



A Deal to Mend Their Marriage (Harlequin Romance Large Print)

By Michelle Douglas



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Her ex-husband is back!

Antiques dealer Caroline Fielding is married more to her job than she is to dashing Jack Pearce. After five years apart, their relationship should be over—only, when Jack shows up asking for a divorce, the chemistry is as strong as ever...

Caro tries to ignore her heart and sign the papers that will let go of Jack. But now her professional reputation is on the line and only her private investigator husband can help her! Working together 24/7 may be emotionally heart-wrenching...but it could also save her job and their marriage...



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A Deal to Mend Their Marriage (Harlequin Romance Large Print) By Michelle Douglas Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #935377 in eBooks
- Published on: 2016-02-01
- Released on: 2016-02-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

When MICHELLE DOUGLAS was asked what she wanted to be when she grew up she answered, “A writer.” Years later she read an article about romance writing and thought, ooh that’ll be fun. She was right. She lives in a leafy suburb of Newcastle on Australia’s east coast with her own romantic hero who is the inspiration behind all her happy endings. Visit Michelle at her website www.michelle-douglas.com

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The first prickle of unease wormed through Caro when the lawyer's gaze slid from her to Barbara and then down to the papers in front of him—her father's will, presumably. The lawyer picked up a pen, turned it over several times before setting it back to the table. He adjusted his tie, cleared his throat.

Even Barbara noticed his unwillingness to start proceedings. Turning ever so slightly, her stepmother reached out to pat Caro's hand. 'Caro, darling, if your father has disinherited you—'

Caro forced a laugh. 'There'll be no *if* about that, Barbara.'

It was a given, and they both knew it. Caro just wanted all the unpleasantness over so she could put it behind her. Her father was about to utter the last words he ever would to her—albeit on paper. She had no expectation that they'd be any kinder in death than they had been in life.

'Mr Jenkins?' She prodded the lawyer with the most pleasant smile she could muster. 'If you'd be so kind as to start we'd both appreciate it. Unless—' she pursed her lips '—we're waiting for someone else?'

'No, no one else.'

Mr Jenkins shook his head and Caro had to bite back a smile when the elderly lawyer's gaze snagged on the long, lean length of Barbara's legs, on display beneath her short black skirt. At thirty-seven—only seven years older than Caro—Barbara had better legs than Caro could ever hope to have. Even if she spent every waking hour at the gym and resisted every bit of sugar, butter and cream that came her way—which, of course, she had no intention of doing.

The lawyer shook himself. 'Yes, of course, Ms Fielding. We're not waiting for anyone else.'

'Come now,' she chided. 'You've known me my entire life. If you can't bring yourself to call me Caro, then surely you can call me Caroline?'

He sent her an agonised glance.

She made her smile gentle. 'I *am* prepared, you know. I fully expect that my father has disinherited me.'

She didn't add that the money didn't matter. Neither Mr Jenkins nor Barbara would believe her. The fact remained, though, that it had never been money she'd craved but her father's approval, his acceptance.

Her temples started to throb. With a superhuman effort she kept the smile on her face. 'I promise not to shoot

the messenger.'

The lawyer slumped in what had been until recently her father's chair. He pulled off his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'You have it all wrong, Caro.'

Barbara clasped her hands together and beamed. 'I *knew* he wouldn't disinherit you!'

The relief—and, yes, the delight—on Barbara's face contrasted wildly with the weariness in Mr Jenkins's eyes. Cold fingers crept up Caro's spine. A premonition of what, exactly...?

Mr Jenkins pushed his spectacles back to his nose and folded his hands in front of him. 'There are no individual letters I need to deliver. There are no messages I need to pass on nor any individual bequests to run through. I don't even need to read out the will word for word.'

'Then maybe—' Barbara glanced at Caro '—you'd be kind enough to just give us the general gist.'

He slumped back and heaved out a sigh. 'Mr Roland James Philip Fielding has left all of his worldly goods—all of his wealth and possessions—to...'

Caro braced herself.

'Ms Caroline Elizabeth Fielding.'

It took a moment for the import of the lawyer's words to hit her. When they did, Caro had to grip the arms of her chair to counter the roaring in her ears and the sudden tilting of the room. Her father had left everything... *to her*? Maybe...maybe he'd loved her after all.

She shook her head. 'There must be a mistake.'

'No mistake,' the lawyer intoned.

'But surely there's a caveat that I can only inherit if I agree to administer my mother's trust?'

Her father had spent the last twenty years telling her it was her duty, her responsibility...her *obligation* to manage the charity he'd created in homage to her mother. Caro had spent those same twenty years refusing the commission.

