



Lynne Graham

The **GREEK'S**
Blackmailed
MISTRESS

MILLS & BOON
MODERN

LYNNE GRAHAM

The Greek's Blackmailed Mistress

Аннотация

'I do have an option to offer you.' Three months between the Greek's sheets! Blackmailed into the billionaire's bed? Elvi can't believe her attempt to appeal to heartless Xan's benevolent side has gone so wrong! But to save her step-mother's job, she nervously agrees to the Greek's outrageous terms. Xan is gorgeous with a damaged side only Elvi sees—but how will he react when he realises that his new mistress is an innocent virgin?

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Escape with this captivating Cinderella romance!

LYNNE GRAHAM was born in Northern Ireland and has been a keen romance reader since her teens. She is very happily married to an understanding husband who has learned to cook since she started to write! Her five children keep her on her toes. She has a very large dog, which knocks everything over, a very small terrier, which barks a lot, and two cats. When time allows, Lynne is a keen gardener.

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ISBN: 978-1-474-07246-5

THE GREEK'S BLACKMAILED MISTRESS

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Published in Great Britain 2018

by Mills & Boon, an imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* 1

London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF

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[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Booklist](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

Extract

About the Publisher

CHAPTER ONE

‘I’M TOO BEAUTIFUL to be dumped,’ Fabiana told Xan in all seriousness, her perfect face a mask of disbelief. ‘It’s my poor English, isn’t it? I’m picking you up wrong—’

‘No,’ Xan contradicted with gravity, smoothly switching to her native Spanish. ‘The movers will be here in an hour to help you pack. We’ve been together two months. I did tell you that this arrangement wouldn’t last any longer than that—’

‘But you can’t *not* want me any more—’ Giving her reflection an appreciative appraisal in the nearest mirror, Fabiana fluffed up her fall of tumbling dark curls.

‘I *don’t* want you any more,’ Xan countered, losing patience, beginning to wonder how the hell he had enjoyed even one encounter with the brunette, infused as she was with astronomical vanity.

‘Where am I supposed to go?’ Fabiana demanded abruptly, studying him in frustration, silently recognising that she was unlikely to ever have a better-looking man in her bed. Six foot three and beautifully built, his black hair cropped short over a lean, devastatingly handsome face, the Greek financial guru, Xan Ziakis, would be a very hard act to follow and without him she would lose access to the exclusive events she had so much enjoyed.

‘Your possessions will be stored and a hotel room has been engaged for you,’ Xan clarified, on firmer ground now because he had been changing mistresses every couple of months for years. There was nothing new about the status quo and Fabiana had benefitted richly from their association even though his visits had been few.

Reflecting on that last surprising truth, Xan questioned his libido. He was only thirty years old. Obviously he was bored with Fabiana, he told himself impatiently. Yet, in truth, work and the pursuit of profit had always won out over the thrill of sex for Xan. *Some day* he would heed his mother’s endless pleas and start dating with a view to taking a wife but that day was many years off. His father, Helios, had married five times over, gifting Xan with a costly and troublesome flock of half-siblings, and he was determined not to repeat his father’s mistakes. Helios had married too young while Xan intended to wait until he was in his forties, at the very least, and had sown every last wild oat available to him.

Not that Fabiana and her faceless, virtually indistinguishable predecessors had much in common with wild oats, he conceded with wry self-mockery. All his bed partners had been models or minor actresses, the sort of women who understood that he paid generously for everything they wanted in return for their bodies. Framed in those words, it sounded crude, he acknowledged without shame, but that very basic format worked well for him and the one time he had tried another approach, when he had been both young and idealistic, it had gone badly wrong for him.

Xan believed love was a dangerous risk. His father had fallen in love repeatedly with demonstrably unsuitable women. Xan had had his heart broken when he was only twenty-one and nothing would've persuaded him to revisit that learning experience.

A financial genius, who had become a billionaire by the age of twenty-five, Xan was the acclaimed mastermind behind City coups worth billions. He had quickly repaired the giant hole in the Ziakis family fortunes left by his imprudent father, and had simply chosen to organise his sex life much as he organised everything else around him because disorder of any kind put him in a bad mood. He liked his life smooth; he *preferred* a routine he virtually never deviated from. He would not risk the upheaval of marriage breakdowns and hugely expensive divorces that had decimated his father's wealth. He was stronger than that and infinitely cleverer, indeed smarter than most of the people around him, and the only risks he took were in the financial field where he trusted his gut and aggressive instincts.

His phone vibrated, instantly freeing him from all awareness of Fabiana's presence. He dug it out, immediately wondering why Dmitri, the head of his security team, would be contacting him. A moment later, he found out and he was enraged. Someone had *dared* to steal something very precious from him, and he stalked out of the apartment his mistresses used without another word to the brunette. His penthouse apartment was his sanctuary where he entertained neither women nor anyone else. The idea that *any* person could violate his London home in spite of all the security he had put in place sent his hot temper nuclear.

'The maid?' he breathed with audible distaste.

'Or her son. She let him into the apartment even though it's against the rules,' Dmitri filled in stiffly. 'I could pursue this discreetly *or* call the police—'

'You call the police and provide them with the evidence,' Xan cut in fiercely. 'You punish them with the full weight of the law!'

Xan collected imperial jade that cost him shocking sums and he had placed that little brush pot in the hall for his own enjoyment because it was a remarkably tactile piece and had once belonged to a Chinese emperor. In his penal frame of mind, whipping was too light a punishment for thieves.

* * *

The following day, Elvi's teenaged brother flung himself into her arms and sobbed, 'I'm so sorry...this whole nightmare is *my* fault!'

'Let's calm down,' Elvi suggested gently, framing her little

brother's face with both small hands, recognising from the anguish in his green eyes that he had been crying alone in his room for some time. 'I'll make some tea—'

'I don't want tea!' Daniel protested. 'I want to go down to the police station and admit it was me and *not* Mum!'

'No, we're going to talk about this first,' Elvi overruled. 'Mum protected you for a reason—'

'Bloody medical school! It doesn't matter—'

Of course it mattered, Elvi thought ruefully, that Daniel wanted to be a doctor like their late father. It was all he had ever wanted to be since he was a little boy and a conviction for theft would totally destroy that ambition. Furthermore, Daniel had already been awarded a place at Oxford to study because his academic results were the very best. She knew exactly why her mother had lied and taken the blame for her son, but what she could not understand or credit was that Daniel would *ever* have stolen anything.

