



Rebel's Bargain (The Chatsfield)

By Annie West

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When the thrill-seeker returns!

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Injured in a climbing accident, there's only one person Orsino can turn to...his wife! They have unfinished business, and he'll face it before he walks away forever. But the blazing passion between them reignites in an instant, leaving Orsino to wonder whether it will kill or cure!

Welcome to The Chatsfield, London!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Annie West has devoted her life to an intensive study of tall, dark, charismatic heroes who cause the best kind of trouble in the lives of their heroines. As a sideline she's also researched dreamy locations for romance, from vibrant cities to desert encampments and fairytale castles. Annie lives with her family at beautiful Lake Macquarie. She loves to hear from readers and you can contact her at www.annie-west.com or at PO Box 1041, Warners Bay, NSW2282, Australia.

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'I'll be there as soon as I can organise flights.'

Orsino heard an unfamiliar grim note in his brother's voice. News your twin had almost died would sober anyone. He grimaced.

After years of risk-taking his luck had run out. Being faced with his own mortality and possible permanent incapacity was forcing him to reassess his life.

'There's no need to race here, Lucca.' He shifted the phone and winced as he knocked the bandages on his head. 'There's nothing you can do. Besides—' he forced a smile into his voice '—you'd spend your time flirting with the nurses and ignoring me.'

'How can you say that?' No mistaking Lucca's relief at Orsino's joke. 'I'm a changed man. There's only one woman for me and she's a real princess.'

Orsino groaned at his brother's awful pun. Lucca's romance with a royal hadn't improved his sense of humour.

'Besides, the nurses probably have their hands full with you,' Lucca continued. 'Have you got a date with the prettiest one yet?'

Orsino swallowed the retort that he had no idea what the staff looked like. That was a detail not even Lucca needed to know. Unless it became absolutely necessary.

'You're the lady-killer, Lucca, remember?'

'This is me you're talking to, Orsino. I've seen how women react to you. Not that I could work out why, when I'm the handsome twin. You're seriously saying you're not fending women off?'

'Not right at the moment.'

Orsino gritted his teeth against swamping self-pity and anger. Not anger at Lucca, but at the disaster his world had become. The staff fussed over him only because it had been touch and go at first whether he'd survive.

'Of course.' Lucca sounded serious again. 'That's why one of us should be there. You need family.'

'Family!' Orsino didn't hide his bitterness.

The closest family had come recently was when his father's CEO, Christos Giatrakos, had made contact, wanting to cash in on Orsino's reputation, requesting—no, demanding—that he be the 'face' of the company. Orsino and his father had never been close but at least the old man could have rung himself.

'Yeah, well, I know I've been busy but—'

'I didn't mean you, Lucca.' Orsino palmed his bristled jaw with his unbandaged hand, feeling like an ungrateful heel. 'Sorry. I'm in a foul mood, not used to being stuck in a hospital bed. I shouldn't take it out on you.' He drew a slow breath, knowing his injuries were only part of the problem. 'I appreciate the offer but there's nothing you can do here.'

'Maybe not now, but when you're released from hospital you'll need someone.'

'You're offering to play nurse?' Orsino smiled. 'It might be worth agreeing just to see it.'

His twin's chuckle was the best thing he'd heard in days, warming him in ways thermal blankets hadn't. Orsino hadn't realised till this week what was important in his life. Now he knew, and he'd make it his business to catch up with his twin more regularly. But only after he'd recovered enough not to be a figure of sympathy.

'Why do you always underestimate me, Orsino? Just because you're a couple of minutes older?'

'I'm picturing you in a starched cap and apron, Lucca.'

The idea has a certain appalling fascination.' Orsino spoke again over his brother's laugh. 'Don't worry about the nursemaid gig. I've lined up someone.'

'Lucilla?'

'No, though she called. Our big sister still worries about us after all these years, and despite the fact Giatrakos clearly runs her ragged.'

