



HARLEQUIN®

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December

*Harlequin Romance®*

# THE STAND-IN BRIDE

*Lucy Gordon*



*"Don't be stupid, Maggie.  
The answer must be as  
obvious to you as it is to me.  
I have arranged to be married  
on the sixteenth, and that's  
what I mean to do."*

"But you haven't got a bride," she said incredulously. "What are you going to do? Call in one of your conquests? Will any woman do?"

The strange light was there in his eyes again. "Not any woman," he said. "You."

Something caught in her throat and she forced herself to give a brief choking laugh.

"I'm not laughing," he said quietly.

"You're right. It's the unfunniest joke I've ever heard."

"I was never further from making jokes in my life. You don't understand Spanish honor. The one who does the injury is the one who makes reparation. You have injured me, and it is you, and nobody else who must make it right."

**Lucy Gordon** cut her writing teeth on magazine journalism, interviewing many of the world's most interesting men, including Warren Beatty, Richard Chamberlain, Roger Moore, Sir Alec Guinness and Sir John Gielgud. She also camped out with lions in Africa, and had many other unusual experiences which have often provided the background for her books.

She is married to a Venetian, whom she met while on holiday in Venice. They got engaged within two days, and have now been married for twenty-five years. They live in the Midlands with their three dogs.

Two of her books, *His Brother's Child* and *Song of the Lorelei*, won the Romance Writers of America RITA Award in the Best Traditional Romance category.

Next month, look out for the third story  
in Lucy Gordon's THE ITALIAN GROOMS miniseries—  
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## **Books by Lucy Gordon**

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3655—WIFE BY ARRANGEMENT

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# THE STAND-IN BRIDE

*Lucy Gordon*



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## CHAPTER ONE

CHRISTMAS weather had come early. Although it was only the first day of December there was already the promise of snow, making the air sparkle and the street decorations gleam. High over London's West End they shone against the darkness, multi-coloured confections of angels with long golden trumpets, elves, fairies dancing with long streamers, silver bells hanging in clusters.

But the two young women hurrying along the glittering street had no attention for the beauty overhead. They were arguing.

'Catalina, please don't be unreasonable,' Maggie begged for the third time.

'Unreasonable!' Catalina snapped. 'You want me to spend an evening looking at men wearing nighties and little skirts, and *I'm* unreasonable? Hah!'

'*Julius Caesar* is a great play. It's a classic.'

Catalina made a sound that might have been a snort. She was eighteen, Spanish and looked magnificent in her blazing temper.

'It's Shakespeare,' pleaded Maggie.

'*That* to Shakespeare!'

'And your fiancé wants you to see it.'

Catalina said something deeply uncomplimentary about her fiancé.

'Hush, be careful!' Maggie urged, looking around hurriedly, as though Don Sebastian de Santiago might appear from thin air.

'Pooh! I am here in London; he is in Spain. Soon I

shall be his prisoner, and behave myself, and say, "Yes, Sebastian," and "No, Sebastian," and "Whatever you say, Sebastian." But until then I do what I like, I say what I like, and I say I don't like men with knobbles on their knees wearing skirts.'

'They probably don't all have knobbles on their knees,' Maggie said, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

Catalina let forth a torrent of Spanish and Maggie hastily seized her arm and steered her along the road, weaving in and out of the seething crowd. 'It was supposed to be part of your English education,' she said.

'I am Spanish; he is Spanish. Why I need an English education?'

'Why *do* I need—' Maggie corrected her automatically.

'Why *do* I need an English education?' Catalina repeated in exasperation.

'For the same reason you needed a French education, so that you can be a cultivated woman and host his dinner parties.'

Before her rebellious charge could answer, Maggie steered her into a teashop, found a table and said, 'Sit!', much as she would have done to a recalcitrant puppy. The young Spanish girl was delightful but exhausting. Soon Maggie would see her off to Spain and retire to the peace of a nervous breakdown.

For the last three months it had been Maggie's job to perfect Catalina's English and share chaperoning duties with Isabella, her middle-aged duenna. The two Spanish women lived in one of London's most luxurious hotels, courtesy of Don Sebastian, who had also arranged the highlights of their schedule, and paid Maggie's wages.

The whole thing had been arranged at a distance. It was six months since Don Sebastian had last found time

to see his fiancée, and that had been on a flying visit to Paris, during which he seemed to have checked the improvement in her French, and little else.

Day-to-day decisions were in the hands of Donna Isabella, who hired teachers locally, communicated with Sebastian and relayed her employer's wishes to her employer's bride-to-be.

He was in America at the moment, expected to arrive in London the following week, after which Catalina would accompany him back to Spain to begin preparing for her wedding. Or possibly he wouldn't have time to come to London at all, in which case they would travel without him. Whatever else he could be accused of, Maggie thought, it wasn't flaming ardour.

She couldn't imagine what he was thinking of to choose a wife so totally unsuitable. Catalina was ignorant and empty-headed—clothes-mad, pop music-mad, boy-mad. By no stretch of the imagination was she a proper consort for a serious man with a seat in the regional Andalucian government.

Catalina's efforts to master languages were half-hearted. She managed fairly well with English because she'd watched so many American television programs, but her French was dire, and her German had been a waste of everybody's time.

Yet Maggie was fond of her. Exasperating Catalina might be, but she was also kind, warm-hearted and fun. She needed a young husband who would be entranced by her beauty and high spirits, and care nothing for her lack of brains. Instead she would soon be imprisoned in a world of premature middle age.