Her father might have thought it was the sole reason Caro had been put on this earth, but she'd continued to dispute that sentiment right up until his death. She had no facility for figures and spreadsheets, no talent nor desire to attend endless board meetings and discuss the pros and cons of where the trust money should be best spent. She did not have a business brain and had no desire whatsoever to develop one. Simply put, she had no intention of being sacrificed on some altar of duty. End of story.

'No caveat.'

The lawyer could barely meet her eye. Her mind spun.

She shot to her feet, a hard ball lodging in her chest. 'What about Barbara?' He passed a hand across his eyes. 'I'm afraid no provision has been made for Mrs Barbara Fielding in the will.'

But that made no sense!

She spun to her stepmother. Barbara rose to her feet, her face pinched and white. Her eyes swam but not a single tear fell, and that was somehow worse than if she'd burst into noisy weeping and wailing.

'He doesn't make even a single mention of me?'

The lawyer winced and shook his head.

'But...but I did everything I could think of to make him happy. Did he never love me?' She turned to Caro. 'Was it all a lie?'

'We'll work something out,' Caro promised, reaching out to take Barbara's hand.

But the other woman wheeled away. 'We'll do nothing of the sort! We'll do exactly as your father wished!'

Barbara turned and fled from the room. Caro made to follow her—how could her father have treated his young wife so abominably?—but the lawyer called her back.

'I'm afraid we're not done.'

She stilled and then spun back, swallowing a sense of misgiving. 'We're not?'

'Your father instructed that I give you this.' He held out an envelope.

'But you said.'

'I was instructed to give this to you only after the reading of the will. And only in privacy.'

She glanced back at the door. Praying that Barbara wouldn't do anything foolish, she strode across and took the envelope. She tore it open and read the mercifully brief missive inside. She could feel her lips thinning to a hard line. She moistened them. 'Do you know what this says?'

After a short hesitation, he nodded. 'Your father believed Mrs Fielding was stealing from him. Valuables have apparently gone missing and...'

And her father had jumped to conclusions.

Caro folded the letter and shoved it into her purse. 'Items may well have gone missing, but I don't believe for one moment that Barbara is responsible.'

Mr Jenkins glanced away, but not before she caught the expression in his eyes.

'I know what people think about my father and his wife, Mr Jenkins. They consider Barbara a trophy wife. They think she only married my father for his money.'

He'd had *so much* money. Why cut Barbara out of his will when he'd had so much? Even if she *had* taken the odd piece of jewellery why begrudge it to her?

Damn him to hellfire and fury for being such a control freak!

'She *was* significantly younger than your father...'

By thirty-one years.

'That doesn't make her a thief, Mr Jenkins. My father was a difficult man and he was lucky to have Barbara. She did everything in her not insignificant powers to humour him and make him happy. What's more, I believe she was faithful to him for the twelve years they were married and I don't believe she stole from him.'

'Of course you know her better than I do—but, Miss Caroline, you do have a tendency to see the best in people.'

She'd been hard-pressed to see the best in her father. She pushed that thought aside to meet the lawyer's eyes. 'If Barbara did marry my father for his money believe me: she's earned every penny of it several times over.'

Mr Jenkins obviously thought it prudent to remain silent on the subject.

'If my father's estate has passed completely to me, then I can dispose of it in any way that I see fit, yes?'

'That's correct.'

Fine. She'd sell everything and give Barbara half. Even half was more than either one of them would ever need.

Half an hour later, after she'd signed all the relevant paperwork, Caro strode into the kitchen.

Dennis Paul, her father's butler, immediately shot to his feet.

'Let me make you a pot of tea, Miss Caroline.'

She kissed his cheek and pushed him back into his seat. 'I'll make the tea, Paul.' He insisted she call him Paul rather than Dennis. 'Please just tell me there's cake.'

'There's an orange syrup cake at the back of the pantry.'

They sipped tea and ate cake in silence for a while. Paul had been in her father's employ for as long as Caro could remember. He was more like an honorary uncle than a member of staff, and she found herself taking comfort in his quiet presence.

'Are you all right, Miss Caroline?'

'You *can* call me Caro you know.' It was an old argument.

'You'll always be Miss Caroline to me.' He grinned. 'Even though you're all grown up—married, no less, and holding a director's position at that auction house of yours.'

In the next instance his expression turned stricken. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to mention that bit about you being married. It was foolish of me.'

She shrugged and tried to pretend that the word *married* didn't burn through her with a pain that could still cripple her at unsuspecting moments. As she and Jack had been separated for the last five years, 'married' hardly seemed the right word to describe them. Even if, technically, it was true.

She forced herself to focus on something else instead. 'It's not *my* auction house, Paul. I just work there.'

