



Jennie Lucas

CHRISTMAS BABY
for the
GREEK

MILLS & BOON
MODERN

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Jennie Lucas

Christmas Baby For The Greek

«HarperCollins»

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A festive surprise... “Did you have my baby, Holly?” Facing the worst news imaginable, Stavros Minos seeks oblivion in an incredible encounter with Holly Marlowe. But a year later he discovers she’s had his child! In his mind, nothing could be more logical than legitimising his heir with a marriage this Christmas. Yet Holly disagrees! Stavros will have to break down the emotional walls he’s spent years building, if he’s to claim his bride and son...

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“Did you have my baby, Holly?”

Facing the worst news imaginable, Stavros seeks oblivion in an incredible encounter with Holly. And a year later, he discovers she’s had his child! In his mind, nothing could be more logical than legitimizing his heir with a ring.

Yet he’s stunned when Holly disagrees! Yes, he rejected her after their night together, but she deserved more than he could offer. He’s spent years building his emotional walls, he can’t possibly break them down... This Christmas, to claim his bride and son, will Stavros take the ultimate risk?

USA TODAY bestselling author **JENNIE LUCAS**’s parents owned a bookstore, so she grew up surrounded by books, dreaming about faraway lands. A fourth-generation Westerner, she went east at sixteen to boarding school on a scholarship, wandered the world, got married, then finally worked her way through college before happily returning to her hometown. A 2010 RITA® Award finalist and 2005 Golden Heart® Award winner, she lives in Idaho with her husband and children.

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Christmas Baby for the Greek

Jennie Lucas

MILLS & BOON

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MILLS & BOON

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CHAPTER ONE

WAS THERE ANYTHING worse than a wedding on Christmas Eve, with glittering lights sparkling against the snow, holly and ivy decking the halls and the scent of winter roses in the air?

If there was, Holly Marlowe couldn't think of it.

"You may now kiss the bride," the minister said, beaming between the newly married couple.

Heartbroken, Holly watched as Oliver—the boss she'd loved in devoted silence for three years—beamed back and lowered his head to kiss the bride.

Her younger sister, Nicole.

The guests in the pews looked enchanted at the couple's passionate embrace, but Holly felt sick. Fidgeting in her tight red maid-of-honor dress, she looked up at the grand stained-glass windows, then back at the nave of the old New York City church, lavishly decorated with flickering white candles and red roses.

Finally, the newly married couple pulled apart from the kiss. Snatching her bouquet back from Holly's numb fingers, the bride lifted her new husband's hand triumphantly in the air.

"Best Christmas ever!" Nicole cried.

There was a wave of adoring laughter and applause. And though Holly had always loved Christmas, striving to make it magical and full of treats each year for her little sister since their parents had died, she thought she'd hate it for the rest of her life.

No. A lump rose in Holly's throat. She couldn't think that way. She couldn't be selfish. Nicole and Oliver were in love. She should be happy for them. She forced herself to smile as the "Hallelujah" Chorus pounded from the organ in the alcove above.

Smiling, the bride and groom started back down the aisle. And Holly suddenly faced the best man. Oliver's cousin, and his boss. Which made him her boss's boss.

Stavros Minos.

Dark, tall and broad-shouldered, the powerful Greek billionaire seemed out of place in the old stone church. The very air seemed to vibrate back from him, moving to give him space. *He* hadn't been forced to wear some ridiculous outfit that made him look like a deranged Christmas lounge singer. Of course not. She looked over his sleek suit enviously. She couldn't imagine anyone forcing Stavros Minos to do anything.

Then Holly looked up, and the Greek's black eyes cut through her soul.

He glanced with sardonic amusement between her and the happy couple, as they continued to walk down the aisle to the cheers of their guests. And his cruel, sensual lips curved up at the edges, as if he knew exactly how her heart had been broken.

Holly's mouth went dry. No. No, he couldn't. No one must ever know that she'd loved Oliver. Because he wasn't just her boss now. He was her sister's husband. She had to pretend it never happened.

The truth was nothing *had* happened. She'd never said a word about her feelings to anyone, especially Oliver. The man had no idea that while working as his secretary, Holly had been secretly consumed by pathetic, unrequited love. No one had any idea. No one, it seemed, except Stavros Minos.

But it shouldn't surprise her the billionaire Greek playboy might see things no other person could. Nearly twenty years ago, as a teenager, he'd single-handedly started a tech company that now owned half the world. He was often in the news, both for his high-powered business dealings and conquests of the world's most beautiful women. Now, as organ music thundered relentlessly around them, Stavros looked at Holly with a strange knowing in his eyes.

Wordlessly, he held out his arm.

Reluctantly, Holly took it, and tried not to notice how muscled his arm was beneath his sleek black jacket. His biceps had to be bigger than her thigh! It seemed ridiculously unfair that a man so rich and powerful could also be so good-looking. It was why she'd carefully avoided looking at him whenever she'd liaised with his executive assistants—he had three of them—at work.

Shivering, she avoided looking at him again now as they followed Oliver and Nicole. The faces of the guests slid by as Holly smiled blindly at everyone in the packed wooden pews until she thought her face might crack.

