



*Sharon*  
**KENDRICK**

THE GREEK'S  
MARRIAGE BARGAIN

**Sharon Kendrik**  
**The Greek's Marriage Bargain**

Renewing their vows?

Xenon Kanellis is not a man who fails, and certainly not a man who gets divorced. Now with the perfect opportunity to get his wife back where she belongs—on his arm and in his bed—his immaculate record will be restored.

Lexi Kanellis needs her estranged husband's help...even if that means playing the good Greek wife for a few more weeks. The island sun is no match for the reignited heat between them, but no amount of passion can erase the memory of what tore them apart....

"I'm waiting, Lex," came the sound of his impatient voice in her ear.

"You know that I don't want to do it," she said. "And I'm asking you to reconsider."

"Ochi. Can't be done. You will do what I want you to do."

"You're a ruthless man, Xenon Kanellis."

"Insult me all you like," he said. "But my heart will not be swayed by your pleas."

"You have no heart!"

"Then waste no more of my time with your futile protestations. Give me your answer, Lex—is it yes or no?"

There was a pause while she tried to fight it, but she realized she had no choice. "Yes," she breathed reluctantly.

"Good."

[Dear Reader,](#)

One hundred. Doesn't matter how many times I say it, I still

can't believe that's how many books I've written. It's a fabulous feeling but more fabulous still is the news that Mills & Boon are issuing *every single one* of my backlist as digital titles. Wow. I can't wait to share all my stories with you - which are as vivid to me now as when I wrote them.

There's **BOUGHT FOR HER HUSBAND**, with its outrageously macho Greek hero and **A SCANDAL, A SECRET AND A BABY** featuring a very sexy Tuscan. **THE SHEIKH'S HEIR** proved so popular with readers that it spent two weeks on the *USA Today* charts and...well, I could go on, but I'll leave you to discover them for yourselves.

I remember the first line of my very first book: "So you've come to Australia looking for a husband?" Actually, the heroine had gone to Australia to escape men, but guess what? She found a husband all the same! The man who inspired that book rang me up recently and when I told him I was beginning my 100<sup>th</sup> story and couldn't decide what to write, he said, "Why don't you go back to where it all started?"

So I did. And that's how **A ROYAL VOW OF CONVENIENCE** was born. It opens in beautiful Queensland and moves to England and New York. It's about a runaway princess and the enigmatic billionaire who is infuriated by her, yet who winds up rescuing her. But then, she goes and rescues him... Wouldn't you know it?

I'll end by saying how very grateful I am to have a career I love, and to thank each and every one of you who has supported

me along the way. You really are very dear readers.

Love,

Sharon xxx

**Mills & Boon are proud to present a thrilling digital collection of all Sharon Kendrick's novels and novellas for us to celebrate the publication of her amazing and awesome 100th book! Sharon is known worldwide for her likeable, spirited heroines and her gorgeous, utterly masculine heroes.**

**SHARON KENDRICK** once won a national writing competition, describing her ideal date: being flown to an exotic island by a gorgeous and powerful man. Little did she realise that she'd just wandered into her dream job! Today she writes for Mills & Boon, featuring her often stubborn but always to-die-for heroes and the women who bring them to their knees. She believes that the best books are those you never want to end. Just like life...

The Greek's Marriage Bargain

Sharon Kendrick



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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

WHY HADN'T SHE been paying attention?

Why hadn't she registered the horribly familiar sound of footsteps on gravel?

If Lexi hadn't been thinking about silver earrings—the type which caught the light when you moved—she might have ignored the sharp ring on the bell. As it was, she was completely distracted when she pulled open the door to see the towering form of her estranged husband standing there, sunlight glinting off his ebony hair.

His stance was fixed and immovable. He seemed to absorb all the light which surrounded him, like a piece of blotting paper drinking up a dark spill of ink.

Lexi's heart contracted with pain. The last time she'd seen him he'd been knotting his tie with fingers which had been trembling with rage. A blue tie, she recalled—which had matched his eyes perfectly.

His gaze licked over her now like a cobalt flame. She got the feeling he was undressing her with that gaze. Was he? Didn't he once tell her that whenever a man looked at a woman he was imagining what it might be like to make love to her? And she had listened to him of course, because Xenon had been the expert when it came to sex and she had not. Her heart began to thump heavily in her chest.

Why was he here?

She wished she'd had time to brush her hair. She wasn't trying to impress him, but even so—a woman still had her pride. She thought he looked shocked. As shocked as she felt—though

she suspected his momentary loss of composure was for very different reasons. She knew she looked nothing like the woman he had married. The gilded creature who had gazed up at him from behind a misty veil of tulle was nothing but a distant memory. These days she wore the same clothes as other women. She did the same things as other women. No more couture and fast cars. Her hand strayed up to push an errant strand of hair behind her ear. No more expensive trips to the hair salon either.

While he, of course, looked exactly the same.

Six feet two and eyes of blue. Xenon Kanellis. An olive-skinned powerhouse of a man and a legend in his native Greece. A man with a face of dark and rugged beauty. And a man she had never wanted to see again.

‘X-Xenon,’ she said, her voice stumbling over a word she hadn’t said in a long time.

‘Thank heavens for that.’ He gave the sardonic smile she knew so well. ‘For a moment back then I thought you’d forgotten me.’

Lexi almost laughed because the suggestion was so ludicrous. Forget him? It would be easier to forget her own name. True, he wasn’t on her mind 24/7 the way he used to be when they’d first split. Before she had decided to take herself in hand. She’d known she would never recover if she continued to obsess about him. The stern talking-to she’d given herself had carried her through the worst. It got her through those bleak, dark days when she had missed him so much that it had felt as if someone had ripped her heart out and crushed it.

But she had recovered because people always recovered, even if at the time they never thought they would. And she had survived worse things than a marriage which should never have happened in the first place.

‘You’re not an easy man to forget, Xenon,’ she said, and then added as an afterthought, ‘More’s the pity.’

He laughed then but it sounded strange. Maybe she just wasn’t used to the sound of male laughter any more. Or the sight of a man—any man—turning up on the doorstep of her cottage and staring at her with such a disturbing sense of entitlement.

His blue eyes bored into her. ‘Aren’t you going to invite me in?’

Something about his demeanour was unsettling and Lexi felt a flicker of foreboding. ‘Is there any point?’

‘You’re not even a bit curious to discover why I’m here?’ He gaze moved over her shoulder, to glance into the cosy interior of her cottage. ‘Why I’ve driven all the way down from London to this godforsaken little place you’ve chosen to live in?’

‘I imagine it must be for your benefit and yours alone,’ she answered. ‘And if that’s the case, then I’m not interested. I’ve got nothing to say to you that hasn’t already been said.’

