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HELEN BIANCHIN

The Greek's Bought Wife



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“What if I were to suggest adoption?” Nic spoke with a deceptive mildness. “For a mutually agreed sum.”

Tina froze, unable to utter so much as a word for several long seconds before anger ignited and threatened to explode. “You have to be joking.”

“One million dollars.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again as she found her voice. “Go to hell,” she managed.

“Two million.”

Incredulity was uppermost. She turned, only to come to a halt as her arm was caught in a firm grasp.

His eyes held hers, their expression impossible to read. “Sit down. Please,” he added with chilling softness. “There are other options.”

“I don’t see how you can top it,” Tina ventured savagely.

“Marriage.” He paused fractionally. “To me.”

Legally wed, but he’s never said...

“I love you.”

They’re...



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His Wedding-Night Heir

by Sara Craven

#2509

The Greek's Bought Wife

Helen Bianchin



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CHAPTER ONE

NIC LEANDROS eased the powerful Lexus down into the underground parking area beneath a luxurious apartment building located in Sydney's suburban Double Bay, slid into a reserved bay and cut the engine.

His cellphone rang, and he quickly checked the caller ID, uttered a husky oath, and let the call go to MessageBank.

Sabine...again. How many times had she called today? Four...five? The woman was becoming obsessive, he admitted with a wry grimace. He hadn't expected an easy end to the relationship. But how long would it take for Sabine to understand no meant precisely that?

It had been months since he'd cut the ties, politely refusing her veiled invitations until her protestations reached desperation point, whereupon he refused to take any of her calls. For the past several weeks she'd virtually stalked him, resorting to SMS text messaging several times a day and turning up wherever he happened to be...in his favoured Melbourne restaurants, at two parties and a fundraiser.

He'd issued a warning, followed it with legal action. Yet Sabine still persisted.

Nic crossed to the bank of lifts. He had no need to check the apartment number or the floor on which it was situated, for it was one of several owned by the Leandros Corporation and occupied until very recently by his young half-brother.

Sixteen years his junior, Vasili had been a much-loved addition to the Leandros family twenty-one years ago. To his father Paul, a delight, and the apple of Nicos' adored stepmother Stacey's eye.

Nic reflected on the affection they'd shared, despite the gap in their ages. Vasili's upbringing had followed an identical path to his own...strict and loving. How else could it be beneath Stacey's guiding hand?

Yet Vasili had developed a recklessness Nic had never aspired to. He'd sailed through scholastic studies, gained a degree in business management, and entered the Leandros Corporation at the bottom of the corporate ladder...as Nic had, succeeding without any seeming effort.

Vasili had remained in Sydney acquiring corporate skills, while Nic was based in the Melbourne head office, in between extensive travelling between America and Europe.

Yet their bond had remained a close one, despite the vagaries of distance.

Good-looking, fun, Vasili had had a love of life, girls, and fast cars...in that order.

Tragically, it had been the fast car—a Lamborghini—that caused Vasili's death little more than two weeks ago.

Nic had been aware of the numerous girls who sought Vasili's company, his bed, and his share of the Leandros fortune. Although Tina Matheson had been the first girl Vasili had invited to move in with him.

What Nic hadn't known was news of Tina's pregnancy. Stacey had been Vasili's only confidante in that piece of information, the day before his untimely death.

There had been no mention of it...hell, no visible sign of it as the slender auburn-haired girl had stood at Vasili's grave-side ten days ago.

Among the grief-stricken, Tina had stood apart. Cool, controlled, with a fragility he'd instinctively felt the need to ease.

Yet he'd been polite on introduction, distant as befitted the solemnity of the occasion, and had stood in silence as Stacey had issued Tina with an invitation to join the family in a private wake.

Tina's refusal had surprised him. Given the circumstances, he'd thought she'd use any advantage to further her relationship with the Leandros family.

If he was honest, he'd have admitted he wanted to see her again in less sombre surroundings, for there was some indefinable quality about her that intrigued him.

Her stance, the way she held herself aloof. The classical, fine-boned features, cream-textured skin. Eyes the colour and brilliance of emeralds, deep, unfathomable.

Untouchable, he'd reminded himself.

His half-brother's woman. The mother of Vasili's unborn child.

The existence of a Leandros grandchild had provided an element of hope for Paul and Stacey Leandros. The child of their child. A child who would share Vasili's inheritance, and take its rightful place in the Leandros family.

Both Paul and Stacey had assumed Tina would welcome their support, their help. Dammit, their unconditional affection and love.

Except Tina had politely refused Stacey's, then Paul's advances. Something that merely accelerated Stacey's grief to an insoluble level.

Now it was Nic's turn to attempt to sway Tina's decision. At any cost, Paul had determined.

Money. Sufficient of it could buy most anything, anyone, Nic decided with wry cynicism as he passed through security and rode the lift to the penthouse level. Besides which, he was a shrewd judge of character, a lauded strategist...and he had a few contingency plans.

It was simply a matter of determining the one most likely to succeed, and putting it into action.

Seconds later he crossed the marble-tiled floor to a set of ornate double doors.

Nic pressed the call button, then held it down when no one answered.

Nic wondered at Vasili's fascination with the woman carrying his child, for at twenty-seven Tina was almost six years Vasili's senior, and the only child of a widowed mother whose remarriage five years ago had resulted in a move to Noosa on Queensland's Sunshine Coast.

Tina had a record of average scholastic achievements, a love of sport, life. A flair for fashion had led to a managerial position in an up-market Double Bay boutique owned by her mother. A collection of friends, but no long-term boyfriend.

Dammit, why didn't she answer?

Impatience creased his features as he withdrew his cellphone, hit auto-dial, and queried Paul as to when the apartment had last been checked.

His father's answer brought forth a frown. The morning following Vasili's death.

Two weeks ago?

'Given the current situation,' Paul relayed, 'Stacey refuses to interfere with Tina's live-in arrangement.' His voice sharpened. 'Give me a few minutes and I'll call you back.'

