chocolate, or the witty little individual cakes that were suddenly all the fashion, but an honest-to-goodness traditional three-tier solid fruit cake, exquisitely iced by a master confectioner with the Harcourt coat of arms and Tom McFarlane's company logo in full colour on each layer.

The kind of cake where the top tier was traditionally put aside to be used as the christening cake for the first-born.

Until that point she'd almost felt as if Candy had been playing at weddings, more like a little girl let loose with the dressing-up box and her mother's make-up—or in this case a billionaire's bank account—than a woman embarking on the most important stage of her life. But that cake had suggested she'd been serious.

Maybe she'd just been trying to convince herself.

'Where is this monstrous confection?' Tom McFarlane asked.

'The cake?'

'Of course the damn cake!' he said, finally snapping, proving that he was made of more than stone. 'Did she take that with her too? Or has it already been foisted on some other unsuspecting male?'

'That's an outrageous thing to say, Mr McFarlane. The people I deal with are honest, hard-working businessmen and women.' She should have stopped then. 'Besides, no one wants a secondhand wedding cake.' Particularly one with someone else's coat of arms emblazoned on it.

'They don't? What a pity the same can't be said about brides.' For a moment she thought he was going to let it go. But not this time. 'So?' he demanded, glaring at her. 'What will happen to it?'

Desperate to get this over with, she was once more tempted to ask him if it mattered.

The words were on the tip of her tongue but then, for a split second, she caught a glimpse of the man beneath. A man who'd worked himself up from labouring in the markets to the top floor of a prestigious office building but had never forgotten how hard it had been or where he'd come from and was just plain horrified by such profligate waste and realised that, yes, to him it did matter.

'That's for you to decide,' she said.

'Then call the baker. He can deliver it to my apartment this evening.'

This was her cue to suggest that he was joking.

Had he any idea how big it was?

She restrained herself, but when she hesitated he sat back in his chair and gestured for her to get on with it.

‘Do it now, Miss Smith.’

About to ask him what he’d do with ten pounds plus of the richest fruit cake—not including the almond paste and icing—she thought better of it. Maybe he liked fruit cake.

And when he got tired of it he could always feed the rest to the ducks.

It was all downhill from there with a mass of personalized stuff—all of it now just so much landfill. Menus, seating cards, table confetti in their entwined initials, candles, crackers with their names and the date on them, filled with little silver gifts for the guests—she’d managed to negotiate the return of the gifts. Every kind of personalized nonsense, each imprinted with their names and the date of the wedding that never was.

There wasn’t a single thing that Candy had overlooked in her quest for the most extravagant, the most talked-about wedding of the season.

The list went on and on but the only other invoice to provoke a reaction was the one for the bon-bonnière.

‘Well, here’s something different,’ he said, stretching for a touch of wry humour. ‘A French tradition for wasting money instead of a British one.’

Seeing light at the end of the tunnel, she was prepared to risk a smile of her own but instead she caught her breath as, his guard momentarily down, she caught a glimpse of the grey hollows beneath his eyes, at his temple.

Maybe he heard because he looked up, a slight frown puckering his brow.

‘What?’ he demanded.

She shook her head, managed some kind of meaningless response that appeared to satisfy him, but after that she kept her head down and finally it was all done but for the last invoice. The one for her own fee, which she’d reduced by twenty per cent, even though the cancellation had caused nearly as much work as the actual day would have done.

‘It’s as well you don’t offer a money back guarantee,’ he said.

‘My company’s services carry a guarantee,’ she assured him.

‘But not one that covers parts replacement.’

Which was almost a joke but this time she didn’t even think about smiling. ‘I’m afraid not, Mr McFarlane. The bride is entirely your responsibility.’

‘True,’ he said, surprising her. ‘But maybe you’re missing out on a business opportunity,’ he continued as, finally, he wrote the cheque. ‘It would be so much simpler if one could pick and choose from a list of required qualities and place an order for the perfect wife.’

‘Like a washing machine? Or a car?’ she asked, wondering what, exactly, had been his specification for a wife. And whether he’d adjust it in the light of recent events.

Go for something less glamorous, more hard-wearing.

