A Wild Affair

Gemma Townley

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright © of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

A Wild Affair



Gemma Townley



Chapter 1



'WE'RE REALLY GOING TO GET MARRIED?' I snuggled into Max's chest. Max, my fiancé. Max, the man with whom I was going to spend the rest of my life.

'We really are,' he confirmed, grabbing the remote control from where it had fallen under the duvet. Our duvet. I was still getting used to the idea, still pinching myself on a regular basis to check that I wasn't dreaming.

'So I'm going to be Mrs. Wainwright?'

'You will if you decide to change your name.'

'If?' A line of concentration was creased into Max's brow, which I scrutinized. What was he trying to say? 'You don't think I should?'

Max shrugged, kissed me, and looked back at the television. 'It's up to you. Personally I like your name. I think it would be a shame to change it.'

I digested this for a few minutes, letting my paranoia dissipate slightly. I wasn't naturally a paranoid person. Then again, I'd never really been in this territory before. In love, I mean. I'd thought I was immune to the whole concept until I met Max; thought it was a sign of weakness, an irrational response to the influence of romantic novels and make-up ads. But recently, things had changed somewhat; in the space of a few months, I'd gone from workaholic and determined singleton to love-sick fiancée, which meant that new rules were required – I just had to

figure out what they were. It was simply a matter of adjustment.

'I guess I'll think about it,' I said, lightly. Max nodded; he seemed unconcerned. Me . . . I was concerned. This time, I wanted to get everything right, unlike the last time I walked down the aisle. I wanted this marriage to be perfect.

Not that I'd been married before. Just . . . you know . . . nearly married.

Actually, it's kind of a long story. And not the kind of story you tell at dinner parties, unless you're forced to.

'So what are we doing this weekend?' I asked. 'Why don't we go out for dinner tonight? I can tell you all about the meal plans I'm considering for the reception. And we need to think about the wedding list, too.'

'Tonight?' Max turned to me, a flicker of worry on his face. 'Actually, tonight's not that great for me, I'm afraid.'

I looked at him accusingly. 'And you're telling me this now?'

He shifted uncomfortably. 'Something's come up. I got a call last night . . .'

'I knew it!' I thumped him. 'You said that call was nothing. I knew you were acting funny afterward.' He had, too. His mobile had rung at ten and he'd walked out of the room to take it, which was normal, but when he'd come back in he'd been . . . I don't know. Shifty. Guilty. And now I knew why.

'I'm sorry, Jess. You know these things happen.'

'Sure I do.' I felt a thud of disappointment, but pushed it aside. Max didn't have to spend every moment with me, after all. Even if it was Saturday night.

'It's a business thing,' Max said with an apologetic shrug. 'A client dinner.'

I nodded with what I hoped was an understanding look.

I could be strong and in love, I told myself firmly. The two could go together quite nicely if I tried hard enough, in spite of what Grandma used to say. Grandma hadn't been a great believer in love. Love had been the downfall of my mother, she'd told me again and again. False hopes, irrationality, weakness, and a loss of moral compass – these were the things that love achieved. Mum died in a car crash, but that didn't stop Grandma from blaming her love of lipstick, her determination always to raise her skirt hem just a little too high, her weakness for tall, dark, handsome strangers, for her untimely death. 'Mark my words,' she'd say at least once a week, 'hard work and independence are the only things that will get you anywhere in life. View romance as your enemy, Jessica. You may not notice it at first, but eventually it will bring everything crumbling to the ground.' Of course, it didn't help that Grandpa left her around the time that I was dumped on her as a young child. She blamed that on my mother, too. And me. And men in general. To be honest, growing up hadn't been a whole lot of fun. 'Fine,' I said. 'I mean, that's no problem. I'll just . . . I was hoping for an early night, anyway.'

'I thought you wanted to go out to dinner?'

Max was looking at me curiously, a little smile playing on his lips.

'I was just being polite,' I said defensively.

'You could go out with Helen,' Max suggested.

