

Chapter One

“Don’t look now, but Mr. McSexy just entered the building.”

“Blast.” Peppa Grant spun round and did exactly what her best friend and colleague Izzy had ordered her not to. Her breathing faltered at the sight of six foot plus of unadulterated male who now towered at the entrance to the company’s function room. An anxious hush fell over the previously buzzing room. As all eyes snapped to him, she tried not to quake in her costume’s fairy shoes.

Until half an hour ago, Cameron McCormac had meant nothing more to Peppa than the new name at the very top of the office food chain. Now he was the man who owned the car she’d sideswiped in the car park tonight.

The dangerously handsome man who was making her pulse spike simply by standing in the doorway. “Oh, God.”

As Peppa pushed her barely touched glass out of reach and let her head fall onto the table in front of her, Izzy giggled.

“It’s. Not. Funny,” Peppa declared when she finally looked up. Her eyes sought the company’s new CEO again and she felt her heart collapse into her stomach.

“You’re right,” Izzy said, reaching out and stroking Peppa’s hair like a mother over a sick child. “If *I’d* just put a prize-winning dent in the big boss’s

red, convertible pride and joy, I'd probably be at Sydney airport boarding a plane or planning to hitch a ride with Santa back to the North Pole."

"Hilarious." Peppa shot her friend a sarcastic smile. "Please tell me McSexy has just vanished up a chimney?"

Izzy took a sip of her chocolate mocktail, her sea-blue eyes sparking with laughter as she peered theatrically over Peppa's head. "No can do. Looks like he's doing the rounds, handing out candy canes or something to all the children. Molly must have put him up to it."

Molly, although old enough to be his mother, was Mr. McCormac's personal assistant. Rumor had it when he did anything remotely human, she'd put him up to it. She'd been with the company longer than anyone and was the brains behind this event, the annual Christmas party for children of Lyrique Recordings' employees. Peppa had a fleeting fantasy of leaving a message with Molly about her little misdemeanor in the car park but that wouldn't be right. And she hadn't been brought up to take the easy option.

"I'll do it now," she said, resting a hand on her queasy belly as she pushed herself off the stool and onto quaky feet. Although whether her shakiness was from trepidation or her gorgeous boss's sexy gait and air-of-confidence, she couldn't be sure. "Confess before I'm due on stage and then, if he has any sympathetic bones in his body, he'll let me entertain the kids before the crucifixion."

"You're such a drama queen," sighed Izzy. "The

top job pays well. He has enough money to line his undies drawer in gold. You apologize. You give him the details of your insurance company. You get on with your life. Simple.”

Simple. Right. But Izzy didn’t know that Peppa had just switched to a budget insurance provider. As she had never needed to claim in seven years of driving, the switch had seemed a good decision at the time. The upside was low monthly rates. The downside? A mammoth deductible on claims.

Well, that faux-pas may not only have cost Peppa her car and her job, but paying back the damage to the boss’s vintage Lamborghini would seriously endanger her ability to pay her mortgage. Not to mention she’d have to put her plans for an overseas holiday on hold—a holiday that had been all about helping her mind and emotions recover from the battering of the past few months.

“I think he’s looking at you.”

Izzy’s words broke Peppa’s reverie. And of course she looked up, across the room, only to find her gaze colliding with the Head Honcho himself. Her heart hitched a beat. Despite the distance she could see the roguish tilt of his lips, the slight frown of his distinguished black brows and that his devilish licorice eyes were trained on her. Dark-chocolate hair, speckled with naturally sun-kissed spikes, framed a face so chiseled it could have been carved from stone.

A man so in-control of his world he had no reason to question it. Heat flooded her cheeks and, not wanting to draw unnecessary attention, Peppa

forced herself to break her gaze.

Her fingers sought the stalk of her wineglass and she gulped the liquid down, wishing its contents were alcoholic and could not only quench her suddenly parched throat but also numb her quivering insides. Perhaps he'd been in the car park and witnessed her misjudged swerve.

