

Roses for His Rival

A Contemporary Romance

Jax Burrows

Jax Burrows / Manchester UK

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<http://www.jaxburrowsauthor.co.uk/>

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Thank you to everyone who bought this book

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Chapter One

He was late.

Harrison J Bentley was keeping them all waiting.

The other board members and senior executives had arrived, eager to begin the meeting in the brand new, state-of-the art building. Two newly merged companies, a new board of directors and a newly renovated boardroom. All they needed now was their new business partner.

So – where was he?

The last time Leah Fitzpatrick had seen Harrison in the flesh had been ten years ago, on her eighteenth birthday. So much had changed since then. For them both. Would she still recognize the young man who had won her heart and broken it on the same night?

She knew, from social media and the financial papers, that he had made a name for himself in the business world. She had followed his career with interest. And his love life. He had become successful and, as an eligible bachelor, was much in demand. But she had become successful too. CEO of Lau Fitzpatrick Properties, the Asian Branch of the family business, Fitzpatrick Financial Holdings. She had arrived in London that morning, from Hong Kong and was eager to start the meeting.

To distract herself, she looked around the room. The designers had done a good job. She approved of the décor; a balance of conventional and

modern with the comfortable leather seats arranged around the rectangular dark walnut table, a light brown carpet and wood panelling on one wall with a widescreen TV monitor secured in the centre.

A gleaming corporate coffee machine and a tray of white cups and saucers stood on a table in the corner of the room. There was a small pot of tea for those non-coffee drinkers and a large jug of orange juice. All in readiness for the first board meeting of the newly formed Bentley Fitzpatrick Enterprises.

Leah was a stickler for punctuality, as was her father. He looked calm enough, however, standing on the other side of the room, deep in discussion with two of the senior executives. The others milled around the boardroom networking and drinking the refreshments.

She caught his eye and he made a show of pointing to his watch and raising his eyebrows. She smiled and shrugged. *No, Dad, I don't know where he is either.*

To give her something to do whilst they waited, she poured a second cup of coffee and sipped it. Espresso, black with no sugar. Hopefully, it would counteract the jetlag that was setting in.

Although she had lived in Hong Kong for the past seven years, she always felt excited to be back home in the UK. This time, however, the excitement was tinged with nervous tension. This merger was bothering her. Seventy percent of corporate mergers failed and she would hate to see the business her father had built from the bottom up compromised. She couldn't understand why he had agreed to it.

The other thing that was bothering her was Harrison himself. She had succeeded in banishing the memories of the night she had made a complete fool of herself in front of him; after all, she was young and naïve then, now she was a strong, confident businesswoman, equal to any man she met in the boardroom. But how would Harrison feel about her? Would he be happy to work with her as his equal? If not, he would just have to get used to it. Their companies were merging and they were partners now. Although her father was in charge overall. But Harrison, by all accounts,

had become a fiercely ambitious man. Better to have him as a partner than a competitor, she supposed.

But - where was he?

She gazed out of the floor to ceiling windows at the London skyline. They were on the fifteenth floor and the view was impressive. The building that caught her eye was “The Gherkin”. It always made her smile. Looking more like a futuristic spacecraft than a vegetable, Leah loved the sleek lines with the swirling striped pattern and diamond shaped windows. Over three times the height of Niagara Falls, it had nine aircraft warning lights that glowed red when it got dark to alert planes overhead.

Property was Leah’s passion. Part of her role in Hong Kong was to oversee investments in commercial and residential property and she was fascinated by innovative design.

Maybe, before she returned to Hong Kong, she would treat her father to a meal in the restaurant at the top of the building.

He had finished his conversation, so she strolled over. ‘Dad.’

‘Leah. Where the hell is he? He knew what time the meeting was due to start.’

‘I’ve no idea, but it doesn’t bode well for the future does it, if our new partner can’t be bothered to turn up for our first board meeting? Maybe we should ring him, or even better, start without him.’

‘Well, let’s not be hasty. We’ll give him the benefit of the doubt for now; he may have a good reason. The London traffic for instance.’

‘Umm.’ Leah wasn’t convinced. ‘I still can’t believe we’ve gone into business with the Bentleys. After everything you’ve said about them.’

‘I can’t quite believe it myself, sweetheart, but Harrison’s offer was too good to refuse. Anyway, it’s time to heal the rift. Especially now his father is so ill.’

‘Shame he can’t be here today. What does William think of the merger?’

‘He approves, of course. If he didn’t we wouldn’t be having this conversation.’

Leah couldn't help but feel sceptical. The feud between the two older men had started before she was born. She had asked her father many times to tell her why they hated each other so much, but he had always managed to avoid giving her an answer. She guessed it was something to do with business. Had William cheated her father in some way? If so, why had he agreed to the merger? Fitzpatrick Financial Holdings was doing fine on its own. Why did they need the Bentley's hotels? It could all go badly wrong. She didn't know who to trust anymore.

Her father looked at his watch again, his impatience visibly growing. 'Damn the man, where the hell is he?'

The last thing Leah wanted was for her father to lose his temper before the board meeting had even started, so distraction tactics were called for. 'Dad, it doesn't change anything, does it? I'll still be your successor, won't I?'

Her father smiled indulgently. 'If it was up to me you would, but you know as well as I that the board makes that decision.'

'But you'll work closely with the board and be able to influence their choice.'

Her father put his hands in his trouser pockets and frowned. Even with her killer heels, she had to tilt her head back to look into his eyes. 'You shouldn't be worrying about this now, Leah, I won't be going anywhere for a long time. I need to be here for the foreseeable future. This is my company and this merger is my responsibility.'

'I just think we need to make it clear that's all. With all the changes taking place, some people may see it as an opportunity to step into your shoes – when the time comes, of course.'

'And by "some people" I'm guessing you mean Harrison?'

Leah shivered and folded her arms. It had been warm and humid in Hong Kong but the London air in April still contained a bite. 'I'm so used to thinking of the Bentleys as rivals, I'm having to make a real leap of faith to accept them as business partners.'

'I know, I can't say I'm finding it easy, but you two will need to play nicely from now on.'

Just as Leah was about to reply, the door opened abruptly. All talk ceased as Harrison strode in. Leah took a sharp intake of breath as he scanned the room. Was it her imagination or had the energy levels in the boardroom just been turned up a notch? She had been expecting to feel nothing when she saw him again. Ten years was a long time. Why then, had her heart rate suddenly increased and the chill she had been feeling a minute ago, changed to an uncomfortable warmth? She admired his tall, muscular physique and the purposeful way he marched towards them.

He glanced at her briefly before addressing her father. His look was unreadable but the intensity of his blue eyes took her breath away. ‘My apologies, Connor,’ Harrison shook her father’s hand, ‘I’ve just been on the phone to my father and lost track of time.’ He turned to her then. ‘Leah, it’s been too long.’ He studied her face and the heat increased and rose from her stomach to settle in her cheeks.

He took her hand in a firm grip and before she could react, he pulled her into his arms and hugged her to him. She felt the strength of his hold and breathed in the aroma of his citrus cologne, refreshing above the heavy smell of coffee that hung in the air. Then he pushed her away from him gently and bent his head to kiss her on the cheek. His lips were soft but firm and fire, deep in the core of her being, began to scorch her determination to be cool and in control. She felt surprisingly weak at being so close to Harrison again after such a long time and she stumbled slightly.

He held her easily and frowned. She grabbed his upper arms, his muscles flexing under her fingers. They were rock hard and toned. ‘All right?’ he asked. He sounded concerned.

‘Yes, fine, thank you.’ Her voice sounded strained to her ears, so she smiled to reassure him.

‘Good.’ Harrison let his hands fall to his sides and she stepped back and looked him in the eye. He was taller than she remembered, even taller than her father. Her heart was still pounding and she took deep breaths to calm her nerves. She remembered the longing she had felt at eighteen for the man standing in front of her. It had spread like molten honey through her veins as soon as she felt Harrison’s breath on her skin and his hands

holding her. But she was no longer that eighteen-year-old virgin and he the twenty-one-year-old undergraduate whose touch had the power to turn her into mush. They were different people now. She stood up straighter and took a deep breath to get herself together.

‘After the meeting, you’re invited to Bentley Hall. My father would like to see you both.’

‘That’s kind and we’ll gladly accept,’ her father said.

What? William Bentley and Connor Fitzpatrick in the same room together. This she must see. She tried to focus on the business at hand.

They took their seats and the meeting began. Her father sat at the head of the table with Harrison on his left and Leah on his right. As she listened to her father’s speech, she watched Harrison.

She had wondered how much he had changed. Now she had her answer. He dressed the part of the successful executive with his sharp black suit, pale blue shirt, gold cufflinks and black shoes polished to an inch of their lives. Gone was the carefree youngster and in his place sat a confident, commanding man oozing authority. She had teased him once; told him he was pretty enough to be a model. Now that look had gone. There was a hunger behind his polite smile and the softness had hardened into unyielding power. His body was relaxed but his stillness held latent strength.

Did he aspire to be the next head of the company? She found it hard to believe he didn’t. Everything she had ever read about Harrison made her think he was as ambitious as she was. No matter, he would find out soon enough that she would take over the running of BFP Enterprises whenever her father retired, merger or no merger.

‘Ladies and gentleman, welcome to the first board meeting of Bentley Fitzpatrick Enterprises. You are witnessing the joining of two great companies to form one giant financial corporation. Separately, Fitzpatrick Financial Holdings and Bentley Hotels International were forces to be reckoned with in the global market place, but together...’ Connor paused

for dramatic effect, before letting his gaze sweep slowly over the board members, ‘together, we will be unstoppable.’

As Harrison listened to the opening speech he watched Leah. She looked good. Surprisingly good. The last time he had seen her was when he had gate-crashed her eighteenth birthday party. He had been twenty-one and home, on holiday from Oxford University. A party in the enemy camp had been too much to resist.

He wondered if she ever thought about that night. Probably not. It was not the kind of memory she would want to hold on to. She had been a wide-eyed virgin, eager for romance, yearning to be swept off her feet and had, for some inexplicable reason, decided he was going to be the one to do the sweeping. He had been young, restless and had gone to the party looking for sex. A disaster waiting to happen. When he had, reluctantly, let her down gently, she had been embarrassed, no doubt thinking herself irresistible and instead of finding the love she craved, she had experienced rejection, probably for the first time.

He had hated himself for doing it, but knew he had acted appropriately. The question was – did she still hate him for rejecting her or did she barely remember that night, having grown into a modern, sophisticated business-woman, probably with a string of lovers in her past?

She looked every bit the successful executive. Chic in a black sheath dress that emphasised her curves, she wore killer heels and her hair and make-up were immaculate. External appearance meant nothing however. If Peter, his personal assistant, wore an Armani suit and Italian shoes, he would look just as good as the men around the table did, but he would still be a PA.

One thing that hadn’t changed were her eyes. They were still as open and expressive as ten years ago. The deep green of summer, they held suspicion whenever she looked at him. Was she unhappy about the merger? Would her cosy, sheltered little world come crashing down around her ears now? Or was she as competent at her job as her appearance suggested?

The idea for the merger had been a stroke of genius on his part. Or so he liked to think. With his father being so ill, the family business was now under his control. This was his chance to redeem himself in his father's eyes and make up for the time he had turned his back on the hotel business and had taken off around the world. He hadn't realized then that everything his father had worked for all his life had been for him. He had thrown it back in his face, telling him that he wanted to make his own way in life. And now the great man was seriously ill and all Harrison wanted was to make it up to him before it was too late.

He had begun by starting the healing process; mending the rift that had driven William Bentley and Connor Fitzpatrick apart for far too long. Hence the merger. But with it, however, came the opportunity to take over the whole shooting match when Connor retired. Bentley Fitzpatrick Enterprises would be his one day.

And Leah? What was he going to do about her? She had felt good in his arms just now and he had an overwhelming urge to repeat the exercise. Bad idea. They had to work together. As equals initially. Then, when Connor retired, and he took over, she would be working for him. Never mix business with pleasure. It was a maxim that had stood him in good stead and he had no reason to discard it now. But the memory of her sweet scent, the softness of her petite form and the way his body had responded to her as she had hugged him back, made him wonder which would be the more challenging. Convincing Connor Fitzpatrick and the board to accept him as the next head of BFP Enterprises or keeping his hands off Leah.

Chapter Two

After the board meeting, the three of them waited in the foyer of the corporate headquarters of BFP Enterprises. It was all glass and chrome with a high ceiling that let in too much light. The huge potted plants placed strategically around leather armchairs did nothing to alleviate the feeling that they were in an aeroplane hangar. Leah felt small standing between the two men and was glad when Harrison turned away to answer his phone.

Leah took her chance. ‘Dad, why are we driving instead of flying? It would take a fraction of the time to get to Cheshire,’ she whispered, afraid of her voice carrying in the echoing space.

Her father moved closer to her and whispered too. ‘Because this is a personal matter and I can’t justify the expense. The Bentleys will be watching us from now on, especially our spending.’

‘Do you care what they think?’

‘Of course I care, and so should you. Like it or not, Harrison’s our partner now. Communication will be key. And transparency. Anyway, the few hours it takes to get there will give you both the chance to talk. Get to know each other better.’

‘Talk about what?’ Talking to Harrison was the last thing Leah wanted to do. The board meeting had been lengthy and, sitting across from him,

she had found it impossible to concentrate. Unwelcome memories kept drifting into her mind. All that was behind her; she didn't want to be forced to think about it.

'The business, of course, and how you two are going to work together.'

'But Dad, we are not going to be working together. We're running different parts of the organisation, so we'll probably only meet up occasionally.' Leah glanced at Harrison to make sure he couldn't hear their conversation. He was still on the phone with his back to her.

'Sweetheart, the three of us together will be running BFP Enterprises, as corporate executives. That is, until William is well enough to take over again. As the board has just suggested, our first step is to thrash out the differences in our corporate cultures before we can start planning for the future. We'll be making decisions for the company together. The operative word here, daughter, being *together*.' Her father gave her a quick hug, which took the sting out of his words.

The company limousine drew up outside the building and Harrison ended his call. Leah got in first and Harrison after her. She sat with her back to the driver and the two men took the seats opposite. Immediately upon sitting down, Harrison opened his laptop and started working. Then he glanced up.

'You two don't mind if I answer a few emails, do you?'

'Go ahead.' Her father answered for both of them.

Sharing the limousine with two big, powerful men made Leah feel claustrophobic, in direct contrast to the way she had been feeling in the foyer. It was stuffy in the interior of the car and heavy with a mix of aromas. The scent of the men's after-shave, the smell of leather and a hint of air freshener.

The two men hadn't spoken since the board meeting. But they'd better loosen up and start communicating or this was going to be a long, tedious journey. She sensed the testosterone hanging in the air between them.

The car pulled away from the curb. It would take an age to escape London and then, once on the motorway, the scenery would become boring quickly. Her briefcase was on the floor at her feet. Her laptop was in it.

She should be working, answering her emails, diligent like their business partner, but instead, she couldn't stop staring at him.

Harrison was bent over his laptop, immersed in his work. His hair, a rich, chestnut brown, was short at the back and over his ears. On top of his head, however, it grew thick and untamed, as if it would go its own way at the slightest excuse. Just like its owner. Leah clasped her hands together to stop them from reaching out and running her fingers through his unruly locks.

It had been a long time since she had enjoyed a meaningful relationship with a man. She missed the intimacy, especially the hugs. She also missed sex. She dated occasionally but had no-one special in her life. Her career and working her way up the corporate ladder had always been her priority. Now more than ever. Her three younger brothers had no interest in the business. The twins, Kelty and Liam, were sports mad and were both rugby players. Her youngest brother, Colin, was still at university studying the classics. It was down to her to carry on her father's hard work and dedication to his company and she wasn't going to let him down. She glanced at him.

He shot her a meaningful look and tipped his head towards Harrison. He meant for her to initiate a conversation, but her mind had gone blank. She had nothing to say to this man. Well, nothing she wanted her father to hear anyway. She cleared her throat and leaned forward.

'Uh, Harrison?'

He glanced up from his laptop and his blue laser gaze pinned her to the seat. His fingers were poised over the keys as if he couldn't bear to stop working for a second.

'Yes, Leah?'

'Would you like a drink? Whisky?' *Blast. Why did she have to revert to playing the little woman?*

Her father raised his eyes to heaven. He must have realised Leah wasn't going to start a meaningful discussion so he reached over to the drinks cabinet and took out the bottle.

'Good idea, Leah, let's all have a drink to celebrate the merger.'

‘Just mineral water for me thanks,’ Harrison said.

‘Right, of course. Bit early.’ Her father sounded disappointed as he reached instead for the bottle of sparkling water.

Leah’s stomach rumbled as her father handed out the glasses and they clinked them together before settling back in their seats. She hadn’t eaten much on the plane and there had been no time for lunch.

‘Harrison, tell me about Bentley Media. I’m not sure an advertising agency fits in with our plans for the future.’ Her father sipped his water and grimaced. Leah hid a smile. He would much prefer it topped up with Jack Daniels.

Harrison made a show of closing the lid on his laptop and stretching his long legs out in front of him. ‘Bentley Media is the first company I obtained and it’s doing well. It just needs more time to fulfil its potential.’

‘I think that’s something we need to discuss later. What I’m curious about is why you picked that agency in the first place. Word on the street is it was a lame duck.’

‘Because I love a challenge. The company was failing badly, I admit, a mere few months away from bankruptcy, but I pulled it out of the gutter. We’re now thriving and the lame duck has turned into a swan. In fact, we’re up for an award next month and stand as much chance as any of our rivals.’

‘So, now we’ll sell it on and make a massive profit. I’m impressed.’

‘It’s not for sale.’

‘I’m sorry?’ Her father sat up straighter in the seat, his body tense. Leah sensed danger in the air.

‘You heard, Connor, I said it’s not for sale.’

‘With all due respect, Harrison, that’s not your decision to make. Bentley Media is now an asset of the new merger; you can’t keep running it solo. As stated in the meeting, all our assets will be scrutinised with a view to streamlining.’

Harrison was staring at her father, his face impassive, but his eyes shot sparks of blue fire. ‘I understand that, but my view is that Bentley Media

has potential and I would like to be given the opportunity to prove its worth – both to you and the board.’

‘I still think we should sell. Advertising has no place in BFP Enterprises.’

They were both being stubborn. Leah knew she had to step in before things got out of hand. ‘What I’d like to know is what the attraction is for you personally. I mean, advertising is so different from hotels,’ Leah said, shooting a warning glance at her father.

‘Hotels are boring. They’re for sleeping in – amongst other things.’ His gaze lingered on her face as he spoke, then dropped to her breasts. Her face flushed and she fought to keep her expression neutral. If any other man had stared at her so blatantly, she would have been angry but, to her chagrin, her nipples hardened. She longed to open the window but forced herself to keep still, returning Harrison’s lazy stare. Did that look mean he was attracted to her and he was sending her a message, or was he toying with her?

‘The advertising industry is vibrant and dynamic. I love being part of the creative process. There’s always so much going on, with each day bringing new challenges.’

‘But surely you don’t have much to do with your staff directly? As CEO of the company, don’t you spend most of the time in meetings and entertaining your clients?’ Leah knew nothing about the advertising world but CEOs were much the same in any company, she imagined.

‘On the contrary, I attend a lot of the brainstorming sessions, especially the all-nighters. I love being amongst the creatives and they value my input.’ Harrison sipped his mineral water and glanced out of the window.

Leah followed his gaze. The driver kept a steady pace in the fast lane and the scenery passed by in a blur. She wondered if she had heard correctly. ‘The all-nighters? You mean you stay up all night? For what purpose?’ Leah couldn’t think of anything worse. She was up at six-thirty and in bed by ten. That was her routine and she believed in routine. It had helped her work her way to the top.

‘What you’ve got to understand, Leah, is that an advertising agency isn’t like any other working environment. It makes its own rules and that means encouraging artistic expression and creative flow. If people are in the zone, working on a project, sparking ideas off each other and the creative juices are flowing, they’re not going to stop because its five o’clock are they?’

‘Well, yes, I think they should. My staff keep regular hours and I encourage them to leave on time. If they can’t get their work done in their normal day, they’re not doing their job properly. Don’t your creatives have home lives?’ she asked. ‘And what about the following day? Do you still expect them to come in to work?’

‘Of course, just later that’s all.’

Her father had given in and filled his glass with whisky. He sipped it while gazing at Leah thoughtfully. ‘You’re in no hurry to go back to Hong Kong, are you?’

‘Well, I do want to see my brothers before I go back and spend some time with you all but -’

‘Good, didn’t think so. Why don’t you spend a few weeks working with Harrison at Bentley Media, then you can see everything for yourself? In fact, you can write a report for me. I have to be in New York on Monday or I would have done it myself. I would value your opinion on whether this company is worth our time and trouble or if we should sell it on.’

‘Not if he’s going to keep me up all night.’ She meant it as a joke, but then realised the implication of what she had said. A vision of the pair of them naked and entwined on satin sheets, burned the back of her eyelids. She risked a glance at Harrison.

He was grinning at her, and his eyes were sending out a message that made her squirm in her seat. ‘You never know, Leah, you may get to enjoy it.’

Chapter Three

Leah had never visited Bentley Hall before. As enemies, it had been unthinkable for the two families to meet socially, even though the Fitzpatrick estate was in the next village. She had heard so much about the magnificence of the Bentley family home; it had been featured in *Cheshire Life* more than once. It was in direct contrast to the rough and tumble untidiness of her own home, but she had loved their large, messy house no matter how lived in it had appeared.

Harrison was an only child who had spent most of his education in boarding school. She was the oldest of four children, had three boisterous brothers and a chronically sick mother who had died when Leah was fifteen. How could their poor house compete? Luckily, her father had never thought competition necessary. He enjoyed his comforts but had no desire to show off his wealth in material ways.

When the limousine stopped, Leah was the first one to alight. She stood on the gravel drive and gazed around like a child on Christmas morning. The grounds were magnificent, acres of rolling lawns, fountains and meandering paths surrounded by deciduous woodland. Blackbirds sang all around in the late afternoon sunshine. She turned in a full circle to take it all in, only to find Harrison watching her thoughtfully.

‘You’ve never been here before, have you?’

‘I’ve never been invited.’ There was no accusation in her voice; she was just stating a fact.

‘After we’ve seen my father I’ll give you a guided tour.’

Sylvia Bentley appeared at the front door. Harrison ran up the stone steps to stand next to her and Leah watched as they hugged and he gently kissed her cheek. The family resemblance was strong. Sylvia was slender with a blonde bob and Leah realized now where Harrison got his remarkable blue eyes.

Leah and her father followed Harrison, and Sylvia greeted them. ‘Thank you for coming, William will appreciate it.’ Her smile was warm and Leah liked her straight away.

She shook Sylvia’s hand, waiting for her father to be his usual hearty outgoing self, talking too loudly to prevent any awkwardness. He said nothing, took Sylvia’s hand in his, the look on his face bordering on reverence. Leah couldn’t help feeling she was missing something. The families never saw each other but her father seemed tense next to Harrison’s mother. Was he worried about seeing William again? All their dealings concerning the merger had been done with Harrison as William had spent so much time in hospital lately.

Harrison had already moved into the house. Sylvia linked her arm through Connor’s, so Leah had no choice but to follow on behind. She felt uneasy, but had little time to ponder the source of it, for she found herself in the sumptuous living room face to face with the man her father had hated for most of his adult life. The look of animosity passing between the two older men after they had briefly shaken hands, proved to Leah that whatever had caused the rift was still there and vibrating in the air between them.

She knew William Bentley had suffered a heart attack, but this man looked at death’s door. He was gaunt and his skin was grey. He sat in an armchair next to a stone fireplace that seemed to take up half one wall. A blanket covered his knees and an oxygen mask sat in his lap. The tank sat nearby. Boxes and bottles of various medications covered an occasional table next to his chair.

She sensed Harrison standing next to her, she breathed in his unique scent and heard his voice in her ear. ‘Let’s leave them to it. Come with me, Leah, and I’ll show you around.’

From not wanting anything to do with Harrison, she was suddenly grateful for his presence. She followed him out of the living room and into the hall.

‘Right. Guided tour then.’ His voice took on the timbre of a tour operator. ‘We have eight bedrooms, three bathrooms, two formal rooms, dining-room, lounge, kitchen and various other smaller rooms.’

‘It’s a beautiful house and I love the antiques.’

‘Some of them have been in the family for generations.’ Harrison strolled next to her with his hands in his trouser pockets. His nearness was a distraction but she was determined to make the most of the chance to snoop into his private world.

‘And the colour scheme – who’s choice was that?’ The decor was light; the walls decorated in soft shades of cream, ivory, rose pink and beige.

‘My mother’s. She has excellent taste.’

Despite her fascination with the house, she was finding it hard to focus. The expression she had seen on her father’s face when he looked at Sylvia Bentley was still bothering her.

‘Let’s get some fresh air and I’ll show you the grounds.’

They strolled side by side and, by the time they’d walked across the turning area at the front of the house and were heading to the tennis courts, Leah had worked it out. She stopped. ‘I know what it is.’

‘What?’

‘I’ve just realized why they hate each other so much.’

‘Why?’ The question was spoken more curtly than Harrison intended, but he fervently hoped that Leah didn’t know the real reason.

‘It’s your mother, isn’t it?’

‘What’s my mother? You’re not making any sense.’

‘The way my father behaved with Sylvia. I’ve only ever seen him look at one other person with such devotion, and that was *my* mother.’

‘Your parents adored each other, as mine do.’

‘What’s going on, Harrison, you know, don’t you?’

‘Nothing’s going on.’

Leah wore stilettos, at least six inches high. They would need to keep to the path if they wanted to avoid the wrath of the head gardener. She was tiny. Without her shoes, she couldn’t be more than five foot four. He was six feet three and, as he gazed down on her belligerent face, the expression *pocket rocket* jumped into his mind. It suited her perfectly.

‘Harrison?’ She stood her ground and he had an overwhelming urge to pick her up and tuck her under his arm. She would fit comfortably. ‘Well? I’m waiting.’

‘Okay. Let’s keep going.’ He set off down the path again walking slowly so she could keep up. The sun was behind the trees now and the air was decidedly colder. He took his jacket off and draped it around her shoulders. She muttered some thanks and pulled it tighter around her. The worried frown that wrinkled her forehead told him he needed to start talking.

‘Your father and my mother dated when they were young. It wasn’t serious but Connor fell in love.’ Leah was silent. Her head was down and she stared at the ground. This must be hard for her, he thought. The memory of her eighteenth birthday party entered his mind. *Young love*. ‘Then my mother met my father. Connor was devastated and couldn’t accept it. According to my mother, he made a complete nuisance of himself. Became a bit of a stalker and they had to phone the police at one point.’

Leah stopped and gaped at him. ‘That doesn’t sound like the man I know. I can’t believe this is true.’

Harrison stopped too and put his hands in his pockets. ‘It’s all true I’m afraid. But my father’s behaviour was less than admirable. He threatened Connor, told him never to show his face anywhere near my mother again. Instead of letting time heal as it would have done, both our fathers behaved like overgrown schoolboys and kept the feud going.’

‘But what about Sylvia? What did she think of it all?’

‘She hated it and blamed herself. When Connor really fell in love, with your mother, she hoped it would be the end of it and they could all be friends. Some hope that turned out to be.’

Harrison felt ashamed of how the men had behaved, which was one of the reasons he had been so keen on the merger. It was time to make amends. His father was seriously ill and Rosemary Fitzpatrick had been dead for thirteen years. The feud ended now; or at least it would if he had his way.

They walked on until they reached the rose garden. The beds were arranged in a circle, each path in between leading to a central bench, the epicentre of a world of colour and perfume. They sat down.

‘It was all a long time ago, Leah, best put it behind you.’

Tears swam in those beautiful emerald eyes. ‘Do you think my father loved my mother at all or was Sylvia his only true love?’

‘He adored her. You know he did, Leah, don’t torture yourself.’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I suppose you’re right.’

‘Of course I am. Anyway, dry your eyes; I need to ask you an important question.’

What could possibly be more important than the pain in her heart? Her father and Harrison’s mother. Judging by the look he had given Sylvia when she greeted them, he was still carrying a torch for her. She thought of her poor delicate mum with her gentle smile and fragile health and felt like weeping. Unthinkable in front of Harrison, so she forced back the tears and put on her executive face. Cool, calm and collected. Even though her emotions were bubbling away under the surface like a volcano about to erupt.

‘Yes, Harrison, what do you want to ask me?’

‘What is your opinion of roses?’

‘Roses?’

‘We’re in a rose garden, Leah, in case you hadn’t noticed. Do you like them?’

‘Of course, they’re my favourite flower. Don’t you?’

‘Not particularly. I’ve always felt they were almost too perfect, as if a computer designed them. And yet so many people love them.’

‘If you don’t mind me asking, is this relevant to anything?’

‘Of course. Advertising. You remember I said we were in the running for an award? Our clients are specialist rose growers who want to increase their sales all year around, not just on Valentine’s Day and Mothering Sunday. So, we thought up an ad campaign that we believe will win the hearts of the nation. And us an award.’

‘Oh, right.’ *What am I supposed to say to that?* She knew nothing of advertising, or growing roses. Anyway, her thoughts were too frazzled to think about work. There was only one thing she wanted to talk about. ‘Harrison, how long have you known about our parents?’

He had moved nearer to her and his arm rested on the back of the bench. They were close enough for her to feel the warmth emanating from him. The sun was about to set and there was a chill in the air. She was glad of his jacket, and his nearness, even though butterflies had started dancing in her stomach.

‘For a while. Time to forget it now, Leah. You’ll drive yourself mad.’ Harrison was the one driving her mad. He had a thin layer of perspiration on his top lip. She longed to wipe it away. His jaw was starting to show his five o’clock shadow, which on some men, would have been scruffy. On Harrison, it was heart-stoppingly sexy. She imagined the roughness under her fingers. He had a strong jaw and perfectly shaped lips. Perfect for kissing.

Was it her imagination or was he going to kiss her? His face was moving closer to hers and she stared deep into his eyes, the deep blue of the ocean on a hot summer day. Did she want him to kiss her? She didn’t know. She didn’t know anything anymore. She licked her dry lips. They tingled in anticipation.

‘Right, we’d better get back.’ Harrison stood up and straightened his tie. ‘I wouldn’t put it past those two old reprobates to try to kill each other, even now. And I think you’ve been invited to dinner.’

He walked away and Leah stood up. Her whole body was trembling with tension. She moved out of the rose garden and watched him striding across the lawns, his long legs eating up the ground. He didn't look back but assumed she would follow like a docile little lamb.

For a split second, she considered digging her killer heels into his immaculate lawn and staying put, but something told her he would keep walking and leave her behind. She hurried after him, trying not to break into a run.

He waited for her at the back door and pushed it open with a flourish to let her walk in first, like a perfect gentleman. The smile on his face and the amusement dancing in his eyes told a different story. This man was dangerous, as unpredictable as a firecracker.

She was used to dealing with difficult people. It came with the territory when a CEO. She used calm restraint and reasoned common sense. Up to now. But, as she felt the tingle of electricity passing between them as she brushed against him to get into the house, her womanly inner voice was warning her of challenging times ahead.

Fasten your seatbelt, girl, you're in for a bumpy ride.

Chapter Four

Leah walked through the doors of Bentley Media in Soho at seven o'clock the following Monday morning. The receptionist greeted her warmly and phoned Peter, Harrison's personal assistant, to come down and collect her.

While she waited, she assessed the old-fashioned reception area. Perhaps Harrison hadn't got around to modernizing this part of the office yet. First impressions were vital and the lobby needed some serious updating. Clipboards with questionnaires and biros attached sat on a round table. In her office in Hong Kong they supplied tablets in the reception area so their customers could browse their website, thereby signing up for newsletters instantly. They also provided charging stations so the customers could stay connected while they waited. Not that Leah's company ever kept their customers waiting long.

Leah glanced at her watch. She had been waiting for twenty minutes. An old-fashioned water cooler stood in one corner and Leah went over to get herself a drink. There were no paper cups. Another negative comment to add to her report. To improve the ambience, she would recommend a plug-in air freshener giving out a pleasant scent such as lavender or sandalwood.

What did impress her were the pictures of their most successful advertising campaigns adorning the walls. There were no words, just images, instantly recognizable and powerful in the statements they made. Leah had seen some of the adverts on the television and in glossy magazines, but had no idea Bentley Media had been behind them.

‘Aren’t they wonderful? Mr Bentley’s idea, he has such a good eye for detail.’

A young man she assumed was Peter put out his hand. She shook it and he beamed at her. ‘It’s such a pleasure to have you here with us, Ms Fitzpatrick, Mr Bentley’s told us all about you. Isn’t it wonderful that two great companies are now one?’