'All right,' Maggie said as they ate tea and cakes. 'What do you want to do this evening?'

'Die!' Catalina declared passionately.

'Short of that,' Maggie said, firmly dousing melodrama with common sense.

'What does it matter? In a few weeks my life will be over anyway. I will be an *old* married woman with an *old* husband and a baby every year.'

'Is Don Sebastian really old?' Maggie asked.

Catalina shrugged. 'Old, middle-aged. So what?'

'I wish you had a picture of him.'

'Is bad enough I have to marry him. What for I want his picture?'

'Anyone would think I hadn't taught you any English,' Maggie complained. 'It's not "what for I want his picture?"', it's "Why should I want his picture?"' Now, let's try it. *I* say, "I wish you had his picture", and *you* say—?'

'I say if I have his picture here, I stamp on it.'

Maggie gave up.

'Maybe he's only middle-aged outside, but he's old *in here*.' The girl tapped her forehead, then her chest. 'And it's in there that counts.'

Maggie nodded. She knew only too well how a man could look one thing and be another. Four years of marriage had taught her that. Blissful happiness, followed by disillusion, then heartbreak, disgust and despair. To cover her sudden tension she ordered more tea.

The two women made a study in contrasts—the one still in her teens, all proud, passionate Spanish beauty, dark, glittering eyes and a warm complexion, and the other in her late twenties, with soft fair skin, dark brown eyes and light brown hair. Catalina was tiny, built on dainty lines, but her lively temper and excitable personality tended to make her the centre of attention.

Maggie was tall and statuesque, but her manners were so quiet that she could be overlooked beside the mag-



nificent Catalina. Yet she too had a touch of the Mediterranean. Her grandfather had been Alfonso Cortez, a Spaniard from Andalucia who had fallen madly in love with an Englishwoman spending a week in Spain. When it was over he'd pursued her all the way home, never seeing his own country again.

From him Maggie had inherited her large, dark eyes that suggested unfathomable depths. They were alluring in themselves, but doubly so against the Anglo-Saxon pallor of her skin. Observers would have summed Catalina up in an instant, but would have lingered over Maggie, puzzling over her mystery, and the pain and bitterness that she strove to hide. They might have read the sensuality and humour in her mouth. The sensuality she tried to conceal, even from herself. The humour was her weapon against the world. Once, and it seemed a long time ago, she had laughed all the time. Now she laughed to protect her privacy.

'If you feel like that about your fiancé, you should tell him,' she said.

'You think Sebastian would let me go, after he's spent two years grooming me? Everything I do is under his control. I am taught what he wants me to know—languages, how to dress, how to eat, how to behave.

'Even on this tour of Europe, I have no freedom because he has organised everything. In Rome, in Paris, in London I stay in hotels he chooses, and do what he say.

'And now, it's Christmas and there are so many lovely things in London: decorations and Christmas trees, and children singing carols, the stores are full of lights, and we buy lots of lovely presents, and visit Santa in his grotto...'

'I'm not taking you to any more grottoes,' Maggie

interrupted with a shudder. 'You nearly got us thrown out of the last one for flirting with an elf.'

Catalina giggled. 'Wasn't he the most handsome boy you ever saw?'

'But you're practically a married woman.'

The girl's laughter faded. '*Si!* And when all these lovely Christmas things are happening, Sebastian want me to see a worthy play. Why not a pantomime? Widow Twanky and Principal Boys. We don't have that in Spain, so is part of my English education, *si?* But no! *Julius Caesar!*'

It would be impossible to convey the depth of loathing and disgust she put into the last two words. Maggie sighed in sympathy.

Having exploded, Catalina settled to submerge her sorrows in chocolate éclairs doused in cream. 'And always there is Isabella,' she sighed. 'Spying on me.'

'That's not fair,' Maggie protested. 'She's kind and very fond of you.'

'I'm fond of her, but I'm also glad that tonight we could come out without her. She means well, but she is Sebastian's poor relation, and she thinks he's God. Always she say, "Don Sebastian's wife would never do this," and "Don Sebastian's wife would always do that." One day I will reply, "Then Don Sebastian's wife can do it, but *I'm* going to do something else.'"

'Good for you. Tell him that the wedding's off.'

'If only I dared! Oh, Maggie, I wish I was like you. You had the courage to follow your heart and marry the man you loved.'

'Never mind that,' Maggie said hastily. Catalina's curiosity about her marriage was making her tense and edgy. To change the subject she said, 'We've still got time for a show.'

'Oh, yes, we must go somewhere, or we shall look nice for nothing,' Catalina said fervently.

She seized any excuse to wear her loveliest clothes, so even for an outing with her chaperone she was done up to the nines. The floor-length peacock-blue dress looked glorious with her warm colouring. The diamonds, perhaps, were a little old for her, but she knew she looked beautiful, and was happy.

Maggie would have preferred to dress with restraint, but Catalina viewed restraint with horror. She had insisted on a shopping trip and, with an unerring eye, steered Maggie towards a black silk cocktail gown that moulded itself to her womanly curves.

'It's a bit low,' Maggie had said hesitantly.

'So what? You have a magnificent bosom; you should show it off,' Catalina had said imperiously.

Even Maggie could see that the dress had been made for her, and she bought it, compromising with a black silk chiffon scarf that she could whisk about her shoulders. She was wearing the scarf now but, even so, she wished that the dress was a little less revealing.

'What shall we choose?' she asked now.

