Andie Brock

REUNITED *by the* GREEK'S VOWS

MILLS & BOON

MODERN

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Reunited By The Greek's Vows

Серия «Mills & Boon Modern»

Аннотация

A marriage on paper only……until long-hidden desires reignite! Kate O'Connor's stunned when ex-fiancé, self-made billionaire Nikos Nikoladis, storms back into her life with a shocking demand: to complete their previously abandoned trip down the aisle! He'll gain the wife he requires to secure his goddaughter's adoption, and save Kate's ailing company. In desperation, she agrees. But on an opulent honeymoon across Europe, these heated adversaries don't anticipate their still-smoldering flame to explode into irresistible passion…

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A marriage on paper only...

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Kate O'Connor is stunned when her ex-fiancé, self-made billionaire Nikos Nikoladis, storms back into her life with a shocking demand: to complete their previously abandoned trip down the aisle! He'll gain the wife he requires to secure his goddaughter's adoption *and* save Kate's ailing company. In desperation, she agrees. But on an opulent honeymoon across Europe, these heated adversaries don't anticipate their still-smoldering flame to explode into irresistible passion...

Discover this passionate reunion romance

ANDIE BROCK started inventing imaginary friends at around the age of four, and is still doing it today—only now the sparkly fairies have made way for spirited heroines and sexy heroes. Thankfully she now has some real friends, as well as a husband and three children—plus a grumpy but lovable cat. Andie lives in Bristol, and when she's not actually writing she might well be plotting her next passionate romance story.

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Reunited by the Greek's Vows

Andie Brock

MILLS & BOON

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CHAPTER ONE

KATE FROZE, THE bottle of champagne foaming in her hand. *Oh, please no! Not him—not here!* She screwed up her eyes, praying that when she opened them again he would have miraculously vanished. But, no. He was still there, and the shock of his presence was ringing in her ears, blotting out everyone else in the room.

Watching as if in slow motion horror, Kate saw him lean back to address the overly attentive waitress. Broodingly handsome, all sculpted features and olive skin, his broad shoulders and towering height were carried with that familiar, athletic grace. Nikos Nikoladis. Her first love. Her ex-fiancé. The man who had broken her heart.

'Hey, honey, careful with that champagne.' A diner at Kate's table reached out to steady her hand. 'If you knew what it cost you might treat it with a bit more respect.'

As the other men snickered in agreement Kate forced herself to apologise, holding a rictus grin that threatened to break her jaw as she refilled their glasses. She didn't know exactly what it cost, but she did know it was a vastly over-inflated price, designed to feed their self-importance rather than please their palates. The enormous egos and choking testosterone of the herd of fat-cat businessmen here tonight made it hard to breathe.

But that was why she was here. Why she had signed up to

this agency specialising in corporate hospitality. Why she had wriggled into a short black skirt that barely covered her butt and the horrible faux leather waistcoat now pulling tight across her bust. Because if there was the slightest chance that she might be able to persuade one of these arrogant jerks to invest in her ailing family business then she was going to take it. And if that meant she had to play waitress at this godawful event, flirt a little with these people, massage their massive egos, then so be it. As long as they knew that was the only thing she'd be massaging.

Because desperate times called for desperate measures. And, boy, was Kate desperate. And that had been even before the mortifying reappearance of her ex-fiancé.

Lowering her head, she let a curtain of blonde hair fall across her face, then took another peek in his direction, refusing to acknowledge the quickening of her heart. Engrossed in conversation with the CEO of a major corporation on his left, Nikos didn't appear to have spotted her. That, at least, was some consolation. And he wasn't seated at one of her designated tables in this vast hotel dining room, for which she was supremely grateful.

With a bit of luck she might be able keep her back to him and avoid being seen. Her new hairstyle would help her—the tumbling blonde curls were very different from the sleek mane of chestnut hair belonging to the Kate he had once known.

Refusing to panic, Kate squashed down her instinct to turn tail and run. Much as she wanted to tell the agency what they could

do with their sleazy job, its degrading outfit and its horrible, predatory guests, the fact was that even if trying to persuade one of them to invest in Kandy Kate *was* a ludicrously naïve idea, this was still well-paid work with the potential for healthy tips and she needed the money.

There were over three hundred diners here tonight, and at least thirty waitresses. As long as she kept her wits about her she should be able to avoid Nikos. She *would* avoid him. Because coming face to face with him when she was dressed like a backstreet hooker was one humiliation she could firmly do without.

What was he even *doing* here? She shot him another surreptitious glance from beneath heavy lashes. She would never have put Nikos down as the sort of man who would attend this type of do—even if it *was* a charity event. But then she would never have thought he was the kind of guy to rip her life apart the way he had. To be capable of such abject cruelty. She had no idea who Nikos really was at all.

What she *did* know was that she had totally lost her heart to this man. To the gorgeous Greek Adonis who had waited on her table that warm summer's evening in Crete three long years ago. The handsome, charming, captivating stranger who had walked along the beach with her, taking her hand, kissing her under the stars, turning her upside down and inside out there and then with a crazy sort of love that she'd thought only existed in stories.

