

Marrying Miss Martha ~ Chapter 1

Martha sat bolt upright on a wooden chair in the lawyer's office listening to Mr Droffington read her father's will, confirming what each of the three persons present already knew.

“ . . . and to my beloved daughters, Martha and Penelope Merridene of Rosemount Lodge, Woodbourne, I leave the residue of my estate, to be divided equally between them. I am aware that this is not as much as I would have wished, since my naval pension will die with me, so I commend my daughters to the protection of their cousin, Edward Merridene, of Poolerby Hall, Leicestershire, to whom I also bequeath the gold signet ring that has belonged to the head of the family for nearly two hundred years.”

Edward nodded his head in satisfaction and turned to smile reassuringly at his two cousins. “You may rely upon me *absolutely*”.

Martha decided that Edward's resemblance to a rabbit was increasing rather than decreasing with the years. As if she would let *him* manage her life!

Mr Droffington lowered the paper from which he had been reading. “There should be no difficulty in settling affairs within a few weeks, my dear ladies. Not a complicated estate, since there is no property involved.”

Edward nodded. “Might I ask—as head of the family—how much you estimate will actually be realised for my poor cousins?”

How dare he call us “poor cousins”, Martha thought, anger momentarily overcoming her grief. She opened her mouth to protest but closed it again as Penelope gave her a quick nudge.

“Well—er—not quite two hundred pounds, I’m afraid. And the furniture, of course.”

“As little as that, eh?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Captain Merridene was not an extravagant gentleman, but his private means were small, he only rented the house and the naval pension was not exactly generous.”

Edward shook his head and looked at his cousins pityingly.

Martha scowled at him. “We had the best of fathers and I wouldn’t have changed a single thing about him!” Which was not quite true. Her father had never been good with money and his unthinking generosity had sometimes made for difficulties given their restricted budget.

An uneasy silence followed her words then Mr Droffington cleared his throat and continued, “The lease on the Lodge will expire in December, but as it would be beyond the ladies’ means to renew it, this is very timely. Of course, they each have a small annuity from their mother’s marriage settlement, so they will not be entirely penniless.”

Martha listened indignantly to the two men discussing the situation as if she and Penelope were not there—or were too stupid to understand.

Edward shook his head sadly. “I cannot consider a hundred pounds a year each anything more than pin money. However, you may rely upon me, my dear cousins, to deal with all the business details and supply the masculine guidance which you have sadly lost with my uncle’s passing.” He slid the signet ring on to his finger and held his hand up to admire this symbol of his new position in the family, then stood up to signify that it was time to leave.

Martha found the sight of her father’s ring on Edward’s plump white hand painful in the extreme and was unable to keep silent a second longer. “That will not be necessary!” Her voice came out more loudly than she had intended and both

gentlemen gaped at her.

Edward blinked in shock. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said: that will not be necessary," she repeated, standing up and facing the two of them. "My sister and I are quite capable of settling any business arising from Father's will ourselves."

"You had much better leave such things to those who understand them, Cousin."

Edward drew himself up to his full five foot five inches and stared resentfully across the table. There was something very unladylike about such a strong-looking woman.

Penelope was slightly taller than he was, but Martha must be all of five feet nine! She was handsome enough—or she would be if she did something with herself—for she had regular features and hair of an attractive chestnut hue. But he didn't approve of the aggressive jut to her chin and he preferred Penelope's slenderness and softer prettiness to Martha's generous curves and look of strength.

The chin was even more pronounced as she continued, "You forget that it was I who handled all our business matters after Mother died because Father could never understand accounts, so I can probably tell you to the farthing how we're left."

"My uncle might have allowed you to organise the *housekeeping money*, Cousin Martha, but that is quite different, believe me, from managing one's income! And it is . . ."

Penelope swayed and clutched her sister's arm. "Oh dear! I'm afraid I feel rather faint! I . . ."

In the bustle of getting Penelope out to Edward's carriage, further discussion was postponed, but Martha knew her sister had not felt faint—neither of them were prone to that sort of thing—and had done this on purpose to prevent a quarrel. Well, perhaps it would be as well to discuss matters privately, but she had no intention of biting her

tongue if Edward continued to speak to them in such a patronising manner and she would not be giving their affairs into his hands.