Nic didn't have to wait long for Paul to relay the building manager was on his way with a master-key.

The apartment offered stunning views over the bay, but Nic took little notice of the sparkling nightscape beyond floor-to-ceiling glass as he thanked the manager and closed the door behind him. Instead he walked through the lounge, eyes alert for any signs of occupation, only to discover there was none.

Vasili's clothes hung in one of two large walk-in robes, and there was an assortment of male toiletries atop a double marble vanity unit in the master en suite.

The sight of them hurt, like a stake through the heart. Curiously more so than when he'd received the tragic call from Paul; more so even than the funeral. For now there was the visual attestation Vasili would never return to claim what was his...clothes, possessions, or the joy of holding his child.

A muscle bunched at the edge of his jaw as he crossed to the second robe, only to discover on opening the door that it was empty.

Nic moved through the apartment, checking a second bedroom, a third...and discovered both were empty. There were no clothes in either wardrobe or chest of drawers. No sign of any feminine possessions in each adjoining en suite.

A husky oath escaped from his lips.

Tina Matheson had moved out.

It was obvious Paul hadn't considered keeping tabs on her. Dammit, he'd only given the need a fleeting thought, then dismissed it, sure she'd milk the situation, eagerly taking whatever Paul and Stacey offered. Hell, even demand more in a quest to set herself up for life by virtue of the child she carried.

He checked the dining-room, the kitchen, spotted a set of keys resting on the marble bench-top and reached for them, examining each before weighing the set in one hand. Then he slid them into his jacket pocket and made a phone call.

The name Leandros garnered respect. It also opened doors to data not easily available to the general public.

Within fifteen minutes Nic had the information he needed.

It didn't take long to drive the few kilometres to a small private hotel where Tina Matheson was registered as a guest.

Locating her room took mere minutes, and when there was no answer to his knock he repeated the action, harder, more forceful than before.

He was about to give it another try when the security chain was removed, the lock disengaged, the door opened sufficiently for him to glimpse a female clutching a large bath-towel around her slender form.

Nic registered damp auburn curls piled high on her head, pale features, and a pair of brilliant emerald-green eyes.

Eyes that hardened somewhat as they ascertained his identity.

'Go away.'

The door slammed shut, and he stifled a lurid oath.

'Do that again,' he warned with dangerous silkiness, 'and I'll disregard common courtesy.'

He heard the security chain engage, then the door opened a fraction. 'I could take that as a threat and call the police.'

'Go ahead.'

'Don't tempt me.'

'Aren't you going to ask me in?'

'Not if I can help it.'

'We can have a conversation now,' Nic offered with deceptive mildness, 'in relative privacy. Or,' he paused slightly, 'I'll arrive at your place of business tomorrow and hold it there.'

There was a perceptible silence, then Nic heard the locks disengage, and the door swung open.

She was more petite than he recalled, but then she was barefoot. The bath-towel had been discarded in favour of a towelling robe.

She looked tired, and there were dark smudges beneath her eyes. The result of grief, lack of sleep...or both?

'Another Leandros emissary?' Tina took in the tall, broad male frame clothed in superb tailoring, forced herself to meet and hold those dark, almost black eyes...and felt all her protective self-defence instincts rise to the fore.

'We have been introduced.'

The voice held a faint American-inflected drawl, and she suppressed a shiver of unease. Nic and Vasili Leandros might share the same father, but as men they were as chalk to cheese.

Whereas Vasili had borne an air of insouciant youth, Nic Leandros possessed an indefinable quality that meshed ruthlessness and power...and combined it with a sexual chemistry no woman could successfully ignore.

Raging hormones had to be the reason why she felt vaguely off balance. It couldn't be the man unsettling her.

'You want to conduct this conversation on the doorstep?'

Oh, Lord. She'd just emerged from the shower. 'You'll have to wait while I get dressed.' And she shut the door in his face.

It took only minutes to step into underwear, jeans, add bra and tee shirt. She didn't bother with her hair. As for make-up...forget it.

He was there when she pulled back the front door, his tall frame seeming even more threatening than before.

Men of Nic Leandros' ilk weren't used to having doors shut in their faces, she perceived with a certain wry humour as she silently indicated he could enter.

'Thank you.' His voice was dry, and held a degree of impatience as he followed her into the suite.

Tina turned to face him, aware of the need to take control.

'Let's get this over with, shall we?'

One eyebrow rose, and his gaze remained steady. 'Dispense with polite conversation?'

She lifted a hand and smoothed back a wayward fall of hair, only to silently damn the visible indication her nerves were twisting every which way but loose.

'Why pretend civility when we have opposing agendas?' Tina queried, and saw those dark eyes harden fractionally.

'Can you blame Stacey and my father for wanting to share a part of their grandson or granddaughter's life?' he queried quietly.

'Do you think I don't know where this is leading?'

'Enlighten me.'

'Let's see.' She tilted her head and began listing probable possibilities. 'What comes next? Any minute soon you'll present several attractive reasons why I should agree to your parents' desire to assign the Leandros name to Vasili's child.' She paused and drew in a deep breath.

Nic Leandros dominated the room, his presence a compelling entity that disturbed her more than she was prepared to admit.

'If I agree, the heat will be on for it to be raised and educated according to Leandros tradition.'

'And that's a problem...because?'

He didn't get it. 'I'll lose control.'

'Any decisions made will, of course, be reached by mutual agreement.'

'Oh, please.' Tina raked his features with evident cynicism. 'Give me a break.' Her gaze speared his. 'How long will it take your parents to lodge an unfit parent complaint after the birth?' She closed her eyes, then opened them. 'Deny that's the master plan.'

A muscle tensed at the edge of his jaw. 'I doubt anything of the sort has entered Stacey's mind.'

'But it will, eventually.'

Her fierceness and her fragility were a contradiction in terms, something he found intriguing.