'I *need* to know what happened,' she persisted quietly, seating herself on the bed where her dark-haired brother had flopped down to hang his head. He was getting so tall and lanky at just past eighteen that he was fast growing out of all his clothes, his jeans barely reaching his ankles and his enormous feet. She and Daniel bore not an ounce of resemblance to each other because, although they had had the same father, they had had different mothers. Elvi's mother had died when she was a baby, and her father's second wife had adopted her and brought her

up as her own. She was the short, plump one of the family, Elvi conceded ruefully, bright blue eyes troubled, pushing back the white-blond hair sticking to her perspiring brow because she had run all the way home from work as soon as Daniel had phoned her.

‘Yesterday, I called to pick up Mum for her AA meeting but I was a bit early,’ Daniel confided.

Elvi heaved a sigh, for both of them tried to ensure that their mother went to regular meetings and since the summer arrived and Daniel had finished school and only contrived to find part-time employment, he had taken over the duty. Sally Cartwright deserved her family’s support to stay sober. She had been sober now for three long wonderful years but Elvi was painfully aware that alcoholism was an affliction that never entirely went away. Denying herself the craving for that one dangerous drink was what Sally dealt with every day.

‘*And?*’

‘She was cleaning something and had to finish it, so she told me to sit down in the hall and not to touch anything,’ Daniel grumbled. ‘Like I was a little kid or something and I was annoyed, so I *didn’t* listen...’

‘What did you touch?’ Elvi almost whispered.

‘There was this little jade pot sitting on the console table in a patch of sunlight—honestly, Elvi...it was the sort of thing I’ve only ever seen inside a museum case—and I just wanted to hold it for a minute, so I picked it up and took it over to the window

to hold it up to the light because it was so delicate—’

‘And then what?’ Elvi prompted with anxious impatience.

Daniel studied her in almost childlike discomfiture. ‘Then the doorbell went and Mum rushed out to answer it and I kept the pot hidden in my hand because I didn’t want her to see what I’d been doing. Unluckily for me, the man at the door worked for Mr Ziakis too and he was there to tell me that I shouldn’t be in the apartment in the first place and that I should be waiting for my mother downstairs. He made me leave immediately, like...he was sort of nice about it but I had no chance of putting the pot back with him standing there—’

‘For goodness’ sake, Daniel!’ Elvi erupted in vehement protest. ‘You should’ve handed it to him straight away! The minute you stepped out of that apartment door with it, you labelled yourself a thief—’

‘Yeah, you think I don’t know that now?’ Daniel traded with laden irony. ‘But I gave way to panic and I concealed it, brought it home and stuck the blasted thing in a drawer. I planned to ask Mum to put it back for me tomorrow but apparently the housekeeper reported it missing when she turned in for work in the evening, so that was that. I missed the boat and—’

Stupid, stupid, stupid, repeated in Elvi’s head but she didn’t let the word pass her lips because she could see that her sibling was already painfully aware that he had acted like an impulsive and reckless total idiot. ‘When did the police get involved?’ she interposed.

‘This morning...they arrived with a search warrant and of course they found it. Mum asked me to go into her room to get her handbag and while I was in there she may have confessed to taking it because by the time I came back out again because I couldn’t find the blasted thing she was being arrested and read her rights,’ he revealed chokily, gulping back more unmanly sobs. ‘We need a solicitor—’

Elvi was thinking hard and fast but coming up with nothing. Her brain was still in shock. She wished she didn’t know as much about her mother’s fabulously wealthy employer as she did. He was the guy with the colour-coded closets and alphabetically arranged books. He had a desk that must never be touched and a bed that had to be changed every day. Her mother’s duties in his apartment were hedged in by a very detailed list of do’s and don’ts. That in the flesh the same male looked as though he had stepped straight out of a glossy magazine advertisement as a supermodel for designer apparel had struck Elvi as uniquely unfair.

She had read up about her mother’s employer on the Internet, learning more that had made her grind her teeth together. *Why?* Because, Xan Ziakis seemed to have been born under a very lucky star, blessed by every conceivable attribute, and all he seemed to have learned from his remarkable good fortune was a marked tendency to behave as though he suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder. Of course, maybe he did, she allowed ruefully, because nobody could possibly be that perfect in the

real world. When she was still meeting her mother out of work to accompany her to AA meetings, she had seen Xan Ziakis coming home on several occasions while she sat waiting in the foyer of the luxury apartment block. And he was gorgeous to look at, absolutely, unmistakably gorgeous.

* * *

‘I did the only thing I could,’ Sally Cartwright confided hours later as she sat with her adopted daughter in the bedroom they shared. In her forties, she was a slender brunette with anxious green eyes now lined and shadowed with strain.

‘It wasn’t the only thing,’ Elvi argued in a low voice, neither of them wanting Daniel in the next room to overhear them. ‘You could’ve told the truth, both of you—’

‘And do you really think anyone would have *believed* us?’ her mother demanded tearfully, her cynicism unhidden. ‘We’re poor and down on our luck. Why? Because *I* wrecked all our lives, brought us down from a normal happy family to *this*!’

This, expressed by a shamed hand gesture, encompassed the grim surroundings of their council flat in a tower block. But it was the guilt infused by Sally’s bitten-back sob that worried Elvi the most, fearful as she was that her mother’s distress would drive her back to alcohol. She knew better than to fall into reasoned argument with her mother on the score of her culpability because essentially the older woman was stating the unlovely truth.

At the time of Elvi’s father’s sudden death, the Cartwright family had been financially secure. They had owned their home

and Sally had been a respected teacher in a girls' school but alcohol and a tide of growing debt had washed that safe, comfortable life away. Inevitably, Sally had lost her job and Elvi had left school at sixteen to find work. Like bricks tumbling down in a child's game, everything they had once taken for granted had been taken from them until they'd reached rock bottom and became homeless.

From there it had been a slow climb back to security, a *very* slow climb, Elvi acknowledged wryly, but until this theft incident occurred their lives had steadily been improving. The three of them had rejoiced the day Daniel was accepted into medical school because it had been the first positive event they had had to celebrate in a very long time. Sally was so proud that, in spite of all that they had lost, Daniel had kept on studying and finally won through against such stiff competition because places to study medicine were very much oversubscribed in the UK. The threat of Daniel being ruined by one foolish mistake *could* destroy her mother all over again, Elvi thought with a sick sinking sensation in her stomach.