Outside the old stone church, on a charming, historical lane in the Financial District, more guests waited to cheer for the couple, tossing red and white rose petals that fell against the thin blanket of snow on the ground.

The afternoon sunlight was weak and gray against the lowering clouds when Holly reached the safety of the waiting limo. Dropping Stavros's arm, she scrambled inside and turned to stare fiercely out the window, blinking fast so no one would see her tears.

She couldn't be sad. Not today. Not ever. She was happy for her sister and Oliver, happy they'd be leaving her today to start new adventures together around the world. *Happy.*

"Whew." Nicole flopped into the seat across from her in a wave of white tulle that took most of the space in the back of the limo. She grinned at her new husband beside her. "We did it! We're married!"

"Finally," Oliver drawled, all lazy charm as he looked down at his bride. "That was a lot of work. But then, I never thought I'd let anyone put the marriage noose round my neck."

"Til you met me," Nicole murmured, turning her face up to be kissed.

Smiling, he lowered his head. "Exactly."

Holly felt her own seat move as Stavros Minos sat beside her. As the door closed behind him, and the limo pulled away from the curb, she unwillingly breathed in his intoxicating scent of musk and power.

Oliver turned smugly to his cousin. "How about it, Stavros? Did the ceremony give you any ideas?"

The Greek tycoon's handsome face was colder than the icy winter air outside. "Such as you can't imagine."

How dare he be so rude? Holly thought incredulously. But then, the commitment-phobic playboy famously despised weddings. He obviously was unhappy to be forced to attend his cousin's wedding. And unlike Holly, he didn't feel any compunction to hide his feelings. Luckily, the happy couple didn't seem to notice.

Oliver snorted. "I was going to invite Uncle Aristides today, him being family and all that, but I knew you wouldn't like it."

"Generous of you." His voice was flat.

Holly envied Stavros Minos's coldness right now, when she herself felt heartbroken and raw. Her sister's pressure for Holly to move with them to Hong Kong after they returned from their honeymoon in Aruba had been ratcheted up to an explosive level. Oliver had already quit at Minos International. If Holly stayed, she'd soon be working for the notoriously unpleasant VP of Operations. Or else she had a standing offer from a previous employer who'd moved back to Europe.

But if she was going to leave New York, shouldn't she move to Hong Kong, and work for Oliver in his new job? Shouldn't she devote herself to her baby sister's happiness, forever and ever?

"You really hate weddings, don't you, Stavros?" Oliver grinned at his cousin. "At least I won't have to see your grouchy face at the office anymore, old man. Your loss is Sinistech's gain."

"Right." Stavros shrugged. "Let another company deal with your three-hour martini lunches."

"Quite." Oliver's grin widened, then he licked his lips. "I can hardly wait to explore Hong Kong's delights."

"Me, too," Nicole said.

Oliver nearly jumped, as if he'd forgotten his bride beside him. "Naturally." He suddenly looked at Holly. "Did Nicole convince you yet? Will you come and work as my secretary there?"

Feeling everyone's eyes on her, her cheeks went red-hot. She stammered, "D-don't be silly."

"You mustn't be selfish," Oliver insisted. "I can't cope without you. Who else can keep me organized in my new job?"

"And I might get pregnant soon," Nicole said anxiously. "Who will take care of the baby if you're not around?"

The ache in Holly's throat sharpened to a razor blade. Watching her sister marry the man she loved and then leave for the other side of the world was hard enough. But the suggestion that Holly should live with them and raise their children was pure cruelty.

As of her birthday yesterday, she was a twenty-seven-year-old virgin. She was a secretary, a sister, and perhaps soon, an aunt. But would she ever be more? A wife? A mother?

Would she ever meet a man she could love, who would love her in return? Would she ever be the most important person in the world to anyone?

At twenty-seven, it was starting to seem unlikely. She'd spent nearly a decade raising her sister since their parents died. She'd spent the last three years taking care of Oliver at work. Maybe that was all she was meant to do. Take care of Nicole and Oliver, watch them love each other and raise their children. Maybe Holly was meant only to be support staff in life. Never the star. The thought caused a stab of pain through her heart.

She choked out, "You'll be fine without me."

"Fine!" Indignantly, Nicole shook her head. "It would be a disaster! You have to come with us to Hong Kong, Holly. *Please!*"

Her sister spoke with the same wheedling tone she'd used since she was a child to get her own way. The same one she'd used four weeks ago to convince Holly to arrange her sudden wedding—using the same Christmas details that Holly had once dreamed of for her own wedding someday.

Until she'd realized there was no point in saving all her own Christmas wedding dreams for a marriage that would never happen. If any man was ever going to be interested in her, it would have happened by now. And it hadn't. Her sister was the one with the talent in that arena. Blonde, tiny and beautiful, Nicole had always had a strange power over men, and at twenty-two, she'd learned how to use it well.

But even Holly had never imagined, when she'd introduced her to Oliver last summer at a company picnic, that it would end like this.

Looking at her sister, Holly suddenly noticed Nicole's bare neck. "Where's Mom's gold-star necklace, Nicole?"

Touching her bare collarbone above her neckline, her sister ducked her head. "It's somewhere in all the boxes. I'm sure I'll find it when I unpack in Hong Kong."

