Unwrapping
HIS CONVENIENT FIANCÉE
MODERN™
MELANIE MILBURNE

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Аннотация

The perfect lie…Violet Drummond can't face another office Christmas party as a singleton, but charismatic family friend Cameron McKinnon seems like the perfectly platonic plus one for the festive season. Until he reveals his plan to make Violet his convenient fiancée! Wealthy Architect Cameron sees this charade as the perfect escape hatch from the unwelcome attention of an important client's wife, but soon fake feelings shift to real attraction…There's only one thing Cameron wants to unwrap on Christmas morning – the staid suit from Violet's lush body – and he's willing to push the boundaries of their agreement to accommodate his growing desire…

The perfect lie...

Violet Drummond can't face another office Christmas party as a singleton, but charismatic family friend Cameron McKinnon seems like the perfectly platonic "plus one" for the festive season. Until he reveals his plan to make Violet his convenient fiancée!

Wealthy architect Cameron sees this charade as the perfect escape hatch from the unwelcome attention of an important client's wife, but soon fake feelings shift to real attraction...

There's only one thing Cameron wants to unwrap on Christmas morning—the staid suit from Violet's lush body—and he's willing to push the boundaries of their agreement to accommodate his growing desire...

'Are you sure we should be doing this?'

There was a slight easing of the tension around his mouth. 'We're not robbing a bank, Violet.'

'I know, but—'

'If you'd rather not, then I can always find someone—'

'No,' Violet said, not even wanting to think about the someone else he would take. 'I'll go. It'll be fun—I haven't been out to dinner for ages.'

He smiled a lopsided smile that made the back of Violet's knees feel weak.

'There's one other thing...'

You want it to be a real date? You want us to see each other as in see each other? You've secretly been in love with me for years and years and years?

Violet forced herself to keep her expression blank while her thoughts pushed against the door of her reasoning like people trying to get in to a closeing down sale.

'We'll have to act like a normal dating couple,' he said. 'Hold hands...show affection...and so on.'

And so on? What else did he mean?

Violet nodded as if her head was supported by an elastic band instead of neck muscles. 'Fine. Of course. Good idea. Fab. Brilliant idea. We have to look authentic. Wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong idea... I mean...Well, you know what I mean.'

Cam leaned down and brushed her cheek with his lips, the slight graze of his rougher skin making something in her stomach turn over.

'I'll pick you up at seven.'

MELANIE MILBURNE read her first Mills & Boon at age seventeen, in between studying for her final exams. After completing a Master's Degree in Education she decided to write a novel in between settling down to do a PhD. She became so hooked on writing romance the PhD was shelved and her career as a romance writer was born. Melanie is an ambassador for the Australian Childhood Foundation, is a keen dog-lover and trainer and enjoys long walks in the Tasmanian bush.

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Unwrapping His Convenient Fiancée
Melanie Milburne

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To my dear friend Jo Shearing.

You are such a gorgeous person
and I value our friendship so much.
This one is for you. xxxx

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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS THE invitation Violet had been dreading for months. Ten years in a row she had gone to the office Christmas party sans partner. Ten years! Every year she told herself next year

would be different, and yet here she was staring at the red and silver invitation with her stomach in a sinkhole of despair again. It was bad enough fielding the What, no date? looks and comments from her female colleagues. But it was the thought of being in a crowded room that was the real torture. With all those jostling bodies pressing up so close she wouldn't be able to breathe.

Male bodies.

Bodies that were much bigger and stronger and more powerful than hers—especially when they were drunk...

Violet blinked away the memory. She hardly ever thought about that party these days. Well, only now and again. She had come to a fragile sort of peace over it. The self-blame had eased even if the lingering shame had not.

But she was nearly thirty and it was time to move on. More than time. Which meant going to the Christmas party to prove to herself she was back in control of her life.

However, there was the agony of deciding what to wear. Her accountancy firm's Christmas party was considered one of the premier events in the financial sector's calendar. It wasn't just a drinks and nibbles affair. It was an annual gala with champagne flowing like a fountain and Michelin star quality food and dancing to a live band. Every year there was a theme and everyone was expected to be part of the action to demonstrate their commitment to office harmony. This year's theme was A Star-Struck Christmas. Which would mean Violet would have to find something Hollywoodish to wear. She wasn't good at

glamour. She didn't like drawing attention to herself. She wasn't good at partying full stop.

Violet slipped the invitation between the pages of her book and sighed. Even the London lunchtime café crowd was rubbing in her singleton status. Everyone was a couple. She was the only person sitting on her own. Even a couple pushing ninety were at the table in the window and they were holding hands. That would be her parents in thirty years. Still with the magic buzzing between them as it had from the first moment they'd met. Just like her three siblings with their perfect partners. Building their lives together, having children and doing all the things she dreamed of doing.

Violet had watched each of her siblings fall in love. Fast-living Fraser first, racy Rose next and then laid-back Lily. Been to each of their weddings. Been a bridesmaid three times. Three times. Groan. She was always in the audience watching romance develop and blossom, but she longed to be on the stage.

Why couldn't she find someone perfect for her?

Was there something wrong with her? Guys occasionally asked her out but it never went past a date or two. Her natural shyness didn't make for scintillating conversation and she had no idea how to flirt... Well, she did if she had a few drinks but that was a mistake she was not going to repeat. The problem was that men were so impatient these days, or maybe they always had been that way. But she was not going to sleep with someone just because it was expected of her...or because she was too drunk

to say no. She wanted to feel attracted to a man and to feel his attraction to her. To feel frissons of red-hot desire scoot all over her flesh at his touch. To melt when his gaze met hers. To shiver with delight when he pressed his lips to hers.

Not that too many male lips had been pressed to hers lately. She couldn't remember the last time she had been really kissed by a man. Pecks on the cheek from her father and brother or grandfather didn't count.

Violet was rubbish at the dating game. Rubbish. Rubbish. Rubbish. She was going to end up an old and wrinkled spinster living with a hundred and fifty-two cats. With a chest of drawers full of exquisitely embroidered baby clothes for the babies she had longed for since she was a little girl.

'Is this seat taken?'

Violet glanced up at the familiar deep baritone voice, a faint shiver coursing down her spine when her gaze connected with her older brother's best friend from university.