'*Your Place Or Mine?*' Catalina said at once. 'I have wanted to see that ever since I read that it was very rude and naughty.'

'Just the sort of thing Don Sebastian's wife shouldn't see,' Maggie teased.

'No, she shouldn't,' Catalina said happily. 'So let us go *immediately*.'

Isabella turned her heavy bulk over in bed, trying to ignore the nagging pain in her side. She wondered when Maggie and Catalina would return, but a glance at the clock told her they had been gone barely an hour.

A sudden noise made her stiffen. It came from the other side of her bedroom door, where there was the large sitting room of the luxurious suite she shared with Catalina. Somebody had entered by stealth, and was looking around.

Summoning her courage she slipped out of bed, found her bag, dropped a heavy ashtray into it, and crept to the door. Then, with one wild movement, she yanked the door open and swung the bag at the intruder.

The next moment her arm was seized in a grip of steel, and she was looking at the astonished face of Don Sebastian de Santiago.

‘Merciful mother of heaven!’ she moaned. ‘What have I done?’

‘Nearly brained me,’ her employer said wryly, feeling into the bag and removing the ashtray.

‘Forgive me, Señor. I thought you were a burglar.’

The habitual stern, haughty look on Don Sebastian’s face softened. ‘It is I who should ask your forgiveness for intruding on you without warning,’ he said courteously. ‘I ought to have knocked, but knowing it was your night for going to *Julius Caesar* I assumed the place would be empty, and persuaded Reception to give me a key.’ He regarded her face with concern. ‘Are you unwell?’

‘A little, Señor. It is nothing, but I preferred not to go out, and I knew I could entrust Catalina to Señora Cortez.’

‘Ah, yes, you mentioned her in your letters. A respectable English woman, who teaches languages.’

‘And the widow of a Spaniard,’ Isabella said eagerly. ‘A most cultivated and reliable person, with a mature outlook and the highest principles.’ Fearful that her chaperonage might be found wanting, she continued to

expatiate on Maggie's virtues until Don Sebastian interrupted her gently.

'I don't wish to keep you from your bed. Just tell me how to find them.'

Isabella produced her own unused ticket from the bag. 'They will be sitting here.'

He shepherded her kindly to the door of her room, bid her farewell, and departed. In fifteen minutes he was at the theatre, arriving in the middle of the first interval. Rather than waste time searching the crowd, he went to the seat number on his ticket, and waited for Catalina and her companion to join him.

*Your Place Or Mine?* was only mildly shocking, but to a girl from a sheltered background it seemed deliciously risqué. Afterwards they walked to a nearby restaurant, Catalina blissfully remembering tunes and jokes from the show.

'Sebastian would be so cross if he knew where I'd been tonight,' she said cheerfully as they sat waiting for their food.

'I can't imagine why you agreed to marry him if you dislike him so much.'

'I was sixteen. What did I know? Maggie, when you live in a convent boarding school with nuns saying, "Don't do this," and "Don't do that," you will agree to *anything* to get out.

'And along comes this old man—OK, OK, middle-aged man—who was a friend of your Papa—also he is your distant cousin, third or fourth, I forget. But Sebastian is the head of the family, so when your Papa die this man is your guardian. And he say he has decided you will make him a suitable wife.'

'*He* has decided?'

'He is a decisive man. It is his way.'

'What about what you want?'

'He says I'm too young to know what I want.'

Maggie appealed to heaven. 'Give me patience!'

'Anyway, you say yes, because if you don't get out of that school you will scream,' Catalina explained, adding with a big sigh, 'but he's much worse than the nuns. A girl should go to her wedding joyfully, full of adoration for her groom. How can I adore Sebastian?'

'Since I've never met him, I don't know whether he's adorable or not,' Maggie pointed out.

'He is not,' Catalina said firmly. 'He is a grandee, an aristocrat. He is proud, fierce, haughty, imperious. He demands everything and he forgives nothing. He believes that only honour matters, for himself, for his family. He is *impressive*. But adorable—no!'

'Well, adoration is fine for the wedding day,' Maggie observed. 'But a marriage needs to be built on reality.' She poured them both a glass of the light wine she had ordered.

'What are you thinking?' Catalina asked, looking curiously into her face.

'I—nothing. Why do you ask?'

'Suddenly your face has a strange expression, as though you could see something very far away that nobody else could see. Oh, no!' Her hand flew to her mouth in a conscience-stricken gesture. 'I have made you think about your own husband, and that makes you sad because he is dead. Forgive me.'

'There's nothing to forgive,' Maggie said hastily. 'It's four years since he died. I don't brood about it now.'

'But you do. You never talk about him, so you must be brooding in secret,' Catalina said with youthful romanticism. 'Oh, Maggie, how lucky you are to have

known a great love. I shall die without *ever* knowing a great love.'

That was the thing about Catalina. One moment she could discuss her predicament with a clear-sightedness that made Maggie respect her, and the next she would go off in a childish flight of melodramatic fancy.

'I wish you would tell me about Señor Cortez,' she begged.

'Start eating,' Maggie advised quietly.

The last thing she wanted to discuss was her husband, whose name had been Roderigo Alva. After his death she had reverted to her maiden name of Cortez, determined to cut all connection with the past. Normally she kept her secrets, but in an unguarded moment she'd let slip that she'd once had a Spanish husband, and Catalina had naturally assumed that Cortez was her married name. Rather than correct her, and prompt more unwanted questions, Maggie had let it pass.