'No,' Sally declared steadily, her troubled face set with strong determination. 'This is *my* moment to make a sacrifice for everything *I* took from the two of you years ago and nothing you can say or do will change my mind on that score.'

Well, we'll just see about that, Elvi thought defiantly as she lay in her bed that night, listening to her mother toss and turn, as unable to find sleep as her daughter. The mother she loved as

much as she loved her little brother. Yet *her* mother had been her father's first wife, a Finnish nurse, tragically mown down by a car in a hospital car park within months of Elvi's birth. Her father had met and married Sally when Elvi was two years old and Elvi had no memories whatsoever of her birth mother. Her Scandinavian background came down to some faded photos and a handful of letters from an elderly Finnish grandma, who had died while she was still a child. For Elvi, family meant everything and she truly wished that her mother would accept that she and Daniel had long since forgiven her for her blunders.

After all, it wasn't as though Sally had *wanted* to become an alcoholic. Shattered by the sudden death of the husband she had adored, left alone to raise a six-year-old and a toddler, Sally had fallen apart in the grip of her grief and had slid into addiction by using alcohol as a crutch. Sally had had no other relatives to turn to for support and no close friends either because shortly before her husband's death, he had moved them all across the country to accept a new job. No, Elvi had sufficient compassion and understanding not to blame her mother for all their woes, nor was she willing to stand by and watch Sally undo all the progress she had made in recent years.

But realistically, what *could* she do?

Go and speak to Xan Ziakis in the hope that there was a streak of mercy beneath that designer suit and that frightening reputation for ruthless aggression and financial self-aggrandisement? Some hope, she mused wretchedly, feeling

horribly weak and small and powerless. Xan Ziakis was feared in the City of London for his refusal to ever play as one of a team and his disdain for alliances, temporary or otherwise. He worked alone and her mother had never seen any evidence of a woman having been in his penthouse. Maybe he was gay...

No, not him, Elvi decided, shifting quietly beneath her duvet, remembering with shame a period when she had been almost obsessed by a need to see him daily. She didn't like to think about it but a sort of juvenile crush had engulfed her when she first saw Xan Ziakis. Not before time, she told herself drily; after all, life might have been all swings and not much roundabout throughout her unsettled and unhappy adolescence, but she was now twenty-two years old even if she was still almost as innocent as a child. Even so, she still recalled the single scorching appraisal Xan Ziakis had given her months ago and the flame that had leapt through her like a soaring torch along with the surprise of its effects on her body. No, he definitely wasn't gay, she was convinced. But the shock had been that a man who looked as he did could look at *her* that way.

She was no show-stopping beauty and she bore not the smallest resemblance to the giraffe-legged bone-thin models she had seen on his arm in images on the Internet. Five feet two inches tall, she had white-blonde hair down to her waist, blue eyes and the sort of generous curves that made buying clothes a nightmare. She kept her hair long because the unusual colour was the one thing she liked about herself. As for the big breasts, the

overly large bottom and the thick thighs, anyone was welcome to them. If only she had been the gym-bunny type, she reflected, but she hated gyms, hated dieting, hated getting on the scales and loved her food far too much. He must have been looking at the boobs, she thought ruefully.

Would the boobs get her into his presence? Embarrassed by her own thoughts, she winced, but she wasn't in a position to be precious about what it might take to get a meeting with Xan Ziakis. He was a very powerful, influential and wealthy man, whose staff probably guarded access to him as if he were a solid platinum trophy to be seen only by the fortunate and equally rich and important few. So, approach him at home? Or at his office?

He was way too private in his lifestyle to be approached at his penthouse. It would have to be the office. Shortly before dawn when Sally had fallen into a restless sleep, Elvi crept out of bed, having finally decided what to do next. Since she doubted the likelihood of Xan being willing to grant her a personal interview, she would write him a letter, telling him what she needed to say. It was worth a try, she thought limply, and better than doing nothing. *Only just*, her intelligence warned her.

On Daniel's laptop, she began to tell their family history, but only after humbly apologising for both troubling Xan and the theft. She wished it had been possible to tell him the truth but, like her mother, she reckoned it would be too dangerous to put Daniel back in the suspect corner. If she told Xan Ziakis the truth, he could easily drop the charges against her mother and

instead pursue her brother and, even worse, he could then use the very letter she was writing against her family. Maybe writing *anything* down on paper was too dangerous, she thought fearfully, stopping in her task several times with a chill on her skin as she tried not to envisage even worse consequences coming their way.

But what other option did she have? Appealing to a man who might well have no heart was the only road she could take, and only then, if he was willing to see her, would she see him and plead her family's case to the best of her ability. Having to lie and state that her mother must have succumbed to an inexcusable moment of temptation distressed Elvi, but since Sally had already owned up to the theft with the police she didn't have much choice. She begged him to drop the charges because he had got his valuable artefact back. Did Xan Ziakis have any compassion? Was it possible that a man who had so much could be decent enough to be human and caring too?

The letter in an envelope squarely marked 'private and confidential' in one corner, Elvi waited on the pavement outside the Ziakis headquarters at eight that same morning. An assistant in a craft shop, she didn't start work until nine. And, according to her mother's idle chatter over the months, Xan Ziakis had a schedule that ran like clockwork. He left the penthouse at eight and travelled by limousine to his office seven days a week. *Seven*, she reflected wryly, a man who worked every day of the week for his success. Well, she could hardly criticise his work ethic.

The big black limousine drew up. The driver only opened the

door after another car drew up behind and four men in dark suits sprang out. Looking on in dismay, Elvi registered that Xan Ziakis was guarded by a ring-of-steel protection before he even got a polished shoe out of his limo. Even so, she moved forward, her legs turning strangely wobbly as Xan himself emerged into daylight, blue-black hair gleaming like polished silk, his flawless bronzed cheekbones taut below dark deep-set eyes, his lean, powerful body encased in an elegant suit that fitted him like a second skin, and there she froze.

‘Get back!’ someone said to her and, disconcerted, she retreated several steps still clutching her envelope.

Her quarry stalked on into the building...out of sight, *out of reach*, and she felt sick with failure, her face drained of colour, her eyes bleak.

