Vows of Vengeance

by Alison Reid

Angela's throat tightened, her breath quick and shallow. "What offer?"

There was something in his tone, in the cold deliberation of his words, that made her blood run cold. Lincoln never stopped—he only changed direction. If he had abandoned the vendetta, it was only because he had conceived of something more dangerous.

He gestured to a chair, his own body settling into one with calm finality. "Perhaps you'd better sit down. You'll need to."

Dread pressed on her chest, but she obeyed, lowering herself opposite him. Her wide green eyes clung to his, betraying every flicker of fear and confusion.

"What offer?" she whispered again.

"I'm prepared to end this." His voice was level, almost conversational. "I'll make a bid for Marsden Enterprises and ease it into my firm. Or—if he prefers—I'll help rebuild it. Put it back on its feet."

It was impossible. He couldn't mean it. Angela's eyes searched his face desperately, probing for some hidden snare, some cruel trap, but Lincoln's expression remained cool, unreadable. At last, she drew in a long, ragged breath.

"Why?" she whispered. It could not be because she had gone to him, nor out of pity for her father. Lincoln had never been moved by pity. Unless he chose to tell her, she had no hope of understanding. He was colder now, harder—perhaps he always had been. She had simply been too young, too entranced, to see it.

"Not generosity," he said smoothly, "and not from the kindness of my heart." He leaned back in the chair, one long leg crossing elegantly over the other, his mouth curving in a faint, sardonic smile. "There is one condition."

Of course there was. And it would be appalling. Angela's lips parted, but no sound came; she was too afraid to ask.

"I'd be grateful if you would stop looking at me like a frightened rabbit," he drawled, the same sceptical amusement now glinting in his eyes. "The condition is not too terrible, all things considered."

"What things?" Her voice trembled despite her effort to keep it steady.

"I'll admit this much," he said, his tone clipped, deliberate. "My relentless pursuit of your father's firm has played its part in his condition. I never wanted him dead—I told you that before. But even without me, Marsden Enterprises is finished unless someone intervenes. Unless I step in openly, visibly. You need me, Angela. And I'm willing to help."

"But—" she breathed, sensing the sting in the tail, the real cost.

He inclined his head, dark eyes holding hers. "I wish to have my wife back for a few weeks. Nothing arduous. No… marital duties. Merely a front for a necessary trip."

"What?"

Angela rose slowly, gripping the chair for support. Lincoln's gaze followed her, one brow lifting, and in the depths of those astonishing eyes a dangerous spark of mischief danced.

"You're not stupid," he said softly. "You heard me. You understood. I have a trip to make. For a few weeks, I need a wife—in name only. Conveniently, I already have one. What could be simpler?"

Her breath came back in a rush, fury surging to replace shock. "What are you up to now?" she stormed. "Even the sight of you could kill my father. Any hint of such a scheme would finish him! If you must have a companion, then take Fiona Martin!"

"She isn't my wife," Lincoln returned smoothly, his amusement sharpening. "I have a business deal. A very large one—with an American family firm. The man at the head of it has… old-fashioned values. No mistresses. No divorces. He expects to meet my wife. I'm buying him out, Angela. With his company I gain another foothold in the States."

"Then go and buy him out!" she flung at him. "Leave Marsden Enterprises to sink! We've managed perfectly well without you for months."

His gaze cooled. "He doesn't need the money, and there are other buyers circling. Given a choice between my offer—however generous—and that of a solid family man, he'll take the latter. He's peculiar that way."

"This isn't amusing!" she spat. "You're thinking of schemes while my father clings to life. I won't let you near him!"

"You think I owe him favours?" Lincoln's voice cut like a blade, his earlier amusement vanishing. "I made a promise five years ago—and so far, I've kept it. I could take someone else, yes, and risk discovery. But I offer this to you, Angela, because I never vowed to see Kurt Marsden dead. Not despite what he did to my father. And my mother."

"He did nothing!" she cried, her voice breaking with rage. "It was business. That's all it ever was!"

“He’s a liar and a cheat.” Lincoln surged to his feet, looming over her, his anger vibrating in the air. “Go to the hospital. See for yourself. Then ring me with your decision. The offer expires tonight. Make the deal yourself if you like—without telling him. But if you refuse…” His jaw tightened. “Then I unleash the dogs again.”

Angela’s hands trembled, her throat raw with unshed tears. The words slipped out before she could stop them, fragile and desperate in the silence that followed her outburst.

“Why did you marry me?”

For a long, breathless moment, he only looked at her. His gaze burned into hers, unreadable, unyielding. Then, with deliberate slowness, he lifted her chin with one imperious finger, tilting her face up until she could not escape him.

“I’ve told you before,” he said, his voice low, threaded with something dark and rough, almost haunted. “Because I wanted you.”

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