'When I return to work and put the babe into a day-care nursery?' She felt as if she were on a runaway train. 'Employ sitters on the rare occasion I feel the need to socialise?'

'It's my parents' intention to provide handsomely for the child's welfare.' He waited a beat. 'The ball is in your court. Name your terms.'

'And they'll be met?' She lifted a hand and ran it wearily over her hair. 'Thanks, but no, thanks.'

He'd tabled each stumbling block and had a strategy for every one of them. It was just a matter of time... 'Perhaps you'd care to elaborate why?'

'I don't see how a one-night stand qualifies the right for the child to assume its deceased father's name.' If she'd hoped to shock, she gained no visible reaction from his expression. 'Especially when I had no intention of making it my own.'

Nic's eyes became hooded. 'Vasili meant nothing to you?'

Tina took her time with the question. 'We played the boyfriend/girlfriend game.' She paused fractionally. 'It was...convenient. For each of us.' She had no obligation to relay why.

'The age difference didn't bother you?'

Her chin tilted a little and her eyes acquired a dangerous gleam. 'Are you implying Vasili was my toy boy? We were friends.'

'Yet you moved in with him.'

Explanations tended to become complicated. Yet Nic Leandros was entitled. How else would her decision make any sense?

'I sold my apartment,' Tina defended. 'I was in negotiations to buy another. Vasili suggested I move in with him instead of securing a hotel room or renting short-term.' It had seemed so logical at the time, and she'd insisted on contributing towards food and utilities.

'And shared his bed,' Nic accorded in a hateful drawl.

Her chin tilted a little, and her eyes blazed green fire. 'Once.'

Dammit, that was all it took. Once. A little too much champagne, a friendly kiss that had become more, and somehow they'd ended up in the same bed.

She dimly remembered voicing a half-hearted protest as instinctive wisdom had fought against the persuasiveness of Vasili's mouth, his hands. Then it had been too late. The sex had been less than noteworthy. Not that she'd had much experience to compare it with.

All the pent-up emotion of the past few weeks caught up with her. 'I should disillusion your mother...sorry, stepmother?' she offered the correction. 'Your father? Paint a false picture of a relationship that was only friendship?' She was on a roll, unable to stop. 'Enlighten them that the conception of their coveted grandchild was a mistake? Dammit,' she said forcefully, 'a meaningless, forgettable mistake.' She wanted to hit something, throw something. Anything to rid the impossible anger that burned within...at herself, for being so senseless.

'Obviously there were no precautions taken.'

Tina heard the words, and only just refrained from hitting the man who uttered them. 'Obviously.'

'Yet you've taken no steps to abort the foetus.'

She drew in a sharp breath and pressed a protective hand to her waist. 'No.'

Nic's eyes narrowed. 'Would you have, if my parents had been unaware of the pregnancy?'

Tina didn't hesitate. 'No.'

The insistent ring of a cellphone sounded loud in the silence of the room, and Tina watched as he withdrew the unit, checked the caller ID, and registered his irritation as he thrust the cellphone back into his jacket pocket.

'Have you eaten?'

Her eyes widened. 'Excuse me?'

'Dinner.' His voice held an element of impatience.

He was talking of food? 'I don't see that's a relevant question.'

'It's relevant if you haven't eaten.'

'Why?'

'I'm suggesting we share a meal.'

'Again...why?'

She irritated and fascinated him at the same time. She was also the first woman in a long time to refuse his invitation.

'Go change. I'll make a reservation.'

Tina closed her eyes, then opened them and shot him a fierce glare. 'Are you usually this dictatorial?'

He extracted his cellphone, and hit a speed-dial button. 'I'm known to get what I want.'

'Really?' She was singularly unimpressed. And remained so at the ease with which he secured a table.

Nic regarded her steadily. 'You want to argue with me?'

'Heaven forbid any female would dare,' Tina offered facetiously, and caught a glimpse of something that was almost humour in those dark eyes.

'You being an exception?'

'Count on it.' She glared at him, then she crossed to the door. 'I want you to leave.'

His expression remained unchanged, except there was a sense of innate power, a strength of will, evident beneath the surface.

Her gaze arrowed in on his, and didn't waver. She could feel her spine stiffen...literally. 'I don't want to share a meal with you.'

'Same destination,' Nic stated. 'Separate cars.'

'That's a persuasive ploy?'

'A compromise. It's almost seven, neither of us have eaten, and we've yet to reach a satisfactory resolution.'

'My decision is made.'

'One that concerns you. However, there's a child's life at stake. Your child.' He paused slightly. 'But indisputably also my brother's child.'

She was hungry. In the past few days she'd developed a heightened sensitivity to the smell of food. The thought of ordering a meal of her choice that she didn't need to prepare or cook was enticing. Besides, it was clear Nic Leandros wouldn't let up any time soon.

'Go wait outside while I change.'

'And have you lock the door behind me?' His expression held wry cynicism. 'Collect what clothes you need and get dressed in the en suite.'

She wanted to kill him...or at best do him physical harm. Yet it was no contest. A venue they drove to in separate cars was preferable to the intimacy of a hotel suite.

At least she'd be free to walk out of a restaurant undeterred. Whereas here it would be a different matter entirely. And, while his presence was unlikely to pose a threat, she had the distinct feeling he'd play any game by his own rules.

'There's a problem?'

Tina sent him a scathing glare. 'I'm deciding what method I should use to render you physical harm.'

His mouth quirked in silent amusement, and she bit back an attempt at childish retaliation as she crossed to the storage unit.

With quick, economical movements she collected black silk evening trousers, an emerald green silk camisole, matching jacket, and headed for the en suite.

A few minutes, minimum make-up, a vigorous brush through her hair, and she was done. When she emerged it took only seconds to step into stiletto heels, then transfer money and keys into an evening purse.

Tina was conscious of his appraisal, and deliberately arched an eyebrow. 'Shall we leave?'

They rode the lift down to the basement car park, and within minutes Tina followed Nic's black Lexus to the trendy heart of Double Bay, parked, then accompanied him into a small, intimate restaurant filled with patrons.