Perhaps he already knew.

"Peppa. Thank God." Molly's breathless voice penetrated her panic.

She felt the PA's pointy, manicured nails against her forearm. "How can I help you, Molly?" she asked, snatching the opportunity to distract herself.

"Santa Claus is running late."

Peppa nodded at Molly's announcement, trying to appear sympathetic while her own predicament threatened to unravel her usual confidence. She didn't *want* to look at Mr. McCormac—at the impressive breadth of his shoulders or his dark, ruggedly beautiful face—but she had to work hard to keep her focus on Molly.

"Some lout stole his motorbike and he's finding it hard to find a taxi this time of the afternoon on Christmas Eve. The kids are getting restless." Molly took an exasperated breath. "Do you think you could work your magic a tad earlier?"

Before Peppa could reply, Molly thrust a wriggling, chocolate-covered toddler into her arms.

Peppa's heart melted in her chest at the soft, warm feel of the tiny body—a bitter reminder of what she might never have. The last thing she wanted to do right now was be at this party—where

every little cherubic face felt like a knife twisting in her all-but-barren womb. “Hi there,” she said, trying to smile as she positioned the girl on her lap. She couldn’t let the emotional train wreck that had been her life of late stop her from doing her bit for the kids. “What’s your name, precious?”

“Annabel is my granddaughter,” Molly explained. She patted at a brown smear on her white, linen suit. “Do you two mind watching her while I make arrangements for Santa?”

“Sure, not a problem,” Izzy chirped sardonically to Molly’s retreating back. She put out her hands for the child. “Here, you’d better give her to me. Even you won’t be able to sing and do your magic balloon sculpting with your hands full of brat.”

Glaring at her friend, Peppa reluctantly parted with Annabel. Izzy and she didn’t see eye to eye on the adorableness of little people. Where Peppa longed to go forth and multiply, Izzy joked on a regular basis about having her tubes tied.

Although when it came to having children, Peppa’s medical woes were possibly the least of her worries. First she had to find a man willing to take the chance. Her eyes drifted to *him* of their own accord—the second she realized, she gave herself a mental cold shower, shook her head and looked back to Izzy. Even if he weren’t her boss, such a striking example of male perfection would never want a flawed model like she was.

“Be nice,” ordered Peppa. She turned away to focus on gathering the exuberant masses currently wreaking havoc with green and red balloons. She

owed it to them to at least try and forget the problem of Mr. McCormac and his dented convertible.

She put two fingers in her mouth and whistled.

Loudly.

The amber contents of Cameron's glass rippled as an ear-splitting whistle cut through the room. Small bodies froze as if deafened by the sonic boom and then came to life, streaming toward the hired entertainer. The *very attractive* entertainer who, with glossy golden hair cascading down her back, sparkling eyes and a fairy costume from some grown-up male fantasy, had caught his eye the instant he'd entered the room. He'd had to force the breath through his lungs when she'd looked up and met his gaze and, for a brief moment, he'd glimpsed wariness in their depths before she'd quickly hidden her reaction behind the bowl of her wineglass. And although the air between them almost visibly sizzled, she'd glanced away quickly instead of returning a flirtatious grin which was the habit of most women of his acquaintance.

Her response—or lack thereof—piqued his interest.

He took a sip of his beer and edged away from the group he'd been mingling with, giving him the chance to watch her, unhindered by office small talk. She was like some female, glitter-infused Pied Piper. With a few softly spoken words, she had all the kids in a circle, staring up at her as if mesmerized.

And, although not usually able to find anything in common with children, this time he could hardly blame them. From the most impractical shoes he'd

ever laid eyes on rose sensational legs wrapped in red fish-net stockings. Just looking at her made his blood pump hot through his veins, especially in certain places.

Hell, he prided himself on steely resistance, but a few minutes in his sights and she'd done more for his libido than any woman had in a long while. Especially when she bent over to retrieve something from her sparkly hot-pink bag.