To divert the girl's attention, Maggie said, 'I'm sure Don Sebastian will see that he can't hold you to a promise given when you were sixteen. If you just explain—'

'Explain? Hah! This isn't a reasonable Englishman, Maggie. He only listens to what he wants to hear and insists on his own way—'

'In short, he's a Spaniard. And I'm beginning to think any woman who marries a Spaniard is crazy,' Maggie said with more feeling than she'd meant to reveal.

'Oh, yes,' Catalina agreed. 'Let me tell you what my Grandmama used to say about my Grandpapa—'

Maggie was a good listener, and Catalina poured her heart out in a way she could never do with the easily shocked Isabella. Maggie already knew much of the story of her childhood in the old Moorish city of Granada, motherless, because her mother had died at her

birth, leaving her with a bewildered father who was already middle-aged. But Catalina told it again anyhow, talking about southern Spain, its vineyards and olive groves, orange and lemon orchards.

Just outside Granada stood the Santiago estate, or at least part of it, for it also included extensive property in other parts of Andalucia, all owned by the rich and powerful family head, Don Sebastian de Santiago. Catalina had met him once, when she was ten, and she was taken to the Residenza Santiago, his great home that was like a palace. For this visit she wore her Sunday dress, and was warned to be on her best behaviour. She recalled little of that meeting, save that he had been formal and distant. Soon after that she was sent to the convent school. When she emerged at sixteen her father was dead, and she found herself the ward and betrothed of a man she hardly knew.

She was still chattering as they hailed a cab to take them the short distance to the hotel, travelled up in the lift and walked along the corridor to the suite.

They found the main room almost dark, except for a small table lamp.

'We have a cup of tea, like true English people,' Catalina said. While she called room service, Maggie took off her coat, yawned and stretched.

'I so envy you that dress,' Catalina said longingly. 'No straps and only your bosom is holding it up, so when you stretch your arms over your head it look like maybe it fall down, and maybe not. And all the men are watching and hoping. I wish I can have a dress that look like it fall down.'

'Catalina!' Maggie said, half-amused, half-horrified. 'You make me out a terrible chaperone.'



Impulsively the girl hugged her. 'I like you so much, Maggie. You have an understanding heart, I think.'

'Well, you take my advice. Stand up to this ogre and tell him to get lost. This is the twenty-first century. You can't be forced into marriage against your will—certainly not with an old man. One day you'll meet a nice boy of your own age.'

Catalina chuckled. 'I thought you believed a woman was crazy to marry a Spaniard of any age.'

'I meant any English woman. I dare say if you're Spanish they might be just about tolerable.'

'How kind of you,' said an ironic voice from the shadows

They whirled and saw a man rise from the armchair by the window, and switch on a tall standard lamp. Maggie felt a frisson of alarm, and not only because of his sudden appearance, the way he seemed to loom up from nowhere. It was to do with the man himself. There was something inherently dangerous about him. She knew that by instinct, even in that brief moment.

Before she could demand to know who he was and how he came to be there, she heard Catalina whisper, 'Sebastian!'

Oh, heavens! Maggie thought. Now the fat's in the fire.

Obviously he'd heard every word she'd said. But that might even be a good thing. A little plain speaking was long overdue.

She surveyed him, realising that she had been seriously misled. Catalina's notion of elderly was coloured by her own youth. This man bore no relation to the grey-beard they had been discussing. Don Sebastian de Santiago was in his thirties, perhaps his late thirties but

certainly no older. He stood a good six foot two inches tall, with a lean, hard body that he carried like an athlete.

Only on his face did Maggie see what she had expected, a look of pride and arrogance that she guessed had been imprinted there at the hour of his birth. And right now, to pride and arrogance was added anger. If she'd cherished a hope that he hadn't heard all her frank words, a look at his black, snapping eyes would have dispelled it.

But for the moment anger was just below the surface, almost concealed by a layer of cool courtesy. 'Good evening, Catalina,' he said calmly. 'Will you be so kind as to introduce me to this lady?'

Catalina pulled herself together. 'Señora Margarita Cortez, Don Sebastian de Santiago.'

Sebastian inclined his head curtly. 'Good evening, Señora. It is a pleasure to meet you at last. I have heard much about you, although I admit that I had not expected to find you so young.'

His eyes flickered over her as he spoke, as though he were sizing her up, prior to dismissal.

Maggie raised her chin, refusing to be discomposed.

'I was not informed of any age qualifications for my job, Señor,' she replied crisply. 'Only that I should speak fluent Spanish, and be able to introduce Catalina to English customs.'

He seemed a little surprised that she had turned his remark back on him. He surveyed her ironically.

'Then permit me to say that you seem to have exceeded your brief. Was it part of the terms of your employment to criticise me to my bride, or is that an English custom I've never heard of before?'

'You take a light-hearted conversation too seriously, Señor,' Maggie said, managing to sound amused. 'Catalina

and I have enjoyed an evening at the theatre, followed by a meal, and we were in the mood to talk nonsense.'

'I see,' he said sardonically. 'So you were talking nonsense when you told her that she couldn't be forced into marriage with an ogre. I can't tell you how greatly that relieves my mind. For if you were to seriously oppose me, I tremble to think of my fate.'

'So do I,' she riposted. She wasn't going to let him get away with that.

He raised his eyebrows slightly, but otherwise didn't deign to react.

'It's time for me to be going home,' Maggie said. 'I'll just call a cab—'

He moved swiftly to put himself between her and the telephone. 'Before you do, perhaps you could favour me with an account of your evening. Did you enjoy *Julius Caesar*?'

