



Unlocking Her Innocence

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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Christmas. It was *that* time of year again. Not in a jolly mood, Vito Barbieri grimaced, his darkly handsome features hard with impatience. He had no time for it—the silliness of the festive season, the drunken antics and the extravagance, not to mention the lack of concentration, increased absenteeism and reduced productivity from his thousands of staff. January was never a good month for the profit margins.

Nor was he ever likely to forget the Christmas when he had lost his kid brother, Olly. Although three years had passed the tragedy of Olly's horribly wasted life was still etched on his mind. His little brother, so bright and full of promise, had died because a drunk got behind a car wheel after a party, Vito's party, where he and his brother had argued minutes before that fatal car journey. Guilt clouded his happier memories of the boy, ten years his junior, whom he had loved above all else.

But then love always *hurt*. Vito had learned that lesson young when his mother walked out on her husband and son for a much richer man. He never saw her again. His father had neglected him and rushed into a series of fleeting affairs. Olly had been the result of one of those affairs, orphaned at nine years old when his English mother died. Vito had offered him a home. It was probably the only act of generosity Vito had never regretted, for, much as he missed Olly, he was still grateful to have known him. His sibling's sunny outlook had briefly enriched Vito's workaholic existence.

Only now Bolderwood Castle, purchased purely because Olly fancied living in a gothic monstrosity complete with turrets, was no longer a home. Of course he could take a wife and watch her walk away with half his fortune, his castle and his children, a lesson so many of his friends had learned to their cost, a few years down the road. No, there would be no wife, Vito reflected grimly. When a man was as rich as Vito, greedy, ambitious women literally threw themselves at his feet. But tall or short, curvy or skinny, dark or fair, the women who met the needs of his high sex drive were virtually interchangeable. Indeed sex was steadily becoming nothing to get excited about, he acknowledged wryly. At thirty-one years of age, Vito was reviewing the attributes he used to define an attractive woman by.

He knew what he *didn't* like. Airheads irritated him. He was not a patient or tolerant man. Intellectual snobs, party girls and social climbers bored him. Giggly, flirtatious ones reminded him too much of his misspent youth and tough career women rarely knew how to lighten up at the end of the day. Either that or they wanted a four point plan of any relationship laid out in advance. Did he want children? Did he actually know if he was fertile? Did he want to settle down some day? No, he didn't. He wasn't opening himself up to that level of disillusionment; particularly not after losing Olly had taught him how transitory life could be. He would be a very rich and cantankerous and demanding old man instead.

There was a knock on the door and a woman entered the room. Karen Harper, his office manager, Vito recalled after a momentary pause; AeroCarlton, which manufactured aeroplane parts, was a recent acquisition in Vito's business empire and he was only just getting to know the staff.

'I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr Barbieri. I wanted to check that you're happy to continue endorsing the prisoner rehabilitation placement scheme we joined last year? It's run by the charity New Start and they recommend suitable applicants who they fully check out and support. We have an office trainee starting tomorrow. Her name's—'

'I don't need to know the details,' Vito cut in smoothly, 'I have no objection to operating such a scheme but will expect you to keep a close watch on the employee.'

'Of course,' the attractive brunette declared with a bright smile of approval. 'It feels good at this time of year to give someone in difficulty a new chance in life, doesn't it? And the placement does only last three months.'

More goody-goody sentimental drivel, Vito thought in exasperation. He supposed the applicant had paid her debt to society through serving her sentence in prison but he was not particularly enamoured of the prospect of having a potential villain on the premises. 'Did this person's crime involve dishonesty?' he queried suddenly.

'No, we were clear that we wouldn't accept anyone with that kind of record. I doubt if you'll even see her, Mr Barbieri. She'll be the office gopher. She can take care of messages, filing and man reception. At this time of year, there's always room for an extra pair of hands.'

A momentary pang of conscience assailed Vito, for, astute as he was, he had already noticed that the manager could be a little too tough on her subordinates. Only the day before he had overheard her taking the janitor to task over a very minor infringement of his duties. Karen enjoyed her position of power and used it, but he could only assume that an ex-con would be well equipped to cope.

