



Marriage: To Claim His Twins

By Penny Jordan

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Ruby's shocked that she's still so attracted to dark, sexy and powerful Alexander. She's afraid she might lose her beautiful boys, whom she's struggled to bring up on her own, but maybe there's a solution.... Can she wed Sander—a virtual stranger—and live as his wife, and in his bed?

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Marriage: To Claim His Twins By Penny Jordan Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #2048872 in Books
- Published on: 2010-09-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.62" h x .50" w x 4.21" l, .25 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 192 pages

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Editorial Review

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Cursing as she heard the doorbell ring, Ruby remained where she was, on her hands and knees, hoping that whoever it was would give up and go away, leaving her in peace to get on with her cleaning. However, the bell rang again, this time almost imperiously. Someone was pressing hard on the bell.

Cursing again under her breath, Ruby backed out of the downstairs cloakroom, feeling hot and sticky, and not in any mood to have her busy blitz on cleaning whilst her twin sons were at school interrupted. She got to her feet, pushing her soft blonde curls off her face as she did so, before marching towards the front door of the house she shared with two older sisters and her own twin sons. She yanked it open.

'Look, I'm—' Her sentence went unfinished, her voice suspended by shock as she stared at the man standing on the doorstep.

Shock, disbelief, fear, anger, panic, and a sharp spear of something else that she didn't recognise exploded inside her like a fireball, with such powerful intensity that her body was drained of so much energy that she was left feeling shaky and weak, trembling inwardly beneath the onslaught of emotions.

Of course he *would* be dressed immaculately, in a dark business suit worn over a crisp blue shirt, whilst she was wearing her old jeans and a baggy tee shirt. Not that it really mattered how she looked. After all, she had no reason to want to impress him—had she? And she certainly had no reason to want him to think of her as a desirable woman, groomed and dressed for his approval. She had to clench her stomach muscles against the shudder of revulsion that threatened to betray her. The face that had haunted her dreams and then her nightmares hadn't changed—or aged. If anything he looked even more devastatingly handsome and virile than she had remembered, the dark gold gaze that had mesmerised her so effectively every bit as compelling now as it had been then. Or was it because she was a woman now and not the girl she had been that she was so immediately and shockingly aware of what a very sexual man he was? Ruby didn't know, and she didn't *want* to know.

The disbelief that had frozen her into silence had turned like snow in the sun to a dangerous slush of fear and horror inside her head—and her heart? *No!* Whatever effect he had once had on her heart, Sander Konstantinakos had no power to touch it now.

But still the small betraying word, 'You,' slid from the fullness of the naturally warm-coloured lips that had caused her parents to name her Ruby, causing a look of mixed contempt and arrogance to flash from the intense gold of Sander's eyes. Eyes the colour of the king of the jungle—as befitted a man who was in effect the ruler of the Mediterranean island that was his home.

Instinctively Ruby started to close the door on him, wanting to shut out not just Sander himself but everything he represented, but he was too quick for her, taking hold of the door and forcing it open so that he could step into the hall—and then close the door behind him, enclosing them both in the small domestic space, with its smell of cleaning fluid. Strong as it was, it still wasn't strong enough to protect her from the scent of *him*. A rash of prickly sensation raised the hairs at the back of her neck and then ran down her spine. This was ridiculous. Sander meant nothing to her now, just as she had meant nothing to him that night... But she mustn't think about that. She must concentrate instead on what she was now, not what she had been then, and she must remember the promise she had made to the twins when they had been born—she would put the past behind her.

What she had never expected was that that past would seek her out, and now it had...

'What are you doing here?' she demanded, determined to wrest control of the situation from Sander. 'What do you want?'

His mouth might be aesthetically perfect, with that well-cut top lip balancing the promise of sensuality with his fuller bottom lip, but there was nothing sensual about the tight-lipped look he was giving her, and his words were as sharply cold as the air outside the Manchester hotel in which he had abandoned her that winter morning.

'I think you know the answer to that,' he said, his English as fluent and as accentless as she remembered. 'What I want, what I have come for and what I mean to have, are my sons.'