‘I wouldn’t speak too soon if I were you, Lex.’

‘Veiled threats won’t work, Xenon.’ She gave him a tight smile. ‘Time after time you’ve refused to give me a divorce and we seem to have reached a stalemate. So unless you’ve got the papers with you, it’s going to have to be hello and goodbye. I’m sorry if you’ve

had a wasted journey but...’

She began to close the door on him but was stopped by his frankly outrageous action of inserting one soft Italian shoe into the narrowing space. For a moment she actually thought about pushing all her weight against it but Lexi knew there was no point in trying. She was strong for a woman, but he was built like an ox. She remembered the first time he’d picked her up and carried her effortlessly to bed. How she had purred her pleasure out loud. Lexi shuddered at the memory. How could she even have been that woman?

‘I don’t need your strong-arm tactics,’ she said.

‘Tough.’

His eyes met hers and Lexi knew this was one battle she wasn’t going to win. ‘Then I suppose you’d better come in,’ she said ungraciously. ‘Perhaps you’d like to beat your chest like an ape while you’re at it?’

‘I might,’ he agreed. ‘I know how much that macho stuff turns you on.’

Don’t rise to it, she told herself even though she could tell from the cool smile on his face that he seemed to be enjoying this. But then Xenon thrived on battle, didn’t he? He liked the frisson and the taste of triumph. That was one of the reasons for his global success and his boardroom victories.

Over his shoulder, she could see his gleaming limousine parked awkwardly at the bottom of the tiny lane. It couldn’t have been more in-your-face if it had tried and she hoped none of

her neighbours were home. She had tired of the fame which had once been hers and had done her best to leave it all behind. She worked hard at being normal. She'd spent time blending into her local community, trying to prove that she was just like everyone else. The last thing she wanted was for Xenon Kanellis to come along and blow all her efforts with one ostentatious display of wealth. 'You're taking up a lot of space with that gas-guzzling piece of machinery.'

'You want me to ask my driver to move it?' He raised his eyebrows. 'I could send her away for a couple of hours, if you like.'

Stupidly, one word registered above all the others. A word which echoed annoyingly in her head. 'You have a female driver?' she questioned, unprepared for the flash of primitive jealousy which shot through her.

'Why not?' He shrugged. 'Weren't you always telling me that I should practise a little more equality?'

'Your idea of equality ended when women got the vote, Xenon. I thought you didn't like female drivers? You went on about my driving often enough.'

'That was different,' he said, shutting the door behind him and giving her a patronising smile. 'You are temperamentally unsuited to being behind the wheel of a car, Lex. Probably because of your artistic nature.'

She'd only been in his company for five minutes but already Lexi wanted to tip her head back and scream. But anger was

good, she told herself. It kept the adrenalin flowing. It stopped her thinking about the pain of the past. It stopped her from wanting him. And that was the crazy and scary thing. That she still wanted him.

‘So why are you here?’ she asked. ‘To remind me how lucky I am not to have to put up with your sexist attitude any more—or is there something else on the agenda?’

For a moment Xenon didn’t answer. Instead, he let his eyes travel over her, slowly acquainting himself with someone he’d once known better than any other woman. But the truth was that he was taken aback by her appearance.

The Lexi he’d met and fallen in love with had been a glossy pop-star. A woman with fame at her fingertips and a world who couldn’t get enough of her. Sexy Lexi the press used to call her and they hadn’t been wrong. Everyone had told him she was the last woman he should have married. That a woman like her was ill suited to a man with such fiercely traditional Greek values. Even when she had abandoned her singing career and tried to play the good wife with varying degrees of success, people had still regarded her with suspicion and subsequent events seemed to have proved them right.

Yet the Lexi who stood before him now was a low-key version of the woman who had turned heads whenever she’d walked down the street. The shiny red hair—her trademark look—had gone. She still wore it long, but now it was back to its natural colour; it hung over one shoulder in a thick plait of strawberry-

blonde. Gone were the contact lenses she was always losing and, instead, her silvery-green eyes were accentuated by a pair of dark-rimmed spectacles. He didn't think he'd ever seen her wearing glasses before and they made her look oddly serious and surprisingly sexy. The only jewellery she wore was a pair of silver earrings—heavy twists of metal which caught the light as she moved.

In faded jeans and a plain cotton shirt, her transformation couldn't have been more dramatic and it was hard to reconcile this new sober image with the glittering woman he'd married. But with Lexi, what you saw wasn't necessarily what you got. Of every woman he'd ever known—and there had been quite a few—she had depths like no other. Hidden, mercurial depths which had captivated him from the start.

'You've changed,' he said slowly.

She answered his scrutiny with a shrug, even though she could feel the inevitable sting of wounded pride. Because she had seen that look in his eyes and had known exactly what it meant. She had been judged and found wanting and even if it shouldn't hurt, it did.

If she'd known he was coming she would have put on some make-up and changed out of her old jeans. She might have disagreed with such a plan on principle, but what woman wouldn't have made an effort if she'd known she was about to come face-to-face with one of the most desirable men in the world?

‘Most people change, Xenon,’ she said. ‘It’s one of the few certainties in life.’ But she thought that, as usual, he had managed to buck the trend, because everything about him seemed exactly the same. The same thick black hair, which could never quite be tamed, no matter how expensive his barber. The same effortless elegance—easy when you had a body of muscular perfection which radiated easy power. He always wore a suit when he was in England and today was no different. His only concession to the warm summer day had been to ditch his tie and loosen the top two buttons of his shirt, but that made him look disturbingly accessible. And he wasn’t, she reminded herself. He definitely wasn’t.

She fixed him with an inquisitive look, knowing that she needed to get rid of him and as quickly as possible. ‘So are you going to tell me why you’re here?’ she said. ‘Maybe it’s my lucky day and you have got those divorce papers. Or are you still stalling?’

Xenon tensed, her flippant tone reminding him of the essential differences between them. Keep reminding yourself of those, he thought grimly. ‘I prefer to think of it as giving time for the dust to settle rather than stalling. You know my views on divorce, Lex,’ he said. ‘Half the problems in this world can be laid at the door of broken marriages.’

‘But when two people can’t live together—what’s the alternative?’ she questioned. ‘A life of misery with two people trapped in a relationship which has become a nightmare? Surely

the world has moved on from that?’

He ignored that. ‘Aren’t you going to invite me to sit down?’ His gaze flickered around the cluttered room. ‘To offer me some coffee and show me a little hospitality? Black mark for you, Lex. Have you forgotten all the things you learnt as my wife? Was all my tuition wasted?’