The maître d' greeted Nic with the obsequious fervour reserved for a favoured patron, personally escorted them to a table, saw them seated and summoned the drink steward.

Prestigious, known for its fine cuisine, and expensive, Tina acknowledged as she cast the room a casual glance.

The service was excellent, and she requested mineral water, chose a starter as a main meal, and settled back in her chair.

The steward brought their drinks, served them with deferential good humour, then retreated.

'You eat here often.' It was a statement, not a query, and Nic subjected her to a solemn appraisal.

'Whenever I'm in Sydney.'

Uh-huh. The Leandros corporation had its main base in Melbourne. Vasili's parents resided there. So did Nic, Vasili had relayed...in between business trips to New York, London, Athens and Rome.

'I imagine you'll acquaint your parents with my decision?'

He fingered the stem of his wine goblet with deliberate distraction. 'When we're done with it.'

She held his gaze. 'There is no when.'

'What if I were to suggest an alternative option?' Nic paused, then added, 'Or two.'

She took a sip of icy liquid. 'There are none.'

'Adoption,' he presented with deceptive mildness. 'For a mutually agreed sum.'

Tina froze, temporarily unable to utter so much as a word for several long seconds before anger ignited and threatened to explode. 'You have to be joking.'

'One million dollars.'

She opened her mouth, then closed it again as she found her voice. 'Go to hell,' she managed in a fierce undertone as she collected her evening purse and stood to her feet.

'Two million.'

Tina registered the calmness apparent in his voice, and barely controlled the urge to throw something at him.

'Three.'

Incredulity was uppermost. She turned, only to come to a halt as her arm was caught in a firm grasp. She directed him a vehement glare that would have felled a lesser man. 'Let me go!'

His eyes held hers, their expression impossible to read. 'Sit down. Please,' he added with chilling softness. 'There are other options.'

'I don't see how you can top it,' Tina ventured savagely.

'Marriage.' He paused fractionally. 'To me.'

For a few heart-stopping seconds she remained transfixed with shock. It took her time to find her voice. 'Are you insane?'

She picked up the glass and tossed the contents at him in a wildly spontaneous action, watching as he dodged the icy mineral water, and saw it hit his shoulder and cascade down his jacket, his shirt.

In the next instant the glass slipped from her fingers, hit the table, and slid onto the tiled floor to splinter into countless shards.

Tina was vaguely aware of the steward's presence, his concern, the removal of glass and mopping up operation. She even recalled offering an apology.

And heard Nic's drawling explanation. 'It's not often a man receives such an unusual reaction to his marriage proposal.'

She was vaguely aware of the steward's effusive congratulations, and the news took wing and spread.

Somehow she was no longer standing, but seated opposite the arrogant, ruthless man who had, she strongly suspected, stage-managed precisely this scenario.

'Retract it, and do it now,' Tina said in a fierce undertone.

'A marriage mutually convenient to both of us,' Nic continued silkily. 'It will give Vasili's child legitimacy and a legal place within the Leandros hierarchy.'

Her voice dripped ice. 'Haven't you forgotten something?'

A cameraman appeared out of nowhere and a camera flash temporarily blinded her.

'I won't be a part of it.'

'No?' Nic ventured silkily. 'Be warned, I can be your friend...or your worst nightmare.'

CHAPTER TWO

SUDDENLY it all fell into place, and Tina hated him. Truly hated him.

‘This is the ultimate manipulative manoeuvre, isn’t it?’

Everything about the evening up to this point had been a farce. The child she carried was of prime importance. The only importance.

‘A process of elimination.’ His drawled admission caused the breath to catch in her throat.

‘You thought I was a money-grubbing bitch with an eye to the main chance?’ Anger tore at her control when he didn’t answer. ‘You bastard.’ The accusation whispered silkily from her lips.

His expression didn’t change, nor did his gaze waver from her own. ‘It was a possibility I had to consider.’

Tina attempted a deep calming breath, and cursed softly when it had no effect whatsoever. ‘Should I surmise you’ve also run a routine check?’

She had nothing to hide, except one incident on record. He couldn’t have delved that far, surely?

‘Private schooling, love of sport, father killed in an accident when you were seventeen.’ He paused for a few seconds. ‘Assaulted a year later by an intruder during a home invasion.’

Tina felt the colour leach from her face as she fought to control the vivid image obliterating her vision. In an instant she was back there in her bedroom, home alone in the apartment she’d shared with her mother, waking to an unusual sound close by, scared out of her wits in the knowledge someone was in her room.

The guttural voice, the stale smell of unwashed clothing...one hard hand clamped over her mouth while the other tossed aside bedcovers and ripped the thin nightshirt from her body. She’d fought like a demon, lashing out with her feet, her hands...

Nine years had passed since that frightening night. She’d had therapy, learnt coping mechanisms and acquired combat skills.

Her determination to be a survivor not a victim had left her with an almost obsessive need for security measures, a mistrust of men...and a legacy of infrequent nightmares.

‘Assaulted, but not raped,’ Tina managed quietly. Although it had come close. Too close. He’d hurt her, broken her arm, fractured three of her ribs.

‘You were hospitalised.’

So he’d gained access to the medical report.

‘Did you also unearth a speeding ticket, a few parking violations?’ She was like a speeding train, unable to stop. ‘Run a check my taxes are paid to date?’

His steady gaze was unnerving as the silence stretched between them.

‘I’m suggesting a marriage in name only,’ Nic offered in a faintly accented drawl.

‘A sham? Separate rooms, separate lives?’

‘A mutually convenient partnership,’ he elaborated. ‘A shared social existence.’

‘Isn’t that taking familial duty and devotion just a little too far?’

‘Vasili would want his child to be well cared for...to legitimately bear the Leandros name. I can at least do that for him.’

‘Regardless of my wishes?’

‘You’ll be more than adequately compensated. Houses at home and abroad, frequent travel, jewellery, an extremely generous allowance.’