‘Yes, it is and I’m pleased to meet you, Peter.’

Peter chattered all the way up in the lift to the top floor. Leah wished he would stop so she could collect her thoughts. Harrison’s mention of all-nighters and working with the creatives had unsettled her. She didn’t know what to expect, so had put on her best armour - her favourite suit. Black jacket and matching knee-length skirt. It was smart, beautifully tailored and gave a message to the world that she meant business. Her blouse was plain white and she wore her signature heels. They weren’t killer, but were definitely threatening. After all, she was going to wear them all day and nothing destroyed her concentration like aching feet.

‘Here we are, after you Ms Fitzpatrick. There’s coffee waiting and if you would like breakfast, please let me know.’

‘Thank you, Peter.’

Leah was relieved to see all the people who sat around the table in Harrison’s office were dressed conservatively. She shook hands with a woman who was the director of account management, and three men, the media director, the creative director and the head of strategy. Leah was disappointed, but not surprised, to find only one woman in the group. She had been doing some research in preparation for her stint at Bentley Media. Women filled only twenty-six percent of advertising leadership posts.

That was something she was most definitely going to take up with Harrison. She wanted to see more women in senior executive roles and would be interested to hear his views on the subject.

The man himself looked cool and every inch the successful CEO in a pale grey suit with a white shirt and a blue tie that matched his eyes. He seemed relaxed as he poured coffee for them all. He smiled at the woman as he handed her a cup. She appeared to be holding it together which earned Leah's admiration. From what she had seen so far, most women who came within a few feet of Harrison's orbit soon became a puddle of helpless need at his feet. Including herself. She wanted to hate him but couldn't. She didn't want to be attracted to him. But, unfortunately, she was. He was utterly gorgeous and her resistance weakened with each second that passed.

Leah tried to concentrate on the agenda and not glance at Harrison, but she couldn't think about anything but him. He obviously noticed her discomfort, found it highly amusing and winked at her whenever he caught her eye. She vowed she wouldn't look at him again. Then he would interject with a comment or question and her gaze would automatically return to his face. If another man had behaved in such an inappropriate way at a meeting she would have been having words. Harrison, she was starting to realise, was like no other man she had ever met.

Unlike the board meeting, however, Leah was prepared this time and took an active part in discussions. She asked relevant questions and, she hoped, gained the respect of the people around the table. They discussed the merger and how Bentley Media would fit into the structure of BFP Enterprises. Leah couldn't help feeling they were jumping the gun, as her father seemed determined the agency would be sold.

When, at last, the meeting was over, Leah felt emotionally drained and was relieved when she received a phone call requesting her presence back at BFP Enterprises corporate headquarters. Some urgent papers needed her signature. Her father was in New York and there was no one else available who had the authority to sign them, as all the other seniors were away from the office.

‘I’m so sorry, Harrison, I need to go straight away.’

‘No matter, the fun part will start after lunch. Why don’t I meet you back here and I’ll show you around?’

‘Fine, see you later.’

It would be quicker to take the Tube back to the office, instead of summoning the company car and waiting while the driver fought his way through the London traffic.

As she walked across Soho Square Gardens in the sunshine, she fought the desire to play hooky. It was a beautiful spring day and the jetlag was still playing havoc with her body clock. To sit outside a trendy bar and sip coffee or even wine, whilst watching the world go by, seemed preferable to more meetings. Being continually “on” was wearying. But, duty called, and she had a report to write.

She was in Harrison’s world now and needed to make a good impression. He had to accept she was going to take over from her father and was a worthy successor. It was important Harrison took her seriously. His sexy wink across the meeting room table told her he didn’t. Because of her eighteenth birthday party? If so, it was her job to change his mind.

Chapter Five

Harrison loved Soho. He loved the bohemian, artistic vibe and the diverse choice of restaurants and bars. He was a foodie and eating out was one of his favourite evening entertainments. In the company of a beautiful woman, preferably, preceding a night of hot sex.

The thought of sex brought his new business partner's daughter to mind. Not that he intended to go there. Not worth upsetting Connor. He planned to be the next head of BFP Enterprises, and nothing was going to stand in his way. It was his chance to redeem himself in his father's eyes.

When he'd told his parents he wasn't joining his father in the hotel business, there had been an almighty row and Harrison had left home to travel the world and strike out on his own. William's heart attack had changed everything. His father had hated the idea of the merger, as much as he hated Connor. When Harrison explained that he intended to take over BFP Enterprises himself and run the whole show, William had started to come around to the idea.

He hoped his father lived long enough to see his son crowned as king.

He met Leah outside the office, walking from the direction of the Tube station. She was still wearing her power suit from the morning meeting. He tried not to smile, as she looked him up and down in consternation.

‘Harrison? Where are you going?’

‘I’m going back to work, of course. Like I said earlier, it’s the creatives turn to meet you.’

‘Is it fancy dress?’ She frowned as he threw back his head and laughed. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘No, Leah, I’m dressed as a cowboy because we have a pitch to come up with for an American Diner. They specialize in authentic American fast food and we dress the part to get us in the zone. I’ve just had lunch with one of their team and he liked my outfit. Don’t you?’ He stepped back to give her the full benefit. He was proud of his tatty blue jeans and belt with the silver buckle, checked shirt and brown suede jacket with tassels. He’d left the hat in the office. The cowboy boots were his favourite item, however. ‘Anyway, we’d better get back, Peter will be expecting us. He’ll have the coffee ready.’

‘You mean you hurry back to the office because your PA is expecting you?’

‘Peter isn’t just my PA, he’s also the office barista and makes great coffee, and anyway, I want to show you something.’

Harrison ushered Leah into what looked like a miniature cinema. A movie screen stood facing rows of seats. Leah settled herself into one on the front row near to a small table containing a tray with the coffee and a plate of sugared donuts. Peter’s handiwork presumably. There was also a box of tissues.

Harrison removed his jacket and poured the coffee.

‘Black, no sugar?’

‘Yes, please.’ He had remembered how she took her coffee. A trick all good CEOs know. Show you are interested in a person by remembering little details. Even so, she felt pleased. She took the coffee and breathed in the aroma. Italian espresso. A good blend if she wasn’t mistaken. ‘What did you want to show me, Harrison?’

Harrison added milk and sugar to his and pressed the start button on the remote control. 'I would value your opinion on our advert. It's received high acclaim but I'd love to know what you think.'

The screen displayed a boy of about seven years old walking hand in hand with a man Leah took to be his father down a long hospital corridor. The boy carried something in his other hand but you couldn't see what it was. Leah hoped this wasn't going to be sad and tug on her heartstrings. Hospitals reminded her of the numerous times her mother had to be admitted for treatment. She didn't want to have to use the tissues.

The two people kept walking, passing patients in dressing gowns, porters pushing some in wheelchairs. The whole feeling was one of tension and drama. *I hope no-one's died.* The music emanating from the speakers was slow and sombre, not exactly a funeral march but if this had been a movie it would have raised the tension considerably. Harrison was watching her and she gave him a reassuring smile before glancing back at the screen.

The father and son stopped outside a room. The door was closed. The father slowly pushed it open and they entered cautiously. Mum was sitting up in bed with a new-born baby in her arms. There were pink balloons with 'Baby Girl' tied to the locker and cards with 'Congratulations' huddled together. The young boy ran to the woman, the music by now uplifting and joyous. He kissed her then kissed his baby sister on her downy head. He presented his mum with a single, exquisite red rose. Dad was beaming at them.

The words running across the screen said, '*A rose can express so much more than words.*'

Leah stared hard at the screen until it started to blur.

'Here,' Harrison put a tissue in her hand and she blew her nose. 'I take it by your response it pressed the right buttons. Good.'

'It was beautiful.' Not only had it pressed buttons, but it brought back memories. She had visited her mum in hospital after her twin brothers were born. She had also walked, with her father, down a long corridor to

the maternity ward. Whilst she watched the advert, she felt again the wonder and awe of seeing the two tiny people who had appeared as if by magic.

Harrison picked up a donut and bit into it, the sugar falling onto his shirt.

‘I wish you every success with the award. I think it’s a winner. Whilst we are on the subject of family though, I haven’t asked you about your father. How ill is he?’

Harrison brushed off the sugar absentmindedly and stared straight ahead. ‘He needs an operation. Coronary artery bypass grafting to be exact. His blocked arteries are depriving his heart of oxygen. But my father is a stubborn man and has resisted until now.’

‘Heart surgery? Is it dangerous?’

‘No more than any other heart surgery is. In other words, it’s a common operation but there’s always a risk. But if he doesn’t have it he’ll die for sure.’

‘But you’ve persuaded him to have it?’ From what she had heard about William Bentley, he wasn’t scared of anything.

‘I reminded him if he died he was leaving the way wide open for your father to court my mother. I think he’d rather leap through hoops of fire than let that happen. It did the trick; the operation is scheduled for two weeks’ time.’

‘Good. I hope it all goes well.’

‘Thanks.’ Harrison stood and stretched. ‘Right, now we get back to work. Come and meet my A team.’

Chapter Six

Harrison took the scenic route as he showed her the rest of the agency. It was so different from the working environment she was used to she had to keep reminding herself people were paid good money to be there. It was like a playground for adults.

A bar was decked out like a tropical island paradise, complete with plastic dolls doing hula dancing. A blow-up palm tree sat in one corner and there were glasses with strange coloured liquid in them. No doubt pretend cocktails. Or were they the real thing? Leah spotted sand on the tiled floor and feared for her new shoes. They were Louboutin after all.

The bar was empty so they moved on to the games room. Two members of staff were playing tennis on Wii. The players barely looked up as Harrison introduced them. They stood and watched them for a while.

‘Great ace, Ace,’ Harrison called out and Leah winced. Such familiarity with subordinates only brought trouble on a manager if he was called to discipline that person. It would never happen in the Hong Kong office; her staff knew how to behave.

Next, the coffee lounge. Peter stood behind the counter, dressed all in black, handling the expensive-looking machine like an expert.

‘Mr Bentley, Ms Fitzpatrick, good afternoon. Have you come to sample our new coffee? It’s an exotic blend of Brazilian and Indonesian beans. It’s going down a storm.’

‘Not right now, Peter, maybe you could bring us some later. We need to get to work.’

‘As you wish, Mr Bentley.’ Peter returned to his barista duties and Leah moved away. She was eager to see the staff in action. Working that is, not playing.

‘Harrison, it’s interesting that your PA calls you Mr Bentley, whereas all the other staff seem to have such an informal approach to their CEO.’ They left the coffee lounge and strolled down a corridor.

‘Peter is old-school. He believes calling me by my first name would be disrespectful. He takes his duties seriously.’

‘Good for Peter, he can come and work for me if he gets tired of making coffee.’

‘I take it you don’t approve of the informal approach, Leah?’

‘No, as a matter of fact, I don’t. I think there should be a respectful distance between top management and the rest of the workforce. That way, people know where they stand.’

‘So, tell me, where exactly do your staff stand with you?’

‘I do operate an open-door policy at certain times of the day. After all, I like to be accessible to my staff, but not all the time or I’d never get any work done.’

‘Interesting.’ Harrison’s eyes were deep and impenetrable. She longed to know what he was thinking. Could he revert to the clinical, mercurially minded CEO he was in the boardroom while pretending to be a cowboy? How could people take him seriously when he was dressed like John Wayne? And why did she find his checked shirt and those faded blue jeans so disturbingly sexy?

They arrived at another large office where the A Team were already hard at work. This office appeared normal to Leah’s eye; desks with computers, filing cabinets and potted plants. Good, this is more like it. But the

staff themselves were dressed in Wild West costumes and one young girl with pink hair and a nose piercing seemed overly pleased to see Harrison.

‘Hi, Harry,’ she squealed. Harry?

‘Hi yourself, Honey,’ Harrison replied before sitting at a desk, placing a cowboy hat on his head and his booted feet next to the computer. He lounged back in the chair and grinned at Leah. She was about to comment on informality taken a step too far when she realized Honey was actually the girl’s name.

Harrison introduced the team, then said, ‘Oh, and Oscar’s behind you. Best not to turn your back on him, though, he has a habit of pushing his nose where it’s not wanted.’

She spun around. He was looking up at her, his tongue hanging out of one side of his mouth and his tail sweeping the floor. He was a nondescript, hairy type of dog who wouldn’t win any prizes at Crufts.

‘He’s friendly and loves to be patted.’

‘Why is there a dog in the office, Harrison? Who does he belong to? I’ve heard of companies who offer crèche facilities, but a dog-sitting service?’

‘He belongs to all of us,’ Honey said. ‘He’s bootiful, aren’t you baby.’ Honey proceeded to hug the dog and kiss the top of his head. He suffered the indignation stoically and Leah started to warm towards him. When she sat at a desk in the corner of the office to watch proceedings, Oscar sat at her feet and gazed up at her adoringly.

‘When we get a new account, we have to learn their business from the inside out. We work out what makes them distinctive, gain an understanding of their product and how the client wants to be perceived. I believe we should do that before we get the account too, then we stand a better chance of beating our rivals.’ Harrison spoke with passion. He obviously loved the advertising business. He was at home with his team and they weren’t fazed at all by having the CEO sitting in on their brainstorming session. ‘Have a look at our other clients and check out the ideas we have come up with.’

Leah switched on the computer and read about the campaigns Bentley Media were working on. A pet food company were branching out into other areas of pet care such as grooming, medication and accessories, and a company who sold mobility scooters wanted their product to have more appeal.

Leah couldn't get her head around the idea that people were paid good salaries to wear fancy dress and sit around thinking up slogans for flea powder. To her mind, this wasn't work. She scrolled through some of the information and tried to ignore the cowboy in the corner. Harrison wasn't easily ignored. She could feel his eyes on her and sensed his mocking smile. Should she challenge his decision to keep this company? She sided with her father. They should sell it, make a huge profit and plough the money back into the business.

'I know you don't approve, Leah, and probably think this is all too frivolous to take seriously but bear one thing in mind. Advertising is an essential component of a free market economy and reflects the society that created it. People want things and are happy to pay good money for the right product. It's our job to steer them in the direction we want them to go.'

'A subtle form of manipulation in other words.'

'Exactly,' Harrison said with a grin. 'We'll make a creative of you yet.'

Chapter Seven

After another three coffees and two sugared donuts, Leah was buzzing. Normally she ate a healthy diet of salads and plenty of fish. She enjoyed a treat now and again, but kept an eye on her calorie intake and exercised regularly. Since arriving in the UK, she had been in back to back meetings and her diet had consisted of fast food with too much caffeine and sugar. Her head was fuzzy, making concentration difficult.

Harrison and his team were also buzzing but for a different reason altogether. Ideas were bandied about, voices raised, they talked across each other and finished each other's sentences. They paced about the office and scribbled on a white board. Strange mind maps and cartoon-like drawings appeared on large sheets of paper. How anything sensible came out of it all she had no idea.

At eight o'clock Peter came in with a trolley full of food. Hot-dogs, burgers and cans of Lone Star beer. They leapt on it without stopping their flow of talk.

Leah was getting a headache.

'You want relish on your burger?' Harrison brought a paper plate over and perched on the corner of the desk. He still wore his cowboy hat but the top two buttons of his shirt had come undone and a small curl of brown

chest hair peeped out over the top. The sight made her feel light-headed and she closed her eyes for a second.

‘Leah? Are you okay? You don’t need to stay here until morning, you know, no one will think any less of you if you leave. After all, you’re not used to all-nighters like we are.’

All-nighters? *I didn’t know it’s an all-nighter.* She could take the easy way out and go back to the hotel. The thought of the double bed with crisp, clean sheets was almost too much to bear. Jet lag was overtaking her and she needed time-out. Showing any weakness in front of Harrison was unthinkable however. She had to prove she was as good as he was as a senior manager and falling at the first hurdle wasn’t an option.

‘I have no intention of leaving and missing all the fun. I’ll be here as long as you are. And yes, I will have relish on my burger, thank you, Harrison.’

Maybe if she drank lots of water it would dilute all the rubbish she had been putting into her body. Harrison handed her a can of Lone Star beer along with the burger. He broke a hot dog in small pieces and fed Oscar with it. The dog took it from his fingers with surprising gentleness.

‘Of course, you don’t need to be in tomorrow. Take the day off; pamper yourself before the award ceremony. Oh, and I’ve sent a selection of ball gowns to your hotel suite, as I was sure you wouldn’t have brought one with you.’

The award ceremony? *I didn’t know it’s tomorrow.* Was he doing this deliberately, trying to catch her on the back foot to see how well she reacted? Well then, she wouldn’t react. ‘Thanks Harrison, that’s kind. I may come in later for a few hours but would like some time to get ready.’

Six hours later, Leah was starting to feel ill. She was so tired she could have wept, but the sight of Harrison, wide-awake, smiling and still wearing his hat, forced her to keep her eyes open and try to look interested.

She’d lost all sense of time when blackness descended. Strong hands lifted her head up and put something soft beneath it and those same hands tucked a soft blanket around her shoulders.

She let go and slept.

She hadn't moved since he put the pillow under her head. He watched her while he sipped his beer. She disapproved of many of the things he had shown her, but wanted to learn too. Daddy's little princess had guts. Perhaps Connor had taught her well after all. She had grown up, not only physically but also emotionally.

Time to wake up, sleeping beauty. 'Leah,' he gently shook her, 'wake up, time to go home.' Oscar sat up and whined at the sound of his voice. 'I know, boy, I don't want to wake her either but it's past her bedtime.'

The A team were hunched over a wide-screen computer, one of them tapping furiously and the others exclaiming and calling out encouragement. He marvelled at their stamina and enthusiasm. He'd had enough and was going back to his penthouse apartment. A crazy, irrational idea popped into his mind that he would take Leah back with him and, when she finally woke up, they could have long, slow, lazy sex.

'Harrison, oh goodness, I'm so sorry, I just shut my eyes for a minute.'

'It's okay, Leah, it's time to leave now, I'll drop you off at your hotel.'

In the limousine, Leah fell asleep again, her head on his shoulder. He put his arm around her to support her and marvelled at how slim she was. Her perfume invaded his senses and his body responded. He buried his face in her hair and breathed in the sweet scent of flowers. She was fresh, soft and feminine. He wanted to possess her and protect her at the same time. This woman could seriously mess with his head if he wasn't careful.

Harrison didn't do commitment. He had never been in love, carefully finishing any relationship threatening to move in that direction. He made love but moved on. The way his body was responding to the petite Ms Fitzpatrick, he knew he could make love to her, but could he move on after? It was too risky.

The car drew to a stop in front of the hotel. It was one of theirs. One of the best in the Bentley House chain of hotels and all the staff knew him. He got out of the limo, reached into the back and pulled Leah into his arms. She was so light he carried her effortlessly into the hotel.

'Morning, Mr Bentley,' the doorman said.

‘Morning, Brian,’ Harrison replied.

If the staff thought it at all strange that the son and heir of the great William Bentley should appear in the early hours of the morning, dressed as a cowboy and carrying an unconscious woman, none of them showed it by the slightest change of expression. The receptionist smiled at him and he smiled back. A security man who called the lift for him enquired politely as to which floor he wanted, pressed the right buttons, then stepped aside.

His father certainly knew how to pick staff. Professional, down to their polished shoes.

He had to put Leah on her feet while he fumbled in her handbag for the keycard. She wrapped her arms around his neck and murmured something unintelligible. He opened the door, picked her up and carried her inside. After laying her down on the bed, he removed her shoes and pulled the duvet over her.

She murmured again and snuggled into it. He couldn’t help melting at the sight. She looked like a little girl, but Harrison knew looks were deceptive. She was a full-blooded, sexy woman and she was the only other person who stood to beat him in his quest to be the next head of BFP Enterprises. Although she had yet to express her intention to succeed Connor, her interest in everything he had shown her and her quick wit and intelligence would make her a worthy opponent.

They would fight for the prize, in a civilized fashion, but it would be a fight nonetheless. There would only be one winner. And that winner would be him.

Chapter Eight

Leah ran her fingers over the shiny material and watched the royal blue shimmer in the artificial light. She wouldn't normally countenance a man buying her clothes, but this was a special occasion and, it was true, she had brought nothing with her that would be suitable. Nor did she have the time to shop. The dresses Harrison had arranged to be delivered to her hotel suite were sumptuous, obscenely expensive and she couldn't wait to try them on.

As she was about to slip out of her jeans, her phone rang. 'Hi, Harrison. Thanks for looking after me last night, I don't know what came over me.'

'Think nothing of it; you were dead to the world. How are you feeling now?'

'Oh, much better thanks. It was only jetlag. Anyway, thanks for the dresses, they're wonderful and you must let me reimburse you for them. I was just about to try them on. Do you have a preference?'

'I'm sure you'll look delightful whichever one you choose. The reason I'm ringing is to tell you to make your own way to the venue and I'll join you there.'

Leah slumped on the edge of the bed. 'Okay, but... is there a reason? I imagined we would all go together.'

‘My father’s had another heart attack. I’m flying home in an hour. I hate to do this to you, but I have to be there.’ Harrison sounded calm but Leah could detect a hint of tension behind his words.

‘I’m so sorry, that’s awful, of course you must go.’ William Bentley had looked so ill. She shivered. ‘Please tell Sylvia she’s in my thoughts. If there’s anything I can do...’ She trailed off, her words sounding as inadequate as she felt.

‘Thanks Leah. I’ll know more when I get to the hospital. I’ll give my mother your message and the best thing you can do to help is keep an eye on the A team for me – they’re going to be like kids on Christmas Eve tonight.’

‘Of course. I’ll try. I do hope you won’t have to miss the whole event.’

‘I’ll do my utmost not to, but I don’t know what I’m going to find when I get to the hospital...’

‘I’m so sorry, I don’t know what to say.’

‘Then say nothing, just concentrate on having a good evening. If I don’t get back in time, maybe you could make a speech in my place – provided we win, of course.’

Me? Make a speech? Her stomach lurched but she had asked if she could help. ‘Yes, of course, I’d be delighted.’

‘Thanks, I appreciate that. Now, I have to go. Hopefully I’ll see you later.’

‘Yes, bye...’ but he had already gone.

Leah tried on the dresses, admiring herself in the mirror, but her heart was no longer in it. Poor Harrison. She wished there was something she could do, then remembered the speech. Public speaking was not her forte; it had always been left to her father who was an expert. But Harrison had asked her to step in and she wasn’t going to let him down. She grabbed her laptop and sat cross-legged on the bed. Something short and to the point would be best. Maybe with a touch of humour. Or should she just say thanks? *Harrison – please get back in time.*

Leah searched the spacious, air-conditioned ballroom for the Bentley Media table. People were streaming in through the open doors and the ballroom wouldn't be spacious for long. She caught sight of pink hair and headed in that direction. Harrison had told her there were twelve people on their table, including her father and a guest. She hadn't spoken to him since he arrived back from New York, so had no idea who the guest was.

She found their table which was near the podium and to the side of the screen that would show the winners' adverts. On the other side of the ballroom was a platform where five musicians, dressed in tuxedos, were arranging their instruments and microphones. If Harrison made it back from Cheshire tonight she would ask him to dance.

'Hi there, come and join us.' Honey clutched the arm of an attractive black man and drank beer out of the bottle. Leah introduced herself and shook hands with him. The rest of the team introduced their partners, then it was Peter's turn.

'Ms Fitzpatrick, may I introduce my partner, Robert?' Peter was beaming with pride and looking smart in his tuxedo. Robert was a handsome man who smiled shyly at her. She shook hands and took a seat opposite Honey.

The Grand Rossini Hotel was hosting the award ceremony and the grand ballroom looked spectacular. Tiny lights resembling stars in the night sky covered the ceiling and the table decorations were tasteful, but with a modern, artistic note. Leah wondered what Harrison thought of the ceremony being held in one of his rival's hotels. No doubt he would take it in his stride, as he appeared to do with most things. Then she thought of William and guessed underneath Harrison's unruffled exterior he would be worried sick about his father.

She recognized several people from the business world and waved at a few. A couple of reporters were circulating and the photographers would be somewhere in the crowd too. She must remember to smile and look relaxed. The dress she had chosen was the first one she tried on, the royal blue with matching bolero. It was smart and sophisticated and Leah knew

she looked good, which was important if she had to stand up in front of all these people.

After a quick visit to the rest room before proceedings started, to check her hair and make-up, she returned to find her father and his guest had arrived. They were standing near to the table where the A Team were talking amongst themselves.

‘Ah, there she is,’ her father said, kissing her on the cheek. ‘Monique, this is my daughter, Leah. Leah, Ms Devereux is interested in buying Bentley Media, so I invited her along tonight.’

‘Bit premature, Dad, we haven’t made a final decision to sell.’

Her father laughed. ‘I think I made my wishes clear. It’s a matter of finding the right buyer.’

Leah, stung by her father’s patronizing manner, turned her attention to the woman. Her father was actively looking for a buyer. What would Harrison make of that? And who was this woman?

Then Leah recognized her. Monique Devereux had been Harrison’s lover at Oxford. She was ten years older than he was, the wife of one of the professors, and Leah remembered reading articles in the gossip magazines and on the Internet about their love affair. After Harrison graduated, the gossip ended abruptly. They went their separate ways. Monique divorced her professor, left the UK for America and had worked her way through two further marriages to financial magnates, becoming a rich divorcee and businesswoman in the process. Harrison had gone abroad and had fallen off the radar for several years.

Monique Devereux, eyeing her as if she was something nasty she’d found on the bottom of her shoe, extended her hand. Her fingernails were long and painted blood red. ‘Charmed.’

Leah shook her hand, carefully avoiding her nails. ‘Shall we sit?’ Leah sat down and Monique Devereux sat next to her. Her father sat on the opposite side of the table and was immediately engrossed in a conversation with members of the A Team, leaving Leah to entertain his guest. *This is going to be a fun evening.*

Monique was drawing a lot of attention from the other people around the table, who were gazing at her with varying degrees of awe. Her red dress clung to her curves like nylon clings with static. Her jewellery was gold and her perfume heavy. Her long black hair hung straight and shone like polished jet. She sipped her wine cautiously and shuddered, obviously finding it did not match her impeccably high standards.

Leah, who usually didn't hate anyone, thinking it a destructive emotion, was filled suddenly with a loathing so deep that she reached for her own glass and took careful sips of the wine to try to get herself together.

Jezebel.

Leah was no prude but she did believe in the sanctity of marriage. Monique Devereux apparently didn't. She was the older woman who had turned the boy into a man. Harrison had a reputation for being a considerate and accomplished lover. Monique Devereux had been his teacher. But she'd been a married woman and had led a student astray. The woman obviously had no morals. Strangely, she didn't blame Harrison, who had barely been out of his teens. That woman had seduced him; the poor boy hadn't stood a chance.

Why do I care? She shouldn't care about events so far in the past. It was what was happening now that mattered. *But what is happening now? Why is she here?*

'Leah, Connor tells me you live in Hong Kong now? Are you going home after the award ceremony?' The hateful woman had a voice like silk, smooth and seductive with a slight American accent. The strength of the woman's perfume threatened to asphyxiate her.

'Yes, I run the Hong Kong office but I'll be sticking around for a while yet. Harrison and I are working closely together and he needs me here.'

Monique smiled and her dark eyes, framed with black eyeliner, glittered in the light from the crystal chandelier. 'Of course, one can never have too many assistants when running a company.'

'The three of us are running the company together, Monique, not just Harrison.'

‘Well, if I know anything about that young man, and trust me, I know him better than anyone does, he will be running it all by himself pretty soon.’

Leah looked to her father for help but he was deep in conversation with someone on his other side and hadn’t heard what Monique said. ‘Harrison’s happy for the three of us to work together for the good of BFP Enterprises, but his heart lies in advertising. Bentley Media is his baby and his main priority. I’ve spent a lot of time with him recently, I know how his mind works.’

Monique stared at her for what seemed like an eternity. Her look chilled Leah despite the warmth of the room. This woman hated her. *Why?*

‘Harrison is the most ambitious man I’ve ever met. He doesn’t share. I know how his mind works too. And his body.’ Her smile turned smug. ‘Especially his body. Every glorious inch of it.’

Honey was sitting opposite her and trying not to listen to their conversation. At the mention of Harrison’s body, her eyes widened and she nearly choked on her beer. Robert was also listening and coughed politely into his napkin. She wished she could think of a witty retort, but was speechless at the woman’s brazenness.

‘Leah, your phone’s buzzing.’ Honey’s voice rescued her from having to answer. She read the text.

‘Harrison. He’s on his way. Should be here in half an hour.’ *Thank goodness.*

‘He’ll miss the meal, what a shame,’ Peter said.

An hour later, Harrison still hadn’t arrived, the waiters had cleared the table and more drinks had appeared. Leah was still smarting from Monique’s comments. She avoided looking in her direction. No way was she going to get embroiled in any more battles with her. She could never win and the thought of what that woman and Harrison had once meant to each other was playing on her mind. She only hoped whatever it was they’d had was firmly in the past.

The award ceremony began. A man stepped up to the podium and spoke about how wonderful the entries had been this year, the incredibly stiff competition and the fact that they were all winners. Leah glanced around the table. Hardly anyone was listening to him; they just wanted the results. It looked as if she may be called on to give a speech after all.

The awards were given out to loud cheers from the winning agencies but still Harrison hadn't appeared. In desperation, she grabbed her phone and texted, *Where are you?* Then she heard the announcement that Bentley Media had won third prize for innovation. The noise was explosive as they all jumped up, shouting and hugging each other.

Her father shook people's hands, offering his congratulations, and Leah did the same. Her stomach was in knots and she was shaking. They trooped up to the stage and Leah followed, her mouth dry. *Please don't let me make a fool of myself in front of everyone.*

Just as she was about to take the microphone from the MC, she heard loud cheering from the A Team and Harrison leapt up onto the stage in front of her. Leah's knees nearly gave way with relief. She backed away gratefully and left the group together, laughing and slapping Harrison on the back as he spoke about the talent and enthusiasm of the people he was lucky enough to be working with.

Leah returned to the table and sank down onto her chair. When she had calmed down sufficiently to watch the proceedings, she noticed the tuxedo that Harrison was wearing. She was thrilled to see it wasn't the conventional black, but the same shade of royal blue as her dress. It sent a message to everyone present that they had coordinated their attire. Surprisingly, she felt incredibly pleased with herself that she'd made the right choice of evening dress.

Chapter Nine

The noise of raucous celebration was deafening. Once off the stage, Harrison shook hands with his team and Honey threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. He was pleased with the award, even though he would have liked the first prize. It was affirmation that Bentley Media was on the up. This was just the beginning; there was no stopping them now. His staff would celebrate hard tonight. They deserved to.

He tried to make his way to the table where Leah sat on her own. She looked gorgeous in the blue dress. Clever girl to have picked the right one. He planned to take her in his arms and whisk her on to the dance floor when all the excitement died down. For now, he would be happy with a kiss of congratulations.

‘Harrison, we thought you’d never get here.’ That voice stopped him in his tracks and he turned slowly and came face to face with his old lover. She was the last person he expected to see and he tried to hide his dismay behind a mask of polite indifference.

‘Monique, what a pleasant surprise.’ He leant forward and kissed her on the cheek, noting a strong smell of alcohol. She had always been able to drink him under the table and frequently did, but that had been ten years ago. They had moved on. He needed no reminders of his misspent youth.

‘Monique and I met in New York and she told me of her wish to buy into advertising,’ Connor said, ‘A golden opportunity I’m sure you’ll agree, Harrison. By the way, how’s William?’

‘My father is stable. The surgeon wants to bring the operation forward.’ *Before it’s too late.* He kept his features blank. He didn’t intend to discuss his father’s condition. His mother wanted the seriousness of his illness kept from the public for as long as possible. Even if he had the operation, he might not be strong enough to survive it.

‘Give him my best. Perhaps this is the right time, when you have your father to think about, to get rid of a company that’s draining money and Monique is generous enough to take it off our hands.’

Harrison clenched his jaw to stop himself from telling Connor Fitzpatrick what he thought of him. He had obviously made it known, through his numerous business contacts, that Bentley Media was for sale. How many more enthusiastic buyers would they have to disappoint? Surely now, after winning their first award, Connor would see the potential in his company.

And as far as Monique Devereux’s generosity went, he obviously didn’t know the woman. She never did anything without benefit to herself. Why on earth, though, would she want to buy his company?

His poker face was still intact but inside he was seething. His voice, however, was calm when he spoke to Monique. ‘Advertising is a great business to be in and I’m sure you’ll find what you’re looking for eventually. However, if you have Bentley Media in mind I’m afraid you’ve had a wasted journey – we are making a profit, and it’s not for sale.’

‘That’s not what Connor said. He’s told me all about your newly merged company. The first job in any merger is to streamline your operations. Surely you know that, Harrison, it’s the first rule of business.’ Monique was flirting with her eyes, and standing too close to him. He was no longer the young man freshly released into the world and wet behind the ears. Whoever took him on lost.

