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By Helen Bianchin

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Alesha reluctantly concedes to a paper marriage where she and Loukas will fulfill social obligations yet lead separate lives. But Loukas needs more...a wife who is doting in public. And the only way to make that arrangement appear authentic is if she's his willing bride *in private*...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Helen Bianchin was encouraged by a friend to write her own romance novel and she hasn't stopped writing since! Helen's interests include a love of reading, going to the movies, and watching selected television programs. She also enjoys catching up with friends, usually over a long lunch! A lover of animals, especially cats, she owns two beautiful Birmans. Helen lives in Australia with her husband. Their three children and four grandchildren live close by.

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Alesha sat in stunned silence as the lawyer finished reading her late father's will.

Surprise didn't even begin to cut it.

What had Dimitri Karsouli been *thinking* in selling a twenty-five-per-cent share in the Karsouli Corporation to Loukas Andreou?

Worse... gifting Loukas a further twenty-five-per-cent share. Representing several hundred million dollars on today's market.

Subject to marriage.

The breath caught in her throat as realization hit. Dear heaven. Her father had *bought* her a husband?

It was beyond comprehension.

Yet she was all too aware how her father's mind worked; it didn't take much to do the maths.

A year ago Alesha's disastrous short-lived marriage had formally ended in divorce from a man who had professed to love her... only for her to discover to her cost that Seth Armitage's main goal had been a stake in her father's fortune and a free ride on the gravy train. It had devastated her and angered her father... more than she had known.

Dimitri, out of a sense of parental devotion, had clearly conspired to arrange what he perceived to be a fail-safe liaison for his daughter via marriage to a man who had his total approval. A man of integrity, trust, possessed of astute business nous, and a worthy companion.

Loukas Andreou, the inflexible omnipotent head of the Athens branch of the Andreou Corporation, whose financial interests included shipping and considerable ancillary assets worldwide.

Loukas, whose father Constantine had been Dimitri's lifelong friend and associate... a man whose powerful image sprang so readily to Alesha's mind, it was almost as if his presence became a tangible entity in the room.

In his late thirties, attractive, if one admired masculine warrior features, with the height, breadth of shoulder and facial bone structure that comprised angles and planes. Loukas had brilliant dark eyes and a mouth that promised much.

Sophisticated apparel did little to diminish an innate ruthlessness resting beneath the surface of his control.

It was utterly devastating for Alesha to even begin to imagine what had possessed Dimitri to revise his will to include a clause stipulating his bequest of the remaining fifty-per-cent share in the Karsouli Corporation to his only child, Alesha Eleni Karsouli. This bequest was conditional on a marriage taking place to Loukas Andreou within a month of Dimitri's demise, thus ensuring a one-hundred-per-cent joint *family* ownership, thereby securing the corporation and ensuring it would continue into another generation.

'A court of law could rule the marriage stipulation as invalid,' Alesha voiced.

The lawyer regarded her thoughtfully. 'While there would be a degree of sympathy regarding that specific clause, your father's instructions were very clearly defined. I counselled him to reconsider, but he was adamant that clause should stand.'

Alesha stifled a startled curse beneath her breath.

Dimitri had known how much Karsouli meant to her, how she'd lived and breathed it for as long as she could remember. Absorbing every aspect, studying for degrees at university to ensure she acquired the relevant knowledge, the edge... aware the word *nepotism* didn't exist in her father's vocabulary.

He knew too the pride she'd taken in working her way from the ground up to her current position of authority.

It had been a foregone conclusion his only child would assume control upon Dimitri's demise.

And he had, Alesha conceded, gifted her that... with strings attached. Conditions aimed to protect Karsouli, and her. Especially *her*.

To attempt to force her into a marriage she didn't want was the ultimate manipulative act, and in that moment she could almost hate him for it.

Two days ago she'd weathered the funeral service at the chapel. Walked behind the hearse to the grave site. Stood in silent despair and grieved as the ritual played out.

Aware of Loukas Andreou's presence...imagining he'd flown in from Athens to attend Dimitri's funeral as a mark of respect. And totally unaware of any subterfuge.

She could walk away; ignore the marriage clause, resign from the Karsouli Corporation and seek a position in a rival firm.

Except she was a Karsouli, born and bred, legally reverting to her maiden name after her failed marriage. Hadn't her father groomed her to rise to her current position? Conditioning her to believe it didn't matter she was female; women in the twenty-first century held positions of power, and he'd given her no reason to suppose otherwise.

Dimitri Karsouli had ruled his life and his business interests with an iron fist in a velvet glove, earning him a corporation now worth a fortune.