'I could,' I agreed. And he was right, I could. But I didn't want to go out with Helen; I wanted to go out with him. Lately, he'd been so busy – dashing out regularly to go to the office or to visit a client after work – and I'd offered to help a million times but he just brushed me away and told me not to worry, that everything was fine. And everything

was fine, more than fine, actually. 'I just, you know, wanted to spend the evening with you.'

Max nodded. 'I know. I'm sorry. I'd like nothing more than to spend the evening with you, too. It's just . . . you know. I'm managing director now. I have to make this work.'

'I know,' I said despondently. The truth was that Max was determined to succeed in his new role and it was taking up all his time. Which was fine by me, particularly since it was kind of my fault that he was heading up the firm in the first place. And my fault that he had fallen out with his best friend, Anthony, who used to run the firm instead. He always told me that it was the best thing that ever happened to him, but still . . . the least I could do was to be supportive.

'So why don't I come with you?' I perked up suddenly. After all, if it was his client, then it was my client, too. I was an account director at Milton Advertising now – had been for four months. Max had eventually promoted me after being assured by everyone in the company that it wouldn't smack of favoritism.

'No, it's . . .' Max frowned. 'It's a potential client. Not that sort of . . . I mean, it's just me and him. I think he was hoping for a . . . for just the two of us. I'm sorry, Jess.'

'Oh, right.' I bit my lip. 'No, actually that's fine. Absolutely fine.' I looked around the room. It was fine. I'd spent plenty of Saturday nights without Max before we got together and I could do the same now. I could catch up on some work. Read a book. Read one of the current affairs magazines that were piling up on the kitchen table. I could . . . I sighed. I didn't want to do any of those things. 'Actually I think I'm going to get up now,' I said, pulling myself out of bed, a slightly sulky tone creeping into my

voice. 'I'm going to make some breakfast. You carry on watching the news if you want.'

'Don't be like that. I'm really sorry about tonight,' Max said. 'How about we go out to breakfast instead? You can tell me about the wedding stuff.'

'Out to breakfast?' I thought for a moment, weighing my annoyance against my desire to make the most of the few hours I got with Max each week. 'Fine,' I relented. 'But it has to be a long leisurely one. And you're not allowed to read the newspaper. Deal?'

'Deal,' Max grinned. 'But first you have to come back to bed and help me build up an appetite.'

'And how am I going to do that?' I said, but my last word was muffled as Max grabbed my arms, pulled me back under the duvet, and answered my question.

'So,' Max said. An hour later, and we were sitting at a small table in a little brasserie, drinking mugs of steaming hot coffee and dipping croissants into puddles of jam.

'So?' I asked, covering my mouth a little too late and spraying the table with croissant crumbs.

'So tell me about the wedding,' Max said, pushing back his chair. 'Isn't this what the breakfast was all about?'

I swallowed my mouthful and shrugged. 'I guess. Although I do have other things to talk about, you know. It isn't all about the wedding.'

'Of course it isn't,' Max said, seriously. 'So what else is new?'

I thought for a moment. 'There's the launch of Project Handbag. I've been . . .'

'No, you're not allowed to talk about work. It's the weekend.'

'Right. Of course,' I nodded. Project Handbag was my big account at work. It was actually a financial fund, not

anything to do with bags really. Chester Rydall, chief executive of Jarvis Private Banking, was launching an investment fund aimed at successful, affluent women, and I'd won the pitch by arguing that we had to make investing as exciting and accessible a concept as buying a new handbag. Amazingly, he'd totally gone for it. 'Okay, well . . .'

'Well . . . ?' There was a mischievous glint in Max's eye. 'You want to discuss the situation in Gaza instead? Or whether fiscal instruments can stem the tide of deflation?'

'Sure,' I said, defiantly. 'In fact, that's exactly what I'd like to discuss.'

'Good,' Max said, sitting back in his chair, the corners of his mouth pointing upward.

'Great,' I agreed.

'Go on then.'

I opened my mouth, ready to spout everything I knew on U.S. politics and economics, then closed it again. I never thought I'd be one of those girls who got obsessed with weddings, who equated thinking about world affairs with pondering the tricky decision of what to give wedding guests as a wedding favor. But here I was, and all I could think about was the beautiful venue I'd found, about a gorgeous little spot I'd discovered in the South of France where I hoped we might go on honeymoon.