‘I think you’ll find the first rule of business, Monique, is to know your enemies.’

‘Am I the enemy?’ Her voice was husky and she put her hand on his arm in a gesture that screamed possession. He looked down at her hand with its slender fingers, heavy with gold rings, then at her face. He stepped back just far enough so that her hand dropped to her side.

‘I hope not, for your sake.’

‘I think we should all have a drink now, don’t you?’ Connor was smiling but behind his affability was a shrewd business mind with a ruthless streak running through it. He wanted to sell Bentley Media. Harrison didn’t. Connor needed to realise that Harrison danced to no man’s tune, not even that of his business partner.

‘Tonight is for my staff. They are my priority and I would like to join them now and help them celebrate their first award. If you don’t mind.’ He started to walk away but Monique grabbed his arm again.

‘Well, at least dance with me Harrison, for old time’s sake.’

‘Yes, dance with Monique, it would be rude not to. I’ll get the next round of drinks in and keep the party going. Go on.’

He was desperate to join the others at the table. Specially to greet Leah who kept glancing at them and looking away. He was hoping they could get closer tonight, in a relaxed social setting. Before he could say no, Monique had taken his hand and was pulling him onto the dance floor.

Okay, so one dance won’t hurt.

Harrison and that woman had been dancing together for hours. At least it seemed that way to Leah. The band were playing many old favourites, and she would have loved to be the one dancing with him. Instead, he seemed to prefer the company of his ex. Had he loved her all those years ago? Maybe he had never stopped loving her. Leah felt a cold chill as if an icy wind had blown in at the thought. Now she was back, they would get married, and live happily ever after. Then Monique Devereux would be able to influence all the decisions that were made about BFP Enterprises. Harrison and Connor would agree with her, and Leah... She couldn’t finish the thought as the horror of that scenario struck her. *What would happen to me?* Leah grabbed her wine glass and drained it.

‘Careful, Daughter, the night is young and you need to pace yourself. Don’t want you making a spectacle in public, do we?’

‘Dad, I wouldn’t do such a thing, what do you take me for?’

‘Why are you looking so miserable anyway? Monique wants to buy Bentley Media and, seeing she has history with Harrison, I’ve no doubt she can persuade him to sell. It’s all good news for us. I’m impressed with the way you’ve handled Harrison J Bentley, I know you were against the merger, but you’ve behaved like a consummate professional. Well done, but you need to keep up the act a while longer.’

Act? What act? ‘I have a lot of respect for Harrison.’

‘Thought you hated the guy? You always gave me the impression you did.’

‘That was before I knew him. I like him ... as a business partner I mean.’

‘Right. What about in other ways? He is one of the world’s most eligible bachelors; if you believe the nonsense those tabloids print. Do you like him as a man, Leah?’

‘No, of course not.’ Her father looked sceptical. She had never been able to lie to him. Even as a child she confessed to any misdemeanour straight off, it saved time in the long run. However, he knew nothing about the events of her eighteenth birthday, not even the fact that Harrison had gate-crashed the party. Too late now to confess, but she could at least try to be honest. ‘Well, of course, I know he’s attractive, if you like that kind of a look.’

Her father’s eyebrows had risen nearly up to his hairline. ‘Oh, alright, yes I do find him attractive, but I always keep work and play separate. Always.’ She poured the last of the wine and waved the bottle in his direction. ‘Dad?’ She smiled sweetly at her father. ‘There’s no wine left.’

Connor laughed, a sound that came up from his belly and gave Leah an inner warmth. She loved him and wanted his approval so much. She had to keep her mind focused on what was important. Her career.

‘Okay, because I love you, I’ll get some more wine. But sip it, Leah, alright?’

‘Thanks, Dad, I love you too.’

Harrison should have joined them by now. He obviously preferred to be in the arms of that woman. She took a gulp of water and forced her attention away from the couple on the dance floor. Despite her best intentions, her mind started to drift. It travelled back ten years to the most humiliating night of her life.

The party had been her father’s idea. He’d even let them have as much alcohol as they liked. A big mistake, in hindsight. All her friends had lost their virginity except her. She was beginning to feel desperate, and unattractive. Thinking the night of her eighteenth birthday would be a fitting time to become a real woman, she had decided the first reasonable looking boy that showed up at her party would be the lucky winner.

Enter the most popular and utterly gorgeous young man that ever walked the face of the earth. The one she should have avoided at all costs. The son of her father’s fiercest business rival. The men hated each other, so their offspring should too, right? *Wrong*.

A naïve romantic, Leah had compared them to Romeo and Juliet. For hadn’t Romeo gate-crashed a party at the Capulets’? For the star-crossed lovers it had been love at first sight. Leah was hopeful that her party might prove similarly successful.

Harrison had worn his hair long in those days and had the look of a fallen angel. When he entered the party, she could hear the sighs from the other girls like air released from a tyre. He had worked the room, talking to each of them as she waited patiently for her turn. After all, it was her birthday; she should have been the centre of attention. But her turn never came. Harrison studiously ignored her.

For the first time in her short life, she had been proactive. With the aid of Dutch courage, she went after him; flirting, dancing around him seductively, or what she thought was seductive, as she’d had little experience of such things. In the end, amused, he had given in and she led him to the summerhouse.

She had waited for him to kiss her but he didn't. Taking the initiative, she had lunged at him, and thrown her arms around his neck. He had responded at first but, when she tried to unbutton his shirt, he had stopped her. A crazy idea passed through her mind that he might be shy. Proof, if she needed any, of the depth of her ignorance. When she had started stripping, thinking she was turning him on, he had gently told her no, it wasn't going to happen and she collapsed in a heap and sobbed. Strong hands had lifted her up and led her to an old sofa. He had put his arm around her and she had drenched his shirt with her tears. If she concentrated hard, she could still smell the mustiness of old wood and feel the hard, cracked leather of the sofa.

'Here we go, Leah, don't drink it all at once.' Her father put four bottles of wine on the table in front of her.

'Dad? Dance with me?' Her trip down memory lane had left her feeling fragile and she needed her father's love and strong arms around her.

'Dance? Not danced in years. No, you enjoy yourself with the others. You youngsters should be living it up on a night like this. You don't want me cramping your style. I'm feeling a bit tired, I'll just go.'

'Go? You can't, it's far too early. Anyhow, you have to take Ms Devreux home, don't you?' *And the sooner the better.*

'Oh, I think I can leave that task in Harrison's capable hands, I'm sure he'll see her safely back to her hotel.' He bent down and kissed her on the cheek, but avoided eye contact. 'Night, Leah, enjoy yourself.'

He strode across the ballroom towards the main doors. Her father was a fit, strong man, who could have danced all night and not felt any ill effects the next morning.

A picture of the last time she had seen her parents dance together crept unbidden into Leah's mind. It had been their tenth wedding anniversary and they were waltzing. She had been eight years old and thought they looked like a prince and princess from a fairy tale. The following year her mother had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. She had never danced again.

‘Leah, I’ll dance with you.’ One of the A team, a geeky young man with straggly hair and Harry Potter glasses was smiling at her.

‘Stuart, how kind.’ She got up and they made their way to the dance floor. Stuart had taken his jacket off. Sweat marks stained the underarms of his shirt. He looked nervous and she smiled encouragingly at him.

‘I heard you ask Mr Fitzpatrick to dance, and when he said no I thought... well, you may have said no, of course and I would have understood, but...’

‘Stuart,’ she put her hand on his arm, ‘I’m glad you asked me, thank you.’

When they reached the dance floor, she steered Stuart as close to Harrison and Monique as possible. He seemed happy to go where she led. It was a slow foxtrot, which Stuart obviously didn’t know as he shuffled around, not quite in time to the music. Harrison and Monique, however, looked as if they had been dancing together all their lives.

After it had ended, the band went straight into a jive. Harrison and Monique moved smoothly into it, executing the kicks, twirls and turns like professional dancers. Stuart looked at her helplessly and she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. The rest of the A Team rescued her when they crowded onto the dance floor and started gyrating and twisting with their arms around each other’s shoulders, like a giant spider with sore feet. Robert, fortunately, knew the jive well and he pulled her into the hold. She began to enjoy herself. Who doesn’t love to jive? Such a feeling of exhilaration to dance with someone who knew what he was doing. Peter was a lucky boy.

As the dance ended, Leah laughed with giddiness and noticed Harrison watching her with a speculative look on his face. He came over to the group and they jumped all over him, the men clapping him on the back, the women fighting to kiss his cheek, congratulating each other all over again.

Monique was staring. Not at the group, but at her. She looked as fresh as she had at the start of the evening whereas Leah felt out of breath and perspiration was collecting under her dress. She wanted a shower, badly.

Harrison managed to extricate himself from his team and came over to where she was standing, trying to ignore the daggers being thrown at her by her nemesis. ‘Leah, you look lovely. I’m so sorry I’ve neglected my duties tonight, but judging by the way you danced that jive you’re having a good time.’

Duties? Is being with her doing his duty? ‘Oh please don’t worry about me, Harrison; I’m having the time of my life. There’s no need to stop enjoying yourself on my account.’

‘Leah,’ Harrison looked puzzled and tried to take her hand but she pulled away. ‘I want to dance with you – how about the next one?’

How could she refuse when she’d wanted to dance with him all evening? ‘Yes, I’d love to dance with you.’ She moved towards him as the music started up again. It was a slow ballad, the perfect excuse for them to get close. Just then, Monique made her move. She pushed in front of Leah and grabbed his arm.

‘Harrison, this is our song! We must have this dance together, I insist.’

Before Leah could react, Monique had dragged Harrison away. He looked back at her and mouthed ‘sorry’ but Leah was incensed and glared at him. *Why is he letting that woman push him around? He’s being pathetic.*

An alpha male, in control of his world, Harrison didn’t allow anyone to tell him what to do. Anyone except a beautiful woman. Monique Devreux was a black-haired beauty. Tall, slim and willowy. She was obviously just his type. Someone he could have fun with, a sexy siren with come-to-bed eyes and the sexual experience of a cougar. Monique Devreux had Harrison J Bentley in the palm of her hand.

Stuart was laughing with the others and had obviously forgotten all about her. Good. She wanted to be on her own. She was the odd one out at this party. The Bentley Media table was empty as everyone was now on the dance floor, so she headed to the bar.

‘Vodka shot, please. Actually, make that two.’ After the first one, which hit the back of her throat like liquid fire, she sipped the second

slowly. The night had started out with so much promise. She had been determined to enjoy it, but it had all come crashing down around her ears.

‘Another shot, please. Better just leave the bottle.’ The bartender gave her a questioning look but she returned it with her best snooty executive stare. He left the bottle.

‘Are you okay, Ms Fitzpatrick?’ Peter appeared next to her looking concerned.

‘I will be okay after another drink. Have a shot with me, Peter, we’re celebrating.’

‘I don’t think that’s sensible, do you?’

‘I’m sick of being sensible. Good old Leah, busy being reliable and boring while the rest of the world is out having fun.’ She downed her vodka shot to show that she could be a good sport too.

Peter vanished into the crowd.

The noise level had increased. The band were playing a fast number and some of the crowd were singing along. Bursts of laughter assaulted her senses like gunfire. She was feeling dizzy again. Did she still have jetlag? She must get something from the doctors in preparation for her next flight. She turned her head to see if Harrison and that woman were still on the dance floor and nearly fell off the barstool. The room was spinning. *Why is that? I haven’t had that much to drink.*

She reached for the bottle to pour another shot but a hand reached over from behind her and grabbed it. ‘I think you’ve had enough, don’t you?’

‘Harr’son, put that back.’

‘No, I’m taking you home, you’re drunk.’

‘I’lav you know I’m perf’ly sober.’

‘No, Leah, you’re not. You’ll thank me in the morning.’

There was still some vodka left in the glass so she downed it in one. Big mistake. She remembered being a child and staying too long on the roundabout. When she got off the whole world seemed to be on the move. It felt the same, only worse. She felt herself falling and then strong male arms encircled her, protecting her. Arms that she had longed to have around her all night. Only, not like this.

The last thought she had before the blackness descended was that she'd done it again.

Chapter Ten

Leah woke just as dawn was coaxing the world to life. Her body felt heavy and her head felt twice its normal size. She forced her eyes open and immediately regretted it. The pale light filtering in through an opening in the curtains pierced her aching eyeballs and caused a wave of dizziness to wash over her. She quickly shut them again and tried to lie as still as she could on the bed.

As the dizziness passed, the events of the evening before unravelled in her mind. Harrison. *Oh, my God!* She had got drunk – again. Made a complete fool of herself in front of him for the second time. What must he think of her?

She forced her eyes open again, extremely slowly. This time the room stayed still. A room she had never seen before. Not a hotel room. She risked turning her head and stared at Harrison asleep in a chair next to the bed.

Even through the haze of her hangover, her mind registered that he was looking hot. The tuxedo was gone. He wore his ripped blue jeans with the button undone, his cowboy hat and nothing else. His chest and feet were bare. She stared at his feet. They were large with a high arch and looked so masculine that something stirred deep inside her. She had never been

attracted to men's feet before but everything about this man was as close to physical perfection as it was possible to be.

Except, of course, for the bags under his eyes and the stubble darkening his jawline. Evidence he had stayed up all night and watched over her. That and the empty bottles of water and a half-eaten packet of custard creams scattered on the floor around the chair.

She pushed back the duvet and looked down. She was wearing a man's oversized T-shirt, and it smelled of Harrison. He had undressed her and put her to bed. How much more humiliation could she take? At least she was still wearing her panties. But he'd removed her dress and her bra. She shivered, wondering if he had taken any liberties while she had been in such a vulnerable state.

She turned her head carefully and looked at him. He lounged in the chair, his long legs in front of him and his hands in his pockets. His head rested on a cushion with the cowboy hat over his eyes. His mouth was open slightly and she watched in fascination as his lips twitched. They looked so inviting she had to tear her eyes away as salacious thoughts entered her aching head.

Her gaze swept down the length of his torso. His bare chest captured her attention and she took in the muscle definition of his well-developed pecs with their smattering of chest hair and the way the hair on his stomach led her gaze further south to the enticing bulge covered by the blue denim.

She allowed herself the indulgence of letting her eyes sweep back up his body, enjoying the thoroughly masculine sensuality of the man. After all, he was asleep, he didn't know she was scrutinising him. When she got to his face, however, the hat was tipped back and his eyes, blue as the deepest ocean, were open and looking straight at her. He sat up and leaned forward with his arms resting on his knees.

'How are you feeling?'

'Stupid and embarrassed.'

'Sick?'

'Yes.'

'Bad head?'

‘Shocking.’

‘Right.’ To his credit he didn’t say she deserved it, even though she did. His expression was caring. ‘We better get you some aspirin.’

‘What happened after...?’

‘You passed out and Peter and I brought you home.’

She looked down at the T-shirt and back at Harrison questioningly.

‘You had a bit of an accident. I washed your clothes. The ballgown had to go, I’m afraid.’

Leah longed to hide under the duvet. Not only making a fool of herself by getting drunk, she had to perform an encore by throwing up all over herself. Her degradation was complete. She was never going to live this down. Getting drunk on her eighteenth birthday because she was a stupid, dreamy kid with low self-esteem was one thing, but getting drunk in front of Harrison’s A team was inexcusable. Not acceptable behaviour for the next head of BFP Enterprises.

Then there was Harrison himself. He had witnessed it. He had undressed her and put her to bed. How much worse could it get? ‘Did you sleep in that chair all night?’

‘I didn’t sleep. You were barely conscious and I didn’t want Connor’s little girl to choke.’

‘Thanks.’ She wished the ground would open and swallow her.

‘I put your stuff away but you may want to sort it out. You can share the dressing room if you like. You have your own bathroom, of course.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I had your stuff brought here from the hotel. You can stay with me for now. I’ll be spending a lot of time in Cheshire over the next few weeks so this place is yours.’

Stay with you? Over my dead body. Which, judging by the way she felt, could be any time soon. Then her mind processed what he had just said. ‘Your father?’

‘The operation is next week and I need to be around to support my mother. I’d be grateful if you could stay in the UK to act as CEO in my place.’

‘Of course.’ How could she refuse when he had a personal crisis to sort out? After all, they were business partners now and that’s what partners did, they supported each other.

‘Do you remember anything about last night, Leah?’

‘Not much.’ Unfortunately, she remembered too much.

Suddenly the mattress dipped as Oscar jumped onto it and flung himself into her arms, his tail wagging enthusiastically. The movement caused a stab of pain from the top of her head to the base of her skull. She groaned and covered her mouth with both hands as waves of nausea threatened to drown her.

‘If you’re going to throw up, please don’t do it on Oscar, he’ll shake and when I decide to redecorate the bedroom, vomit will not be my colour of choice.’

That did it. Leah only just made it to the bathroom on time. She sat on the floor, wearing a T-shirt and bikini briefs, her head down the toilet and thought it couldn’t possibly get any worse. Then she felt a rough tongue licking her cheek and smelt dog breath.

‘He’s worried about you and so am I.’

A damp cloth was applied to her forehead gently. She fought the tears as well as the rising nausea and lost the fight on both counts.

‘There, there,’ Harrison said as she was sick again.

She was wrong. It had just got a whole lot worse.

When she had finished, Harrison carefully rinsed out the face cloth and wiped her mouth.

‘Thanks,’ she muttered.

‘You’re welcome.’

He felt sorry for her, of course he did, he’d suffered countless hangers in his lifetime, but he’d always acted with decorum at important public functions. Last night had meant a lot to him and his team; she could at least have stayed sober for their sakes. Was she bored? Or was she a secret drinker? Either way, Harrison couldn’t help a feeling of irritation at the way she had behaved.

Overriding everything else, however, was an increasing lust. He thought about her body when he had undressed her the previous night. Her soiled clothes had to go and he had tried to deal with the situation respectfully. The royal blue dress was ruined. Shame, she had looked stunning in it. She was a breathtakingly beautiful woman. Her breasts were small but perfectly shaped and he had longed to cup them in his palms, to kiss and lick her nipples. He felt himself growing hard and shook such thoughts out of his head.

Despite the reputation he knew he had, it had been a long time since he had been with a woman, as he had grown tired of casual sex. The myriad of women he encountered, both at work and socially, didn't interest him enough to pursue a one-night stand, let alone anything more. Work was the only thing that gave him any satisfaction these days. Or that was how it had been until Leah had appeared back in his life.

Now, she was all he could think about.

'Right. We need to get you an aspirin and something to drink – juice?'

'Fine.' She was looking very pale and sorry for herself. With good reason. Food and drink were what she needed.

'How about a tour of the apartment on the way to the kitchen?' She nodded and tried to smile. A quick tour then, as she obviously wasn't up to the grand tour.

Harrison enjoyed showing off his three-storey river-fronted penthouse apartment on the Southbank. It occupied the 43rd to the 45th floor of an exclusive block and had views of the Thames, St Paul's Cathedral and the city skyline.

At night, weather permitting, he would sit on the private roof terrace and gaze out at the city lights. If the weather didn't allow that, however, he had his sunroom. Fully enclosed with floor to ceiling panoramic windows, Harrison gravitated to this room whenever he needed time out. He felt peaceful there, looking down on the world but far removed from the madness that was London.

He showed her the upper floor with its four bedrooms and shower room. The master bedroom was en suite and had a dressing room. She

chose another bedroom for herself. They stayed in the kitchen on the middle floor, after a brief look around the open plan living accommodation. She could see the study, gym and media room on the lower floor later when she was feeling better. She commented on the impressive circular staircase that linked the three floors. Harrison was rather pleased with that feature himself.

Harrison helped Leah onto a stool at the breakfast bar and poured juice for them both. He gave her a glass with two aspirin.

‘Thanks.’

‘You’re welcome.’ They were being terribly polite to each other but inside Harrison felt like a volcano about to explode. He was finding it hard to stop himself from touching her. He wanted her, desperately. He’d never felt this way about a woman before. One look at her green eyes, huge in her pale face, however, and he reined in his libido. Sex was obviously not on the agenda today.

‘I’ll make you some breakfast. Scrambled eggs and toast, I think, and sweet tea. Best cure for a hangover.’ He set to work beating the eggs to scramble. He added a pinch of nutmeg and a splash of milk, and then melted some butter in the pan.

‘Harrison, I just want to say thanks.’

‘What for?’

‘For looking after me last night. I didn’t deserve it and I thought you should know I appreciate it.’

‘Do you get drunk at every social occasion or is it only in my presence? I’m beginning to develop a complex.’

‘I hardly ever get drunk, I was tired and jetlagged. And anyway, I wasn’t in your presence as you put it, you ignored me all night.’

Leah was looking belligerent, not a good sign. ‘I apologise for that. The traffic was bad getting to the hotel. Anyway, I wasn’t deliberately ignoring you, I had my team to think about, they had to come first.’

‘But they didn’t, did they? She did.’

Harrison served the eggs on toast, then sat next to Leah. He was missing something but he wasn’t sure he had the patience to find out. He had

been up all night and tiredness was moving through him in waves. ‘Leah, I’ve no idea what’s wrong, so just tell me, please.’

‘You spent the whole evening with that woman and neglected your team shamefully. You should have been with them, celebrating, not smooching with her.’

‘Smooching? I don’t remember anyone smooching, Leah. Anyway, it was your father who invited her so you can blame him.’ He dug his fork into the eggs and tried to damp down his frustration. *Why is she sounding so bitter about Monique?*

‘But you danced with her all night. You dance well together by the way. Did you do a lot of it at Oxford?’

They did many things at Oxford, but he didn’t want to tell Leah that. ‘A bit.’ Sex was what they did the most. Mindless sex.

‘Why does she want to buy Bentley Media?’

‘Because Connor told her it was for sale when it clearly isn’t. Why are you asking me so many questions about Monique Devereux?’

‘Because you spent so much time with her last night. I know she must mean a lot to you, I was just wondering...’

‘She means nothing to me. I haven’t seen her for ten years. I was dancing with her last night because it would have been rude not to and because Monique can be very persistent and loves to dance. Is there a problem here?’

‘No.’ But there clearly was.

‘Eat your eggs, Leah.’ He wasn’t prepared to discuss it. She had a closed, stubborn look on her face, the kind of look most men were incapable of penetrating unless the woman decided to let him in on the secret. Leah wasn’t about to do that.

She had only eaten half the food when she pushed the plate away from her.

He made a stab at pacifying her. ‘Look, as senior executives, we sometimes have to do things we would rather not. It goes with the territory. Monique may be an old flame but she is also a businesswoman and a respected colleague. If my dancing with her upset you, then I apologise.’

‘Of course it didn’t upset me. Why should I care? You can dance with who you want.’

The lady doth protest too much, methinks. He had the sense not to say it aloud. He would never understand women and he was too tired to think about it anymore.

‘Look, I’m going to run you a bath. Have a long soak and relax, okay. You’re obviously not yourself at the moment.’ She nodded and looked away. Her cheeks were pink now instead of the paper white they had been earlier. *Good, the food and drink must be working.*

Harrison bent over the huge bathtub and opened the state-of-the-art gold taps so that water cascaded onto the expensive bath oil he poured in. The white bubbles frothed up like whipped cream and the aroma of exotic flowers and spices filled the air around his head. He lit small scented candles and placed them strategically, adding to the peaceful ambience he had created.

He stood back and surveyed the room. Against his will, he pictured Leah, lying naked in the bathtub. He saw clearly her white skin, ash blonde hair and her emerald green eyes that tormented him. She had soft pink lips like cushions his teeth longed to sink into.

She had a habit, when he was talking to her, of gazing at him so intently, her mouth opened slightly and, unconsciously, she wet her lips. It never failed to turn him on. Then her eyes would grow bright and draw him into their depths. He could drown in those eyes.

She was still sitting at the breakfast bar staring into space, when he returned.

‘Right, the bath is ready. I’m going to check my emails.’

‘Thanks.’ She stood up and walked past him without making eye contact.

When she had gone, he went into the sunroom. Instead of opening his laptop, he stood at the window, staring out at the city. Concentration was impossible; his nerves stretched to the limit. His mind filled with only one image.

Leah, naked and wet.

Chapter Eleven

Leah slipped down into the bath so the bubbles covered all her body except her head. She had pinned her hair up and the hot, scented water massaged her stiff neck. The tension started to ease and she closed her eyes and rested the back of her head on the rim of the bathtub. She could easily fall asleep, as the food and the aspirin were making her feel drowsy.

Harrison had been good to her and she was stacking up a pile of guilt. She had behaved badly since the beginning of the following evening and needed to get herself together. She was not coming across as a calm and collected executive, which is how she saw herself. *Why did I have to quiz him about Monique Devereux? He thinks I'm jealous of the dratted woman now. But I'm not. Am I? Of course I am, with good reason.* That woman introduced him to a world of pleasure and sensuality. She is chic, elegant and confident of her power over men. Doesn't every woman want to be like her?

No wonder Harrison had rejected her feeble advances on the night of her eighteenth birthday. He must have been secretly laughing at her. Why would he want a clueless virgin when he could have his experienced cougar?

The thoughts whirling around her head like puppies chasing their tails were ruining her relaxation. She did some yoga breathing, then, on a

deeper breath let her mind empty of all thoughts. She used this practice a lot in stressful situations. She also studied Tai Chi back in Hong Kong and the company had introduced mindfulness sessions, which helped the staff to concentrate on the task in hand. She had found it paid dividends. There were fewer absences due to sickness as well.

As her mind drifted in a sea of peacefulness, her other senses changed. She could no longer feel the water but just experienced it as warmth. The scent of the candles became flowers that surrounded her in a beautiful meadow...

‘Don’t you dare fall asleep, Leah; I’d hate to have to tell Connor his princess drowned in the bathtub.’

Leah shot up out of the water, her tranquillity shattered in seconds. Harrison was standing in the doorway, glaring at her.

‘Harrison! Get the hell out of here – what d’you think you’re doing?’ She tried to cover her nakedness as the bubbles were disappearing and she was left exposed and feeling extremely vulnerable. Her heart was pounding and she felt sick at the sudden adrenaline surging through her body.

‘You’ve been in here for ages, I was worried. And apparently I was right to be.’

‘Nonsense, I was having a relaxing soak as you suggested. In private. At least, I was until you barged in. And get that mangy mutt out of here.’ Oscar had wandered in and stood next to Harrison wagging his tail amiably, ready to join in the fun.

Harrison pointed outside and said, ‘Bed,’ in a commanding voice. Oscar crept out with his tail between his legs. Harrison watched her with a closed look on his face. His eyes, however, were overly bright and she couldn’t help noticing his jeans looked too tight around the crotch area.

The word ‘bed’ was ringing in her ears and she knew she was in danger. *From what, though?* Harrison ravishing her? The disappointment she’d feel, yet again, if he doesn’t make a move? Of her skin wrinkling like a prune if she stayed in the bath much longer?

Then Harrison took the responsibility for having to make any decisions out of her hands. He slowly undid the zip on his jeans and, without breaking eye contact; he pushed them down to his ankles and stepped out of them. Next were the black boxers and Leah gasped as, despite telling herself not to, she looked down and took in the sight of a naked Harrison for the first time.

He looked the epitome of a healthy, athletic male at his peak. His stomach was firm and ridged, his thighs powerful and his erection took her breath away.

‘Oh, God,’ she whispered.

Harrison smiled and she knew she was lost.

He did look like a god, an Adonis, the Phoenician demi-god of beauty and desire and Leah’s mouth was suddenly as dry as a desert. She couldn’t think of anything sensible to say and watched helplessly as Harrison walked slowly towards her.

‘Shuffle up.’

‘Why?’ she said in alarm. She did as she was told, however, and Harrison stepped into the water behind her and sat down. ‘You can’t do that; this is my bath.’

‘Yes, but my bathtub and I can do whatever I like.’

‘Harrison! I demand that you leave now.’ There was no conviction in her voice, which had turned to a croak.

He picked up a face cloth and some bath gel, then began washing her back. His touch through the cloth was gentle but firm. Leah felt the first stirrings of desire. If he didn’t stop this soon she would not be responsible for her actions. He gently held her wrists and pulled them away from her body that she was still fruitlessly trying to protect. Too late for that. The most gorgeous man she had ever known was sitting naked behind her, stroking her wet skin and breathing unsteadily in her ears.

‘Lie back against me.’

Again, she did as he asked and he proceeded to wash her stomach and breasts, but he had discarded the cloth and poured the bath gel into the

palm of his hand. His touch was driving her wild and she moaned softly. He kissed her temple and the strokes became caresses. He played with one of her nipples and she squirmed in ecstasy. She could feel his erection pressing into her lower back.

‘No! Harrison we can’t do this.’

‘We can do anything we want, Leah, we’re consenting adults.’ His voice was husky with desire.

‘But – ’

Then his hand stilled and he whispered into her hair. ‘Please tell me you’re not still a virgin.’

‘No! Of course not.’

He sighed. ‘Good.’ Then he continued to stroke, caress and fondle her until her body was arching upwards and she writhed under his touch.

‘Harrison, please...’

‘What d’you want, baby?’ One hand slid down her stomach to her hip, then across, tantalizingly slowly, to brush her pubic hair. Then it stopped.

‘What?’

‘Do you want me to touch you?’

Did she want... ? Oh, my God if he didn’t touch her she was going to scream.

‘Yes,’ she growled through gritted teeth. She heard a sexy, teasing laugh and his hand moved lower.

‘Straighten your legs.’ Without even thinking about it, she straightened them and he moved his feet inside her legs and pulled them open as wide as they would go in the bathtub. It wasn’t a conventionally sized tub and was more circular than rectangular, so she found herself wide open and exposed, allowing Harrison access to the most private part of her. She should have felt nervous but instead felt a surge of longing and need so strong she whimpered with the force of it. She couldn’t move, he held her captive and his fingers were playing with her, his touch light and painfully teasing.

She wanted to come so badly, she didn’t know how long she could stand the torture, but Harrison took his leisurely time, his stroking fingers

sending jolts of electricity through her. She wanted to close her legs, to squeeze them tightly together to gain release, but his legs held hers locked in a vice-like grip. She pushed her bottom into his erection and he groaned but kept up the torment.

She tried to keep still and quiet, as she knew he wanted her to beg. Well that wasn't going to happen, she wouldn't beg for any man. Then she cried out as he took her to the edge and held her there, dangling over a precipice, helpless and desperate.

'Harrison!'

'Yes, Leah?'

'Please...' she begged and he took pity on her, sending her spiralling into ecstasy with a few expert strokes of his long fingers. He held her while she orgasmed and rocked her like a baby as she cried out again and again.

She had never had such a powerful physical experience in her life and it left her rung out and lifeless. Then she remembered how aroused Harrison had been and wondered if she should offer him the same courtesy.

He stood up in one swift movement and stepped out of the bath. He put his hand out to her and she placed her hand in his and stood up. He swept her into his arms and walked out of the bathroom and into the master bedroom, the dripping water leaving a trail behind them.

'Harrison, we're wet.'

'I know.'

'Shouldn't we dry off first?' For she knew he must be desperate to make love to her.

'No time.'

He threw her down on the bed and she lay, wet and naked, staring up at him. His eyes shone like the brightest stars in the night sky. His erection throbbed but still he stood looking down at her. 'Do you want this, Leah? Because if you don't, this is the time to tell me.'

How to tell him she had never wanted anything as much in her whole life? She nodded, not being able to express it.

'I need you to say it; I need to hear the words.'

'Yes, Harrison, I want you. I want you to make love to me.'

Then he lay down on top of her and kissed her. She put her arms around him and whispered, 'Harrison.'

'Yes, Leah?'

'Don't you think you should take your hat off first?'

Chapter Twelve

She clung to him and he inhaled the smell of bath gel. Underlying that, the scent of her arousal. It was driving him wild but she wasn't ready for him yet so his pleasure would have to wait a while longer.

He was a big man and she a petite woman. He didn't want to hurt her. Even though she claimed not to be a virgin, his guess was that her sexual experience was limited. He would go slowly and make it memorable for her.

She seemed reluctant to take her arms away from his neck, so he covered her body with his and kissed her softly before moving to the area he had been aching to kiss for so long. He licked her around her nipples, first one then the other. As he teased one, he stroked her other breast, which caused her to moan and grab his hair with both hands. The harder she pulled his hair, the more turned on he became. He didn't think he could hold back much longer. He took his time, savouring her skin, licking and tasting. Then, when she started moaning and writhing, he took one nipple into his mouth. He made sure he gave both breasts equal and delightful attention.