'*Your* sons?' Fiercely proud of her twin sons, and equally fiercely maternally protective of them, there was nothing he could have said which would have been more guaranteed to arouse Ruby's anger than his verbal claim on them. Angry colour burned in the smooth perfection of Ruby's normally calm face, and her blue-green eyes were fiery with the fierce passion of her emotions.

It was over six years since this man had taken her, used her and then abandoned her as casually as though she was a...a nothing. A cheap, impulsively bought garment which in the light of day he had discarded for its cheapness. Oh, yes, she knew that she had only herself to blame for what had happened to her that fatal night. *She* had been the one to flirt with him, even if that flirtation had been alcohol-induced, and no matter how she tried to excuse her behaviour it still shamed her. But not its result—not her beautiful, adorable, much loved sons. They could never shame her, and from the moment they had been born she had been determined to be a mother of whom they could be proud—a mother with whom they could feel secure, and a mother who, no matter how much she regretted the manner in which they had been conceived, would not for one minute even want to go back in time and avoid their conception. Her sons were her life. *Her* sons.

'My sons—' she began, only to be interrupted.

'*My* sons, you mean—since in my country it is the father who has the right to claim his children, not the mother.'

'My sons were not fathered by you,' Ruby continued firmly and of course untruthfully.

'Liar,' Sander countered, reaching inside his jacket to produce a photograph which he held up in front of her.

The blood left Ruby's face. The photograph had been taken at Manchester Airport, when they had all gone to see her middle sister off on her recent flight to Italy, and the resemblance of the twins to the man who had fathered them was cruelly and undeniably revealed. The two boys were cast perfectly in their father's image, right down to the unintentionally arrogant masculine air they could adopt at times, as though deep down somewhere in their genes there was an awareness of the man who had fathered them.

Watching the colour come and go in Ruby's face, Sander allowed himself to give her a triumphant look. Of *course* the boys were his. He had known it the first second he had looked at the image on his sister's mobile phone. Their mirror image resemblance to him had sent a jolt of emotion through him unlike anything he had previously experienced.

It hadn't taken the private agency he had contacted very long to trace Ruby—although Sander had frowned over comments in the report he had received from them that implied that Ruby was a devoted mother who dedicated herself to raising her sons and was unlikely to give them up willingly. But Sander had decided that

Ruby's very devotion to his sons might be the best tool he could use to ensure that she gave them up to him.

'My sons' place is with me, on the island that is their home and which ultimately will be their inheritance. Under our laws they belong to me.'

'Belong? They are children, not possessions, and no court in this country would let you take them from me.'

She was beginning to panic, but she was determined not to let him see it.

'You think not? You are living in a house that belongs to your sister, on which she has a mortgage she can no longer afford to repay, you have no money of your own, no job. No training—nothing! I, on the other hand, can provide my sons with everything that you cannot—a home, a good education, a future.'

Although she was shaken by the knowledge of how thoroughly he had done his homework, had had her investigated, Ruby was still determined to hold her ground and not allow him to overwhelm her.

'Maybe so. But can you provide them with love and the knowledge that they are truly loved and wanted? Of course you can't—because you don't love them. How can you? You don't know them.'

There—let him answer *that*! But even as she made her defiant stand Ruby's heart was warning her that Sander had raised an issue that she could not ignore and would ultimately have to face. Honesty compelled her to admit it.

'I do know that one day they will want to know who fathered them and what their family history is,' she said.

It was hard for her to make that admission—just as it had been hard for her to answer the questions the boys had already asked, saying that they did have a daddy but he lived in a different country. Those words had reminded her of what she was denying her sons because of the circumstances in which she had conceived them. One day, though, their questions would be those of teenagers, not little boys, and far more searching, far more knowing.

Ruby looked away from Sander, instinctively wanting to hide her inner fears from him. The problem of telling the boys how she had come to have them lay across her heart and her conscience in an ever present heavy weight. At the moment they simply accepted that, like many of the other children they were at school with, they did not have a daddy living with them. But one day they would start to ask more questions, and she had hoped desperately that she would not have to tell them the truth until they were old enough to accept it without judging her. Now Sander had stirred up all the anxieties she had tried to put to one side. More than anything else she wanted to be a good mother, to give her boys the gift of a secure childhood filled with love; she wanted them to grow up knowing they were loved, confident and happy, without the burden of having to worry about adult relationships. For that reason she wa...

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