‘Performance, style, finish...’ She had been dangerously close to sarcasm but he appeared to take her analogy seriously. ‘That sounds about right.’ Then, as he tore the cheque from the book, ‘But forget economy. Fast women and fast cars have that in common. They’re both expensive to run. And you take a hit on the trade-in.’ He didn’t hand her the cheque but continued to look at it. ‘Good business for you, though.’

‘I’m not that cynical, Mr McFarlane,’ she assured him as, refusing to sit there like a dummy while he made her wait for him to hand it over, she set about gathering her papers.

She tucked them back into the file and stowed them in her case, taking all the time in the world over it, just to prove that she was cool.

That nothing was further from her mind than a speedy exit from his office so that she could regain control over her breathing and her hormones, both of which had been doing their own thing ever since she’d been confronted at close quarters by whatever it was that Tom McFarlane had in such abundance. And she wasn’t thinking about his money.

When everything was done she looked up and said, 'No one, no matter who they are, gets more than one SDS wedding.'

'Speaking personally, that's not going to be a problem.'

And he folded the cheque in two and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

No...

'Once has been more than enough.'

He stood up and hooked his jacket from the back of the chair before heading for the door.

No... Wait...

'Shall we go, Miss Smith?' he prompted, opening it, waiting for her.

'Go?' She stood up very slowly. 'Go where?'

'To pick up all this expensive but completely useless junk that I'm about to pay for.'

Oh. No. Really. That was just pointless. Besides the fact that she was now, seriously, running out of time as well as breath. Her staff didn't need her to hold their hands, but the pop diva was paying for that kind of service.

Sylvie was really annoyed with herself about that. Not the time—that was all down to Tom McFarlane. But the breath bit.

It wasn't even as if he'd tried. Done a single thing to account for her raised pulse rate or the pitifully twisted state of her hormones.

Apart from looking at her.

It was, apparently, enough.

'I'm qu-quite happy to dispose of it for you,' she said quickly. She could at least spare him the indignity of having to haul it to the recycling centre. Then, when that offer wasn't leapt on with grateful thanks, 'Or I can arrange to have it delivered.'

It wasn't as if he could be in a hurry for any of it.

'If that's more convenient for you,' he said. Her relief was short-lived. 'I assume you're not planning to charge me for storage?'

'Er, no...'

He nodded. 'I'm leaving the country tonight—my diary has been cleared, the honeymoon villa paid for—but I can hold on to the cheque until I get back next month and we can finish this then.'

What?

'I'll give you a call when I get back, shall I?'

Give her a call...?

Everyone had their snapping point. His had been the wedding cake. This was hers.

'You have got to be joking! I've already rearranged my afternoon for you and been kept waiting nearly an hour for my trouble. And I've got a party this evening.'

'Your social life is not my problem.'

'I don't have a social life!' she declared furiously.

'Really?' His glance was brief but all-encompassing, leaving her with the feeling that she'd been touched from head to foot in the most intimate way. And enjoying every moment of it.

Then he lifted one brow the merest fraction as if he knew...

'Really,' she snapped. Every waking moment of her life was spent making sure other people had a good time. 'This is business. And my van, unlike me, can't do two things at once.'

For some reason, that made him smile. And she'd been right about that too. Something about the way one corner of his mouth lifted, the skin crinkled around his eyes. The eyes heated...

'No problem,' he said, bringing her back to earth. 'For a reasonable fee, I'll hire your company one of mine.'

Beneath the riotous collage of balloons, streamers and showers of confetti with which Sylvie's van—the one presently engaged elsewhere—was painted, you could just about make out that its original colour was, like her mood, black.

Tom McFarlane's van was an identical model. Equally glossy and well cared for and equally black. In his case, however, the finish was unrelieved by anything more festive than his company's gold logo—TMF enclosed in a cartouche—so familiar from that wretched cake.

They'd ridden in his private lift down to the parking basement in total silence. With no choice but to go along with him, she was too angry to trust herself to attempt small talk.

Her sympathy was history. Sylvie no longer cared what he was feeling.

Smug self-satisfaction, no doubt, at putting her to the maximum possible inconvenience just because he could.

He led the way past an equally black and gleaming Aston Martin that was, no doubt, his personal transport. Fast and classy with voluptuous cream leather upholstery, it fitted his specification perfectly.

For a car or a wife.

Shame on Candy for dumping him; he deserved her!

They reached the van. He unlocked it, slid open the driver's door and held out the keys.

She stared at them.