Once back at Rosemount Lodge the two ladies served tea in the front parlour and as nothing further was said about financial matters, Edward was able to give himself up to enjoyment of the feather-light scones. "By Jove! My own cook could not have done better!"

"Do have another!" Penelope said quickly. To her relief, her sister only watched grimly as Edward consumed a second scone and followed it with a large piece of plum cake.

Afterwards Penelope invited Edward to take a turn round the garden with her and listened meekly to his views on how *he* would have set out the vegetable patch. With true heroism she refrained from interrupting or pointing out the glaring faults in his schemes, which took no account of the prevailing winds or the amount of shade in each area.

Well aware of what her sister was doing and grateful for the respite from Edward's inanities, Martha went to help their maid, Sally, prepare an evening meal which would not disgrace them in their cousin's eyes. When she heard Penelope bring Edward back into the house, she went upstairs to change for dinner, donning her one black evening gown.

Her sister joined her a short time later, similarly clad but with her hair still loose about her shoulders. "Could you help me put up my hair?"

"Of course, love." Martha pinned her sister's soft brown waves into a high chignon twisting the shorter hair at each side of the face into curls. Penelope was calm again, with that distant look on her face. Martha wished, as she had so many times, that her

sister's fiancé had not died so suddenly. The look of bright interest and anticipation that used to light up her sister's face had rarely returned, though it was well over two years since that dreadful day when Mr Medson had arrived to tell them that his son had died of a putrid sore throat—just one month before Penelope and he were to have been married.

Banishing such depressing memories firmly, Martha stood back. “There. You look charming, Pen. You always were the pretty one of us two. I wish we could afford a new evening dress for you, though. Even the vicar's wife is wearing wider sleeves than ours now.”

Penelope stood up and gave Martha a hug. “Thank you. No one can put up my hair as well as you. And I don't care about fashion any more than you do, as long as I'm decently clad.”

Martha sat down in front of the mirror to attend to her own coiffure, clicking her tongue in exasperation at the unruly mass lying on her shoulders. “Strands will escape, however firmly I pin it back,” she grumbled.

“If you didn't try to push your hair into such a severe style, it might behave itself better. I wish you would let me—”

“You know I can never be bothered to fuss. There. That's the best I can do with it. At least it's neater now.”

“Why will you never let me help you look your best?”

“What's the point? At twenty-eight I'm well beyond trying to attract a husband and a neat hairstyle is easier to manage. Don't look at me like that, Pen. You won't change my mind. I'm quite sure I was never meant to marry.”

Penelope sighed, but refrained from arguing. At the door she stopped again to say, “Do try to bite your tongue tonight, dear. Edward can't actually *force* his wishes upon

us, after all, and he'll soon be gone."

"I'll try, I really will, but I can't promise anything. He's such a fool. And I'm not—" Martha's voice wobbled for a minute, "—not quite myself at the moment." She took a deep breath and led the way downstairs.

"I have been considering your position," Edward announced abruptly after spooning up the last of his second helping of stewed apples and cream.

Martha looked up, her own spoon poised half-way to her mouth, ready to take issue with the idea that their position was any concern of his, but he didn't give her time to protest.

"Although you are not precisely young ladies any more, it would still not be seemly for you to keep house without the support of a gentleman's presence. I am not, in any case, a believer in female independence." He waved a nearly empty wine glass at them. "But you are not to worry! No, indeed! I spoke to my dearest Rosemary before I left the Hall and we are as one in this as in everything else. We shall be very happy to offer you a home." He sat back and smiled benignly at them.

He spoke as though they would be reduced to starvation or the workhouse otherwise, Martha thought, when they had a perfectly adequate income if they lived modestly and moved to a smaller house or took rooms. But even if they didn't have enough money, she would rather hoe turnips than live with their cousin! Far rather!

Edward continued to explain the situation. "Rosemary and I are, as you know, blessed with three children."

Poor little things! thought Martha. *They already favour their parents.*

"I am happy to inform you that we expect another addition to our family in three weeks' time. In these circumstances, my dear wife will positively welcome the support

of her two cousins, for she does tend to become a trifle out of spirits when she is—
ahem—” he lowered his voice, “great with child.”

As he seemed to expect some comment, Martha managed a “Mmm”.

“And with *three* ladies in the house, I’m sure we shall be able to dispense with the services of the housekeeper. That and the savings on hiring a governess—for we all know how well-read you are, my dear Martha—will more than compensate us financially. So you need have *no* fear of being a burden.”