That summer had been the most wonderful time of her life.

And the hurt that had followed more excruciating than she would ever have imagined possible.

So why was she surprised that he would frequent this sort of event? He was certainly wealthy enough. In fact, he could probably buy out most of these guys and scarcely make a dent in his multi-billion-dollar fortune.

Kate had watched his meteoric rise to enormous wealth from afar. The carefree, laid-back guy she'd fallen in love with, who hadn't had two cents to rub together when she'd met him, had become a billionaire businessman almost overnight. In the blink of a red-rimmed eye.

Whereas, of course, *her* fortunes had done the reverse. Her family's well-established confectionery business, Kandy Kate, had been crippled by a series of bad decisions since her father had died. But Kate was absolutely determined that was going to change. She was going to save Kandy Kate if it was the last thing she did. Because it was her father's legacy, named in her honour. It had meant everything to him. And for that reason it meant everything to her.

'Hey, baby, I'm dying of thirst over here!'

More raucous laughter around the table snapped Kate back to the job she was supposed to be doing.

'Get that pretty little ass of yours around here and refill my glass.'

'Yes, sir, of course.' Silently seething, Kate cautiously sidled around the table, keeping her back to Nikos as best she could.

‘Whassup, honey? You scared of me?’ The man stretched out his arm, snaking it around Kate’s waist to pull her closer. ’Cos you know, there ain’t no need for that. I’m nice as pie. You ask anyone.’ More drunken hee-hawing. ‘Why don’t you come sit on my lap and I’ll show you just how *nice* I can be?’

Taking a step back, Kate gripped the neck of the champagne bottle tightly enough to throttle it. It was a poor substitute for what she would have *liked* to throttle, but it would have to do.

‘I’m not paid to sit down.’ She feigned a light-hearted remark through gritted teeth.

‘No? Well, I’m sure we could make it worth your while. Whaddya you say, guys?’

The man lurched forward, knocking Kate off balance so that she stumbled, falling towards him. She tried to right herself, to pull away, but he was too strong for her and before she knew it he had tugged her firmly down onto his lap, spreading his legs to accommodate her, his alcohol-soaked breath belching into her face. And when he adjusted his position, pressing her down onto his crotch, she genuinely thought she was going to be sick.

No job was worth this. No amount of money would compensate for being treated like a piece of meat.

For God’s sake Kate, she told herself, dragging in a breath, *have a bit of self-respect.*

But she mustn’t make a scene. The last thing she wanted to do was draw attention to herself—not with Nikos across the other side of the room. Extricating herself as carefully as possible, her

stomach roiling as her movement only served to arouse her captor more, she put the champagne bottle down on the table and started to lever herself away from him.

'Oh, no, you don't.' He pulled her back down, his foul breath in her ear. 'I'm just startin' to enjoy myself. You can probably tell...'

* * *

From the other side of the glittering dining room, Nikos narrowed his eyes, turning in his chair to get a better look. Something about that young woman was very familiar, making him stare long and hard. Making his pulse beat faster too, if he would but admit it. It couldn't be...could it?

He'd watched as she moved around her table, filling the glasses of rowdy guests who had already had way too much. With her back to him, and quite some distance away, he didn't have much to go on—and the mane of blonde curls was telling him he must be mistaken. But as he'd watched she had raised a hand to touch her earlobe, tugging on it gently in an unconscious display of vulnerability the way he had seen her do a hundred times before.

And then Nikos had known without a shadow of doubt.

It was her.

Kate O'Connor.

He'd sat back in his chair, waiting for his heart-rate to steady. *Of all the gin joints...* It almost felt as if he'd conjured her up from his mind. Because Kate O'Connor had been very much on his mind lately. Hadn't he had just flown five thousand miles to see

her? The prospect of ambushing her in her office the following morning had brought him a twisted sort of pleasure that had made the journey almost enjoyable.

And now here she was, right in front of him, a vision in tart's clothing. Never would he have expected to find Kate in a place like this, looking like that. He wouldn't be here himself if he hadn't been talked into it by a business associate who had insisted they would talk shop over dinner. One look at the place and he'd almost turned around there and then. But something had made him stay. It must have been a sixth sense.

Unable to tear his gaze way, Nikos had watched on as one guy had slid an arm around Kate's waist, pulling her closer. He'd felt his hands ball into fists. *Steady, now.* This was none of his business. Maybe it was all part of the service.

He had waited for some sense of satisfaction to kick in, for a feeling of gratification at seeing what Kate had been reduced to to warm his dry bones. But, strangely, there was none to be had. Nikos could find no consolation in her downfall.

He wanted to. Badly. He wanted to enjoy every minute of this degrading spectacle—to revel in it and to feel it thawing the very core of him. A core that had hardened like stone in the years since their bitter break-up.

But now, as he watched her sliding onto some creep's lap, the emotion rising in his gullet had nothing to do with comfort or consolation. It was pure rage—so bitter and acrid that it burnt his throat with its vicious bile.

Because Kate O'Connor was his. Or at least she soon would be.