"You lost Mom's necklace?" Holly felt stricken. It was bad enough their parents hadn't lived to see their youngest daughter get married, but if Nicole had lost the precious gold-star necklace their mother had always worn...

"I didn't lose it," Nicole said irritably. She shrugged. "It's somewhere."

"And don't try to change the subject, Holly," Oliver said sharply. "You're being stubborn and selfish to stay in New York, when I need you so badly."

Selfish. The accusation hit Holly like a blow. Was she being selfish to stay, when they needed her? Selfish to still hope she could find her own happiness, instead of putting their needs first forever?

"I...I'm not trying to be," she whispered. As the limo drove north toward Midtown, Holly looked out the window, toward the bright Christmas lights and colorful window displays as the limo passed the department stores on Sixth Avenue. The sidewalks were filled with shoppers carrying festive bags and wrapped packages, rushing to buy gifts to put under the Christmas tree and fill stockings tomorrow morning. She saw happy children wearing Santa hats and beaming smiles.

A memory went through her of Nicole at that age, her smiling, happy face missing two front teeth as she'd hugged Holly tight and cried, "I wuv you, Howwy!"

A lump rose in Holly's throat. Nicole was her only family. If her baby sister truly needed her, maybe she *was* being selfish, thinking of her own happiness. Maybe she should just—

"Let me get this straight." Stavros Minos's voice was acidic as he suddenly leaned forward. "You want Miss Marlowe to quit her job at Minos International and move to Hong Kong? To do your office work for you, Oliver, all day, then take care of your children all night?"

Oliver scowled. "It's none of your business, Stavros."

"Your concern does you credit, Mr. Minos," Nicole interceded, giving him a charming smile, "but taking care of people is what Holly does best. She's taken care of me since I was twelve. I can't imagine her ever wanting to stop taking care of me."

"Of us," Oliver said.

Stavros lifted his sensual lips into a smile that showed the white glint of his teeth as he turned to Holly. "Is that true?"

He was looking at her so strangely. She stammered, "A-anyone would feel the same."

"I wouldn't."

"Of course you wouldn't," Oliver said with a snort, leaning back in the seat. "Minos men are selfish to the bone. We do what we like, and everyone else be damned."

"What is that supposed to mean?" his wife said.

He winked. "It's part of our charm, darling."

But Nicole didn't seem terribly charmed. With a flare of her nostrils, she turned to Holly. "I can't just leave you in New York. You wouldn't know what to do with yourself. You'd be so alone."

She stiffened. "I have friends..."

"But not family," she said impatiently. "And it's not very likely you ever will, is it?"

"Will what?"

"Have a husband or children of your own. I mean, come on." She gave a good-natured snort. "You've never even had a serious boyfriend. Do you really want to die alone?"

Holly stared at her sister in the back of the limo.

Nicole was right. And tomorrow, for the first time in her life, Holly would spend Christmas Day alone.

Christmas, and the rest of her life.

Her eyes met Stavros's in the back of the limo. His handsome features looked as hard and cold as a marble statue, his black eyes icy as a midwinter's night. Then his expression suddenly changed.

"I'm afraid Miss Marlowe can't possibly go to Hong Kong," he said. "Because I need another executive assistant. So I'm giving her a promotion."

"What?" gasped Oliver.

"What?" gasped Nicole.

Holly looked at him sharply, blinking back tears. "What?"

His expression gentled. "Will you come work directly for me, Miss Marlowe? It will mean long hours, but a sizable raise. I'll double your salary."

"But—" Swallowing, Holly whispered, "Why me?"

"Because you're the best." His jaw, dark with five-o'clock shadow, tightened. "And because I can."



Stavros hadn't meant to get involved. Oliver was right. This was none of his business.

He didn't care about his cousin. Cousin or not, the man was a useless bastard. Stavros regretted the day he'd hired him. Oliver had done a poor job as VP of Marketing. He'd been within a day of being fired when he'd taken the "surprise offer" from Hong Kong. Stavros was glad to see him

go. He suspected Oliver might be surprised when his new employers actually expected him to work for his salary.

Stavros didn't much care for his cousin's new bride, either. In spite of his own turmoil last night, he'd actually tried to warn Nicole about Oliver's cheating ways at the rehearsal dinner. But the blonde had just cut him off. So she knew what she was getting into; she just didn't care.

He didn't give a damn about either of them.

But Holly Marlowe—she was different.

Stavros suspected it was only through the hardworking secretary's efforts that Oliver had managed to stay afloat these last three years. Holly worked long hours at the office then probably nights and weekends at home, doing Oliver's job for him. Everyone at the New York office loved kind, dependable Miss Marlowe, from the janitors to the COO. Tender-hearted, noble, self-sacrificing... Holly Marlowe was the most respected person in the New York office, Stavros included.

But she was totally oppressed by these two selfish people, who, instead of thanking her for all she'd done, seemed intent on taking her indentured servitude with them to Hong Kong.

Two days ago, Stavros might have shrugged it off. People had the right to make their own choices, even stupid ones.

But not after the news he'd received yesterday. Now, for the first time he was thinking about what his own legacy would be after he was gone. And it wasn't a pretty picture.