A man appeared in front of her then, an older man, and there was something vaguely familiar about his craggy face. ‘Is that letter you’re gripping about your mother?’ he asked bluntly. ‘I work for Mr Ziakis too—’

‘Oh,’ Elvi said, taken aback by his approach. ‘Yes, it’s about Mum—’

‘Then give it to me,’ he urged. ‘I’ll see that it reaches the boss’s desk.’

In a daze Elvi looked up and saw the kindness in his gaze. ‘You’re—?’

‘Dmitri,’ he supplied, twitching the letter out of her loosening grasp. ‘I know your mother. I can’t promise that the boss will

read it or anything but I *can* put it on the desk.'

Elvi blinked. 'Thank you very much,' she murmured with warmth.

'No problem. She's a lovely lady,' Dmitri told her, walking off again at speed and vanishing into the building while tucking her letter into a pocket.

And Dmitri, whoever he is, doesn't think Sally Cartwright's a thief, Elvi realised as she climbed on a bus to get to work and mulled over that surprising encounter. Just as well, considering that she had frozen like an ice sculpture when she saw Xan Ziakis, not that she thought his bodyguards would have allowed her anywhere near him, because someone had told her to get out of the way. Dmitri? One of the other three men?

It didn't matter, she decided as she stocked shelves of knitting wool at work. The letter might land on Xan's desk but, as Dmitri had said, that didn't mean he would actually bother to read it or even more crucially respond to it.

But in that Elvi was mistaken. Xan was so disconcerted by the unexpected sight of his head of security covertly sliding an envelope onto his desk, when Dmitri clearly thought he was unseen, that nothing would have kept him from opening up that letter out of sheer human curiosity. Xan skimmed down to the signature first: *Elvi Cartwright*. He knew that name well enough and he also knew he should've been prepared for the tactic in such a situation. Instantly he wanted to crumple the letter up and bin it without reading it. That would have been the cautious way

to deal.

Even so, although Xan was *very* cautious with women, he couldn't bring himself to dump the letter unread. A couple of months ago, he had noticed her, well, really, *really* noticed her, he acknowledged grimly, and he had instructed Dmitri to find out who she was, assuming that she lived in the same apartment block. He had, however, learned that she was his maid's daughter, which had naturally concluded his interest. Billionaires did not consort with the daughters of their domestic staff. The gulf was too immense, the risk of a messy affair too great.

And yet, all the same...the letter still unread, Xan drifted momentarily into the past, recalling Elvi Cartwright with intense immediacy. The shining pale-as-milk hair, the wonderful blue eyes, the crazy natural glow of her, not to mention the extraordinary fact that she looked very different from the sort of women he usually slept with and yet, inexplicably, one glance at her turned him on harder and faster than any of them.

She was a bit overweight, he supposed abstractedly; hard to tell when he had only ever seen her in a loose black jacket that swamped her. Very short in stature, not his type, absolutely *not* his type, he told himself sternly as he shook out the letter, more concerned by Dmitri's bizarre involvement in its delivery than by what it might say. If he couldn't trust his head of security, who could he trust? Why had Dmitri got personally involved in so tawdry an incident?

Xan had a scientific approach to everything he read. Elvi's use

of English was far superior to what he would have expected and then he began reading and what he read was most educational from his point of view even if, by the end of it, he couldn't think why she expected *him as the victim* to want to do anything about Sally Cartwright's self-induced predicament.

Inevitably he studied the situation from his side of the fence, where all the power lay, and the sort of ideas that had never occurred to Xan Ziakis before when it came to a woman began very slowly to blossom. Xan, who never ever allowed himself to succumb to any kind of unwise temptation. Xan, who usually policed his every thought, suppressing any immoral promptings to concentrate more profitably on work. And once he let those bad ideas out of the box they created a positive riot in his imagination, raising the kind of excitement that only a good financial killing usually gave him...and that was it, Xan Ziakis was seduced by erotic possibilities for the first time in his life.

Xan folded the letter with a dark forbidding smile that his opponents would have recognised as a certain sign of danger and threat. He would give his quarry a couple of days to stew and wonder and *then* he would get in touch...

CHAPTER TWO

TWO ANXIOUS DAYS in which she never allowed her phone to stray from her pocket passed for Elvi and on the third day, at the point where she had almost given up hope entirely, it finally rang.

One of Xan Ziakis's staff invited her to a meeting late that

afternoon. Distracted by what lay ahead of her, she pleaded a dental appointment with her employer to finish early and worked over her usual lunch break instead. She got through her working hours on autopilot while anxiously rehearsing speeches in the back of her brain, only to discard them again when she tried to picture herself saying such things to a stranger. She would have to be lucid and brief, she told herself, because Xan Ziakis was unlikely to give her more than ten minutes of his time.

Seated in the plush quiet waiting area on the top floor of Ziakis Finance, Elvi was a bundle of nerves. How likely was it that he would even consider dropping the theft charge? Very unlikely, she reckoned, because what would be in that for him? But he *could* be a really good person, a little voice whispered. What were the chances? her brain scoffed, unimpressed by such wishful thinking. Xan was a merciless financier renowned for his profit margins. Every single thing he did during his working day was focused on gaining an advantage...and what did she have to offer?

She plucked a piece of tapestry wool off a black-trousered knee and shed her jacket to reveal the long-sleeved blue tee below because she was too warm. It was a waste of time approaching the wretched man when she was already virtually drowning in a sense of defeat, she told herself furiously. He was a rich, privileged guy, who lived a life far beyond the imagination of other, more ordinary mortals. He would not understand where she was coming from unless he had a reformed alcoholic in his own family circle. He would not appreciate the challenges Sally

Cartwright had already overcome in her efforts to rebuild her life, nor could he even begin to imagine the misery of the 'lost' years that Elvi and Daniel had lived through with their mother.

Stop it, stop with the negative inner talk, she urged herself just as the svelte receptionist uttered her name in the same low-pitched tone that everyone who worked on the top floor seemed to use. Elvi rose stiffly from her seat, full of apprehension but struggling to appear composed because she knew that that was necessary. She couldn't afford to get emotional with such a self-disciplined man.

In his office, Xan was on a high because he was *finally* getting to meet *her*. The woman he had wanted, the *only* woman he had wanted in years that he couldn't have, but now that her mother was no longer his employee, and that connection was at an end, he no longer had to consider that aspect. That was done, dusted, in the past as far as he was concerned. Now he could move forward freely. Admittedly she was still of much lower status than he or her predecessors in his life had been but did he really have to be so particular about the women he took to his bed? He straightened his jacket and leant back against his designer desk as the door opened.