'You need someone experienced, someone you can trust.'

Orsino bit back a bark of laughter. *Trust?*

No, trust didn't describe his feelings for Poppy. Once he'd vowed never to see her again. But days stuck on a mountain expecting to die gave him a new perspective.

He'd never trust her again. But there was a freedom, and power, in knowing that.

Poppy and he had unfinished business. That's why she still haunted his thoughts. For five years he'd told himself he was done with the past, but in the burst of clarity that had come to him on the mountainside, he knew it would never be over till he'd faced her one more time.

Something lingered there. Something he had to face before he walked away for ever.

She'd hate being with him again. After what she'd done that would be tough, even for a woman so brazen. As for being at his beck and call while he recovered...

Orsino's lips curved in a tight smile. He looked forward to making her squirm. It was small enough revenge for what she'd done.

'Don't fret, Lucca. The woman I have in mind is just what the doctor ordered.'

Poppy drew a jagged breath as the taxi wove through traffic.

Fear had crowded close from the moment news broke of the avalanche and the two injured climbers. Even strangers felt fear for Orsino and awe for what he'd done. She'd overheard them discussing it at the airport: Orsino Chatsfield's heroism, or his foolhardiness, depending on your view.

She looked at her ringless hands twisting in her lap. It wasn't fear she felt but terror. It grated through her empty stomach.

She hadn't seen Orsino in five years but she couldn't imagine a world without him in it. His vitality, his passion, oh, Lord, his passion!

Her hands clenched as memories rushed to the surface, heating her skin.

His arrogance. His demands. The way he was so ready to judge but so unready to face his own faults.

Despite all the negatives, a hard, heavy lump pressed down on her chest as if she'd swallowed an anvil.

The message from the hospital—so uninformative, yet so peremptory—had congealed the dread in her veins. It had sent her racing from France to the base of the Himalayas. She hadn't caught her breath the whole way. Even now her heart pumped too fast.

The taxi stopped and Poppy looked out at the ugly hospital, her heart in her mouth.

She didn't even blink when a cluster of press surged, bombarding her with questions. She barely heard them. All she could think of was what awaited her inside.

Poppy's footsteps echoed in the silent corridor. With each step her nerves screwed tighter.

Please, please. Let him survive. Let him live.

She'd told herself she felt nothing for Orsino Chatsfield. The burn of negative feelings had died long ago, buried under the overload of sheer hard work that had taken her to the top of her profession. No time to feel hurt, regret or guilt when every waking hour was occupied. That's what she'd told herself for five years. What she'd believed. Till yesterday.

The fact he'd almost died on one of the world's most inhospitable mountains, might even now be dying, made her swallow convulsively, her throat clogging.

He couldn't die.

Poppy stumbled. She who never faltered, not even in six-inch stilettos, navigating a catwalk artistically obscured by dryice vapour.

Finally she reached the last room. Taking a shaky breath she stepped in, only to halt as she spied the figure unmoving in the hospital bed.

He was so still that for a horrible few seconds she wondered if he breathed.

Poppy pressed her hand to her chest. Her heart battered her ribs so hard it felt like it might jump free.

Her gaze riveted on the bed. She couldn't remember Orsino being still. He was always on the move, as if his life force was greater than everyone else's. The only time she'd seen him unmoving was when she'd woken before him. She remembered drinking in the sight of him, heart-stoppingly gorgeous, so precious as he sprawled beside her. The desperate intensity of her feelings had terrified her.

With good reason.

She should have trusted her instincts and run for her life.

Except she'd been hooked from the first look.

Orsino lay swathed in bandages—glaring white against his tan. One arm was in a sling, covered from fingers to elbow. The other, bare on the cotton blanket, bore livid bruises. His head was bandaged, as well. Not just his scalp but his eyes, too.

Poppy's heart plunged to the toes of her soft kid boots.