Both sisters gaped at him, astounded by this meanness.

“And you will have your annuities,” he continued, “which will provide you with enough pin-money to buy the material to make yourselves the simple gowns which will be in keeping with your new station in life. So you see, it all works out very neatly.” He leaned back in his chair, drained the last of the wine and beamed at them.

Martha could hold back no longer. “Thank you, Edward, but I’m afraid we must decline your generous offer!” She had the pleasure of watching his smile fade as her words sank in.

“*Decline!* Decline my offer! But—but—you cannot! Whatever will Rosemary say? She is quite counting on your help, as am I. Our eldest son had been growing somewhat naughty lately—such a spirited lad, dear little Ned!—and he needs a firmer hand than poor Rosemary—the most sensitive of females!—can provide.”

“Well, I’m sorry but we do decline, Edward!” In response to a well-aimed kick from her sister, Martha tried to modify her tone and find more conciliatory words, but could only repeat, “We are, however—as dear Penelope would agree—grateful.” The word nearly choked her. *Grateful!* For a mean-spirited offer like that! Well, she had no intention of becoming the unpaid slave of her Cousin Edward and his wife, thank you very much.

Penelope stood up. "This has been such a wearing day and my head is aching abominably. I do think we ought to postpone further discussion until tomorrow, my dear cousin."

Martha pushed her chair back abruptly. Pen was right. They were both tired and sad, not in the mood to manage a polite conversation with their fool of a cousin. She took their candlesticks from the mantelpiece, allowed Edward to light them with the taper that stood ready near the fire, and then went upstairs with her sister.

"We'll talk in the morning," Penelope told her soothingly as they went to their own rooms. "Early."

Martha nodded, so weary now she could hardly set one foot in front of the other. Tears filled her eyes as she passed the door of what had been her father's bedroom and she whisked into her own room before her sister could see them.

In the bedroom at the end of the landing Penelope went to stand by the window, drawing the curtains back and staring out across the moonlit gardens. Her father's death had made her think very deeply about their personal situation. Since John's death she had felt only half-alive, deprived of the future she'd looked forward to, but now she knew she must pull herself together and become stronger, more like she used to be. She did not intend to be a burden on Martha.

She gave a wry smile at her reflection in the mirror. Stronger was one word for her old self, rebellious was another. Father had called her that several times, because he hadn't wanted her to marry John and she'd defied him. He'd said the fellow was not only short of money but had dangerous radical tendencies, just because John cared about their poorer brethren. Well, what else should a curate care about but those who needed his help most?

The rebellious part of her seemed to be surging up again, pulsing with life. She

might not speak as bluntly as dearest Martha, she might sometimes try to avoid trouble rather than confront it head on, but she was equally determined that they should make a life for themselves, one not dependent on their cousin.

On that thought, she drew the curtains firmly and got into bed.

Seven o'clock the following morning saw the sisters sitting with a tea-tray in the parlour, knowing they were safe from interruptions because their cousin had never been an early riser.

"Edward's a fool!" stated Martha, stirring her cup of tea so vigorously it slopped into the saucer. "*You* can go and live with him if you want to, Pen! I'd rather go out as a governess. Far rather!"

"That's just what he was offering you," Penelope pointed out with a chuckle.

"Unpaid! And as if he were doing us a favour, too!"

"Yes, but what *are* we going to do, Martha? We shan't be able to afford to live here any more. He's quite right about that."

"We can manage on our annuities if we're frugal and go into rooms, but personally I'd prefer to find some way to earn a living. Otherwise what should we do with our time?"

"We ought to have made plans before now." She frowned and fell silent for a moment, then asked, "What *can* we do, though? You wouldn't really go out as a governess, would you, Martha?"

"I would if I had to! Only I'd prefer us to stay together. Wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes!"

"And besides, governesses lead awful lives. Look at Jenny Barston. The poor thing can't call her soul her own, and if it weren't for us, she'd have no friends at all, because

the Warings rarely include her in their social life unless they need to make up the numbers. Anyway, I know exactly what we can do. I've had it in mind for a year or two now, only you were grieving for John and it didn't seem necessary to discuss it yet. I didn't expect Father to die so soon."

Penelope squeezed her hand in sympathy. "What can we do?"

"Open a school."

"A school! But there's one in the village already!"