He reached to his neckline to loosen his tie, wondering if her lime-green tutu could possibly be any shorter. Not that he was complaining. If his matchmaking-obsessed aunt and cousins had a habit of setting him up with *this* kind of woman, perhaps he wouldn't be dreading the annual family Christmas party this evening quite so much.

The last place he wanted to be was a house too small for its visitors, where everyone was drinking far too much punch and spouting about how blessed they were. Where people who called him uncle but were actually his second cousins clamored for his attention. Where somehow he got suckered into playing with dolls every year on the anniversary of the very day his nightmares had begun. He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to relieve the tension crunching his shoulders.

At least the fairy had taken the boredom out of *this* function. He generally loathed the idea of a room full of happy families but Molly insisted throwing a Christmas bash for his employees' kids took only a little effort and would reap a whole lot of rewards. He'd have been fine with the idea if she

hadn't insisted on him making an appearance.

A stumbling shadow appeared at his side.

"Great bash," slurred Stanley, the exec in charge of voice talents. Judging by the stench of his breath, he'd obviously begun partying well before his regulated knock-off time.

"That was the idea," replied Cameron, forcing a smile and trying his hardest not to sound annoyed when Stanley's larger-than-average, bald head blocked his view.

Stanley turned, following Cameron's gaze. "She's something else, ain't she?"

"Looks that way," he answered, stealing another mouthful of his drink as he watched the entertainer sing and dance with the children. The sound of her angelic voice offset against her fresh face and contagious smile sparked a rush of response in his groin.

"We trekked around town for half a day looking for that dress," continued Stanley. "Had to have ribbons, had to have wings..."

"You bought *that* dress? For *her*?" For some reason the idea of Stanley shopping for clothes with this woman pierced him like barbed wire, the sharp points snagging him in the chest. He slammed his glass down on a nearby table and rubbed his temple in an aim to banish the sensation of tribal spears stabbing into his skull.

"Had to be pink!" Stanley chuckled.

"Huh? Oh." Cameron's heart rate decelerated as he realized Stanley was talking about his daughter. Talk about foolish. If he recalled rightly she was the

auburn, ringlet-headed *cherub* now in the center of the circle. At least he'd never have to endure the agony of fashion shopping for little girls. Fate had seen to that. He strangled a sudden sense of loss. "I'm sure it was worth the effort."

"Look, here comes Santa." Stanley pointed to the doorway where Molly, looking flushed but smiling, was busy ushering in her husband who was dressed in a red suit and ample padding. Luckily the man already had impressive facial hair, and years of living under Molly's obsessive routines had turned his hair a nice shade of Father Christmas white.

Thank the Lord. Once the presents had been dished out, the families would likely disperse at a rapid rate and he could focus on getting the next torture over as quickly as possible.

Stanley trekked off to join his wife and daughter, and Cameron scanned the room wondering where his fairy had escaped to. *The* fairy, he meant *the* fairy. Just because he fancied the idea of making her acquaintance and getting her a drink for all her hard work, didn't make her *his*.

With Kristen's death, he'd given up on a lot of ideas. Having a relationship was one of them. But he wasn't averse to a bit of casual flirting. "Can I get you a refill?"

Peppa looked up from where she was leaning against the bar, her shoe in one hand and the other hand rubbing the aching arch of her left foot, to find the chief of Lyrique Recordings staring down at her. His smoky eyes seemingly shimmered above a delectable, dangerous grin that almost made her lose

her grip.

She'd never been this close to those eyes but she'd heard plenty about their renowned owner. Rumor had it many a woman had lost sleep, dignity and more at his hand. Men in suits usually did nothing for her—she preferred her guys clad in denim and tight black T-shirts, casual attire—but he had the kind of body that would get Armani excited. The kind of body that made business sexy and her insides roil. Suddenly she understood all the hype.

