



Shattered: All that GlittersAn Independent Wife

By Linda Howard

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Two timeless tales of romance and suspense from New York Times bestselling author Linda Howard

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When Greek billionaire Nikolas Constantinos set out to lock down a major business deal with the beautiful—and scandalous—Jessica Stanton, falling for her hadn't been part of the plan. A steamy one-night stand was all he'd allow. Because love would lead to commitment. And commitment to a woman with Jessica's reputation could ruin him. But as it turns out, falling in love is the one thing beyond his control...

AN INDEPENDENT WIFE

It's been seven years since Rhy Baines last set eyes on estranged wife Sallie Jerome. She's since picked up the pieces of their shattered marriage and started a new life for herself, complete with a new image, new attitude and new career reporting for one of the nation's leading magazines. With Rhy taking over as the magazine's publisher, Sallie wonders if he'll even recognize his own wife. She's finally the self-assured woman he's always wanted. Only now she has to figure out if he's still what she wants...

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Editorial Review

Review

"You can't read just one Linda Howard!"

-New York Times bestselling author Catherine Coulter

"Linda Howard writes with power, stunning sensuality and a storytelling ability unmatched in the romance drama. Every book is a treasure for the reader to savor again and again."

-New York Times bestselling author Iris Johansen

"This master storyteller takes our breath away."

-RT Book Reviews

"Linda Howard knows what readers want."

-Affaire de Coeur

About the Author

Linda Howard is the award-winning author of many *New York Times* bestsellers, including *Up Close and Dangerous*, *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, *Cover of Night*, *Killing Time*, *To Die For*, *Kiss Me While I Sleep*, *Cry No More*, and *Dying to Please*. She lives in Alabama with her husband and two golden retrievers.

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Charles said bluntly, without warning, "Constantinos arrived in London this morning."

Jessica looked up, her mind blank for a moment, then she realized what he had said and she smiled ruefully. "Well, you did warn me, Charles. It seems you were right." Not that she had ever doubted him, for Charles's instincts in business were uncanny. He had told her that if she voted her stock in ConTech against the Constantinos vote, she would bring down on her head the wrath of the single largest stockholder and chairman of the board, Nikolas Constantinos, and it appeared that once again Charles had been exactly right. The vote on the Dryden issue had been yesterday. Despite Charles's warnings, she had voted against the takeover and her vote had carried the majority. Less than twenty-four hours later, Constantinos had arrived in London.

Jessica had never met him, but she had heard enough horror tales about him to count herself lucky in that respect. According to gossip, he was utterly ruthless in his business dealings; of course, it stood to reason that he would not have achieved his present position of power by being meek and mild. He was a billionaire, powerful even by Greek standards; she was only a stockholder, and she thought humorously that it was a case of overkill for him to bring out his heavy artillery on her, but it looked as though no problem was too small for his personal attention.

Charles had pointed out that she could have voted for the takeover and saved herself a lot of trouble, but one

of the things that Robert had taught her in the three years of their marriage was to stand up for herself, to trust her instincts and never to sell herself short. Jessica had felt that the move against Dryden was underhanded and she voted against it. If Constantinos was unable to accept that she had the right to vote her stock as she wanted, then he would just have to learn to deal with it. Regardless of how much power he wielded, she was determined not to back down from her stand, and Charles had found that she could be very stubborn when she set her mind to something.

"You must be very careful around him," Charles instructed her now, breaking into her thoughts. "Jessica, my dear, I don't believe you realize just how much pressure the man can bring to bear on you. He can hurt you in ways you've never imagined. Your friends can lose their jobs; mortgages can be called in on their homes; banks will cease doing business with you. It can even extend to such small things as repairs to your auto being delayed or seats on flights suddenly becoming unavailable. Do you begin to see, my dear?"

Disbelievingly, Jessica stared at him. "My word, Charles, are you serious? It seems so ludicrous!"

"I regret that I am very serious. Constantinos wants things done his way, and he has the money and the power to ensure that they are. Don't underestimate him, Jessica."

"But that's barbaric!"

"And so is Constantinos, to a degree," said Charles flatly. "If he gives you the option of selling your stock to him, Jessica, then I strongly urge you to do so. It will be much safer for you." "But Robert—"

"Yes, I know," he interrupted, though his voice took on a softer tone. "You feel that Robert entrusted that stock to you, and that he would have voted against the Dryden takeover, too. Robert was a very dear and special man, but he's dead now and he can't protect you. You have to think of yourself, and you haven't the weapons to fight Constantinos. He can demolish you."

