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By Lynne Graham

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lynne Graham lives in Northern Ireland and has been a keen romance reader since her teens. Happily married, Lynne has five children. Her eldest is her only natural child. Her other children, who are every bit as dear to her heart, are adopted. The family has a variety of pets, and Lynne loves gardening, cooking, collecting allsorts and is crazy about every aspect of Christmas.

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Mikhail Kusnirovich, Russian oil oligarch and much feared business magnate, relaxed his big body back into his leather office chair and surveyed his best friend, Luka Volkov, with astonishment. 'Hiking...*seriously*? That's truly how you want to spend your stag weekend away?'

'Well, we've already had the party and that was a little high octane for me,' Luka confided, his good-natured face tightening with distaste at the memory. Of medium height and stocky build, he was a university lecturer and the much admired author of a recent book on quantum physics.

'You can blame your future brother-in-law for that,' Mikhail reminded him drily, thinking of the lap and pole dancers hired by Peter Gregory for the occasion, women so far removed from his shy academic friend's experience that the arrival of a group of terrorists at the festivities would have been more welcome.

'Peter meant it for the best,' Luka proclaimed, instantly springing to the defence of his bride's obnoxious banker brother.

Mikhail's brow raised, his lean, darkly handsome face grim. 'Even though I warned him that you wouldn't like it?'

Luka reddened. 'He does try; he just doesn't always get it right.'

Mikhail said nothing because he was thinking with regret of how much Luka had changed since he had got engaged to Suzie Gregory. Although the two men had little in common except their Russian heritage, they had been friends since they met at Cambridge University. In those days, Luka would have had no problem declaring that a man as crude, boring and boastful as Peter Gregory was a waste of space. But now Luka could no longer call a spade a spade and always paid subservient regard to his fiancée's feelings. An alpha male to the core, Mikhail gritted his even white teeth in disgust. He would *never* marry. He was never going to change who and what he was to please some woman. The very idea was a challenge for a male raised by a man whose favourite saying had been, 'a chicken is not a bird and a woman is not a person'. The late Leonid Kusnirovich had been fond of reeling that off to inflame the sensibilities of the refined English nanny he had hired to take care of his only son. Sexist, brutal and always insensitive, Leonid had been outraged by the nanny's gentle approach to child rearing and had been afraid that she might turn his son into a wimp. But at the age of thirty there was nothing remotely wimpy about Mikhail's six-foot-five-inch powerfully built frame, his ruthless drive to succeed or his famous appetite for a large and varied diet of women.

'You'd like the Lake District...it's beautiful,' Luka declared.

Mikhail made a massive effort not to look as pained as he felt. 'You want to go hiking in the Lake District? I assumed you were thinking of Siberia—'

'I can't get enough time off work and I'm not sure I'd be up to the challenge of the elements there,' Luka admitted, patting his slight paunch in apology. 'I'm not half as fit as you are. England in the spring and a gentle workout is more my style. But could you get by *without* your limo, luxury lifestyle and your fleet of minders for a couple of days?'

Mikhail went nowhere without a team of security guards. He frowned, not at the prospect of existing without the luxuries, but at having to convince his protection team that he didn't need them for forty eight hours. Stas, his highly protective head of security, had been taking care of Mikhail since he was a little boy. 'Of course, I can do it,' he responded with innate assurance. 'And a little deprivation will do me good.'

'You'll have to leave your collection of cell phones behind as well,' Luka dared.

Mikhail stiffened in dismay. 'But why?'

'You won't stop cutting deals if you still have the phones in tow,' Luka pointed out, well aware of his friend's workaholic ways. 'I don't fancy standing on top of a mountain somewhere shivering while you consider share prices. I know what you're like.'

'If that's really what you want, I'll consider it,' Mikhail conceded grudgingly, knowing he would sooner cut off his right arm than remove himself, even temporarily, from his vast business empire. Even so, although he rarely took time out from work, the concept of even a small physical challenge had considerable appeal for him.

A knock on the door prefaced the appearance of a tall beauty in her twenties with a mane of pale blonde hair. She settled intense bright blue eyes on her employer and said apologetically, 'Your next appointment is waiting, sir.'