'Cam?' Her voice came out like the sound of a squeaky toy, an annoying habit she hadn't been able to correct since first meeting Cameron McKinnon. She had been eighteen when her brother brought Cam home for the summer—or at least the Scottish version of it—to their family's estate, Drummond Brae, in the Highlands. 'What are you doing here? How are you? Fraser told me you've been living in Greece designing a yacht for someone super-rich. How's it all going? When did you get back?'

Shut up! Funny, but she was never lost for words around Cam.

She talked too much. She couldn't seem to help it nor could she explain it. He wasn't intimidating or threatening in any way. He was polite, if a little aloof, but he had been a part of her family for long enough for her to get over herself.

But clearly she hadn't got over herself.

Cam pulled out the chair opposite and sat down, his knees gently bumping against Violet's underneath the table. The touch was like an electric current moving through her body, heating her in places that had no business being heated. Not by her brother's best friend. Cam was out of her league. Way out.

'I was in the area for a meeting. It finished early and I remembered you mentioning this café once so thought I'd check it out,' he said. 'I've only been back a couple of days. My father is getting remarried just before Christmas.'

Violet's eyes widened to the size of the saucer under her skinny latte. 'Again? How many times is that now? Three? Four?'

His mouth twisted. 'Five. And there's another baby on the way, which brings the total of halfsiblings to six, plus the seven stepsiblings, so eleven all together.'

Violet thought her three nephews, two nieces and the baby in the making were a handful—she couldn't imagine eleven. 'How on earth do you keep track of all of their birthdays?'

His half smile looked a little weary around the edges. 'I've set up automatic transfers via online banking. Takes the guesswork out.'

'Maybe I should do that.' Violet stirred her coffee for

something to do with her hands. Being in Cam's company—not that it happened much these days—always made her feel like a gauche schoolgirl in front of a college professor. He was an unusual counterpoint to her older brother who was a laugh a minute, life of the party type. Cam was more serious in nature with a tendency to frown rather than smile.

Her gaze drifted towards his mouth—another habit she couldn't quite control when she was around him. His lips were fairly evenly sculpted, although the lower one had a slightly more sensual fullness to it that made her think of long, blood-heating, pulse-racing kisses.

Not that Violet had ever kissed him. Men like Cameron McKinnon didn't kiss girls like her. She was too girl-next-door. He dated women who looked as if they had just stepped out of a photo shoot. Glamorous, sophisticated types who could hold their own in any company without breaking out in hives in case someone spoke to them.

Cam's gaze briefly went to her bare left hand where she was cradling her coffee before coming back to hers in a keenly focused look that made something deep in her belly unfurl like a flower opening its petals to the sun.

'So, how are things with you, Violet?'

'Erm...okay.' At least she wasn't breaking out into hives, but the blush she could feel crawling over her cheeks was almost as bad. Was he thinking—like the rest of her family—Three times a bridesmaid, never a bride?

‘Only okay?’ His look had a serious note to it, a combination of concern and concentration, as if she were the only person he wanted to talk to right then. It was one of the things Violet liked about him—one of the many things. He wasn’t so full of himself that he couldn’t spare the time to listen. She often wondered if he’d been around to talk to after that wretched party, during her first and only year at university, her life might not have turned out the way it had.

Violet stretched her mouth into her standard everything-is-cool-with-me smile. ‘I’m fine. Just busy with work and Christmas shopping and stuff. Like you, I have a lot of people to buy for now with all my nephews and nieces. Did you know Lily and Cooper are expecting? Mum and Dad are planning the usual big Christmas at Drummond Brae. Has Mum invited you? She said she was going to. The doctors think it will be Grandad’s last Christmas so we’re all making an effort to be there for him.’

Cam’s mouth took on a rueful slant. ‘My father’s decided to upstage Christmas with his wedding on Christmas Eve.’

‘Where’s it being held?’

‘Here in London.’

‘Maybe you could fly up afterwards,’ Violet said. ‘Or have you got other commitments?’ Other commitments such as a girlfriend. Surely he would have one. Men like Cam wouldn’t go long between lovers. He was too handsome, too rich, too intelligent, too sexy. Too everything. Cam had never broadcast his relationships with women the way her brother Fraser had

before he'd fallen madly in love with Zoe. Cam was intensely private about his private life. So private it made Violet wonder if he had a secret lover stashed away somewhere, someone he kept out of the glaring spotlight that his work as an internationally acclaimed naval architect attracted.

'I'll see,' he said. 'Mum will expect a visit, especially now that her third husband Hugh's left her.'

Violet frowned. 'Oh, no. I'm sorry to hear that. Is she terribly upset?'

Cam gave her a speaking look. 'Not particularly. He drank. A lot.'

'Oh...'

Cam's family history was nothing short of a saga. Not that he'd ever said much about it to her, but Fraser had filled in the gaps. His parents went through a bitter divorce when he was six and promptly remarried and set up new families, collecting other biological children and stepchildren along the way. Cam was jostled between the various households until he was sent to boarding school when he was eight. Violet could picture him as a little boy—studious, quietly observing on the sidelines, not making a fuss and avoiding one where it was made. He was still like that. When he came to visit her family for weddings, christenings or other gatherings he was always on the fringe, standing back with a drink in his hand he rarely touched, quietly measuring the scene with his navy-blue gaze.

The waitress came over to take Cam's order with a smile that

went beyond I'm your server, can I help you? to Do you want my number?

Violet tried to ignore the little dart of jealousy that spiked her in the gut. It was none of her business who he flirted with. Why should she care if he picked up a date from her favourite café? Even if she had been coming here for years and no one had asked for her number.

Cam looked across the table at her. 'Would you like another coffee?'

Violet put her hand over the top of her latte glass. 'No, I'm good.'

'Just a long black, thanks,' Cam said to the waitress with a brief but polite smile.

Violet waited until the girl had left before she spoke. 'Cra—ack.'

His brow furrowed. 'Pardon?'

She gave him a teasing smile. 'Didn't you hear that girl's heart breaking?'

He looked puzzled for a moment, and then faintly annoyed. 'She's not my type.'

'Describe your type.' Why had she asked that?

The bridge between Cam's ink-black eyebrows was still pleated in three tight vertical lines. 'I've been too busy for any type just lately.' His phone, which was sitting on the table, beeped with a message and he glanced at it before turning off the screen, his lips pressing so firmly his mouth turned bone-white.

