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Penny Jordan

THE MARRIAGE DEMAND



“Married?” Faith interrupted Nash in a shocked voice. “No! We can’t! That’s not possible.”

“Don’t afraid it isn’t merely possible, Faith, it’s essential. You and I have to get married. We don’t have any other option.”

“Why?” she asked Nash, her voice high with defensive panic. “We don’t!”

“Do you really need to ask me that?” Nash cut across her with grim cynicism. “Had you been more...experienced...”

“You’re saying we have to marry because I was a virgin?” Faith demanded, disbelief coloring her voice. “But that’s...that’s archaic, Nash.”

“To you I dare say it is, but it is the right thing, the only thing I can do now.”

“And if I refuse?” she asked him, holding her head high.

“I can’t allow you to do that.”

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THE MARRIAGE DEMAND

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CHAPTER ONE

'DID you really think I wouldn't recognise you?'

The ice-cold darts of numbing, mind-blitzing shock pierced Faith's emotions as she stood staring in horrified nauseous disbelief. *Nash!* How could he be *here*? Wasn't he supposed to be living in America, running the multi-billion-pound empire she had read in the financial press he had built up? But, no, he was quite definitely here, all six foot-odd male animal danger of him: the man who had haunted her nightmares both sleeping and waking for the last decade; the man who...

'Faith, you haven't met our benefactor yet, have you?'

Their *what*? So far as Faith had understood, the huge Edwardian mansion so belovedly familiar to her had been handed over to the charity she worked for by the trustees of the estate that owned it. If she had thought—guessed—*suspected*—for one single moment that Nash... Somehow she managed to repress the shudder tearing through her and threatening to completely destroy her professionalism.

The Ferndown Foundation, begun originally by her boss Robert Ferndown's late grandfather, provided respite homes for children and their parents who were living in situations of financial hardship.

The Foundation owned homes in several different parts of the country, and the moment Faith had seen their advertisement for a qualified architect to work directly under the Chief Executive she had desperately wanted to get the job. Her own background made her empathise immediately and very intensely with the plight of children living in hardship...

She tensed as she heard Nash speaking.

'Faith and I already know one another.'

A huge wave of anger and fear swamped Faith as she listened, dreading what he might be going to say and knowing that he was enjoying what she was feeling, relishing it, almost gloating over the potential pleasure of hurting her, damaging her. And yet this was a man who, according to Robert, had, along with the other trustees of the estate, deeded the property as an outright gift to their charity—an act of such generosity that Faith could scarcely believe it had come from Nash.

She could feel Robert looking at her, no doubt waiting for her to respond to Nash's comment. But it wasn't Robert's attentive smiling silence that was reducing her to a fear-drenched bundle of raw nerve-endings and anxiety. Grittily she reminded herself of everything she had endured and survived, of what she had achieved and how much she owed to the wonderful people who had supported her.

One of those people had been her late mother and the other... As she looked around the study she could almost see the familiar face of the man who had been such an inspiration to her, and she could

almost see too... She closed her eyes as she was flooded with pain and guilt, then opened them but refused to look at Nash; she could almost feel him willing her to turn round and make herself vulnerable to his hostility.

'It was a long time ago,' she told Robert huskily, 'over ten years.'

She could feel her fear sliding sickly through her veins like venom, rendering her incapable of doing anything to protect herself as she waited for the first blow to fall.

She knew Robert had been disappointed by her hesitation and reluctance when he had told her that he was giving her full control of the conversion of Hatton House.

'It's absolutely ideal for our purposes,' he had enthused. 'Three floors, large grounds, a stable block that can be converted alongside the main house.'

Of course there had been no way she could tell him the real reason for her reluctance, and now there would be no need—no doubt Nash would tell him for her.

The sharp ring of Robert's mobile phone cut through her thoughts. As he answered the call he smiled warmly at her.

Robert had made no secret of his interest in her, and had made sure that she was included as his partner at several semi-social events he had to attend as the charity's spokesperson. But so far their relationship was strictly non-sexual, and had not even progressed to the point where they had had a proper

date. But Faith knew that that was only a matter of time—or at least it had been.

‘I’m sorry,’ Robert apologised as he ended his call. ‘I’m going to have to go straight back to London. There’s a problem with the Smethwick House conversion. But I’m sure that Nash, here, will look after you, Faith, and show you over the house. I doubt I’ll be able to get back here tonight, but I should be able to make it tomorrow.’

He was gone before Faith could protest, leaving her alone with Nash.

‘What’s wrong?’ Nash demanded harshly. ‘Or can I guess? Guilt can’t be an easy bedmate to live with—although you seem to have found it easy enough—and just as easy to sleep with Ferndown, by the looks of it. But then morals were never something you cared much about, were they, Faith?’