"You can't have Holly! I need her!" Oliver exploded. At Stavros's fierce glare, his cousin glanced uneasily at his wife. "We need her."

"You don't want some stupid promotion, do you, Holly?" Nicole wailed.

But Holly's face was shining as she looked at Stavros. "Do—do you mean it?"

"I never say anything I don't mean." As they drove north, past bundled-up tourists and sparkling lights and brightly decorated department-store windows, his gaze unwillingly traced over her pretty face and incredible figure. Until he'd stood across from her in the old stone church by candlelight, he'd never realized how truly beautiful Holly Marlowe was.

The truth was, he hadn't *wanted* to notice. Beautiful women were a dime a dozen in his world, while truly competent, highly driven secretaries were few. And Holly had hidden her beauty, making herself nearly invisible at the office, yanking her fiery red hair in a matronly bun, never wearing makeup, working quietly behind the scenes in loose-cut beige skirt suits and sensible shoes.

Was this what she'd looked like all the time? Right under his nose?

Her bright, wide-set green eyes looked up at him, luminous beneath dramatic black lashes. Her skin was pale except for a smattering of freckles over her nose. Her lips were red and delectable as she nibbled them with white, even teeth. Her thick, curly red-gold hair spilled over her shoulders. And that tight red dress—

That dress—

Stavros obviously wasn't dead yet, because it set his pulse racing.

The bodice was low-cut, clinging to full, delicious breasts he'd never imagined existed beneath those baggy beige suits. As she moved, the knit fabric clung to her curves. He'd gotten a look at her deliciously full backside as they'd left the church, too.

All things he would have to ignore once she worked for him. Deliberately, he looked away. He didn't seduce women who worked for him. Why would he, when beautiful women were so plentiful in his world, and truly spectacular employees more precious than diamonds?

Sex was an amusement, nothing more. But for years, his company had been his life.

And the reason Holly chose to dress so plainly in the office was obviously that she wanted to be valued for her accomplishments and hard work, not her appearance. In that, they were the same. From the time he was a child, Stavros had wanted to do important things. He'd wanted to change the world.

But that wasn't all they had in common. He'd seen her tortured expression as she'd looked at Oliver. So Stavros and Holly each had secrets they didn't want to talk about.

To anyone.

Ever.

But her inexplicable infatuation for Oliver couldn't possibly last. When she recovered from it, like someone healing from a bad cold, she'd realize she'd dodged a bullet.

As for Stavros's secret, people would figure it out for themselves when he dropped dead. Which, according to his doctor's prognosis, would happen in about six to nine months. He blinked.

All the life he'd left unlived...

Just a few days ago, Stavros had vaguely assumed he'd have another fifty years. Instead, he'd be unlikely to see his thirty-seventh birthday next September.

He would die alone, with no one but his lawyers and stockholders to mourn him. His company would be his only legacy. Estranged from his father, and feeling as he did about Oliver, Stavros would likely leave his shares to charity.

Poor Stavros, his ex-mistresses would say. Then they'd roll over and enjoy their hot new lovers in bed.

Poor Minos, his business associates would say. Then they'd focus on exciting new technology to buy and sell.

And he'd be dirt in the ground. Never once knowing what it felt like to commit to anything but work. Not even leaving a son or daughter to carry on his name.

Looking back, Stavros saw it all with painful clarity, now that his life was coming to an end. And he had only himself to blame. Nicole's thoughtlessly cruel words floated back to him. *Do you really want to die alone?*

Christmas lights sparkled on Sixth Avenue, as yellow taxis filled with people on the way to family dinners rushed past in the rapidly falling twilight. The limo turned east, finally pulling into the entrance of the grand hotel overlooking Central Park.

"This isn't over, Holly," Oliver said firmly. "I'm going to persuade you."

"You'll come with us," Nicole said, smiling as she smoothed back her veil.

The uniformed driver opened the back door of the limousine. Oliver got out first, then gallantly reached back to assist his glamorous bride. Nicole's white tulle skirts swirled in a train with her fluttery white veil, her diamond tiara sparkling. Tourists gaped at them on the sidewalk. A few lifted their phones for pictures, clearly believing they were seeing royalty. The new Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Minos waved at them regally as they swept into the grand hotel to take photos before the guests arrived for a ballroom reception.

Silence fell in the back of the limo. For a moment, Holly didn't move. Stavros looked at her.

"Don't give in to them, Holly," he urged in a low voice. It was the first time he'd used her first name. "Stick up for yourself. You're worth so much more than they are."

Her green eyes widened, then suddenly glistened with tears. She whispered, "How can you say that?"

"Because it's true," he said harshly. He got out of the limo and held out his hand for her.

Blinking fast, she slowly placed her hand in his.

And it happened.

Stavros had slept with many women, beautiful and famous and powerful, models and starlets and even a Nobel laureate.

But when he touched Holly's hand to help her from the limo, he felt something he'd never experienced before. An electric shock sizzled him to his core.

He looked down at her as he pulled her to the sidewalk, his heart pounding strangely as he helped her to her feet. Snowflakes suddenly began falling as she looked up, lingering in his arms.

Then Holly's gaze fell on the lacy white snowflakes. With a joyous laugh, she dropped his hand, looking up with wonder at the gray lowering sky.