‘What’s wrong?’

He forcibly relaxed his features. ‘Nothing.’

The phone beeped again and his mouth flattened once more. He clicked the mute button and slipped the phone into his jacket pocket as the waitress set his coffee down on the table between them. ‘So, how’s work?’

Violet glanced at the invitation peeping out of the pages of her book. Was it her imagination or was it flashing like a beacon? She surreptitiously pushed it back out of sight. ‘Fine...’

Cam followed the line of her gaze. ‘What’s that?’

‘Nothing... Just an invitation.’

‘To?’

Violet was sure her cheeks were as the red as the baubles on the invitation. ‘The office Christmas party.’

‘You going?’

She couldn’t meet his gaze and looked at the sugar bowl instead. Who knew there were so many different artificial sweeteners these days? Amazing. ‘I kind of have to... It’s expected in the interests of office harmony.’

‘You don’t sound too keen.’

Violet lifted one of her shoulders in a shrug. ‘Yeah, well, I’m not really a party girl.’ Not any more. Her first and only attempt at partying had ended in a blurry haze of regret and self-recrimination. An event she was still, all these years on, trying to put behind her with varying degrees of success.

But secret shame cast a long shadow.

‘It’s a pretty big affair, isn’t it?’ Cam said. ‘No expense spared and so on, I take it?’

Violet rolled her eyes. ‘Ironic when you consider it’s a firm of bean counters.’

‘Pretty successful bean counters,’ Cam said. ‘Well done you for nailing a job there.’

Violet didn’t like to admit how far from her dream job it actually was. After quitting her university studies, a clerical job in a large accounting firm had seemed a good place to blend into the background. But what had suited her at nineteen was feeling less satisfying as she approached thirty. She couldn’t shake off the nagging feeling she should be doing more with her life. Extending herself. Reaching her potential instead of placing limitations on herself. But since that party... Well, everything had been put on pause. It was like her life had jammed and she couldn’t move forward.

The vibration of Cam’s phone drew Violet’s gaze to his top pocket. Not just to his top pocket but his chest in general. He was built like an endurance athlete, tall and lean with muscles where a man needed them to be and where a woman most liked to see them. And she was no exception. His skin was tanned and his dark brown hair had some surface highlights where the strong sunlight of Greece had caught and lightened it. He had cleanly shaven skin, but there was enough dark stubble to suggest he hadn’t been holding the door for everyone else when the testosterone was dished out.

‘Aren’t you going to answer that?’ Violet asked.

‘It’ll keep.’

‘Work or family?’

‘Neither.’

Violet’s eyebrows lifted along with her intrigue. ‘A woman?’

He took out the phone and held his finger on the off switch with a determined set to his features. ‘Yeah. One that won’t take no for an answer.’

‘How long have you been dating her?’

‘I haven’t been dating her.’ Cam’s expression was grim. ‘She’s a client’s wife. A valuable client.’

‘Oh... Tricky.’

‘Very. To the tune of about forty million pounds tricky.’

Forty million? Violet came from a wealthy background but even she had trouble getting her head around a figure like that. Cam designed yachts for the super-wealthy. He’d won a heap of awards for his designs and become extremely wealthy in the process. Some of the yachts he designed were massive, complete with marble en suite bathrooms with hot tubs, and dining and sitting rooms that were plush and palatial. One yacht even had its own library and lap swimming pool. But, even so, it amazed her how much a rich person would pay for a yacht they only used now and again. ‘Seriously? You’re being paid forty million to design a yacht?’

‘No, that’s the cost of the yacht once it’s complete,’ he said. ‘But I get paid a pretty decent amount to design it.’

How much was pretty decent? Violet longed to ask but decided against it out of politeness. 'So...what will you do? Keep ignoring this woman's calls and messages?'

He let out a short, gusty breath. 'I'll have to get the message across one way or the other. I'm not the sort of guy who gets mixed up with married women.' His mouth twisted again. 'That would be my father.'

'Maybe if she sees you've got someone else it will drive home the message.' Violet picked up her almost empty latte and looked at him over the rim of the glass. 'Is there someone else?' Arrgh! Why did you ask that?

Cam's gaze met hers and that warm sensation bloomed deep and low in her belly again. His dark blue eyes were fringed with thick ink-black lashes she would have killed for. There was something about his intelligent eyes that always made her feel he saw more than he let on. 'No,' he said. 'You?'

Violet coughed out a self-effacing laugh. 'Don't you start. I get enough of that from my family, not to mention my friends and flatmates.'

Cam gave her a wry smile. 'I don't know what's wrong with the young men of London. You should've been snapped up long ago.'

A pin drop silence fell between them.

Violet looked at her coffee glass as if it were the most fascinating thing she had ever seen. The way her cheeks were going, the café's chef would be coming out to cook the toast on her face to save on electricity. How had she got into this

conversation? Awkward. Awkward. Awkward. How long was the canyon of silence going to last? Should she say something?

But what?

Her mind was blank.

She was hopeless at small talk. It was another reason she was terrible at parties. The idle conversation gene had skipped her. Her sisters and brother were the ones who could talk their way out of or into any situation. She was the wallflower of the family. All those years of being overshadowed by verbose older siblings and super articulate parents had made her conversationally challenged. She was used to standing back and letting others do the talking. Even her tendency to gabble like a fool around Cam had suddenly deserted her.

'When's your office party?'

Violet blinked and refocused her gaze on Cam's. 'Erm...tomorrow.'

'Would you like me to come with you?'

Violet had trouble keeping her jaw off the table and her heart from skipping right out of her chest and landing in his lap. Best not think about his lap. 'But why would you want to do that?'

He gave a casual shrug of one broad shoulder. 'I'm free tomorrow night. Thought it might help you mingle if you had a wingman, so to speak.'

Violet gave him a measured look. 'Is this a pity date?'

'It's not a date, period.' Something about his adamant tone rankled. 'Just a friend helping out a friend.'

Violet had enough friends. It was a date she wanted. A proper date. Not with a man on a mercy mission. Did he think she was completely useless? A romance tragic who couldn't find a prince to take her to the ball? She didn't even want to go to the ball, thank you very much. The ball wasn't that special. All those people drinking and eating too much and dancing till the wee hours to music so loud you couldn't hear yourself shout, let alone think. 'Thanks for the offer but I'll be fine.'