She'd been tempted to insist on driving the van herself, if only to reclaim a little of the control which he'd wrested from her the moment she'd arrived at his office. If he was really serious about charging her for using it—and nothing about him so far suggested he had a sense of humour; his smile, when he'd finally let it go, had been pure wolf—it seemed eminently reasonable.

She'd had Tom McFarlane up to the eyebrows; he'd used up every particle of goodwill and she didn't want to spend one more minute with him than was absolutely necessary.

But she also wanted this over and done with as quickly as possible and had been counting on the fact that macho man wouldn't be able to stand by and watch her load and unload the thing by herself.

She might, of course, be fooling herself about that. It was quite possible he'd enjoy watching her work up a sweat as she earned every penny of her—reduced—fee. She was already regretting that twenty per cent. She'd earned every penny of it this afternoon.

Too late now. She'd just have to think of the eighty per cent she would be paid. The money for all those suppliers who'd put their heart and soul into making Candy's dream come true. And her reputation for being the kind of solid, dependable businesswoman whose word, in a business that was not short on flakes, meant something. Trust that had taken time to garner when her centuries-old name had, overnight, become a liability...

'I'd come and give you a hand but I have to take delivery of a cake.' Then, 'Do you need a hand up?'

'No, thanks,' she snapped back, snatching the keys from him and tossing her bag on to the passenger seat. 'I've got one of these and I frequently drive it myself.'

'Not in that skirt or those heels, I'll bet.'

Oh, terrific!

That was where anger and speaking before your brain was engaged got you. But it was too late to change her mind because he didn't give her the chance to do so and back down gracefully. Instead he gave one of those I'm-sure-you-know-best shrugs—the ones that implied it was the last thing he thought—and stood back, leaving her to get on with it.

Unfortunately, getting on with it involved hoisting her narrow skirt up far enough to enable her to step up into the cab. Which was far enough for Tom McFarlane to get the full stocking tops and lace underwear experience.

The up side—there had to be an up side—was that it would be his breathing under attack for a change.

'Not that I'm complaining,' he assured her, apparently perfectly in control of his breathing.

And a good thing too, she decided. One of them ought to be in control of their bodily functions. Not that she bothered to dignify his remark with an answer, but let her skirt drop, smoothing it primly beneath her as she sat down, before placing the key in the ignition.

‘What kept you?’

She’d had to buzz him so that he could let her through into the basement parking garage and by the time she’d pulled into the bay by the private lift that would take her directly to the penthouse loft apartment he was there, waiting for her.

His impatience touched a chord deep within her. Despite her very real, her justifiable anger with Tom McFarlane, her own impatience with every interruption, every traffic delay had been driven not by her need to be with an important client in Chelsea but by some blind, completely insane desire to get back to him. To renew the edgy, heat-filled connection.

He might make her angry but for the first time in years she felt like a woman and it was addictive...

‘I can manage,’ she assured him as he opened the door, offered her a helping hand. The default reaction of the modern woman. When did that happen?

It didn’t matter; he took no notice. ‘I’ve seen you manage once today. Since I’ve already seen your underwear, this time we’ll do it my way.’

‘A gentleman wouldn’t have looked,’ she gasped, outraged. Outraged by the fact that he obviously thought her legs not worth a second look.

‘Is that a fact? I guess that just proves that I’m not a gentleman.’ His eyes gleamed in the dim light of the underground garage. ‘Didn’t your old school chum tell you that it was one of the things she liked most about me? After my money. The risk. The realisation that for once in her life she wasn’t in control.’ He leaned close enough for her to feel his breath upon her cheek. For every cell to quiver with heightened awareness. Her skin to get goose-bumps. ‘That she was playing with fire.’

Sylvie’s mouth dried.

It worked for her.

‘But then again,’ he said, straightening, ‘you’re no lady, Miss Smith, or you’d have accepted my offer of assistance. So shall we try it again? Need a hand?’

‘The only help I need is with the boxes,’ she declared angrily. She certainly didn’t need to hitch up her skirt to get down. All she had to do was swing her legs over the side and drop to the floor but, then again, Tom McFarlane was going out of his way to rile her, so why make it easy for him?

It wasn’t as if she’d wanted to organise this wedding in the first place—especially not once she’d met the groom—but Candy had begged and when she wanted something, no one could deny her anything.