He kissed her mouth again and their tongues danced causing sensations of fire and ice to surge through his body. He placed her arms over her head and drew a trail of kisses up one arm and down the other, lingering in her

armpits, which caused her to tense. She was delightfully ticklish, a fact he stored for a later time, and moved on swiftly until he returned to her breasts. When she tried to touch him, he carefully put her arms above her head again and continued his journey. He paid particular attention to her navel and she wriggled like a fish on a line. When he reached lower she shivered and cried out, but he moved instead down one leg to her foot. He kissed and licked each toe and the sole until she squirmed on the bed. She kept her arms where he had placed them and shut her eyes. Harrison used his fingers, tongue and lips to caress and worship every inch of her body. When he finally came to the place that was his final destination he gently parted her legs and groaned as he discovered how wet and ready for him she was.

By now Leah was hopelessly under his spell, calling his name and saying, 'Yes!' and 'Oh please!' But Harrison hadn't finished and tormented her until he felt she couldn't take any more. Just before she was about to beg him, which turned him on so much he thought he was going to explode, he took pity on her and she came with a force that thrust her whole body upwards and he held her, while her orgasm vibrated through her.

She came down gradually, and Harrison watched her with a smile on his face. He felt pleased with himself. He slipped a condom on and Leah put out her arms to him. He covered her body with his and entered her carefully. She was tight, and he watched her face for any sign that he was hurting her. There was none. Leah was smiling, her eyes half closed in ecstasy. He moved slowly, letting her arousal build again, whilst trying to hold back his own need. But the feel of her body squeezing him, her muscles tightening as her climax started to build, was almost too much for him and he gritted his teeth and groaned.

He concentrated on Leah, taking her to new heights, holding her there so long she probably thought she would never come back down. As her climax built, Harrison matched her with every movement. Each thrust of his powerful hips drove her on and they came together with cries and gasps, holding on to each other as if neither could bear to let go.

When he had disposed of the condom, he lay on his back with his arm around Leah and her head on his chest. He was spent, physically and mentally. There was no point trying to stay awake. His eyelids were heavy and he wanted to let go of all thought. He was just drifting off to sleep when Leah's muffled voice forced him awake again.

'Harrison, can I ask you something?'

He hoped she wasn't going to start talking about Monique again. 'Okay.' This was the time for confidences, secrets and lovers' vows. A time Harrison found as enjoyable as filling in his tax return. Normally he would be dressed and out at this stage. He sometimes allowed his lovers to stay the night but only because they made love all night so never got the chance to sleep.

'At my eighteenth birthday party, you talked to every girl except me. Why was that?'

'I did talk to you. In the summerhouse.'

'No, I mean before that, when you first arrived. I watched you talking and flirting with all my friends and waited for you to talk to me. But you didn't.'

'How can you remember that clearly, it was ten years ago?' But he knew what she was referring to, just not why. Surely she'd moved on since she was eighteen.

'I can remember every second of that night.'

How did he steer the conversation away from such an emotional time for Leah? He remembered her sobbing on his chest as if it were yesterday. 'Well I can't.'

'Was it because I wasn't as attractive as the others? Did I look like a virgin, was that it?'

'No. Of course not. Leah, it was a long time ago, you're a different person now.'

'What did you see when you looked at me, Harrison, tell me.'

Harrison was quiet for a long time. He could hear Leah's soft breathing and feel the warmth from her skin seeping into him. 'The most beautiful girl in the room. When I arrived at the party and looked at all the young

girls there, only one stood out from the crowd. Fresh, eager, sweet and –

‘Virginal?’

‘Naive, I was going to say. You were the only one I was attracted to and for that reason, you were the one I had to avoid. You, Leah Fitzpatrick, have no idea how beautiful you are.’

‘No, sorry, I don’t get it. You’ll have to explain.’

‘I was all wrong for you. Apart from the fact that you were Connor Fitzpatrick’s daughter, we wanted different things. You were ready to fall in love, ready for romance. All the gentle, sweet notions that young girls harbour were written all over your face. I couldn’t give you what you needed.’

‘And who are you to make that judgement? What gave you the right to choose?’

‘I was older and sexually experienced. I had to be the strong one.’

‘You said we wanted different things. So what did you want that night?’

‘Isn’t it obvious? I wanted sex. That’s all, just no-strings, no questions asked sex.’

‘I could have given you that.’ There was a hint of desperation in her voice and Harrison wished he could reassure her.

‘No, Leah, you couldn’t.’

‘Was it because you were still at Oxford? Were you having too much fun there? I know how the student life can be full of temptation. Especially for someone like you.’ Harrison was glad she hadn’t mentioned Monique again.

‘Someone like me?’

‘You just said I had no idea how beautiful I was – well, ditto.’

Harrison shrugged. ‘I don’t think I was beautiful.’

‘Was it anything to do with, you know, that woman?’

Spoke too soon. ‘I do hope you’re not going to start on about Monique again.’ Leah ignored him and carried on.

‘I know she was older than you and opened you up sexually. At least that’s what I’ve heard.’

‘You shouldn’t listen to gossip.’ He didn’t want to discuss this with Leah, especially now, lying together in the afterglow of amazing sex. This was the reason he didn’t do relationships. Women always had to probe until they’d opened up your soul and dissected it.

He kissed Leah in an attempt to distract her and stop her asking any more awkward questions. He kissed her gently at first, then more demandingly, deepening the kiss as his tongue took possession of hers and he murmured as he delved into her mouth. She pushed her hands up into his hair and tugged gently causing him to groan and he ran his fingers lightly down her back. Her body arched against him. He moved so he was over her but still supported on his elbows as he continued the kiss. His mouth seduced her, made love to her and promised her so much.

Then he turned over onto his back and brought her with him so she straddled him with her knees clenching his hips. He lay still, his hands holding her hips lightly and grinned up at her startled face.

‘Okay then,’ he said, ‘little miss sexy business lady, you want to take charge – over to you.’

‘You want me to lead?’ He wondered if Leah had ever initiated love-making. Could she take charge? He waited to see what she would do.

She moved her hips seductively and caressed his growing erection with her naked sex. She was wet and ready for him; his kiss had seen to that. She teased him by lying flat against his stomach to kiss his lips, then moved down his chest, licking and nibbling at his nipples and then lower to his navel. Her hair brushed his skin and he shivered with the caress. She had moved off him and down the length of his body so her mouth found his hardness. She licked and sucked him and it wasn’t long before he was panting and thrusting his hips upwards.

Soon his self-control slipped into urgent, frantic need. She stroked him and kissed him until he couldn’t stand it any longer. He called her name breathlessly. Taking pity on him, she moved back up to guide his hard length into her waiting wetness.

He stopped her long enough to slide a condom on, then groaned as he took hold of her hips to help her take him in. He started to thrust and she put her hands on his wrists to stop his movements.

‘I thought sexy business lady was in charge this time?’

‘Well, don’t take too long.’

She wriggled and writhed so she was touching him in exactly the right position and moved quickly, her body rising and falling in a rhythm that seemed to suit her but wasn’t quick enough for Harrison.

He held onto her hips and moved her up and down faster but then, keeping their bodies connected, he flipped her over so that he was on top. He thrust into her with a force that sent them both swiftly into orbit. He propelled her towards her orgasm until she cried out and seconds later Harrison joined her, his body jerking in spasm and a cry emanated from his throat that was part human and part animal.

He rolled off her and then held her tightly to him, his chest heaving and sweat rolling down his face. He felt as if he was falling, just drifting through space in the aftermath of their amazing lovemaking.

He held her close until they both came back down to earth. Slowly the sweat dried on their bodies and Harrison pulled the duvet over them both. He felt drowsy and warm, cocooned in a private world. Not a feeling he was familiar with or had ever wanted. Now was not the time for analysing it. For all he needed at that moment was the joy of holding Leah, feeling his naked body pressed to hers and drifting slowly, inexorably into a deep, peaceful sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

‘Coffee, Ms Fitzpatrick?’

‘Thank you Peter that would be lovely. And could you get me the Happy Pets account please?’

‘Straight away.’ Peter left with a smile and closed the door quietly behind him.

Leah had been covering Harrison’s CEO duties for the past week while he spent time with his father. He had phoned to say that the operation had been lengthy but successful. Leah had been delighted but when she questioned him further, he cut the phone call short and told her he would be back at work the following Monday.

She was using Harrison’s office even though he had provided her with one of her own. It was spacious with everything she needed, including a white leather sofa that must be used for long, informal meetings. The desk, however, was a disaster area. With Peter’s help she had filed, sorted and organised the papers strewn all over it so that she felt more at home and in control. When she left her office in Hong Kong each night, there wasn’t one piece of paper or article of stationery to be seen on any surface.

Oscar, who went home every night with Honey, wandered into the office several times a day, no doubt looking for Harrison. Leah had taken to

petting him and carrying dog biscuits in her handbag. 'I miss him too,' she told the dog, as she scratched him behind his ears.

It had been two weeks since the award ceremony and their night of lovemaking; a night that had changed everything for Leah. She had always imagined Harrison would be an accomplished lover. She was delighted to find his technical skills were matched by gentleness, consideration and a tenderness that surprised her. The word she used when she thought of that night, which was often, was - cherished. A new and exquisite feeling that she wanted to repeat.

Before Harrison, her experience of sex had been mixed. She had lost her virginity to a young man who she had dated for a few months. Also a virgin, he had become so aroused that the whole experience had lasted a matter of seconds. It wasn't repeated. Her second lover was marginally better, but had no finesse. She never achieved orgasm with him. The third was the best, but they had nothing in common apart from physical attraction and their relationship soon cooled off. Since then, she had had the occasional one-night stand which she found unsatisfactory and spiritually demoralising.

In a moment of self-awareness, she acknowledged that she had been seeking solace from the loneliness she sometimes felt away from her father and brothers. At her lowest, her longing for her mother was so deep that it reduced her to tears. No-one had understood and loved her the way her mum had.

But now, she had an entirely new experience to marvel at. Making love with Harrison was like finding an oasis of pure, cool water in the middle of a desert. Refreshing and restoring. She couldn't shake the uncomfortable truth, however, that it might never happen again. Harrison didn't do relationships. Neither did she, but for this man she might be persuaded to make an exception. Would Harrison still want her, or would he move on to his next conquest?

He would be back at his desk next Monday, dividing his time between Bentley Media and Bentley Fitzpatrick Enterprises. They would be working together whilst she finished the report for her father and ensuring the merger ran smoothly.

All the thoughts running through her mind made it hard to concentrate but this was her last chance to prove to Harrison she was worthy of her position in the company. She suspected that he thought of her as a 'daddy's girl' and she needed to prove to him that she was as good at her job as he was. She didn't want to stuff it up and leave a mess for him to sort out. For that was one thing that hadn't changed, they were both still rivals, even though they never talked about it. Perhaps they should. They shared the same dream, to be her father's successor. Neither was prepared to back down.

At the thought of her father, a picture of Sylvia Bentley came to mind. If William did die - God forbid - it would leave the way clear for her father to court her again. And, if that did happen, - again, God forbid - would he want Sylvia's son to take over and not his own daughter?

There were too many questions and not enough answers.

On Friday morning, Leah was sitting at his desk signing some documents, with Peter hovering nearby, when he entered unexpectedly. She looked relaxed but efficient, as if she belonged there. The desk, he noticed, looked unnaturally tidy.

'Harrison? I didn't know you were coming back today?' That was deliberate, he wanted to surprise her and see how she was coping with the stresses of running an ad agency.

'Didn't get the chance to tell you, I only decided this morning. How's Ms Fitzpatrick been shaping up, Peter? Has she been a good boss?'

'Ms Fitzpatrick has done a splendid job of holding the fort until your return, Mr Bentley; no one could have done a better one.'

'Good.'

'How's William doing?' Leah asked.

‘He’s recovering slowly, it’s early days yet but the medical team are pleased with him.’ Evasive and only half the story. A story he was keeping to himself for now.

‘So, I suppose you want your chair back then?’ Leah’s attempt at humour was unconvincing. She looked a bit shocked to discover her stint as CEO of Bentley Media was now officially over. She was looking down at the desk and shuffling papers and couldn’t look him in the eye.

He wondered if she was still burning with the passion they’d shared as he was. The hours of waiting around for his father’s operation to be over had been spent thinking about her. He had emails, accounts and pitches to look over. The reports from the newly merged BFP Enterprises to read and absorb. Instead, he had sat next to his mother in the comfortable relatives’ room at the private hospital and stared at a blank wall, visions of Leah’s naked body dancing seductively across his inner vision.

Leah obviously thought it was over now he was back, but he had a surprise for her.

He sat on the white leather couch and stretched out his legs. Then he smiled. ‘There’s been a change of plan.’

‘Oh?’ Leah looked interested now.

‘I’ve decided that Bentley Media and BFP Enterprises can do without me for a few more days. We have enough talented senior executives to step up to the plate. Always a good idea to push your staff once in a while, that way you know the ones to watch and whose careers are worth nurturing.’

‘Right. So, will you be spending the time with your mother? Do you want me to stay on a bit longer?’ William wouldn’t be leaving the hospital for a couple of weeks at least and any more time staring at a blank wall would drive him crazy. His father was being well looked after, his mother had friends to support her and... anyway, he had other plans.

‘No, I’m going abroad.’

Leah had tensed at his words and her face drained of colour. ‘New York?’

Why would she think he'd go there? Then the penny dropped. Because Monique Devereux lived there. He must find a way to convince Leah his old flame was exactly that, a blaze that had burnt itself out a long time ago.

'No. Hong Kong actually.'

'Hong Kong?'

'Yes. I thought it would be a good time to look over our overseas offices. I was hoping you'd show me around.' He watched her face carefully as she settled her features into a neutral expression. Not before he had spotted the flare of elation she hadn't been able to hide. And her eyes, bright emerald jewels that haunted his dreams, were sparkling.

'Is that okay? I thought it only fair I get the chance to see you in action. After all, you've seen how I work; now it's my turn.'

'That's perfectly fair, Harrison, and I will be pleased to show you around my world. We do things very differently. I hope you'll be impressed.'

'I hope so, too. We can spend the weekend in Cheshire with our families, then the private jet will take us to Hong Kong on Sunday night. Does that suit?'

'Perfectly.'

'Good.'

It would be an interesting trip. He'd been to Hong Kong many times and loved the excitement of the place. And maybe, if he played his cards right, he could manoeuvre the situation so that they could spend time alone. He wanted her again. He could take her now on the white leather couch. Once was usually enough with most of the women he'd had sex with to satisfy his curiosity and slake his thirst. With Leah, however, he suspected the more he made love to her, the more he would want her. It was a conundrum. He would think about it later. Hopefully, time spent with her in Hong Kong would help to get her out of his system.

And if not? Basically, he was screwed.

Chapter Fourteen

There was no sound except the quiet hum of the private jet's engines.

The cabin crew were nearby, ready with food, drink and a friendly smile. Professional and efficient like everyone who worked for Harrison. Including the little lady sitting next to him, her head bent over her laptop.

Leah had hardly spoken since they had cleared security and boarded the plane an hour ago. At first, Harrison was glad. He had emails to answer and reports to read. Now, he was growing bored and her physical presence was disturbing his concentration.

Despite the space between the deep leather seats, Harrison was aware of every move Leah made. When she coughed, or sighed, his instinct was to look up and ask her if she was okay. He stifled it. Of course she was okay. Why wouldn't she be? She was travelling in luxury and had staff on hand to attend to her every need. What more could anyone want?

Harrison didn't like being ignored, he wasn't used to it. Women, especially, never ignored him. The two of them should be comfortable in each other's presence, having spent a blissful night together, but there was a tension between them that Harrison didn't like. He must have done something to upset her, but he had no idea what. He needed to get her talking, then maybe she would give herself away and he could find out what was bugging her.

‘So, Leah, tell me about your world.’ He smiled as he spoke in an attempt to keep the mood light.

‘My world?’ she looked puzzled, as if he had dragged her away from something important.

‘Yes, you said you’d be pleased to show me your world.’

‘Of course.’ She rummaged in her flight bag and came up with a glossy brochure. ‘This will give you all the information you need on Lau Fitzpatrick Properties, part of Fitzpatrick Financial Holdings.’ She handed it to him and he opened it. It contained the usual spiel that he knew backwards, having read everything Connor had given him thoroughly.

‘Our buzzwords are integrity, professionalism and innovation. Our long history, including more than thirty years in Asia Pacific, means we have knowledge of local markets enabling us to provide expertise in a broad range of services.’

‘Thanks, Leah, I can read.’

‘Oh, right – sorry.’

‘What I meant was, tell me about Leah Fitzpatrick’s world. Why Hong Kong for a start? When you graduated, you went abroad almost straight away. Why didn’t you spend some time in the UK?’

Her expression changed from executive to cornered animal. Something here disturbed her. He needed to tread gently. ‘If I’m getting too personal, just tell me, but it would be nice to get to know each other a bit better.’ He’d like to reacquaint himself with her body too. The thought of her legs wrapped around his hips, whilst he got to know every luscious inch of her intimately, threw his concentration and he nearly missed her reply.

‘It’s okay. I needed to get away and I’ve always been fascinated by all things Asian. I love authentic Chinese food and the way of life there suits me. It’s structured and orderly, has to be with so many people living in such a small space.’

‘What do you mean, you needed to get away? Get away from what?’

‘It’s difficult to explain.’ She looked down and stroked the keyboard of the laptop as if what she really wanted was to disappear into it.

‘Let’s have a coffee. Espresso, no sugar?’

‘Please.’

Harrison turned towards the galley and straight away, a flight attendant was at his side. ‘One espresso, no sugar, and a macchiato with one sugar. Oh, and bring some more sparkling water, please.’

‘Straight away, sir.’ The woman scurried off and Harrison turned back to Leah.

‘All my life, I’ve been there for other people,’ Leah spoke slowly, as if she was trying to find the exact words for her feelings. ‘People I loved, so I didn’t mind.’ She looked up at him as if he was about to criticise her in some way.

‘Your mum?’

‘Yes, when the multiple sclerosis was at its worse, she needed me to help her wash, dress... everything.’

‘It must have been heart-breaking.’ Harrison hated such platitudes but he wasn’t good with emotion and found it difficult to know what to say. She had a frown on her face as if she was reliving painful memories and wasn’t listening to him.

‘Then, when she died, the boys needed me. Liam and Kelty were ten, and Colin was only eight, they were devastated. And Dad, well...’

‘He took it hard.’ It was more a statement than a question. Harrison suspected Connor Fitzpatrick’s world had come to an end when he lost Rosemary.

‘It tore him apart. I had to take over running the household for the boys’ sake. Dad was hardly home.’

The coffee arrived which gave Harrison a chance to think about what she had said. ‘When did it start to get better? When you went to university?’

‘I’m not sure it did get better. I went to Manchester University so I could spend time at home with the boys. Colin especially needed a lot of attention. The twins have always had each other, but he was still so young.’

‘Did you enjoy university?’ He remembered his time at Oxford as consisting of long bouts of socialising; parties, theatre and lazy days in bed

with Monique interspersed with frantic, panic-induced nights of study. Leah had to be a mother to her brothers and run the home. *Did she have any fun at all?*

‘I enjoyed the work but I didn’t have time to join any clubs. I did have a few friends.’

‘Boyfriends?’

She glanced at him and sipped her coffee. ‘One or two.’

Evasive. Understandable, he would have been the same. ‘So Hong Kong was your chance to escape?’

She turned to him with a frown. He had sudden desire to touch her, stroke the frown lines away. He kept his hands still.

‘Oh, don’t misunderstand me, I hated leaving my family, but it was time.’

‘Time for you?’

‘Yes. I needed to prove to myself and the world I was executive material, worthy to be my father’s successor. I didn’t feel I could do that in the UK; I needed to be somewhere new.’

Leah thinks she’s taking over the company. Now, why doesn’t that surprise me? ‘Did you feel the need to prove yourself to your father too?’

‘No, it’s always been an unspoken agreement that I would take over from him, I am his daughter after all. The boys aren’t interested in business, in fact, they’re relieved I am; it takes the pressure off them.’

‘And then this merger came along and threw a spanner in the works. Things have obviously changed now.’

‘No spanner, Harrison, I am still going to take over; the merger has made no difference to that.’

He smiled to himself. *Feisty lady.* He liked them like that, so long as they weren’t standing in his way. She was glaring at him with a stubborn set to her chin. Waiting for him to argue, he supposed. He had no need to argue, the company was his and she would get used to that in time. He didn’t want to upset her, not when his whole body was fizzing with lust for her. He could smell her perfume and tried not to stare at her chest,

rising up and down too rapidly. She was ready for a fight but the only action he was interested in would take place in the bedroom.

‘It’s a big responsibility, running a giant company like ours. You’re happy where you are, that’s obvious by the way you speak about Hong Kong. Wouldn’t it be easier to stay in a job you love and leave the running of BFP Enterprises to others?’

‘Leave it to the men you mean? You don’t think a little woman is capable of being head of a large financial organisation?’

‘Some women, yes.’

‘But not me?’ Her voice was rising and her green eyes narrowing. Harrison knew he should stop taunting her but couldn’t resist pushing. He wasn’t entirely convinced of her ability to run the whole show. His time spent in her world would prove him right or wrong.

‘That remains to be seen, Leah, I’ll look forward to watching you in action.’

‘And I’ll look forward to showing you how wrong you are by underestimating me.’

‘Interesting times ahead.’ He spoke softly, unthreateningly. He hadn’t realised how hard Leah’s life had been. Losing her beloved mum and having to take over the role of surrogate mother to her brothers at the age of fifteen must have been a horrendous burden. Then, not being able to enjoy student life as family responsibilities still weighed her down. She didn’t complain, just took it on the chin. Would he have been so amenable if he’d missed out on his youth like she had?

All he wanted now was to make love to her. She would have to meet him half way though. He suspected she wouldn’t feel comfortable with the idea, despite the double bed waiting invitingly in the bedroom at the back of the plane. Too many other people to witness them disappearing together. Time to test it out anyway.

He stood up and stretched. ‘Think I’ll catch some sleep before we land. There’s plenty of room if you care to join me, the bed’s a double.’ It was said as a throwaway remark but Leah blushed and looked away. He could see she was trying to appear cool and longed to pick her up and carry her

to the bed as he had done before. He would never embarrass her like that. It had to be her decision.

‘I’ll stay here, still got some work to do.’

He shrugged and walked away. In the bedroom, he took his shoes and socks off, then sat on the bed and waited for fifteen minutes. No sign of her. He took off his trousers and shirt and hung them up carefully. Then he climbed under the duvet and lay, with his hands behind his head and thought about all the things he would like to do to Ms Leah Fitzpatrick if only she’d unbend a little and come and join him.

Despite being wide-awake when he had left Leah, the hypnotic sound of the engines and the gentle movement of the plane started to relax him. His eyelids closed. Then he stopped fighting sleep and started to drift off.

By the time he felt sleep overtake him, he knew Leah wasn’t coming.

Leah watched him go with a yearning deep in her soul. She wanted to join him in that double bed more than she had ever wanted anything. He was so confident in his ability to charm her, sure that she wouldn’t be able to resist. But she had to, for her sanity’s sake.

Harrison didn’t know about her dislike of flying. Despite the air miles she clocked up every year in her job, she still felt nervous until she was back on the ground. Still smarting from their conversation, she was glad she hadn’t told him. His opinion of her was low enough without adding frightened little woman to it. Although she’d always suspected that he didn’t think much of her abilities, to have it confirmed in such a ruthless fashion had been deeply hurtful. She had tried not to let it show, but suspected he knew. Harrison J Bentley could look into her eyes and read everything she tried to keep hidden. The man had many talents, reading people was just one. Overpowering them with his outrageous arrogance was another.

He was, however, an excellent listener. Once again, she had poured out her heart to him, telling him personal details she should have kept to herself. He seemed to have a knack of sitting quietly and waiting for her to

spill her guts. She always obliged. *How does he do that, and why do I let him?*

She had been determined to act cool on this trip, not let her attraction to him colour her judgement. They were rivals and Harrison would be scrutinising her every move once they arrived in Hong Kong. She had no qualms concerning her abilities as the chief executive of Lau Fitzpatrick Holdings. The many changes the company was undergoing were challenging but she knew she would be fine so long as Harrison didn't try to interfere with the part of the company she ran.

What she couldn't control, however, was her powerful attraction to the man; the way her body ignored her mind whenever they were together. She had never before experienced such heart-fluttering excitement whenever he looked at her. Her insides had never melted so quickly at the touch of his hand. He had just demonstrated the power he had over her. He had asked her one question, showed the merest hint of being interested in her and she had folded in exactly the same way she had done when she had been eighteen.

Women at the top of their game were supposed to be able to have it all, weren't they? So why couldn't she have Bentley Fitzpatrick Enterprises and Harrison J Bentley? The only thing stopping her was her own low self-esteem.

The plane was quiet again. She stared at the screen of her laptop, then closed it with a sigh. How much work was she going to get done, knowing that Harrison's delectable body was waiting for her a short distance away, naked and ready to fulfil her girlish dreams? She wanted him so much; she could burst with the ache inside her.

So, what am I waiting for? Was she worried about the staff? They must be used to it. Harrison would have used that bedroom for activities other than sleeping many times. The flight attendants would be familiar with his playboy lifestyle. They were all attractive women and may have been the lucky recipients of his attention themselves.

God, what a depressing thought. Was she going to spend the next few days feeling jealous of every woman Harrison spoke to or smiled at? If so, she was in for a rough time.

She took her travel pillow out of her flight bag and placed it around her neck. Normally it felt comfortable and had a calming effect on her. Today, it felt restrictive. She wanted to be naked and unfettered, in bed with the most gorgeous man she had ever known.

She closed her eyes and tried to rest. The peace and quiet of the plane and the subdued lighting should have been conducive to sleep, but all she could think of was the bedroom nearby and, behind the closed door, an opportunity for the best sex she would ever experience. Any red-blooded woman would be with Harrison, bouncing joyfully all over that bed by now. *What is wrong with me?*

She sat up and tossed the travel pillow aside. She may not have many more opportunities like this one. He had told her he wanted her. *What am I waiting for?*

She made her way to the bedroom and put her ear to the door. Nothing. She glanced furtively over her shoulder in case someone was watching her but the cabin was empty. She slowly opened the door and peaked in.

Harrison was lying on his back, spread-eagled in the bed, a duvet covering him from the waist down. He was asleep, with one arm flung over his head. She wondered if he was naked and the thought sent heat racing through her. Dare she pull the duvet down to find out? Should she wake him up so she could tell him she'd changed her mind? She crept nearer to the bed and stood at the side, gazing down at him.

His features, in the depths of sleep, were softer, younger despite the stubble that graced his chin. He was relaxed and looked as if he hadn't a care in the world. He murmured softly and she wondered if he was dreaming. She let her gaze follow the contours of his body, admiring his smooth skin, hard muscles and utter masculinity.

This man had been part of her life for so long, albeit mainly at a distance. She had always known of his existence, but it wasn't until her eighteenth birthday that she had got to know him personally. He had held

her whilst she sobbed, listened to her tales of woe, looked after her and stopped her making a bigger fool of herself than she already had.

Then, ten years later, she had got drunk again in front of his colleagues. He had looked after her that time too. They had shared the most mind-blowing sex, they'd worked and laughed together. She had met his family and his staff; and he was about to be introduced to her world. They had a bond that was strengthening by the day.

She warned herself the worst thing she could do was fall in love with Harrison J Bentley, but suspected that warning had come too late. For the feeling that overwhelmed her as she watched him sleeping was something she'd never felt for any man except her father and brothers. That feeling was tenderness.

She quietly tiptoed out of the room and went back to her seat.

Chapter Fifteen

As the company car sped away from the airport towards the centre of Hong Kong, Harrison expected Leah to perk up and show a bit of excitement. They were on her territory now, the place she had been looking forward to showing him. He knew she wanted him to be impressed and to admit he had been wrong about her. He was more than willing to be persuaded of her competence and was looking forward to seeing Leah Fitzpatrick the CEO in action.

Instead of wowing him with local knowledge and fascinating information about her adopted home, she sat huddled in the corner of the limo, staring morosely out of the window.

He had woken up alone, but refreshed after the longest sleep he had enjoyed for weeks. Leah was still awake, having worked the whole trip no doubt, her laptop open and documents spread out on the table in front of her.

Harrison wanted to ask her why she hadn't joined him but, one look at her face, pale with dark smudges under her eyes, and he had his answer; she had obviously been working all night. Leah Fitzpatrick, like her father and himself, was a workaholic.

The car was speeding towards the apartment in Mid Levels Central District that Leah shared with two colleagues. He would stay in one of the Bentley House hotels. In the penthouse suite of course.

The last time Harrison had been in Hong Kong was ten years ago when he had been backpacking around the world. Then, he had been fresh out of university and penniless as his father had stopped his allowance when he discovered his son had no intention of going into the business. Harrison had worked hard for his low wages; in bars, front of house in restaurants and once, in desperation, as a porter in one of the family's hotels.

What a difference ten years made. He had fought his way from obscurity to become a successful CEO and was well on the way to running BFP Enterprises, thus, earning his place as one of the world's most successful and richest company directors. He hoped his father would be proud. He also hoped Leah would forgive him.

Hong Kong was hot and humid, but the car was air-conditioned. The driver spoke little on the journey but told them to take umbrellas with them as a storm was forecast for later that afternoon.

When they arrived at the apartment, Harrison played the gentleman by carrying Leah's bags. Her two friends greeted her with screams and hugs as soon as she stepped through the door.

'Oh my God, let me look at you,' said one.

'You're back, you're back! We've missed you so much!' from the other.

The three of them stood in the centre of the apartment in a group hug, their arms around each other's shoulders, jumping up and down like little girls in a school playground. Harrison put the bags down and watched with amusement. There was obviously more to Leah than she had let him see so far.

The three seemed oblivious of him, which was a unique experience. He couldn't remember a time when he had been in the company of women and felt like an intruder. Then almost as if she could read his thoughts, Leah turned to him with an embarrassed little smile.

‘Girls, this is Harrison J Bentley, our new business partner. Harrison, meet Joyce and Tanya.’

‘Of course, we’ve heard all about Harrison J Bentley. Hi!’ Joyce came forward and shook Harrison’s hand.

Tanya crept forward shyly, gazing at Harrison from under lowered lashes. ‘Hello.’ She whispered.

‘Hello, Tanya, very pleased to meet you.’

‘Tell me something I’ve always wanted to know,’ Joyce asked ‘what does the J stand for?’ She was flirting with him, and he resolved to be friendly but not to flirt back. He didn’t want to upset Leah.

‘Jonathan. My mother was a Harrison Ford fan, hence my first name, but my grandfather’s name was Jonathan and it’s a family tradition to name boys after their grandfathers. Harrison Jonathan Bentley was too much of a mouthful so I shortened the Jonathan to J.’

‘Ah,’ said both girls together, as if Harrison had just imparted the secret to eternal youth. ‘that’s so interesting.’

‘Let me show you around,’ Leah said, dragging him away from her friends’ adoring gazes. His instincts had been right. She didn’t appreciate him being too friendly with her flatmates. Did he detect a hint of jealousy?

The apartment was small but compact as many of Hong Kong’s homes were. Every inch of space was used to the fullest advantage. There were three bedrooms, bathroom, a separate living room, kitchen and dining room. There was also a balcony, which Leah headed for. ‘Come and look at the view, it’s magnificent.’

They leant on the balcony rail and gazed out at Hong Kong in silence.

Leah was looking more like the confident young woman he had seen in the board meeting. Whatever had been eating her before obviously forgotten. ‘You love it here, don’t you?’ Harrison asked, watching Leah’s eyes shine with excitement as she looked out over Victoria Harbour. She looked beautiful when she smiled and Harrison felt the familiar tightening in his stomach.

‘I do, it’s so vibrant and dynamic. There’s so much going on. Everything’s packed into such a small area but it’s ordered and efficient.’

‘Regimented,’ Harrison replied. ‘Don’t you find it a little bit claustrophobic?’

‘Not at all. You get used to it. I love living high up – I mean, just look at that view.’ He lived high up in London but she had never mentioned the view from his luxury penthouse suite. Maybe the London skyline couldn’t compete with Hong Kong, but it was impressive in its own right.

He looked as instructed and saw a forest of modern skyscrapers interspersed with small patches of trees, the green a welcome relief from the grey concrete. Older buildings, obviously built in a bygone era, struggled to make their presence felt amongst all the towering glass. The skyscrapers would always win. They didn’t call Hong Kong the vertical city for nothing.

The sky was getting darker by the minute. A storm was brewing.

As they stood together looking out at the view, Harrison was acutely aware of her closeness. He wanted to reach out and touch her, to stroke the skin on her bare arm, to bury his face in her hair and breathe in the smell of her shampoo. She affected him in a way no other woman had and his body’s response was immediate. He wondered what she would do if he kissed her and turned slightly towards her.

He raised his hand to stroke her face, and a clap of thunder made Leah jump.

‘Oh!’ she squealed, ‘I hate thunderstorms.’

‘Come on, let’s go inside.’