'Very much,' Catalina burst out before Maggie could stop her. 'Such a great play, and an inspired performance. We were thrilled, weren't we, Maggie?'

'Yes, do tell me.' He turned to her. 'Did you enjoy the performance as much as Catalina—?'

Maggie's alarm bells rang. 'Don Sebastian—'

'Or will you, at least, have the sense to admit the truth?' he cut across her sharply. 'Neither of you were there tonight.'

'But we were,' Catalina plunged on, unwisely. 'Truly, we were.'

'That's enough,' Maggie said, laying a hand on the girl's arm. 'There's no need for this, Catalina. We've done nothing to be ashamed of. Perhaps it's Don Sebastian who should be ashamed, for spying on us.'

'That was a most unwise remark, Señora,' he said in

a hard voice. 'I do not owe you or anyone an account of my actions, but I will tell you this. I arrived unexpectedly and decided to join you at the theatre. When it was clear that you weren't there, I returned here to wait for you. It's now past one in the morning, and if you know what's good for you, you will explain exactly where you were, *and who you met.*'

'How dare you?' Maggie snapped. 'We met nobody. Catalina has been in my company, and mine alone, the whole evening.'

'Dressed like that?' he asked scathingly, taking in the elegantly sexy contours of her dress. 'I don't think so. Women flaunt themselves for men, not each other.'

'Piffle!' Maggie said, losing her temper. 'Catalina likes to dress up for the pleasure of it, as does any young girl. I dressed up to keep her company.'

'You'll forgive my not accepting your word,' he said coldly.

'No, I won't forgive you, because I don't tell lies.'

'But Catalina does. Under your chaperonage she feels free to deceive me. Now I know the kind of example you set her. You take her out gallivanting heaven knows where, and encourage her to lie about where you've been.'

'I didn't encourage her—I couldn't stop her. Yes, it was a stupid lie, but only a small one, and it wouldn't have happened if you didn't act like a man bringing the word down from the mountain. Stop making such an issue of something so trivial. She's eighteen, for pity's sake, and entitled to some innocent fun.'

'I will be the judge of that.'

From behind the bedroom door came the sound of a groan.

‘Poor Isabella,’ Catalina said hurriedly. ‘I was forgetting that she isn’t well. I should go to her.’

‘Yes, do,’ Maggie advised, regarding Don Sebastian out of glinting eyes. ‘We’ll fight better without you.’

Catalina scuttled away, leaving the other two eyeing each other like jousters. Again Maggie had the sensation of danger that she’d felt in the first moments of meeting him. She wasn’t frightened. There was something about danger that exhilarated her when she could meet it head-on. Perhaps *he* should be afraid.

## CHAPTER TWO

‘YOU are right, Señora,’ Don Sebastian said. ‘My bride is innocent in this matter. The blame lies with the woman charged with her welfare, who has so notably failed in her responsibilities. For the last time, I demand that you tell me where you have been.’

‘To the theatre.’

‘To see what?’

‘A light-hearted musical. Not as worthy and improving as *Julius Caesar*, but it’s Christmas and neither of us was in the mood for war and murder.’

‘And does this light-hearted musical have a title?’ he growled. He knew she was prevaricating.

Maggie sighed. ‘Yes. It’s called *Your Place Or Mine?*’ she said reluctantly, realising how it sounded.

‘*Your Place Or Mine?*’ he echoed. ‘I suppose that tells me all I need to know about the kind of sleazy entertainment you think suitable for a sheltered young girl.’

‘Rubbish,’ Maggie said firmly. ‘The title is misleading. It isn’t sleazy at all—just a little bit naughty, but basically innocent.’

‘Indeed?’ Don Sebastian snatched up a newspaper he had been reading to pass the time, and pointed to an advertisement for the show they had just seen. ‘Outrageous,’ he quoted. ‘Titillating! Don’t take your grandmother!’

Maggie struggled to stop her lips twitching, and failed.

‘I am amusing you?’ Don Sebastian asked in a warning voice.

‘Yes, frankly, you are. If you knew anything about theatre advertising—which you clearly don’t—you’d realise that this kind of publicity is deliberately angled to make the public think a show more shocking than it is. “Don’t take your grandmother,” really means that even your grandmother wouldn’t be shocked. My own grandmother would have loved it.’

‘I can well believe that.’

‘Meaning? *Meaning?*’

‘Do you wish me to spell it out?’

‘Not unless you enjoy making yourself unpleasant, which I’m beginning to think you do. What a fuss about nothing! Catalina is young, pretty. She ought to be out dancing with friends of her own age, and what do you offer her? *Julius Caesar*, for pity’s sake! Men in nighties and little skirts, with knobbles on their knees.’

‘Since you didn’t see the performance you are hardly equipped to comment on their knees,’ he snapped.

‘I’ll bet they were knobbly, though. A sheltered girl like Catalina would probably have been shocked at the sight.’

But humour was wasted on this man. His eyes had narrowed in a way that some people might have found intimidating, but Maggie was past caring. She had never met anyone who made her so angry so quickly.

At last he said, ‘You have your values and I have mine. They seem to be entirely different. I blame myself for hiring your services without checking you out first.’

‘Don’t you have your finger in enough pies?’ she demanded in exasperation. ‘Must each tiny detail come under your control?’

‘With every word you betray how little you understand. When a man is in authority, control is essential.

If he does not control all the details, his authority is incomplete.'