Except, it seemed, Tom McFarlane.

And maybe the house in Belgravia and the country estate were, after all, non-negotiable if you weren’t marrying for love...

In retrospect, Sylvie thought, it was easy to see why she’d left so much of the detail to Quentin, but it really was too bad that, when all her instincts had been proved right, she was being punished by this man, not just for her bad judgement but for his too.

And her body seemed intent on joining in.

Maybe that was why, instead of jumping down, she put her hands flat against the seams of her skirt in a deliberately provocative manner, as a prelude to sliding it back up her legs.

To punish him—punish them both—right back.

Tom McFarlane couldn’t believe the way he was behaving. He was already calling himself every kind of a fool. He’d cleared his desk in preparation for a month away and all he’d had to do was get on a plane. Instead, he’d demanded Sylvie Smith’s presence in his office to explain her invoice. And then, as if that hadn’t been sufficient misery for both of them, he’d made a complete fool himself by demanding she deliver a pile of useless junk to his apartment.

He'd already put himself through an afternoon of torment, looking at her long legs as she'd crossed and re-crossed them, her sexy high-heeled shoes highlighting the beauty of slender ankles.

They were the kind of legs that could give a man ideas—always assuming he hadn't got them the minute he'd set eyes on her. Hadn't had the best part of two hours, while she'd kept him waiting, to think about them.

But enough was enough and, before she could repeat the move with the skirt, he snatched back control, seizing her around the waist to lift her down.

Taken by surprise, she gasped as she grabbed for his shoulders, bunching his shirt in her hands as she clung to him. She was not the only one short of breath. Close up, by the armful, Sylvie Smith's figure more than lived up to the promise glimpsed when she'd unbuttoned that sexy little jacket. All soft curves, it was the kind of figure that would look perfect in something soft and clinging. Would look even better out of it.

For a moment they were poised, locked together, just two people, holding each other, heat sizzling between them with only one thing on their minds—and it sure as hell wasn't wedding stationery.

A wisp of her streaky blonde hair brushed against his cheek and, as naturally as breathing, his hand slipped beneath the chocolate silk to cradle her ribcage, his thumb teasing the edge of a lace bra that he knew would exactly match the trim on what could only be French knickers.

There was no exclamation of outrage. Instead, as his thumb swept up over the aroused peak of her nipple, Sylvie Smith's lips parted, her breathing grew ragged and the look in her eyes was pure invitation as she seemed to melt against him, clinging to his shoulders as if they were the only thing keeping her on her feet.

It would be impossible to say whether it was the shudder that ran through her, her tongue moistening her hot, full lower lip or the tiny moan low in her throat that precipitated what happened next.

Or maybe it was none of those things. Maybe this had been in his mind from the very beginning, from the minute he'd first set eyes on her six months ago when he'd walked into her office and had instantly wanted to be anywhere else in the world.

Why he'd provoked today's meeting.

Because this raw, atavistic connection between two strangers, rather than a wedding that had lain like lead in his gut for weeks, was what today had been all about and the connection between them was as inevitable as it was explosive.

Control? Who did he think he was kidding...?

As his lips touched hers it was like oxygen to a fire that had been smouldering, unseen for months. One minute there was nothing. The next it was wildfire. Unstoppable...

Somehow they made it to the lift and he groped back for the key that closed the doors, sending it silently upward as they tore at the fastenings on each other's clothes, desperate for skin against skin. Just desperate.

A ping announced the arrival of an email from his office. Tom McFarlane bypassed the trip to Mustique, driven by a woman's tears to take the first long haul flight out with a vacant seat, and he'd hit the ground running the moment he'd touched down in the Far East. Work. Work had always been the answer.

He opened it. Read the note from his secretary and swore. Then he picked up the picture postcard of Sydney Opera House lying beside the laptop. Read the brief message—'Wish you were here'—not a question but a statement, before tearing it in two.

'I'll be fine...'

Famous last words, Sylvie thought as she regarded the pregnancy test. But then, when she'd said them, she hadn't been talking about the fact that she'd just had unprotected sex with a man with whom, despite the fact that he'd taken up residence in her brain, she'd never made it to first name terms.

She'd hoped, expected, that he'd call from Mustique, if only to make sure that there had been no consequences to their moment of madness. Maybe, even better, just to say hello. Best of all to say, I'd like to do that again...