Without her warmth, Stavros again felt the winter chill beneath his tuxedo jacket. The world became a darker place, freezing him, reminding him he'd soon feel nothing at all. He stood very still, watching her. Then he lifted his face to the sky, wondering if this would be the last time he'd feel snowflakes on his skin.

If only he could have at least left a child behind. He suddenly wanted that so badly it hurt. If only he could have left some memory of his existence on earth.

But the women he knew were as ambitious and heartless as he was. He couldn't leave an innocent child in their care. Children needed someone willing to put their needs above her own. He knew no woman like that. None at all.

Then he heard a laugh of pure delight, and Stavros looked down at Holly Marlowe's beautiful, shining, tenderhearted eyes.

"Can you believe it?" Stretching her arms wide, laughing like a child, she whirled in a circle, holding out her tongue to taste the snowflakes. She looked like an angel. Her eyes danced as she cried, "It's snowing at my sister's wedding! On Christmas Eve!"

And all of the busy avenue, the tourists, the horse-drawn carriages, the taxis blaring Christmas music, faded into the background. Stavros saw only her.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GRAND TWO-STORY hotel ballroom was a winter wonderland, filled with white-and-silver Christmas trees twinkling like stars. Each of the twenty big round tables had centerpieces of red roses, deep scarlet against the white. It was even more beautiful than Holly had dreamed. A lump rose in her throat as she slowly looked around her.

She'd imagined a wedding reception like this long ago, as a lonely nineteen-year-old, cutting out photographs from magazines and putting them in an idea book each night while her little sister slept in the dark apartment. Holly had been alone, her friends all in college or partying in clubs.

Holly didn't regret her choice to give up her college scholarship and come home. After their parents had died in the car accident on their anniversary, she'd known she couldn't leave Nicole to foster care. But sometimes, she'd felt so trapped, chained by the responsibilities of love. She'd felt so lonely, without a partner, and with a teenaged sister who'd often shouted at Holly in her own grief and frustrated rage.

So to comfort herself, Holly had created the dream book. It had kept her company, until Nicole had left for college three years ago, and Holly had started working for Oliver.

In her romantic fantasy of long ago, she'd always imagined she'd be the bride in the white princess dress, dancing with an adoring groom. Now, as she watched Nicole and Oliver dance their first dance as husband and wife, surrounded by all their adoring friends, she told herself she'd never been so happy.

"They really do make a perfect couple." Stavros's low, husky voice spoke beside her. Somehow, his tone made the words less than complimentary.

"Yes," Holly said, moving slightly to make sure they didn't accidentally touch. When he'd helped her from the limo earlier, her whole body had trembled. It was totally ridiculous. She was sure Stavros Minos hadn't felt anything. Why would he? While Holly, hours later, still felt burning hot, lit up from within, whenever the Greek billionaire drew close. Whenever he even looked at her. She had to get ahold of herself, if she was going to be his assistant!

What was wrong with her? Holly didn't understand. How could she feel so—so aware of Stavros, when she was in love with Oliver?

She was, wasn't she?

But she didn't want to love Oliver anymore. It had done nothing but hurt her. And now he was her brother-in-law, it felt slimy and wrong. She wanted to reach inside her soul and turn off her feelings like a light—

"You arranged the reception, too, didn't you?" Stavros said, looking at the Christmas fantasy around them.

She forced herself to smile. "I wanted my sister to have a dream wedding. I did my best."

Stavros abruptly turned to look at the happy couple, dancing now in front of the largest white-flocked tree, decorated with white lights and silver stars. He took a long drink of the amber-colored liquid he'd gotten from the open bar. "You are a good person."

Again, the words should have been a compliment, but they weren't. Not the way he said them. She tried to read his expression, but his darkly handsome face was inscrutable. She shook her head. "You must hate all this."

"This?"

"Being best man at a wedding." Holly shrugged. "You're the most famously commitment-phobic bachelor in the city."

He took another deliberate drink. "Let's just say love is something I've never had the good fortune to experience."

More irony, she thought. Then his black eyes burned through her, reminding her he knew about her secret love for Oliver. Her cheeks burned.

Looking toward the beautiful bride and handsome groom slow-dancing in the center of the ballroom, the very picture of fairy-tale love, she mumbled, “You’re right. They do make a perfect couple.”

“Stop it,” he said sharply, as if he was personally annoyed.

“Stop what?”

“Take off the rose-colored glasses.”

Her mouth dropped. “What?”

“You’d have to be stupid to love Oliver. And whatever you are, Miss Marlowe, you’re not stupid.”

The conversation had taken a strangely personal turn. Her heart pounded. But there seemed no point in trying to lie. She’d never dared to give voice to her feelings before. She whispered, “How did you guess?”

He rolled his eyes. “You wear your heart on your face.” He paused. “I’m sure Oliver knows exactly how you feel.”

Horror went through her. “Oh, no—he couldn’t possibly—”

“Of course he knows,” Stavros said brutally. “How else could he have taken advantage of you all these years?”

“Advantage?” Astonished, she looked up at him. “Of me?”

He looked down at her seriously. “I have ten thousand employees around the world. And from what everyone tells me, you’re the hardest working one.”