'Details!' Maggie said explosively. 'You're talking about this poor girl's life. And if you regard that as a detail I can only say I pity her.'

'How fortunate that I'm not obliged to consider your opinion,' he snapped.

'I don't suppose you've ever considered anyone's opinion in your life,' she snapped back.

'I don't tolerate interference with my private affairs. It's not your place to criticise me or my forthcoming marriage.'

'If you had any decency, there wouldn't be a marriage.'

'On the contrary, it's only my sense of duty that makes me take a feather-headed ninny as my wife. On his death-bed her father made me promise to protect her, and I gave my word.'

'So be her guardian, but you don't have to be her husband!'

'A guardian's power ends on the day his ward marries. I protect her best by remaining her guardian for life.'

'Well, of all the—'

'You know Catalina by now. Is she intelligent? Come, be honest.'

'No, she isn't. She has a butterfly mind. All the more reason to marry a man who won't care about that.'

'And how will she choose her husband? She's an heiress, and the fortune-hunters will flock to her. Can you imagine the choice she'll make? I don't need her money. I'll make a marriage settlement that ties it up in favour of her children, and then I'll give her everything she wants.'

'Except love.'



‘Love,’ he echoed scornfully. ‘What sentimentalists you English are. You think marriage has anything to do with romantic love? My wife will be protected and cared for. I will give her children to love.’

‘And she’ll have to be content with the small corner of your life that you spare her.’

He regarded her cynically. ‘I see how it is. You think a man only makes a good husband if he prostrates himself and worships the woman, like a weakling. But I tell you that a man who truly worships is without pride, and the man who only pretends is not to be trusted.’

‘You think a strong man patronises the woman?’ Maggie demanded sharply.

‘I think men and women each have their roles, and their duty is to fill them well. And since you ask, no, I don’t think that my role is to look up to any woman. I suppose you’ve been filling Catalina’s head with your pretty nonsense.’

‘Catalina is young. She knows what she wants out of life, and it isn’t you.’

‘I’m sure you’re right. She’d like some fast-talking boy who’ll sweep her off her feet, spend her money and turn on her when it’s gone. Is that the fate you want for her?’

‘No, of course not, I—’ Something was making it difficult for her to speak. His words had touched a nerve. She turned away and went to the window, so that she didn’t have to look at him. But the darkness outside reflected the room within, and she could still see him, watching her, frowning.

‘What is it?’ he asked at last.

‘Nothing,’ she said quickly. ‘You’re right, this is none of my business. Soon you’ll take Catalina away, and I won’t see her any more.’

‘What was your own husband like?’ he asked, with a flash of insight that alarmed her.

‘I’d rather not talk about him.’

‘I see,’ he said harshly. ‘You discuss my marriage, which—as you so rightly say—is not your concern, but if I wish to discuss yours, you feel entitled to snub me.’ He pulled her around to face him. ‘Tell me about your husband.’

‘No.’ She tried to get free but he held her firmly.

‘I said, tell me about him. What was he like to put that withdrawn look on your face when he’s mentioned?’

‘Very well, he was Spanish,’ she flashed. ‘Everything else I prefer to forget.’

‘Did you live in Spain?’

‘That’s enough. Let me go at once.’ But his long fingers clasped on her arm did not release her.

‘I’d rather stay like this. I don’t want to have to follow you about the room. I asked if you lived in Spain, and so far you haven’t answered me.’

‘No, and I’m not going to.’

‘But I intend that you shall. I’ve been very patient while you interrogated me and favoured me with your insulting opinions, but my patience has run out. Now we talk about you. Tell me about your husband. Was he a passionate man?’

‘How *dare*—? That’s none of your—’ His glintingly ironic eyes stopped her, reminding her of how frankly she had spoken about his private affairs. But that was different, she told herself wildly. It didn’t entitle him to invade the secrets of her bed, or to look at her with eyes that seemed to see the things she kept so carefully hidden.

‘So tell me,’ Sebastian persisted. ‘Was he passionate?’ Maggie pulled herself together. ‘I’m surprised you ask.

You just told me that love has nothing to do with marriage.'

'And so it hasn't. But I'm talking about passion, which has nothing to do with love. What a man and a woman experience together in bed is a life apart. It matters little whether they love each other or not. In fact, a touch of antagonism can heighten their pleasure.'

She drew an uneven breath. 'That is nonsense!'

He didn't answer in words, but his fingers twitched, catching the silk chiffon scarf and slowly drawing it away, leaving her shoulders bare. A tremor went through her at the sudden rush of cool air on her skin.

'I think not,' he said softly.

His eyes held hers. His meaning was shockingly clear. The hostility that had flared between them in the first instant was, to him, an attraction. He was inviting her to imagine herself in bed with him, naked, turning their anger into physical pleasure. And he was doing it so forcefully that she couldn't help responding. Against her will the pictures were there, shocking in their power and abandon: a man and a woman who'd thrown aside restraint and were driving each other on to ever greater ecstasy.

She was intensely aware of the sheer physical force of his presence. Once, before passion had played her false, she had responded to it fiercely: so fiercely that in disillusion she'd turned away from desire, fearing it as a traitor. She'd fought it, killed it. Or so she'd thought.

But now it was there again, not dead but only sleeping, waiting to be awoken by a certain note in a man's voice. *Not this man!* she swore furiously to herself. But even as she made the vow she became conscious of his body, how lean and hard it was, how long his legs with their heavy thigh muscles just perceptible beneath the

conservative suit. The touch of his fingers was light, but force seemed to stream through them so that she could think of nothing else but that, and what a man's strength might mean to a woman in bed. Power in his hands, in his arms, in his loins...