‘For which I should be duly grateful?’ If looks could kill, he’d fall dead on the spot. ‘And you?’ Tina demanded. ‘What would you get out of such a marriage?’

‘A wife, a legitimate Leandros heir, a social partner.’ He waited a beat. ‘And one very persistent woman out of my life.’

‘I very much doubt you need protection from anyone. Especially a woman!’

Tina was so impossibly angry she didn't pause to think. 'I imagine your wife would be expected to turn a blind eye to a mistress discreetly set up in an apartment somewhere?' She leaned forward and sharpened a mythical dart, just for the hell of it. 'Or does your taste run to same-sex lovers?'

She glimpsed something hard in the depths of those dark eyes, then it was gone.

'Are you done?'

Tina paid no heed to the dangerous silkiness in his voice. 'What about my needs?'

His eyes locked with hers, and she couldn't look away. 'All you have to do is ask.'

She swung her hand towards his face. Except it didn't connect.

Instead he used her momentum to pull her into his arms and silenced her by covering her mouth with his own in a kiss that tore her composure to shreds.

Nothing she'd ever experienced came close to the frankly sensual plundering he subjected her to. It was an invasion of the senses, a flagrant, devastating attempt to suppress her will.

When he released her she could barely stand, and she was hardly aware of the notes he tossed onto the table, or that he followed as she turned and walked from the restaurant.

It was impossible to ignore him, for he was there as she unlocked her Volkswagen...a funky bright yellow sedan, with a sunroof, that she'd fallen in love with on sight.

'Tomorrow,' Nic inclined as she slid in behind the wheel.

'Go to hell.' Fierce, angry, foolish words, she perceived as she fired the engine and sent the car towards the exit at a speed in excess of the marked restriction.

Nic Leandros was the most impossible man she'd ever met. If she never saw him again, it would be too soon.

A sharp horn-blast startled her, and she swore beneath her breath at her failure to notice the traffic light had changed from red to green.

Focus, Tina silently berated as she sent the car forward.

In a determined bid, she attempted to dismiss Nic Leandros from her mind.

Except it didn't work. She could still feel the pressure of his mouth on her own, the taste of him. Dammit, the sensual sweep of his tongue.

Oh, for heaven's sake! Get over it.

Nic Leandros was merely exerting male dominance in a spontaneous attempt to still her angry tirade.

Tina slept badly, and woke feeling as if she'd run a marathon. The beginnings of a headache threatened an emergence, and her stomach didn't feel as if it belonged to her at all.

Sweet tea and dry toast...or was that merely an old wives' tale?

The temptation to bury her head beneath the pillow and tell the world to go away was uppermost. Except it wasn't going to happen.

There was work...and some time during the day she had to face Nic Leandros. The hope he might go away was as unlikely to be realised as a snowfall in summer.

What time was it? She checked the digital clock and groaned. Another hour before room service would deliver breakfast.

Okay, so she could do the sweet tea, and there was probably a snack-pack of dry biscuits in the complimentary mini-bar. The day's newspaper should already be outside her door...

If her stomach decided to revolt, better sooner than later, she determined a trifle grimly.

Ten minutes later she cast the newspaper aside and took a leisurely shower, then dressed; she ate a healthy breakfast, tidied the suite, then she cast a glance at the time.

It was early, yet the need to keep occupied prompted the thought of work. Better to be at the boutique than sit twiddling her thumbs in a hotel room.

She would dust the fittings, vacuum, then check the floor stock before opening up at the usual time.

Early mornings tended to be slow, with few patrons making an appearance much before ten, when Lily reported in for the day.

With that in mind she collected her laptop, caught up her bag and went down to collect her car.

Double Bay was only a matter of kilometres distant, and she parked at the rear of the building, activated the car alarm, then crossed to the entrance out front.

Tina took great pride in the boutique with its elegant salon, beyond which lay a small back room where extra stock was stored, as well as the usual utilities.

There was a need to be in familiar surroundings, she acknowledged as she crossed the salon. To think and rationalise Nic Leandros' proposition. She'd be damned if she'd term it a proposal.

She hadn't thought of children; she definitely hadn't considered marriage.

It was the reason she socialised within the safe company of a few selected and trusted friends. Vasili used to tease that while he protected her from male predators, she protected him from female fortune hunters. A mutually satisfactory relationship.

At least it had been until that fateful night when a friendly kiss had led to more. A tenderly concerned Vasili who had suggested it was time she made the final leap to sexual intimacy with a friend for whom she held affection and trust. Add the enhancement of wine...and it had seemed so logical at the time.

Ironical that the act should result in pregnancy. Yet she wanted this child...an unexpected gift in living memory of a fun and caring young man.

Was she right in keeping the child solely hers? If Vasili were alive, they'd share parenting and the child would assume the Leandros name.

So why did she balk at Nic Leandros' proposition?

Because Vasili's half-brother was an unknown quantity. Older, ruthless...dangerous.

Yet she had to concede there were advantages. The child would have a father figure, a legal right to its heritage, grandparents, family. A stable, loving environment in which to grow.

On a personal level she'd have a steady male companion whom she could trust not to hit on her at the end of an evening.

Another plus was the knowledge Nic travelled extensively on business. A lot of the time he wouldn't be in the same city, the same country.

The vacuum hummed as she ran it over carpet and marble tiles, then she carefully smoothed a dusting cloth over shelving, polished the mirrors before standing back to admire her handiwork.

The salon held the restrained elegance of an up-market boutique, its design and fittings...so exactly right for the Double Bay location renowned for its fashionistas, the wealthy women who could indulge their expensive tastes in imported and Australian designer apparel.

Tina possessed a natural love of clothes, and had done so for as long as she could remember, mix and matching outfits as she'd dressed her dolls...Barbie, of course, in each of her guises. As a teenager, she'd helped out in her mother's boutique, proving she had a keen eye for fashion, accessories, and an instinctual flair for putting things together.