Downing the last of his whisky in one burning gulp, Nikos forced himself to calm down. His every instinct was screaming at him to cross the room, haul Kate off the lap of that revolting sleazeball, fling her over his shoulder and carry her out of this place.

His body positively twitched with the effort of stopping himself. But stop himself he would. Because Nikos was cleverer than that. He was here to claim his ex-fiancée and finally she would do his bidding. She just didn't know it yet. But right now, it was time to leave.

* * *

Back in her tiny apartment, Kate sprawled down on the bed, burying her face in the covers. That had been one of the most humiliating nights of her life—and lately she'd had a few.

Pulling herself upright, she shifted along the bed and swung her legs over the end, leaning forward to prop her elbows on the top of the dresser. This place was so small that during her first week there she'd had to battle against claustrophobic panic attacks in the middle of the night.

But that had long since passed and she had become used to it. Her spacious penthouse condominium at the top of KK Towers—her family home before it had all gone so badly wrong—was now not much more than a distant memory.

She peered at herself in the mirror, wincing at the sight that

met her eyes. She hardly recognised the heavily made-up blonde who stared back at her—which was all to the good. Because that person wasn't her. She was just a means to an end. An end that couldn't come fast enough for Kate.

Raising her hand, she grasped a fistful of hair and lifted up the blonde wig, tossing it to one side. She shook her head, running her fingers through her short dark hair before regarding herself again. Better. She had worn this style for over a year now, her decision to crop her long chestnut hair having been an attempt to present a more businesslike, serious persona.

The business might still bear her name, but Kate was no longer the happy, rosy-cheeked kid who had promoted the brand throughout her childhood—whose chestnut plaits and gap-toothed smile had helped to sell several million candy bars and made Kate instantly recognisable.

Now Kate was all grown up. And as head of the Kandy Kate empire it fell to her to stop the rot and save the company. To keep production running. Which meant generating the cash flow needed to pay their suppliers. And looking after the staff—some of whom had been with the company right from the start, who were more like family.

They were loyal employees, who had stood by Kandy Kate through bad times and even worse times, taking a salary cut, sometimes no salary at all, because they had loved her dad. Because they had faith that Kate would get the company back on track...see them right.

And Kate was absolutely determined she wasn't going to let them down. Somehow she was going to save Kandy Kate—even if she didn't have a clue how she was going to do it.

Peeling off the hateful false eyelashes, she blinked with relief, then set about scrubbing away her heavy make-up before heading for the shower. She felt soiled, unclean, and the pummelling hot water was doing nothing to remove the scent of the evening that seemed to have crept under her skin, into her pores. But at least she had managed to stick it out until the end, so that would mean she'd get paid.

And, more importantly, she had avoided being recognised by Nikos. That alone made her awful disguise worthwhile.

After finally managing to extricate herself from that creep's lap, she had shot a panicked glance in Nikos's direction, sick with dread that he might have witnessed the humiliating scene. But to her immense relief he had gone—vanished. A quick, hopeful glance around her revealed no sign of him, and when his seat had still been empty twenty minutes later Kate had finally let herself breathe.

She had got away with it. Because if Nikos had recognised her he wouldn't have been able to resist storming over, nailing her with those piercing ebony eyes and watching her squirm with embarrassment. Gloating over how the mighty had fallen.

Because fall she had—from a great height. After Kate's father had died she and her mother had been left in joint control of Kandy Kate, and between them they had brought the business to

its knees. The combination of Fiona O'Connor's erratic decisions and Kate's naivety had rapidly turned the thriving, much-loved brand—a household name—into a company on the brink of bankruptcy.

Too late Kate had realised that her mother wasn't mentally strong enough to have taken on such a weighty responsibility. But by then the Kandy Kate name had already been dragged through the mud—no longer associated with traditional values and a wholesome image but rocked by indiscreet comments from the new boss.

Convinced she knew best, Fiona had waltzed into the office on her first day like an impending storm, immediately making ridiculous demands and crazy decisions. The board had tried to overrule her, but Fiona would have none of it, convinced that they were just being obstructive because they didn't like her. It had got so bad that anyone who'd tried to stand up to her had been fired on the spot, with senior executives told to clear their desks there and then.

As the carnage had continued Kate had begged her mother to step down, to leave the running of the company to *her*—for the sake of Fiona's mental health as well as for the business. But as it had turned out leaving Kandy Kate in her hands had been even worse. Failing to keep a check on the new finance director—appointed by Fiona after the previous one had walked out in protest—Kate had signed papers without looking at them properly and delegated power to him, completely unaware of his

fraudulent intentions.

Gullibility, lack of experience, and the fact that Kate had been way out of her depth had cost the company dear. Within months the con man had syphoned off vast quantities of money, leaving Kandy Kate in a more desperate state than ever.

Nearly three years had passed since then, and Kate had wised up considerably. But despite her best efforts—despite selling off just about every asset that Kandy Kate had had left, working all the hours that God sent, begging, borrowing and pleading with banks, investors, and anyone else who might be prepared to pour some serious capital into the business—Kate had got nowhere.