The office was the size of a football pitch, probably supposed to intimidate, Elvi decided, inching in from the doorway like a mouse trying to evade a hungry cat before she threw back her shoulders, straightened her back and lifted her chin, determined not to appear either weak or too humble.

‘I’m Elvi, Sally Cartwright’s daughter,’ she declared quietly, battling to stand her ground as Xan Ziakis angled up his arrogant dark head, his classic nose as high as his perfect cheekbones to look directly at her.

Behind her the door closed, locking them into uneasy silence. Involuntarily Elvi connected with dazzling amber-gold eyes screened by criminally long and distinctive lush black lashes. She had never been close enough to him to see those eyes before, nor had she realised quite how tall he was, while even his formal business suit failed to conceal the power in his wide shoulders and muscular torso, not to mention the virile strength of his long thighs as he stood braced against his desk. He was drop-dead beautiful and at that moment she wasn’t at all surprised that for a little while she had succumbed to a pathetically juvenile crush on him. She’d been far from being a teenager, and that crush had mortified her pride.

‘Xander Ziakis,’ he matched, extending an elegant lean brown hand.

At least he had manners, Elvi conceded feebly as she advanced to shake that hand, finding his grasp warm and her own cold with nerves, goose flesh erupting beneath her top as nervous tension threatened again. That close to him she could hardly breathe as a faint tang of some exotic designer cologne infiltrated her nostrils.

‘Take a seat, Elvi,’ he instructed, angling his head in the direction of the chair in front of him.

‘I don’t think I would be comfortable sitting down while you’re

still standing,' Elvi confided, stepping back but avoiding the chair, wondering if he was always as domineering, deciding he very probably was when she caught the flash of surprise in his gaze before he cloaked it. She reckoned everyone did exactly what they were told in his radius.

Disconcertingly and with a gleam of humour lightening his dark eyes, for he was rarely challenged, Xan slid back behind his desk and waited for her to sit down as he had told her to do.

Outmanoeuvred, Elvi took a seat and rested her bag on her lap to hide her trembling hands.

'Would you like a drink? Tea? Coffee? Water?' Xan proffered politely.

'Some water if it's not too much trouble,' Elvi framed, watching as he pressed a button and gave an order to some employee. Thirty seconds later, a moisture-beaded tumbler of water was clutched between her restive hands and she sipped, wetting her dry lips.

Xan studied her in fascination, because she was much more controlled than he had expected and possibly ten times more attractive close up than he had forecast. In reality he had been prepared for disappointment, having only seen her so fleetingly in the past. But there she was in front of him with skin that had the natural lustre of a pearl, eyes as blue as the Greek sky, dainty features and white-blond hair falling like a cloak to her waist. And then there were the fabulous hourglass curves with that tiny waist, the amazing feminine bounty at breast and hip

she had hidden beneath that awful coat. Not overweight, *glorious*, Xan decided hungrily, wondering if it would even occur to her that he had been forced to sit down because her body made him hot as hell. He thought not, for there was nothing even slightly flirtatious or inviting about either her clothing or her attitude, and he wasn't accustomed to that lack of interest in the women he met. This one hadn't even bothered to put on make-up, he registered in mounting surprise.

'Why do you think I offered you this appointment?' Xan enquired with innate ruthlessness, because he doubted his reading of her character from her appearance and behaviour. He didn't trust women. He had *learned* not to trust women through the experience of growing up with several unpleasant stepmothers and the conviction had been rubber-stamped by his first love's change of heart the instant she realised his family fortune was gone.

'I don't know, which is why I am here,' Elvi said truthfully. 'Obviously you read my letter—'

Xan lounged back in his chair and lightly shifted an eloquent brown hand as if in dismissal of the letter. 'Why would I want to do anything for a woman who stole from me?' he asked bluntly.

In receipt of that acerbic enquiry, Elvi lost colour. 'Well, maybe not *want*—'

'That's the problem,' Xan interposed before she could even finish speaking. 'I don't want to help her because I believe that those who break the law should be punished—'

‘Yes, *but*—’ Elvi began afresh, thrown on the back foot because before her mother had been charged with theft she would have agreed with him on that score.

‘There is no saving exception in my book,’ Xan Ziakis sliced in again. ‘I felt more sorry for you growing up with an alcoholic parent than I feel sorry for her.’

Elvi’s hands tightened around the glass cradled between her hands and she forced herself to sip again; she wanted to slap him and shut him up because he wasn’t allowing her to get in a word in her mother’s defence. ‘We don’t need your compassion!’ she heard herself snap back and then she bit her lip hard, knowing she shouldn’t have responded in that tone for there was truth in that old adage about catching more flies with honey than vinegar.

‘But *you* chose to *ask* for my compassion,’ Xan reminded her with dogged purpose. ‘And I have to wonder, what’s in it for me?’

‘You have your jade pot back?’ Elvi suggested shakily.

‘But I don’t. It’s police evidence at this moment in time,’ Xan told her gently.

Elvi breathed in deep and slow, battling to think straight while he sat there as cool as a block of untouchable ice, and then she clashed with eyes that flamed over her like a fire and realised that his apparently glacial outlook had given her a mistaken impression of him. For a split second as her chest swelled on that breath, his gaze had dropped revealingly below her chin and she was shaken that he could be quite as predictable as most of the men she met. Her boobs were playing more of a starring role

than *she* was, she thought bitterly.

‘My mother *has* been punished,’ Elvi argued, taking another tack in her growing desperation. ‘She’s been arrested and that was frightening for her and more than enough to teach most people a hard lesson. She has also lost her job and her good name—’

‘*Elvi...*’ Xan leant across his desk to interrupt her again.

‘No, don’t cut me off this time!’ Elvi urged impatiently. ‘Tell me why you can’t drop the charges—’

‘I’ve already answered that question,’ Xan reminded her with finality.

Enormous blue eyes fixed on him hopefully. ‘But don’t you think that making a benevolent gesture would make you feel good?’

Xan could not believe how naïve she was and he almost laughed. ‘I don’t have a benevolent bone in my body,’ he admitted without embarrassment. ‘I’m a hard-hitter. That’s who I am.’