It was a dig at her background. She knew that. He was attacking her where she was at her most vulnerable—a position from which she could never fight back. But today she wasn’t going to take the bait because nobody could help where they came from. The only thing which mattered was the person they had become. And she had become a person who was no longer dazzled by the Greek billionaire’s arrogance or impeccable background.

‘I certainly haven’t forgotten your high-handedness and sense of privilege,’ she said coolly. ‘But since you’re clearly not going anywhere, we might as well do this with a degree of civility. Even if we both know it’s only a veneer.’

‘Oh, Lex,’ he murmured. ‘What a cynic you have become.’

‘I learnt from the very best,’ she retorted, leaving him standing in the middle of her sitting room as she went out into the kitchen to make coffee.

Her fingers were trembling as she boiled the kettle and spooned coffee into a pot. Why had he turned up now, when she’d just about got her life back on track? When she’d seen—if not exactly a light at the end of the tunnel—at least some hint

that the world didn't have to stay black and miserable for ever.

It hadn't been easy, going from being a famous pop-star to wife of a global magnate—and then back to relative obscurity again. Sometimes her life seemed to have had more transitions than a quick-change artist. The failure of her marriage had been almost unbearably painful at times, but she had come through it. She had survived.

But now it all came rushing back. The pain and the fear. The look on Xenon's face when he'd finally arrived at the hospital with eyes like stone, when she'd lost her baby. The second pregnancy she had failed to carry. When she'd discovered just how unbearably painful a late miscarriage could be. The memory was so overwhelming that for a moment Lexi had to lean over the sink, sucking in several deep breaths of air until she'd composed herself enough to go back into the sitting room.

She set the tray down. He was sitting in a chair which seemed too small for him and his brooding figure seemed to dominate the room.

'So,' she said, handing him a cup. But she didn't sit down and join him. She didn't want to do anything remotely intimate because that was fraught with danger. She perched her bottom on the window sill, thinking that looking down on him from a height might give her something of a psychological advantage.

'So,' he echoed. Pushing aside a pile of brochures which were piled up on the coffee table, he put his cup down and looked around. 'This is a bit of a fall from grace, isn't it?'

She knew it was stupid to react but, even so, Lexi couldn't stop herself from bristling with indignation. 'This is my home and I love it,' she said. 'At least I can close the door at the end of the day and know that I'll find peace inside.'

'But it is small. Surprisingly small.' He fixed his gaze on two goldfish which were swimming round and round in a bowl. Goldfish? Since when did his wife start keeping fish? He frowned. 'I realise that no alimony has been finalised—'

'And I've told you that I don't need your money!'

'Which is clearly not true if you're having to live like this.'

'I like living like this!'

'Do you? Yet you walked away from a life where you had homes all over the world—beautiful homes?'

'They were your homes, Xenon, not mine.'

'And now they tell me you are working as a jewellery designer?'

'They?' Lexi raised her eyebrows. 'No need to ask how you found that out. I suppose you hired some private investigator to spy on me.'

'I don't consider finding out a few basic facts about my wife to be "spying",' he answered. 'I'm just intrigued by the life you've chosen. You earned a fortune when you were with the band. What's happened to all the money?'

She sucked in a breath, tempted to tell him to mind his own business. Because it wasn't his business and he had no right delving into it. But Lexi knew how persistent he could be. How

he liked the facts to be laid out in front of him. If he wanted to know something he was only going to find out anyway—because when you were a man like Xenon Kanellis, you could find out pretty much anything you pleased.

‘A lot of it went on my...family.’

‘Ah, yes. Your family.’ He picked up his coffee and sipped it, wincing slightly at the weakness of the brew. Her background had added to her general unsuitability as a Kanellis wife. She came from the kind of dysfunctional family which had been completely outside his experience. Her mother had never been married and her three children had been fathered by unknown and absent men. The ramshackle, gypsy-like quality of Lexi’s home life had appalled him—but even that had not been strong enough to take the edge off his hunger for her. He had brushed aside suggestions that two people from such differing backgrounds might never find any mutual areas of compatibility and had married her anyway. ‘How are they?’

Lexi’s eyes narrowed with suspicion because there was an odd note in his voice and it was alarming her. Xenon didn’t usually enquire solicitously about her family and he certainly didn’t drive nearly two hundred miles in order to do so. In the past she might have asked him why he wanted to know—when she was still in that honeymoon phase of believing that things like that mattered. When all their dreams had been intact and lying ahead of them. But she had moved beyond that phase a long time ago and his opinions were no longer relevant.

‘They’re okay,’ she said.

‘Really?’

She met his eyes and gave a sigh of resignation. ‘Look, you’ve obviously got something on your mind—so why not just come out and say it?’

There was a pause. ‘I’ve seen your brother.’

‘My brother?’ she echoed in alarm, because this could only mean trouble. Hiding her sudden sense of fear, she composed her features into an expression of mild interest. ‘Which one?’

‘I think you know very well which one. Jason.’

Lexi’s heart was now going, thud, thud, thud. Jason. Of course. Jason who had been trouble from the moment he was born. Still she kept the tremble from her voice, trying to make her question sound as indulgent as the question of any caring sister. ‘What did he want?’

Xenon put his cup down with a small sound of exasperation, watching as her heavy-lidded eyes suddenly became hooded. ‘Let’s dispense with the air of innocence, shall we? You’re not stupid, Lexi. What do you think he wanted?’

The invisible hand which was clenched around her heart grew even tighter and Lexi knew that the time for pretence had passed. ‘Money, I’m guessing,’ she said numbly.

‘Money!’ he agreed. ‘That thing he can’t do without. The one thing he’s never bothered to earn himself throughout his useless, idle life.’

‘Please don’t insult him.’

‘Oh, come on—isn’t that taking sisterly loyalty a little too far? Since when did the truth become an insult—or have you spent so long avoiding it that you just don’t see it any more? And maybe here’s a truth you really should take on board.’ His body stilled and his eyes grew watchful. ‘Don’t you see that giving him everything he wants has helped make him the man he is today?’

Furiously, she shook her head and glared at him. Because how would someone like Xenon ever understand? Xenon who had been born into a world of lavish wealth. He hadn’t known what it was like to come home from school to an empty fridge. To have to cut a hole at the top of your shoes because you’d outgrown them.

In Xenon’s world there had been relatives—far too many of them in her opinion—and servants, who had all doted on him. He’d never had to go to the police station to bail out his drunken mother and then to lie about it to social services, terrified that the family would be split up if the truth ever emerged. He’d never had to hold a terrified and sobbing child who had woken up from yet another nightmare to discover that the real world could be infinitely worse.

‘You don’t understand,’ she said.