“Mr. Minos—”

“Call me Stavros,” he ordered.

“Stavros.” She blushed. “I’m sure that’s not true. I go home at six every night—”

“Yes, home to do Oliver’s paperwork. Never asking for a raise, even though you were paying for your sister to go to college. Which, by the way, she could have gotten a job and paid for herself.”

Her blush deepened in confusion. “I take care of my sister because—because she’s my responsibility. I take care of Oliver because, because,” she continued, faltering, “I’m his employee. At least I was...”

“And because you’re in love with him.”

“Yes,” she whispered, her heart in her throat.

“And now he’s impulsively married your sister, and instead of being angry—” he motioned at the winter wonderland around them “—you arranged all this.”

“Except for this dress.” She looked down ruefully at the tight red dress, wishing she was dressed in that modest burgundy gown she’d selected. “Nicole picked it out. She said my dress was the frumpiest thing she’d ever seen and she wasn’t going to let it ruin her wedding photographs.”

“They really do deserve each other, don’t they?” he murmured. Then he glanced down at her and growled, “You look beautiful in that dress.”

Another compliment that didn’t sound like a compliment. If anything, he sounded angry about it. His jaw was tight as he looked away.

Was he mocking her? She didn’t understand why he would tell her she was beautiful but sound almost furious about it. Her cheeks burned as she muttered, “Thanks.”

For a moment, the two of them stood apart from the crowd, watching as the bridal couple finished their dance with a long, flashy kiss. The guests applauded then went out to join them on the dance floor. Feeling awkward, Holly started to turn away.

Stavros stopped her, his dark eyes glittering as he said huskily, “Dance with me.”

“What? No.”

Broad-shouldered and powerful in his tuxedo, he towered over her like a dark shadow. Lifting a sardonic eyebrow, he just held out his hand, waiting.

What was he playing at? Stavros took starlets and models to his bed. Why would he be interested in dancing with a plain, ordinary girl like her? She looked up at him. His handsome face was arrogant, as untouchable and distant as a star.

“You don’t have to feel sorry for me,” she said stiffly.

“I don’t.”

“Or if you think it’s a requirement, because you’re best man and I’m maid of honor—”

“Do I strike you as a man who gives a damn about other people’s rules?” he asked, cutting her off. “I just want you to see the truth.”

“What’s that?” Half-mesmerized, she let him pull her into his powerful arms. Electricity crackled up her arm as she felt the heat of his palm against hers. She looked up at his face. His jawline was dark with five-o’clock shadow below razor-sharp cheekbones. There was a strange darkness in his black eyes, a vibrating tension from his muscular body beneath the well-cut tuxedo.

“You don’t love my cousin. You never did.”

She tried to pull away. “You have some nerve to—”

Holding her hand implacably in his own, he led her out onto the dance floor, where guests swayed to the slow romantic Christmas music of the orchestra.

She felt everyone looking at her. The women, with a mix of envy and bewilderment, the men, with interest, their eyes lingering on her uncomfortably low neckline.

Even Nicole and Oliver paused to gape at the sight of Stavros leading her out on the dance floor. Holly felt equally bewildered. Stavros could dance with anyone. Why would he choose her? Had he lost some kind of bet?

Surely this couldn’t just be to convince Holly she had no real feelings for Oliver.

But if he could, how wonderful would that be?

Suddenly, Holly wanted it more than anything in the world.

Stavros led her confidently to the center of the dance floor, forcing others to move aside to make way for them. Pulling her against his chest, he looked down at her. She felt his dark gaze burn through her body, all the way to her toes. He looked at her almost as if he—

Desired her?

No. Holly’s cheeks went hot. That was a step too far. No man had ever desired her. Not Oliver. Not even Albert from Accounting, who’d asked her on a date a few months ago, then stood her up for some playoff game.

But there was heat in Stavros’s gaze as he moved her in his arms.

“You don’t love my cousin,” he whispered, tightening his hold on her. “Admit it. He was just a dream you had to keep you warm at night.”

Could it be true? How she wanted to be convinced! “How can you say that?”

His sensual lips curved. “Because as little as I know about love, it seems to involve really knowing someone, flaws and all. And you don’t even know him.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve worked for him for three years. Of course I know Oliver. I know everything about him.”

“Are you sure?” Stavros said, glancing at the dancing couple.

Following his gaze, Holly saw Oliver give a flirtatious smile to a pretty girl over his wife’s shoulder. She saw Nicole notice, scowl, then deliberately step on her new husband’s foot with her wicked stiletto heel.

“So he’s a little flirty,” she said. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

Now Stavros was the one to roll his eyes. “He sleeps with every woman he possibly can.”

“He never tried to sleep with me,” she protested.

“Because you’re special.”

Holly sucked in her breath. “I am?”

“Get that dying-cow look off your face,” he said irritably. “Yes, special. His secretary before you filed a sexual harassment suit against him. I told Oliver if that ever happened again, I’d fire him, cousin or not. And he’s a Minos man to the core. Like he said, selfish to the bone. Why would he want to risk losing an amazing secretary slaving away for him night and day, just for some cheap sex he can—and does—get everywhere else?”