"But I don't want to fight him," she protested. "I only want to carry on as I always have. It seems so silly for him to be upset over my vote—why should he take it so personally?"

"He doesn't take it personally," explained Charles. "He doesn't have to. But you've gone against him and you'll be brought into line, regardless of what he has to do to accomplish it. And don't think that you can appeal to his better nature—"

"I know," she broke in, her soft mouth curving into a smile. "He doesn't have one!"

"Exactly," said Charles. "Nor can he be feeling very charitable toward you; your record in voting against him, my dear, is very nearly perfect."

"Oh, dear," she said wryly. "I hadn't realized. But at least I'm consistent!"

Charles laughed unwillingly, but his cool eyes gleamed with admiration. Jessica always seemed in control of herself, capable of putting things into their proper perspective and reducing crises to mere annoyances, though he feared that this time she was in over her head. He didn't want her hurt; he never again wanted to see the look in her eyes that had been there after Robert's death, the despair, the pain that was too deep for comforting. She had recovered, she was a strong woman and a fighter, but he always tried to protect her from any further hurt. She had borne enough in her young life.

The phone rang and Jessica got up to answer it, her movements, as always, lithe and as graceful as a cat's. She tucked the receiver against her shoulder. "Stanton residence."

"Mrs. Stanton, please," said a cool, impersonal male voice, and her sharp ear caught the hint of an accent. Constantinos already?

"This is Mrs. Stanton," she replied.

"Mrs. Stanton, this is Mr. Constantinos's secretary. He would like to see you this afternoon—shall we say three-thirty?"

"Three-thirty?" she echoed, glancing at her wrist-watch. It was almost two o'clock now.

"Thank you, Mrs. Stanton," said the voice in satisfaction. "I will tell Mr. Constantinos to expect you. Good day."

The click of the receiver made her take the phone from her ear and stare at it in disbelief. "Well, that was cheeky," she mused, hanging up the instrument. It was possible that he had taken her echo of the time as an affirmation, but her instincts told her otherwise. No, it was simply that she was not expected to make any protest, and it wouldn't have mattered if she had.

"Who was that, my dear?" asked Charles absently, gathering up the papers he had brought for her signature.

"Mr. Constantinos's secretary. I've been summoned into the royal presence—at three-thirty this afternoon."

Charles's elegant eyebrows rose. "Then I suggest you hurry."

"I've a dental appointment at four-fifteen," she fretted. "Cancel it."

She gave him a cool look and he laughed. "I apologize, my dear, and withdraw the suggestion. But be careful, and try to remember that it would be better to sell the stock than to try to fight Constantinos. I have to go now, but I'll ring you later."

"Yes, 'bye," she said, seeing him out. After he had gone, she dashed upstairs and took a shower, then found herself dawdling as she selected her dress. She was unsure what to wear and stood examining the contents of her wardrobe for long moments; then, in swift impatience with herself, she took down a cool beige jersey dress and stepped into it. It was classically simple and she wore it with four-inch heels to give her enough height to make her look more than a child.

She wasn't very tall, and because she was so fragile in build she tended to look about sixteen years old if she didn't use a host of little tricks to add maturity to her appearance. She wore simple clothing, pure in cut, and high heels whenever possible. Her long, thick, tawny hair she wore twisted into a knot at the back of her neck, a very severe hairstyle that revealed every proud, perfect line of her classically boned face and made her youth less obvious. Too much makeup would have made her look like a child playing grown-up, so she wore only subtle shades of eye shadow, naturally tinted lipsticks and a touch of peach blusher. When she looked into the mirror, it was to check that her hair was subdued and her expression cool and reserved; she never saw the allure of long, heavily lashed green eyes or the provocative curve of her soft mouth. The world of flirtations and sexual affairs was so far removed from her consciousness that she had no concept of herself as a desirable woman. She had been a child when Robert had taken her under his protective wing—a sullen, self-conscious, suspicious child—and he had changed her into a responsible adult, but he had never attempted to teach her anything about the physical side of marriage and she was as untouched today at the age of twenty-three as she had been when she was born.