Violet pushed her coffee glass to one side and picked up her book. But, before she could leave the table, Cam's hand came down on her forearm. 'I didn't mean to upset you.'

'I'm not upset.' Violet knew her crisp tone belied her statement. Of course she was upset. Who wouldn't be? He was rescuing her. What could be more insulting than a man asking you out because he felt sorry for you? Had Fraser said something to him? Had one of her sisters? Her parents? Her grandfather? Why couldn't everyone mind their own business? All she got these days was pressure. Why aren't you dating anyone? You're too fussy. You're almost thirty. It never ended.

The warmth of Cam's broad hand seeped through the layers of her winter clothing, awakening her flesh like a heat pack on a frostbitten limb. 'Hey.'

Violet hadn't pouted since she was about five but she pouted now. She could find a date. Sure she could. She could sign up to one of any number of dating websites or apps and have a hundred dates. If she put her mind to it she could be engaged by

Christmas. Well, maybe that was pushing it a bit. 'I'm perfectly able to find my own date, okay?'

He gave her arm the tiniest squeeze before releasing it. 'Of course.' He sat back in his chair, his forehead creased in a slight frown. 'I'm sorry. It was a bad idea. Seriously bad.'

Why was it? And why seriously bad? Violet cradled her book close to her chest where her heart was beating a little too fast. Not fast enough to call for a defibrillator but not far off. His touch had done something to her, like he had turned a setting on in her body she hadn't known she'd had. Her senses were sitting up and alert instead of slumped and listless. Had he ever touched her before? She tried to think... Sometimes in the past he would kiss her on the cheek, a chaste brotherly sort of kiss. But lately...since Easter, in fact...there had been no physical contact from him. None at all. It was as if he had deliberately kept his distance. That last holiday weekend at home, she remembered him coming into one of the sitting rooms at Drummond Brae and going straight back out again with a muttered apology when he'd found her curled up on one of the sofas with her embroidery. Why had he done that? What was wrong with her that he couldn't bear to be left alone with her?

Violet picked up her scarf and wound it around her neck. 'I have to get back to work. I hope your father's wedding goes well.'

'It should do, he's had enough practice.' He drained his coffee and stood, snatching his jacket from the back of the chair and slinging it over his shoulder. 'I'll walk you back to your office.

I'm heading that way.'

Violet knew the tussle over who paid for the coffee was inevitable so when he offered she let him take care of it for once. 'Thanks,' she said once he'd settled the bill.

'No problem.'

He put a gentle hand in the small of her back to guide her out of the way of a young mother coming in with a pram and a squirming, red-faced toddler. The sizzling heat of his touch moved along the entire length of Violet's spine, making her aware of her femininity as if he had stroked her intimately.

Get a grip already.

This was the problem with being desperate and dateless. The slightest brush of a male hand turned her into a wanton fool. Stirring up needs that she hadn't even registered as needs until now.

But it wasn't just any male hand.

It was Cam's hand...connected to a body that made her think of smoking-hot sex. Not that she knew what smoking-hot sex actually felt like. The only sex she'd had was a surrealist blur with an occasional flashback of two or three male faces looming over her, talking about her, not to her. Definitely not the sort of romantic scene she had envisaged when she'd hit puberty. It was another thing she'd miserably failed at doing. Each of her siblings had successfully navigated their way through the dating minefield, all of them now partnered with their soul mate. Was she too fussy? Had that night at that party permanently damaged

her self-esteem and sexual confidence? Why should it when she could barely remember it in any detail?

She had been surrounded by love and acceptance all her life. There should be no reason for her to feel inadequate or not quite up to the mark. But somehow love—even a vague liking for someone of the opposite sex—had so far escaped her.

Violet walked out to the footpath with Cam, where the rain had started to fall in icy droplets. She popped open her umbrella but Cam had to bend almost double to gain any benefit from it. He took the handle from her and held the umbrella over both of their heads. Her fingers tingled where his brushed hers, the sensation travelling all through her body as if running along an electric network.

Trying to keep dry, as well as out of the way of the bustling Christmas shopping crowd, put Violet so close to the tall frame of his body she could smell the clean sharp fragrance of his aftershave, the woodsy base notes reminding her of a cool, shaded pine forest. To anyone looking in from the outside they would look like a romantically involved couple, huddled under the same umbrella, Cam's stride considerately slowing to match hers.

They came to the large Victorian building where the accounting firm Violet worked as an accounts clerk was situated. But just as she was about to turn and say her goodbyes to Cam, one of the women who worked with her came click-clacking down the steps. Lorna ran her gaze over Cam's tall

figure standing next to Violet. 'Well, well, well. Things finally looking up for you, are they, Violet?'

Violet ground her teeth so hard she could have moonlighted as a nutcracker. Lorna wasn't her favourite workmate, far from it. She had a tendency to gossip to stir up trouble. Violet knew for a fact their boss only kept Lorna on because she was brilliant at her job—and because she was having a full-on affair with him. 'Off to lunch?' she asked, refusing to respond to Lorna's taunt.

Lorna gave an orthodontist's website smile and aimed her lash-fluttering gaze at Cam. 'Will we be seeing you at the office Christmas party?'

Cam's arm snaked around Violet's waist, a protective band of steel that made every nerve in her body jump up and down and squeal with delight. 'We'll be there.'

We will? Violet waited until Lorna had gone before looking up at Cam's unreadable expression. 'Why on earth did you say that? I told you I didn't want a—'

He stepped out from under the umbrella and placed the handle back in her hand. Violet had to extend her arm upwards to its fullest range to keep the umbrella high enough to maintain eye contact. 'I'll strike a deal with you,' he said. 'I'll come to your Christmas party if you'll come to a dinner with my client tonight.'

Violet screwed up her face. 'The one with the persistent wife?'

'I've been thinking about what you said back at the café. What better way to send her the message I'm not interested than to show her I'm seeing someone?'

‘But we’re not...’ she disguised a little gulp ‘...seeing each other.’

‘No, but no one else needs to know that.’

You don’t have to be so darned emphatic about it. Violet chewed at one side of her mouth. ‘How are we going to keep this...quiet?’

‘You mean from your family?’

‘You know what my mother’s like.’ Violet gave a little eye roll. ‘One whiff of us going on a date together, and she’ll be posting wedding invitations quicker than you can say I do.’