“Cameron McCormac.” He introduced himself with a playboy smile as he reached out to steady her.

Replacing her shoe and straightening up, she dragged her eyes off his chest, over broad shoulders and forced herself to meet his gaze as she willed her lips to form a reply. She fought the urge to place her hand against her thundering heart.

She would *not* be overwhelmed.

“Yes, I know, and thanks, a drink would be lovely,” she replied, summoning her most professional tone, “but first there’s something I need to get off my chest.” The minute she’d uttered the sentence, she silently cursed her choice of words. But with her heart still galloping, it was hard to think of anything else.

“Really?” McCormac raised one brow as his gaze brushed her cleavage. Instantly, her nipples tightened.

The traitorous reaction of her body incensed her. Normally she'd pour her drink over any man who checked her out in such a presumptuous manner but there were three problems with such an action.

One, her glass was empty.

Two, he was her boss.

And three, she didn't want to. It had been months since her body had responded to the charms and attention of a man that she'd forgotten how fabulous being female could be. Still, better to try and ignore her hormones and face the matter at hand.

"Yes." She gulped a shot of oxygen before explaining. "In the car park earlier, a huge orange cat dashed out in front of my car. I swerved to avoid killing the poor thing and accidentally brushed up against your vehicle."

His eyebrows encroached on each other ever so slightly and his lips twitched at the edges. "Brushed up?"

"Well...perhaps 'clanged up against' would be a more accurate description." She bit her lip, trying to steady her breathing as she waited for his response.

"Clanged up?" Any hint of a smile vanished. "I think we'd better step outside and take a look."

It wasn't a question, or a suggestion. The big boss had just ordered her to step outside. *Alone. With him.*

She tried to read his expression. Annoyed? Furious? Menacing? Or maybe something else entirely? Her stomach churned as if a flock of blackbirds were flying laps inside. She made the effort to stand but her legs felt like they'd just ran a marathon and she wondered if she'd actually be able to make the short distance from the function room to the car park.

What was it they said about wild animals? Don't

let them see your fear?

“Good idea,” she said, standing tall and trying to maintain some semblance of control. It wasn’t like her to get hot-under-the-collar about alpha males. Then again, Tim had been about as far from alpha as a man could get and look where that had landed her. Perhaps it was time to stop judging books by their covers.

Suddenly she felt Cameron’s hand on the small of her back, bare where her wings had been attached moments earlier, and any chance of maintaining a level head evaporated. She sucked in air as the after effects of his hot touch ricocheted to every nerve ending of her being.

Despite heat pooling between her thighs, goose bumps erupted across her skin.

Aware of a zillion eyes bearing into them as they crossed the polished floor, Peppa’s heart raced as she fought her reaction to his touch, pondered *his* reaction to the damage and racked her mind for a solution to the little issue of how to pay for the car’s repairs.

Minutes later they stood eyeing his convertible, which now looked a little too bedraggled for its CEO car space.

McCormac shook his head slowly before speaking. “You’re right. It’s definitely clanged.” The flirty tone he’d used when he’d offered her a refill was well and truly ancient history. Peppa felt foolish for thinking he’d ever been interested in more than his car or his business. In offering her a drink, he’d merely been thanking her for her role in the party.

She looked into his eyes hoping to gauge the exact extent of his fury. But looking too deeply into those slate depths was hazardous to her mental health, not to mention her body. She clamped her legs together, desperate to quell the burgeoning heat. Needing to do something, she fished her own car keys out of her bag, ready to escape the moment she could.

Finally, his face a blank canvas, he said dryly, “I hope you’ve got insurance.”

“Of course.” She held her chin high. “What do you take me for? A fool?”

“No.” He sighed and ran a hand through his mop of gold-tinged hair as he stared sadly at his less-than-shiny car. The expression reminded her of a little boy whose remote control car had broken two hours after receiving it. Strangely the proof that he was only human made him all the more appealing.