Apparently he wouldn't. No doubt he thought that she'd have dealt with the possibility of any unforeseen consequences without a second thought. It was true; she had momentarily thought about emergency contraception while she'd been walking past a pharmacy the day after Tom McFarlane had made love to her. Then, just like some teenage kid buying his first packet of condoms, she'd come out with a new toothbrush.

Not because she was embarrassed, but because she had given it a second thought.

She was nearly thirty and a baby would not be bad news. She smiled as she lay her hand over her still perfectly flat abdomen. Far from it. It was wonderful news. Totally right. For her, anyway.

Quite what her baby's father would make of it was another matter altogether. She'd given up hoping for any kind of a call from him when she'd received a freshly drawn cheque in the post, clipped to a compliment slip with 'settlement in full' typed on it, followed by someone's indecipherable initials. Not his. Well, no, he was taking time out in the fabulous villa that Candy had chosen for their honeymoon.

He'd reinstated the twenty per cent she'd deducted and couldn't have made his point more succinctly. He'd known exactly what he was doing. Had regained control...

She returned the twenty per cent with a brief note, reminding him that she had deducted it from her bill. Stupid, no doubt, but pride had its price and it had been essential to make the point that she did not.

A secretary replied to thank her for pointing out the error, assuring her that Mr McFarlane had been informed.

She wasn't going to risk that this time. Or a formal letter from a lawyer demanding a paternity test. He had a right to know he was about to become a father, but she was going to make it plain that this was something he'd have to deal with himself and steeled herself to call his office.

She doubted that holidays came easily to him and fully expected that he would have returned early, but was informed that he was still away and did she want to leave a message?

She declined. A letter would be easier. That way she could keep it cool. She pulled a sheet of her personal notepaper from the rack, uncapped her pen.

An hour later she was still sitting there.

How did you tell a man you scarcely knew that he was about to become a father? Especially since Candy had shared her joy that ruining her figure to provide him with an heir had not been part of the deal.

How could she tell a man who apparently had no desire for children of his own that this was the most magical thing that had ever happened to her? Share just how amazing she felt, how happy she was? How life suddenly had real meaning?

She knew he'd hate that and, since she didn't want him angry, she'd keep it businesslike. Strictly to the point. Give him room to look past a moment of sizzling passion and see what they'd created together so that he could, maybe, find it in his heart to reach out to his child without any burden of liability to get in the way.

Finally, she began.

Dear Tom,

No. That wouldn't do. She blotted out the memory of crying his name out as he'd brought her body humming to life and scratched out Tom and, clinging instead to the memory of that twenty per cent, she wrote:

Dear Mr McFarlane—that was businesslike.

I'm writing to let you know that as a result of our recent...

She stopped again.

What? How could she put into words what had happened. His unexpected tenderness. The soaring joy that had brought the tears pouring down her face...

He hadn't understood the tears, how could he? She just kept saying, 'I'm all right...' Blissfully, brilliantly, wonderfully more than 'all right'. And she would have told him, but then Josie had rung in a panic because Delores was out of her head on an illegal substance half an hour before everyone was due to arrive and the baker had turned up with the cake and there had been no time. And all she'd said was, 'I have to go.'

She'd expected him to ring her. Kept hoping he would. But when she'd rung his office using the excuse of reminding him about the cheque—they'd somehow forgotten all about that—she'd been told he was away. He had, apparently, taken her at her word and caught his plane...

Come on, Sylvie. Get a grip. Keep it simple.

...as a result of our recent encounter, I am expecting a baby in July.

Businesslike. To the point. Cool. Except there was nothing cold about having a baby. When she'd seen the result of the pregnancy test there had been a rush of an emotion so powerful that she could hardly breathe...

Please believe me when I say that I do not hold you in any way responsible. It was my decision alone to go ahead with the pregnancy and I'm perfectly capable of supporting both myself and my son or daughter. My purpose in writing is not to make any demands on you, but obviously you have a right to know that you are about to become a father. Should you wish to be a part of his or her life, I would welcome your involvement without any expectation of commitment to me.

She crossed out without any expectation of commitment to me. You could be too businesslike. Too cool...

You have my assurance that I won't contact you again, or ever raise the subject in the unlikely event that our paths should cross. If I don't hear from you, I'll assume that you have no wish to be involved.