‘Oh, I think I do,’ he said coldly. ‘Jason has found that the well of easy money you’ve always provided has run dry—so who better to turn to than his wealthy brother-in-law?’

The thudding of her heart increased. ‘What does he want money for?’

‘Why do you think? To mop up the mess he’s made of his life with his gambling addiction.’

Lexi closed her eyes as a terrible sense of inevitability crept over her. She’d tried everything to help Jason with his gambling habit. In the early days she had sat down and talked to him and he had lied through his teeth and told her he’d quit. She’d believed every word he’d said as she’d signed over yet another cheque supposed to help put him back on the straight and narrow. Or maybe she had just wanted to believe it. Later, she had paid for the first of many visits to the rehab clinic—until he was kicked out of the last one for starting up a poker school with his fellow patients.

She opened her eyes to find Xenon studying her. ‘I expect that you told him no and sent him away,’ she said. ‘In fact, I’m rather hoping you did. The last counsellor I spoke to told me that I should “withdraw with love”.’ She saw the perplexed look on Xenon’s face as he heard the term and she remembered how disparaging he’d been about people who had sought professional help for their problems. ‘It means you have to stop giving him money and bailing him out. It’s supposed to make him take control of his own life.’

‘Actually, I didn’t send him away.’

‘You didn’t give him money?’ Her voice rose in alarm. ‘That’s what’s known in the business as “enabling”.’

‘I don’t give a damn what it’s known as!’ he bit out. ‘I’m more concerned with the consequences of his actions.’

Her fear growing by the second, Lexi blinked at him from behind her glasses. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘I’m talking about the fact that Jason has borrowed money. Lots of it. Against your name—and against mine as it happens, since we are still legally married and the Kanellis connection is like liquid gold.’ Resolutely, he ignored the horrified widening of her eyes. ‘He has built up the kind of debts which made even my eyes water—and I’m no stranger to large sums of money—’

‘How much?’ she butted in.

He told her and Lexi blanched because she didn’t have that kind of money. Not any more.

‘And the kind of people he’s borrowed it from tend to get rather...angry if they don’t get their loans back,’ he continued.

Lexi’s hand flew to her mouth. She could feel the hot rush of breath against her fingers as Xenon’s blue gaze iced into her. ‘What are we going to do?’

Xenon nodded as a grim feeling of satisfaction washed over him, because that was the first sensible thing she’d said. We. ‘It looks like I’m going to have to pay off his debt for him—’

‘But—’

‘There’s no alternative, unless you happen to have the money sitting stashed away. That is, unless you want his pretty face altered out of all recognition?’ His eyelashes suddenly narrowed, so that his eyes looked like shards of blue ice. ‘These people can be dangerous, you know.’

Lexi knew about danger. She’d grown up surrounded by it.

And hadn't that been one of the best things about her sudden fame—that she'd been able to escape from the dark and seedy side of life? The last thing she wanted was for Jason to be catapulted back to that place, where nothing seemed safe. She looked at Xenon's hard features, realising that he was offering to help. 'Thank you.'

'Don't thank me until you've heard what it entails,' he said. 'I'll pay off his debt for him—but this time, he doesn't go back to his old life and repeat the same old pattern. And neither does he go into some fancy clinic where he uses that abundance of Gibson charm to manipulate his counsellors.'

'So what are you proposing he does?' she questioned. 'Apply for a personality transplant?'

'Nothing quite so drastic. My solution is simple. He needs to change. To work his body like a man. To see the sun come up in the morning and put his head on the pillow at night, instead of spending it in the casino, like a zombie.' His eyes bored into her. 'And maybe he wants to change because he has agreed to go to work for one my cousins in Greece.'

'Are you serious?'

'On one of the family's vineyards,' he continued. 'Your darling brother has agreed to do some hard, physical labour for the first time in his life.'

She stared at him in disbelief. 'He's agreed?'

'I didn't give him very much choice in the matter,' he snapped. 'It was my condition for bailing him out.'

Lexi felt a worrying see-saw of emotions as she took in what he'd just told her. He could be so hard and indomitable that it was all too easy to forget his streak of kindness.

But he hadn't been kind when she'd most needed him to be, had he? He hadn't been there for her at all when she'd reached out for him. He had pushed her away until there had been nothing but distance left between them any more.

'So...why come here and tell me all this?' she questioned.

He gave a cold, hard smile. 'No ideas, Lex? You think I should bail out your brother just out of the goodness of my heart?'

She met the obdurate look in his eyes and a whisper of fear began to creep over her skin as she realised what lay behind his words. 'You mean...there's a price?'

'There is always a price,' he said softly. 'I would have thought you'd have learned that by now. And the price is that I want you back as my wife.'

Lexi's lips opened as if in slow motion, though no words emerged. She could feel the sudden thunder of her heart and a great rush of unexpected excitement because hadn't some rogue part of her always dreamt of just this moment? That Xenon would come back and tell her he was willing to forgive her for walking out. Willing perhaps to try again.

But even as hope flared inside her with a bright, sharp heat, she forced herself to quash it. Because their marriage could never be saved. She knew that. The past held too much sorrow and there could be no future. They might go through the motions of

reconciliation—but now a darkness lay at the heart of what they'd once had. And Xenon would never be able to tolerate it.

‘Your wife?’ she echoed.

His mouth hardened. ‘There’s no need to look so horrified,’ he said. ‘It’s purely a short-term measure.’

Lexi only just stopped herself from shuddering at her own foolishness, terrified that he would know the crazy thoughts she'd been entertaining. Did she really think that Xenon would be willing to try again? That a man that proud and powerful would be willing to forget the fact that she'd ‘humiliated’ him with her desertion.

Blankly, she stared at him. ‘But why? Why on earth would you want to resurrect our marriage?’

Xenon watched the way she lifted her shoulders in confusion and the gesture made the fabric of her shirt ride over the generous curve of her breasts. The eyes behind her glasses were the silver-green colour of eucalyptus leaves—only right now they were dark with bewilderment. And suddenly he felt a stab of lust so powerful that he could have pressed her down onto the carpet and made her come alive in his arms.

‘My sister is having her baby daughter christened and I want you beside me.’

The impact of his words was like a series of small, sharp knives aimed straight at her heart. It hurt to think of his sister managing to produce the first of the next generation. It shouldn't have done, but it did. For her to have succeeded where she herself

had failed so badly somehow seemed to bring it all back again. ‘I...I’d heard Kyra was married, of course,’ she stumbled. ‘And that she was pregnant. It just all seems to have happened so quickly.’

He gave a short laugh. ‘It was a whirlwind romance, it’s true. But you’ve been gone two years now, Lex. Or did you imagine that the world would stop turning the moment you walked out of my door?’