'Thank you, Lara. I'll call you when I'm ready.'

Even Luka stared as the PA left the room, her slim hips swaying provocatively in her tight pencil skirt. 'That one looks like last year's Miss World. Are you—?'

Mikhail was amused and his wide sensual mouth quirked. 'Never ever in the office.'

'But she's gorgeous,' Luka commented.

Mikhail smiled. 'Is the reign of Suzie wearing thin?'

Luka flushed. 'Of course not. A man can look without being tempted.'

Mikhail relished the fact that *he* could still look at any woman and be tempted, a much more healthy state of affairs in his opinion than that of his friend, he reflected grimly, for Luka clearly now felt forced to stifle all his natural male inclinations in the holy cause of fidelity. Was his old friend so certain that he had found everlasting love? Or should Mikhail make use of their hiking trip to check that Luka was still as keen to make the sacrifices necessary to become a husband? Had Lu-ka's awareness of Lara's attractions been a hint that he was no longer quite so committed to his future bride? *Forsaking all others...in sickness and in health?* Not for the first time, Mikhail barely repressed a shudder of revulsion, convinced that it was unnatural and unmanly to want to make such promises to any woman, and as for the what's-mine-is-yours agenda that went with it—he would sooner set fire to his billions than place himself in a financially

vulnerable position.

Kat tensed in dismay as the sound of the post van crunching across gravel reached her ears. Her sister, Emmie, had come home late and unexpectedly the night before and she didn't want her wakened by the doorbell. Hastily setting down the quilt she was stitching, she flexed stiff fingers and hurried to the front door. Her stomach hollowed in fear of what the postman might be delivering. It was a fear that never left her now, a fear that dominated her every waking hour. But Kat still answered the door with a ready smile on her generous mouth and a friendly word and as she signed for the recorded delivery letter with the awful tell-tale red lettering on the envelope she was proud that she kept her hand steady.

Slowly she retreated back inside the solid stone farmhouse, which she had inherited from her father. Birk-side's peaceful setting and beautiful views had struck her as paradise after the rootless, insecure existence she had endured growing up with her mother, Odette. A former top fashion model, Odette had never settled down to live an ordinary life, even after she had children. Kat's father had married her mother before she found fame and the increasingly sophisticated Odette had found the wealthy men she met on her travels far more to her taste than the quiet accountant she had married at too young an age. More than ten years had passed before Odette chose to marry a second time. That marriage had produced twin daughters, Sapphire and Emerald. Odette's final big relationship had been with a South American polo player, who had fathered Kat's youngest sister, Topaz. When Kat was twenty-three years old, her mother had put her three younger daughters into care, pleading that the twins in particular were out of control and at risk. Touched by the girls' distress, Kat had taken on sole responsibility for raising her half-sisters and had set up home with them in the Lake District.

Looking back to those first halcyon days when she had had such high hopes for their fresh start in life now left a bitter taste in Kat's mouth. A deep abiding sense of failure gripped her; she had been so determined to give the girls the secure home and love that she herself had never known as a child. She tore open the letter and read it. Yet another to stuff in the drawer with its equally scary predecessors, she reflected wretchedly. The building society was going to repossess the house while the debt collection agency would send in the bailiffs to recoup what funds they could from the sale of her possessions. She was so deep in debt that she stood to lose absolutely everything right down to the roof over her head. It didn't matter how many hours a day she worked making hand stitched patchwork quilts, only a miracle would dig her out of the deep financial hole she was in.

She had borrowed a small fortune to turn the old farmhouse into a bed and breakfast business. Putting in en suite bathrooms and extending the kitchen and dining area had been unavoidable. The steady stream of guests in the early years had raised Kat's hopes high and she had foolishly taken on more debt, determined to do the very best she could by every one of her sisters. Gradually, however, the flow of guests had died down to a trickle and she had realised too late that the market had changed; many people preferred a cheap hotel or a cosy pub to a B&B. In addition, the house was situated down a long single-track road and too far from civilisation to appeal to many. She had still hoped to get passing trade from day trippers and hill walkers but most of the walkers, she met went home at the end of the day or slept in a tent. The recent recession had made bookings as scarce as hens' teeth.