She tried to blot out such thoughts but his will was stronger than hers. He seemed to have taken over her mind, giving her no choice but to see what he wanted her to see, and to reflect back that consciousness to him.

'Yes,' he said softly. 'Yes.'

As though in a trance, she murmured. 'Never.'

'Then he was not passionate?'

'Who?' she whispered.

'Your husband.'

Her husband. Yes, of course, they had been discussing her husband. The world, which had vanished for a heated moment, seemed to settle back into place.

'I won't discuss him with you,' she said, echoing words she'd spoken before because her mind was too confused to think of new ones.

'I wonder why. Because in bed he was a god, who showed you desire that no other man could ever match? Or because he was ignorant about women, knowing nothing of their secrets and too selfish to learn, a weakling who left you unsatisfied? I think he failed you. What a fool! Didn't he know what he had in his possession?'

'I was never his possession.'

'Then he wasn't a man or he would have known how to make you *want* to be his. Why don't you answer my question?'

'What question?'

'Yes, it was so long ago that I asked, wasn't it? And such a little question. Did you live in Spain?'

'For a few years.'

‘And yet you know nothing about the Spanish mind.’

‘I know that I don’t like it, and that’s all I need to know.’

‘Just like that,’ he said, ‘you condemn a whole race in a few words.’

‘No,’ she said defiantly, ‘I condemn all the *men* of your race. Now let me go, *this instant*.’

He laughed softly and released her. Something in that laugh sent shivers up her spine, and her sense that he was a man to avoid increased. It was unforgivable that he should have called up old memories that still tormented her. She backed away and turned from him, resisting the temptation to rub the place where his fingers had gripped. He hadn’t hurt her, but the warmth was still there, reminding her how he had felt.

‘All Spanish men!’ he said ironically. ‘But surely, some of us are “tolerable”?’

‘None of you,’ she said coldly.

‘How very tragic to have fallen under your displeasure!’

‘Don’t bother making fun of me. I don’t work for you any more.’

‘That’s for me to say.’

‘No. There are two sides to every bargain and I’ve just terminated my employment. And let me say that you made that very easy.’

‘Not so fast,’ he said at once. ‘I haven’t finished with you yet.’

‘But *I* have finished with *you*. Now you’re here, my job is finished—which is fortunate because, having met you, I have no desire to work for you. You can take that as final. Goodnight.’

From the look on his face she guessed that he had

been about to give her the sack, and was furious that she'd gotten her word in first.

'And may I ask if you expect me to give you a reference, Señora?'

'You may do as you please. I'm never short of work. In short, Señor, I'm as indifferent to your opinion of me as you are to mine of you.'

That really annoyed him, she was glad to see.

'I'll just say goodbye to Catalina and Isabella,' she said, heading for the bedroom door, 'and then I won't trouble you again.'

But when she entered Isabella's room an alarming sight met her. The duenna's plump form was tossing and turning, and her flushed face was twisted with pain.

Catalina was sitting on the bed. She turned quickly when Maggie entered. Her face was frantic.

'She's so ill,' Catalina wailed. 'I don't know what to do. She won't let me call a doctor.'

'She needs more than a doctor,' Maggie said swiftly. There was no telephone by the bed so she looked back to the sitting room and called, 'Get an ambulance.'

'What has happened?' Sebastian asked, heading for her.

'I'll tell you later,' she said impatiently. 'Call the ambulance. Hurry!'

'No,' Isabella protested weakly. 'I will be well soon.'

'You're in great pain, aren't you?' Maggie asked, dropping to her knees beside the bed and speaking gently.

Isabella nodded miserably. 'It's nothing,' she tried to say, but the words were cut off by a gasp. Isabella clutched her side and her head rolled from side to side in agony. Sweat stood out on her brow.

Maggie hurried out. 'I've called them,' Sebastian said. 'They'll be here soon. You evidently think it's serious.'

'Earlier tonight she said it was a headache, but the pain seems to be in her side. It may be her appendix, and if it's ruptured it's serious.'

Catalina came flying out. 'I don't know what to do,' she wept. 'She's in such pain, I can't bear it.'

'Pull yourself together,' Maggie said, kindly but firmly. 'It's poor Isabella who has to bear it, not you. You shouldn't have left her alone. No, stay there; I'll go to her.'

She hurried back to the bedside. Isabella was moaning. 'No hospital,' she begged. 'Please, no hospital.'

'You must be properly looked after,' Maggie said.

She began to talk softly to Isabella, sounding as reassuring as possible, but she couldn't reach the old woman, who seemed maddened by terror at the mere word 'hospital'. At last, to her relief, Maggie heard a knock at the outer door. Through a crack she could just see Sebastian admit the paramedics. But Isabella was now in a state of hysteria.

'No,' she screamed. 'No hospital, *please*, no hospital!'

The next moment, Sebastian appeared. Maggie rose as he came to the side of the bed and took Isabella's hands between his. 'Now, stop this,' he said in a gentle voice. 'You must go to the hospital. I insist.'

'They took Antonio there and he died,' the old woman whispered.

'That was many years ago. Doctors are better now. You're not going to die. You're going to be made well. Now, be sensible, my dear cousin. Do this to please me.'

She had stopped writhing and lay quietly with her hands in his. 'I'm afraid,' she whispered.

'What is there to be afraid of, if I am with you?' he asked, smiling at her.