Lexi’s breath was coming in shallow and rapid little bursts. For a minute she actually felt faint. Concentrate on the facts, she told herself. Try to talk him out of this insanity. ‘Why would you want me there when we’re divorcing? When my attendance there would only excite gossip and comment?’ She fixed him with a look of appeal, as if from one reasonable person to another. ‘Surely you don’t want that, Xenon?’

‘It’s not just the christening,’ he said and now his voice took on a dark and sombre note. ‘My grandmother is ill. In fact, she’s very ill and they’ve brought forward the christening, even if she’s not actually well enough to attend.’

Despite everything, Lexi’s heart turned over. ‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ she said. ‘I know how much you love your grandmother. But your family won’t want me there, Xenon—especially not at such an emotional time. Your mother always thought I was the worst possible wife you could have chosen. You know that. And that kind of feeling could spoil the atmosphere and ruin the day for Kyra. What’s it going to be like if I suddenly waltz back to

Rhodes on your arm?'

'My family will do what I want them to do,' he stated flatly. 'And I want you there.'

Lexi glared. How could she have forgotten his controlling nature? His desire to make everything in the world happen the way that he wanted it to? 'You still haven't answered my question, Xenon. Why me, after everything that's happened? There must be hundreds of women who would make more suitable partners. Your little black book was certainly bursting at the seams before I came along.'

'But you were the only woman I married. And my marriage is the only thing in my life which could be considered a failure.' His eyes were steely now. They gleamed with a determination she recognised only too well. 'I don't like failure—perceived or otherwise—and it will make my grandmother happy to see us together again. She believes in marriage. At the end of her life it will please her to discover that her favourite grandson is back with his wife.'

'But that's...that's dishonest.'

'More dishonest than you promising to love and to cherish me, until death us do part? Were you remembering those vows when you walked out and broke them?'

To Lexi, this was nothing but a cold-blooded manipulation of the truth, but she bit back her objections. What was the point of trying to reason with him when he would tie her up in knots with his clever, educated arguments? She wouldn't go to pieces

in front of him. She couldn't afford to. She needed to be strong. 'I won't do it, Xenon,' she said quietly.

'But you don't have a choice. Not if you want to save your brother's skin. I suggest you think about it.' His coffee barely touched, he rose to his feet. 'I'll give you until tomorrow lunchtime to make up your mind.'

She watched him as he walked over to the door and Lexi felt like a person clinging to the edge of a cliff whose fingers were slowly slipping. Suddenly the once solid surface of her life was crumbling away and she was losing her grip.

'And if I don't?'

His smile was as cold as steel. 'Then I throw your brother to the wolves.'

## CHAPTER TWO

THE NIGHT SEEMED endless and Lexi spent most of it awake, shivering like someone with a fever although the July air was warm. Her nerves felt shot and when the first pale light of dawn began to appear, she gave up all attempts to sleep and pulled back the curtains to watch the sun rise.

But it was difficult to concentrate on anything—even the explosion of light outside her window, which normally filled her with pleasure. Seeing her estranged husband again had stirred up all kinds of feelings—feelings she'd done her best to suppress after the end to her marriage. She'd felt devastated and bereft when it had failed, even though people had done their best to reassure her. They'd said that was the way everyone felt when a

marriage ended and she knew that to some extent that was true. But Lexi's pain had been compounded by the loss of their baby.

The thought of that tiny lost scrap of life was still painful and so she got up and dressed before taking herself outside for a walk. Cutting across the fields at the back of the cottage, she walked towards the sea until she had reached the shoreline. The tide was out and it was early enough to still be deserted—with only a lone dog walker striding across the sands.

Her life had taken so many twists along the way. It hadn't turned out the way she'd expected it to—but then, whose life ever did? She had settled in this beautiful part of Devon, an existence which some might have considered dull—but Lexi revelled in the peace and quiet she'd found here after the high-octane experiences of her past.

But she still had responsibilities, no matter how much she sometimes wished she could shrug them off. She'd been a quasi mother to her two siblings. Jake was in Australia now and seemed to be forging a successful career for himself. But Jason was a different story. She'd been at her wit's end with his ongoing problems. She'd thought—hoped—that the reason she hadn't been able to get hold of him had been because he was sorting himself out. Only it seemed that his problems were much worse than she'd thought.

She bent to pick up a shell as she thought about the possibility that her little brother could be in danger and the solution which Xenon was offering.

There is always a price, he had said in that very Greek way of his. And surely the price was too high. How could she bear to spend time pretending to be his wife when barely an hour in his company had left her wanting to climb the walls?

Yet could she deny her brother this chance because she didn't have the guts to face the man she'd married? What was she so afraid of?

Him. She was afraid of Xenon and the way he made her feel. She was afraid of the things he made her want. Things she could never give him.

She put the shell in her pocket and headed for home. The breeze had whipped her hair into a wild frizz, but at least her cheeks had gained some colour by the time she got back to the cottage. She tried ringing Jason but as usual his phone was switched off and her imagination began to work overtime, and to scare her.

If she denied him this chance for selfish reasons, then wouldn't she spend her life waiting for the knock on the door? The sombre voices of the police telling her that her baby brother had been found in a ditch somewhere?

She picked up the phone and dialled Xenon's number, only to be told that he was in a meeting. But when she gave her name, the tone of the woman answering seemed to change and there was a click before Xenon himself came on the line.

'Lex?'

Still taken aback by the fact that he'd actually interrupted a

meeting to speak to her, Lexi forced herself to respond. ‘Yes, it’s me.’

‘You’ve made a decision?’

‘I have.’ She kept her voice low and her answers short—afraid she would betray some kind of emotion if she said too much. And the most stupid emotion of all was the hunger welling up inside her. The terrible aching deep in her heart, which made her long for the love they’d once shared.

Maybe it was because the telephone could sometimes play tricks with you. Speaking to someone without seeing the look in their eyes could make you feel as if nothing awful had ever happened. That you were still the same two people who would meet at the end of the day. Suddenly, it was frighteningly easy to imagine him pulling her into his arms and kissing her. Holding her tightly against his big, strong body as he’d done at the beginning. When for the first time in her life she’d felt safe.

She gave a wry smile. She should have known it was too good to be true. What was it that they said? That the honeymoon never lasted. And they were right. Because almost as soon as they had returned from their trip to Rhodes, her husband had given himself over to his real love. The work which defined him and drove him and which had made him one of the world’s most successful businessmen.

‘I’m waiting, Lex,’ came the sound of his impatient voice in her ear.

‘You know that I don’t want to do it,’ she said. ‘And I’m asking

you to reconsider.’