Back in the apartment, the girls had made tea and the four of them sat in the living room making polite conversation. Harrison sensed Leah wanted him gone so she could catch up with her friends alone. He was growing bored anyway, so phoned the driver to let him know he’d be right down.

‘I’ll meet you at the office at seven tomorrow, Leah. I’m looking forward to it.’

‘So am I. Until tomorrow.’ Leah sounded distant. Was it an act for the girls, as she didn’t want them to know they’d slept together? Or was it

simpler than that? Had one night been enough for her. She'd had sex, finished what they'd started ten years ago, and now she wasn't interested in him anymore. A thought that left a bitter taste in his mouth. *We're not finished with each other yet. Not by a long way.*

Chapter Sixteen

When Leah greeted her secretary the following morning, she sensed a difference in her. She was normally level-headed with nothing seeming to phase her. Today, however, she appeared flustered and her cheeks were pink. She kept patting her hair and Leah could detect a smear of lipstick on her thin lips. She hardly ever wore make-up to the office.

‘Kevin Wong and Mr Bentley are in a meeting and they would like you to join them as soon as you arrive.’ So that was it, she’d met Harrison.

‘How long has Mr Bentley been here?’ She heard the irritation in her voice but her PA didn’t seem to notice.

‘Oh, about an hour. He’s such a lovely man, isn’t he? So charming and polite.’

‘Delightful.’ Leah had wanted to get to the office early and be engrossed in work when Harrison arrived. He had wrong-footed her. He knew what time her driver was collecting her and made sure he was there first.

Was this Harrison’s plan? To challenge her authority? This was her territory, she was supposed to be showing him around, not taking orders. There was nothing else for it. She got back in the lift again, fuming and wishing she had time to calm down but she was already at a disadvantage and needed to regain the upper hand.

She marched into the Deputy CEO's office without knocking and the two men looked up. They were laughing together at something one of them had said. The male bonding was obviously going well.

'Leah, you've made it. Good morning.' Harrison looked smug, probably congratulating himself that his plan had worked.

'Morning, Leah,' Kevin said.

'Good morning, gentleman. Glad to see you two have met, that saves me from going over the groundwork, so we can get straight to business.'

'I was telling Harrison about the latest commercial development. I thought I could take a drive out there later and show him around.'

'I had that down on my agenda, Kevin, I need to monitor progress anyway.'

'As you wish.' Kevin knew better than to argue with her. They were undertaking a project that was close to Leah's heart – shopping.

'No time like the present. Shall we go?' Harrison stood up and opened the door. Leah had no choice but to walk past him, trying to avoid eye contact. This wasn't difficult as he towered over her, even though she was wearing her signature high heels. She shivered as his closeness affected her already shredded nerves. She would have seemed unprofessional if she'd complained she hadn't even had a coffee yet, although her heart was racing like a runaway horse without the need for caffeine to drive it over the edge.

'Fine.' She left the office and Harrison followed her, calling a cheery farewell to Kevin over his shoulder.

'I can introduce you to people before we leave if you like.'

'No need, Kevin's already taken care of it. And he's briefed me about the staff meeting this afternoon. He says we have to stand as you don't allow anyone to sit?'

Good old Kevin. She tried not to feel angry; the man was only doing his job. Her fault for not getting to work earlier. 'That's right, I believe that meetings should be short and to the point. Staff should stick to the agenda and not deviate. I've spent so many wasted hours listening to people going over the same points and getting nowhere.'

‘Are we allowed to pace? I think more clearly when I pace.’

‘Yes, Harrison, you can pace.’ She pictured him, dressed in his cowboy outfit with his feet on the desk, and hoped he behaved himself at the meeting. He had dressed appropriately today. He wore a black bespoke suit that fitted him to perfection. His shirt was white and his tie was blue. She couldn’t decide which was the brightest blue; his eyes or his tie. The darkness of his clothing made his chestnut brown hair look lighter. He looked stunning and Leah couldn’t help be aware of all the admiring glances he was receiving from female members of staff. He was an exceptionally attractive man and his height made him stand out amongst the other men in the building.

They were silent as the company car carried them to their destination; Harrison gazed out of the window appearing genuinely interested in everything he saw.

Causeway Bay was a shopper’s paradise and Leah loved it. It sold every luxury item imaginable. They drove past stores selling clothes, jewellery, handbags, perfume and every kind of accessory a woman or man could want. People thronged the pavements, happily clutching designer label carrier bags, some smiling, others looking bemused or harassed. Shopping wasn’t for everyone, but Leah revelled in it. She had never had much time for frivolities as a teenager but had made up for that since moving to Hong Kong.

Today, however, she had to walk past her favourite shops and keep her professional persona intact. She needed to have her wits about her and forget about her growing feelings towards Harrison. He was a colleague she was showing around, nothing more.

When they arrived at the shopping mall they were inspecting, she stopped. She turned to Harrison who was looking up at the sky, which was barely visible for all the skyscrapers towering over them.

‘I better give you a bit of background first. You know that Hong Kong is mainly self-governing, of course, which means we are free from China’s import tariffs. Prices for luxury goods are much lower than on mainland China so people come here.’ Harrison didn’t respond and she hoped he

was listening. She carried on. 'There's a lot of luxury items on the market as you can see.' Harrison gave a brief nod. 'With that and the increasing number of shoppers, retail sales have soared, which has pushed the demand for property and retail space up.'

'Which is where Lau Fitzpatrick Properties comes in.'

'That's right.' *Good, he was listening.* 'Space in this new shopping mall is highly sought after. There's a lot of wealthy people in Hong Kong, as well as the visitors.'

'I'm surprised there's much opportunity for development left. Population nearly as large as London with an area almost twenty times smaller.'

'The number of visitors is increasing all the time and the retailers need space for their goods. It's a challenge, but that's what our business is about, Harrison, rising to the challenge. We're exploring other locations of course.'

'And all these visitors need somewhere to stay, which is where Bentley House hotels come in. It's a marriage made in heaven this merger, don't you agree?'

Leah wondered if Harrison was teasing her again, but he looked serious. He was always serious about business and recognised an opportunity before most of his rivals. Now the Bentleys and Fitzpatricks were rivals no longer but business partners. She should be pleased. If she could be sure of taking over she would have been. But if Harrison takes over, her career would have all been for nothing. She refused to be second best, forever in his shadow, she would have to find another home for her talents and that would break her heart.

Then she melted as Harrison's smile worked its magic. *A marriage made in heaven.* If only. It would solve everything. She knew it was out of the question. Harrison wanted her for sex but marriage? Preposterous.

'Yes, Harrison, I agree.' *Liar.* She forced herself to keep smiling.

The staff meeting was a revelation to Harrison. Leah facilitated proceedings with an iron fist. She knew exactly when to let someone speak

and when to politely, but firmly, cut them off. No-one interrupted or argued. They all stood in a circle like children in a playground about to play a game and took turns to read their carefully typed reports. Copies had been handed out beforehand so Harrison could follow the gist. They all spoke English, but when Leah invited comments from the others, some answered in Cantonese. Harrison glanced at Leah to note her reaction and was surprised and more than slightly impressed that she slipped from English to Cantonese seamlessly. He only had a working knowledge of other languages but then he hadn't lived abroad for as long as Leah had. By the end of the meeting, his admiration for her skills had grown.

'That was interesting,' Harrison said as they walked out of the room, having smiled and bowed at each member of the group. *Impeccable manners and no-one gives anything away.*

'It lasted precisely thirty minutes and we managed to get more work done and agree on how to take things forward than we would ever have done sitting down.'

'How about a tour of the building? Is this a good time?'

'Of course.' Leah smiled politely and led the way. Harrison was determined to see as much as he could of this organisation that did things so differently to Bentley Media. He was also anxious to see how Leah interacted with the lower ranks.

The Lau Fitzpatrick Enterprises building itself was impressive if you liked the clinical, uncluttered look. It was all sharp edges and smooth, empty walls. There was state-of-the art signage in several languages but the effect, to Harrison's eyes, was monochrome glass and metal. No warmth or colour. He found it soulless.

The working environment was alien too. It was shockingly quiet. No music or loud voices. Everyone was terribly serious and kept their heads down over their keyboards, barely looking up. Harrison knew that, if he had to work here, he would miss the banter he enjoyed with his creatives and, after a short time, he would probably even start to miss Oscar.

Leah, however, was inordinately proud of her company. 'We want to create a workplace of the future, one that helps optimise productivity.'

‘Yes, but what about individuality?’

‘We’re team players, Harrison; the end result is the most important thing. We are happy to sacrifice our own needs on the altar of the company’s success.’

As they walked around the building and Leah introduced him to people, he realised that he had been wrong about her. Far from being the empty-headed bimbo, protected and cosseted as the boss’s daughter he had thought her to be, she commanded the respect of all her colleagues. Her opinion and advice was much in demand and her phone never stopped ringing.

By the end of that week, Harrison had to admit his opinion of Connor’s princess had completely changed. Every person who spoke to him in private told him how wonderful she was.

Her knowledge of her adopted home was extensive. She knew who the up and coming architects were and the history of all the properties they were invested in. She had a certain light in her eyes when speaking of the company’s successes. Leah was completely committed to her role and Harrison could find no fault with her, no matter how hard he tried.

Time to face facts. Leah Fitzpatrick was a worthy rival for the leadership of their company. Instead of being an obstacle to his own ambitions, the thought caused a ripple of excitement to move up his spine. He was confident of his abilities and had no doubt he would win the fight. But the thought of taking on the luscious Ms Fitzpatrick, either in the boardroom or the bedroom, was a challenge he relished.

Chapter Seventeen

It was Friday night and the staff of Lau Fitzpatrick Properties were out on the town. At least, eight of them were. They had arranged to meet outside a nightclub on D'Aguilar Street in Lan Kwai Fong. Leah had assured Harrison it was Hong Kong's trendiest nightspot. The street was narrow, steep and packed with bars and nightclubs.

Harrison was impressed so far. He people-watched as he waited for the others. Even at the early hour of six-thirty, crowds thronged the street. Chinese youngsters mixed with visitors and ex-pats. Office workers still in their business suits mingled with the night owls who looked as if they were gearing up for the long haul. The street was full of noise and bright lights; the vibe was electric.

Leah, Joyce and Tanya arrived together. Joyce threw her arms around his neck and gave him a kiss. He watched Leah warily for her reaction, but she looked away and said something to Tanya. The girls wore the traditional attire of the hardened clubber. In other words, as little as possible. It was a long time since Harrison had been in a club but he remembered how incredibly hot and sweaty it got. The female of the species had a perfect excuse to show off as much flesh as was decent. Leah wore a little black dress, short with thin straps, a low neckline and tiny sequins that shone under the bright lights.

As well as the skimpy but extremely sexy dresses, the girls wore pink flashing bunny ears. They all wore killer heels and their make-up was straight out of a fashion magazine. Harrison couldn't help smiling. Ms Fitzpatrick was out for a good time tonight and maybe, if he were a good boy, he would get lucky. He was flying back to the UK on Sunday and Leah was staying on for a while to finalise the shopping mall deal, so who knew when he'd get another chance to spend the night with her.

Harrison spotted an empty table as they all trooped through the doors of the club. It wouldn't stay empty for long as the place was filling up quickly. 'Right,' he said, slipping into CEO-in-charge mode, 'Leah and I will go to the bar, you two grab that table.'

Joyce and Tanya obeyed without a word but Leah shot him a glowering look.

'What?'

'Nothing. I just hope you're not going to be as bossy as this all night.'

'Difficult not to be bossy when you're the boss.'

'You're not the boss here in Hong Kong, Harrison.'

'Yet.' He gave her his best winning smile to soften his words. He wasn't going to pull any punches. This company was his and she needed to get used to the idea. Tonight, however, was for socializing, so he put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her cheek. 'You look beautiful by the way, really stunning.'

No woman could resist a compliment and Leah was no exception. He saw her trying to hide a smile and she blushed under her make-up. He pressed his advantage. 'So, what do you lovely ladies drink when you're out on the prowl?'

She stepped away from him and brushed her hair back in a nervous gesture. 'We're not on the prowl as you put it; this is for your benefit, to show you the best of Hong Kong.'

'So you don't go out every Friday night?'

'No, of course not. I've not been to a club for ages.'

'So what about the...' He waved at the bunny ears.

‘These are Joyce’s idea; she thought it would make a statement that we’re fun-loving and ready for anything.’

‘And are you? Ready for anything?’ She was blushing furiously and looking decidedly uncomfortable.

‘No, not really. Clubs aren’t my scene normally, although I do love dancing.’

‘Shame. I’d like to see you let your hair down. So, what are you drinking?’

‘Well, seeing it’s Happy Hour I think I’ll have a cocktail. We’ll get the same for the girls.’

‘I’ll have an English beer.’

They carried the drinks over to the others. Kevin and his wife and two young men had joined them. Soon, conversation across the table was impossible with the live music assaulting their eardrums. Joyce was giving him the eye and Tanya was sitting quietly on her own. Leah was valiantly trying to talk to Kevin’s wife and Harrison was feeling restless.

Leah couldn’t possibly object if he danced with her friends, could she? Especially as she was busy playing the boss. Social occasions were scarce in large organisations and Leah was no doubt trying help Kevin’s wife to feel part of the group. He didn’t want to interrupt her when she was in business mode. He would make sure she enjoyed herself tonight, however; this was her night too. But for now, he would entertain her friends whilst he waited. He got up and held out his hands to Joyce and Tanya.

‘Come on girls, show me your moves Hong Kong style.’ Neither of them needed asking twice and he led them both to the dance floor and, to their delight, twirled them around under the flashing neon lights.

Leah was suffering from *déjà vu*. It was the awards ceremony all over again. Kevin had dragged his giggling wife up and led her to the dance floor. The two young men had gone to the bar and were mingling with other youngsters. Young people didn’t sit down in clubs any more, they circulated, danced or propped up the bar. You don’t meet members of the opposite sex by sitting in a dark corner, you need to put yourself out there.

Worst of all, was the sight of Harrison on the dance floor. He hadn't asked *her* to dance. Why? At least he was dancing with two of her friends and not his ex-lover. She still felt deflated. *What is wrong with me? Why am I always the one sitting on my own?* She loved dancing and longed to dance with Harrison. Sadly, she was old-fashioned enough to want to be asked, not have to ask him herself.

The week had gone by so fast and Harrison was leaving on Sunday. She felt empty at the thought for no matter how many times she told herself they were business partners, nothing more, her heart told her a different story. She was falling for him with no way to stop herself from crash landing. Every time he smiled at her, teased her, or got too close and his aroma enveloped her senses, she wanted to throw herself at him and beg him to love her. Tonight, he wore a different cologne to the light citrus he wore for work. This was woody, with a hint of leather. Intensely masculine.

It was no use; Harrison J Bentley didn't do commitment. In fact, he didn't do relationships, he just did sex. And they'd already had that. The memory of their night together was burned indelibly into her brain. As far as he was concerned, she was past her sell-by date.

Now, she was sitting on her own again, feeling sorry for herself. The problem was that clubs were alien places. She had no real idea of protocol, what was standard behaviour. There were no reports to read and digest that told her how to behave. She had spent her youth looking after her sick mother, then her little brothers. There had been no time for going out, experimenting with make-up and clothes, giggling with girl friends about boys and kissing. Despite all that, she would give up her freedom and everything that went with it to have her mother back. To feel her loving arms around her, telling her everything was going to be okay.

To Leah's consternation, a tear escaped and rolled down her cheek. She brushed it away. *What am I doing? Crying like a sulky teen.* Her staff were on the dance floor enjoying themselves and she should be there too. As the boss, she didn't need permission to dance or anything else for that matter. And who needed a partner? She would dance on her own.

Before her nerve deserted her, Leah downed the rest of the cocktail and promised herself that nothing but sparkling water would pass her lips for the remainder of the night. She'd already been drunk in Harrison's presence twice in her life, a third time would not be lucky. Strolling towards the crowd of people who were dancing with varying degrees of skill, she plastered a confident smile on her face to give the impression she danced alone all the time.

Harrison and the girls were gyrating and swaying together in the middle of the dance floor. Leah longed to join them and moved in their direction, but lost her nerve at the last minute and turned her back to them. *I don't need them. I don't need anyone.* She closed her eyes and gave herself permission to let go.

The music was so loud that Leah couldn't think straight. So, she abandoned any attempt at thinking and gave herself up to the atmosphere, the rhythm and the thudding vibration that shook the floor causing her feet to tingle in their glittery high-heeled shoes. She had felt so good about herself when she was getting ready with her friends. Her dress was new and expensive, she had sprayed herself liberally with her favourite perfume and made her eyes as smoky as she dared. The result was a woman she didn't recognize in the mirror, but she liked the image – strong and fearless. She wanted to be that woman and if she had to dance herself into that persona, then so be it.

The music throbbed through her, making her tingle in secret places and the lights flashed overhead, creating a feeling of unreality. It was no wonder people lost their inhibitions in clubs like this. Well, she would lose hers tonight too. If Harrison didn't want her, there would be plenty of men who did.

Then Leah felt a hand on her shoulder, a male hand. She sensed him standing behind her. A thrill of triumph rushed through her at the thought that Harrison did want to dance with her after all. He'd left the girls and come straight over to her. When she turned around, however, she got a shock. It wasn't Harrison. It was one of the young men from the office. He smiled shyly at her and she forced her lips to respond.

‘Hi.’

‘Hi, Leah, hope you don’t mind me dancing with you, but you look really hot tonight.’

‘No, I’m flattered.’ And she was. The boy was a lot younger than her but to be told she looked hot gave her a buzz that, in some way, made up for the disappointment she felt that he wasn’t the man she wanted to dance with.

‘I’m glad you’re back in Hong Kong. We’ve all missed you.’ He was holding her hands nervously and moving back and forwards. His body language was stilted and careful. The kind of dancing a young man would do with his maiden aunt and she wondered what he really thought of her. *Is he just being polite? Does he really think I’m hot?* Perhaps it was simply because she was older and his boss. She commanded respect from her staff and they treated her accordingly. Had she caused a situation whereby the boss/worker role spilled over into social events? She could never be as informal with her workers as Harrison was with his beloved creatives.

When the dance was over, he thanked her politely, then turned and grabbed a young girl who had been hovering nearby and spun her away. So, he was just being polite. Leah was left on her own again. She’d swallow her pride and join the others. When she looked for them, though, they had left the dance floor. She looked over at the table and saw the three of them sitting together and laughing at something Harrison had said. Joyce was invading his personal space and Tanya was gazing up into his face adoringly.

She headed for the ladies to freshen her make-up and regroup. When she was ready to get back into the fray, however, she found her strong and fearless self had deserted her, there was just uncertain, socially inept Leah left behind. Then the doubts crept in and undermined all the positive thinking she had been using to give her confidence. The three of them looked happy together, they didn’t need her to break up the party. The young man had done his duty and danced with the distant and unapproachable boss. If she left and went home, no one would even notice.

With a final, backward glance at the others, she walked through the doors and out of the club. Just as she thought, no one had noticed her leaving. Ignoring the taxis waiting at the kerb, she started walking. D'Aguilar Street was one-way and, if she got a cab outside the club, it would crawl in heavy traffic all the way to the bottom. Much quicker to get a taxi at the end of the street.

What's the hurry? She was going home alone and who knew at what hour the others would get back. Maybe Harrison would take the girls back to his hotel room for a nightcap.

She felt sick to her stomach at the thought and she hurried down the street, suddenly needing the comfort of her own bed and the pleasure of pulling the duvet over her head to hide from the world.

Chapter Eighteen

Harrison looked up and down the street. Leah had left only minutes before; she couldn't have disappeared so quickly. He peered into the red taxis but couldn't see her. Red was the luckiest colour in Chinese culture, maybe he should have worn a red shirt instead of his blue denim one. He hadn't had much luck that night. Why had Leah left? She had ignored him all evening and he was still not sure what he had done wrong. He had danced with the girls as a favour to her and they had clung to him like limpets.

Then he spotted her, walking with her head down. She was too far away to hear him if he shouted so he started running. When he got nearer, he called out to her. 'Leah!' She hadn't heard him and appeared lost in thought. He ran faster. 'Hey.' He caught up to her and touched her shoulder. She jumped.

'Oh, my God, Harrison, you scared me.' She put her hand to her throat and stepped back. Her face was pale and her eyes red.

'Sorry. Where are you going? And why didn't you tell me you were leaving?' If anyone else had behaved that way he would have been angry at their rudeness, but Leah was upset. In fact, she hadn't been acting her normal cool self all night.

‘I’m tired and I didn’t want to disturb you. Everyone was having such a good time.’

‘You think?’ He was bored rigid and longing to be alone with her.

‘Well, you looked as if you were.’ Her voice shook as if she were on the verge of tears.

‘So, these didn’t work any magic then.’

She frowned then realised where he was looking. ‘I forgot I was wearing these stupid things.’ She pulled the bunny ears off her head and threw them onto the ground. Harrison picked them up.

‘What’s wrong, Leah, tell me.’

‘Nothing’s wrong, I’m fine.’ She turned away and refused to look him in the eye.

‘You’re not fine. Right, come with me.’ He took her arm and propelled her towards the nearest taxi. They got in, he gave the driver the name of his hotel and they moved away.

‘Harrison, I need to go home, I’m really tired.’

‘Why were you dancing on your own?’

‘What?’ She turned a frightened face to him and he had the urge to take her in his arms and comfort her. She looked as she had on her eighteenth birthday, in a world of pain.

‘Why didn’t you join us?’

‘Because I didn’t want to spoil the mood, you three looked so good dancing together.’

‘What! Leah are you mad? I was being nice to your friends because I thought that was what you wanted. They’re just a pair of giggling girls. You’re the one I wanted to dance with.’

‘But you didn’t, did you? You asked them.’

Harrison was dumbfounded. She was a senior executive, in charge of a building full of people, but she had such low self-esteem in social situations it was unreal. ‘I don’t believe we’re having this conversation. We were in a club, anything goes in a nightclub, it’s not like the business world, Leah. If you want to dance with someone you grab them and drag them onto the dance floor.’

‘That’s easy for you to say. Everything comes easily to you, Harrison.’

‘Is that right?’ He was starting to feel angry. He knew her life hadn’t been plain sailing, but his hadn’t either. The pressure he’d been under to conform all his life had turned him into a rebel at an early age. His parents had expected so much and he had let them down so many times.

‘It’s alright for you, Harrison, you had your life mapped out from birth – boarding school, Oxford, then straight into the boardroom.’ She smiled a sad little smile. ‘You were always the golden boy, even as a child. Everyone adored you. My father admires you. Your parents put you on a pedestal. We were constantly hearing stories about the Bentley Boy Wonder.’

He squirmed in his seat. ‘You shouldn’t believe everything you hear. Anyway, people can fall off pedestals.’ He thought of how he had disappeared into a grey, empty world when he had argued with his father. No pedestal then, just a bottomless pit. His father had refused to speak to him and only the intervention of his mother had brought them back together. He had spent years travelling the world alone, working his way from place to place. Then, a business opportunity had presented itself, he had acquired Bentley Media and turned his life around.

‘Oh no, not you.’ Leah laughed but there was no humour in it. ‘You’ll always be up there sparkling away like a diamond. Everything you touch turns to gold.’

‘Gold *and* diamonds – riches indeed.’

At that moment, they arrived at the hotel and Harrison paid the driver then took Leah’s arm. They were silent as they travelled up to the penthouse suite. He was in the same situation as he had been ten years ago. He wanted to make love to Leah but the mood wasn’t right. He needed her to open up again and tell him what was wrong before he could help her. If he didn’t, he’d be taking advantage of her vulnerable state. He wouldn’t go to all that trouble for any other woman. He would have left her in the taxi with instructions to the driver to take her home.

Leah wasn’t any other woman. She was special.

As well as being his colleague, she was his lover. He'd never had a lover before. He'd had sexual partners but that was all. The word "love" had never entered into it. Monique Devereux had taught him everything she knew about sex. And that everything was extensive. Subsequent women had been the lucky recipients of his knowledge. None of them had touched his heart as Leah did. They shared a common history, were rivals for the same position in the company but more than that – they were fantastic together in bed. He felt a connection with Leah he had never felt before. He didn't know if it was love, but he wanted it to last.

She stood in the middle of the living-room exuding tiredness and misery.

'Is this where you offer me a nightcap, then we end up in bed?' *Is there a hint of hopefulness in her cynical words?*

'No. This is where I make you a coffee, then you go to bed alone. I'll be here if you want me but I will never force myself on you.'

She looked utterly defeated. He hated to see it. He led her to the bedroom, turned back the duvet and took a T-shirt from one of his drawers. 'You've worn one of mine before so I know it will cover your modesty.' He left her and went to make the coffee.

When he returned she was in bed, wearing his T-shirt. She had washed her make-up off and looked more like the real Leah. She giggled when she saw him. The bunny ears had worked.

'What? Don't you think they suit me?' He waggled the ears and they flashed.

'Yes, probably more than they suit me.'

He put the coffee down on the table next to the bed. 'Do you need anything else, or shall I leave you?'

Tears started to flow down her cheeks and darken the T-shirt. 'I need a hug.'

'That I can do.' He took off the bunny ears, and got onto the bed with her. She immediately turned to him and he wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair while she sobbed on his chest. Her body

shook. He felt helpless against such intense pain. Whatever was hurting Leah, it went deep and he doubted his ability to help her.

Gradually the shaking ceased. Harrison didn't move, just stroked Leah's hair and waited. The coffee had grown cold, Leah's breathing changed to a deeper, more even rhythm. She had fallen asleep. Still Harrison lay holding her and not moving. She wanted comfort, not clever words or advice. She just wanted someone to hold her. It was a new experience for Harrison. He had never been asked for that before, unless as a prelude to sex. No one had ever wanted him just for himself. Just the simple, primitive need to be physically close to another person.

He could give her this, so he lay still and held her until the first rays of morning light chased the darkness into the corners of the room.

When she stirred, he kissed her on the forehead. She murmured as she woke slowly and realised where she was. Then she sat up and pulled the T-shirt over her head. The sight of her naked breasts aroused him instantly. She pulled off her panties and reached for him. She unbuttoned his shirt and he felt relief as he shed the damp garment. He had spent all night in his clothes, not wanting to disturb Leah. Now as she helped him take off his jeans and briefs, the chill morning air caressed his overheated body and Leah's cool fingers stroked his skin. He savoured the sensations, delighting in her touch and immersing himself in the moment. He wanted to remember the sensation of having her naked body pressed up close against his; so close, he didn't know where he ended and she began.

They made love then, gently and languorously in the semi-darkness. No words were spoken, but no words were needed. As he moved over her, entering her swiftly and smoothly, she sighed as if all the troubles of the night before had melted away by their joining.

As their passion increased she lifted her hips to meet his thrusts and they moved as one, clinging to each other and both achieving their release at the same time. Then, when it was over, they lay, not speaking, simply holding each other again, knowing that the following day Harrison would be gone and their brief time together would be over.

‘My last day in Hong Kong,’ Harrison said at breakfast. Leah wished she was returning with him, but duty came first. She had to see her project for the shopping mall through to the end.

‘I thought we could do the whole touristy thing and spend the day sightseeing. That is, unless you have other plans.’

‘No plans, Leah, I’m entirely in your hands.’ As he had been in the early hours of the morning. The sweetness of their lovemaking had stayed with her making their parting the following day more painful. She wanted to make today memorable and show him why she loved Hong Kong so much. Neither had mentioned the night before and the reason for Leah’s meltdown. She wasn’t sure she could explain it if she tried.

‘Good. I’ve got enough plans for both of us.’

They took the Peak Tram, the oldest public transport system in Hong Kong, to Victoria Peak and gazed out at skyscrapers clustered together, with the mountains as a perfect backdrop. They were so high up they felt that they were on a level with the clouds.

They bought souvenirs in Peak Tower and shopped for clothes in Stanley Market. Leah bought Harrison a T-shirt with a red and yellow dragon and the words *I love Hong Kong* on the front that he would probably never wear. Harrison bought Leah a silver bracelet that she loved so much she wore it straight away.

They ate street food for lunch - seafood and noodles, fish balls, meat on sticks and other delicacies. Harrison wanted to try everything.

After lunch, they relaxed on the Hop on Hop off bus and stayed on for most of the trip, Leah pointing out places of interest and Harrison nodding occasionally to show he was listening to her.

Then, finally, he wanted to see Hong Kong at night and the best place to do that was from the harbour. They booked on the symphony of lights harbour cruise with a small group of visitors who were braving the weather. It was wet and squally and Leah shivered in her wool jacket. Harrison removed his leather jacket and put it around her shoulders. Then he kept his arm around her and she cuddled up to him on the wooden bench.

‘Do you want to go inside?’ Harrison asked.

‘No, I love it out here. The wind is so bracing.’

‘Good, I feel the same way.’

The water was black and churning, contrasting with the colour reflected on the harbour from all the buildings lit up around the shore. They were of one mind, enjoying the salty smell of the harbour, the colourful lights and the lurching of the ferry as it ploughed through the water. It made Leah feel alive and to be able to share it with Harrison was a special treat.

The only negative was the thought he was leaving the following day. She wondered if he was thinking about it too. Would he miss her or just settle back into his normal routine?

‘I’ve been thinking.’

Leah said nothing, but her heart gave a lurch. Had he been thinking of ways they could see each other?

‘It’s Connor’s birthday soon, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, on June twenty first.’

‘Summer solstice. The longest day of the year. Perfect. What do you think of the idea of holding a garden party?’

‘Sounds great, where?’

‘Bentley Hall.’

‘But what about your father? I can’t see him agreeing to it.’

‘I’ll take care of Dad. It’ll be a great way to extend the hand of friendship. Our families are business partners now and socialising is part of that. So, good idea, then?’

‘Great idea.’ It meant that there was only a matter of weeks before she’d see Harrison again. She normally flew home for her father’s birthday, which consisted of a family meal at the Fitzpatrick estate, just the five of them. A garden party would be so much better. Maybe it would be a good time and place to announce that they were now officially a couple. Even though Harrison hadn’t spoken of his feelings, it was obvious that their relationship had been taken to a new level. *Wasn’t it?*

Her hopes were confirmed when he pulled her closer and whispered, 'It won't be for long, Leah.' Proof that he was going to miss her too, over the next few weeks.

Then he kissed her, long and hard, water glistening in his hair and on his eyelashes. His face was wet and so was hers. She couldn't tell whether it was from the spray or her tears.

Harrison left Hong Kong in the early hours of the following day. Leah decided not to go to the airport to see him off, instead, choosing to bury herself in work as a way of distracting herself from the thought that she wouldn't see him again for weeks.

So much had happened since the merger; finding out that her father had once loved Sylvia Bentley, concern at the seriousness of William Bentley's medical condition and, most importantly, losing her heart to the younger Mr Bentley had turned Leah's ordered world upside down. A few weeks of normality was exactly what she needed to ground her again. The calm efficiency of her working day at Lau Fitzpatrick Enterprises, the satisfaction of closing the shopping mall deal and the anticipation of seeing Harrison again at the garden party would be enough to keep her going for the next few weeks.

Despite this, she couldn't resist contacting him as soon as she knew he had arrived in the UK. She sent a text, which was swiftly returned. *Flight okay. Weather in UK better than Hong Kong. Be good. C U soon. H.* No declarations of love. Nothing remotely affectionate or sweet. He appeared to have reverted to the old Harrison as if their last night had never been. But maybe she was expecting too much. Harrison was not the sentimental kind. It would be different when they saw each other again.

Over the proceeding weeks, they kept in touch by email, the occasional text and once they had a Skype conversation. She'd foolishly washed her hair and put on her designer make-up just so she could sit in front of a computer screen for half an hour. Even via a video-link, seeing Harrison and hearing his voice made her heart race.

Then, finally, the project was finished. All the contracts were signed, all concerned parties happy and Leah was free to go home. For, despite her love for Hong Kong, England was her home now. Because that was where all the people she loved were. Her father, her brothers and Harrison J Bentley.

Chapter Nineteen

Leah arrived back in the UK in the early hours of Friday morning. She had hoped that Harrison would be the one to pick her up but, instead, one of the twins, Kelty, met her at the arrivals lounge of Manchester Airport. When he spotted her, he ran up to her and lifted her off her feet.

‘Great to see you back, sis.’ When he put her down, he grabbed her suitcase in one hand, and put his other arm around her waist with the other, then steered her towards the doors. Kelty was always in a hurry, always had been, ever since they were little. Liam, the quieter twin, had followed in his shadow, like an adoring puppy.

‘How’s things?’ she asked, eager for news of her family.

‘Good. Cathy’s moved in, which has made Dad happy; she’s a great cook.’