There was another yawning silence.

I do?

Are you nuts? You said the words ‘I do’ to the man who views weddings like people view the plague!

Something shifted in Cam’s expression—a blink of his eyes, a flicker of a muscle in his lean cheek, a stretching of his mouth into a smile that didn’t involve his eyes. ‘We’ll cross that bridge if we come to it.’

If we come to it? There was no if about it. That bridge was going to blow up in their faces like a Stage Five firecracker on Guy Fawkes Night. Violet knew her family too well. They were constantly on the lookout for any signs of her dating. MI5 could learn a thing or two from her mother and sisters. How was she going to explain a night out with Cam McKinnon? ‘Are you sure we should be doing this?’

There was a slight easing of the tension around his mouth.

‘We’re not robbing a bank, Violet.’

‘I know, but—’

‘If you’d rather not, then I can always find someone—’

‘No,’ Violet said, not even wanting to think about the ‘someone’ he would take. ‘I’ll go. It’ll be fun—I haven’t been out to dinner for ages.’

He smiled a lopsided smile that made the back of Violet’s knees feel like someone was tickling them with a feather. ‘There’s one other thing...’

You want it to be a real date? You want us to see each other as in ‘see each other’? You’ve secretly been in love with me for years and years and years? Violet kept her face blank while the thoughts pushed against the door of her reasoning like people trying to get into a closing down sale.

‘We’ll have to act like a normal dating couple,’ he said. ‘Hold hands and...stuff.’

And stuff?

What other stuff?

Violet nodded like her head was supported by an elastic band instead of neck muscles. ‘Fine. Of course. Good idea. Fab. Brilliant idea. We have to look authentic. Wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea... I mean, well, you know what I mean.’

Cam leaned down and brushed her cheek with his lips, the slight graze of his rougher skin making something in her stomach turn over. ‘I’ll pick you up at seven.’

Violet took a step backwards to enter the building but

stumbled over the first step and would have fallen if it wasn't for Cam's hand shooting out to steady her. 'You okay?' he asked with a concerned frown.

Violet looked at his stubble-surrounded mouth that just moments ago had been against the smooth skin of her cheek. Had he felt that same sensation ricochet through his body? Had he wondered in that infinitesimal moment what it would feel like to press his lips to hers? Not in a brotherly kiss, but a proper man-wants-woman kiss? She sent the point of her tongue over the surface of her lips, her breath hitching when he tracked every millimetre of the movement. Keep it light. 'For a moment there I thought you were going to kiss me,' Violet said with a little laugh.

The navy-blue of his gaze turned three shades darker before glancing at her mouth and back again. But then his hand dropped from her arm as if her skin had scorched him. 'Let's not go there.'

But I want to go there. I want to. I want to. I want to. Violet kept her smile in place even though it felt like it was stitched to her mouth. 'Yes, that would be taking things too far. I mean, not that I don't find you attractive or anything, but us kissing? Not such a great idea.'

There was the sound of heels click-clacking behind her and Violet turned to see Lorna coming back. 'Silly me. I forgot my phone,' Lorna said and with a sly smile at Cam added, 'Aren't you going to kiss her and let her get back to work?'

Violet sneaked a glance at Cam but instead of looking annoyed at Lorna's comment he smiled an easy smile and reached for

Violet's hand and drew her against his side. 'I was just getting to that,' he said.

Violet assumed he would wait till Lorna had gone back into the building before releasing her but Lorna didn't go back into the building. She stood three steps up from them with that annoying smirk on her mouth as if daring Cam to follow through. Cam turned his back to Lorna and slipped a hand under Violet's hair, cupping the nape of her neck, making every nerve beneath her skin pirouette.

'You don't have to do this...' Violet whispered.

Cam brought his mouth down to within a whisker of hers. 'Yes, I do.'

And then he did.

CHAPTER TWO

CAM PRESSED HIS lips to Violet's mouth and a bomb went off in his head, scattering his common sense like flying shrapnel. What are you doing? But he didn't want to listen to his conscience. He had wanted to kiss her from the moment he'd walked into that café earlier and now her annoying workmate had given him the perfect excuse to do so. Violet's mouth tasted like a combination of milk and honey, her lips soft and pliable beneath his. He drew her ballerina-like body even closer, his body responding with a fierce rush of blood to his groin. Her small breasts were pressed against his chest, her slim hips against his, her hands gripping the front of his jacket as if she couldn't stand upright without his support. Hell, he was having trouble

keeping upright himself, apart from one part of his anatomy.

It's time to stop. You should stop. You need to stop. The chanting of his brain was attempting to drown out the frantic panting of his body. Yes. Yes. Yes. Clearly it had been too long between drinks. His self-control was usually spot on. But he didn't want the kiss to end. He felt as though he might die if it did. Lust pounded through his body, rampaging, roaring lust that made every cell in his system shudder with need. Intense need. Need that made him think of sweating, straining bodies and tangled sheets and blissful, euphoric release.

She gave a little mewling sound when he shifted position, her mouth flowering open to the hungry glide of his tongue. He explored her sweet interior, his pulse rate going off the scale when her tongue came into play with his. Her tongue was hesitant at first, but then she made another whimpering sound and grew more and more confident, flirting with his tongue, darting away and coming back for the sensual heat of his strokes. He put his hands on her hips, holding her to the throbbing ache of his body.

She felt so damn good, like she was made for his exact proportions. Had he ever felt so aroused so quickly? It was like he was a hormone-driven teenager all over again. He seriously had to get his work/life balance sorted out. How long had it been since he'd slept with a woman? Too long if his trigger was being tripped by just a kiss.

A car tooting on its way past was the only thing that got through to him. Cam put Violet from him, holding her by the

hands so as to help her keep her balanced. He did a quick glance over his shoulder but Violet's workmate had disappeared. Not surprising given he'd lost track of time during that kiss.

Violet blinked as if trying to reorient herself. Her small pink tongue did a quick circuit of her lips and his groin groaned and growled with need. He could almost imagine how it would feel to have that shy little tongue move over his body. He couldn't remember a kiss being so...consuming. He had forgotten where they were. He had darned near forgotten who he was. He might be seriously hot for Violet but he wasn't going to act on it. She was his best mate's kid sister, the baby of the family he adored.