‘Ochi. Can’t be done. You will do what I want you to do.’

‘You’re a ruthless man, Xenon Kanellis.’

‘Insult me all you like,’ he said. ‘But my heart will not be swayed by your pleas.’

‘You have no heart!’

‘Then waste no more of my time with your futile protestations. Give me your answer, Lex—is it yes or no?’

There was a pause while she tried to fight it, but she realised she had no choice. ‘Yes,’ she breathed reluctantly.

‘Good.’

She heard the unmistakable triumph in his voice. She could imagine him sitting in the chair at his desk, swivelling it around so that he could gaze out at the London skyline. And she could have screamed.

‘We need to discuss practicalities,’ he was saying.

‘I agree.’ She drew in a deep breath because this bit was much better done on the phone, away from the calculating gleam of his eyes. ‘So let’s kick off by saying that this is not going to be a real marriage in any sense of the word. Let’s call it a masquerade, shall we? The mask I’ll wear in public won’t come off in private. Do you understand?’

‘I think it’s a consideration which can be discussed at a future date,’ he answered smoothly. ‘When can you be here? Tomorrow?’

‘Are you out of your mind?’ Lexi gripped the telephone. ‘I

can't just pack up and go! There are things I need to take care of. It may surprise you to know that I have a life here.'

There was a pause. 'Or a man? An eager lover you can't bear to leave behind?'

Lexi almost laughed at how far he was from the truth. How she would have loved to tell him that, yes, there was a man. Someone who thrilled her whenever he touched her, as Xenon had always thrilled her. But there had been no one else. Sometimes she doubted that there ever would be. 'I'm sure that your spies must have reported back to you that currently there's no man.'

'Currently?' he echoed.

'None of your damned business. One of the perks of being separated is that it means you're free to start dating.'

She heard what sounded like Xenon trying to control his angry breathing and she gave a small smile of satisfaction.

'Don't push me too hard,' he growled. 'What do you need to take care of?'

'Well, there's my goldfish, for a start. There's also my jewellery business. I may work for myself but I still have some commissions which I need to finish. When is...?' The lump which had suddenly risen out of nowhere now lodged itself deep in her throat. 'When is the christening?'

'Next week. I'll send my car for you on Friday and we'll fly out on Saturday. Make sure you're ready at noon,' he said, and cut the connection.

Lexi was left clutching the phone, her hand shaking with rage.

He was so authoritative. So used to getting what he wanted. He hadn't even given her a chance to tell him that she would drive herself up to London. Or should she just let herself be whisked away in his fancy, chauffeur-driven car—no doubt in a demonstration of how easily he could flex his power?

She drew in a deep breath, knowing that she shouldn't sweat the small stuff. She was doing this for Jason—and all she had to do was to get through it.

She spent the rest of the week finishing up her commissions and thinking about whether she should make something for Kyra's baby. It would make sense and at least it would guarantee that her gift would be unique.

Her career as a jeweller was building slowly, but surely—though at the moment it was confined mainly to locals, with the occasional holidaymaker. Learning how to make silver jewellery had been one of the best decisions she'd ever made. She'd liked the combination of the practical and the artistic and it still thrilled her every time someone liked one of her designs enough to buy one.

Just last week an old man had ordered a chunky brooch for his wife, to celebrate fifty years of marriage. He obviously enjoyed chatting and started telling Lexi all about his long-ago wedding day. She had felt herself getting emotional as his rheumy old eyes welled up with tears and she thought it made her own marital record of two years seem like a mockery.

Picking up a lump of silver, she thought again about the

new baby and, although she always steered clear of designing for infants on the grounds that it was too painful, she set to work. Because she had adored Xenon's little sister and she had felt almost guilty that the breakdown of her marriage meant that communication with her had been severed. Somehow this handmade gift for Kyra's firstborn seemed important, and significant. She worked long into the night and most of the next day too, until she had fashioned the small silver charm to her satisfaction.

On Friday, she had only just closed up her workshop and finished packing when Xenon's car arrived. Lexi tried not to be intimidated by the female driver who jumped out of the luxury limousine to open the door for her, but it wasn't easy. The wafer-thin woman who introduced herself as Charlotte certainly made her fitted uniform look sexy. Lexi started wondering if there was anything going on between her and Xenon, until she remembered his strict rule about fraternising with the staff. He'd told her it was an important lesson his father had taught him: that you should never sleep with someone you might one day have to sack.

She pushed the thought away, troubled by how much it bothered her. Because it shouldn't bother her. Xenon could sleep with who he liked. They were separated. They were getting a divorce.

She spent the journey watching as countryside morphed into city and her stomach contracted with apprehension as the car drew up outside the gleaming monolithic tower of the Kanellis

headquarters.

She gazed up at the plate-glass-and-steel building, reluctantly remembering the last time she had been here. It had been at some company ‘do’ when the cracks were already beginning to appear in their marriage.

Xenon had been tired and fractious. He’d been working away—again—and had come to the party straight from the airport. He had eyed the close-fitting cocktail dress she’d been wearing with the expression of a hungry lion being offered a piece of raw meat and had then proceeded to accuse her of flirting with another man. As if. He didn’t seem to get that no other man existed for her. She remembered him being angry in the car afterwards and then she’d been angry right back, complaining that he always made her feel like some sort of object or possession. The simmering silence in which they’d sat had grown ever-more resentful, but that hadn’t stopped him from practically ripping off her dress the moment they’d arrived home. Or her doing the same with his trousers...

Her breath already dry in her throat, Lexi reached down for her suitcase, but Charlotte must have been watching from the driver’s mirror.

‘Don’t worry about that, Mrs Kanellis. I’ll take care of your case,’ she said.

Lexi wondered if it was worth going to the trouble of explaining that she no longer used her married name, but decided not to bother. ‘Thanks very much.’ She gave the young woman a

warm smile. ‘You’re a great driver.’

But her nerves returned when she went into the building, her footsteps clicking as she made her way across the marbled foyer to the executive lift. Stroking her clammy palms down over her dress, she tried not to feel claustrophobic as she rode up towards Xenon’s penthouse office. The smoked mirrors threw back distorted images of her face and the dress she wore seemed to have leached all the colour from her skin and she suddenly felt terribly provincial. It was a long time since she had been somewhere like this, somewhere where you could almost smell the scent of money.

Xenon’s was a success story which business schools used as a template aimed at people for whom no glass ceiling was too high. Born into a wealthy Greek family, he had assumed control of the Kanellis empire after the sudden death of his father—only to discover that the family finances were failing.