The sad fact was that Kate's eponymous business was still in a dire state. And, short of a miracle, there was nothing she could do to repair it.

The press, of course, were lapping it up. Fiona O'Connor had always been good tabloid fodder, with her expensive tastes and her erratic outbursts. But, as the face of Kandy Kate, Kate herself was the real prize. Hounded by the press all her life, she never knew when she was going to be snapped by a lone pap, hoping to make a few dollars out of her—though why anyone should be remotely interested in seeing her buying a few groceries in the local deli or snatching a coffee on her way to work she had no idea.

Events like the Executives' Club, however, were a different matter. Which was why Kate made sure she concealed her identity with a false name, a blonde wig and more make-up than

a three-year-old at a clown convention.

Getting into bed, she pulled the covers under her chin.

Maybe it was time to give up. This morning she'd discovered there had been a surge in the price of Kandy Kate's shares, and that meant only one thing. Someone was planning a hostile takeover. Which was all she needed.

Kate had hoped she might be able to glean some information as to who might be behind the takeover from some of guests at the Executives' Club. Obviously she'd had to make sure she didn't reveal who she was, but successful businessmen loved to brag and champagne loosened their tongues. Unfortunately it also loosened their hands, and Kate had found them far more interested in stroking her butt or staring down her cleavage than giving her the lowdown on the latest gossip from the trading floor.

Closing her eyes, Kate willed herself to go to sleep. She was dog-tired...physically and emotionally drained. But sleep refused to come. Instead, Nikos's powerful image filled her vision, crowding her mind, snapping her eyes open again.

The acute shock of seeing him tonight still held her body in a rigid grip. The three years since she had last seen him had vanished like vapour the second she had set eyes on him again. One glance at that handsome face and the memories of their break-up had come flooding back: the fight, the things they had said...horrible, hateful, brutal words...all recalled with vivid clarity. She felt as if time had simply distilled the pain, making it

even more potent as it sank its vicious claws into her once again.

When Nikos had left her, Kate's whole world had collapsed. Her hopes and dreams had crumbled before her eyes—built, as it turned out, on nothing more substantial than the shifting sands of blind optimism and unguarded love. She had fallen into a place so deep, so dark, that she had feared she would never see the light again.

But somehow she had clawed her way back up. Somehow she had survived.

As she stared up at the peeling paintwork of the ceiling Kate conceded that their relationship had been doomed from the start. The cracks had always been there—just ignored in the first wild rush of all-consuming passion. A time when anything had seemed possible.

She hadn't been totally blameless. By choosing to play down her family's wealth and lavish lifestyle she had been guilty of deceiving Nikos. It had been a selfish act, but the relief of being free from the shackles of Kandy Kate that had dominated her whole life had been so wonderful, so liberating, she had lied by omission just to try and keep it that way for as long as possible.

Just for a while she had wanted to be Kate O'Connor—a regular kind of girl from an ordinary background, who happened to have been fortunate enough to fall in love with the most wonderful guy in the world.

But the flipside had meant she'd failed to mention Nikos to her parents. Far less the fact that she had rushed headlong into an

engagement with him. That she intended to marry the remarkable Greek man as soon as possible.

Because Kate had known full well the ruckus it would cause. She knew her mother would hit the roof and insist that the engagement was broken off immediately—that there was no way she was going to allow her daughter to marry some penniless Greek bum. And then her poor father would be dragged into it, torn between the two women in his life the way he always was, doing his best to keep the peace.

Kate had decided that she was going to keep the engagement a secret for as long as she could. But when news had arrived that her father had been taken seriously ill her little secret had suddenly begun to grow, to take on a life of its own.

As she'd rushed to make plans to return to New York Nikos had assumed he would be going with her. But Kate hadn't been able to let that happen. Her parents hadn't even known of his existence—she couldn't arrive back home with him by her side, knowing the way her mother would react and risking damaging her father's fragile health still further.

So she had insisted Nikos stayed behind in Crete. She could still remember the look of hurt on his face when she'd told him. Standing there in the Greek sunshine, so tall and proud, his dark brows pulling together in surprise, his features had set like stone.

It had all but broken her heart, but Kate had stood firm, slinging her rucksack over her shoulder and turning away when all she'd wanted to do was to fall into his arms and stay there

for ever.

If she had come clean there and then, confessed everything, would things have turned out differently?

Kate had gone over that moment in her head a thousand times. But the fact was she hadn't. And as Nikos's hurt had quickly turned to a carefully controlled anger, a cold cloud of animosity had descended over them as they'd said their goodbyes.

Nikos's dry peck on her cheek had only accentuated the widening rift between them.

Her father had died two weeks later. And in the melee of trying to organise everything—taking care of her mother, who had always suffered from fragile mental health, as well as coping with her own crippling grief—suddenly Nikos had arrived. Unannounced. Uninvited. And even though her heart had leapt at the sight of him—even though he had been the person Kate had wanted to see more than anyone else in the world, *needed* more than anyone else in the world—she had panicked.

Hadn't she expressly told him not to come? His arrival was going to cause nothing but trouble. And that trouble had started almost immediately.