It was a boundary he was determined not to cross. Or at least not to cross any further than he just had.

Cam released her hands and gave a relaxed smile he hoped disguised the bedlam of base needs in his body baying for more. 'That was quite a kiss.'

Violet gave him a distracted little smile that seemed to set off a rippling tide of worry in her toffee-brown eyes. 'Y-you caught me by surprise...'

Right back at you, sweetheart. 'Yes, well, I figured your workmate wasn't going to go away until we got it over with. Is she usually that persistent?'

'You caught her on a good day.'

Cam wondered how much bullying went on in that office. Violet was a gentle soul who would find it hard to stand up for herself in a dog-eat-dog environment. Even within the loving and

loud bosom of her family, she had the tendency to shrink away to a quiet corner rather than engage in the lively banter. Before he could stop himself, he brushed a fingertip down the pinked slope of her cheek. 'You're completely safe with me, Violet. You do know that, don't you? Kissing is all we'll do if the need should arise.' I hope fate isn't listening, otherwise you are toast.

Her small white teeth sank into the pillow of her lower lip and she lowered her gaze to a point at the base of his neck. 'Of course.' Her voice was not much more than a scratchy whisper.

He stepped back from her. 'I'd better let you get back to work.'

She turned without another word and climbed the steps, not even glancing back before disappearing into the building when she got to the top.

Cam let out a long breath and walked on. It was all well and good to kiss her but that was as far as it could go. He wasn't what Violet was looking for. He wasn't the settling down type. Maybe one day he would think about setting up a home with someone, but right now he had too much going on in his career. That was his focus, his priority. Not relationships.

Marriage might work for some people, but it didn't work for others—his parents and their collection of exes being a case in point. Too many people got hurt when relationships broke down. It was like a boulder dropped into a pond; the ripples of hurt went on for years. He was still sidestepping the pain his parents' divorce had caused. It wasn't that he'd wanted them to stay together. Far from it. They hadn't been happy from the get-

go because his mother had been in love and his father hadn't and then his father had dumped his mother for someone younger and more attractive and had been outrageously difficult about the divorce. His mother had responded by being equally difficult and, inevitably, Cam had got caught up in the middle until eventually he'd been dumped at boarding school and left to fend for himself. In the years since, his parents had changed partners so often Cam had trouble keeping track of names and addresses and birthdays. He'd had to set up a database on his phone to keep on top of them all.

But he needed to get Sophia Nicolaides off his case and taking Violet was the way to do it. Sophia was too crafty to spot a fake. He couldn't bring someone he'd only just met to the dinner. It had to be someone he already felt comfortable with and her with him. Violet was shy around him, but then, she was shy around most people. It was part of her charm, the fact that she didn't flaunt her assets or draw attention to herself. He'd been upfront about the fact it wasn't a date and he was sure she too wouldn't want to compromise the friendship that had built up over the years.

At least they'd got the first kiss out of the way.

And what a kiss. Who knew that sweet little mouth could wreak such havoc on his self-control? He would have to watch himself. Violet wasn't street smart like the women he normally dated. She wasn't the sleep-around type. He wondered if she was still a virgin. Not likely since she was close to thirty, but who knew for sure? It wasn't exactly a question he'd feel comfortable

asking her. It was none of his business.

Cam ran his tongue over his lips and tasted her. Even if he never kissed her again, it was going to take a long time to forget that kiss.

If he ever did.

* * *

Violet tried on seven different outfits until she finally settled on a navy-blue velvet dress that fell just above the knee. It reminded her of the colour of Cam's unusual eyes. Maybe that was why you bought it? No. Of course not. She'd bought it because she liked it. It suited her. She loved the feel of the fabric against her skin. She slipped her feet into heels and turned to view her reflection in the cheval mirror.

Her flatmate, Amy, popped her head around the door. 'Gosh, you look scrumptious. I love that colour on you. Are you going out?'

Violet smoothed the front of her dress over her stomach and thighs, turning this way and that to check if she had visible panty line. No. All good. 'You don't think it's too...plain?'

'It's simple but elegant,' Amy said, perching on the end of Violet's bed. 'So who's the guy? Have I met him? No, of course I haven't because you've never brought anyone here, that I know of.'

Violet slipped on some pearl drop earrings her parents had given her for her twenty-first birthday. 'He's a friend of my brother's. I've known him for ages.' And he kisses like a sex god

and my body is still humming with desire hours later.

Amy's eyes danced. 'Ooh! A friends-to-lovers thing. How exciting.'

Violet sent her a quelling look. 'Don't get your hopes up. I'm not his type.' Cam couldn't have been more succinct. 'Kissing is all we'll do.' She hadn't turned him on... Well, she had, but clearly not enough that he wanted to take things further.

The doorbell sounded and Amy jumped off the bed. 'I'll get it. I want to check out your date to see if he passes muster. Flat twenty-three B has certain standards, you know.'

Violet came out a few seconds later to see Amy giving an impression of a star-struck teen in front of a Hollywood idol. Violet had to admit Cam looked heart-stoppingly fabulous in a suit. He wasn't the designer-wear type, but the sharp tailoring of his charcoal-grey suit fitted his tall frame to perfection and the white dress shirt and blue and grey striped tie highlighted the tanned and healthy tone of his skin and the intense blue of his eyes.

Cam's gaze met Violet's and a tiny invisible fist punched her in the stomach.

'You look stunning.' The deep huskiness of his voice was like a caressing stroke down the entire length of her spine. The way his eyes dipped to her lipgloss-coated mouth made her relive every pulse-racing second of that kiss. Was he remembering it too? How it had felt to have their tongues intimately entwined? How it had felt to taste each other, to feel each other's response? How

it had felt to end it without the satiation both their bodies craved?

Violet brushed an imaginary strand of hair off her face. 'This is one of my flatmates, Amy Kennedy. Amy, this is Cameron McKinnon, a friend from way back.'

When Cam took Amy's hand, Violet thought her flatmate was going to fall into a swoon. 'Pleased to meet you,' he said.

Amy's cheeks were bright pink and her mouth seemed to be having trouble closing. 'Same.'

Violet picked up her coat and Cam stood behind her and helped her into it. His body was so close she could feel its warmth and smell that intriguing blend of his aftershave. He briefly rested his hands on the tops of her shoulders before stepping away. While he was facing the other way, Amy gave her the thumbs-up sign, eyes bright with excitement. Violet picked up her purse and followed Cam to the door.