‘Well, I didn’t come here to repeat the sob story I already put in my letter,’ Elvi assured him with cringing dignity as she started rising from her seat. ‘So, if that’s your last word—’

‘It’s not. You don’t listen very well, do you?’ Xan shot back at her in exasperation. ‘I asked you what would be in this benevolent gesture for me and I do *have* an option to offer you—’

Taken aback at the very point where she had felt that she was getting nowhere with him, Elvi sank slowly back into the chair. ‘You...er...do?’ she queried dubiously, her eyes openly bemused by the concept.

‘It’s simple and unscrupulous,’ Xan warned her without hesitation. ‘I want you. Give yourself to me and I will drop the charges.’

Elvi’s lower lip parted company with the upper one as she stared back at him in complete astonishment, not quite willing to believe he had actually said those words to her. *Give yourself to me.* He meant sex. What else could he mean? *I want you.* The most enormous sense of shock engulfed her. It wasn’t simply unscrupulous, it was filthy, and she was shattered that he could sit there behind his rule-the-world desk and dare to offer her such an offensive escape clause on her mother’s behalf. What world did he live in? What kind of women was he accustomed to dealing with? It was a horrific suggestion no decent woman would accept.

‘I finally appear to have silenced you,’ Xan remarked with unhidden amusement.

And it was that glint of amusement in his extravagantly handsome face and the energy of it in his accented intonation that set free the tide of rage inside Elvi. She flew upright like a rocket and her hand jerked up and she flung the glass of water over him. ‘How dare you?’ she snapped at him furiously. ‘I’m not a slut!’

Xan shook his dark head, water droplets rolling down his lean, dark, dangerous face. Never had he been attacked in such a way, but it didn’t show because he did not move a single muscle. He gazed broodingly back at her, disturbed by her passionate nature but already wondering how that seeming flaw would play out between his sheets. Obviously he was bored with the identikit

mistresses who had met his physical needs for years, but that rational, unemotional approach worked for him, he reminded himself, staving off the risks of more personal entanglements. ‘I didn’t suggest that you were, but there’s a vacancy in my bed at present and I would be happy for you to fill it for a couple of months—’

‘Well, I wouldn’t be happy to fill it!’ Elvi snarled back incredulously. ‘A *vacancy*? Is that how you think of sex?’

‘It is a need like hunger, an appetite that must be met,’ Xan responded levelly, his hard, dark gaze locked to hers like a laser beam that made her body as hot and perspiring as if she were under a spotlight. ‘If it makes you feel better, I wanted you the first time I saw you waiting in the foyer of my apartment block. I found out your name then and your connection to my maid. Doing anything about the attraction would’ve been inappropriate at that time—’

Elvi studied him in helpless wonderment. ‘I don’t believe this... I don’t believe any of it!’ she gasped. ‘You don’t even know me—’

Xan lounged back in his seat, damp but disciplined. ‘I don’t need to *know* you to want to have sex with you. I’m more about the physical than the cerebral with women,’ he admitted smoothly.

‘But you’re trying to buy me with a bribe!’ Elvi condemned furiously.

‘And if the offer suits you, I’ll drop the theft charge. That’s how negotiations work in this world, Elvi. *You* give, *I* give. It

really is that basic—'

'But it's blackmail!' Elvi accused heatedly, increasingly unnerved by his shattering level of inhuman self-control.

'No, it's not. You have a choice. Whether you choose to accept my offer or not is entirely up to you,' Xan pointed out with precision. 'Think it over for a week...'

'I'm not going to think it over!' Elvi assured him with blazing conviction. 'It's a filthy proposition and I'm not that sort of woman—'

'Presumably you enjoy sex like other women,' Xan interposed very drily. 'If you're afraid that I might be into something different like BDSM, you're wrong. I'm completely normal in the sex department—'

'I don't care! I'm not interested in what you do in the bedroom!' Elvi proclaimed, pacing his office carpet in a passion of disbelief at the direction their interview had gone in, her triangular face as red as a tomato. 'I couldn't imagine being some sort of sex slave—'

Xan laughed out loud, shocking her again, startling her as he sprang up from behind his desk and extended a business card to her. 'The word you seek is mistress, *not* sex slave, which is rather melodramatic, if you don't mind me saying so—'

'Yes, I *do* mind!' Elvi gasped, snatching the card off him and backing away at speed from his proximity, her heart beating so fast she feared it might bounce right out of her tight chest. 'I mind every darned thing you've said since I arrived. I didn't like any

of it and I wouldn't have come to this meeting if I'd known you were likely to suggest some immoral arrangement to me! Call me stupid but that idea didn't even cross my mind!"

Xan had never wanted to touch a woman as badly as he did at that moment. *Thee mou...*she excited him to the most extraordinary degree. Her amazing chest was heaving, her blue eyes were huge with anxiety and her opulent pink pouty mouth was yet another temptation that tugged at him as he pictured her lying in his bed. It was lust of the lowest possible order, he acknowledged grimly, but somehow, even though lust had never driven him to such a degree and he thoroughly distrusted the urge, he couldn't shake free of it. The harder she argued with him, the more he wanted to persuade her because, whatever else Elvi Cartwright was, she was neither boring nor insipid. A sex slave though, he savoured with unholy amusement, even while he wondered if that could possibly be a fantasy of hers...how did he know? But he very badly wanted to know about *her* fantasies. Yet he could not recall ever being so curious about any other woman and his innate caution cut in.

She was saying no, shrieking no, in fact, and possibly that was for the best, he reasoned flatly even as all the potential colour and enjoyment drained straight back out of his immediate future again. Was he so bored with his life that he had proposed such an innovative exchange of favours? It was out of character for him. He picked up women and dropped them again as easily as he worked seven days a week. He didn't normally *picture* them

in that apartment bed, he merely joined them there to satisfy a natural desire for physical satisfaction.

‘You have my phone number if you change your mind,’ Xan Ziakis intoned, as if he could not quite credit that she had turned him down.

Elvi tossed her head, platinum-blond hair spilling across her shoulders. She would have made a terrific Lady Godiva, Xan reflected abstractedly, wondering why he was even thinking that. He stalked across to the door and opened it for her, now determined to bring the unsettling meeting to a quick conclusion.

‘Good luck,’ he murmured graciously, feeling inordinately proud of himself for his restraint.

Blue eyes collided with his. ‘You are the most hateful man I have ever met!’ she hissed at him like a cat flexing her sharp claws and, turning on her heel, she sped off down the corridor.

Xan noted that she had left her jacket behind, lifted it and strode out of his office again.

‘Elvi!’ he called when he saw her standing at the lift, hugging her handbag as if it were a comforter.