Yours

Sylvie Smith

What else could she say? That she would never forget him? That he had broken down the protective wall that had been in place ever since Jeremy had decided that he wasn't up for the 'worse' or the unexpectedly 'poorer'—at least not with her—leaving her with everything in place for a wedding except the groom.

That she would always be grateful to him for that. And for the precious gift of a baby.

A new family. The chance to begin again...

No. That would be laying an emotional burden on him. Any involvement must not be out of guilt, but because he wanted to be a father. If he didn't, well, at least that way, her child would be spared the bitter disillusionment she'd suffered at the hands of her own father.

Something dropped on to the paper, puddling the ink. Stupid. There was no reason for tears, absolutely none, and she palmed them away, took out a fresh sheet of paper and wrote out her letter minus the crossings out. Then she drove across to the other side of the river and placed her letter in Tom McFarlane's letter box so that she wasn't tempted to write again if he didn't reply, just in case it had been lost in the post. Could be sure that no one else would open it, read it...

Then, since there was nothing else to be done, she went home and started making plans for the changes that were about to happen in her life.

Tom managed to get the last seat on the flight back to London. Four months. He hadn't stopped travelling for four months. Like a man on the run, he'd been in flight from the memory, burned into his brain, of Sylvie Smith, silent tears pouring down her face.

For a moment, in that still, totally calm space, when he'd spilled his seed into her, he'd felt as if the entire world had suddenly been made over for him, that he was the hunter who'd come home with the biggest prize in the world.

Then he'd seen her tears and realised just what he'd done. That while she kept saying 'I'll be fine...' she was anything but. 'I have to go...' when all he wanted was to keep her close.

And work, he'd discovered, was not the answer, which was why he was going back to face her. To beg her to forgive him, beg her for more...

About to go through passport control, he paused at a book shop—with a twelve hour flight ahead of him, he'd need something to read—and found himself confronted by the face that haunted his dreams, both waking and sleeping. Not crying now, but smiling serenely out at him from the latest copy of *Celebrity*.

Saw the story flash—'Sylvie's Happy Event!'

He didn't need an interpreter to decipher 'happy event' and for a moment he felt a surge of something so powerful that he felt like a man with the world at his feet. She was wearing something soft and flowing and there was nothing to show that she was pregnant. Only the special glow of a woman who had just told the world that she was having a baby and was totally thrilled about it.

His baby...

He picked up the magazine. Opened it and came crashing back to earth as he saw that the cover photograph had been cropped. Inside, the same photograph showed that she was posed with a tall, fair-haired man and the caption read:

'Our favourite events organiser Sylvie Smith, who has just announced that she's expecting a baby later this summer, is pictured here with her childhood sweetheart, the recently divorced Earl of Melchester. Their marriage plans were put on hold when Sylvie's grandfather died and, as Jeremy put it, "life got in the way". It's wonderful to see them looking so happy to be together again and we confidently predict wedding bells very shortly.'

He read it twice, just to be sure, then he tossed the magazine in the nearest bin and went back to the desk to change his ticket.

'Where do you want to go, Mr McFarlane?'

'It doesn't matter.'

CHAPTER THREE

JOSIE FOWLER flung herself full length into the sofa that had, at considerable expense, been provided for the comfort of their clients. With her feet dangling over the arm and her arm shielding her eyes, she groaned.

‘Late night?’ Sylvie asked.

‘Late and then some. I have to tell you that you are, without doubt, a world class fantasy wedding planner.’

‘Event planner,’ Sylvie said, pulling a face. She was so off weddings. ‘We are SDS Events, Jo. Fantasy or otherwise, weddings are no different from any other job.’ Cue, hollow laughter... ‘I take it from your reaction that everything went according to plan yesterday?’

In other words, please tell me that the bride didn’t have second thoughts...

‘Pleease!’ Josie, in full drama queen mode—despite her eighteen-hole Doc Martens and punk hair-do, both of them purple—clutched both hands to her heart. ‘What SDS event would dare to deviate from “the plan”?’

‘According to my grandfather,’ she said in an effort not to think about the Harcourt/McFarlane debacle—she’d promised herself she wouldn’t think about that nightmare, or the Tom McFarlane effect, more than three times a day and she was already over budget— ‘the first casualty of battle is always “the plan”.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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