“Cheap!” Holly had never even been naked with a man before. How dare Stavros imply she offered cheap sex to all comers? She glared at him. “What right do you have to criticize him? You’re just as bad. You sleep with a new actress or model every week!”

Stavros’s jaw tightened. “That’s not true...” Then something made the anger drain out of his handsome face, replaced by stark, raw emotion. “But you’re right. I have no right to criticize him. And I wouldn’t, except he’s trying to take your life. Don’t let him do it,” he said fiercely. He pulled her closer, looking down at her as they swayed to the slow music. “Oliver is using you. Look past your dream. See him for the man he really is.”

Looking back at Oliver, now arguing with his new bride as they left the dance floor, Holly suddenly thought of all the times that he’d stopped her as she left the office on Friday nights, putting stacks of files into her arms. “You don’t mind taking care of this over the weekend, do you, Holly?” he’d say, flashing her his most charming, boyish, slightly sheepish grin. “Thanks, you’re the best!”

She thought of all the times he’d mysteriously disappear when an unpleasant conversation was required, leaving Holly to do his dirty work for him. And not just work like firing someone. Frequently she’d be left alone to sort out weeping, heartbroken women who appeared at the office, begging to see him, railing about broken promises.

At the time, Holly had convinced herself it was proof of his faith in her that he’d relied on her to handle such important matters.

But now...

She looked at Oliver and Nicole, who’d gone back to sit at the head table. There was still a smudge of white frosting on her sister’s cheek. Earlier, when they’d cut the wedding cake, Nicole had delicately fed her new husband his slice, holding the pose beautifully for pictures. Immediately afterward, Oliver had smashed the piece into his bride’s face to make the crowd laugh.

Now, sitting on the dais, they were arguing fiercely over champagne. She was trying to pull the bottle away from him. Yanking it back, Oliver tilted back his head and vengefully drank it straight from the bottle.

And this was supposed to be the happiest day of their lives.

Holly’s body flashed hot, then cold, from her scalp to her toes. With an intake of breath, she looked up at Stavros as they danced. “My sister—”

“She’s made her bed. Now she’ll have to lie in it.” His hands tightened as he said, “But you don’t have to.”

Holly desperately tried to remember the feelings she’d once had for Oliver, all the lonely nights she’d spent in her tiny apartment, with only her romantic fantasies about her boss to keep her warm. But those memories had disappeared like mist against the cold reality of this wedding, and the hot feel of Stavros’s hand over hers. The dream was gone.

“Why are you forcing me to see the truth?” she said helplessly. “Why do you care?”

Stavros abruptly stopped dancing. He looked down at her, his black eyes searing through her soul.

“Because I want you, Holly,” he said huskily. “On my arm. In my bed.” His hand trailed through her hair and down her back as he whispered, “I want you for my own.”



He was going to hell for this.

Or at the very least, his conscience warned, he shouldn't hire her as his secretary. Because as hard as he'd tried to ignore her beauty—he *couldn't*.

Stavros looked down at her. Her emerald eyes widened. Her curly red hair looked like fire tumbling over her shoulders. Her petite body felt so soft and sensual in his arms.

But he wanted to keep her as his secretary. He wanted to keep her for everything. He wanted Holly more than he'd ever wanted anyone.

Why her? He didn't know. It couldn't just be her luscious beauty. He'd bedded beautiful women before.

Holly Marlowe was different. The supermodels and actresses seemed as glittery as tinsel, cold as snowflakes. Holly was real. She was warm and alive. Her heart shone from her beautiful green eyes. She didn't even try to guard her heart. He could read her feelings on her face.

And her body...

As they'd danced, he'd watched the tight red fabric slide against her ripe, curvaceous body, and his mouth had gone dry as he'd imagined feeling her naked skin against his own. With his hand against her lower back, he'd felt her hips move, felt the sway of her tiny waist. He'd watched her blush and shiver at his touch, and wondered how innocent she might be. Could she even be a virgin?

No. In this day and age? Surely not.

And yet he'd known then he had to make Holly his, if it was the last thing he did. Which it well could be.

His gaze fell to her pink lips, tracing down to her low-cut neckline, where with each sharp rise and fall of her breath he half expected the red fabric to tear, setting her deliciously full breasts free. He repeated huskily, "I want you."

Holly gave a sudden jagged intake of breath. "How can you be so cruel?"

Frowning, Stavros pulled back. "Cruel?"

"All right, so I'm just a secretary. I'm plain and boring and nothing special. That gives you no right to—no right to—"

"To what?" he said, mystified.

"Make fun of me!" Her voice ended with a sob, and she turned and fled, leaving him standing alone on the dance floor.

A low curse twisted his lips. Make fun of her? He'd never been more serious about anything in his life. Make fun of her? Was she insane?

Grimly, he turned through the crowd, trying to pursue her. But other people suddenly blocked his path on the dance floor, business acquaintances desperate to ingratiate themselves, women hoping for a shot at dancing in his arms.

He barely knew what he said to them as his eyes searched the crowds for Holly. His heart was racing and his body was in a cold sweat. Symptoms of his condition? His body shutting down?

All the things he'd never get the chance to do...

All the things he'd never thought of...