'Have a good time!' Amy's voice had a sing-song quality to it that made Violet feel like a teen going out on her first date.

Cam led her to his car, parked a few metres down the rain-slicked street. 'How many flatmates do you have?'

'Two. Amy and Stefanie.'

Violet slipped into the plush leather seat of his showroom-perfect convertible. There was no way she could ever imagine a couple of kids' seats in the back. His car was like his lifestyle—free and fast. Not that he was a hardened playboy or anything. But he was hardly a monk. He was a healthy man of thirty-four, in the prime of his life. Why wouldn't he make the most of his

freedom? How many women had experienced that divine mouth? That gorgeous body and all the sensual delights it promised?

Probably more than she wanted to think about.

'I'm sorry about Amy back there,' Violet said after they were on the move. 'She can be a bit over the top.'

Cam glanced her way. 'Did I pass the test?'

Violet could feel an annoying blush creeping over her cheeks. 'The girls have a checklist for potential dates. No smokers, no heavy drinkers, no drugs, no tattoos. Must be gainfully employed, must respect women, must wear a condom... I mean during...you know...not at the time of meeting... That would be ridiculous.'

Cam's deep laugh made the base of her spine quiver. 'Good to know I tick all the boxes.'

Violet swivelled in her seat to look at him. 'So what's on your checklist?'

He appeared to think about it for a moment or maybe it was because he was concentrating on the traffic snarl ahead. 'Nothing specific. Intelligence is always good, a sense of humour.'

'Looks?'

He gave a lip shrug. 'Not as important as other qualities.'

'But you've only ever dated incredibly beautiful women. I've seen photos of them. Fraser showed me.'

'Mere coincidence.'

Violet snorted. 'Well-to-do men are selective when choosing a lover. Women, in general, are much more accepting over looks. It's a well-known fact.'

‘What are you looking for in a partner?’

Violet looked at her hands where they were clutching her purse. ‘I guess I want what my parents have—a partner who loves me despite my faults and is there for me no matter what.’

‘Your parents are a tough act to follow.’

She let out a long sigh. ‘Tell me about it.’

* * *

The dinner was at a restaurant in Soho. Cam’s client had booked a private room and he and his wife were already seated at the table when they arrived. The man rose and greeted Cam warmly. ‘So good you could join us. Sophia has been excited about it all day, haven’t you, agapi mou?’

Sophia was excited all right. Violet could see the sultry gleam in those dark eyes as they roved Cam’s body like she was mentally undressing him.

Cam’s arm was around Violet’s waist. ‘Nick and Sophia Nicolaides, this is my partner Violet. Darling, this is Nick and Sophia.’

Partner? What was wrong with girlfriend? Partner sounded a little more...permanent. But then he wanted to make sure Sophia got the message loud and clear. ‘Darling’ was a nice touch, however. Violet quite liked that. No one had ever called her that before. She got ‘poppet’ and ‘wee one’ from her parents and her grandad called her Vivi like her siblings did. ‘I’m very pleased to meet you both,’ she said. ‘Cam’s told me all about you. Are you in London long?’

‘Until New Year,’ Nick said. ‘Sophia’s never had an English Christmas before.’

Sophia looked like all her Christmases and New Year’s Eves had come at once when she slid her hand through Cam’s arm. ‘You’re a dark horse, aren’t you?’ she said. ‘You never told us you had a partner. Are you engaged?’

Cam’s smile looked a little tight around the edges as he disentangled himself from Sophia’s tentacle-like arm. ‘Not yet.’

Not yet? Didn’t that imply he was actually considering it? Violet had trouble keeping her expression composed. Even though she knew he was only saying it for the sake of appearances, her heart still gave an excited little leap. Not that she was in love with him or anything. She was just imagining what it would be like if she was. How it would feel to have him look at her with that tender look he was sending her way and actually mean it. For real.

Sophia smiled but it didn’t crease her eyes at the corners, although that could have been because of Botox. Meow. Violet wasn’t normally the critical type but something about the predatory nature of Nick Nicolaides’ wife irritated her beyond measure. Sophia looked like the type of woman for whom the word ‘no’ was a challenge rather than an obstacle. What Sophia wanted, Sophia got. No matter what. And Sophia wanted Cam. It was a wonder Nick couldn’t see it. Or was Nick so enamoured with his young, stunningly beautiful wife he couldn’t see what was right before his eyes?

Violet decided it was time to draw the line, not in sand but in concrete. She gazed up at Cam with what she hoped passed for besotted devotion. 'I didn't know you were thinking along those lines this early in our relationship.'

He leaned down and dropped a kiss to her upturned mouth. 'It's never too early to say I love you.'

Violet smiled a blissfully happy smile. Who said she couldn't act? Or maybe she wasn't acting. Hearing him say those words, even though deep down she knew he didn't mean them, had a potent effect on her. No one, apart from her family, had told her they loved her. 'I love you, too, baby.' She turned her smile up a notch.

Nick slapped Cam on the shoulder. 'Let's have a drink to celebrate in advance of the announcement.'

Champagne was ordered and served and the glasses held up in a toast to an engagement that wasn't going to happen. It felt weird to be part of such a deception but Violet had no choice but to run with it. Sophia kept looking at her, sizing her up as if wondering what on earth Cam saw in her. Violet didn't let it intimidate her, which was surprising as, under normal circumstances, she would have retreated to the trenches by now.

Dinner was a long, drawn-out affair because Nick wanted to discuss business with Cam, which left Violet to make conversation with Sophia. Never good at small talk, Violet had exhausted her twenty question checklist before the entrées were cleared away.

Cam came to her rescue after what was left of their mains was removed. He excused them both from the table and escorted her out to the restroom. 'You're doing great, Violet. Hang in there.'

'If looks could kill, I'd be lying in a morgue with a tag on my big toe right about now,' Violet said through clenched teeth. 'She is such a cow. She's not even trying to hide how she's lusting after you. Why can't Nick see it? She's so brazen it's nauseating.'

Cam's mouth was set in a grim line. 'I think he does see it but he's in denial. I don't want to be the one to take the bullet for pointing it out to him. This project is too important to me. It's the biggest contract I've done and more could follow. Nick has a lot of contacts. Word of mouth is everything in my business.'