“I am really sorry,” she said. “I’ll get on to my insurance company straight away.”

He waved a hand in front of his face. “Don’t bother. Give me the details and I’ll get my PA to handle the liaisons between insurance companies.”

“Okay. I’m with BB Complete.”

At her words, his eyes widened. Then closed. He shook his head and a curse slipped from his lips.

“What’s the matter?”

He cleared his throat as if finding it difficult to speak. “You haven’t read the headlines this morning, have you?”

“No.” The news generally depressed her and, lately, her life had been depressing enough. “Why?”

“BB went bust yesterday. They can no longer honor any of their contracts.”

“That can’t be true.” Bile crawled up her esophagus. “I only signed with them last week.” Their rates were significantly lower than all the big insurance companies.

As if reading her mind, he spoke, “Because they were cheaper, right? And you could save your money for more important things.”

“Yes. Exactly.” Thank God he was human enough to understand.

“Like shoes?” He glared down at her pointy fairy heels.

His condescending tone incensed her. What gave him the right to judge? He who sat on the twenty-third floor in an illegally massive office with views of Sydney Harbor. She’d never actually seen said office but she’d heard about it. The office rumor mill was alive and churning. Apparently the decor was minimalist, the room decked out in mostly granite furniture—dark and hard like the man himself. Exactly the type of man she’d vowed to avoid.

She opened her mouth, about to bombard him with a lesson in common courteous conduct—one his mother had obviously failed dismally on—but at the last minute she bit her tongue. She’d do best to rein in her notorious temper, grovel and get out quick.

She looked up and met his gaze. “You know nothing about me, so I’d appreciate you keeping your misguided judgments to yourself. And you

don't need to worry about your vehicle—" she spat the word with the same tone of distaste he'd used for *shoes*, "—I'll ensure you receive whatever is necessary to bring it back to all its shining glory."

Not waiting for his response, she fled toward Sadie, her pink Volkswagen Beetle, on a mission to find a pen and a scrap of paper.

Leaning into the front of the car, Peppa took a deep breath, racking her brain for some kind of get-rich-quick scheme as she retrieved a pen and an old receipt from her handbag. Only extravagantly wealthy folk could afford to fix the likes of his car without insurance. She scrawled her first name and her mobile phone number on the scrap of paper, reasoning he could easily get the information from his employee register but probably wouldn't appreciate the hassle.

When she turned back, McCormac had his arm along the top of Sadie's door as if it were the most natural pose in the world. Her eyes zeroed in on the way his jacket sleeve puckered over what had to be pure muscle and for a split second she cursed the car, wishing his arm on her instead. Good God...had she suffered a head injury in the accident? How preposterous to be jealous of a vehicle. Jealous because of *him*.

His cat-got-the-cream grin said he'd noticed her gawking.

"Here." She shoved her details toward him, pressing herself against the car as she did so. Scared to get any closer for fear of how her body would react. "When you have a quote, call me?"

She meant to escape after that. Get the hell out of Dodge before she did something she'd regret—like offer up her body as payment for the damage—but his fingers clamped around her wrist as his other hand plucked the keys from her grasp. Her pulse thundered under his thumb. Seemingly oblivious, he made a show of reading her scrawl.

“Just Penelope?” he drawled. And somehow he managed to make a name she'd always despised sound sweet and wicked.

She wet her lips, made a half-hearted attempt at shaking free. “Take down my license plate as well if you want. That way if I do a disappearing act, you can set the authorities on to me.”

He shook his head. “I settle my own scores.”

She gulped. So damn peeved as she did so because it wasn't her nature to be intimidated by men who thought themselves the center of the universe. No matter how gorgeous the man.

“And right now, I'm concerned about your ability to come good with the money.” He paused long enough to offer a devil's grin. “Which is why I have a proposition.”

“Proposition?” Penelope's voice caught on the word.