There was no hesitation in which field she'd make her career, and she'd learnt the retail clothing trade from the floor up...initially through her mother's expert tutelage, then in one of Sydney's large city stores for three years before returning to co-manage her mother's Double Bay boutique.

Until five years ago when Claire had met and married Felipe, the second love of her life, shifted base to Noosa, leased her apartment and left Tina in control.

The Double Bay social set employed a reasonably routine shopping pattern, meeting around nine-thirty for coffee, electing to begin browsing the various boutiques around ten-thirty, followed by a long lunch at one of the trendy restaurants, before doing the air-kiss thing and departing for homes cleaned by professionals.

Lily arrived promptly at ten, almost bursting into the boutique, modifying her excitement as Tina finished dealing with a patron who'd bought the entire outfit displayed in the front window... including shoes and handbag.

A folded newspaper was placed onto the glass-topped island counter.

'Have you seen this?' Lily demanded, sotto voce, following it with an irrepressible grin.

Tina glanced at the newsprint and felt the breath catch in her throat. Strategically placed centre page was a reasonably sized photograph taken the previous night at the restaurant, together with a bold caption speculating a date for Nic Leandros' forthcoming marriage to Tina Matheson.

'How come you kept this to yourself?' Lily teased. 'Give.'

The truth was a credibility stretch...even for a friend. 'It represents a gross misinterpretation by the media.' Initiated by a determined manipulative man, Tina added silently, and met Lily's speculative gaze.

'That's all you're going to say?'

'For now.'

The electronic door buzzer provided a timely interruption, and she turned to discover the courier delivery guy with a packing box.

'Where do you want this?'

Three patrons entered the boutique, one serious buyer, Tina judged, and two browsers idly riffling through the racks.

With a quick word she excused herself and crossed to the courier's side. 'Out back.' She silently signalled Lily to take over while she checked the invoice.

Minutes later the courier clipped the signed invoice onto his clipboard and departed, leaving Tina to cross to the two women checking out a garment, whereupon she offered assistance, complimenting the designer, the fabric and style.

Another sale, followed soon after by another, adding to a productive morning, Tina reflected as she took a moment to complete the unpacking of new stock.

'Oh, my.'

The hushed tone in Lily's voice had Tina shooting a glance in her direction. 'As in?'

'Serious eye candy about to walk through the door.'

Male, Tina deduced. An attractive husband intent on buying his wife an expensive gift? She didn't bother glancing up. 'Go for it.'

'I wish.'

Lily's reverence brought forth a slight smile. Lily was equally friend as valued employee, and considered herself to be a connoisseur of men.

'However, he's yours.'

Tina's gaze shifted to the salon entrance and the breath caught in her throat in recognition of the man engaging Lily in conversation.

Nic Leandros...here?

If he thought she'd walk over to him and play pretend in Lily's presence, he could think again.

With outward calm Tina extracted the last garment from the box, deftly inserted a clothes hanger and transferred it onto a rack so it could air for a while. After lunch she'd freshen today's delivery with the steam-iron before transferring the garments onto display racks in the salon.

She was acutely aware of the muted background music whispering through strategically placed speakers, creating a relaxed ambience that was reflected in the elegant combination of delicately blended cream, wheat and beige utilised in the furnishings. A luxurious setting to display the exclusive range of designer garments for which the boutique was known.

'Tina.'

It was a voice she'd recognise anywhere. It was also one she didn't want to hear. Yet good manners forced her to school her features into a polite mask as she turned to face Nic Leandros.

Her gaze was silently challenging. 'Is there something I can help you with?' Cool...she could do cool, despite the fact her nervous system was in direct conflict. It was insane the way one glance at that well-shaped, sensual mouth brought a vivid recall of how it had felt possessing her own.

'Lunch,' Nic informed her with deceptive calm. 'Your assistant is happy to take charge for an hour.'

He really was the limit! 'I already have plans.' She didn't, but he wasn't to know that.

'Change them.'

'Why should I do that?'

'We can discuss arrangements here,' he informed steadily. 'Or over lunch. Choose.'

The electronic door buzzer sounded, signalling the arrival of a client.

'This is neither the time nor the place,' Tina protested quietly, silently hating him for placing her in such an invidious position. She made an instant decision. 'Give me five minutes.'

She made it in four, spoke briefly to Lily, preceded him from the boutique, and waited until they reached the pavement before demanding, 'What do you want?' She kept her voice low, but her pent-up anger was an audible force.

'To continue the discussion you walked out on last night.'

His drawled tone held a steely quality she chose to ignore. 'You're giving me a choice?'

There were a few trendy cafés and restaurants dotting the street, and Nic indicated one close by. She wanted to turn and retrace her steps, and almost did. Except he'd probably follow.

Within seconds he caught a waiter's attention, sought a table, and waited until they were seated before venturing, 'It's possible the media will make contact with you at some stage this afternoon.'

Tina was unable to prevent a cynical element tinging her voice. 'For this I need your help?'

Nic's gaze remained steady. 'Regarding my statement announcing our imminent marriage.'

A waitress crossed to their table and stood with pen and pad poised as Nic placed an order for two.

'I may not want the chicken Caesar salad,' Tina stated, and fixed Nic a deliberate glare before turning towards the waitress. 'Don't you just hate it when a man thinks he knows a woman's mind?' A double-edged query, if ever there was one.

The waitress, having undoubtedly witnessed the behaviour of numerous patrons during her employment, merely flicked Tina a glance that clearly queried Tina's sanity.

What woman wouldn't give her eye-teeth to have a man of Nic Leandros' ilk appear so...in control?

Damn. She liked Caesar salad. 'Make mine spinach and fetta tortellini with the mushroom and bacon sauce.'

Tina met Nic's hooded gaze. 'We can argue this back and forth for ever.' She wanted to hit him...or, failing that, go several rounds in verbal battle. 'Give me one good reason why I should agree to marry you, aside from being pregnant with Vasili's child.'