Eyes flying wide, she spun and he handed her the jacket.

‘Oh...thanks,’ she mumbled in disconcertion, suddenly uncomfortably aware that every employee in the area had stilled to watch them.

That was the instant when Xan saw the tears glimmering in her eyes and wished he hadn’t followed her. It made him feel like an ogre who kicked puppies, a complete bastard. But he was

what he was and he had never been soft in heart or deed, he reasoned harshly. She needed to toughen up because the world was a thoroughly nasty place.

* * *

Still shell-shocked by that encounter with Xan, Elvi went home and found her mother in tears at the kitchen table. 'I don't know how I'm going to get work anywhere without a reference from my last job,' she confided chokily. 'And I can't tell the truth either. Nobody wants a light-fingered employee!'

Elvi paled. 'We'll think up something,' she said soothingly. 'Is Daniel at the restaurant?'

'Yes. Thank goodness he got that bar job. At least it gets him out of his room,' his mother remarked unhappily. 'He's so depressed, Elvi. He feels so guilty—'

Elvi nodded, trying not to think that, had she been of a different persuasion, she might have been able to make the whole nightmare go away. It would be indecent, though, for her to have sex with Xan Ziakis in return for him dropping the theft charge. Totally disgustingly indecent, she told herself squarely. Surely she didn't have to sink *that* low to help her family?

She lay awake half the night thinking about it. The irony was that before she had met Xan Ziakis he was the only man she had ever thought of having sex with. Well, in her dreams, her imagination, that was, because he was the first man she had ever been strongly attracted to. Of course, she had met very few men. Few men went into craft shops; customers who liked to knit,

crochet and embroider were mostly of the female persuasion, although not exclusively. Throughout most of her teen years, while other young girls were flirting and dating, Elvi had been looking after her little brother and tucking her comatose mother into bed at night. She had missed out on a large chunk of her supposedly carefree youth, having to be responsible, having to be the adult for as long as Sally had been incapable of meeting that challenge.

By the way, I'm still a virgin, she tried to picture herself telling Xan Ziakis. Unexpectedly, her body shook with sudden laughter at the image. No doubt Xan had assumed that she was experienced when he'd made that crack about women enjoying sex as well. No doubt he also believed she would be mistress material with the sort of sexy tricks a more practised lover would provide. But she had no tricks, no clue, *nothing* to give in that department, and she was quite sure that that would have disillusioned him, maybe even put him off.

Although, how would that have helped them? He had only made that ridiculous offer because he found her attractive. For a split second, she cherished the knowledge of that startling truth. Xan Ziakis found *her* attractive as well. It was a fact that bolstered her ego even though she knew it shouldn't. Probably the boobs again, she thought wryly. As an adolescent, who had been tormented at school by the boys once she began developing way beyond what she had deemed an acceptable size, she had always loathed her large breasts and ample hips. Joel, her best mate since

primary school, told her she looked lush and feminine, but then that was exactly the sort of comforting comment a friend was supposed to make, so she hadn't paid any heed to it.

The following morning, Joel sent her a text asking her to meet him at lunchtime. She smiled at the prospect, knowing she could tell her friend the truth about her mother and her brother, although she had no intention of mentioning Xan's proposition.

'How could a boy as smart as Daniel be that dumb?' Joel demanded, smoking while they sat outside a bar close to where she worked.

'Clever people don't always have common sense,' Elvi pointed out, leaning across the table to add, 'You're getting eyed up by that beautiful blonde over there. I think it's time I went back to work—'

'No!' Joel protested, closing an imprisoning hand over the one she had braced on the tabletop to rise. 'I'm not interested—'

'You haven't even looked yet,' Elvi rebuked as she met his brown eyes and wondered how his could be so different from Xan's, because they did not make her melt or heat up to even the smallest degree. Yet, Joel was tall and attractive with tousled dark curls. He was also an up-and-coming successful painter, already being singled out for his talent with portraits. But then Joel's life had gone much more smoothly than her own, she reflected ruefully, and sometimes she marvelled that he still stayed in touch with her because they now led such divergent lives.

'All I want to do right now is give you some cash to help out,'

Joel told her ruefully. ‘You earn a pittance and with Sally out of work—’

‘No, thanks,’ Elvi cut in hastily. ‘Thanks for offering but no, thanks—’

‘Don’t you ever just want to walk away from the two of them and their problems?’ her friend enquired ruefully. ‘You could’ve been so much *more* without them holding you back—’

‘You’re talking about my mother and my brother,’ Elvi reminded him tartly. ‘I love them and they love me and you don’t turn your back on that kind of love and support—’

‘But you’re always supporting *them*, not yourself!’ Joel argued. He didn’t understand, he never *had* understood, Elvi reflected wryly, because his was not a close family. Elvi, however, knew that, no matter what happened to her, her mother and her brother would always be there for her just as she was for them. That made her feel warm and complete inside herself in a way she couldn’t have described even to her longest-standing friend.

‘I’m wasting my breath,’ Joel recognised impatiently as Elvi slid back into her black jacket. ‘For some bizarre reason you don’t want the stuff other women want...the new clothes, the parties, the *fun*—’

‘I’d give anything to own a dog,’ she confided, and not for the first time.

‘A dog would just be another burden,’ Joel reproved. Didn’t stop her wanting one, Elvi reasoned wryly as she got off the bus to go home that evening. A dog to walk and cuddle

when she felt lonely. A cat was a possibility but cats weren't necessarily cuddly, being more independent. As usual the lift was out of service and she had to climb flight after flight of stairs to the tenth floor, telling herself all the while that the exercise was keeping her fit even if she was wheezing like an old lady by the time she walked into the kitchen. That lighter mood didn't last once she saw her mother and brother standing there, clearly in the middle of a rare argument.

'What's wrong?' she asked tightly.

'Look, what I did wrecked everything for *all* of us,' Daniel declared forthrightly. 'Mum can't find work now, and you hardly earn anything. How are we going to live? Obviously I have to find a *permanent* job—'

'No, that's not what this is all about,' Elvi cut in hastily. 'That would make what Mum did pointless, Daniel. We *want* you to go to university and train to be a doctor—'

'I did this. This is *my* responsibility and I'm old enough to behave like a man,' her little but very tall baby brother announced. 'A man doesn't turn his back on his family and just go off and become a student without thinking about how *they* are going to survive!'