Leah felt a twinge of envy. She had always been the one to cook for her father, whenever the housekeeper had a day off. Now, Kelty’s fiancée had taken over the role. She was delighted that her brother had found his soul mate, and liked Cathy, but realised with sadness that everything was changing. She had been away for seven years. Each time she came back, it felt a little less like home. But she was back now, and things were going to change.

‘How’s Dad?’

‘Oh, you know, same as ever, working too hard and drinking too much. He’s looking forward to his birthday on Saturday.’

‘Yes, so am I. Have you heard from Harrison at all?’

‘Yeah. He phoned to ask what food Dad liked. Seems to be taking this garden party seriously.’ *Good. All going according to plan.*

When they arrived at Kelty’s BMW, he shoved her suitcase into the boot, then, after they were settled, took off as if he was being chased, and sped down the quiet, empty roads towards the Fitzpatrick Estate. He was intent on his driving, so Leah gazed out of the window at the changing sky and thought about Harrison.

She wondered how soon she could contact him without looking desperate. She wondered how long it would be before she didn’t care how desperate she looked.

The sky was just beginning to lighten when Kelty pulled up outside their family home and slammed on the brakes. Dark shapes that she knew to be box trees stood sentry on either side of the old oak door. They hadn’t switched on the outside lights that they used when people arrived at the house in the dark. She didn’t need them; she knew this house and its surroundings intimately.

They retrieved her suitcase and hurried inside into the spacious hall. She couldn’t help noticing how polished the floor looked. It shone like the sun on water. When she had been little it had been scuffed and dull, with the passage of children’s feet and dogs’ paws. Nobody seemed to notice or care then. Now, it had been restored to its former glory. Was this Cathy’s doing? As the new mistress of the house, she was making her mark already.

‘Leah, is that you?’

‘Dad.’ Her father emerged from the library with a tumbler of scotch in his hand. She walked up to him and hugged him, luxuriating in the familiar feeling of security she got when wrapped in her father’s arms. He smelt of his old-fashioned aftershave and wore his favourite tatty wool jumper that he refused to relinquish.

‘It’s so good to have you back.’

‘It’s great to be back.’ She turned to Kelty. ‘Thanks for the lift, bro.’

‘Any time, babes. Right, I’m off to my bed. Night you two.’

‘Night, son.’ Her father kissed her on the top of her head and then looked into her eyes. ‘Come and have a drink with me.’

They went into the library, which was a much smaller room than the living room or drawing room. This was her father’s sanctuary and to be invited to share it with him meant he had something to say.

‘Scotch?’

‘Why not? It might help me sleep.’ Unlike the last time she was in the UK when she could hardly stay awake, she felt wired, restless and knew sleep was a long way off. Maybe this was a good opportunity to ask her father some probing questions. It wasn’t often she had him to herself, in a place where he was unlikely to run off.

‘Good trip?’

‘Yes, thanks, it was okay.’

‘Thanks for organising this birthday bash for me, I’m really looking forward to it.’

‘It was Harrison’s idea and he’s doing all the work.’

‘Still.’ Her father fell silent and he sipped his Scotch thoughtfully. He sat in his favourite armchair and she sat opposite on a two-seater sofa. This room held special memories for Leah. Evenings when she had curled up on the sofa with a book whilst her father worked at his desk. The same desk that sat squarely in the centre of the room, slightly battered now from use. A traditional style writing desk with a green leather top insert, drawers on both sides and metal handles. And the books. He had floor to ceiling bookcases full of books. As a child, this room had been Leah’s idea of paradise.

‘Dad?’

‘Yes, dear?’

‘I need to ask you something. I know you don’t like talking about feelings, but this is important.’

‘Sounds ominous.’ He sat back in his chair and stretched his legs out. A move that reminded her so much of Harrison she momentarily lost her train of thought.

‘Sylvia Bentley?’

‘What about her?’ She watched his face for a reaction but there was none. He didn’t look guilty or love-struck. He just looked puzzled.

‘Harrison told me.’

‘Harrison told you what?’

‘About the two of you, when you were younger.’

‘Did he now?’

‘Do you still love her, Dad?’

Her father heaved a sigh and got up slowly. He came and sat beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. ‘When did he tell you all this?’

‘The day we came to visit William. I kind of guessed and he filled in the blanks.’

‘And you’ve been worrying and stressing about it ever since, haven’t you?’

‘It has been on my mind, yes. I keep thinking of Mum.’ She couldn’t go on as a lump had appeared in her throat and her eyes burned. She stared at the rug on the floor as her father started to speak.

‘When I was young I used to fall in love at the drop of a farmer’s hat. Every lovely young girl who came my way was at risk. I was a hot-blooded male with no common sense, just like most men, like your brothers.’ *And like Harrison?* Leah believed Harrison to be different, but maybe all men were the same. ‘Sylvia Bentley was unlike any woman I’d ever met. She was gracious, elegant, charming and I fell for her. But it wasn’t love, Leah, it was infatuation. She was everything I wasn’t. I was a country bumpkin from Ireland who didn’t know which fork to use in polite society. Still don’t, come to that, but now I couldn’t care less. I’ll eat peas with my knife if I like.’

‘You didn’t love her, then?’

‘Oh, I thought I did sure enough, but it wasn’t until I met your darling mother that I found out what love really is. She completed me, Leah, she

understood me and she loved me anyway. I adored her and she felt the same way about me. And you four kids. So please, put it out of your mind. Okay?'

Her father looked at her with such tenderness that the lump in her throat had grown to the size of a golf ball. She nodded.

'Good, because there's something I want to say to you. Whilst we're in the mood to spill our guts, I have something else to spill.'

Something else? What else could her father possibly have to confess? He looked down, then drained the glass he was holding and put it on the floor.

'I have something to apologise to you for.' His voice was shaky. He wasn't an emotional man and hated exposing his feelings to anyone, even his family. *This must be hard for him.*

'Go on.' She waited patiently whilst the man she had worshipped forever struggled visibly with his demons.

'I am sorry that I took your youth away from you. Sorry that I let you bear the burden of looking after the three boys when your mother died. Sorry that I was the weak one whilst you, my beautiful daughter, had all the strength.'

Leah was crying openly now and watched as a single tear slid down her father's face. 'If there was any way at all that I could turn back time and give you back what I stole from you, I would. But I can't. I'm sorry.'

'Dad, stop it, please, I can't bear this. I love you and the boys. I wouldn't change a thing. Please don't feel bad.'

'I'm so proud of you, Leah, so incredibly proud.'

They hugged then and she felt a weight slipping away. He *was* proud of her. That was all that mattered.

'Anyway, time you were in bed, young lady. Living the jet set lifestyle, you need your beauty sleep.'

'Okay, maybe I'll go up now.' And dream of Harrison because she knew she wouldn't sleep after the emotional turmoil of the last half hour. She was determined that the garden party on Saturday was going to be a turning point in their relationship. And if he didn't initiate it, she would.

She would be the brave one and risk rejection. If he didn't want her he would have to be honest and tell her. But if he did, they could make beautiful music together under the summer stars. It would be like her eighteenth birthday again, only with a different ending. A completely different ending.

‘Think I’ll go up too

. Need to be fresh for my party. Can't wait to see what William Bentley has in store for me. Do you think there'll be fireworks?’

Leah thought of Harrison, and smiled. ‘Oh yes, Dad, I'm pretty sure there's going to be fireworks.’

Chapter Twenty

Leah alighted from the limousine and stood on the gravelled drive outside Bentley Hall. As the rest of her family joined her, a butler greeted them and directed them to where she could hear the noise of a party in the distance; the sound of laughter and music. They made their way to the gardens.

The Fitzpatricks had arrived in two cars. She was in the limo with her father, Liam and his partner. Kelty drove the BMW with Cathy beside him; Colin and his new love, Saskia, were in the back. She was Colin's first real girlfriend and the two youngsters were so loved up they could have been attending a party on the moon for the notice they took of their surroundings.

Her brothers were being their usual blasé selves, but her father had made an extra effort with his appearance and looked dapper and much younger than his fifty-five years. He also appeared incredibly happy.

‘Are you looking forward to this, Dad?’

‘Certainly am, Leah. It's been a lovely birthday so far what with having my children together again and all my gifts, but I think it's about to get even better.’

‘I didn't know you were such a party animal.’

‘I never thought I’d live to see the day when William Bentley threw a party in my honour. That’s got to be worth celebrating on its own.’

The grounds looked spectacular. Mature trees around the periphery of the garden were alive with birdsong. The women in their colourful summer finery stood in groups on the grass. Many of them wore hats and looked, from a distance, like exotic flowers blooming in the sun.

They made their way to where Harrison’s parents were and stood en masse in front of William Bentley. He was in a wheelchair but today there was no blanket or medication nearby. The man looked thin and weak, but he shook her father’s hand as he wished him a happy birthday. Sylvia stood at his side and came forward to kiss the honoured guest on the cheek.

Leah couldn’t see her father’s face but Sylvia’s was as serene and calm as always. She smiled sweetly at everyone and asked questions of the boys and their partners. It reminded Leah of commoners meeting the queen.

When it was Leah’s turn, she hugged her. ‘Thank you for coming, Leah, it means a lot. You’ve done such a good job with your brothers since your poor mother’s demise. You should be proud, I’m sure your father is.’

Leah wasn’t sure how to respond to this so she simply said, ‘Thank you,’ and resisted the urge to curtsy.

Then the family moved away, the boys and their partners towards the food and drink and her father towards some business associates he had spotted. Leah decided to take a walk around the grounds and look for Harrison. It was a perfect day to be outdoors. The sun was hot and she put her face up to it, luxuriating in the unaccustomed warmth.

She started by looking in a large white marquis that stood off to one side. Catering staff moved in and out, laden with trays of cold drinks, champagne and canapés. She took a quick peek and saw waiters in black and white loading their trays, so she beat a hasty retreat, not wanting to get in the way.

As she was backing out, she heard a voice she recognised. ‘Ms Fitzpatrick – great to see you again.’ Peter came hurrying over, followed by Robert who kissed her on the cheek.

‘Hi guys, lovely day for it.’

‘Midsummer day is so romantic, don’t you think?’ Peter gazed openly at Robert who took his hand and gave it quick squeeze.

‘You’re right. And Midsummer night even more so.’ Leah had plans for the shortest night of the year. If she had her way, it would be short, but memorable.

Peter laughed, ‘Of course, the Bard knew what he was doing. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is my favourite play. Did you know Mr Bentley used to act?’

‘Really?’ She remembered reading something about Harrison being part of a drama group at university.

‘Oh yes, he was quite the thespian in his younger days.’

‘He’s not exactly old now though, is he?’ Robert asked.

‘Of course not – he’s only thirty-one.’

‘Not much older than you then.’

Before the boys started bickering, Leah asked the only question she wanted an answer to. ‘Where is he, the youthful thespian? I’ve not seen him. Do you know at all?’

‘I think he went that way,’ Peter said pointing towards the house.

‘I saw him over there about twenty minutes ago,’ Robert said, pointing in the opposite direction.

‘Okay, never mind, I’ll go and look. See you later.’ Leah strolled off before an argument broke out. It was pleasant in the gardens, listening to the sounds of the party all around her. But she heard it all with only a fraction of her mind. Her senses were alert, listening for the sound of his voice, or a glimpse of his chestnut hair in the crowd. She pictured in her mind’s eye the way he threw back his head when he laughed and the way the skin around his intense blue eyes crinkled and his mouth was so luscious.

She’d reached a purpose-built platform where a band played easy jazz and she stood and listened to the music for a few minutes before catching sight of her brothers. She made her way over to them. Maybe Harrison was inside the house. She would have to wait for him to find her. Meanwhile, the party was just warming up.

He heard her laughter first. A rare sound, sweet and uninhibited. Then he saw her. Leah, encircled by her brothers, was tiny in comparison with the big men that joked with her. She wore a pale blue cotton summer dress with spaghetti straps and new shoes with killer heels. She tottered on these precariously and Harrison guessed that when she danced, it would be in bare feet on the grass. He would ask her to dance this time; in fact, she would dance with no one but him.

She spotted him and waved. He waved back, then walked towards her.

The weeks since they'd last seen each other had been long and empty. He'd yearned for the sound of her voice and the sight of her tentative smile. It shocked him, this feeling of missing her. He had thought, foolishly, that once he spent time in Hong Kong with Leah and enjoyed making love to that tantalising body, he would have been satisfied. That hadn't happened. He had thought of little else but her since they said good-bye.

He had felt incomplete, restless as if something vital was missing. Then at night, he couldn't sleep. Strange yearnings tugged at his insides, longings for something he couldn't put a name to. Now, seeing her again, he knew exactly what he had been missing.

'Harrison, hello. It's all wonderful, my father is so pleased, you've done such a great job, I can't thank you enough.'

His gaze was riveted on Leah's face as she spoke. The need to kiss her rendered him speechless. He stepped forward and cupped her face. Bending slowly, he kissed her gently then withdrew. Her light perfume lingered on his hands as he brushed them through his hair.

She had closed her eyes and obviously expected so much more. He wanted to give her more but not with the curious looks some of his guests were giving them. Her brothers were watching his every move. But he didn't have time to worry about them. He wanted Leah, and wasn't prepared to wait any longer. He grabbed her hand.

'Come with me.'

'Where are we going?'

They hurried towards the house and when they got inside, he almost ran up the sweeping staircase in the centre of the hall.

‘Harrison, wait for me.’ Leah followed him, struggling to keep up.

He pulled her inside the nearest bedroom and shut the door. His own room was at the end of the corridor but he couldn’t wait a second longer. Nobody would bother them here as the room hadn’t been in use for months. Dustsheets still covered the furniture and the curtains were drawn against the light.

Her face was lovely, framed by her blonde hair, and her green eyes searched his questioningly. ‘Leah.’ He drunk her in as if he wanted to remember every tiny detail of her features. He kissed her then, his mouth hot and hungry, transmitting all his compelling need to her, so they fell onto the bed together. The smell of lavender wafted off the cover, the material scratchy on his skin.

Leah struggled to sit up and said, ‘Harrison, slow down, what’s the hurry?’

‘I want you.’

His desperation must have transferred to her as she held him then as if she never wanted to let him go. This was madness but something drove him on. A need to be close to her, to hold her and love her. He had waited so long for this moment.

He lifted her dress and bunched it around her hips then his face was between her legs and he kissed her inner thighs and gently pulled off her lacy briefs so that she groaned and grabbed his hair. His movements were urgent as if he couldn’t wait a second longer, his desire for her burning him up and consuming him in its fire.

‘Harrison, we shouldn’t, not here – the guests ...’

Harrison silenced her with a deep, passionate kiss. He then stood up and removed her expensive new shoes, carelessly throwing them over his shoulder so he could run his tongue down the soles of her feet. She squirmed deliciously and cried out. He kissed each toe, then her ankle and worked his way up her legs until he was back where he started. Leah groaned and writhed on the bed, calling his name softly.

Harrison pulled down his white designer jeans and Calvin Klein briefs, pushed her knees apart and entered her. He still wore his black short-sleeved shirt buttoned and his jeans were around his ankles. He had never done this before. Secret and illicit sex in the middle of a genteel garden party; it was like a scene from a film.

Then he forgot everything as he drove into her. Leah was as aroused as he was and pushed up to meet him, gasping at his savage intensity and holding him tightly, her nails digging into his skin. Leah came then Harrison followed.

He lay on his back next to her until their breathing returned to normal.

‘That was...’ Leah hesitated and Harrison wondered if he had upset her.

‘Sorry, it’s just that I’ve been thinking of doing that since my last night in Hong Kong.’

‘No, it was wonderful, just a bit, well – unexpected.’

‘What are you doing to me Ms Fitzpatrick?’ He turned on his side and stroked her face with one finger. ‘You’ve bewitched me. I can’t think of anything but you. Can’t concentrate, can’t eat...’

‘Can’t eat? What with this belly?’ She patted his stomach. He didn’t have an inch of fat on his body, he made sure of that with rigorous sessions in the gym. He liked the fact that she was teasing him. It gave him the chance to do something he’d wanted to do for ages. He grabbed her hands and held them firmly together while he tickled her.

‘How dare you call me fat?’ Leah squealed and wriggled underneath him. She begged him to stop. ‘Do you take it back?’

‘Yes, yes, please don’t tickle me!’

He stopped and she lay gasping on the bed. She was out of breath, flushed and the sexiest thing he’d ever seen. He was hard again. He was contemplating making love to her one more time when he heard his mother’s voice. It was faint but getting louder. She was making her way up the stairs, no doubt giving a guest the guided tour.

He put his finger to his lips and quickly pulled his clothes back together. He opened the door a crack and listened. She was going into the

master bedroom. There was no reason for her to come into the one they were in but he didn't want to take any chances. He wanted to tell her about Leah in his own time, not let her find them dishevelled and still hot for each other. 'Leah, quickly, we need to go.'

They crept back down the stairs, his mother and the guest having moved on down the landing, so they could make their escape. Harrison showed Leah where the downstairs bathroom was and he straightened his clothes and ran his hands over his hair whilst he waited for her to clean herself up.

Once back in the garden Harrison said, 'Right. Once everyone's eaten, I'll just say a few words, thanking people, getting them to sing Happy Birthday, that kind of thing...'

'Oh, Dad'll love that!'

'Then you and I are going to dance, okay?'

'You'll get no argument from me.' Leah beamed.

'Good, as I may have to tickle you again if you argue with me.' Harrison congratulated himself on managing to do something that pleased her. He wanted to please her in every way.

'While you're doing your MC thing, I'll do some networking. I know it's a social event but we shouldn't lose an opportunity to tell people how well we're doing, should we?'

'Always the executive, just like your father. Where is Connor, anyway?'

'He's over there, talking to some people.'

Harrison looked and saw a group of businessmen he recognised and, in the middle of the group, almost hidden from view, the back of a woman he knew too well. Monique Devereux. Leah had obviously not seen her. She was dressed in a black suit with a large, white floppy hat. The lack of colour in her outfit camouflaged her amongst the men, but Harrison could always spot her in a crowd. She was elegant, with the figure of a model and, at forty-one, was still a beautiful woman.

He was puzzled as to why Leah hated her so much, but she did. It can't be just because they had been lovers whilst he was at Oxford, that was

such a long time ago; they were different people now. *Was it because Monique had been a married woman?* If so, he could understand her animosity. He wasn't proud of the way he had behaved. His only defence was youthful arrogance. He regretted his behaviour, but couldn't change the past. Leah would not be happy if she spotted her, though, so he would have to keep them from meeting.

'Right, Leah, I'll go over and talk to them. Why don't you go that way and we can cover the whole group between us?'

'Okay.' Luckily, Leah took the bait and wondered off in the opposite direction.

Harrison walked swiftly over to the group, pondering how he was going to get rid of Monique. Things were going well with Leah and he wanted nothing to spoil it. This day was going to cement their relationship and nobody was going to stop that happening.

He must think of a way to keep the two women apart. He would talk to Monique and find out why she was here. If she still wanted to buy Bentley Media, he would tell her she had made a wasted journey and phone a taxi for her. He could be as persuasive as she when he needed to be. And he needed to be now. He had to get her off the premises as quickly as possible, then he could spend the rest of the afternoon dancing with Leah, barefoot on the lawn.

As long as he worked quickly, Leah need never know she had ever been here. It was a good plan, and he was confident of his ability to convince Monique there was nothing for her here. What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter Twenty-One

The party was a success, the gardens reverberated to the sounds of laughter, and the clinking of glasses as the champagne went down nicely in the hot summer sun. It had been the perfect day so far, and Leah had no doubt it would get even better when she and Harrison were lying together on silk sheets, naked and satiated. Then they would take their time. They had all night. The quickie was unexpected and sweet, but Leah loved it when they had time to enjoy each other properly.

It was time for Harrison to speak. Leah felt immense pride as he stood on the platform and thanked everyone for being there. He looked impossibly handsome in the sunlight. The eyes of the crowd, especially the women's, never left his face for a moment. He spoke easily and with authority, as if he was used to people hanging on his every word. The crowd laughed at his jokes and her father laughed the loudest.

He told them they had to sing up and he would name and shame anyone who didn't join in. More laughter as the band played the introduction to *Happy Birthday* and, as Harrison still held the microphone, his voice carried out over the lawns. Leah was delighted to hear he had a strong, true tenor. Then, *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*. By that time people had lost their self-consciousness at having to sing in public and voices blended together in tune, with some brave souls harmonising. Leah felt a lump in

her throat. Friends and colleagues were honouring her father and Harrison had organised it all. Her pride in him grew.

‘What a touching scene, Harrison’s making use of his acting skills, I see.’

At the sound of her voice, Leah froze. Then she turned slowly and came face to face with her worst nightmare. ‘Monique.’ At the sight of her, Leah’s good mood melted away like ice cubes in the sun.

‘Leah.’

‘What are you doing here?’ She didn’t intend to sound so abrupt, but the sight of the woman she hated with a passion had caused her to speak without thinking.

‘I’m here as Harrison’s guest of course, what else?’

Why hadn’t he warned her? Then, why would he? Harrison had no idea of her feelings for Monique Devereux; he would have had no reason to. She needed to be as cool and professional as the woman standing in front of her. She was a business colleague, nothing more, no reason to be jealous. It would have looked strange if he hadn’t invited her. She, Leah, was the one Harrison had promised to dance with, had just made love to. She had the upper hand, not that woman.

‘When all this is finished,’ Monique waved her hand expansively to include the crowds who had started to drift away, the speeches over, ‘Harrison and I will probably spend the rest of the afternoon dancing. He loves dancing with me. I taught him you know, back in the day. Ball-room, Latin American – all the proper dances that people who move in the right circles know.’

‘Really?’ Leah couldn’t see her eyes as she wore sunglasses but recognised the deliberate attack. She had no defence against her. This woman and Harrison had history. What could she say that would beat that? *Nothing*. Harrison had promised to dance with her and she had to hold on to that thought.

Then, shouting from the edge of the lawn drew both women’s attention away from each other.

‘Oh my, it’s finally kicking off, just as I knew it would.’

Leah had no time to think about Monique's comment as she heard her father's angry voice raised in protest. She hurried over to the sound, silently hoping that it wasn't what she feared. When she got close, she saw William Bentley struggling to get out of his wheelchair, Sylvia trying to calm him down and her father standing nearby, running his hands through his hair and bellowing.

'I only asked her to dance, William, for God's sake, man!'

'I told you years back never to lay a finger on my wife, you...'

'William, calm down, you'll give yourself another heart attack.' Sylvia tried to restrain her husband.

'Dad, what's going on?' Leah hurried up and grabbed her father's arm.

'This idiot thinks I'm trying to seduce his wife, when I only asked her to dance.'

'Come on, come away.' She tried to pull him away from the Bentleys. She mouthed *sorry* to Sylvia who mouthed *so am I*, back. She felt a tinge of pity for Sylvia Bentley, if this was the kind of behaviour she had put up with over the years. *The woman must have the patience of a saint.*

'The man's an idiot.' Her father was seething and she was grateful for the sight of Liam and Kelty hurrying towards them. She left the three men together and went in search of Harrison.

Leah wanted only one thing, to be with the man she loved. He had promised he would dance with her and it was time for him to deliver.

As she drew closer to the band, however, her heart sank and her knees threatened to give way underneath her. Harrison and Monique were dancing together, their faces pressed close, Harrison's arm tight around Monique's waist. They looked the perfect couple. Monique was tall, although not as tall as Harrison, and they moved in accord, gracefully swaying like poplars in a breeze. People nearby smiled at them indulgently and Leah felt her world stop turning. Monique Devereux had been right all along.

Oblivious to the stares from some of the guests, she turned her back on the music, dancing and merry-making and started walking. Luckily, she still carried her clutch bag so could make her escape without having to

speak to anyone. When she reached the front of the house, she started running. She kept running down the endlessly long drive, cursing her new expensive designer shoes with the heels that she thought made her look sexy. She didn't look sexy now, stumbling about on the gravel, blisters forming in all kinds of places, tears coursing down her hot cheeks, make-up running with her tears.

She reached the road and ran in the direction of the small country train station. She didn't know how long she'd have to wait for a train to take her to the next village but at least she'd be on her own. She needed to be away from people, somewhere quiet where she could think, wallow in self-pity if she felt like it. Her heart was breaking.

After a while she heard the engine roar of a sports car and knew it was Harrison's Alfa Romeo.

The car drew up beside her and Harrison shouted at her from the driver's seat. 'Get in.'

She shouted back, 'No.'

'Get in, I can't stop here.'

'Good.'

She was exhausted and her feet were agony. Her pace had dropped to a fast walk but she didn't know how long she could keep it up.

'Leah, don't be ridiculous. Talk to me. Get in the bloody car!'

Leah kept walking, her head held high and her feet on fire. She refused to look in the direction of the car but felt the blast as it shot ahead and screeched to a halt in a passing place in the narrow country lane. She watched as Harrison got out of the car and stood in the middle of the road with his arms down at his sides, his hands clenched into fists.

Leah walked slowly towards him and stopped.

It all made sense now. He'd never stopped loving the older woman, the one who had opened him up sexually. Leah had always hated that expression. He must have compared every woman he had ever been with to her and found them all lacking. His ex-lover was the one he wanted. With all the others, it was just sex, including herself. With Monique Devereux, it was the real thing.

It had been bad enough watching them dance together at the Awards Ceremony, but Harrison's explanation had satisfied her then. She was a business colleague, nothing more. She had accepted it because she didn't want to consider the alternative. How eagerly she had talked herself into believing Harrison. Not anymore. The truth had been staring her in the face today; the couple were still in love.

She thought bitterly of the sex she and Harrison had shared earlier in the day. He must be laughing at how easy she was to manipulate. All he had to do was snap his fingers and she was there for him to take whenever he wanted.

Then a thought struck her. Something that, in the heat of the moment, they'd both forgotten about. Harrison hadn't used a condom. They'd had unprotected sex. And it hadn't been the first time. Harrison hadn't used a condom on their last night together in Hong Kong either. If she got pregnant because of their carelessness, then her life was well and truly over.

'Leah, please say something.'

'Congratulations? I hope you'll both be very happy?' Leah hated the bitter jealousy in her voice but couldn't stop herself.

'What the hell are you talking about?' Harrison's face was hard and tense, his eyes desperate.

'You and that woman. Will you marry her?'

'If you mean Monique, I had no idea she was going to be here today. I promise.'

'You invited her. Don't lie to me, Harrison.'

'I didn't invite her. Seeing her was just as much a shock to me. You have to believe me.'

'I don't believe you. I will never believe anything you say from now on.'

'Leah...'

'It's too much of a coincidence that she just turns up out of the blue. Don't you think?' Leah's anger was rising in direct proportion to the pain in her feet. How stupid did he think she was? Not as stupid as she was feeling, trying to keep her dignity in front of him.

‘You’re wrong. I wish I could make you see how wrong.’

‘I’m going home.’

‘Let me take you.’

‘No, I don’t want anything more to do with you.’

‘You work for me; you don’t have a choice about that.’

Leah yelled with all the pent-up frustration and agony in her soul. ‘I don’t work for you! And I will never work for that woman even if you did marry her.’

‘I am not going to marry her!’ Harrison yelled back and the power of his voice sent a blackbird flying out of the hedgerow, squawking its warning call raucously. ‘I have no intention of marrying anyone, ever.’

‘No, you don’t do commitment, do you? Just sex. Is that all it was between us, Harrison? Just sex?’ Harrison’s hands were clenched so tightly his knuckles had turned white.

‘I don’t know how you have the gall to stand there and accuse me of not committing when all you ever do is get drunk or run away. When have you ever stood and fought for what you wanted?’

Harrison’s words were like a slap in the face, because she knew he was right. She was a coward and had been running all her life. ‘Some things are not worth fighting for.’

‘Are *we* not worth fighting for, Leah?’

She wanted to throw herself at his feet and tell him he was the only thing in her life that was, but the image of Monique Devereux and her knowing smile stopped her in her tracks.

‘There is no *we*.’ He’d been using her, that much was obvious. She needed to guard her heart from now on. It was so close to breaking, she had to get away from Harrison before she collapsed.

He turned away and opened the door on the driver’s side of the sports car. ‘I’m taking you home. Get in the car.’ It was a command, not an invitation. All the warmth had gone from his expression. He wasn’t trying to appease her anymore. Just as well. She couldn’t believe anything he said.

‘No. Leave me alone.’ She started walking again, or attempted to, as the pain in her feet brought her up short with a sharp cry.

He walked back quickly when he heard her cry out. ‘Leah, your poor feet, they’re bleeding. You can’t even walk. Please, let me take you home.’

‘Didn’t you hear what I said? I would rather walk across hot coals to get home, than go with you.’

‘You don’t mean that...’

Leah kicked off her shoes, picked them up and started walking in bare feet down the road. She didn’t look back but sensed he was watching her. Then she heard the car again and he crawled next to her calling to her through the open window. She ignored him and kept walking. A car horn sounded behind Harrison as someone tried to overtake. Harrison had no choice but to speed up and leave her behind.

Ten minutes later, as she rounded a bend, she could see the train station at last. She picked up her pace and hurried across the car park, ignoring Harrison who leant against his car waiting for her.

As she walked to the ticket desk and bought her ticket, Harrison was behind her entreating and cajoling her to change her mind and let him take her home. She ignored him and marched onto the platform. Harrison followed her and stood next to her.

‘Are you going to ignore me at work, too?’

‘No, Harrison, I’m a professional.’ She glanced at him. He was at fault, not her. If he could live with coldness between them, then so could she. So long as he didn’t move that woman into his executive suite, she could play the role of the professional for as long as it took.

He was gazing at her and she saw his face soften. She couldn’t look him in the eye. She would never stop wanting him, loving him. He had hurt her more than she could have ever imagined possible but she would always love him. That was her fate.

Then the train came rumbling into the station and Leah turned away from him, watched it slow down, and stop.

‘Leah, please talk to me. I know you’re angry but we can’t leave things like this. I can explain if you’ll let me.’

‘Goodbye, Harrison.’

Leah got on the train without a backward glance and settled herself in a seat on the far side. Just as it started to pull away from the station, she couldn’t resist sneaking a look to see if he was still there.

Harrison hadn’t moved. He was motionless, staring intently into the train and the look on his face contained all the misery and regret that Leah carried in her heart.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Harrison sat in the sunroom in his favourite armchair, nursing a bottle of beer and staring out at the rain. Peter sat on the floor with his head against the arm of the adjacent chair, his bottle of beer next to him. Neither of them had spoken for ages.

He was glad to see Peter when he called around that afternoon; ostensibly, bringing vital documents needed for a breakfast meeting the following day. Peter, being a good PA and an even better friend, was really making himself available in case Harrison needed to talk. He did.

His life was a mess. Leah was refusing to listen to him, despite the number of emails, texts and voicemail messages he had left. Monique was stalking him with endless phone calls, his father was livid at Connor and Connor retaliated by calling him an old fool.

Everyone in BFP Enterprises knew that Leah had run out of the garden party and he had chased after her. The office grapevine was ripe with gossip. They all knew that something had happened between them. Connor and the boys had left the party shortly afterwards. He had no idea what Leah had told her father but the big man had ignored him ever since, except to insist that they sell Bentley Media as soon as possible.

He had to regain control. He was a man of action, not used to sitting back and letting the world go by. He wanted to pick the world up and

shake it until things fell into place in exactly the order he wanted them. He needed to act, but he hadn't a clue where to start. And the only person he could talk to was sitting on the floor waiting patiently for him to speak.

'It was bad timing. I'd phoned for the taxi and we were waiting for it to arrive. Monique begged me for a dance, for old times' sake she said. I knew she'd been quaffing the champagne but I had no idea she was as drunk as she was. Leah was nowhere in sight so I thought... I should have refused.' Harrison drank his beer, berating himself for being so stupid.

'I get the impression Ms Devereux is a lady used to getting her own way,' Peter said.

'Well, she's not getting her own way with me ever again. That ship sailed years ago.'

'I'm amazed that she agreed to go quietly. Very tenacious lady, Ms Devereux from what I've seen of her.'

'I don't think she had any intention of leaving the party. She just told me what I wanted to hear to keep me sweet.'

'Well, you were hardly going to throw her out, were you?'

'I was in a difficult situation, Peter. Rocks and hard places spring to mind.' He should have told Leah that she was there, then they could have ignored her together as a couple. *Would they ever be a couple now?* Harrison sipped his beer whilst watching the rain streaming down the windows. Drops chased each other and mingled, forming tiny rivers on the glass.

'She was very upset; Ms Fitzpatrick I mean,' Peter said.

'If she hadn't run out like that I could have explained everything.'

'I can understand why she was so upset. Ms Devereux had her head on your shoulder and it looked intimate from where we were standing. Ms Fitzpatrick must have thought the same thing.'