She pulled in a breath and left off swirling her fork though the crumbs remaining on her plate.

'My father has left me everything, Paul. *Everything*.'

Paul's jaw dropped. He stared at her and then sagged back in his chair. 'Well, I'll be...'

His astonishment gratified her. At least she wasn't the only one shocked to the core at this turnaround. To describe her relationship with her father as 'strained' would be putting it mildly. And kindly.

He straightened. 'Oh, that *is* good news Miss Caroline. In more than one way.' He beamed at her, patting his chest just above his heart, as if urging it to slow its pace. 'I'm afraid I've a bit of confession to make. I've been squirrelling away odd bits and pieces here and there. Things of value, but nothing your father would miss, you understand. I just thought. Well, I thought you might need them down the track.'

Good grief! Paul was her father's thief?

Dear Lord, if he knew her father had written Barbara out of his will, thinking her the guilty party. *Oh!* And if Barbara knew what Paul had done.

Caro closed her eyes and tried to contain a shudder.

'Paul, you could've gone to jail if my father had ever found out what you were doing!'

'But there's no harm done now, is there? I mean, now that you've inherited the estate I don't need to find a way to...to get those things to you. They're legally yours.' His smile faded. 'Are you upset with me?'

How could she be? Nobody had ever gone out on a limb like that for her before. 'No, just...frightened at what might've happened,' she lied.

'You don't have to worry about those sorts of what-ifs any more.'

Maybe not, but she still had to find a way to make this right. 'It's only fair that I split the estate with Barbara.'

A breath shuddered out of him. He glanced around the kitchen pensively. 'Does that mean selling the old place?'

What on earth did she need with a mansion in Mayfair? She didn't say that out loud. This had been Paul's home for over thirty years. It hit her then that her father had made no provision in his will for Paul either. She'd remedy that as soon as she could.

'I don't know, Paul, but we'll work something out. I'm not going to leave you high and dry, I promise. Trust me. You, Barbara and I—we're family.'

He snorted. 'Funny kind of family.'

She opened her mouth and then closed it, nodding. Never had truer words been spoken.

'Will you be staying the night, Miss Caro?'

Heavens, where Paul was concerned, *Miss Caro* was positively gushing—a sign of high sentiment and emotion.

From somewhere she found a smile. 'Yes, I think I'd better.' She had her own room in the Mayfair mansion, even though she rented a tiny one-bedroom flat in Southwark. 'Hopefully Barbara will... Well, hopefully I'll get a chance to talk to her.'

Hopefully she'd get a chance to put the other woman's mind at rest—at least about her financial future.

'Mrs Fielding refuses to join you for breakfast,' Paul intoned ominously the next morning as Caro helped herself to coffee.

Caro heaved back a sigh. Barbara had refused to speak to her at all last night. She'd tried calling out assurances to her stepmother through her closed bedroom door, but had given up when Barbara had started blasting show tunes—her father's favourites—from her music system.

'You will, however, be pleased to know that she did get up at some stage during the night to make herself something to eat.'

That was something at least.

'Oh, Miss Caroline! *You* need to eat something before you head off to work,' he said when she pushed to her feet.

'I'm fine, Paul, I promise.' Her appetite would eventually return. Although if he'd offered her cake for breakfast...

Stop thinking about cake.

'I'm giving Freddie Soames a viewing of a rather special snuffbox this morning.' She'd placed it in her father's safe—*her* safe—prior to the reading of the will yesterday. 'After that I'll take the rest of the day off and see if I can't get Barbara to talk to me then.'

As a director of Vertu, the silver and decorative arts division at Richardson's, one of London's leading auction houses, she had some flexibility in the hours she worked.

She glanced over her shoulder at Paul, who followed on her heels as she entered her father's study—*her* study. 'You *will* keep an eye on Barbara this morning, won't you?'

'If you wish it.'

She bit back a grin, punching in the combination to the safe. Ever since Paul had caught Barbara tossing the first Mrs Fielding's portrait into a closet, he'd labelled her as trouble. 'I *do* wish it.'

The door to the safe swung open and—Caro blinked, squinted and then swiped her hand through the empty space.

Her heart started to pound. 'Paul, please tell me I'm hallucinating.' Her voice rose. 'Please tell me the safe isn't empty.'

He moved past her to peer inside. 'Dear God in heaven!' He gripped the safe's door. 'Do you think we've been burgled?'

Something glittered on the floor at her feet. She picked it up. The diamond earring dangled from her fingers and comprehension shot through her at the same moment it spread across Paul's face.

'Barbara,' she said.

And at the same time he said, 'Mrs Fielding.'

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