Elvi thought a very rude word inside her head, her shoulders slumping, and passed on by into the bedroom to sink down on her bed. Daniel was like a mule when he set his heart on anything and now he too was in full sacrificial mode, just like her mother. What now? If Daniel threw away his chance, it wouldn't come

around again, and if he did that Sally Cartwright would self-destruct because her son going to medical school was the one thing she had in life to focus on and be proud of.

Xan Ziakis had won, Elvi reflected wretchedly, because her family was falling apart before her very eyes. From the kitchen she could hear the distressing noise of her mother and her brother having a major row as Sally tried to dissuade him from his plans and he fought back loudly. She pulled the business card out of her bag and reached for her phone. She didn't want to speak to a man she hated, a man who was forcing her into a choice that went against everything she had ever valued, so she texted him instead.

Rethink on mistress as you forecast. Need to discuss conditions of servitude.

Across London, Xan checked his phone and laughed out loud, something he didn't do very often and which spooked him with its unfamiliarity. He had won. He *always* won, he reminded himself with satisfaction. But even so there was a sweeter taste to this victory than most.

Meet you for dinner at eight...

And he gave her the address, telling her to ask for *his* table.

CHAPTER THREE

ELVI WENT INTO her slender wardrobe to withdraw a pair of black velour leggings and a black, rather glittery festive top she had received for Christmas the year before. The outfit would have to do because she didn't have anything else to wear.

'Where on earth are you going dressed like that?' Sally

Cartwright demanded boldly as her daughter passed through the kitchen, wearing actual lip gloss and mascara to her mother's wonderment.

'I've got a date for dinner,' Elvi admitted, having reasoned that she had to make a start on her cover story.

'A...*date*?' her mother exclaimed in astonishment.

'Yes, he's handsome, he's rich, he can give me a good time, what's not to like?' she asked the older woman wryly. 'I'm twenty-two and I never go out. Isn't it time I got a life?'

'Of course, it is,' Sally agreed uneasily. 'I was only surprised, not questioning you.'

'I don't know if I'll be back tonight,' Elvi announced uncomfortably, her face flaming, but she had to work on her cover story.

'*Elvi...*?' her mother pronounced in a shaken tone, but she compressed her lips and said nothing more, accepting that her daughter was an adult woman.

Only Elvi felt nothing like an adult woman as she entered an exclusive restaurant, maddeningly conscious that she was underdressed, and where she was looked up and down in open dismissal before the mention of Xan's name produced a very different reaction and suddenly she was 'Madam...' and being escorted by the head waiter to the promised table where Xan was already seated, perusing the extensive wine list.

Xan leapt upright. He was a four-letter word of a man but someone some time had trained him well in courtesy, Elvi

acknowledged, bending to set down her bag before deigning to take a seat in the chair pulled out for her occupation.

Xan was transfixed by his view of her. She was very poorly clothed, but the instant she bent down and he caught a glimpse of her rounded derriere outlined in clinging velour he became a spontaneous fan of clingy leggings that outlined the female form. A bottom as deliciously curvy and ripe as a peach met his attention and the stirring at his groin was even more immediate. He asked himself how he could possibly have reached thirty years of age without appreciating that he found curvaceous women more sexually appealing than their thinner cousins. Or was it only *her*? Something weird about her? That mane of long hair?

‘Elvi,’ he murmured in welcome. ‘What would you like to drink?’

‘I don’t drink. Water, please,’ she told him, settling into her seat, seemingly unaware that he was riveted to his, locked there by the equally clingy glittery top that showcased her breasts. The smooth pale expanse of soft firm flesh and only the merest hint of cleavage sent the pulse below his belt to throbbing discomfort and a level of arousal that set his even white teeth on edge, because he was neither a horny teenager nor a sex-starved man and anything excessive in any personal field set off Xan’s caution alarm.

She didn’t drink. That didn’t bother Xan at all because he had had the experience of several women who liked to drink a little too much and turned into public embarrassments. An alcoholic in the family, he recalled; naturally she was careful. He ordered

wine for himself and ordered meals for both of them, as was his habit with companions.

Elvi sipped her water and watched food selections she hadn't ordered brought to the table with great pomp and ceremony. She wasn't that surprised by his failure to offer her a personal choice or a menu. He was a control freak. He was accustomed to commanding what other people did, even, it seemed, what they *ate*. He would probably be hell in bed, she found herself thinking ruefully, imagining what that innate selfishness would translate to in terms of sex with another person. But then what did she know about it? Maybe that was the norm for a rich man like him. A woman of her status was simply a new toy for him to play with, nothing more.

Elvi cleared her throat awkwardly. 'So, this arrangement...how long would it last exactly?'

'Three months,' Xan heard himself declare, although he had never before mentioned anything longer than two. He was being practical, he told himself, ensuring he could keep her until he got bored, and he *could* get bored the very first month, couldn't he? That had happened on a couple of occasions and could well happen with her.

Elvi studiously stared down at her water. 'And how often...er, would I...see you?'

'I doubt if there's a virile man in the world who would answer that question in advance,' Xan quipped, amusement flashing through him as he wondered how many one-night stands she had

enjoyed. At her age, that was the norm, wasn't it? Or was it? He had no idea because he had never made use of that kind of freedom, reluctant to follow in the footsteps of a father who had been a notorious womaniser and playboy. He had never slept around, never been attracted by indiscriminate casual sex with strangers.

Elvi reddened, heat coursing through her as she met brilliant dark eyes alive with the kind of powerhouse energy he had kept in abeyance during that interview in his office. Stupid question, she conceded uneasily, insanely aware of the tightening of her nipples and the bizarre flush of warmth rising from her pelvis. Both sensations were unhappily familiar, echoes of what she had felt every time she'd seen Xan walk past her months earlier. She hadn't known attraction could make her feel like that about a man and she hadn't appreciated the yearning sense of vulnerability it infused her with.

'I will provide you with an apartment and a new wardrobe. You need clothes,' Xan intoned with a casualness that shot her straight back out of her reverie.

An apartment. Elvi swallowed hard, reminding herself that it would only be for a few months and that she could hardly act the mistress while sharing a bedroom with her adoptive mother.

'Why do I need *you* to buy *me* clothes?' she queried rather sourly.

'When I need a partner to attend a social engagement, you will be my companion,' Xan informed her, startling her afresh

because she had assumed that being a mistress was a very discreet role in a back room some place where she would be hidden from public view.

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