

Miss George's Second Chance

Miss Mayhem, Book 2

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PROLOGUE

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Brighton Shoreline

Difficult situations required desperate measures. Imogen George--writer, spinster and pragmatist--steeled her heart to be as brutal as any heroine before her had ever been. "Have you sulked enough Mr. Watson?"

The man sitting on the dark Brighton shoreline surged to his feet and then faced her. "Hell's bells, what are you doing here?"

Imogen clenched her hands together to hide their trembling. Standing on the dark beach, waves crashing around them, made her meeting with her best friend's brother potentially romantic though she doubted it would be. "I have a proposition for you, Mr. Watson. Do sit down."

She limped forward, annoyed that her clumsiness at dinner earlier in the evening at his house had robbed her of her dignity. It was not every day she pursued a man for conversation, even when he was her best friend's elder brother. She was taking quite a risk being here but it was within her power to improve their lot. Peter Watson may lack the good sense to detect and seize his only chance for security, but Imogen would not. She had a plan for her life and Mr. Peter Watson would suit her needs perfectly.

When she found the place she meant to sit, Mr. Watson remembered his manners and gallantly swept his coat from his shoulders and spread it on the ground so she might rest upon it. She was pleased to see that even while desperate, he did retain some good qualities. Her hopes for a smooth resolution soared.

"Where is your chaperone, Miss George?" Mr. Watson asked suddenly, squinting into the darkness toward the township where their respective homes lay.

With her eyesight as poor as it was, Imogen couldn't say for certain in which direction her reluctant chaperone, her brother Walter, stood, so she waved her hand airily in the direction she'd left him, hoping her companion would not notice or point out if she were utterly wrong. "Walter is over there. Never mind about him for the present. Do sit down so I may avoid suffering a pained neck from

looking up at you.”

As Mr. Watson sank to the ground nearby, a weary sigh left his lips. “I am sorry I tumbled you over earlier tonight, Miss George. You have no idea how sorry.”

“I did say at the time not to concern yourself unduly.” In truth, Imogen was often clumsy outside her home. The objects of her surroundings were less likely to jump out and trip her up if she stayed in familiar territory. Friends frequently moved their furniture and if she could see with any degree of certainty, she would never have stood in Peter’s way to have been in danger. As it was, the world was a trifle fuzzy at times—tonight being one of those. “The collision was as much my fault as yours.”

How did Mr. Watson take her presence she couldn’t tell, but she was determined to press on regardless. There was no point beating about the bush when she judged speed was worth being somewhat more forward. She had a solution to offer Mr. Watson that would meet his immediate need and her future requirements. “Marry me.”

Her mouth grew dry and she swallowed, preparing for his response.

At her side, Mr. Watson furiously rubbed his ear. When he lowered his hand and did not turn his head in her direction, she repeated her proposal in a louder voice. “I asked you to marry me, Mr. Watson. What do you have to say about that?”

“That’s what I thought I heard,” he muttered. “I don’t need pity.”

Imogen heaved a heavy sigh. It had been too much to hope that he would leap on her proposal and agree immediately. A long discussion was undoubtedly necessary to secure his agreement. “I know. And I’m not offering you a bit of it. You need money. Immediately, or you will lose your home and perhaps be forced to debtor’s prison. Your sister’s heart is in danger of breaking if such a calamity should come to pass. I can help get you out of your predicament with little effort on your part and none at all on mine. It is a perfect arrangement.”

He dug a hole in the sand between them with his fingers. “Surely there is someone you fancy to marry rather than me?”

She bent a look at him that she hoped conveyed her skepticism. “At my age? Society has me placed firmly on the shelf. It really is very simple to understand my motives: I would like not to live out all my days under my brother’s roof. However, I’d rather not strike out on my own in order to gain a measure of independence. Society is unforgiving to a woman who challenges the conventions of proper behavior.”

Mr. Watson scowled fiercely. “Society is stupid. You could marry anyone you want. Any one of your brother’s friends, in fact.”

Dash it all. Mr. Watson was the most stubborn man she had ever met. Would he lose the shirt off his back before he accepted help? Perhaps she should forget this. But then again there was no one else she’d consider making this offer to. “A confectioner is always an option for marriage I suppose. I do like caramels.”