Although prodigiously young, Xenon had been undaunted by the task which lay ahead of him, and the fact that the markets had crashed soon afterwards. He had quickly discovered that he possessed the gifts of financial foresight coupled with nerves of steel. He had seen the need to diversify in order to cope with the changeable economic climate and he had done this while assuming the role as head of his extended Greek family, with all the responsibilities that involved.

Through sheer hard graft and dedication, he had revitalised the family shipping line and then added a chain of luxury shops.

A newspaper and publishing house had increased the growing value of his portfolio, and during one economic downturn he had bought the rights of a screenplay written by an unknown student. It had captured the Zeitgeist of the time and *My Crazy Greek Father* had become the surprise global smash-hit of the year.

But the film had dug much deeper into the national psyche of Greece than the usual stereotypical jokes about sex before marriage and the benefits of moussaka. It had charted the rich and complex history of a beautiful and often misunderstood country. It had detailed wars and defeat. It had chronicled heartbreak and triumph—and had won a plethora of awards for it, included a much-coveted Oscar. The stardust of Hollywood had still been clinging to Xenon's skin when Lexi had met him, some years later, when she had just embarked on an ill-judged solo career.

She knew that Xenon deserved his success. She knew he had worked hard for it and that he still did. But hadn't his insatiable appetite for even more success helped drive a wedge between them? Hadn't his ambition grown so big that it had dominated their lives and left her feeling pushed out and resentful?

She had been unable to be the wife he needed, or provide the heir which his fierce Greek pride had demanded. Xenon had wanted perfection and Lexi was a long way from perfection.

The lift pinged to a halt and she walked into the outer office to find a blonde—another blonde!—she didn't recognise seated behind the large desk. Her predecessor had been there for years

and Lexi had liked the middle-aged woman who had acted as gatekeeper to the Greek billionaire. It was a little disconcerting to see this new and rather glamorous incumbent rifling through a pile of papers with her shiny pink nails.

The blonde was looking at her and smiling. ‘Mrs Kanellis?’

Once again, the words sounded shockingly wrong. Like waking up and finding you were in someone else’s body. Lexi wondered how it would go down if she blurted out that she was not really Mrs Kanellis. That she and her estranged husband hadn’t shared a bed in almost two years and that Xenon had steadfastly refused to grant her the divorce she wanted. How would the blonde react to that?

But she said none of these things. Instead, she gave the polite smile which was expected of her even if behind it she was gritting her teeth. ‘That’s right.’

‘Mr Kanellis is expecting you. He said to ask whether you would like anything to drink after your journey.’

Tempted to ask for a mild sedative, Lexi nodded. ‘A cup of tea would be great.’

‘Tea it is. I’ll bring some right in.’

A discreet buzzer sounded on the desk and Lexi watched as the blonde smoothed her hand over her already immaculate hair. And that unconscious gesture told her more than a thousand words ever could, because she’d seen it so many times before. She’d seen it with shop assistants and bar staff, with airline stewardesses and female executives. It was a mixture of adoration

and availability and it told her that Xenon could still get women adoring him, without even having to try.

‘You can go in now, Mrs Kanellis.’

‘Thanks.’ Tucking her bag under her arm, Lexi headed for the inner sanctum and walked into Xenon’s office, shutting the door behind her.

It was an impressive room. One hundred and eighty degrees of glass overlooked some of the most expensive real estate in the capital. In among the skyscrapers were dotted the roofs of famous monuments, looking so out of scale that they would have seemed more at home in a doll’s house.

But Lexi barely noticed the view. Xenon dominated that, just as he dominated everything else around him. He was seated at his desk, surveying her with the stillness of the natural predator. His black hair was tousled, as if he had been running impatient fingers through it. He’d loosened his tie—unless the smooth blonde had been responsible—revealing a glimpse of olive flesh which looked warm and inviting. It was only a little thing, but Lexi hadn’t been prepared for it. It was too intimate. It reminded her of too much. She knew that the hair began at the top of his chest and arrowed all the way down to his groin. She knew the way she used to scrape her fingernails through it and the way he used to moan in response. It was a mental picture she would have preferred not to have created and it made her cheeks grow hot.

‘Sit down,’ he said.

Her legs felt weak and she was glad to sink into the chair

opposite his. Beneath the filmy folds of her dress, she pushed her knees together, looking at the various trophies around his office. There was the Oscar carelessly standing next to a set of leather-bound books by the great Greek philosophers. On one of the walls hung the platinum disc awarded for the colossal sales of his film's soundtrack and there were several citations from various business schools. A small sculpture by a former Turner Prize winner stood next to a sofa on which he sometimes catnapped, if he was working all night. All in all, it was a very impressive room which spoke volumes about its occupant.

'So.' She looked at him with challenge in her eyes. 'Here I am.'

'Here you are,' he agreed slowly.

'Why here?' she questioned. 'I mean, why bring me to your office? So you could work right up to the last possible minute, I suppose. Or to remind me of what a successful man you are?'

'Surely you don't need reminding of that?' he mocked.

'Funnily enough, your achievements aren't the first things I think about, on waking.'

'It's neutral territory,' he said. 'Plus you know that I never like to waste time. Why wait for you at the house, when I could be doing something constructive here?'

She met the hard gleam of his blue eyes. 'So work still rules, does it?' she questioned. 'You're still that man who can never say no to earning an extra dollar even though you've got the kind of wealth which could probably bankroll the economy of a small country.'

For a moment Xenon didn't answer. Instead, he just mused on the fact that nobody had ever spoken to him with quite the same degree of insolence as his wife. He watched as she pressed her beautiful knees together and thought she looked a damned sight more respectable today than when he had turned up announced. No. That was the wrong word. You could never use the word 'respectable' about a woman he could imagine in various states of undress, every time he looked at her.

Lexi wearing nothing but a thong as she'd walked towards their bed.

Lexi sunbathing topless during their honeymoon.

Lexi connecting with something dark and irresistible deep inside him. Something which had enchanted and infuriated him in equal measure, because she had possessed an indefinable power over him and he had resented that.

The first time he'd seen her, he had wanted to ravish her. He had wanted to blot out the rest of the world, so that it was just her and him. It was as simple and as complicated as that and he could remember the moment as if it were yesterday.

She'd recently broken up from her band to launch herself into a solo career. One of her first gigs had been at a big charity function in Bel Air and Xenon had gone along because he'd been a fan of the charity, not of her. He didn't like trashy women who flaunted their bodies and from what he'd heard and seen of The Lollipops all three women had done exactly that in order to get to the top.

With his current squeeze clinging to his arm, he had walked into the crowded ballroom with his prejudices intact and had seen a woman with bright red hair standing on the stage. He had watched her writhing around in a sequined mini-skirt and had grown hard. He couldn't ever remember feeling quite so turned on as he'd been by Lexi Gibson. It had been exquisite and captivating and so had she. His date forgotten, he had been bewitched by the pale-faced singer.