'It may have looked intimate from where you were standing, but from my perspective it was embarrassing. She was a dead weight and I was holding her up. Everyone was staring at us, but I couldn't think of a tactful way to extricate myself from her. If I'd known Leah was watching us I would have done something.'

‘What happened to her?’

‘My mother and a female friend put her to bed. She was still asleep when the party finished. And now I’ve gone and upset Leah – again.’ He thought about her declaration that she would rather walk on hot coals than accept a lift from him. Strong words that betrayed an even stronger emotion. He understood why she was angry with him. He had made love to her urgently and demandingly but, instead of spending the rest of the party in her company, which is what he had planned to do, he had danced intimately, as Peter had pointed out, with a woman she hated. He had hurt her and he wanted to put it right, but a simple apology wasn’t going to do it this time.

‘You love her, don’t you, Mr Bentley?’

‘Whatever makes you say that?’

Peter stared pointedly at the T-shirt he was wearing. It was the one Leah had bought him in Hong Kong. Even though she had bought the biggest size, it was slightly too small and fitted him across the chest like a second skin. Peter let his gaze linger then turned away with a smirk.

‘It’s comfortable!’ Harrison said.

‘Yes, I’m sure, it certainly looks – ah, comfortable...’ Peter’s taste in clothes matched Harrison’s with fashionable bespoke suits and Italian shirts. Even Harrison’s casual look included designer labels. ‘And the cowboy hat accessorises it beautifully.’

‘Funny. You’re a funny man, Peter, you know that.’

‘Just saying.’ Peter had a grin on his face but Harrison felt too wound up to be amused.

‘To answer your question - I don’t do love. I don’t do commitment and I don’t do relationships.’ Harrison drank his beer angrily.

‘Because...?’

‘Because love equals pain and no man in their right mind would make themselves vulnerable like that. And believe me, I am of perfectly sound mind.’

‘I believe you, Mr Bentley, but – may I offer another viewpoint?’

‘If you must.’

‘Your parents love each other very much, don’t they?’

He thought of his father’s jealousy whenever Connor came anywhere near his mother. His mother’s endless care and devotion to his father, even more so since he became ill. ‘I’ve never seen a couple more devoted. They have fights as all couples do. But they never let a day go by without saying I love you to each other.’ Harrison felt his throat constrict and hoped he wasn’t going to embarrass himself in front of his PA. His father had risked another heart attack losing his temper with Connor at the garden party.

‘So, don’t you think they want the same love for their only adored child? They’d hate you to be alone for the rest of your life.’

Harrison’s throat was dry and his breathing became more rapid. He didn’t want to listen to this, he wanted Peter to stop, but his gentle voice was hypnotic and had touched a raw nerve. ‘I think my parents want me to live the life I chose for myself and I have chosen one night stands and friends with benefits. Not love and marriage.’

‘But that’s not entirely true, is it Mr Bentley? If I may be so bold.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, since you and Ms Fitzpatrick met again at the board meeting you haven’t so much as looked at another woman.’ Harrison was silent, so Peter continued, ‘I’m an observer, Mr B, I notice these things.’

Harrison gazed out at the view of Central London, hazy in the mist and rain. He had always loved the fact that his apartment was so high up. He likened it to an eagle’s nest, perched at the top of a tree in the middle of a dense forest. For the first time, however, he felt isolated, cut off from love and laughter and was grateful for Peter’s company.

‘Just say, hypothetically of course, that you’re right. What do you suggest I do about it? She hates me now and refuses to speak to me.’

‘Woo her. Old fashioned word I know, but maybe you need some old-fashioned romance in your lives.’

‘I have no idea how to woo, Peter. I can run a multinational company and earn millions of pounds at the click of a mouse but woo – no idea.’

‘Well, then,’ Peter said getting up and disappearing out the door. Harrison waited until he returned with two more bottles of beer. ‘Why don’t

you put yourself in my expert hands, so to speak? What I don't know about wooing isn't worth knowing.'

Romance? Really? But he had to try something and his mind was blank. Peter and Robert had a sound, loving relationship. Maybe in this area of his life he should trust someone else's judgement. He had nothing to lose.

For the next hour, Peter gave Harrison the benefit of his experience. Harrison still wasn't convinced wooing was his thing but if it brought Leah back to him, he would give it a go. In fact, he would dance naked down the high street if it brought Leah back into his arms. He voiced his sentiments to Peter.

Peter grinned. 'I would have to advise against such rashness, Mr B. That is unless you want a whole raft of female stalkers after you. And a few male as well.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

Leah was exhausted.

Unable to sleep she had tossed and turned, going over in her mind the events of the weekend. Any dreams she may have been harbouring of having a relationship with Harrison were gone. It was strictly business from now on.

Her father wanted her to stay at Bentley Media to finish her report. He had said little about her running out of the garden party except that she should follow her heart but try to be professional while she was about it. This, of course, meant that he wanted her to work with Harrison as if nothing had happened.

She would have much preferred to work in BFP Enterprises HQ, but, if she distanced herself from him, Harrison would know how deeply he had hurt her. She had to keep up the pretence that he hadn't raked her soul, leaving gouges that might never heal. Having to be polite for the sake of the staff would take monumental effort. She wasn't an actor like Harrison.

She had moved into the Bentley House Hotel, refusing to go anywhere near Harrison's penthouse suite. He had said nothing. No doubt he wouldn't want her living with him now anyway. She wondered, in the early hours of the morning when sleep eluded her, whether that woman had already moved in. It was really none of her business and she must get

over it. *Easier said than done.* The image of the two of them locked in each other's arms was stamped on her brain like a brand.

Monday morning, and she was back in the foyer of Bentley Media. The wall contained a new photo. This one was the advert for mobility scooters and showed four pensioners dressed in leather jackets, colourful bandannas around their foreheads, staring ahead intently while they rode their scooters together down a busy high street. People stepped out of their way, respectfully. The scooters, painted like Harley Davidsons, had a skull and cross-bones flag flying from the handlebars.

Leah smiled as she pictured Harrison and his creatives dressed as Hell's Angels in one of their all-nighters. Then she remembered she was still angry with him and turned away.

The receptionist greeted her like an old friend and several people smiled and wished her a good morning on her way to the executive suite. No-one said anything about her melt-down at the garden party, or hinted in any way that they knew all about it. Bentley Media staff were lovely people. The report for her father was going to be harder to write now. She had almost decided to recommend they keep the company and possibly extend into advertising in a big way. But, the remnant of the jealous rage that she had felt was urging her to hit Harrison where it would hurt him the most – by recommending they sell his beloved company. *Could I really be that petty?*

The decision was hers, which empowered her and made her feel stronger. She felt ready to face anything by the time she reached the office Harrison had allocated for her use.

She pushed open the door and was hit by a familiar sweet smell. She gazed around in amazement, wondering if she was in the wrong room. Boxes of chocolates covered the desk, the tops of the filing cabinets, the bookcase and there was a large, three-tiered tower that wobbled precariously on top of the printer. It was chocolate heaven and the sight and aroma assaulted her senses and made her stomach rumble. Even through the layers of cellophane, she could smell the rich, dark chocolate and the

vanilla of the white chocolate that wafted around her nostrils. Sniffing the air, she detected a hint of mint.

‘Oh my God, it’s like Willy Wonka’s in here.’ Peter walked into the room in a daze followed by Oscar who stood with his nose in the air, sniffing furiously.

‘Do you know anything about this?’ she demanded and Peter turned pink and looked away. ‘Is this some kind of joke or am I in the wrong office? Are you pitching to a confectionary company?’

‘No, this is definitely your office. And there’s no such pitch, more’s the pity. Might be fun. Is there a card, Ms Fitzpatrick?’

They searched but there was no card.

‘What’s going on, Peter, you know, don’t you?’

‘No! Well, possibly. Oh, all right, yes.’

‘And?’

‘Can’t you guess?’ Peter’s voice was sharp with an accusing edge and Leah had her answer.

‘Well, you can help me get rid of them. We’ll distribute a box to each floor starting with the receptionists. It’ll be a nice surprise for a Monday morning. I bet they don’t often get presents from the management. It’ll earn us Brownie points. I’m sure your boss will be pleased.’

‘I wouldn’t bank on it.’ Peter sighed. ‘I’ll get a trolley.’

How dare he think that a box of chocolates would make up for the pain he had caused her? *What planet is that man on?* And how typical of Harrison, in his arrogance, to buy the whole shop.

By lunchtime, Leah’s office still smelt of chocolate and she found it impossible to concentrate. She turned the air conditioning up as high as she could and left early.

The following morning, she got to work late as she had slept through the alarm. She opened the door gingerly but the smell of chocolates was gone. In its place was the exotic, heady scent of roses. She sighed in exasperation as she looked around. Freshly watered blooms with droplets

clinging to the velvet of the petals produced a rainbow of myriad colours that danced in front of her eyes.

As she crept into the room, she heard Peter's voice at her back. He must have been listening for the sound of her door opening.

'Oh, how lovely!' He wandered into the office and inspected each vase, smelling the roses with his eyes shut. 'He has surpassed himself this time.' He smiled at Leah. 'What do you think?'

'What do I think? I think he's gone mad. Why is he doing this Peter and why the hell are you encouraging him?'

Peter looked at her with a hurt expression. 'I am not encouraging him; he wants you to know how he feels, that's all.'

'There must be easier ways, and less expensive.'

'Oh but this is so romantic, don't you think?'

'Not really,' Leah said grumpily.

'But you love roses. They're your favourite, aren't they?'

'How do you know?'

'Because Mr Bentley told me. He's trying to please you.' Peter added tentatively, 'All these roses have meaning. Would you like me to explain to you the message he is trying to convey here?'

Leah was tempted to tell him to give Mr Bentley a message that wouldn't be polite or romantic. Then curiosity got the better of her. She tried for an aloof and indifferent air. 'Go on then, enlighten me.' She sat at her desk and leant back in her chair.

'Firstly, he has sent you six white roses. White indicates purity or humility...'

'Humility? Can't be from Harrison then.' Leah received a scathing look from Peter and she grinned at him.

'Six roses together signify a need to be loved or cherished.'

'How many indicates a need to get your butt kicked?' Peter sighed deeply. Uncharacteristically Leah was enjoying winding him up. She normally hated teasing of any kind.

‘Ms Fitzpatrick, I understand you are upset about the situation but so is Mr Bentley. May I continue?’ Leah swallowed her bad temper. Peter was a devoted assistant to Harrison and none of this was his fault.

‘Yellow roses mean the promise of a new beginning. He’s sent you eleven of those which assure the recipient they are truly and deeply loved.’ Leah grunted at that. Actions speak louder than roses.

‘Two roses entwined together means “Marry me”.’ Harrison didn’t do marriage. Leah felt angry suddenly. How dare he play with her affections like this. *He must know how I feel about him.*

‘How many say “Over my dead body”?’

Peter was trying to keep his temper and Leah was growing restless. How much longer was this lecture going to continue?

‘Orange, as I’m sure you know, means desire and pink is saying “please believe me”.’

Leah leapt up quickly, and stood with her hands on her hips. ‘Peter, you’re making all this up.’

Peter put his hand on his heart and stared at her with anguish on his face. ‘I assure you I am not. This is the language of love, Ms Fitzpatrick and Mr Bentley is trying to tell you how much he loves you. He’s gone to a lot of trouble.’

Leah doubted Harrison was saying anything of the kind but Peter was only trying to help. After all, Harrison didn’t love her and never would. He’d made that blatantly clear. ‘Sorry, go on, I won’t interrupt again.’ She sat back in her chair and waited.

Peter continued. ‘Red and white roses together signify unity and,’ he paused, his voice developing a slight tremor, ‘the single red rose, the symbol of utmost devotion, that Mr Bentley has put in the vase and left on your desk so you will be able to see it while you’re working, simply says “I love you”.’ Peter looked as if he wanted to cry and Leah bit back a wave of irritation. Trust Harrison to be able to elicit such devotion from his secretary.

Secretly, deep in her soul, she was dancing for joy at the sight of so many roses. Chosen with care and displayed in such a fashion that told her

of his true, abiding love. *But none of it's real. Is it? And where is he?* Why was Peter conveniently at her side to explain everything?

Then a thought struck her. Is this what Monique Devereux had taught him? She was French after all. Was Harrison looking for romance? Then she thought of the Harrison J Bentley she knew and realised what an absurd idea that was. The man wouldn't recognise romance if it crept up behind him and bit him on the butt. He was the "love 'em and leave 'em" type who used women for his own selfish needs. As he had done with her. That would never change no matter how many roses he gave her.

The roses had to go. The staff of Bentley Media would think Santa Claus had popped in early to give them special summer gifts if any more things turned up in her office that needed distributing around the building. More gossip for the grapevine. *Not my problem.*

'Well thank you, Peter, that was very educational. They can't stay in my office, however. Please arrange to have them removed. I'm going back to the hotel to work. You have my mobile number if you need me.'

'Yes, Ms Fitzpatrick.' Leah walked out of the door, her head held high, and sensing Peter's eyes burning a hole in her back.

Later that evening she returned to Bentley Media. Overwhelmed with curiosity she wanted to catch Harrison in the act. When she opened the door to find the office empty, disappointment soured in her stomach. He'd given up. When his crazy romantic gestures hadn't elicited the response he expected, he had probably shrugged and decided she wasn't worth bothering about anyway. And the roses had gone, just a faint hint of their perfume lingering in the air, proof that they had been there at all. Peter had got rid of them, just as she had asked him to.

All except one. When she walked around her desk she noticed the single red rose in the exquisite crystal vase was still where Harrison had left it. She picked the bloom out of the vase, droplets of water slipping off the stem onto her computer keyboard, and put it to her nose. A sweet, musky freshness assailed her senses. The smell was strange and so familiar. It

reminded Leah of clean sheets, freshly mown grass, and her mother's bedroom in summer.

She found a carrier bag in the drawer of the desk and carefully placed the vase with the rose in it inside. She left the office and got into the lift without encountering any of the staff. Harrison was conspicuous by his absence. She got a taxi outside the building and cradled the carrier bag in her lap until she got back to the hotel. She placed the vase and the rose on the table next to her bed. Before she got up to change and shower, she gently stroked the petals of the rose with one finger, in exactly the same way Harrison had stroked her face after making love to her at the garden party.

Chapter Twenty-Four

After another sleepless night worrying that she might be pregnant, Leah decided to have a lie-in and go into work at lunchtime. She had no idea when Harrison had been planting his outlandish gifts but he hadn't made an appearance in the office during the day. As they weren't speaking, she couldn't access his schedule and had too much pride to ask Peter.

The executive suite was quiet when she arrived and appeared deserted. Everyone was at lunch. Her office looked as it should. No roses or chocolates. Nothing else, as far as she could see after a quick glance. She'd been right. He'd given up.

As she stood in the doorway, she became aware that someone was behind her. She knew it wasn't Peter. Her physical reaction gave his identity away. She felt her heart rate speed up and her breath quicken.

'No champagne?' she asked brightly. 'They usually go together don't they? Roses, chocolates and champagne?'

'If you want champagne, Leah, you shall have it.' Harrison's deep, rich voice vibrated through her as she stood with her back to him. She tried to force her feet to move but she was frozen to the floor, waiting. He stood right behind her and she could feel his breath on the top of her head. She expected him to touch her, but he didn't.

‘What would you like? Krug 1988 is a favourite at present. Or would you prefer the Bollinger? Maybe a nice Dom Perignon?’

His teasing made her grind her teeth and breathe deeply to try to dispel the anger that was steadily building. ‘I want nothing from you.’ She walked slowly into her office and put her briefcase down on the floor next to her desk. It was then she saw it. A small black velvet box sat next to her keyboard. She had almost missed it.

‘Open it.’ Harrison’s voice was quiet but commanding and she obeyed.

She gasped as she removed a white gold necklace. It was a heart on a delicate chain and in the centre was a tiny key studded with minute diamonds. It was exquisite and Leah gazed at it lying in the palm of her hand.

‘You have the key to my heart, Leah, you always will have. Here, let me put it on.’

She couldn’t move as Harrison gently took the key out of her hand and placed it around her neck. He fastened it quickly then turned her around and stroked the necklace as it lay against her skin. His touch sent quivers of desire and need through her and she had to fight against the longing to throw her arms around his neck and hold him close.

‘Do you like it?’ His blue eyes were the colour of a summer sky and the sharp citrus smell of his cologne was intoxicating. She felt herself falling under his spell and fought to remind herself why she had to get away from him as quickly as possible. He was dangerously close and tantalisingly sexy. She wanted him so much that reason and common sense deserted her in the waves of longing that moved restlessly through her limbs.

‘It’s beautiful, but...’

‘No buts, Leah, it’s about time we put a stop to this nonsense. I want us to be friends again. To be more than friends. We’re good together, you and I, you feel it too, I know you do.’

‘No, Harrison, it’s no good. We’re polar opposites. We want different things.’ *I want you and you want Monique.*

Harrison quickly stepped back and picked her up, setting her down on the edge of the desk. He pushed her thighs apart and moved between them,

pulling her close to his hard, muscular body. He had moved so quickly that she hadn't realised his intent until his left hand held her by the back of the neck and he kissed her fiercely. His mouth took possession of hers and he held her so tightly that she couldn't have moved her head if she had wanted to. As it was, she didn't.

She kissed him back, their tongues fighting for supremacy and their lips devouring each other with hunger and desperation. Leah felt Harrison's right hand moving to undo the buttons on her blouse. She should stop him but instead, one arm snaked around his neck and the other held him around the waist. They held on to each other, the kiss melding their mouths into one.

Leah felt Harrison's fingers playing with one of her nipples and she could feel the wetness forming as his hard length pressed into her. She wanted him inside her and soon before she exploded in frustration.

They were at work and lunchtime was nearly over. The staff would be returning and they couldn't catch them like this. She broke the kiss reluctantly and through swollen lips she whispered, 'Harrison, no, the staff.'

He rested his forehead against hers and they stayed like that until their breathing returned to normal and they could separate and adjust their clothing. Harrison was sweating slightly and Leah felt her breasts heavy and tingling. Everywhere he had touched her was on fire and she didn't know how she was going to get through the rest of the day.

'You don't need to be jealous of her, you know.' Harrison's voice was steady with no trace of the passion they had just shared. The bulge at his crotch, however, told a different tale.

'If you mean that woman you bedded at university, I'm not jealous.' Leah felt the passion draining away as Harrison smiled at her as if he knew better.

'You can't even say her name, of course you are. I'm just trying to reassure you that there's no need.'

She moved away from him and stood on the other side of the desk.

‘So what was she doing at the garden party? Why was she there?’ Leah didn’t want to do this. She despised herself for her jealousy but couldn’t stop the questions that poured out of her.

‘I have no idea. Does it matter?’

‘Of course it matters. She wouldn’t have just turned up, Harrison, out of the blue. You must have invited her. Or if not you, then my father.’

‘Have you asked him?’

‘I’m asking you.’

‘Well, ask Connor because it’s nothing to do with me.’

‘Have you seen her since the garden party?’ Leah could see by Harrison’s expression that he was getting angry and she should quit while she was ahead. But she couldn’t. She had spent days mulling things over. Sleepless nights tossing and turning all because of that woman just showing up.

‘No I haven’t seen or spoken to her. Maybe I should. Do you want me to do that?’

Leah felt trapped. Of course she didn’t want Harrison to speak to her. She wanted the ground to swallow the wretched woman up and make her disappear off the face of the earth. She also wanted to know what was going on and Harrison was the only one able to tell her.

She looked him straight in the eye and she saw tension lines around his eyes. He was obviously as affected by their fighting as she was. Maybe it was time to listen to what he had to say, give him the chance to explain. She shook her head.

Harrison was beside her in an instant and took one of her hands in his. He brought it slowly to his lips and, never breaking eye contact, kissed her knuckles. The sudden heat of his mouth on her skin caused her to jerk away, but he held her hand firmly.

He seemed reluctant to let go and watched her expression intently. She waited. Then he spoke.

*‘If I profane with my unwortheiest hand,
This Holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand*

To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss."

Then he turned her hand over and pressed his lips to her palm. The soft touch against the background of his deep husky voice caused her to quiver with longing and she realised she was holding her breath. He folded her fingers over the kiss and kept hold of her hand watching her face.

'Romeo and Juliet,' she said breathlessly.

'I played Romeo at Oxford.'

I bet you did. Leah remembered the stories she had heard of the antics of the undergraduates. His affair with Monique had occupied most of his time at university. Once again, raging jealousy threatened to tear her apart.

'In the play, Romeo offered to kiss away any damage he may have done or sacrilege he may have committed.'

Is this Harrison's way of saying sorry? Was he expressing sincere regret he had hurt her? Was this the point where she forgave everything and fell into his arms again? The mention of Oxford threw cold water on that idea. 'So, who played your Juliet, was it Monique Devereux?'

Harrison's face darkened and his eyes looked stormy and dangerous. 'Oh for goodness sake, Leah! Your jealousy is starting to bore me. It was a long time ago, I was eighteen years old, hormones raging, constantly aroused and an older woman seduced me. She was not my Juliet, more like my Mrs Robinson. What was I supposed to do?' Harrison was pacing the office, obviously trying to keep his temper in check. Then, he smoothed his tie down over his shirt and turned to her with a smile. 'Anyway, you should be grateful to her.'

'Grateful, why should I be grateful to her?'

'Because if she hadn't taught me all she knew, we wouldn't have experienced such hot and satisfying sex.'

'You pig!' Harrison threw back his head and laughed as Leah looked around on her desk for something to throw. She picked up a stapler and Harrison moved swiftly toward the door.

'Temper, temper. Remember, professional at all times in the office.' She pulled her hand back as if she was going to throw it and Harrison dashed out, the echo of his laughter haunting her as she sank into her chair.

She deserved his teasing and he was right, her intense feelings of jealousy were boring even herself. She needed to get over that woman and quickly. He'd been young and vulnerable but that was a lifetime ago. He had danced with his ex, nothing else. She had to start believing him. His accusation that she kept running away played over in her mind. Well, no more. She would stand and fight. For Harrison. Because she loved him, it was as simple as that.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Harrison stood back and surveyed his handiwork. If she wanted champagne, she would have it. Anything for Leah. He grinned. He hadn't realised how much fun this was going to be. *Who knew romance was so entertaining?*

He had arranged four bottles of champagne in different places around her office. On her desk, two bookcases and on top of a filing cabinet. Next to each bottle was a brand new pair of expensive shoes. All Leah's favourite designers. The Krug 1988 was next to a pair of Jimmy Choos; the Armand de Brignac next to a pair of Christian Louboutin; the Dom Perignon was paired with the Louis Vuitton and the Bollinger sat next to a creation by Gucci.

He had chosen the shoes with care. Leah always wore killer heels, as she was only five foot four inches tall. She liked the classy, chic look and was fussy about what she wore. The shoes Harrison had picked out included sugar pink, a black open-toed pair encrusted with tiny jewels, a pair in soft brown alligator skin and, his favourite, white shoes with black soles and heels. They were elegant, smart and suited her taste.

Champers and shoes, right up Leah's street. She's going to love it.

He was pleased with himself as he settled back into his white leather office chair and booted up his computer. He wanted Leah and not just for

sex. Although sex and Leah went together like milk and honey. Her skin was soft and creamy and she tasted sweeter than any honey he'd ever had. How could he have been so naive to think that one night with her would have been enough? He would never get enough of her, if he lived to be a hundred.

Peter's comment that his parents wouldn't want him to be alone for the rest of his life had struck a chord. What was the point of all the hard work, effort and sacrifice if there was no one to share it with? His parents' marriage was solid. They'd weathered many storms in their lives and they were still together. Maybe he, too, was capable of such a love. If he was, there was only one person he wanted by his side.

Leah chose that moment to burst into his office and stand in front of his desk. 'This needs to stop, Harrison, you've gone too far!'

'Something wrong?'

'No more presents, do you hear me? I can't take any more.'

'Don't you like them? I'm sure we can get them changed if you prefer different designers. Or is it the colours I've chosen you don't approve of?'

'It's not the shoes-'

'Don't you like the champagne?'

'Yes, I love champagne-'

'Then what *is* the problem?'

'The problem is you. If you really think that expensive presents and over-the-top gestures are what I want, then you really don't know me at all.'

'I thought I was being romantic.' Harrison felt slightly put out at her tone but was mesmerised by how passionate and fired-up she was. Her eyes were spitting green fire and it was turning him on.

'The necklace was romantic. It's beautiful and was a lovely gesture. But it's not enough.'

'Do you want matching earrings?'

'No!' Leah stood up straight and crossed her arms. She looked like she was on a mission so he gave her his full attention.

'So - what then?'

‘I want your respect. Your attention. I want you to treat me as an equal and talk to me. Tell me what’s going on in your mind, your fears, your dreams. I want you to open up to me, Harrison and not be afraid to tell me your darkest secrets. I want you to trust me.’

Harrison winced. ‘Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have the earrings?’

Leah gave a little smile and then quickly suppressed it. ‘No, I don’t need material things I am perfectly capable of getting for myself. What I want from you is unique.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yourself. I just want you, that’s all.’

‘You can have me, Leah, whenever you want. You know that.’

‘No, Harrison, I don’t. And I want you to just want me. Exclusivity, that’s what I need. We’ve never discussed how we feel about each other. Oh, I know the sex is good, but I’m talking about feelings. I need to know how you feel.’

She was serious and this was crunch-time. Leah was obviously not going to be pacified until she got what she wanted. He wanted her to have that as the realisation was growing that they both wanted the same thing.

‘Right. Okay then, I’ll book a table for seven. We’ll talk. I’ll meet you at the restaurant as I have a meeting at six. I’ll text you the details and please don’t be late.’

‘Fine.’ Leah turned and left his office, but not before he had seen the shine in her eyes and the wide grin on her face.

He was late.

Leah glanced around at the other diners and tried to look as if he hadn’t stood her up. She sipped her wine and wondered whether to text him. She didn’t want to appear too eager but he had told her not to be late and here she was, on her own.

The restaurant was one of the most exclusive in London, which proved how much influence Harrison had. No one else she knew would have been

able to procure a table at such short notice, except maybe her father. She had heard they were always fully booked three months in advance.

Earlier that day her period had started and with it the familiar cramps and irritability. As she did every month, she took her painkillers and did her mindfulness exercises to maintain a calm composure. She should be feeling relief she wasn't pregnant but was taken aback at how disappointed she felt. *How irrational*. In the spirit of the new honesty between them, she would confess her feelings to Harrison and trust that he would smile gently and tell her there would be plenty of time for them to have babies. If he ever turned up.

She felt conspicuous, sitting on her own, glancing from the door to her phone and back. After nearly forty minutes had passed, she picked up her mobile and was about to connect to Harrison's number when it rang. *At last*.

Without looking at the name on the screen she said, 'Where are you? I'm sitting here all alone and you were the one who told me not to be late.'

'Leah? It's Dad.'

'Dad? What's wrong?' She knew instantly that something was. He sounded breathless and the connection was bad. There was a lot of background noise as if he was in a public place.

'I'm at the hospital. William had another heart attack this afternoon. Harrison and I flew up straight away. He asked me to let you know. Something about a meal?'

'We were supposed to be having dinner tonight but that doesn't matter now. Oh God, poor Harrison. And he was doing so well. What have the doctors said?'

'It's not looking good. He's barely conscious and this one was worse than the last. It's touch and go. I'm going to stick around in case Sylvia needs me. She's in bits.'

'When did you find out? Why didn't Harrison ring me?'

'Sylvia rang me when we were both in a meeting. She asked me to come up with Harrison. I don't think she wanted him to be alone. He adores his father.'

Sylvia needed him so he would be by her side. Well, Harrison needed her and she should be there too. ‘Dad, I’m going to fly up tonight, I need to be with Harrison.’

‘I don’t think that’s what he wants, Leah. I’m to ask you if you wouldn’t mind holding the fort at Bentley Media again, and he wants you to take Oscar. He’s phoned the hotel so there shouldn’t be a problem. I think it would be best...’

Dad...I can’t hear you, you’re breaking up.’

‘I’ve got to go...’ then there was a crackling noise and Leah waited until it cleared.

‘Dad? I didn’t catch that.’

‘Speak later, bye love.’

‘Dad? Give my love to Harrison and tell him...’ but the connection had been broken and she was talking to herself.

She stared at the phone, deep in thought. She wanted to be with the man she loved in his hour of need, but he seemed to prefer her to take care of business. Bentley Media was important to him. *What shall I do?* Surely the agency could manage without her for a day or so. If Harrison had specifically asked her to stay, however, she should do that.

On the other hand, her memories of the days leading up to her mother’s death reminded her of how difficult it is to think straight when your heart is breaking. You’ll agree to anything, say yes without thinking, let other people take over the decision-making. Not that her father would ever bully Harrison at a time like this, but Leah knew how determined he could be, and he still wanted to sell the ad agency. Harrison needed someone there who was one hundred percent on his side. He needed her.

She was just about to stand up and put her jacket on when her phone vibrated. Harrison had sent her a text. *Thanks for looking after Oscar and BM. Don’t know what I’d do without you.* Confirmation that he wanted her to stay put. Maybe he didn’t need their burgeoning relationship to distract him. He had enough to think about; he had to be strong for both his parents. *Poor Harrison.* Her heart went out to him, but the best way she could help was to do as he asked.

Leah apologised to the maître d' who was charming and understanding. The Bentleys were regular customers of the restaurant and the man seemed genuinely upset to hear about William. She caught a taxi to the hotel to find Peter in the lobby with Oscar on a lead.

'Ms Fitzpatrick – so you got the message then. Mr Bentley texted me from Cheshire and told me to bring Oscar here. I'd have him myself but Robert is allergic to dogs.'

'It's okay, Harrison texted me as well. He's squared it with the staff. His hotel, his rules I guess.'

'One of the benefits of being the boss's son.' Peter smiled weakly. 'It's so sad about Mr Bentley senior, I can't begin to imagine what the poor family are going through now.'

'I know. We just need to hope for the best. Peter. You don't have a key to Harrison's apartment do you? I could stay there with Oscar.' She could look after it for him and feel close to him as well. Just being able to sleep in his bed, maybe wear one of his large tees and inhale his aroma, would be better than lying in a cold, impersonal hotel bed no matter how luxurious it may be.

'No, I'm so sorry, I don't. I've never needed one before now. I might mention it for the future.'

'Just a thought. Anyway, thanks Peter. I'll take Oscar for a walk before I turn in.'

'Right. Well, then.' Peter seemed reluctant to leave and Leah wondered if she should invite him up for a nightcap. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts so gave him a quick hug instead. He hugged her back with tears in his eyes.

'Goodnight Ms Fitzpatrick.'

'Goodnight Peter.'

She walked Oscar around the block and stopped at an all-night store for some dog biscuits. When she returned to the hotel, there was nothing for her to do but go to bed. Oscar curled up on the rug next to the bed and his snuffling and snoring was strangely comforting. At least she didn't feel so alone.

She sent Harrison a quick text to say that Oscar was fine and that he and his family were in her thoughts. Then she wished she hadn't sent it as it sounded so formal. The kind of thing you put in a sympathy card to someone you didn't know very well. She wanted to tell him she loved him. She needed to hold him and comfort him. She felt small and lonely in the double bed. Even her mindfulness exercises and yoga breathing didn't work.

Sleep was impossible so she got up and made herself some hot milk. Oscar woke up and sat at her feet with his head in her lap. She stroked his silky fur, grateful for his silent companionship. Several times she reached for her phone with the intention of ringing Harrison. She just wanted to hear his voice but didn't want to disturb him at such a crucial time. He would be sitting by William's bedside with Sylvia. A phone call to say nothing much would be inappropriate. No, she had to be patient and wait for him to contact her.

Eventually, she gave in and rang his number. It went straight to voicemail, so she promised herself she would be patient a bit longer and wait for him to ring her. She crawled back into bed and curled up in a ball.

The call came in the early hours of the morning.

Leah had just fallen into a fitful sleep. Her dreams were dark and disturbing. She was almost glad when her familiar ringtone woke her up. Until she heard her father's voice.

'Leah? Bad news, honey, he's gone.'

'What?'

'I'm so sorry. William died half an hour ago. They did everything they could.'

'Oh no,' tears threatened to overwhelm her. Her poor darling and she wasn't there to comfort him. 'I'm coming up as soon as I can get a flight.'

'Leah, stay where you are. This is the time for family; I think the Bentleys just want to be alone to grieve. Plenty of time for you to pay your condolences later.'

'But you're there.' She *was* family. She was the woman Harrison loved. She should be with him; it wasn't right that she couldn't be there

too. Her father didn't understand what they meant to each other. Maybe now was the time to enlighten him. 'I love him, Dad.'

'I know you do, I understand, but the best thing you can do for him is to look after his business concerns. It's what he wants. Be strong, darling, for Harrison's sake.'