He regarded her thoughtfully. 'Protection.' He could promise her that. 'Loyalty. Trust,' he endorsed quietly.

Sans love or fidelity.

Get real, a silent voice taunted. Neither love nor fidelity enter the equation. Nor do you want them to. So why even go there?

'And the child? You intend claiming it as your own?'

Nic's eyes narrowed. 'Foster the illusion I'm the child's biological father?'

Her chin tilted a little. 'Yes.'

'I will delight in my wife's pregnancy, and initiate adoption proceedings immediately following the birth.'

Ensuring the legalities were neatly taken care of.

'You avoided answering the question.'

'The child will be born a legitimate Leandros, with two parents.' His eyes speared hers. 'No one, apart from Paul and Stacey, need know personal details.'

'And Claire.' Dear heaven, she had yet to enlighten her mother of the pregnancy. She eyeballed the man seated opposite. 'I won't keep the truth from her.'

'I wasn't going to suggest you do.'

There were a few other conditions she needed to voice, and she paused as the waitress presented their meals.

'Claire's boutique is my responsibility,' Tina insisted as soon as the waitress was out of earshot. 'Don't expect me to give up work and assume a social butterfly persona.'

'No objection, with one proviso.' Dark eyes lanced her own. 'Unless the medics advise otherwise.'

She wanted to argue, and her eyes darkened to a deep emerald-green. Something that fascinated him. She was fire and ice, and a complex mix of strength and vulnerability.

'I want a prenuptial agreement protecting my interests.'

That was his criterion, surely? 'Anything else?'

'What if either one of us chose to file for divorce?'

'I doubt the possibility will occur.'

'But if it does?' Tina persisted, and met his hard, level look.

'Be aware I'd fight you in court to assume full custody of the child.'

'You'd never get it,' she said with certainty. 'The courts generally favour the mother, especially when the male parent is not even the child's biological father.'

One eyebrow arched in silent cynicism. 'You doubt my ability to prove a case against you?'

A chill shiver feathered its way down her spine. Nic Leandros had both wealth and power in his favour. Sufficient of both to employ the finest legal brains in the country.

'No.' She paused imperceptibly. 'But don't underestimate my determination to oppose you.'

Brave words from a brave woman. He selected his cutlery and indicated she should do the same. 'Let's eat, shall we?'

The tortellini looked and smelt delicious, but Tina's appetite had gone on strike. Instead, she cast an envious glance at the crisp cos lettuce in Nic's bowl, the croutons and sliced chicken, the delicate sauce...and caught the faintly humorous twist at the edge of his mouth.

Without a word he signalled the waitress, ordered another chicken Caesar salad, and met Tina's glare with equanimity.

'What do you think you're doing?'

'Ensuring you have what you'd prefer to eat.'

Her glare intensified. 'And you know this because?'

One eyebrow rose. 'Can I look forward to a battle-field with every meal we share?'

'Count on it if you intend overriding every choice I make!'

Nevertheless the Caesar salad, when it arrived, was too tempting to resist, and she ate in silence while steadfastly ignoring the man seated opposite.

'No polite conversation?'

Tina offered him a level glance. 'I was trying to avoid indigestion.'

His soft laughter surprised her, and her eyes widened fractionally as she caught a gleam of humour in those dark eyes.

'Our relationship will be an interesting one.'

His drawled observation attacked her equilibrium, and she fought to retain it. 'A qualification... I've yet to agree.'

'But you will.'

'Why so sure?'

'Because in your heart you know Vasili would see our liaison as an ideal solution.'

It didn't help Nic Leandros was right. 'Together with your assurance the alternative isn't something I'd want to contemplate?'

He took his time. 'Precisely.'

Tina wanted to throw something at him, and almost did. 'I don't like threats.'

'Believe it's a statement of fact.'

The icy certainty in his voice was a vivid reminder she didn't stand a chance against the wealth and influence of the Leandros family.

This...marriage, Tina qualified, was merely a business arrangement, with advantages for her, a child who surely deserved a stable upbringing...as opposed to a tug-of-war custody battle.

She didn't want to give in. Especially to this man, whose powerful presence disturbed her more than she was prepared to admit.

Yet a marriage based on mutual convenience among the wealthy wasn't so unusual. It forged a legal partnership, built wealth and provided heirs. A beneficial arrangement, legally documented and containing clearly defined boundaries.

'I want everything in writing.' She rose to her feet and sent him a long direct look. 'Subject to my legal advisor's perusal and approval.'

Nic followed her actions, extracted notes from his wallet and tossed them on the table. 'The document will be delivered to you by courier late this afternoon. A copy of which will be despatched to your lawyer.' He waited a beat. 'Whose name is?'

Tina gave it, and battled the apprehension curling deep inside.

An instinctive omen? Don't be ridiculous, she silently derided as she made her way out of the restaurant. This isn't personal...it's business.

She paused as she reached the pavement. 'We'll be in touch.' Then she turned and walked away from him without so much as a backwards glance.

Outward composure, when inwardly her nerves were threatened to shred into a tangled mess.

Lily could barely contain her curiosity as Tina re-entered the boutique. 'Details,' Lily begged without preamble.

Truth wasn't an option, so she went with ambiguity. 'We're still working them out.'

A call from her lawyer a few hours later insisting on a personal consultation at day's end didn't surprise her. Nor, as she sat opposite him, did his cautionary advice.

He agreed, however, that each of her concerns had been adequately dealt with from a business aspect.

Tina signed, her signature was duly witnessed, and she walked out into the cool evening air, aware she'd just sealed her fate.

An hour later her cellphone rang, and she discovered Nic Leandros on the line.

'I've arranged an intimate ceremony at the weekend in my home, immediate family only.' He barely paused. 'Any further media queries, refer them to me.'

Her heart leapt into her throat. 'So soon?'

'Why delay?'

She closed her eyes, then opened them again. Because I'm not ready for this. But then it was doubtful she'd ever be ready.