It had been more difficult than he would have imagined to facilitate a meeting with her. She'd given him the runaround and he got the feeling that she wasn't playing games. She had refused to return his calls and he had been forced to attend her concerts like some run-of-the-mill fan. He'd sent her enough flowers to open a florist's until she had sent him a short note, requesting that the flowers stop. Intrigued and entranced, he had agreed to her request, but only if she would agree to meet him for a drink first. One lousy drink, that was all it had been—but he hadn't been expecting to come away from it still feeling completely smitten. But now it seemed that the feeling had been mutual...

They'd started dating—but it turned out she didn't trust men. It had taken him three whole months to discover that she was a virgin, by which time his need to possess her had become total and complete.

He felt the sudden beat of heat at his groin because that need had never really gone away, had it? Even in the midst of all their rows, he had still wanted her. He wanted her now.

Shifting a little uncomfortably in his chair, he raised his eyebrows. ‘Your journey here was okay?’ he questioned.

‘As okay as any journey can be when you don’t particularly want to take it. And your female driver is superb.’

‘Isn’t she?’ The hint of a smile touched the edges of his mouth. ‘What about the goldfish you were so concerned about—how are they?’

She eyed him suspiciously. ‘They’re all right. They’ve moved in with one of my neighbours.’

‘And should I know their names? Just in case their welfare becomes a matter of overriding concern?’

‘Are you being sarcastic?’

‘Not at all.’ He leaned back in his chair. ‘There is so much of your life that is now a mystery to me, Lex. I think it wise to learn as much as possible about my wife before I take her home to Greece. Their names?’

‘Bubble,’ she said. ‘And Squeak.’

He frowned. ‘That’s a meal you eat in England?’

Lexi nodded. A meal that he would certainly never have tasted, that was for sure. Frankly, she was amazed that he was interested. In the past, he would never have bothered to ask for such an inconsequential detail, and even if he had she probably would have skated over it. She’d known that her background appalled him and so she’d always played it down—even if doing so made her feel slightly guilty, as if she’d been ashamed of where she’d come from. As if she’d been denying who she really was.

But there was no point in doing that now. In fact, it might even work in her favour. Wouldn't it make this ordeal easier if she reminded him of the fundamental differences between them? It would certainly make it easier for her if he didn't look at her like that—with an expression of desire in his eyes which was making her feel curiously vulnerable.

Forcing herself to concentrate, she nodded. 'That's right. Bubble and Squeak is a traditionally English peasant food,' she said. 'It's made of leftover vegetables—usually cabbage and potatoes—fried up together the next day.'

'I fail to see the connection to goldfish.'

'They're cute names. That's why.' It wasn't the whole story, of course, but she ran her thumb over her handbag before meeting his gaze with a defiant look. 'Look, I haven't come here to talk about my domestic arrangements, or my pets. I've fulfilled my part of the bargain by agreeing to this ridiculous charade of being your "wife", so how about you return the favour? Can I please see my brother before he leaves?'

He leaned back in his chair. 'I'm afraid that won't be possible.'

'Why not? Are you keeping him prisoner?'

'If only life were that simple, Lex.' He ran his thumb reflectively along the edge of his bottom lip. 'Jason is already in mainland Greece, working at one of the Kanellis vineyards. I was afraid that seeing you might make him decide to opt for an easier, softer option. It might have encouraged him to tap you for another loan and we couldn't have that.'

‘I told you that I’m no longer in a position to hand out loans,’ she said.

His eyes were curious now. ‘But don’t you miss the money?’ he asked. ‘I don’t mean the funds which were available to you as my wife, but before that. You were a very wealthy woman when we met.’

Lexi met the hard gleam of his eyes. She thought it was a funny question for him to ask now, when at the time he had resented her financial independence. He was one of those men who liked to dominate his woman in every way and that included financial. He’d told her that he preferred to buy her things, rather than having her buy them for herself. He’d said that was the man’s role: to protect and provide for his woman. It had been hard for someone like her to accept because she’d never relied on anyone but herself.

‘To be honest I don’t miss it at all,’ she said slowly. ‘I felt more like me once the bulk of the money was gone.’

‘I’m afraid you’ve lost me now.’

She met the cool question in his eyes. Why not tell him? It wasn’t as if it mattered any more. She was no longer that anxious woman who had been terrified he’d stop loving her if he saw through to the dark insecurity which gnawed away deep inside her.

‘Frugality is my default mechanism,’ she explained. ‘That’s what I grew up with. What I was used to. When you’re dirt poor it’s tough, but it has its benefits. It makes you hungry—and

hunger was what drove my ambition. It's what made me enter that TV reality show at the age of sixteen, even though everybody said I didn't have a chance of winning. But I did win. I confounded all expectations and got myself a recording contract.'

He opened his mouth to reply but at that moment his assistant tapped on the door and entered the room, depositing a tray of tea on his desk. 'Thank you, Kimberly,' he said.

Kimberly smiled and Lexi watched as she walked back out of the office with the slightly self-conscious confidence of an attractive woman who was wearing a too-tight dress.

'Has all your money gone?' he continued.

'Not all of it, no.' Without being asked or offered, Lexi leaned forward and poured herself some tea and this small element of control helped refocus her thoughts. Adding milk and stirring two heaped teaspoons of sugar into her cup, she shook her head. 'I have my own house—paid off in full—and enough investments to ensure I never starve. And I'm hoping to grow my jewellery design business so that it becomes a viable source of income.'

Xenon watched as she sat there drinking her tea, with the summer sunshine illuminating her hair so that it tumbled down around her shoulders like a pale waterfall. He thought she looked fragile and intensely feminine, yet the spectacles she wore gave her a serious and slightly geeky appearance. This was a new Lexi and he didn't know how to handle her. He gave a bitter smile as he thought about the ashes of his marriage. Maybe he had never known.

He got up from his chair. 'Come on. Let's go,' he said.

She finished her tea and put her cup down. 'Where are we going?'

'Home, of course.' An odd kind of smile lifted his mouth. 'We're going home.'

### CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS DISORIENTATING being back in the house where Xenon had once carried her giggling over the threshold. Lexi stood in the high-ceilinged hallway of the beautiful nineteenth century building and felt little beads of sweat pricking at her forehead. She knew Xenon was watching her, just as he'd been watching her during the drive from his office to his home in the classical terrace overlooking Regent's Park. She wondered if he had a clue how weird she found it being here again, after all this time. Did he realise that, behind the smile she'd managed to produce from nowhere, her heart was thudding with pain?

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