



Marriage with Benefits

By Kat Cantrell

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Her Ideal Ex-Husband

"Will you divorce me?" Those are the four little words Cia Allende wants to hear Lucas Wheeler say. Of course, they have to marry first. The gorgeous Texas real estate tycoon shuns commitment, but a six-month fake marriage will help them both. Cia can access her trust fund and build a women's shelter, and Lucas's playboy reputation is repaired. No strings. No romance. Simple.

Except it's anything but. Lucas intends to seduce his in-name-only wife. It's a battle of wills, and Cia is losing...and loving it. And now the divorce she needs is the last thing she wants....

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Marriage with Benefits By Kat Cantrell Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #555500 in eBooks
- Published on: 2013-02-01
- Released on: 2013-02-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

"If you are looking for a touching love story, Marriage With Benefits by Kat Cantrell is just what you want. The ending will leave you with a smile." --Cataromance

"The author did a brilliant job at combining fun, sex, love, romance and a crazy but all too sweet hero into one heck of a read." 5 of 5 stars--Romance Book Haven

About the Author

KAT CANTRELL read her first Harlequin novel in third grade and has been scribbling in notebooks since she learned to spell. She majored in literature, officially with the intent to teach, but ended up in middle management, until she became a stay-at-home-mom and full-time writer. She was the 2011 Harlequin So You Think You Can Write winner and a 2012 RWA Golden Heart finalist for best unpublished series contemporary manuscript. Kat, her husband and their two boys live in north Texas.

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Other single, twenty-five-year-old women dreamed of marriageable men and fairy-tale weddings, but Dulciana Allende dreamed of a divorce.

And Lucas Wheeler was exactly the man to give it to her.

Cia eyed her very male, very blond and very broad-shouldered target across the crowded reception hall. The display of wealth adorning the crush between her and Lucas bordered on garish. A doddering matron on her left wore a ring expensive enough to buy a year's worth of groceries for the women's shelter where Cia volunteered.

But then, if Cia had the natural ability to coax that kind of cash out of donors, she wouldn't be here in the middle of a Dallas society party, where she clearly did not belong, about to put plan B into action.

There was no plan C.

She knocked back the last swallow of the froufrou drink some clueless waiter had shoved into her hand. After she'd put considerable effort into securing a last-minute invitation to Mrs. Wheeler's birthday party, the least she could do was play along and drink whatever lame beverage the Black Gold Club pretended had alcohol in it. If she pulled off this negotiation, Mrs. Wheeler would be her future mother-in-law, and Cia did want to make a favorable impression.

Well, Mrs. Wheeler was also her future ex-mother-in-law, so perhaps the impression didn't matter overly much.

A guy near the bar tried to catch her eye, but she kept walking. Tonight, she cared about only one man and, conveniently, he stood next to his mother greeting guests. Cia's unfamiliar heels and knee-binding slim dress slowed her trek across the room. Frustrating but fortunate, since a giraffe on roller blades had her beat in the grace department.

"Happy birthday, Mrs. Wheeler." Cia shook the hand of the stylish, fifty-something woman and smiled.

"This is a lovely party. Dulciana Allende. Pleased to meet you."

Mrs. Wheeler returned the smile. "Cia Allende. My, where has the time gone? I knew your parents socially. Such a tragedy to lose them at the same time." She clucked maternally.

Cia's smile faltered before she could catch it. Of course Mrs. Wheeler had known her parents. She just didn't know Cia's stomach lurched every time someone mentioned them in passing.

"Lucas, have you met Cia?" Mrs. Wheeler drew him forward. "Her grandfather owns Manzanares Communications."

Cia made eye contact with the man she planned to marry and fell headfirst into the riptide of Lucas Wheeler in the flesh. He was so...everything. Beautiful. Dynamic. Legendary. Qualities the internet couldn't possibly convey via fiberoptic lines.

"Miz Allende." Lucas raised her hand to his lips in an old-fashioned—and effective—gesture. And set off a whole different sort of lurch, this time someplace lower. *No, no, no.* Attraction was not acceptable. Attraction unsettled her, and when she was unsettled, she came out with swords drawn.

"Wheeler." She snatched her hand from his in a hurry. "I don't believe I've ever met anyone who so closely resembles a Ken doll."

His mother, bless her, chatted with someone else and thankfully didn't hear Cia's mouth working faster than her brain. Social niceties weren't her forte, especially when it came to men. How had she fooled herself into believing she could do this?

Lucas didn't blink. Instead, he swept her from head to toe with a slow, searching glance that teased a hot flush along her skin. With an amused arch to one brow, he said, "Lucky for me I've got one up on Ken. I bend all sorts of ways."

Her breath gushed out in a flustered half laugh. She did not want to like him. Or to find him even remotely attractive. She'd picked him precisely because she assumed she wouldn't. As best as she could tell from the articles she'd read, he was like the Casanovas she'd dated in college, pretty and shallow.