"I know that! We shall have to go somewhere else, somewhere that doesn't already have a school for young ladies."

"Leave Woodbourne?"

"How can we stay? There isn't enough money and that's that!" Martha stood up and went to gaze out of the window, her arms rigid at her sides, her hands clenched in tight fists. "Even Edward couldn't offer us a solution that would allow us to stay here, Pen." She swallowed the lump in her throat as she turned round. "Anyway, I refuse to live on his charity! I just won't do it! I can't abide him or that silly moon-faced wife of his. I should be at outs with them in hours—no, minutes!"

"Then it seems we have no choice but to try your school idea."

Martha glanced sideways. "I didn't think you'd agree so easily." She didn't say so, but there was another reason she would be glad to leave quiet little Woodbourne. Penelope was very pretty and if she got the opportunity to meet some eligible gentlemen would surely find herself a husband?

Martha had no such hopes for herself. She'd read novels about people falling in love, but it had never happened to her. She was, she supposed, too practical and as for moderating her own opinions to suit those of a husband, she could never do it. So she'd resigned herself to spinsterhood.

Immediately after breakfast Edward again broached the question of his cousins' future and refused to be diverted from the subject. He spoke soothingly and every third or fourth sentence assured them that their presence would be no financial burden upon himself and his dearest Rosemary.

"Edward, you know perfectly well that you and I could never live in harmony," Martha snapped when his tedious peroration came to an end. "I don't know why you're even considering the idea. Anyway, Penelope and I have other plans for the future. We've decided to open a school and that'll suit us much better."

He goggled at them, then positively shouted, "*Open a school?* I forbid it, absolutely and utterly forbid it!"

Martha began to enjoy herself. "You can't prevent us, Edward! We're of full legal age and we have our own money, so it's got nothing to do with you!"

"Nothing to *do* with me! My own cousins talk about setting up as schoolmistresses—schoolmistresses of all the shabby genteel things!—and you say it's got nothing to do with me! Have you thought what people will say? Merridenes reduced to running a school. It's shocking—unthinkable. And I *won't* have it!"

Penelope joined in. "Rubbish! Teaching is a perfectly respectable occupation for a lady in reduced circumstances."

He opened and shut his mouth a few times. "You must be mad to refuse the offer of a good home at Poolerby Hall—every comfort—the bedroom walls repapered only last year—new curtains, too—ruinously expensive and fading already. I never heard of anything so ridiculous in all my life! Anyway, the risk is too great! You could lose what little money you do have. Schools cost money to set up—if one does things properly, that is."

“We’re not fools!” replied Martha. “We shall choose a suitable town most carefully. We have no intention of failing in this venture.”

“*Choose a town?* What do you mean by that, pray?” He stared at them in horrified dismay as the only possible meaning sank in. “You don’t—you can’t mean you intend to leave Woodbourne and go to some strange place where you know nobody and are utterly without masculine protection!”

“You can’t have been listening, for I told you so quite plainly.”

Penelope stepped in. “We shan’t rush into anything, Edward, I promise you.”

He stood up and marched across to the door, belly and jowls quivering with the violence of his steps. “I shall wash my hands of you! And so will Rosemary! I’m not having people saying that I encouraged you in this ridiculous venture! Or that I didn’t offer you a home. I shall pack my bag at once.”

Withdrawing behind a wall of icy dignity, he summoned his carriage from the inn and took his leave in the curtest possible manner.

“He’ll be back,” said Martha cynically as they stood at the gate and watched the dust settle in the lane.

Penelope laughed. “If only to see how we’re managing.”

Martha threaded her arm in her sister’s and turned towards the house. “Now, love, we must start doing some careful calculations. We have to go into this in a very businesslike manner. Remember, if we fail, we shall be dependent upon Cousin Edward’s charity!”

Finding a place in which to open a school was, however, more difficult than they had expected and the problem had not been resolved by the time winter approached and with it the date they had to move out of their old home. By then, even Martha was

beginning to worry about whether they had made a mistake or not.

They studied advertisements in newspapers and dipped into their slender capital to go and inspect a few schools that were advertised for sale. But these were in districts that were distinctly shabby or else in remote villages. All of them had a sad air, as if the buildings themselves were tired of being schools. This was not at all what Martha had in mind. Better-class persons wouldn't send their daughters to be educated in such places, she was sure, and she intended to run a successful school, not a scratch-quill establishment.