Within minutes her guilty secret had been exposed. Dropping his bag, Nikos had looked around the luxurious apartment with a puzzled expression on his face before pulling her into a stiff hug.

With immaculate timing Fiona O'Connor had walked in at that precise moment, demanding to know who this *person* was.

And as Nikos had stepped forward to offer his condolences, and to introduce himself as Kate's fiancé, she had let out a little scream, her hand fluttering to her throat.

Kate had had no choice but to try and do whatever she could to mitigate the damage, to calm Fiona down. Even though that had meant pushing Nikos away.

And then, on that last evening—the evening of her father's funeral—her whole shaky world had finally collapsed.

When she'd been at her lowest ebb Nikos had turned on her, slashing through her battered defences, inflicting the sort of crippling pain from which there was no recovery...

Turning on her side, Kate curled herself into a ball as the memory of how Nikos had looked tonight imprinted itself on her brain. Gone had been the laid-back guy she had once known, casually dressed in faded jeans slung low on his hips or board shorts frayed at the hems by the sun and the sea. Gone the mass of wind-blown dark curls. Now his hair was tamed, styled, carefully groomed like the rest of him. Now he wore a dinner suit with the easy confidence of a wealthy man, giving off an air of urbane arrogance that told the world he had made it, that life was his for the taking.

Feeling a stab of pain, she buried her head in her pillow. Not for the first time she conceded that Nikos was the one man who had the wealth and the contacts to save her precious business. But there was no way she would ask him. She might only have a shred of pride left, but she was damned if she was going to

give that shred to him. No, hell would freeze over before she *ever* went crawling to him.

CHAPTER TWO

NIKOS GAZED UP at KK Towers, an imposing glass-fronted building in Midtown Manhattan. He had been surprised to discover that the Kandy Kate headquarters were still located here. From what he'd heard, all the offices and apartments had been leased off, even if the premises still retained the KK name.

Christened by Bernie O'Connor, it had been a glittering symbol of the power and success of the Kandy Kate empire, with its offices sprawling over several floors and the stunning penthouse apartment home to his adored family.

He had never met Bernie, but he had obviously been an astute businessman—something that Nikos respected highly. To have made such a success of the Kandy Kate business in what had to be a very competitive market took intelligence and guts.

It was a shame he hadn't applied those same principles to his private life. From what Nikos could see, Bernie had made completely the wrong choice of wife.

Fiona O'Connor was an arrogant snob—that much had been obvious from the start. Her rudeness Nikos might have accepted. After all, when they had met Fiona had been recently bereaved...he would have made allowances. He could even have excused her blatant hostility, given the circumstances. Particularly in light of the fact that Kate had conveniently forgotten to tell her mother of his existence. But the way she had

looked at him with such abject horror—as if he was worse than nothing—*that* had got under his skin.

And then there was Kate...

Nikos held his jaw firm as he marched through the revolving doors into a light-filled vestibule. What right did he have to criticise Bernie O'Connor about his choice of partner when he had made the same mistake—with bells on? He too had fallen for totally the wrong woman.

The 'Kate effect' had hit Nikos like a tornado. His golden rule of never getting emotionally involved with any woman had been smashed just like that. With a rush of wild exhilaration he had taken Kate's hand and jumped off the edge of the cliff, self-preservation blown to the wind. Totally consumed by that all-powerful, all-consuming thing called love, he'd had no choice but to obey the fierce command of his heart.

She had been beautiful, funny, clever...like no woman he had ever met before. The summer they had spent together in his home town of Agia Loukia, had been so special, so wonderful, that Nikos had assumed their joy would last for ever. And when Kate had accepted his proposal of marriage he had thought their future set, their happiness complete.

But too late Nikos had realised that when you jumped off a cliff, at some point you had to come back down to earth. And the crash landing he and Kate had made had been spectacularly horrendous.

Discovering that Kate had never told her parents about him

—never even mentioned him—had been the first punch in the gut. No wonder she hadn't wanted him to accompany her to New York when her father had been taken ill. No wonder she hadn't wanted him at Bernie's funeral.

His first niggling thoughts that she might actually be *ashamed* of him had soon solidified into rock-hard certainty as Kate had continued to treat him with cold distance...holding him at arm's length, pushing him away. Gone had been the warm and loving woman he had fallen in love with in Crete, to be replaced by someone he'd barely recognised—someone who had hardly been able to bring herself to look at him.

Their final showdown had had an air of inevitability about it. But even so it had been far harder, far more painful than Nikos could ever have imagined. Discovering what Kate *really* thought of him, and the pitifully low opinion she had of him, had felt like a stab to the heart. It still did.

But now it was time to expunge that memory. Now the tables had turned. Now Nikos intended to exact his revenge.

The concierge behind the gleaming wooden desk indicated the elevator for Kandy Kate's headquarters. Not the sleek, burnished gold affair at the end of the lobby, but a much smaller one, with an old-fashioned metal grid that you had to pull across manually. There was a moment's hesitation after Nikos pressed the button, and then the elevator slowly ground its way down to what felt like the bowels of the earth.