Only the darkened jawline and column of bronzed throat were familiar. They were strong, beautifully formed and powerful. And his mouth—she surveyed those thin lips that could quirk in a smile guaranteed to make a woman's heart soar.

She blinked, trying not to remember the words that had shot from those sculpted lips five years ago. But time hadn't diminished her memory. They slashed her anew, reviving guilt, indignation and tearing pain.

Poppy swallowed convulsively. How bad *was* he? The news reports had been sensational but unreliable. Those head wounds—

'Amindra? Is that you?'

Everything in her froze at the low words, gravelly as if he wasn't used to speaking. She remembered that early-morning voice, how it had woken her so often, murmuring outrageous suggestions as his marauding hands played her body like a maestro tuning an instrument.

Relief flooded her that he was well enough to speak, and horror, too, at her tumbling rush of emotions.

Poppy bit her cheek, summoning strength. She felt wobbly but after more than a decade modelling she was an expert at hiding behind an impassive mask.

Her gaze went to his bandaged eyes and she shivered. Fear iced her spine.

'Nurse?' His voice was sharper. 'Is that you?'

'Hello, Orsino.' Her voice was like smooth, golden honey, as rich and seductive as in his dreams.

He stiffened, fingers stalling as they groped for the call button. He registered the familiar disinfectant hospital scent and realised this was no dream.

Something whacked him hard in the chest, a jolt of pain as his bruised ribs expanded then eased when he remembered to breathe again.

She'd come.

Even trussed up like a turkey dinner and blind to boot, he knew her voice. He'd know it anywhere. He'd even thought he'd heard it beneath half a tonne of snow. It had bullied and cajoled him into not giving up. How was that for ironic? He must have been out of his mind.

'Who is it?'

Orsino heard her soft gasp. Obviously she expected him to recognise her voice but he'd be damned if he'd give her that satisfaction.

She'd come too soon! They'd promised to take the bandages off his eyes today. He hadn't wanted her seeing him like this—helpless and light-headed from medication that kept pain to a dull throb.

How had she got here so fast when he wasn't expecting her for another couple of days?

'It's Poppy.' She was at the end of the bed.

'Poppy?' His voice thickened unexpectedly on the second syllable, turning it into a question. Orsino flinched, detesting the emotion he heard in that single word. Where had that come from?

Heat flared under his skin and he knew in his gut it wasn't just hurt pride because she saw him like this—*so much less than the man he'd been*. It was something blood-deep and disturbing. Something he no longer wanted to feel.

He'd finally acknowledged they had loose ends to tie up but nothing had prepared him for the explosion of unwanted emotion her presence ignited.

Had he made a mistake, getting her here?

It wouldn't be his first where she was concerned.

'Yes, it's me.' Her voice came from right beside him. 'How are you?'

Orsino groped for the bed controls. He hated being flat on his back while she hovered over him. Bad enough with the nurses.

'Let me. What did you want?' Soft fingers brushed his and he jerked away. He told himself it was because he didn't like the pity in her voice. The tingling in his fingers was a legacy of frostbite, no more.

'Orsino?'

His lips compressed as his body responded to her husky whisper. It reminded him of the last time they'd been together. The memory caught him up short, smashing his composure.

Damn! This wasn't supposed to happen.

'I can do it myself.' This time when he reached for the controls her hand was gone. Seconds later he was sitting up, the bed supporting him.

He shifted his weight, trying to get comfortable.

'Here, I can help.' No huskiness this time. Just cool efficiency. Orsino told himself he welcomed it.

Then the scent of raspberries reached him—tangy and sweet—and she tugged the pillows behind him so he sat more comfortably. Something soft brushed his jaw and he reached up, catching it.

It was a lock of hair. Soft and springy, tickling his palm, twisting around his finger. He tugged lightly and felt warmth surround him, as if she'd leaned close. The light raspberry-and-woman scent deepened in his nostrils and he swallowed hard as the past rose in a consuming wave.