When she was ready she checked the clock again and found that she had three-quarters of an hour to reach the ConTech building, but in the London traffic she would need every minute of that time. She snatched up

her bag and ran downstairs to check on her dog, Samantha, who was very pregnant. Samantha lay in her bed, contentedly asleep even though her sides were grotesquely swollen by the puppies she carried. Jessica made certain there was water in her dish, then let herself out and crossed to her car, a sleek dark green sports model. She loved its smooth power and now she needed every ounce of it as she put it through its paces.

The traffic signals were with her and she stepped out of the lift on the appropriate floor of the ConTech building at precisely three-twenty-nine. A receptionist directed her to the royal chambers and she opened the heavy oak door at the appointed time.

A large room stretched before her, quietly furnished with chocolate-brown carpeting and chairs upholstered in brown and gold. Set to one side of massive double doors was a large desk, and seated at that desk was a slim, dark man who rose to his feet as she entered.

Cool dark eyes looked her up and down as she crossed the room to him, and she began to feel as if she had violated some law. "Good afternoon," she said, keeping all hint of temper out of her voice. "I am Mrs. Stanton."

The dark eyes swept over her again in a manner that was almost contemptuous. "Ah, yes. Please be seated, Mrs. Stanton. I regret that Mr. Constantinos has been delayed, but he will be free to see you shortly."

Jessica inclined her head and selected one of the comfortable chairs, sitting down and crossing her graceful legs. She made certain that her face remained expressionless, but inside she was contemplating scratching the young man's eyes out. His manner set her teeth on edge; he had a condescending air about him, a certain nastiness that made her long to shake the smug look off his face.

Ten minutes later she wondered if she was expected to cool her heels here indefinitely until Constantinos deigned to see her. Glancing at her watch, she decided to give it another five minutes, then she would have to leave if she was to be on time for her dental appointment.

The buzzer on the desk sounded loudly in the silence and she looked up as the secretary snatched up one of the three telephones on his desk. "Yes, sir," he said crisply, and replaced the receiver. He removed a file from one of the metal cabinets beside him and carried it into the inner sanctum, returning almost immediately and closing the double doors behind him. From all indications, it would be some time yet before Constantinos was free, and the five minutes she had allowed were gone. She uncrossed her legs and rose to her feet.

Coolly uplifted eyebrows asked her intentions.

"I have another appointment to keep," she said smoothly, refusing to apologize for her departure. "Perhaps Mr. Constantinos will call me when he has more time."

Outraged astonishment was plain on the man's face as she took up her bag and prepared to leave. "But you can't go—" he began.

"On the contrary," she interrupted him, opening the door. "Good day."

Anger made her click her heels sharply as she walked to her car, but she took several deep breaths before she started the engine. No sense in letting the man's attitude upset her, perhaps enough to cause an accident, she told herself. She would shrug it off, as she had learned to do when she had been battered with criticism following her marriage to Robert. She had learned how to endure, to survive, and she was not going to let Robert down now.

After her dental appointment, which was only her annual checkup and took very little time, Jessica drove to

the small dress shop just off Piccadilly that her neighbor Sallie Reese owned and operated, and helped Sallie close up. She also looked through the racks of clothing and chose two of the new line of evening gowns that Sallie had just stocked; perhaps because she had never had anything pretty when she was growing up, Jessica loved pretty clothes and had no resistance to buying them, though she was frugal with herself in other matters. She didn't wear jewelry and she didn't pamper herself in any way, but clothing—well, that was another story. Robert had always been amused by her little-girl glee in a new dress, a pair of jeans, shoes; it really didn't matter what it was so long as it was new and she liked it.

Remembering that made her smile a little sadly as she paid Sallie for the gowns; though she would never stop missing Robert, she was glad that she had brought some laughter and sunshine into the last years of his life.

"Whew, it has been a busy day," sighed Sallie as she totaled up the day's revenue. "But sales were good; it wasn't just a case of a lot of people window-shopping. Joel will be ecstatic; I promised him that he could buy that fancy stereo he's had his heart set on if we had a good week."

Jessica chuckled. Joel was a stereo addict, and he had been moaning for two months now about a marvelous set that he had seen and just had to have or his life would be blighted forever. Sallie took all of his dire predictions in stride, but it had been only a matter of time before she agreed to buy the new stereo. Jessica was glad that now her friends could afford a few luxuries without totally wrecking their budget. The dress shop had turned their fortunes around, because Joel's income as an accountant was just not enough nowadays to support a young family.

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