Lucas was nothing but a good-time guy who happened to be the answer to saving hundreds of women's lives. This marriage would help so many people, and just in case that wasn't enough of a reason for him to agree to her deal, she'd come armed with extra incentives.

That reassuring thought smoothed out the ragged hitch to her exhale. Refocusing, she pasted on a smile. His return smile bolstered her confidence. Her business with Lucas Wheeler was exactly that—business. And if she knew anything, it was business. If only her hands would stop shaking. "To be fair, you do look better in a suit than Ken."

"Now, I'd swear that sounded like a compliment." He leaned in a little and cocked his head. "If our parents knew each other, how is it we've never met?"

His whiskey-drenched voice stroked every word with a lazy Texas drawl that brought to mind cowboys, long, hard rides in the saddle and heat. She met his smoky blue eyes squarely and locked her knees. "I don't get out much."

"Do you dance?" He nodded to the crowded square of teak hardwood, where guests swayed and flowed to the beat of the jazz ensemble playing on a raised stage.

"Not in public."

Something fluttered across his face, and she had the impression he'd spun a private-dance scenario through his head. Lips pursed, he asked, "Are you sure we haven't met before?"

"Positive."

And Cia wished circumstances had conspired differently to continue their mutual lack of acquaintance. Men like Lucas—expert at getting under a woman's skin right before they called it quits—were hazardous to someone who couldn't keep her heart out of it, no matter what she promised herself.

But she'd make any sacrifice necessary to open a new women's shelter and see her mother's vision realized. Even marrying this man who radiated sensuality like a vodka commercial laced with an aphrodisiac. "We're only meeting now because I have a proposition for you."

A slow, lethal smile spilled across his face. "I like propositions."

Her spine tingled, and that smile instantly became the thing she liked least about Lucas Wheeler. It was too dangerous, and he didn't hesitate to wield it. *Dios*, did she detest being disconcerted. Especially by a man she hoped to marry platonically. "It's not that kind of proposition. Not even close. I cannot stress enough how far removed it is from what that look in your eye says you assume."

"Now I'm either really interested or really not interested." Smoothly, he tapped his lips with a square-cut nail and sidled closer, invading her space and enveloping her with his woodsy, masculine scent. "I can't decide which."

The man had the full package, no question. Women didn't throw themselves at his feet on a regular basis because he played a mean hand of Texas hold 'em.

"You're interested," she told him and stepped back a healthy foot. He couldn't afford not to be, according to her meticulous research. She'd sifted through dozens of potential marriage candidates and vetted them all through her best friend, Courtney, before settling on this one.

Of course, she hadn't counted on him somehow hitting spin cycle on her brain.

"So," she continued, "I'll get right to it. Hundreds of women suffer daily from domestic abuse, and my goal is to help them escape to a place where they can build new lives apart from the men using them for punching bags. The shelters in this area are packed to the brim, and we need another one. A big one. An expensive one. That's where you come in."

They'd already taken in more bodies than the existing shelter could hold, and it was only a matter of time before the occupancy violation became known. Lucas Wheeler was going to change the future.

A shutter dropped over Lucas's expression, and he shook his head. "My money is not subject to discussion. You're barking up the wrong sugar daddy."

"I don't want your money. I have my own. I just have to get my hands on it so I can build the shelter my way, without any benefactors, investors or loans."

She flinched a little at her tone. *What about this man brought out her claws?*

"Well, darlin'. Sounds like I'm unnecessary, then. If you decide to go in the other direction with your proposition, feel free to look me up." Lucas edged away, right into the sights of a svelte socialite in a glittery, painted-on dress, who'd clearly been waiting for the most eligible male in the place to reject her competition.

"I'm not finished." Cia crossed her arms and followed him, shooting a well-placed glare at Ms. Socialite. She wisely retreated to the bar. "The money is tied up in my trust fund. In order to untie it, I have to turn thirty-five, which is nearly a decade away. Or get married. If my husband files for divorce, as long as the marriage lasts at least six months, the money's mine. You're necessary since I'd like you to be that husband."

Lucas chuckled darkly and, to his credit, didn't flinch. "Why is every woman obsessed with money and marriage? I'm actually disappointed you're exactly like everyone else."

"I'm nothing like everyone else." Other women tried to keep husbands. She wanted to get rid of one as soon as possible, guaranteeing she controlled the situation, not the other way around. Getting rid of things before they sank barbs into her heart was the only way to fly. "The difference here is you need me as much as I need you. The question is can you admit it?"

He rolled his eyes, turning them a hundred different shades of blue. "That's a new angle. I'm dying to hear this one."

"Sold any big-ticket properties lately, Wheeler?"