He had decided not to announce his arrival. He preferred

to take his chances rather than give Kate the opportunity to disappear or prepare pretty lies. In his experience an element of surprise always worked in his favour.

The Kandy Kate office was at the end of a long corridor, its name stuck on the middle panel of a half-glazed door. After a single sharp knock Nikos walked straight in.

The room was small, gloomy and empty. There was no natural light, and a fluorescent strip bulb cast a depressingly cold glow over a cluttered desk, a couple of wooden chairs. A rustling noise to the left alerted him to another, smaller room, not much more than a cupboard. Someone of indeterminate age and sex was in there, squatting on the floor in front of an open filing cabinet drawer.

'Hi!' Nikos raised his voice as the person obviously hadn't heard him. 'I'm looking for Kate O'Connor.'

He saw the figure go rigid. As it slowly moved to stand Nikos felt the breath catch in his throat. *Of course.* She still hadn't turned around, but as she pulled out the buds in her ears, cutting short the tinny buzz of music from the phone she retrieved from her pocket, it was obvious. The shape of the back of her head, the long sweep of her neck...

Once again it had taken him a couple of seconds to recognise her, but if this was another disguise she was going to have to try a lot harder.

He advanced further into the room, positioning himself in the doorway of the glorified cupboard. 'I see I have found her.'

‘Nikos!’

His name was a dry accusation on her tongue. As she finally turned to face him Nikos caught the alarm in her wide green eyes, saw the way her face had drained of colour. He heard the snatch of her indrawn breath. It was all suitably gratifying.

Nikos blatantly stared at her, ignoring the normal rules of decorum. They were way past that.

She was dressed entirely in black, her face free from make-up, her dark hair cropped short, cut into the nape of her neck so that it exposed her ears. With an unwanted kick of lust Nikos found himself wondering how that hair would feel beneath his fingertips. She looked elegant, fragile, beautiful. Certainly nothing like the woman he had seen last night. A pair of plain silver earrings dangling from her lobes were the only hint of adornment.

She looked away, avoiding his gaze. Nikos could see her desperately working to regain her composure, to pull a mask of indifference into place. He held the silence.

‘What do you want?’ Her voice sounded faint. ‘Why are you here?’

‘That’s not much of a greeting, Kate.’ Now his taunting animosity had kicked in. ‘Not much of a welcome after all these years.’

‘You’ll get no welcome from me.’ Her head swung back, her words falling like shards of glass.

‘No. Of course I won’t. How foolish of me.’

With a mocking stare, he stepped out of the doorway back into the office. After a moment's hesitation he strode over to a chair, picking up the pile of papers from the seat and holding them in his hand as he waited for Kate to squeeze in the other side of the desk.

'All right if I sit down?'

He waved the papers at her and Kate snatched them back. Nikos seated himself, stretching out his legs and crossing them at the ankles before linking his hands behind his head and leaning back in a classic display of dominance.

'So, tell me, Kate—how have you been?' He let his eyes drift over her face, watching the way the colour flooded back.

Kate gave him a fierce glare. 'I'm sure you haven't come here to ask after my well-being. I repeat, Nikos, what do you want?'

'A cup of coffee would be nice, since you're asking.'

'What do you mean by walking in here uninvited?' Her breath sounded dry in her throat.

'I make a habit of turning up uninvited.' Nikos gave her a pleasant smile. 'You should know that by now.' He watched as his barb sank in. 'Now, how about that coffee? Black, one sugar for me. But I expect you remember that.'

Kate hesitated, looking as if she'd rather boil her head in oil than make him a cup of coffee. But then, obviously deciding it wasn't worth the battle, she laid the papers down on the desk and moved over to a coffee maker in the corner of the room, her shoulders hitched up around her ears. As she removed the jug

from the hotplate Nikos could see the way her hand tremored.

Good. He was glad of the effect he was having on her. It wasn't much consolation after the way she had treated him, but it was a start. And it all increased his sense of power.

As Kate passed the mug to him he deliberately let his hand touch hers, acknowledging the frisson between them with a quirk of dark brows before Kate jerked her hand away.

Yes, he was enjoying this.

'So, are these now the sole premises of the Kandy Kate empire?' He briefly glanced around him, his tone light and casual, but no less cutting for that.

'They are.'

Kate moved back behind the desk, reluctantly sitting down and folding her arms across her chest. She wore a black ribbed jumper with a scoop neck, the sleeves pushed up, and Nikos could see she had lost weight. But the clingy material still accentuated her shape nicely. She looked sober, chic...*sexy*.

'This office is perfectly adequate.'

'I'm sure it is.' Nikos gave a small nod of agreement. 'With the state of the Kandy Kate empire at the moment I imagine you could run it from a phone booth. After all, how much room do you need to go bankrupt?'

'Kandy Kate is *not* going bankrupt!' Kate was on her feet in a second, green eyes flashing.

'No?' Nikos tempered her fire with infuriating calm. 'Well, that's not what I've heard.'

‘Well, you’ve heard wrong.’