Faith didn’t know which of her emotions was the stronger, her anger or her pain. Instinctively she wanted to defend herself, to refute Nash’s hateful accusations, but she knew from experience what a pointless exercise that would be. In the end all she could manage to say to him was a shaky, proud, ‘I don’t have anything to feel guilty about.’

She knew immediately she’d said the wrong thing. The look he gave her could have split stone.

‘You might have been able to convince a juvenile court of that, Faith, but I’m afraid I’m nowhere as easy to deceive. And they do say, don’t they, that a criminal—a murderer—always returns to the scene of their crime?’

Faith sucked in a sharp breath full of shock and anguish. She could feel her scalp beneath the length of her honey-streaked thick mane of hair beginning to prickle with anxiety. When she had first come to Hatton Nash had teased her about her hair, believing at first that its honey-gold strands had been created by artifice rather than nature. A summer spent at Hatton had soon convinced him of his error. Her hair colouring, like her densely blue eyes, had been inherited from the Danish father she had never met, who had drowned whilst on honeymoon with her mother, trying to save the life of a young child.

Once she was old enough to consider such things, Faith had become convinced that the heart condition which had ultimately killed her mother had begun then, and that it had somehow been caused by her mother's grief at the loss of her young husband. Faith acknowledged that there was no scientific evidence to back up her feelings, but, as she had good and bitter cause to know, some things in life went beyond logic and science.

'What are you doing here?' she challenged Nash fiercely. No matter what he might believe, she was not—she *had* not—

Automatically she gave a tiny shake of her head as she tried to break free of the dangerous treadmill of her thoughts, and yet, despite her outward rejection of what she knew he was thinking, inwardly she was already being tormented by her memories. It was here, in this room, that she had first met Philip Hatton, Nash's godfather, and here too that she had

last seen him as he lay slumped in his chair, semi-paralysed by the stroke which had ultimately led to his death.

Faith flinched visibly as the nightmare terror of her ten-year-old memories threatened to resurface and swamp her.

‘You heard your boss.’

Faith froze as she listened to the deliberately challenging way in which Nash underlined the word ‘boss’. Whilst she might have the self-control to stop herself from reacting verbally to Nash’s taunt, there was nothing she could do to stop the instinctive and betraying reaction of her body, as her eyes darkened and shadowed with the pain of further remembrances.

At fifteen a girl was supposed to be too young to know the meaning of real love—wasn’t she? Too young to suffer anything other than a painful adolescent crush to be gently laughed over in her adulthood.

‘As a trustee of my late godfather’s estate, it was my decision to gift Hatton to the Ferndown Foundation. After all, I know how beneficial it is for a child—from any background—to be in this kind of environment.’

He started to frown, looking away from Faith as he did so, the hard angry glaze she had been so aware of in his eyes fading to a rare shadowy uncertainty.

He had thought he was prepared for this moment, this meeting, that he would have himself and his

reactions totally under control. But the shock of seeing the fifteen-year-old girl he still remembered so vividly transformed into the woman she had become—a woman it was obvious was very much admired and desired, by Robert Ferndown and no doubt many other gullible fools as well—was causing a reaction—a *feeling*—within him that was threatening the defences he had assured himself were impenetrable.

To have to admit, if only to himself, to suffering such an uncharacteristic attack of uncertainty irritated him, rasping against wounds he had believed were totally healed. He had, he knew, gained a reputation during the last decade, not just for being a formidable business opponent, but also for remaining resolutely unattached.

He closed his eyes momentarily as he fought against the anger flooding over him and drowning out rationality. He had waited a long time for this—for life, for fate, to deliver Faith into his hands. And now that it had...

He took a deep breath and asked softly, 'Did you *really* expect to get away with it, Faith? Did you really believe that Nemesis would not exact a fair and just payment from you?'

He gave a wolverine smile that was no smile at all but a cold, savage snarl of warning, reminding Faith of just how easily he could hurt her, tear into the fragile fabric of the life she had created for herself.

'Have you told Ferndown just *what* you are and

what you *did*?' he demanded savagely, causing Faith to drag air painfully into her lungs.

'No, of course you haven't.' Nash answered his own question, his voice full of biting contempt. 'If you had there's no way the Foundation would have employed you, despite Ferndown's obvious "admiration" for you. Did you sleep with him *before* he gave you the job, or did you make him wait until afterwards?'

The sound Faith made was more one of pain than shock—a tight, mewling, almost piteous cry—but Nash refused to respond to it.

'*Have* you told him?' he demanded.

Unable to lie, but unable to speak either, Faith shook her head. The triumph she could see in Nash's eyes confirmed every single one of her growing fears.

Giving her another of those feral, intimidating smiles that made her shake in her shoes but made her equally determined that she was not going to give in to his manipulative method of tormenting her, Nash agreed smoothly, 'No, of course you haven't—from what I've heard from your besotted boss it seems that you managed to omit certain crucial facts from the CV you submitted to the Foundation.'

Faith knew exactly what he meant. Her throat dry with tension, she fought with all her emotional strength not to show him how afraid she now was.

