



MODERN™



# KIM LAWRENCE

The Thorn in His Side





## **‘And if I give you that chance now ...?’**

Confused, Libby frowned warily. ‘A chance to what?’

‘A chance to work here and see how a business should be run, to learn from experts ...’

‘Me work for you?’ she exclaimed, waiting for the punchline.

When it did not come she shook her head. ‘I’m assuming that is your idea of a joke?’

Rafael shrugged. ‘You wanted a chance and I am giving you one.’

‘So you said—but giving me a chance to *what?*’

‘Prove there is more to you than a pretty face.’



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# The Thorn In His Side

Kim Lawrence



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## CHAPTER ONE

LIBBY'S phone rang just as she was taking the exit into the motorway services.

She pulled into the first convenient parking space and eagerly reached into her pocket. 'Mum ...?'

'Do I sound like your mother?'

Not unless her mum had developed a strong Irish accent in the two weeks she'd been in New York. '*Chloe?*'

'Libby, love, I was just wondering if you're going through the village on the way home from work?'

'Actually, I'm not in work. I'm on my way back from the airport.'

There was a pause before her friend gave a self-recriminatory groan and added, 'Oh, God, of course you are! Sorry, I forgot.'

There was a lot of it around, Libby thought with a worried frown. 'I don't suppose you've seen Mum or Dad, have you, Chloe?'

'Haven't you? I assumed one of them would be picking you up from the airport.'

'They were meant to,' Libby admitted. 'But they were a no show and when I rang I couldn't get a reply ... so I got a hire car.' She stopped and shook her head, her smooth brow creasing into an anxious frown. 'It's just not like them, but I'm sure there's a perfectly simple explanation ...?' she added, unable to keep the questioning note of doubt from her voice.

'Of course there is,' Chloe responded soothingly. 'And it has nothing whatever to do with ambulances or heart attacks, your dad is fine, and don't deny that's what you were thinking. I know the way your mind works.'

Before Libby could respond to this charge a yawn reverberated down the line so loud it made her grin.

'Why does nobody mention that motherhood turns your mind to mush?' her friend complained.

Libby gave a sympathetic grimace. 'You sound exhausted.'

'I was up all night,' Chloe admitted with another yawn.

'How is my god-daughter?'

'She's teething or colic or something. I've only just got her to sleep. Now how was your trip?'

'Fantastic.'

'And did friend Susie set you up with some gorgeous American hunk?'

'As a matter of fact.'

There was a squeal of delight at the other end. 'Tell me all.'

'Nothing to tell, he was nice but—'

A groan vibrated down the line. 'Let me guess—not your type. Is anyone your type, Libby?' Chloe sounded exasperated. 'Looking the way you do you could have any man—one for every day of the week!'

'You mean I look cheap and tarty?'

'You look about as cheap as vintage champagne, which is why you scare half the men off—too much class.'

'Nice theory but on a more sane note ... what did you want me to get you from the village?' Libby asked, stifling her need to get home. Whatever was happening there, five minutes was not going to make that much difference.

'No, don't worry about it, it doesn't matter.'

After a short argument Libby established that the item Chloe needed picking up was Eustace, their accident-prone Labrador, from the vet's.

'Someone left the gate open and useless Eustace got out. I swear that dog was an escapologist in another life. Mike found him tangled up in some barbed wire.'

'Ouch! Poor Eustace, but don't worry, it's on my way, I'll

—  
'No, it isn't.'

Libby ignored the interruption. 'It's no bother,' she lied.

An hour later Libby was relieved to see the village come into view. The rain that had made motorway driving a nightmare had finally stopped but the puddles on the narrow country lane where she parked were the size of small lakes. By the time she'd brought the Labrador back to the car her shoes were saturated and her legs splashed with mud.

While the excitable animal strained on his leash Libby fumbled for her keys to open the car door. Her fingers closed around them at the same moment her heel caught in a pothole in the uneven surface. Libby staggered, and, losing her balance in her efforts to stay upright and not land in an inelegant heap in the mud, she lost her grip on the dog's lead.

'Great!' she muttered, maintaining a fixed smile as she approached the dog, who was sitting a few feet away looking pleased with himself.

'Good boy, Eustace,' she cajoled, approaching him slowly with her hand outstretched. 'Just stay exactly where you are ...'

The lead was a tantalising inch away from the fingers when he took off, barking madly as he raced away down the lane.