His father before him had come from humble beginnings in Athens, and, fostering an idea presented to the right person at the right time, initiated the founding office in Athens of the Karsouli Corporation. Dimitri, his only son, had followed in hallowed footsteps, living and breathing the business and injecting it with new ideas, broadening its scope and extending it onto a global market.

Dimitri had married and moved to Sydney and had sought to have his own son continue, except his marriage

had gifted him a daughter, born in difficult circumstances that had rendered his wife unable to produce another child.

A beloved daughter, Alesha, who had become her father's pride and joy, especially when she proved she'd inherited his business acumen and sharp mind.

Privately educated and exclusively schooled, Alesha had graduated from university with honours in a business degree, and had entered Karsouli in a lowly position, rising in the ranks through hard work and dedication.

Her one error in judgement had been to marry in haste, against her father's wishes, a man who, while playing a part to perfection during their brief courtship, had revealed his true persona within hours of leaving the wedding reception.

A painful time, when divorce and a handsome pay-out had been the only option. Especially so, as it was compounded by her mother's losing battle with a virulent form of cancer.

Alesha's adamant refusal to consider marriage at any future stage became a bone of contention between father and daughter. Now, by a conditional clause in his will, Dimitri was bent on manipulating her into matrimony with a man of whom he approved. A man of Greek descent. Someone who had his utmost trust...to take the reins of Karsouli and lead his daughter into the marriage bed.

Dimitri had to be smiling in his grave, assured Alesha would never concede to losing what she loved most in life... the family firm.

In that respect she'd inherited her father's genes. His bloodline was so strong, the desire to achieve, to succeed, to prove her worth beyond doubt, irrespective of gender.

'This...*scheme* has Loukas Andreou's approval?'

The lawyer spread his hands in a telling gesture. 'I understand he has indicated his consent.'

'It's outrageous,' Alesha uttered with considerable heat. '*Impossible*,' she added for good measure. 'I don't want to marry *anyone*.'

Loukas Andreou had been welcomed into her parents' home on the few occasions he'd visited Sydney. She'd dined in his company, and met up with him in Athens on the occasional trip to Greece with her parents. Combining business with pleasure... or so she'd thought at the time.

Now, she wasn't so sure. Even *then*, had Dimitri sown the seeds of a possible future marriage?

Loukas Andreou. The man was a force to be reckoned with in the business arena... and the bedroom, if rumour had any basis in fact.

Old money. His great-grandfather, so the Andreou biographical details depicted on record revealed, had made his fortune in shipping. A fortune added to by each succeeding generation.

The Andreou consortium owned two Greek Islands, property, residences in most European cities, and there was the private cruiser, the Lear jet, the expensive cars... the women.

The media followed and tabled Loukas' every move, embellishing the smallest fact with gossip.

Tall, well-built frame, dark hair, ruggedly attractive facial features... he unsettled her. Almost as if he saw far more than she wanted anyone to see.

There were some secrets she'd buried so deep, no one would uncover them. Ever.

'How long has Loukas been aware of the contents of my father's will?'

'It's something you'll have to ask him.'

She would... at the first opportunity!

Alesha glimpsed the faint lift in the lawyer's brow.

'You have two clear options,' he cautioned quietly. 'Agree to the marriage...or disagree. I strongly advise you not to make a decision until you've spoken with Loukas Andreou.'

She stood and indicated the consultation had reached a conclusion. The lawyer accompanied her into the lobby and pressed the call button to summon a lift.

Alesha gritted her teeth together in a need to prevent the urge to scream as the lift transported her to ground. *Why* had her father conspired to do what he had?

Except she knew precisely why.

Hadn't Dimitri's own marriage to her mother been deemed a satisfactory liaison benefitting both families?

Love? If it happened, well and good. If it didn't, affection, *family* was enough to make a contented life.

Surprisingly, her parents had shared a good marriage. A little volatile at times, she reflected, remembering Dimitri's voice raised in anger over some relatively minor conflict with her mother. A woman who'd stood her own ground and given back as much in kind. Had they shared a grand passion? Perhaps. Great affection, certainly.

Alesha had wanted the grand passion, the love generated by two souls in perfect accord. She'd thought she'd found it with Seth Armitage...only to discover he'd very cleverly played a cruel game, and her marriage was nothing more than a travesty. One she escaped from almost as soon as the ink had dried on their marriage certificate.

Dimitri, to give him his due, hadn't vented with *I told you so*. He'd been supportive, caring.

Yet it hurt unbearably that behind the scenes he'd been co...

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