Ava checked the postbox as she did at least twice every day. Nothing. There was no point trying to avoid the obvious, no point in continuing to hope—her family wanted nothing more to do with her and had decided to ignore her letters. Tears pricked her bright blue eyes and she blinked rapidly, lifting her coppery head high. She had learned to get by on her own in prison and she could do the same in the outside world, even if the outside world was filled with a bewildering array of choices, disappointments and possibilities that made her head swim.

'Don't try to run before you can walk,' her probation officer had advised. Sally was a great believer in platitudes.

Harvey's tail thumped the floor at Ava's feet and she bent down to smooth his soft curly head. A cross between a German shepherd and a poodle, Harvey was a large dog with floppy ears, a thick black curly coat and a long shaggy tail that looked as though it belonged to another breed entirely.

'Time to get you home, boy,' Ava said softly, trying not to think about the fact that the boarding kennels where Harvey lived could not possibly house him for much longer. During the last few months of her sentence Ava worked at the kennels—outside work was encouraged as a means of reintroducing prisoners into the community and independent life—and she was all too well aware that Harvey was living on borrowed time.

She loved Harvey with all her heart and soul. He was the one thing in her life that she dared love now, and on the days she saw him he lifted her heart as nothing else could. But Marge, the kind lady who ran the kennels and took in strays, had limited space and Harvey had already spent months in her care without finding a home. Harvey, however, was his own worst enemy because he barked at the people who might have given him a for-ever home, scaring them off before they could learn about his gentle, loyal character and clean habits. Ava knew how big the gap between appearances and reality could be; she had spent so

many years putting on a false front to keep people at arm's length, believing that she didn't need anyone, didn't care about other people's opinions and was proud to be the odd one out. At home, at school, just about everywhere she went, Ava had been alone...

Except for Olly, she thought, and a fierce pang of pain and regret shot through her as sharply as a knife. Oliver Barbieri had been her best friend and she had to live with the knowledge that it was her fault he was dead. She had gone to prison for reckless driving but the memory of the trial was blurred because she had already been living in a mental hell and no court could have punished her more than she had punished herself. It hadn't mattered that her father had thrown her out of the house in disgust or even that she had been advised not to attend Olly's funeral and pay her last respects. She had known she didn't deserve pity or forgiveness. Even so she did not remember the crash. During it she had sustained a head injury and was left with memory loss, meaning she recalled neither her fateful, incomprehensible decision to drive while under the influence of alcohol or the accident itself. Sometimes she thought that amnesia was a blessing, and sometimes that only fear of reliving what she had done lay behind her inability to recall the later stages of that awful night.

She had met Olly at boarding school, a trendy co-ed institution with high fees and a fantastic academic record. No price had been too high for her father to get his least-loved child out from under his roof, she acknowledged sadly. Always made to feel like the cuckoo in the family nest, Ava was the only one of three children to have been sent away from home to receive her education. It had driven yet another wedge between Ava and her sisters, Gina and Bella, and, now that she had truly become the prodigal daughter, there was no sign that anyone wanted to welcome her back to the fold. Of course her mother was dead and there was nobody left to mend fences or at least nobody who cared enough to make the effort. Her sisters had their own lives with husbands and children and careers and their ex-con sister was simply an embarrassment, a stain on the Fitzgerald family name.

Scolding herself for that demoralising flood of negative reflections, Ava strove instead to concentrate on the positives: she was out of prison, she had a job, an actual *job*—she still couldn't believe her good fortune. When she had first been recommended for the New Start programme she had not held out much hope of a placement because, although she had left school with top grades, she had no relevant office work experience or saleable skills. But AeroCarlton had offered her a lifebelt, giving her the chance to rebuild her life, with a reputable firm on her CV she would have a much better chance of getting a permanent job.

Harvey's tail dropped as he stepped through the doors of h...

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