'Or I could tell you about the wedding?' I suggested in a small voice.

He laughed. 'Please do, Jess. I really want to hear.'

I shot him a little look. Max teased me incessantly these days, which was funny because he used to have a reputation for not having a sense of humor at all. The trouble was, sometimes I wasn't sure if he was taking things seriously or not. 'I'm not telling you anything if you're going to laugh.'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' Max assured me.

I looked at him carefully. He'd made it absolutely clear early on in the planning stages that organising the wedding was something that he would be terrible at; that he trusted – indeed wanted – me to make all the decisions. Which was fine with me. But I still wanted to run things by him, check that he was happy. 'It is your wedding too,' I reminded him.

He smiled broadly. 'And that's all that matters. To me, I mean. That we're getting married and that you're happy and that everyone has fun.'

'Okay, so you'll listen without cracking any jokes?' I asked him.

He nodded, po-faced.

'I will be very serious. It is, after all, a serious business. More serious than global warming, than the prospect of worldwide recession, even more serious than Project Handbag.'

'Project Handbag?' I said, raising an eyebrow and allowing myself a little smile. 'Well, now you're just being silly. Nothing's more important than that.'

Max grinned. 'Glad to hear it. For a moment there I was worried you'd been kidnapped by aliens and I'd been left with some kind of clone.'

'Well, I'm not a clone, I'm me,' I said sternly. 'And the fact that you are ditching me tonight for some boring client is making me reconsider whether I actually want to marry you after all. However, assuming that I do go through with it, shall I update you on the progress of the event, or are you going to make more silly jokes?'

'No more jokes,' Max promised. 'Although I don't know what you've got against them. Jokes are the building blocks of a healthy relationship.'

'I'm sure they are, but a marriage is not built on jokes alone. So, I was thinking about salmon for the meal.'

'And what were you thinking about it?'

I started to smile in spite of myself. 'Salmon and asparagus,' I continued, rolling my eyes. 'With apple pie afterwards. And no starter – just canapés with the champagne after the ceremony.'

'Sounds lovely,' Max said appreciatively.

'Really?'

He nodded. 'Jess, it's going to be wonderful, I know it is. I really can't wait.' He was looking at me intently, his eyes so warm and genuine that they made me blush.

'I know it is,' I nodded.

'Good.' He leaned over the table and squeezed my hand. 'So come on, then, what's happening after the apple pie?'

I grinned. 'It doesn't matter. I'll tell you another time.'

'No, I want to know,' he said. 'I want to discuss the wedding cake, the first dance, what you're wearing, what I'm wearing, what the bridesmaids are wearing, what color the napkins are . . .'

'I can't tell you what I'm wearing,' I said, smiling. 'But fine, if you really want to know.'

'I really want to. Really.' He was holding my hand again and for the millionth time in the past three months since Max had proposed, I found myself thinking that I really was the happiest girl in the whole wide world. The luckiest, too. Other people didn't really get Max, didn't see how wicked and funny and deeply loyal he was. But I knew. And he was mine. It made my heart flutter every time I thought about it.

'Well, good,' I said, trying my best to stay focused. 'Because the cake's going to be chocolate, not fruit, and for the first dance . . .'

'Yes?'

'I thought . . . well . . .'

'What?' Max looked at me curiously, then took a gulp of his coffee.

'I thought we could do the dance from *Dirty Dancing*. You know, the routine they did to "I've Had the Time of My Life." '

'What?' he repeated, spluttering this time, and spraying coffee all over the table.

'You don't want to?' My eyes widened in disappointment and my lower lip started to protrude ever so slightly.

'Don't want to? No, I mean, look, it's not really my . . . Oh God, really?'

I looked at him uncertainly, swallowed, then started to giggle. 'No, darling Max. But like you said, jokes are the building blocks of a good relationship, right?'

'Joke? Oh thank God,' Max said, wiping his forehead and looking at me incredulously. 'You're mean,' he said. 'You could have given me a heart attack.'

'Actually I think you'd make quite a good Patrick Swayze if you put your mind to it,' I grinned.