Instantly, he stiffened underneath his custom-made suit, stretching it across his shoulders, and she hated that she noticed. He was well built. So what? She had absolute control of her hormones, unlike his usual female companions. His full package wasn't going to work on her.

"What's real estate got to do with your trust fund?"

She shrugged. "You're in a bit of a fix. You need to shore up your reputation. I need a divorce. We can help each other, and I'll make it well worth your while."

No other single male in the entire state fit her qualifications, and, honestly, she didn't have the nerve to approach another stranger. She scared off men pretty quickly, which saved her a lot of heartache, but left her with zero experience in working her feminine wiles. That meant she had to offer something her future husband couldn't refuse.

"Hold up, sweetheart." Lucas signaled a waiter, snagged two drinks from the gilded tray and jerked his head. "You've got my attention. For about another minute. Let's take this outside. I have a sudden desire for fresh air. And double-plated armor for that shotgun you just stuck between my ribs."

Lucas could almost feel the bite of that shotgun as he turned and deftly sidestepped through the crowd.

His brother, Matthew, worked a couple of local businessmen, no doubt on the lookout for a possible new client, and glanced up as Lucas passed. The smarmy grin on Matthew's face said volumes about Lucas's

direction and the woman with him.

Lucas grinned back. Had to keep up appearances, after all. A hard and fast quickie on the shadowed balcony did smack of his usual style, but it was the furthest thing from his mind.

The gorgeous—and nutty—crusader with the intriguing curtain of dark hair followed him to the terrace at the back of the club. By the time he'd set down the pair of drinks, she'd already sailed through the door without waiting for him to open it.

Lucas sighed and retrieved the glasses, seriously considering downing both before joining the Spanish curveball on the balcony. But his mama had raised him better than that.

"Drink?" He offered one to Cia, and surprise, surprise, she took it.

Twenty-five stories below, a siren cut through the muted sounds of downtown Dallas, and cool March air kissed the back of his hot neck. If nothing else, he'd escaped the stuffy ballroom. But he had a hunch he'd left behind the piranhas in favor of something with much sharper teeth.

"Thanks. Much better than the frilly concoction I got last round." She sipped the bourbon and earned a couple of points with him. "So. Now that I have your attention, listen carefully. This is strictly a business deal I'm offering. We get married in name only, and in six months, you file for divorce. That's it. Six months is plenty of time to rebuild your reputation, and I get access to my trust fund afterward."

Reputation. If only he could laugh and say he didn't care what other people thought of him.

But he was a Wheeler. His great-great-grandfather had founded Wheeler Family Partners over a century ago and almost single-handedly shaped the early north Texas landscape. Tradition, family and commerce were synonymous with the Wheeler name. Nothing else mattered.

"You're joking, right?" He snorted as a bead of sweat slid between his shoulder blades. "My reputation is fine. I'm not hard up for a magic wand, thanks."

The little bundle of contradictions in the unrevealing, yet oddly compelling, dress peered up steadily through sooty lashes. "Really, Wheeler? You're gonna play that card? If this fake marriage is going to work, know this. I don't kowtow to the Y chromosome. I won't hesitate to tell you how it is or how it's going to be. Last, and not least, I do my research. You lost the contract on the Rose building yesterday, so don't pretend your clients aren't quietly choosing to do business with another firm where the partners keep their pants zipped. Pick a different card."

"I didn't know she was married."

Brilliant, Wheeler. Astound her with some more excuses. Better yet, tell her how great Lana had been because she only called occasionally, suggested low-key, out-of-the-way places to eat and never angled to stay overnight. In hindsight, he'd been a class A idiot to miss the signs.

"But she was. I'm offering you some breathing room. A chance to put distance and time between you and the scandal, with a nice, stable wife who will go away in six months. I insist on a prenup. I'm not asking you to sleep with me. I'm not even asking you to like me. Just sign a piece of paper and sign another one in six months."

Breathing room. Funny. He'd never been less able to breathe than right now. His temple started throbbing to the muted beat of the music playing on the other side of the glass.

Even a fake marriage would have ripples, and no way could it be as easy as a couple of signatures. Mama would have a coronary if he so much as breathed the word *divorce* after giving her a daughter-in-law. She'd dang near landed in the hospital after her first daughter-in-law died, even though Amber and Matthew had barely been married a year.

A divorce would set his gray-sheep status in stone, and he'd been killing himself to reverse the effects of his monumental lapse in judgment with Lana. Why eliminate what little progress he'd achieved so far?

The other temple throbbed. "Darlin', you're not my type. Conquistador Barbie just doesn't do it for me."

The withering scowl she leveled at him almost pared back his skin. "That's the beauty of this deal. There's no chance of being tempted to turn this physical. No messy ties. It's a business agreement between respected associates with a finite term. I can't believe you're balking at this opportunity."

Users Review

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