His eyes fell on Oliver, chatting with a trashy-looking girl by the open bar. As much as he despised his cousin's boorish behavior, Stavros realized in some ways he'd been just like him.

He'd never cheated or lied to a girlfriend, it was true. But that was hardly an amazing virtue when Stavros's relationships rarely lasted longer than a month. Whenever the pull of work became greater than the pull of lust, or if a mistress demanded any emotional involvement from him, Stavros would simply end the affair.

For nearly two decades, he'd worked eighteen hours a day, building his tech company. Unlike Oliver, he wasn't afraid of hard work. At first, he'd only wanted to succeed as a big middle finger to his estranged father, who'd cut off his mother without a penny and excluded Stavros from the Minos fortune. But by the time he was twenty, he'd learned the pleasures of work: the intensity, the focus, the thrill of victory. He'd become addicted to it.

But the truth was, he still wasn't so different from Oliver. Like his cousin, Stavros had spent all his adult life focusing on money and power and sleeping with beautiful women, while avoiding emotional entanglement. Stavros had just been better at it.

It was a blow for him to realize that Oliver, as weak and shallow as he was, had managed to do something he hadn't: he'd taken a wife.

Two years younger, and Oliver was already ahead. While Stavros had so little time left...

His eyes narrowed when he finally focused on Holly, speaking urgently with the bride on the other side of the ballroom. "Excuse me," he said shortly, and began pushing through the crowds, ignoring anyone who tried to talk to him.

He came up behind Holly just in time to hear the bride tell her angrily, "How dare you say such a thing!"

Holly flinched, but her voice was low as she pleaded, "I'm sorry, Nicole, I'm just scared for you..."

"I don't care what you imagine, or what Stavros Minos says. Oliver would never cheat. Not on me!" Nicole lifted her chin, her long white veil fluttering as her eyes flashed. "You don't deserve to be my maid of honor. I should have asked Yuna, not you! Better an old college roommate than a jealous old maid of a sister!"

"Nicole!"

"Forget it." Her sister's eyes sparkled as coldly as her tiara. "I want you out of here."

Holly took a deep breath. "Please. I wasn't trying to—"

"*Get out!*" Nicole shouted, loud enough to be heard over the orchestra, causing everyone nearby to turn and look.

Holly's shoulders flinched. She took a deep breath, then slowly turned away. Stavros had a brief glimpse of her stricken face before she walked through the silent, staring crowds.

He turned to Nicole.

"Your sister loves you," he said in a low voice. "She was trying to warn you."

"Warn me?" Nicole's perfect pink lip curled as she lifted her chin derisively. "Excuse me. I've never been so happy."

Stavros stared at her in disbelief.

"Good luck with that," he said, and went after Holly.

He found her shivering in front of the hotel, hopelessly trying to wave down a yellow taxi in the cold, snowy evening. As Christmas Eve deepened, the traffic on Central Park South had dissipated, leaving the city strangely quiet, tucked in to sleep beneath a blanket of snow, as the stars twinkled in the black sky.

When Holly saw him coming out of the hotel, her expression blanched. Turning, she stumbled away, across the empty street toward wintry, quiet Central Park. When he followed her, she shouted back desperately, "Leave me alone!"

"Holly, wait."

"No!"

Stavros caught up with her on the sidewalk near an empty horse carriage, festooned with holly and red bows, waiting patiently for customers. He grabbed her shoulder.

"Damn you..."

Then he saw her miserable face. Choking back his angry words, he pulled her into his arms. She cried against his chest, and he felt her shivering from grief and cold.

"I told her too late. I should have seen... I should have warned her long ago!"

"It's not your fault." Inwardly cursing both his cousin and her sister, Stavros gently stroked her long red hair until the crying stopped.

She looked up at him, her lovely face desolate, tearstained with streaks of mascara as she wiped her eyes. "I'm not going back."

“Good.”

She took a deep breath. “Nicole didn’t send you after me?”

Stavros shook his head.

Her shoulders sagged for a moment, then she lifted her chin. “So what do you want?”

He came closer, looking down at her as scattered snowflakes whirled around them on the sidewalk in front of the dark, snowy park. “I told you.”

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted. Then she turned her head sharply away. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Just don’t.” She swallowed hard, her green eyes glistening with tears as she looked at him beneath the moonlight. “All right, I was a fool over Oliver. I see now it was just a dream to stave off loneliness.” Her voice broke. “But you don’t have to be cruel to prove your point. I know I’m not your type, but I do still have feelings!”

“You think I’m toying with you?” Searching her gaze, he said quietly, “I want you, Holly. As I’ve never wanted anyone.”

Looking away, she mulishly shook her head.

As she shivered, he took off his sleek black tuxedo jacket and draped it gently over her shoulders. Reaching out, he cupped her cheek, running the tip of his thumb over her tender, trembling lower lip. “Holly, look at me.”

Her eyes were huge in the moonlight as she flashed him a troubled glance. Behind her he could see the snowy park stretching out forever beneath the wintry, starlit night. She said haltingly, “You can’t expect me to believe—”

“Believe this,” he whispered. And, grabbing the lapels of the oversize tuxedo jacket around her, he pulled her hard against him, and swiftly lowered his mouth to hers.

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