CHAPTER THREE

THE following few days passed in a blur of activity as Tina dealt with everything that needed to be done.

First and foremost had been a lengthy call to her mother, together with a wedding invitation.

Work became a welcome distraction as she fielded media enquiries, perused and signed relevant paperwork, and applied considerable effort towards choosing something suitable to wear on the day.

A day that came around far too quickly for her peace of mind, and one that began with a leisurely shared breakfast with Claire and Felipe at their hotel. Followed at her mother's insistence by a pampering session, massage, lunch, facial, hair treatment...the works.

A thoughtful gesture, gifted with the intention of helping her relax and unwind, after which they returned to Claire and Felipe's hotel suite in order to change and drive to Nic's Rose Bay home.

Tina had chosen an ivory silk dress with a beautifully crafted bodice, spaghetti straps, whose skirt was a dream in layered chiffon. There was a stylish matching ivory silk jacket. Stiletto heels in matching ivory completed the outfit, and she added an emerald drop pendant and ear-studs.

A small intimate family wedding involved Stacey and Paul Leandros, Claire and Felipe, the celebrant, together with the bride and groom, and was held in the large study of Nic's elegant Rose Bay home.

A setting that added formality to the occasion as Tina stood at Nic's side.

The wide diamond-encrusted wedding ring felt strange on her finger, and she hid her surprise as Nic held out a gold band for her to slide onto his finger. Somehow it seemed an unexpected gesture, given the nature of their union.

So too was the brush of his lips to her cheek...until she registered the camera flash and realised both Stacey and Claire had taken photos.

Afterwards there was champagne, which she declined, and she sipped something light and innocuous as she stood beside the tall, immaculately suited man who was now her husband.

It was too late for second thoughts...and, heaven knew, she had plenty! Such as where was her sanity when she agreed to become Tina Leandros.

Already she was playing the pretend game. So too, she observed, was everyone else in the elegant lounge room.

Nic, because he'd achieved his objective. Stacey and Paul, for now the child of the son they'd had together would legitimately become part of the Leandros family. Claire, because she loved her daughter and wanted only for Tina to be in a caring relationship.

Claire, the eternal optimist, who undoubtedly held the hope care would develop into affection and become love.

As if that were going to happen!

'Shall we leave?' Nic suggested smoothly, and received murmurs of assent.

Dinner at an exclusive city restaurant where the façade would continue, Tina accorded. Although was it a façade? Claire and Stacey seemed to have struck up a friendship, and Felipe appeared at ease in Paul and Nic's company.

In hindsight it was a pleasant evening. The venue, the food were superb; so too was the service.

Nic had inherited his father's genes, for both men shared a similar height and breadth of shoulder. There was a camaraderie between them, an equality and evident respect.

Apparent, too, was the love Paul had for his wife. It was there in the way he smiled, the light touch of his hand, the gleaming depth in his eyes.

To an onlooker their tableau would appear a convivial gathering of three couples who were very good friends.

Which simply went to show appearances were deceptive, for who would guess the bride and groom were barely acquainted, or that until this evening each set of parents had never met?

It was late when they left the restaurant, parted with affection, and went their separate ways.

Nic unlocked the Lexus, saw Tina seated, then walked round to slide in behind the wheel. Within seconds he fired the engine and eased the car into the flow of traffic.

‘Nothing to say?’

Tina cast his profile a measured look. In the semidarkness of the car’s interior his facial features were all angles and planes.

‘I’m all talked out.’

‘That bad?’

Bad didn’t work for her, for the evening had been superficially pleasant. Except she’d been all too aware of the well-hidden undercurrents associated with the marriage and its celebration.

‘Everything was absolutely fabulous.’ She transferred her attention to the scene beyond the windscreen, focusing on the well-lit street and the cars traversing it.

‘Definitely overkill.’

Did his voice hold a tinge of humour, or was it just her imagination?

The day began to catch up with her...the trepidation, doubts, together with several nights of insufficient sleep. It became almost impossible to keep her eyes open, and after a few minutes she didn’t even try.

Tina recalled stirring, and settling into a more comfortable position...then nothing as she sank into deep, dreamless slumber.

When she woke sunlight was edging through the wooden shutters, and for a few seconds she had no idea where she was. Then memory returned, and with it the knowledge she was in a large bed in the suite Nic had allocated her in an upstairs wing of his home.

The first shock was registering the time...the next, becoming aware she’d been divested of her clothes, with the exception of bra, briefs, tights and half-slip.

Dammit, he must have carried her indoors and put her to bed.

Great. So much for personal privacy.

Shower, dress, something to eat, then she’d be out the door and on her way to Double Bay...in less than an hour. Hopefully without encountering Nic Leandros.

She almost made it. Would have if she hadn’t encountered Nic in the kitchen about to pour what was presumably his second coffee for the morning.

‘Sleep well?’

No one had the right to look so darn good at this hour. Freshly shaven, hair groomed, dark trousers, blue shirt and dark blue tie, suit jacket loosely folded over the back of a chair: Nic projected an enviable aura of power.

Tina sent him a telling look. ‘You should have woken me last night, instead of putting me to bed.’

‘You don’t believe I tried?’

‘Not hard enough.’

She hadn’t stirred once...as he’d lifted her from the car, carried her upstairs, nor when he’d laid her down onto the bed and carefully removed her shoes and outer clothes. Tiredness related to pregnancy?

He indicated the carafe. ‘Coffee?’

The aroma teased her senses, taunted her with anticipation of how it would taste, and she shook her head. ‘Can’t have caffeine.’

His gaze narrowed fractionally as he took in her pale features, the dark smudges beneath her eyes.

‘You’ll find several blends of tea in the pantry.’ He swept a hand towards the refrigerator. ‘Fix whatever you want to eat.’

'Don't have time.' Memo to self: unearth or buy an alarm clock.

His gaze sharpened. 'Make time.'

Tina rolled her eyes. 'I'll grab some fruit and yoghurt when I open the boutique.'

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