'But you're staying.' She tried not to sound accusing. Her father would be a great help to them at this stressful time. 'Where is he? Can I speak to him? Please Dad.'

'Not at the moment, Leah, but I'll get him to call you as soon as he can. Wait until the dust settles before ringing him. They are both distraught as you can imagine. Harrison is holding his mother up, as well as dealing with his own pain. It's a terrible time, terrible.'

Leah heard the distress in her father's voice. Whenever a death occurs, the memory of losing loved ones comes flooding back. Doubtless, he was thinking of when her mother lost her fight for life. The emotions are indescribable, the unreal feeling as if the world has stopped turning and will never have a reason to restart.

'Leah, I must go. Look after that business, okay?' Then he was gone and Leah was alone in a hotel room, sitting in a strange bed, trying to imagine the pain that Harrison must be feeling and longing to be with him. She wanted to hold him as he had held her the night she had her meltdown after the nightclub. He hadn't tried to make love to her, hadn't spoken, but his warmth and strength had seeped into her bones and brought her back to life.

Her father knew she loved him. *How?* Had Harrison told her father of his own feelings? Or had he worked it out from the shenanigans at the garden party. The only thing that mattered now was the agony Harrison must be going through. She tried his phone again, desperate to speak to him, but it went straight to voicemail. She stared into space, a feeling of unreality making her brain fuzzy and her thoughts chaotic.

Then she felt the mattress dip and Oscar crawled into her arms whining. He must have picked up on her distress and was trying to comfort her.

She hugged him and breathed in his doggy smell gratefully. ‘You love him, too, don’t you boy?’ Oscar wagged his tail.

Once again Leah sat at Harrison’s desk in his white leather chair. Oscar sat at her feet. Ever since he had spent the night with her in her hotel room, he hadn’t let her out of his sight. The first meeting she had attended when she had tried to leave him outside, he had scratched the paintwork and whined until she had been forced to let him in.

Even Peter hadn’t been able to coax him away from her. So, she let him stay. His presence brought her closer to Harrison. Even though technically he belonged to all the staff, in reality he was Harrison’s dog.

She had been tasked with the job of keeping Bentley Media afloat. But it needed little help from her. Harrison had trained his staff well, the company appeared to be running itself with no input from her whatsoever. She felt too distracted to sit at a desk for long so got up and spoke to Oscar. ‘Come on then, let’s go and see what the staff are up to.’

They made their way down to the coffee lounge where Peter was working hard at his barista duties. He grinned when he saw her. ‘Ms Fitzpatrick, just in time for one of my special blends.’

‘Lovely, Peter. How are you?’

‘I’m fine.’ He busied himself with the controls on the huge chrome monster that he loved so much. He looked tired. ‘Well, actually, that’s a lie. I’m feeling sad and teary. I can’t stop thinking about poor Mr Bentley. It’s brought it all back, too, when I lost my father to cancer.’

‘Oh, Peter, I’m so sorry, when was that?’

‘Three years ago. We used to go and visit him in the hospice. You know, read to him and bring him little things we thought he’d like. Then one day, we got a phone call. The nurse said not to make any arrangements for the weekend. Well, you can imagine the shock. But of course it wasn’t a shock really because we knew he was terminal.’

Peter put a mug of coffee in front of her and wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. ‘Thank you, Peter.’ She waited for him to go on.

‘I suppose the good thing was that we had that warning so we could prepare for it. As much as you ever can. And the whole family were there with him on the Sunday when he passed.’

‘Yes, at least you had the chance to say goodbye. I’m grateful that I was at my mother’s bedside, but...’ she couldn’t go on as her eyes filled with tears.

‘Yes, I know what you were going to say. It makes no difference when they’re gone. The pain is still the same.’ She nodded, too overcome to speak. ‘Oh, listen to us being miserable. This’ll never do, Mr Bentley wouldn’t want this.’ He blew his nose loudly.

‘You’re right, Peter. I think I’ll go and ring him. I was told to wait, but I can’t – not any longer.’

‘Give him my best regards won’t you?’

‘Yes, of course.’

As soon as she got back to the office and shut the door she collapsed onto the sofa. She took a few deep breaths to quieten her emotions. It wouldn’t do for Harrison to hear her in tears, she was supposed to be comforting him.

He beat her to it. The phone rang and Harrison’s name was on the screen. ‘Harrison, I was just about to ring. Oh my darling, I’m so sorry, I should have been with you...’

‘Leah, it’s okay. I needed someone I could rely on to step into my shoes. Thank you for that. Connor was here and has been a Godsend.’

‘How are you?’

‘We’re both okay. I’m staying with Mum for another couple of days but will be home on Sunday. I’d love to see you.’

‘Of course.’ He was holding back, keeping all his feelings inside. ‘When is the funeral?’

‘Not sure yet, next week sometime.’

‘I’m coming, no arguments, okay?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Harrison? Talk to me. I need you to tell me how you’re feeling. You can’t keep all the emotions inside. You adored your father and I know how distraught you must feel.’

There was silence on the other end of the line and she wondered if he was crying. But when he spoke again, his voice was calm and controlled. ‘I feel numb, Leah, I don’t think it’s really sunk in yet. The reason I’m ringing is to ask if you could keep Oscar until Sunday.’

‘Of course, I’ll bring him around to your apartment in the afternoon.’

‘Thanks, you’ve been such a help to me with Bentley Media, I can’t thank you enough.’

‘You’re welcome.’ He was talking to her as if she was a colleague, but she wanted to be so much more than that. She wanted to be his life’s partner, the one he turned to in a crisis, not just a night watchman for his company.

‘I’d better go. Thanks again and – we’ll talk, I promise.’

‘See you Sunday, then.’ Leah broke the connection. She sat on the sofa in Harrison’s office, wondering what she had to do to break down his barriers. Get close to the real man, for until that happened, she could never tell him what was in her heart. That she loved him more than life itself and always would.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Harrison increased the speed on the treadmill and ran flat out for ten minutes until his skin shone with sweat. The feel of straining muscles and a body pushed to the limits might help to erase the memory of watching his father die.

The doctors had warned them, after the bypass surgery, that he only had a thirty-percent chance of surviving for another five years. He would need to live a quiet life and take regular medication, cut out the alcohol and avoid stress. He had exchanged a look with his mother that said *yeah, like that was ever going to happen*. So, when his mother had phoned him with the news of the massive thrombosis his father had suffered, he knew he was going to die. She'd had the foresight to ask to speak to Connor and the two of them had travelled to Cheshire together.

Connor Fitzpatrick had shown his true colours on the flight and later at the hospital. The man had been a mountain of strength, whereas he had been a quivering wreck. He had wanted Leah with him, but Connor told him to forget everything else and concentrate on spending the last precious hours with his parents. Just the three of them. He had been right. Emotionally, he was rung dry.

After slowing the pace on the treadmill, it gradually drew to a halt. He stepped off and, throwing a towel around his neck, made his way to the

sunroom. Peter sat in a chair, balancing a lap tray full of papers. Even though there were two perfectly good tables in the apartment, everyone loved the sunroom. Today, however, the incessant rain and dark clouds that were gathering in the distance obscured the normally spectacular view.

Peter had told him the sterling job Ms Fitzpatrick had done in his absence again, but he had still kept the most important stuff for his return. The confidential papers that only Harrison and Peter had access to.

Peter had been uncharacteristically quiet since his return. Harrison sensed he was bursting to say something about his father's death, but he had warned him up front that he didn't want to talk about it. His PA was always obedient, despite throwing him sympathetic glances and watery smiles.

Just as Harrison sat down in his favourite armchair in order to sign the papers, the intercom buzzed.

'Would you like me to get that, Mr Bentley?' Peter asked, already heading to the door.

'Thank you.' Harrison started signing, his signature a flourish on the page.

He was vaguely aware of voices in the hall as he concentrated on reading every word of the documents before he signed them.

'Mr Bentley, its ... um, uh...'

'Who, Peter?'

Harrison stood up and handed the documents to his PA as he turned. He stared at Monique Devereux standing in the doorway. He almost didn't recognise her. Gone was the sleek, sophisticated woman he was used to seeing. It was evident she was high on something. Her hair was tangled and her make-up smudged. In the harsh daylight, he could see signs of age on her face.

'Harrison, where have you been hiding, you naughty boy? I've been trying to find you for days.'

‘Monique, you have no right to come to my home like this. How did you get the address?’ Harrison was livid. She hadn’t heard about his father’s death and he was in no mood to enlighten her.

‘You wouldn’t answer my messages so I had to ask Connor.’ She whined like a little girl as she walked towards Harrison in what she obviously thought was a seductive manner. It made him want to back off. He needed to get her out of his apartment and fast. Leah would be bringing Oscar back soon and she mustn’t get the wrong idea again. He wished he’d gone straight to her hotel as soon as he’d arrived back, but wanted to get his emotions under control before he saw her again.

When Monique stood in front of him, she put her arms around him and hung on. He tried to push her away, but she clung on tighter. She had obviously been drinking; he could smell the alcohol on her breath.

He looked over her head at his PA who shrugged helplessly.

‘Make some coffee for Ms Devereux, would you Peter?’

‘Of course, Mr Bentley.’ Peter scuttled off in the direction of the kitchen.

As Monique clung to him even tighter, it was evident that, beneath her raincoat, she was naked. An awful thought entered his mind that the crazy woman intended to seduce him as she had so many years ago.

‘Monique, you must go after your coffee, all right?’

‘But we were so good together, you and I, do you remember?’

‘You need help. I can get someone for you. A therapist who can help you move on with your life.’ Harrison felt helpless in the face of his ex-lover’s misery. She was clearly disturbed as well as deeply unhappy.

Monique put her arms around Harrison’s neck and tried to kiss him. He turned his head away and prised her arms off him, ‘I just want you, Harrison, my love. You’re all I’ve ever wanted. Don’t send me away.’

Where’s Peter with that damned coffee?

Harrison squirmed as Monique ran her hands over his chest, one hand stroking lower to reach his groin. With a surge of anger, he grabbed her wrists and pushed them behind her back to stop her touching him.

‘Ah, you always liked it when we played rough, didn’t you?’

‘No, actually,’ Harrison said, ‘that was your taste if I recall.’

She thrust her body onto his and rubbed her breasts against his chest. He was still sweating from the gym and the tension that was steadily rising. He was grieving for his father and the last thing he needed was his ex-lover trying to get him into bed.

When the intercom buzzed again, his heart sank. Another visitor. It was what he had expected, people wanting to pay their condolences. It was what happened when someone died. He didn’t want anyone to see Monique and jump to the wrong conclusions.

He heard Peter call out that he’d go and he released Monique’s hands and pushed her away. He didn’t want anyone seeing him touching her. He had to try to put distance between them before he could get her out of his apartment.

The door opened and his heart stopped at the sound of Leah’s cheerful welcome to Peter. *She’s early, as usual.* When Monique heard Leah’s voice, her eyes turned hard and her expression full of hate. Swiftly, before Harrison could stop her, she unbuckled her raincoat and let it drop to the floor. She stood, naked and defiant in front of Harrison who immediately started backing away from her.

She waited until Leah appeared in the doorway then threw herself at him. Her arms went around his neck and her lips locked onto his. Leah stared at him over the top of Monique’s head, in shock and bewilderment, but by the time he had pushed the woman off and rushed out of the sun-room, she was gone.

Leah grabbed the lift doors before they shut and squeezed through them. She pressed the button for the ground floor, determined not to let tears spoil her dignified exit. Peter had tried to stop her leaving after grabbing hold of Oscar’s lead, entreating her not to go, but all she wanted was to be out of that apartment.

He had lied to her repeatedly. He had told her she needn’t be jealous of Monique, and there they were in each other’s arms. What she had just witnessed had told her the truth in a way that he never had. His father had

just died and all he cared about was that woman. He was selling Bentley Media to her, so he could still be CEO when they married. He had betrayed and lied to her in so many ways.

When the lift stopped at the ground floor, she rushed out of the building as if the devil himself was following her. It was raining more heavily now and the sky was black and ominous. The storm was moving directly overhead and she wanted to get to shelter before the deluge. Where she was supposed to go now, she had no idea.

She put her umbrella up and speed walked, head down, intent on getting out of the rain, somewhere where she could lick her wounds and cry out all her pain. The thunder was moving closer and Leah felt tremulous with fear. She jumped when lightning flashed in front of her, then hurried on.

Harrison's face appeared in the puddles she splashed through, taunting her with his image. His eyes, that shade of deep, cobalt blue that could pierce her very soul. His perfect mouth, made beautiful when he smiled, tasting sweeter than the finest chocolates ever made. She pictured his body, tanned, muscled and hard; felt his heat and could smell his unique scent that overpowered her and left her senseless and begging for more of him. She heard his voice.

'Leah!'

Her imagination was so strong where Harrison was concerned, that she really could hear him calling her name.

'Leah, wait!'

She slowed down and realised that she didn't know where she was. She should find shelter whilst she waited for the rain to cease. She walked on again. She could make out a bus shelter in the distance.

'Leah, please, stop!'

The rain pelted down, getting heavier by the minute. Even her umbrella wasn't keeping her dry. It was cold rain too, miserable and unkind to anyone foolish enough to be out in it. She clasped the collar of her raincoat closer and hurried on.

The rain became torrential and Leah felt the cold water starting to seep up her body, from her feet. Her shoes were drenched as she waded through the rising tide of rainwater that surged over the pavement and bounced into the gutters.

‘Leah!’

That wasn’t her imagination, someone was calling her name. She turned around and saw a figure running towards her. Instinctively she felt fear. Then she looked closer at the figure but realised her mind must be playing tricks on her as it looked the image of Harrison. It couldn’t be. He was warm and dry in his apartment with the love of his life. No doubt, they’d both be naked by now. That thought was like a punch to the stomach and she nearly doubled over with the pain. Then she looked again at the figure moving through the curtains of rain.

Oh, my God! It is Harrison.

He was running towards her, shouting her name and waving frantically. He was saturated. Rain flattened his hair to his head, turning it almost black, and then washed down his face and neck. His T-shirt was soaking and sticking to every inch of his chest and shoulders. She couldn’t even tell what colour his jog pants were and his feet were bare.

She stared in fascination and horror as he stopped in front of her, his hands on his thighs, his chest heaving, water dripping down his body as if he were standing under a shower.

‘Harrison, what the hell are you doing?’

‘You wouldn’t wait,’ he panted.

‘You’re soaked!’

‘Yes, I know, but thanks for pointing it out.’

‘You’re mad.’

‘You’ve noticed at last.’

‘But...’

‘Leah, we really need to talk.’

‘You need to get back home out of the rain and get some shoes on. Your feet are bare.’ Leah looked down at his feet, which were turning a strange shade of blue. ‘Your poor feet must be freezing.’

‘Leah, do you remember, after the garden party, you told me you would rather walk over hot coals than accept a lift from me?’

‘Of course I remember. I’m hardly likely to forget it.’

‘Well, I would willingly walk the length and breadth of this city in bare feet, in the freezing rain, if it kept you from running out on me again.’

‘But – Monique...?’

Lightning lit up the sky followed by a clap of thunder that rent the air straight above them and Leah squealed and threw herself into Harrison’s arms. He caught her, just as she dropped the umbrella and kissed her cold, wet lips. She was so surprised that she kissed him back, her arms hugging him tightly through his sopping clothing.

When they came up for air, he begged her. ‘Please listen to me, I need to explain. It’s killing me that you don’t believe I love only you.’

‘You love me?’

‘More than you’ll ever know. You must listen to me, please.’

‘Okay, but first go back home, Harrison. You can’t be out in this weather dressed like that.’

‘No, now, I have to tell you now, before you escape from me again.’

Leah studied his face and recognised the stubborn set of his jaw and the piercing blue stare as he held her, their bodies so close she could feel his heart racing against hers. She relented and led him to the bench in the nearby bus shelter.

Leah shivered as thunder and lightning sang and danced overhead.

Harrison looked deep into her eyes and clasped her hands in his. She held her breath.

He told her how Monique had staged her little performance and caught him off guard. He told her how both himself and his mother were prepared for his father’s death and had said their goodbyes, albeit silently, long before his last heart attack. He also told her about a conversation he had with Connor one long night as they sat keeping vigil at his father’s bedside.

‘Your father told me he had loved your mother so much that when she died the best part of him died too and he has nothing left for any other woman.’

Tears fell down her cheeks, mingling with the rain that dripped from her hair.

‘Our parents need each other now, Leah. Connor is offering her something precious at a dark time in her life. Friendship. The genuine kind that comes with caring for someone for almost a lifetime.’

‘So, nothing romantic then?’

‘No. She needs a man to lean on, now that Dad...’ He stumbled to a halt, clearly choked. Leah waited until he continued, his voice husky with emotion. ‘All my life, I wanted to make my father proud of me but never felt he was. Before he slipped into a coma, he told me that he had always been proud but never as much as at that moment. He told me he wasn’t afraid to die because he was leaving my mother and his company in safe hands. That meant so much.’ She wrapped her arms around him, feeling him shiver as he buried his face in her shoulder and sobbed.

Once Harrison’s personal storm abated, he lifted his head up. Leah cupped his face and pressed her frozen lips to his. ‘You need to get inside in the warmth; you’ll catch your death.’

Harrison smiled through his shivering, ‘That sounded just like my mum.’

‘Your mum is a very intelligent woman.’

‘As you are.’

‘Have we seen the last of Monique Devereux? Honestly?’

‘We have, I promise.’

‘So she’s not going to buy Bentley Media?’

‘Never. Her firm’s going under. She intended to use the last of her money and influence to buy a growing company, hoping that the profits will pull her out of the mire. Of course it would never have worked. News like that spreads like wildfire in the financial world. No one in their right mind would do business with her.’

‘So why was she in your apartment in the nude tonight?’

‘It was a last ditch attempt to seduce me again. I think the woman is mentally unstable. I thought there was something wrong with her when I was eighteen but I was young and foolish then and not thinking straight.’

‘Did you have any feelings for her at all, Harrison?’

‘Beyond the physical? No. I was her puppet, her plaything. She was like a walking sex manual and I was just a dummy she practiced on.’

‘She wanted you back, didn’t she? I wasn’t so paranoid, was I?’

‘That was never going to happen. I love you, Leah, only you.’

Harrison had started to shiver so violently he was no longer capable of coherent speech. Leah held him close, concerned about how cold his skin was and realising that she would have to be the forceful one and get him into the warmth quickly.

‘Right, I’m taking you home, no arguments.’ She hailed a taxi and spoke to the driver before bundling Harrison into the back. ‘I’ve paid him extra for his trouble as he’ll probably have to mop up all that water you’re dripping all over his cab.’

Harrison’s teeth were chattering so loudly he couldn’t answer. Leah hugged him close and he clung on to her and buried his face in her hair. They stayed like that until the taxi drew up outside his apartment block.

They stepped into the lift, both with their wet clothes sticking to them, hair like rats’ tails and a reluctance to stop hugging as they moved upwards to the penthouse suite.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Harrison stripped off his sodden clothing and dropped it onto the floor of the bathroom. The cold had got under his skin and stiffened his joints. His feet were like slabs of ice but he knew they would burn like hell as soon as the feeling started to return. He didn't regret it. A stupid, spontaneous act, born out of panic that Leah would leave and he may never have the chance to explain and tell her he loved her. He didn't give a damn about anyone except her. His heart, and his body and soul if she wanted it, belonged to her and her alone.

Harrison luxuriated in the feel of the hot water and the spicy shower gel, easing the pain and bringing warmth back into his body. He heard the shower door open and Leah stepped in. They wrapped their arms around each other, letting the cleansing water cascade over them, washing away all the hurt, lies and pain.

Later, Harrison lounged in his favourite chair in the sunroom that was now the storm room. Oscar lay on the floor at his feet and Leah sat in the other chair with a towel on her lap and one of Harrison's feet placed on it. She rubbed liniment into the cuts on his skin and gently massaged feeling back into his hurt flesh.

They both sat in silence as she worked, watching the storm lashing the city and black clouds scudding across the evening sky in the direction of the coast.

‘It’ll be gone by morning,’ Harrison said.

‘What happened to Peter and Monique?’ Leah asked, as she ran a gentle hand down Harrison’s foot.

‘He left a note in the kitchen. It said that he had spoken to Monique and explained the situation. He has recommended a good therapist and offered to take her there himself.’

‘That was kind of him.’ Harrison could detect only sincerity in Leah’s tone.

‘I think he’s found a new project. Peter loves helping people. He has an inner compass for lost souls. Monique will have a friend, probably for the first time ever. Someone who asks nothing of her. You don’t need to worry about her again.’

He closed his eyes, dropped his head back and let out a groan as a surge of lust and longing travelled through him. Would he ever stop wanting this woman whose touch could bring him to his knees so swiftly? The answer, of course, was no.

He waited patiently whilst Leah administered to both his feet, then he couldn’t stand it any longer. He stood up and held his hands out to her.

‘Harrison, your feet...’

‘Never mind my feet, there’s another part of my anatomy that has started clamouring for your attention.’

He picked her up and carried her effortlessly up the spiral staircase and through into the master bedroom. He laid her on the bed, and then kissed her. They undressed, kissing, stroking and caressing every inch of each other while they did so until they were lying, naked, skin to skin, the heat from their bodies mingling with the cool air in the room.

Harrison held back, moving slowly at first, watching Leah for her response. She clung to him and wrapped her legs around him, pulling him closer. Their arousal peaked at the same time as Harrison thrust deeper into her, urging her towards fulfilment. Only when she was satisfied did

he let go with a cry, realising that the act he had thought only physical release had become so much more. He loved Leah and her happiness came first. The happier Leah was, the stronger the feeling that surged through him as he climaxed became. The two were linked so that the act of making love became almost spiritual.

When Leah woke, she found herself alone.

She didn't worry, just lay in the spacious bed, playing the last few hours over in her mind. She had been shocked and sickened to find Monique and Harrison together. If she'd been thinking clearly, if the image of that woman's naked body draped around the man she loved hadn't wiped all common sense from her mind, she would have started to ask questions. Why was Monique naked and Harrison dressed as if he had just been in the gym? If they had been engaged in sexual activity, why was Peter there?

Peter, the most honest, loyal and reliable of assistants, would never have agreed to anything underhand. After all, it was Peter, with the scenario of the roses, who had tried his best to impress on her how much Harrison loved her. Her, not Monique Devereux.

Anger, pain and humiliation had prevented her from thinking clearly at all.

Note to self: stop jumping to conclusions and start trusting the man you love.

Harrison returned carrying a tray with two dishes of pasta, two glasses and a bottle of champagne.

'Don't know about you but I'm starving.'

As she sat up and took one of the plates, she realised she was and tucked into the pasta as Harrison poured them both a glass of bubbly. He sat next to her, raised his glass and they clinked them together.

'To us,' he said quietly, 'no more secrets, complete honesty from now on. Everything shared, all decisions made together, no more holding back.'

‘I’ll drink to that.’ They drank, the chill of the liquid refreshing and the bubbles dancing in the glasses. *Should I ask him?*

They sat in silence for a minute or two, suddenly shy, like teenagers on their first date.

‘Harrison?’

‘Yes, my darling.’

‘Will you do something for me?’

‘Of course. Anything. Just name it.’

‘Will you dance with me. I’ve been longing to dance with you for so long.’

He stood up, put his hand out to her then, when she had clambered off the bed, slowly removed her dressing gown. He pushed his off and it fell to the floor. He kicked it out of his way then, naked, without music, they swayed together in the middle of the bedroom. They stayed like that until Harrison’s gentle kiss grew more urgent and she felt his body respond in the sweet, familiar way. He picked her up and carried her back to bed.

The following day, when they arrived at Bentley Media together, on the dot of seven o’clock, Leah sensed a subtle difference in the greeting they both received.

‘Morning, you two, said the receptionist with a wide grin on her face. Then, her smile slipped and she looked solemn. ‘So sorry to hear about your father, Mr Bentley. Please accept my sincere condolences.’

‘Thanks, that’s kind of you.’ Harrison smiled and nodded, then took Leah’s elbow and steered her towards the lifts.

‘I know they mean well,’ he said, but I’ll be glad when the condolences are over and things can get back to normal.’

They met some of the staff on the way to their offices, who all offered condolences, but then grinned or gave them the thumbs up sign. Somehow, it had already spread that the two of them were now an item.

When they reached the executive suite, Peter was there to greet them. He was his usual ebullient self and put his arms out as if he wanted to hug

them. Being the professional he was, he restrained himself and shook Harrison's hand, then Leah's, instead.

'May I just say how glad we all are that you two have finally seen the light. You make the most wonderful couple. You're obviously made for each other.' Peter had tears in his eyes and seemed reluctant to stop talking. 'I wasn't sure about the colour, as I didn't know whether you'd reached the two-entwined stage, so I just got the yellow ones. I also took the liberty of getting a single red one, because it's obvious you're madly in love.'

'Peter, what in the name of sanity are you talking about?' Harrison looked confused and Leah felt like laughing aloud.

'He's talking about roses, Harrison. Surely you remember? Yellow roses mean the promise of a new beginning and a single red rose means "I love you".'

Harrison looked a trifle shamefaced, then laughed. 'Oh yeah, roses. Of course.'

'I've put them in your office, Ms Fitzpatrick. Now, let me get you both a coffee; we have a lovely new blend I'm trying.' Peter scurried away and Leah smiled at Harrison.

'I suppose we better go and see what your assistant has been up to.'

Eleven yellow roses sat in a pale blue vase on Leah's desk with a single red rose in an exquisite crystal vase. She picked the small vase up and handed it to Harrison.

'I'll keep the yellow ones, but I want you to have this. Because I don't have the words to express how much I love you, so I'll let the rose do the talking.'

Harrison gazed at it for a long time, then gently put it back on the desk. He took Leah in his arms and hugged her. She could feel his breath in her hair and his heart beat, strong and steady.

'There are some feelings that are impossible to express. There are no words in the universe that do it justice. I never thought I'd feel this way about anyone, but you are so precious to me, my darling. You've turned my life around. I love you so much.'

Harrison's simple declaration moved Leah to tears. But they were at work. *Professional at all times in the office.* She wiped the tears away and smiled up at him.

'Right. Now we've got that sorted, let's get back to the important business of running Bentley Media.'

'Spoken like a true executive. I'm glad you're on my side, Leah, I'd hate to have you as a rival.' He grinned when he said it and Leah felt gratitude that they were no long rivals. Business partners and lovers, and ... who knew what the future held.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The church was packed. Sylvia had expressed a wish that William's funeral took place in their small, intimate local church, but the sheer numbers of people that were expected made that unworkable, so it was being held in a larger church in the next parish.

Leah sat on the front pew on Harrison's left. Sylvia and her father sat on the other side. Close friends and family occupied the pews immediately behind.

People were still streaming through the doors and the pews were filling up fast. Connor had glanced behind him and commented that he'd never seen so many of the great and the good of the business world gathered together in one place. William had been well respected, especially amongst the hoteliers. They'd come to pay their respects to one of their own.

It was a warm August day and sunlight lit up the stained-glass windows. Leah tried to distract herself by identifying the stories depicted in the windows. One she recognised as the good Samaritan. Another was clearly the Ascension window. She was about to point them out to Harrison when she noticed his face. He was pale with dark shadows under his eyes. He hadn't slept much the night before and had got up in the early

hours. Leah had left him alone with his thoughts. Harrison knew she was there for him if he needed her.

Sylvia was also pale but her face looked calm as if she had resigned herself to this moment. She looked elegant in black, sitting quietly without speaking.

The service started. *I am the resurrection and the life...* The vicar said a prayer and they all sang *My Song is Love Unknown*. Then it was time for friends and family to speak. Two people paid their tributes to William; one of his closest friends and a work colleague. Then it was Harrison's turn.

Leah squeezed his hand as he stood up to walk to the pulpit. He appeared calm and in control but Leah knew this was a façade. Harrison's heart was breaking. He spoke clearly and with a depth of feeling that had the congregation reaching for the tissues. Sylvia sat with her head bowed and even her father looked moved.

Then it was Connor Fitzpatrick's turn. He read from the Bible, 1 Corinthians. His compelling voice, with its soft Irish accent was Leah's undoing. She felt the tears falling and desperately tried to get herself together. She thought of her mother and understood Harrison's pain. She loved him so much that his pain became hers. She held his hand in both of hers and tried to transmit her love and support to him.

Her father spoke the beautiful words; *And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these is love*. Leah glanced at Harrison who sat with his eyes shut.

After the sermon on the hope of everlasting life, which Leah found hard to concentrate on, the service ended with the Lord's Prayer. They left the church to travel in a procession to the crematorium and then back to Bentley Hall.

The long day was nearly at an end. Most of the mourners had already left and the stragglers were saying their goodbyes. Harrison, although grateful for the support and condolences of the people who had attended

the wake, just wanted everyone to leave. He felt drained as if all his emotion had leaked out and there was nothing left but an empty shell.

There had been mountains of food and copious amounts of alcohol. The latter down to Connor, he imagined. His mother had borne it all with her usual grace and poise, but she was looking tired.

Leah had been his rock and he wanted to be alone with her, to tell her how much he loved her. She was standing on the opposite side of the living-room with his mother.

Connor was talking business and he forced his mind into work mode and tried to concentrate on what he was saying.

‘So, I was thinking – we should be looking at acquiring some more advertising agencies. You’ve convinced me that they are the way to expand. This merger is a golden opportunity for us to forge our way into new territory. What do you think?’

‘So, you don’t want to sell Bentley Media?’

‘Sell? Of course not – that company will be our flagship. Leah’s report makes it obvious that the place is a little gold mine. We need to be aiming at winning some more awards. I’m planning to come and look the place over after your mother and I have come back from our little trip.’

‘What little trip’s that, Dad?’ Leah came up to them and put her arm around his waist. He hugged her to him, grateful for her warm body pressed up close to his.

His mother had also joined them and she stood next to Connor. ‘We haven’t had the chance to tell you, dear. We are going to have a short break, once a suitable period of mourning has passed, of course. I’ve always fancied a river cruise. Your father and I talked about it, but ... well, he was too ill.’

‘What a wonderful idea. Where will you go?’ Leah asked.

‘The one we’ve been looking at starts in Amsterdam and travels through Germany, Austria and Hungary.’ Connor answered, looking to Sylvia for confirmation. She smiled and nodded.

‘That sounds great, doesn’t it Harrison?’ Leah turned her face to him and he desperately wanted to kiss her.

‘Certainly does. How long will you be away?’

‘A couple of weeks. I’ll be relying on you to keep things ticking over in my absence. Is that okay with you?’

‘Of course.’ Harrison and Leah spoke together, then looked at each other and laughed.

‘Which one of us were you addressing?’ Harrison asked.

‘Why, the both of you - obviously.’

‘Let’s get out of here.’ Harrison whispered in her ear and she didn’t need asking twice.

They made their way hand in hand out of the house and strolled across the lawns to the rose garden. Settling themselves on the same bench they had sat on the first time she had visited Bentley Hall, Harrison put his arm around her and she put her head on his shoulder.

Leah was pleased to see that Harrison looked more relaxed now that the ordeal of the funeral was over. He had downed a couple of whiskeys and had more colour in his cheeks. His tie was loose and the top button of his shirt was undone.

‘Thank you for being with me today. I don’t think I would have got through it without you by my side.’

‘Where else would I be? I’ll always be by your side, Harrison, no matter what.’

He kissed her on the top of her head. ‘Good to know. Likewise.’ He sighed. ‘He was a good man, my father. Oh, he had his faults, like we all do. But if I can be half the man he was I’ll be happy.’

My love, you are already twice the man your father ever was. Leah said nothing.

It was peaceful to just sit in silence after the emotional turmoil of the day. It was lovely to be with someone you didn’t have to pretend with. Someone who accepted you for who you are, and loved you anyway.

‘You were right, Harrison, this merger is a marriage made in heaven.’

‘Are you proposing to me, Ms Fitzpatrick?’

‘No. But it is a leap year next year.’

‘Is it now? Are you planning to make an honest man of me?’

‘You’ll have to wait and see.’

Harrison gently placed his hand on the side of her face and she lifted her head to meet his gaze. The tension had left his face, his expression was softer. His eyes still shone with blue fire, but the heat contained love. Slowly their lips met and Leah’s arms snaked around his neck. Harrison deepened the kiss and Leah responded.

She didn’t need mindfulness exercises or yoga breathing to be totally in the now. If this moment was all they had, then she would still be content. No, not content, deliriously happy. The late afternoon sun bathed them in warmth and the garden enveloped them in the heady scent of roses.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jax was born in Manchester where she lives now, after living and working in Australia. After attempting several jobs, Jax trained as a medical secretary and has worked in the NHS for the past fifteen years. Jax has been writing for fun all her life, but now takes it seriously. She has ideas for many more stories and only hopes her years on this earth don't run out before she has the chance to write and publish them all.