Cameron watched as two pools of luminous jade bordered with long, lush, dark lashes widened only centimeters from his own eyes. Lashes slightly shimmery, making him wonder if she were close to tears.

He loosened his grip, finding himself strangely reluctant to completely let go. Her skin felt smoother than satin sheets and the thud, thud, thud of her

pulse beneath his thumb soothed like a massage. Still, he didn't let any of this reflect in his voice.

"Yes. A proposition. Call it an alternative means of payment." Truth was he didn't give two hoots about his car. A few quick phone calls and his not-so-shiny vehicle would be shiny again soon enough. It wasn't like the Lamborghini was his only mode of transport. But dents or no dents, he wasn't a man to waste an opportunity, especially not when that opportunity came in such a delightful package.

And, earlier when he'd left the safety of his office and stepped into Christmas party hell, he'd been hit with the perfect solution to a problem he'd been battling for years. The cost of repairs would be a small price to pay for the look on his family's face when he turned up with a woman wearing a skirt his aunt would liken to a belt. That'd teach them to meddle in his affairs.

"Am I correct in assuming you may find it difficult to pay for repairs?"

Those lashes dropped in time with her shoulders and she gave one reluctant nod.

"Then tonight you'll be my date to a Christmas Party." He smiled, trying to keep the bitterness from his tone. Today was Christmas Bloody Eve and if he didn't appear at his aunt's annual party he might as well kiss goodbye the only family he did have. Although sometimes the idea appealed, he couldn't do that to Auntie Rose, the woman who'd taken him in when his parents had died.

"What?" Her cry pierced his ears and for a second he realized she could have somewhere else to

be on this particular night of the year. Another booking. Tough, she was hardly in a position to refuse.

“Tonight you’ll be my date to a Christmas Party,” he repeated, noticing her balk at the word *date*.

This amused him. Most women were thrilled at the idea, had high hopes of getting their manicured fingernails into his wealth and becoming the next Mrs. McCormac. *Hah!* But the fairy’s nails were clean-cut and short, real as could be and he’d known from the get-go she wasn’t the type to fawn over success. Something in the defiant tilt of her chin and her attempt at bravado told him she wouldn’t be wowed by fast cars, designer suits and platinum credit cards. She was the antithesis to all the names in his little black book, which made her perfect protection against his family’s incessant questions.

He’d get his aunt and cousins off his back and she wouldn’t go getting any high and mighty ideas about the significance of meeting the “parents.” Once the evening finished, there’d be no reason to ever cross paths again.

“Do I even have a choice?” Her words were icy despite the fact she should be sucking up.

“There’s always a choice,” he replied, reasoning she had a mighty fine pout. Yet with lips like that, so full, so red, so enticing, it was hardly surprising. After tracing a soft circle on the inside of her wrist with his thumb, he grudgingly let her go and dangled her car keys in the air between them. For a second their gazes locked and the air between them seemed

decisively lacking in oxygen. “If you’d prefer I’ll have my contacts arrange a quote this evening and will expect payment in full tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow morning?” Despite her previous attempts to hide any desperation, the shriek in Penelope’s voice betrayed her.

“Yes. Will that be a problem?” He felt a bit like the Big Bad Wolf but he didn’t want to part ways just yet. Whether it was her feisty, almost insolent attitude or the fact she was covered in more glitter than he’d ever before seen on a grown woman—and she was most definitely grown—something about her fascinated him. He couldn’t deny she’d had his libido in agony from the moment he’d seen her pert behind and this conversation had been the most enjoyable he’d had in some time.

Lord knew he’d need a little enjoyment in the hours ahead. His trousers tightened at the thought and he indulged in a languid glance from her golden hair to the tip of her pointy shoes, mentally appreciating everything in between. *Simply irresistible* was an understatement.

She narrowed her pretty eyes, then let out a scathing sort of hiss before kowtowing. “I might be a little underdressed. Do I have time to go home and get changed?”

“Another coat of glitter...and you’ll be just fine.”