She tossed her head, turning away from him, her face in profile. Nikos stared at the straight line of her nose, the fine sweep of her jaw. Why had he never noticed her jawline before? He’d thought he was all too familiar with every inch of Kate’s body.

During the weeks they had spent together he had made it his mission to explore every delicious inch of her with his fingers, his lips, his tongue. Making love to Kate had been the most erotic experience of his life—a shared wonder that neither of them had been able to get enough of, as if they had both been taken over by an insatiable craving.

On reflection, he hadn’t made love *to* her, he had made love *with* her. A symphony of sexual pleasures that had ruined him for any other woman.

And he cursed her for it.

He had cursed her when he’d arrived back in Crete after being all but banished from her home. When the very thought of her name had been enough to solidify his blood. He had cursed her during the intervening years when, no matter how attractive a woman might be, how charming and how available, they’d all seemed about as sexy as a block of wood to Nikos after the intense earthly pleasures he had shared with Kate O’Connor. Even drinking himself into oblivion hadn’t helped—just made his self-disgust second only to the disgust he’d felt for his ex-fiancée.

And he still cursed her now.

Nikos hadn't realised just how much until he'd gazed at her haughty profile and realised that time, far from diminishing his desire for Kate, had merely held it in cold storage, frozen, ready to be thawed by one fiery glance from those dark green eyes.

He took a mouthful of coffee, slamming the brakes on thoughts which were taking him in very unwanted directions—directions that had nothing to do with his carefully calculated plans. He needed to focus on what he was here to do.

'So, Kandy Kate's not in trouble then?' The venom in his voice was held just under the surface. 'The reports that your sales have plummeted, your suppliers are threatening legal action, your staff are not getting paid...' he leant forward, idly picking up a sheaf of papers, scanning a few lines before letting them drop '...all totally untrue?'

'Yes.' Kate pointedly straightened the papers, then held them to her chest. 'Well, wildly exaggerated anyway.' She refused to meet his eye.

'Is that right?' Nikos continued. 'So the fact that your share prices plummeted means nothing either? Your shareholders are perfectly happy to have received no dividends in the past twelve months and to have seen their investments dwindle to a pittance?'

'As a matter of fact...' she jutted out her chin '...share prices have increased considerably recently. Confidence in the brand is growing.'

'Really?' Nikos queried amiably. 'Or is it that someone is

about to make a hostile takeover?'

Kate bit down on her lip, the nip against her soft pink pout stirring Nikos somewhere deep and low.

'Well, either way it's none of your concern. In fact I would like you to leave. Immediately.'

She moved the few steps to the door to usher him out but Nikos was too quick for her, barring her way with his broad shoulders and towering height.

'Well, that's just where you're wrong. It *is* my concern. Or at least it very soon will be.'

'What do you mean by that?' Kate stopped stock-still.

'I'm sure you can work it out for yourself, Kate.' Nikos smiled at her. 'You're a bright girl.'

'You...?' Her hand flew to tug at her earlobe. 'You mean it's *you* who has been buying up the shares?'

He rested his arm against the doorjamb. He wasn't going to reply. He would make her squirm while his silence spoke for him.

'But why? Why would you do such a thing?'

'Because I think Kandy Kate is an interesting proposition.' He casually slid his hand down the doorframe and into the pocket of his trousers. 'Handled correctly, I'm confident it will prove to be a good investment.'

'"A good investment"?' Kate challenged. 'I don't believe you. Why would you think that?'

Nikos gave a short laugh. 'No wonder your business is in such dire straits if you have so little faith in it.'

‘I have plenty of faith in Kandy Kate, thank you very much. It’s *you* I have no faith in.’

‘Ah, yes, of course.’ His eyes gleamed darkly. ‘I almost forgot.’

‘Well, I haven’t.’

He could see that Kate was slowly clawing her way to safer ground. He would let her rest there for a while before bringing her straight back down.

‘And there was me thinking you’d be *grateful* to find an investor. Even one such as myself.’

‘You are *not* an investor,’ Kate flew at him. ‘You have gone behind my back and purchased Kandy Kate shares at a rock-bottom price with the intention of taking over the company. You said it yourself—this is a hostile takeover.’

‘It doesn’t *have* to be hostile.’ Lowering his voice, Nikos fixed her with a glittering stare, reaching forward to take hold of her chin when she tried to turn her face away. ‘In fact, if we put our minds to it, I suspect we could make it very friendly indeed.’

‘In your dreams, Nikos.’ Kate jerked her head away from his light grip. ‘If you think I could ever be friendly with you again, in *any* capacity, then you are very much mistaken.’

Nikos watched as she tucked herself behind the safety of her desk, giving her a moment before he spoke again. ‘Well, we’ll see about that, won’t we?’ He sat back down opposite her. ‘And, since you’ve brought up the matter of dreams, then, yes, I admit it—you have featured in mine quite largely.’ He flexed his fingers to inspect his manicured nails. ‘All those long, lonely

nights in an empty bed, with nothing but memories to keep me company...what's a man to do...?' He looked up, spearing Kate with his gaze, registering the deep flush that had stained her cheeks, tinging the rim of her neat ears. 'Maybe it has been the same for you?'