'They had no relevance,' she insisted.

'No relevance? The fact that you only just es-

caped a custodial sentence; the fact that you were responsible for a man's death? Oh, no, you're staying right there,' Nash rasped as Faith, her self-control finally breaking, turned on her heel and tried to leave.

The shock of his fingers biting into the soft flesh of her upper arm caused her to cry out and demand frantically, 'Don't touch me.'

'Don't touch you?' Nash repeated. 'That's not what you used to say to me, is it, Faith? You used to plead with me to touch you...beg me...'

A low, tortured sound escaped Faith's trembling lips. 'I was fifteen—a child.' She tried to defend herself. 'I didn't know what I was saying—what I was doing...'

'Liar,' Nash contradicted her savagely, his free hand lifting to constrain her head and hold it so that she couldn't avoid meeting his eyes.

The sensation of Nash's lean fingers on her throat evoked a storm of reaction and remembrance. Her whole body started to shudder—not with fear, Faith recognised in shock, but with a heedless, wanton, inexplicable surge of feeling she had thought she had left behind her years ago.

How often that summer she had first seen Nash had she ached to have him touch her, *want* her? How many, many times had she fantasised then about him holding her captive like this? Imagining the brush of his fingers against her skin, picturing the feral glitter in his eyes as his gaze searched her face, his body hard with wanting her.

She shuddered again, acknowledging the naïvety of her long-ago teenage self. She had believed herself in love with Nash and had felt for him all the intense passion of that love, wanting to give herself to him totally and completely, longing for him, *aching* for him with all the ardour and innocence of youth.

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he had dismissed once, when she had been attempting to tell him how she felt and what she wanted.

‘Then show me,’ she had responded boldly, adding frantically, ‘Kiss me, Nash.’

Nash froze in disbelief as he heard the words Faith had unwittingly whispered aloud, repeating her own thoughts. Kiss her? What kind of game was she trying to play? He started to move his hand away from her throat, but as he did so Faith turned her head, her lips grazing against his fingers.

Faith gasped as she felt the warm texture of Nash’s flesh against her unguarded lips. She heard the low sound he made deep in his throat, felt him close the small gap that separated them, his body hard and undeniably male against the shocked softness of hers. His hand was pressed into the small of her back, imprisoning her against him, his mouth firm and cool as it covered hers—

Nash felt the shock of what he was doing all the way right down to his toes. Faith’s body felt unbelievably vulnerable against his own, all soft womanly curves, her mouth sweet and warm. He could feel the temptation to touch her, give in to her,

weakening him. His whole purpose in being here was to see justice done, to make sure she was punished for the crime she had committed. He owed it to his godfather to do that much at least for him—and yet here he was instead—

As he felt Faith's response to him Nash shuddered deeply, fighting to remind himself that the sweet, innocent girl he had so stupidly believed Faith was had never really existed, that the woman she was now knew *exactly* what she was doing and what effect she was having on him. But even telling himself that couldn't stop him from answering the passion in her kiss, the invitation of her softly parted lips.

When Faith felt the hot fierce thrust of Nash's tongue opening her lips, seeking the intimacy of her mouth, stroking sensually against her own tongue, she felt as though she was drowning in wave after wave of increasingly urgent desire. It filled her, stormed her, drew her down to a place of deep, dark, velvet sweetness, a place of hot, bold, dangerous, sensual savagery, a place where she and Nash...

She and Nash!

Faith suddenly realised what she was doing and immediately pulled herself free of Nash, her face flooding with the betraying colour of her distress and confusion, her eyes haunted and dark with the pain of it. She had kissed him as the girl she had been, loving the man *he* had been, Faith acknowledged as she tried to reconcile what she had just experienced

in his arms with the reality of the enmity and distrust that now lay between them.

As she'd pulled away from him Nash had stepped back from her. Faith could see the way his chest was rising and falling with the harshness of his breathing, and she quailed beneath the bitter contemptuous look he was giving her.

'You're wasting your time trying those tactics on me, Faith,' she heard him saying cynically to her. 'They might work on other men, but I know what you're really like...'

'That's not true. I wasn't,' Faith defended herself passionately. 'You have no right—'

'Where you and I are concerned, Faith,' Nash cut across her warningly, 'right doesn't come into it.' What the hell was he doing? Angrily Nash reminded himself of just what Faith was.

Faith bit her bottom lip.

'My godfather had a right to have the trust he placed in you respected,' he continued grimly. 'And he also had a right to expect justice to be done—a right to have just payment made for his death.'

'I wasn't responsible for that,' Faith protested shakily. 'You can't make me—' You can't make me admit to something I didn't do, she had been about to say, but before she could do so Nash was interrupting her.

'I can't make you what, Faith?' he asked her with soft venom. 'I can't make you pay? Oh, I think you'll find that I can. You've already admitted that you lied by omission on your CV to the Ferndown