Mr. Watson ceased digging. “Linus Radley would be interested.”

Really, this was all too mortifying. Did she have to go as far as beg? She and Mr. Radley had nothing in common at all. “Oh for goodness sake. Am I discussing marriage with Mr. Radley? No, I am speaking to you, Mr. Watson.”

“There is Hawke.”

Imogen laughed. Abigail, Mr. Watson's sister and her dearest friend, had undoubtedly fallen head over heels for the reserved banker next door and Imogen wouldn't interfere where there was no chance of success. Judging by Mr. Hawke's besotted looks through dinner that night it was very likely that a proposal could be in the wind. But it hadn't happened yet and there was no telling how long the banker would dither over the matter. "Don't be so foolish. Mr. Hawke has other prey in sight. I couldn't turn his head if I tried. I've chosen you so just agree and be done with it, or do you have an heiress waiting in the wings?"

Mr. Watson hunched forward, hugging his arms about his knees. "What heiress would take me?"

Stubborn, and feeling very sorry for himself. Mr. Watson was trying her patience. If Imogen was prone to violence there were any number of scolds she could inflict on him. Yet, Peter Watson needed her help and she needed him too. "Well, there is one sitting at your side right now, perhaps not a great heiress, but one who is offering you her hand in marriage."

There was a long pause, and Imogen took a moment to adjust her position to accommodate her sore bottom while she waited on Mr. Watson to see sense.

After a time, Watson glanced her way. "How large is your fortune?"

At last. Sensible discussion. "Large enough to cover your debts, dower your sister when needed, and live comfortably for the rest of your life provided a reasonable economy of spending is maintained."

He glanced away. "You've known about my problems before tonight, haven't you? How did you find out?"

When she placed her hand on his arm, he tensed. "Don't be cross, but Abigail confided in me some time ago. Your sister has been very worried about you and sought reassurance from a friend who could keep a confidence."

"Does everyone know?"

"I doubt it. Abigail only told me and with Hawke you can be assured of complete discretion in financial matters. We would never betray a friend."

He turned toward her. "I still don't understand why you would do this."

As she met Mr. Watson's gaze her palms grew slick. Doubts crowded her mind. She believed a match between them would solve their respective problems. There would never be love but respect and companionship would be enough, at least for her. "Perhaps I like you, Mr. Watson. I have had years to observe your nature and find little wanting, except perhaps for a degree more care when gambling."

"And if I were to lose your fortune to gambling?"

That possibility brought a bitter taste to her mouth. If Mr. Watson gambled her fortune away they may never recover sufficiently to live a comfortable life ever again. She had always been careful with her funds and she had to be sure Mr. Watson did not think he could waste her money on frivolous pursuits. "I am not in the least as forgiving as your sister, sir." Imogen squared her shoulders. "If that were to happen, our money spent with no regard for the future, then you would have a wife to remind you of that fact for all the days of your life. Ask Walter sometime to describe my personality when I've been thwarted."

Watson barked out a laugh, and his rigid posture eased a touch. "He has on more than one occasion. I did pity him at the time."

At least he was under no illusions that she was the sort to stand aside while he ruined them. “Good. Then I’m sure you understand the conditions under which you would accept my hand in marriage. Your charm will not gainsay agreement or forgiveness in every situation.”

He covered her hand with one of his. “And what would?”

Imogen jerked her hand back. “I offered my fortune for a comfortable life with a marriage, nothing else. You may fall in love with whoever you choose, just do not have the bad taste to flaunt the woman beneath my nose.”

Imogen’s heart raced. Limiting the terms of her offer was purely for self-preservation. A marriage begun under these conditions did not grant Peter Watson access to her person for the mystical pleasure the marriage bed was whispered to provide. He would have to expend some effort if he desired intimacies. Imogen would not make it as easy for him to share her bed as she was handing over her money. She did not find him unattractive. He had a handsome face and tendency to smile, except at this moment. A woman who aspired to a higher level of independence than most had to draw the line somewhere.

After a time, Peter stood and held out his hand. “It seems we have an agreement.”

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