'You are a dangerous woman, Jessica Wild. Dangerous and tricky and . . .' His phone started to ring.

'And what?' I giggled. 'Dangerous and tricky and what?'

'And . . .' He winked. 'And hold that thought,' he said, then picked up his phone. 'Hello? Max speaking.' His face creased into a slight frown and his eyes flicked up at me. Then he shot me an apologetic smile before getting up and walking away from the table. 'No,' I just caught him say as he disappeared out of the brasserie. 'No, don't be like that. I just . . .'

And what, I asked myself, stirring my coffee. Dangerous, tricky, and annoying? Dangerous, tricky, and obsessed with all things wedding-related? I looked out of the window; a glossy-looking couple was standing outside. They looked as

though they'd just stumbled out of a Sunday magazine, with gleaming blond hair and perfect clothes, and smiles full of white teeth. They reminded me of Anthony, reminded me how incredulous I'd been when he'd appeared to fall in love with me, how uncomfortable I'd felt around him and his friends. I'd thought then that relationships were transactional, that white teeth and nice hair would lead to a handsome rich boyfriend. But now I knew different. Max loved me for who I was, not how white my teeth were. And I loved him, too, more than I could put into words; it was like a glow that started in my stomach and bathed the whole of my body in light. It kept me warm. It made me smile at inopportune moments.

And the truth was, I'd come very close to losing Max. Or rather, never having him in the first place. You see, six months ago, I came into some money. Lots of money, actually, only it had strings attached. My friend Grace, this old lady who'd been in the elder-care home with my grandma, left it to me along with a lovely house in the country. But before she died, Grace got it into her head that I should get married. Wouldn't stop going on about it. And eventually I found myself telling her that I had a boyfriend just to shut her up. I probably should have guessed that she'd be so excited she'd never want to talk about anything else; at the time I thought it was the easy thing to do. But it wasn't easy. I had to fabricate dates, weekends away, conversations I'd had with this imaginary man – basically I'd had to fabricate a whole relationship. And eventually, I found myself engaged to this imaginary boyfriend. Then married. I know, it sounds crazy. It was crazy. But it made her so happy for the few hours I spent with her each week.

Of course I didn't plan on her leaving me a small fortune when she died. And I certainly didn't plan on her leaving it

to Jessica Milton. Mrs. Jessica Milton. Oh, I probably should have mentioned, I told Grace I was going out with my boss, Anthony Milton. Max's friend. See, Max works at Milton Advertising, too. Actually, he runs the place now, since Anthony's gone traveling. He left straight after the wedding. The wedding that didn't happen. Marrying Anthony was the only way I was going to be able to claim the money, so Helen and I set up Project Marriage, a campaign to convince Anthony to fall madly in love with me. But I couldn't go through with it, not when I realized I was in love with Max.

The perfect couple appeared to be arguing over the menu of the brasserie; eventually, they turned and disappeared down the street.

'And beautiful,' Max whispered into my ear, making me start slightly; I hadn't noticed him come back in.

'What?' I asked, confused. 'What's beautiful?'

'That was the "and," ' he said, kissing me on the head.

'Beautiful?' I shook my head incredulously. 'Don't be silly.'

'I'm not,' he said, looking at me intently; I found myself blushing.

'So who was that?' I asked, changing the subject, because I was never that great at accepting compliments.

He rolled his eyes and poured us both some more coffee. 'Oh, nothing. Just a . . . tricky client. I'm afraid I'm going to have to dash off in half an hour. But in the meantime, I'm thinking we might need some more pastries with these coffees. What do you think?'

'You really have to go so soon?' I asked. I could feel my face fall. 'But you'll be out tonight, too.'

Max looked at me awkwardly. 'I know. Look, I'll make it up to you, I promise I will.'

'No need,' I said, forcing myself to smile. It wasn't Max's

fault. It was a tricky client. Just because I wasn't a workaholic anymore, just because now that I had Max I didn't want to do anything but spend time with him, didn't mean Max felt the same way. I mean, of course he felt the same way, but . . . but . . . it just didn't matter, that's all. We loved each other and that's what counted. 'It's really no problem. So, pastries. Let's get a whole pile of them.'