Libby closed her eyes and groaned. 'I don't believe this!' Then she set off after him.

She was panting and had a stitch by the time she caught up with the errant animal. He was sitting in the middle of the narrow lane, his tail banging like a metronome against the ground as he looked at her with soulful eyes.

'Glad someone's having fun,' Libby croaked as she bent forward, hands braced on her thighs as she tried to

drag some air into her lungs. 'Oh, my God, I am so not fit.'

Sweeping wayward strands of her thick chestnut hair from her eyes with her forearm, she straightened up and, tucking her hair in a businesslike fashion behind her ears, took a cautious step towards the dog. The dog barked and took a playful leap backwards.

Libby bit her lip and glared in frustration at the animal.

'I refuse to be outwitted by an animal who even his owners admit isn't the sharpest knife in the box!' she yelled, and thought, You're talking to a dog, Libby.

Worry when you start expecting him to answer back.

The inner dialogue came to an abrupt halt as her attention was distracted by the sound of a powerful engine. Tractors were pretty much the only kind of traffic this lane saw and this did not sound like a tractor.

It wasn't.

The exact sequence of events hard to recall after the fact, the next few seconds always remained a blur in her mind. One moment she was watching the big black sleek car going at a shocking pace heading straight at Eustace, who clearly thought this was the second phase of the great game, and the next she was there in the middle of the road holding up her hands—it seemed like a good idea at the time—and the car was going to hit her.

When his detour to avoid the snarl-up on the motorway had led him along lanes that were as narrow as they were winding, Rafael had not been unduly concerned. It did not cross his mind to consult the cars inbuilt navigational system or open the road map in the glove compartment. He preferred to rely on his own naturally excellent sense of direction. And it wasn't as if the green lanes of England were dangerous, unlike some of the terrain he had negotiated in his life.

As he drove Rafael's thoughts drifted back to a solo

journey he had made at seventeen crossing the mountain ranges of Patagonia in a beat-up Jeep that had broken down at regular intervals until it had eventually been swept away. Who knew that the road he had been driving along had actually been a dry river bed? The recollection of managing to open the jammed door and leap out into the raging torrent seconds before the Jeep had been swept down the mountain brought a wolfish grin to his lean face.

His expression sobered, intensifying the brooding quality of his dark features as he identified the pang in his chest as something approaching envy.

*Envy?*

*Or dissatisfaction?*

Rafael's dark brows knitted into a frowning line of impatience over his narrowed cinnamon-coloured eyes. Neither response was either logical or defensible in his opinion—not for a man who had as much as he did.

Rafael attributed in part his uncharacteristic mood of introspection to yesterday's meeting.

A meeting that had not been strictly essential, he need never have seen the man, but to Rafael's way of thinking there were some things that a man, even one as feckless and criminally incompetent as Marchant, deserved to be told face to face, and explaining that he was about to lose his business and his home was one of those things!

He had not expected it to be pleasant and it hadn't been! To see a man, even a bungling idiot, crushed had been painful to witness.

The man had disintegrated before his eyes. A proud man himself, Rafael, embarrassed on the other man's behalf, had found the overt display of tearful self-pity by the Englishman distasteful.

And even though he knew that the man had been the architect of his own misfortune, with a little help from his own grandfather, Rafael had found himself experiencing

an irrational flash of guilt as he had taken his leave, guilt that had faded when the other man had yelled after him.

‘If you were my son—’

Rafael had cut him off in a bored drawl. ‘If I were your son I would have pensioned you off before you bankrupted your firm and lost your family home.’

With a show of more spirit than Rafael had yet observed the man delivered a parting shot.

‘I hope one day you lose everything you love and I hope, I *really* hope, that I am there to see it!’

Maybe the words had stayed with him because the curse was uniquely inappropriate?

Rafael had lost the only thing he had ever loved long ago, and the hurt of that loss was now no more than a memory. He had not laid himself open to a repeat of that experience; there was nothing and no one in his life he loved. He could lose all the wealth he had amassed tomorrow and there would be no pain; a small part of him might even welcome the challenge of starting again.

At thirty he had achieved everything he’d set out to and more. The question now was where to from here?

Rafael recognised that the main problem was how to remain motivated. He was financially successful beyond most people’s wildest dreams. A faint mocking smile tugged the corners of his lips upwards. His life was sweet—so sweet that here he was envying the boy he had been, the boy who had led a grim hand-to-mouth existence and relied on his wits and cunning to survive.