A tall beautiful blonde in a ratty old robe slowly descended the stairs smothering a yawn. 'That postman makes so much noise,' Emmie complained tartly. 'I suppose you've been up for ages. You always were an early riser.'

Kat resisted the urge to point out that for a long time she had had little choice with three siblings to get off to school every morning and overnight guests to feed; she was too grateful that Emmie seemed chattier than she

had been the night before when the taxi dropped her off and she declared that she was too exhausted to do anything other than go straight to bed. During the night, Kat had burned with helpless curiosity because six months earlier Emmie had gone to live with their mother, Odette, in London, determined to get to know the woman she had barely seen since she was twelve years old. Kat had chosen not to interfere. Emmie was, after all, twenty-three years of age. Even so, Kat had still worried a lot about her, knowing that her sister would ultimately discover that the most important person in Odette's life was always Odette and that the older woman had none of the warmth and affection that every child longed to find in a parent.

'Do you want any breakfast?' Kat asked prosaically.

'I'm not hungry,' Emmie replied, sinking down at the kitchen table with a heavy sigh. 'But I wouldn't say no to a cup of tea.'

'I missed you,' Kat confided as she switched on the kettle.

Emmie smiled, long blonde hair tumbling round her lovely face as she sat forward. 'I missed you but I didn't miss my deadend job at the library or the dreary social life round here. I'm sorry I didn't phone more often though.'

'That's all right.' Kat's emerald green eyes glimmered with fondness, her long russet spiralling curls brushing her cheekbones in stark contrast to her fair skin as she stretched up to a cupboard to extract two beakers. More than ten years older than her sister, Kat was a tall slender woman with beautiful skin, clear eyes and a wide full mouth. 'I guessed you were busy and hoped you were enjoying yourself.'

Without warning, Emmie compressed her mouth and pulled a face. 'Living with Odette was a nightmare,' she admitted abruptly.

'I'm sorry,' Kat remarked gently as she poured the tea.

'You knew it would be like that, didn't you?' Emmie prompted as she accepted the beaker. 'Why on earth didn't you warn me?'

'I thought that as she got older Mum might have mellowed and I didn't want to influence you before you got to know her on your own account,' Kat explained ruefully. 'After all, she could have treated you very differently.'

Emmie snorted and reeled off several incidents that illustrated what she had viewed as her mother's colossal selfishness and Kat made soothing sounds of understanding.

'Well, I'm home to stay for good this time,' her half-sister assured her squarely. 'And I ought to warn you... I'm pregnant—'

'*Pregnant?*' Kat gasped, appalled at that unexpected announcement. 'Please tell me you're joking.'

'I'm pregnant,' Emmie repeated, settling violet-blue eyes on her sister's shocked face. 'I'm sorry but there it is and there's not much I can do about it now—'

'The father?' Kat pressed tautly.

Emmie's face darkened as if Kat had thrown a light switch. 'That's over and I don't want to talk about it.'

Kat struggled to swallow back the many questions brimming on her lips, frightened of saying something that would offend. In truth she had always been more of a mother to her sisters than another sibling and after that announcement she was already wondering painfully where she had gone wrong. 'OK, I can accept that for the moment—'

'But I still *want* this baby,' Emmie proclaimed a touch defiantly.

Still feeling light-headed with shock, Kat sat down opposite her. 'Have you thought about how you're going to manage?'

'Of course, I have. I'll live here with you and help you with the business,' Emmie told her calmly.

'Right now there isn't a business for you to help me with,' Kat admitted awkwardly, knowing she had to give as much of the truth as possible when Emmie was basing her future plans on the guest house doing a healthy trade. 'I haven't had a customer in over a month—'

'It's the wrong time of year—business is sure to pick up by Easter,' Emmie said merrily.

'I doubt it. I'm also in debt to my eyeballs,' Kat confessed reluctantly.

Her sister studied her in astonishment. 'Since when?'

'For ages now. I mean, you must've noticed before you went away that business wasn't exactly brisk,' Kat responded.

'Of course, you borrowed a lot of money to do up the house when we first came here,' Emmie recalled abstractedly.

Users Review

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