'Get out!' On her feet again, Kate pointed to the door, her extended arm visibly shaking.

'No.' Nikos matched her stance, his voice a harsh command, all traces of teasing flirtation banished. 'I am not going anywhere, Kate. Not until you have heard what I have to say.'

'And what, exactly, do you think gives you the right to tell me what to do?'

Nikos would have liked to tell her. He could think of plenty of reasons why she should do exactly as he said. Kate O'Connor owed him—and in time he looked forward to making her see that. But not yet. If you were trying to land a wriggling fish it was best to turn the reel nice and slow.

He drew in a steadying breath. 'Let's just say it will be to your advantage.'

'I very much doubt it.' With a scoff, Kate sat back down, folding her arms tightly across her chest. 'Just say whatever it is you have to say, then get out.'

Nikos arranged his body on the chair, deliberately taking his time. Steepling his fingers, he raised his eyes to find hers. 'You may or may not know, but since we last met my fortunes have changed somewhat. I am now an extremely wealthy man.'

‘So?’ Kate glared at him. ‘If you’ve just come here to brag about how rich you are, Nikos, then save your breath. I’m not interested.’

Nikos paused, taking a second to mentally erase her contemptuous remark. It was either that or teach her a lesson. And he knew exactly how he’d like to do *that*.

‘Luckily for you, I am prepared to invest some of that fortune to save your business.’

‘And, unluckily for you, I wouldn’t accept you as an investor if you were the last man on earth.’ Her answer came back with the speed of a bullet.

‘Really, Kate?’ She was starting to wind him up now. ‘Are you *sure* about that?’

‘I said so, didn’t I?’

‘So what sort of man *would* you take investment from, I wonder?’ Nikos narrowed his eyes, pretending to consider. ‘The sort of man who might be persuaded to overlook the dire state of the business in return for other, more personal favours?’

‘What are you insinuating?’ Choking with outrage, Kate was on her feet again. ‘How *dare* you?’

Her hand flew out to slap his face but Nikos intercepted it with ease, standing up and holding it against his chest so Kate was forced to lean her body across the desk.

‘Tut-tut.’ He eyeballed her. ‘Violence is not the answer, Kate—you should know that.’

‘Then take back what you just said!’

Her furious breath swelled her ribcage, pressing her breasts against the fine fabric of her sweater, accentuating the cleavage that Nikos found his eyes drawn to against their will.

'How dare you insinuate such a thing?'

'Because I *saw* you last night, Kate.'

He felt her hand go limp beneath his grasp, slipping away as shock rendered her silent.

She pulled back, dragging in a breath. 'You saw me?' Her skin visibly paled beneath the cruel strip light.

'Uh-huh.'

'Well, whatever it was you *thought* you saw, you were wrong. It was just a waitressing job—that's all.'

'A waitressing job that entailed squirming on the lap of that bloated banker? Assuming that you weren't doing it for your own sexual gratification, I can only conclude you were doing it for other, more practical reasons. I liked the blonde wig, by the way. Very classy.'

'I don't have to explain myself to *you*.' Kate valiantly fought to regain her dignity. 'If it gives you some sort of perverted pleasure to imagine that I would have sex with a stranger for money, then go ahead—be my guest. Frankly, your opinion of me is of no interest. You can think whatever you damn well like.'

'It doesn't give me pleasure, Kate. Quite the reverse.'

Slowly she scanned his face, and Nikos felt his facial muscles pull taut beneath the scrutiny of that dark green gaze.

'Why, Nikos? Why does it bother you? Why would you care

what I do?'

She was taunting him. Nikos cursed inwardly. His voice had been too raw, had betrayed too much emotion, exposing feelings he had fully intended to keep concealed. Far from reeling her in slowly, he was in danger of letting her off the hook.

'After all, we mean nothing to one another any more.' Kate pressed harder. 'We are free to see whoever we want, to do whatever we want.'

'And this is what you want, is it?' Anger fired through him. 'To be free to sell your body to the highest bidder? To anyone who's prepared to sling some money your way so you can prop up your pathetically failing business for a bit longer?'

He saw her swallow, her throat moving in the long column of her neck. But she kept her head held high.

'And what if it is? What's it to you?'

Nikos clamped down on his jaw, fighting to contain the hot sweep of masculine rage that threatened to consume him. He would *not* let her get to him.

Circling the desk, he stood before her, his shoulders back, his breathing heavy. Capturing her eyes, he made sure there was no way she could escape the cruel intensity of his gaze. 'To have a fiancée of mine behaving in such a blatantly wanton manner brings shame to my door. I will not allow it.'

'Aren't you forgetting something?' Kate blinked rapidly against his stare, but still she stayed defiant. 'I am not your fiancée any more. I haven't been for the past three years.'

‘And that’s why I am here. To put that right.’

‘What?’ Confusion spread across her lovely face.

‘We are going to get engaged again, Kate. And this time we are going to see it through. This time we are going to be married.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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