Violet studied his tense features for a moment. 'If she weren't married would she be the type of woman you'd be involved with?'

'God, no.' His tone was adamant. 'What sort of man do you think I am?'

'She's incredibly beautiful.'

'So are you.'

Violet moistened her lips. 'You're terrifyingly good at lying.'

His brows came together. 'You think I'm lying? Don't you have mirrors at your flat? You turned every head when you walked through the main restaurant just now.'

Keep it light. Violet smiled a teasing smile to cover her self-consciousness. Compliments had never been her strong point. She knew it was polite to accept them with thanks but she could never quite pull it off with sophisticated aplomb. And if people

noticed her when she came into a room, she never saw it. She was always too busy keeping her head down trying not to be noticed. 'You were lying about the intended proposal.'

His dark blue eyes held hers in a lock that made the base of her spine tingle like sherbet. 'I can be ruthless when it comes to nailing a business deal, but not that ruthless.'

'Good to know.'

His phone pinged with an incoming message. His expression turned sour when he checked the screen.

'Sophia?' Violet's tone was incredulous. 'She texted you while her husband is sitting right next to her?'

Cam expelled a breath and pocketed his phone. 'Go and powder your nose, I'll wait for you here.'

* * *

Cam led Violet back to the private dining room. She had reapplied her lipgloss and it made her lips all the more tempting to kiss. Get a grip. This was an act, not the real deal. He wasn't interested in the real deal. Not with anyone just now and particularly not with a girl he had viewed as a surrogate sister for the last twelve years.

But then last Easter something had changed.

He had changed.

He had suddenly noticed her. As in noticed her. The way she smiled that shy smile that made the corners of her mouth tilt upwards and then quiver, as if uncertain whether to stay there or not. The way she bit her lower lip when she was nervous. The

way she moved her body like a graceful dancer. Her beautiful brown eyes that reminded him of caramel. Her creamy skin with that tiny dusting of freckles over the bridge of her nose that he found adorable.

Adorable?

Okay, time to rein it in. He had no right to be thinking about her that way. If he crossed the boundary any further it had the potential to ruin his relationship with her whole family. Three generations of it. He had so many wonderful memories of spending time at Drummond Brae, the big old house set on a Highland estate just out of Inverness. He had met Fraser Drummond in his fourth year at university in London when they were both twenty-two. It felt like a lifetime ago now.

But he still remembered the first time he had visited the Drummond family. It was nothing like any of the families he had been a part of, his nuclear family in particular. He had been struck by their warmth, the way they loved and accepted each other; the easygoing bonhomie between them was something he had never witnessed outside of a television show. Sure, they argued, but no one shouted or swore obscenities or threw things or stormed out in a huff. No one went through an insanely bitter divorce and then refused to have the other person's name mentioned in their presence ever again. Violet's parents were as in love with each other as the first day they'd met. Their solid relationship was the backbone of the family, the scaffolding providing the safety net of stability that allowed each sibling to

grow to their full potential. Even the way Margie Drummond was taking care of her ill ninety-year-old father-in-law Archie was indicative of the unconditional love that flowed in the family.

Cam had become an ancillary part of that family in a way he wouldn't dream of compromising, even if it meant ignoring the persistent drumbeat of lust he had going on for Violet—the baby of the clan. Who was doing an excellent job of pretending to be in love with him at the moment.

But it was far more than the fear of compromising his relationship with her family that held him back. How could he even think about settling down when he was all over the place with work commitments? He was driven to succeed and the only way to succeed was to put everything else on hold. Work was his focus. His first priority. His only priority. If he got distracted now, he could jeopardise everything he'd worked so hard for since the day he'd been left at boarding school. He was used to being an island. Self-sufficient.

Violet resumed her seat next to Cam at the table and looped her slim arm through his, gazing up at him with those big brown eyes as if she thought the world began and ended and only made sense with him. This close he could smell her perfume, a bewitching combination of spring flowers that tantalised his senses until he felt slightly drunk. Or mad. Definitely mad. Mad with lust. He could feel it pounding in his pelvis when she leaned closer, her slim pale hand sliding down to his.

Her touch should not be having this effect on him. He was not

a lust-crazed teenager. Normally he could control himself. But if she looked at his lap right now, he'd have some explaining to do. He still had some explaining to do after that kiss. He had been hard for her with one kiss. One kiss, for God's sake! What sort of tragic did that make him? Yes, he hadn't had sex in a while but he'd been busy since Easter... And no, it had nothing to do with seeing Violet that weekend. Nothing to do with noticing her in a way he had never done before.

Or had it?

Had he not pursued the many opportunities he'd had for a casual fling because something had gnawed at him since Easter? The sense that there had to be something more...something more than a few drinks or dinners, a few mostly satisfactory tumbles and a 'goodbye, thanks for the memories'?

For years he had been perfectly content with his lifestyle. He enjoyed the freedom to take on extra work without the pressure of being responsible for someone's emotional upkeep. He had seen both of his parents struggle and fail to meet the needs of each other and their subsequent partners whilst juggling the demands of a career and family. It had always looked like too much hard work.

But there was something to be said for feeling something more than basic lust for a sexual partner. Kissing Violet had felt...different somehow. The connection they had as long-term friends had brought a completely different dynamic to the kiss. He couldn't quite explain it. Maybe he would have to kiss her

again... There's a thought.

'Smile for the camera,' Sophia said from the other side of the table, holding up her phone.

Cam smiled and leaned his head against Violet's fragrant one, her hair tickling his cheek, her closeness doing something dangerous to his hormones. The photo was taken and Sophia sat back with a Cheshire cat smile. He didn't trust that smile. He didn't trust that woman. He didn't trust his deal with Nick would be secure until the contract was signed, sealed and delivered. But Nick was dragging things out a bit. This trip to London was obviously part of the stalling campaign. Cam couldn't help feeling he was being subjected to some sort of test. Maybe Nick knew exactly what his flirty young wife was up to but wanted to see how Cam would deal with it.

He was dealing with it just fine. With Violet's help. But how long would he have to play pretend? This weekend was fine. But after that? There was only one more week before Christmas. If word got out... His gut seized at the thought. Why had he got himself into this? Seeing Violet in that café earlier had been purely coincidence.

Or had it?

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