He told himself to release his grip but his hold tightened on the silk skein of her hair. He tried to imagine it cascading in dark red waves around her pale shoulders and was disturbed to find he pictured it too clearly.

'You've grown your hair.' The whole time he'd known her it had been gamine short. Poppy's air of youthful fragility, reinforced by her stunning eyes in that sculpted face, had caught the public's imagination. She'd been the fresh, innocently sexy face of fashion.

Innocent!

His mouth twisted as tension knotted his chest and belly.

'I wanted a new look.' Her words sounded offhand.

Orsino released her. He refused to ask if her *new look* dated from their separation. For five years he'd avoided society pages and magazines that might feature her. Now wasn't the time for curiosity to reawaken.

Nor his libido.

But it had. Even battered and bruised, his body responded to her feminine scent and the sound of her voice. Too eagerly. Sex hadn't been part of his plan. It infuriated him that she could still do this to him.

He leaned back against the pillows, increasing the distance between them. Yet the perfume of her skin lingered.

When he'd imagined them meeting he'd envisaged himself almost healed, enough to see at least.

His jaw tightened. It had been a mistake mentioning her name so soon to the officious hospital staff. He should have waited. He hated not being in control.

'How do you feel, Orsino?'

A laugh grated in his throat. 'What? You were worried about me?'

She didn't answer but he felt new tension in the air. Something that made him sit straighter. He sensed her turmoil and his predatory senses twitched. How he wished he could see her!

'The whole world is wondering how you are. You're an international hero for saving your climbing partner and yourself.'

'Ah, that's why you came running so quickly. To bask in the reflected media glow.' Everywhere they'd gone, whenever he'd wanted privacy, there'd been someone with a camera wanting pictures of them, dubbed by some trashy magazine the year's hottest couple. He'd been slow to realise it was attention Poppy, with her need for constant media coverage, wanted.

'I see you haven't changed, Orsino.' Her voice came from farther away and held a razor-sharp edge. 'Still the charmer. And still so quick to judge us lesser mortals.'

He ignored that. What was there to say? He'd been in the right. She'd been in the wrong, so far in the wrong he'd known a moment of red-hot fury when violence would have been a welcome outlet. Lucky for Poppy Graham he was a civilised man. Some men wouldn't have walked away as he had. Some would have taken revenge for what she'd done.

Having her at his beck and call for a couple of weeks while he recuperated hardly counted.

'Have *you* changed, Poppy?' This time when he spoke her name the word emerged crisp and clear, yet he tasted the echo of it on his tongue, sweet as wild raspberries but with a tang of disappointment.

How was it that after all this time she had the power to make him *feel*?

It must be some residual weakness after his ordeal in the wilderness.

'Of course I've changed.' He heard her long stride across the floor as she paced. 'I'm not twenty-three any more. I'm my own woman, self-reliant, secure and capable.'

'You were always self-reliant,' he murmured. 'You never needed anyone, did you, Poppy? Except on your own terms.' He heard her hiss of breath. 'You used people for what you could get. Is that still your style?'

'You're a fine one to talk! When did you ever *give* or share?' Orsino heard her jagged breath and knew intense satisfaction that he wasn't the only one *feeling*.

'I remember giving all the time.' He breathed deep. 'Money, the prestige and connections you were so hungry for...'

Silence met his accusation. He waited, but she didn't break it.

So, in one thing at least she'd changed. Once she'd been ruled by passion, as impetuous in her defence as in everything else. Now she knew when to give up. What was the point arguing the unwinnable?

Orsino frowned, fighting a disappointment he couldn't explain.

'Obviously you don't want me here.' Her voice sounded guarded and, if he hadn't known it impossible, defeated. 'The hospital made a mistake contacting me.'

He shook his head, wishing yet again that he could see her face. The strength of his need to see her stunned him.

'No mistake. But they were a little too prompt. You're not needed quite yet.'

'Needed? You don't need me.'

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