Maybe there was such a thing as too much success, he mused, smiling at the irony as he shifted gear to negotiate an extra tight bend in the road.

‘So what will it take to make you happy, Rafael Alejandro?’

The harsh curse that was dragged from his lips was seamlessly tacked onto the self-derisive question as out

of nowhere a figure ran into the road.

She seemed to materialise in the twilight; for a split second she stood there in the glare of his lights like some ghostly apparition.

Rafael had a fleeting impression of a slight figure, an alabaster-pale face, a cloud of dark red hair; he had no time to register anything else. He was too busy trying not to add homicide to the list of sins recently laid at his door as he fought to avoid the collision, which seemed sickeningly inevitable.

Rafael had never in his life accepted the inevitable.

He had been blessed with catlike reflexes and a cool head when facing danger—and luck, of course. Never underestimate luck, Rafael thought, wondering as he saw the tree ahead if his was finally running out.

It wasn't.

Against all the odds he avoided the suicidal redhead and the tree and remained in one piece. No matter how many times he later reviewed the incident he never could figure out how—it was a miracle!

He might actually have escaped the incident totally unscathed if the car had not at the critical moment hit the patch of mud at speed. Rafael was then forced to sit back helpless as the car went into a dramatic skid that turned the car through three hundred and sixty degrees before it took it across the road and into a ditch. Even the seat belt could not prevent the velocity causing his head to connect painfully with windscreen.

Rafael saw stars through his closed eyelids then he heard voices—no, *one* voice, female and not, he mused groggily, unattractive.

The voice was begging him not to be dead. Maybe he was?

The pain in his head suggested otherwise and the voice sounded too sexily husky to be that of an angel.

Rafael thought, Great voice, stupid questions, and tuned them out while he applied himself to more important matters like was he still in one piece and did those pieces all work?

He took a personal inventory of his limbs. Everything still seemed to be attached and in working order, which was good. His head felt as though someone were playing cymbals behind his eyes, which was less good.

One supportive hand at the back of his neck, Rafael began to lift his head cautiously and heard the voice—the one that did not belong to an angel—murmur a fervent, *'Thank God!'*

He blinked; the action sent a stab of pain through his temple. Wincing, he pressed his hands to his forehead and began to move his head cautiously towards the voice. With equal caution he forced his heavy eyelids apart and through his interlocked fingers the pale oval of a face swam into view. Hands still clamped to his forehead, fingers pressed to the bridge of his nose, he blinked again and the blurry outline sharpened. The halo of glowing auburn hair seemed strangely familiar, then the rest of her face came into focus.

It was the suicidal female who had caused his accident.

Up close she turned out to be young, beautiful, and his critical gaze could find no flaw in the smooth lines of her face—she was unfortunately a redhead.

Rafael's attitude to redheads was one that had developed gradually, crystallising into a certainty after an incident involving a particularly voluptuous redhead he had been seeing and a glass of red wine that had ended up in his lap, because apparently he had not been giving her his undivided attention. Redheads, no matter how decorative, were simply too high maintenance.

Even as he was deciding that eyes that blue did not exist without the aid of contact lenses Rafael felt his gut twist as he was hit by a savaging wave of desire that was

visceral in its intensity and proved, if nothing else, he was definitely alive, and clearly the message he had sworn off redheads had not reached all parts of his body.

His vision swam again and he closed his eyes, waiting for the wave of nausea to pass. Seemingly these symptoms, along with the uncontrolled rush of testosterone, were results of the head trauma—presumably all would pass.

He opened his eyes just as the redhead was leaning further into the car, her deep russet-coloured hair that reminded him of falling autumn leaves surrounding a vivid heart-shaped face. The nausea had gone. It had been replaced by a reckless and totally inappropriate desire to sink his tongue between those luscious lips.

Even with his scrambled brain working at fifty-percent capacity he did consider following through with the impulse, but, *Dios*, that mouth!

On the plus side the lust burning through his veins served as an effective distraction from the hammer pounding in his skull whatever the cause, adrenaline rush and near-death experience ...?

A woman's face had not caused him to feel anything this ... *primitive* for a long time. Part of him resented what he was feeling—Rafael liked to stay in control of everything including his appetites—the other half suggested he relax and enjoy the moment.



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