'But you won't be there.'

'I shall be with you all the time. Come, now.'

In one swift, strong movement he pulled back the bed-clothes and gathered her up in his arms, making nothing of her considerable weight. Isabella stopped fighting and put her hands trustingly around his neck as he lifted her from the bed and carried her out to where the paramedics had a stretcher. Maggie heaved a sigh of relief that somebody had been able to get through to her.

At last Isabella was settled on the stretcher, and the paramedics hurried away with her. Sebastian prepared to follow the little party, but in the doorway he stopped and looked back. 'Come!' he commanded Catalina.

The girl shuddered. 'I hate those places.'

'Never mind that. Do as I say. Isabella is our responsibility. She mustn't be left alone without a woman's comfort. These will be your duties in the future, and you may as well start now.'

Catalina looked helplessly at Maggie.

'All right,' Maggie sighed, recognising the inevitable. 'I'll come with you.' She met Sebastian's eyes. 'I can always leave later.'

'To be sure,' he said ironically. 'My bride will magically become strong-minded and responsible, won't she?'

In the flurry of departure she didn't need to answer this. Downstairs the paramedics eased Isabella gently inside the waiting ambulance. Sebastian followed, nodding towards a car just behind.

'Follow us to the Santa Maria Infirmary,' he said curtly. Maggie's eyes widened at the name of the most expensive private hospital in London.



'Of course,' Catalina said, when they were seated side by side in the back of the chauffeur driven car. 'Isabella is one of his family. He feels responsible for her.'

'He must do if he's gone in the ambulance,' Maggie mused. 'Most men would die, rather. But you should have gone, my dear.'

'I hate sickness,' Catalina wailed. She saw Maggie looking at her in exasperation and added shrewdly, 'Besides, Sebastian is the one she wants. He makes her feel safe.'

'Yes, I noticed.'

Maggie had been unwillingly impressed by the kindness and patience he had shown the old woman, and the way she had clung to him, as though to a rock. However overbearing Sebastian might be, he clearly took his patriarchal duties seriously.

At the Santa Maria Infirmary, doctors were waiting for Isabella. As they prepared to wheel her away she cried out to Sebastian. '*No, no!* You promised not to leave me.'

'And he won't,' Maggie said at once, taking the old woman's outstretched hand. 'But he must stay out here a moment to give them your details, and I shall come with you. You and I are friends, aren't we?'

Isabella gave a weak smile of assent, but her eyes rolled to Sebastian. At once he clasped her other hand.

'Señora Cortez will be my deputy,' he said. 'Trust her as you do me, and it is as if I myself were by your side.'

Isabella gave a sigh and allowed herself to be wheeled into the cubicle. Now her eyes never left Maggie and it was clear she regarded the transfer of trust very seriously.

It took only a brief examination to confirm that

Isabella had acute appendicitis, requiring an immediate operation. The word brought her terror rushing back.

‘Why are you so afraid?’ Maggie asked gently.

‘My husband, Antonio, had an operation in a hospital. And he died.’

‘When was that?’

‘Forty years ago.’

‘A lot of people died then who wouldn’t die now. You will recover, and be well again.’

She continued talking in this way, glad to see that the old woman was gradually relaxing. There was a shadow in the doorway and Sebastian looked in. He was smiling in a way that transformed him, and his manner to Isabella was almost teasing.

‘Not long now,’ he said to her. ‘And then all will be well.’

‘And I won’t die? You promise.’

‘You won’t die. Word of a Santiago.’

He leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on Isabella’s forehead. Her eyes remained on him as she was wheeled away, until she was out of sight.

‘I must stress the dangers of surgery on a lady of her age and weight,’ the surgeon explained. ‘But there is no choice.’

‘I take full responsibility,’ Sebastian said at once.

The doctor left. Almost to himself, Sebastian murmured, ‘I have given a promise I had no right to give.’

‘But there was nothing else you could do,’ Maggie said. ‘It was her only chance.’

‘True. But if she dies—when she trusted me—?’

‘She would have died if she had not trusted you,’ Maggie insisted. ‘You did the right thing.’

‘Thank you for saying that. I needed to know that someone—’ He stopped and looked at her with surprise,

as though he'd only just realised what he was saying, and to whom. His face became reserved again, but he said, 'I mean—that I must thank you for what you did for her. It was kind. You have the gift.'

He didn't elaborate and she looked at him with a frown.

'It is a gift that some have,' he said quietly. 'They calm fear and inspire trust.'

'It seems that you have the gift yourself.'

'It's natural for her to trust the head of her family. She trusts you for yourself.'

Then he seemed to become embarrassed, and looked around for Catalina. They found her sitting in a corner, playing with a small child who was waiting with his mother.

'I think I'd better be going,' Maggie said.

'No,' Sebastian said at once. 'Isabella will look for you when she comes round. You must stay here with us.'

Maggie was silent, confused. Despite their truce she still felt an instinctive need to get right away from him. While she hesitated he added gravely, 'I would be grateful if you would oblige me.'

'Very well. But only until I know Isabella is safe.'

He gave her a curt nod. 'I shan't ask you to endure my company longer than that.'

## CHAPTER THREE

DESPITE the surgeon's fears Isabella came through the operation well, and awoke in the early hours. The three who had waited for the news emerged into the dawn, tired and slightly disorientated. Sebastian hailed a cab and urged Maggie into it.

'I should go home,' she said, yawning.

'Later. We have matters to discuss.'

In the short distance back to the hotel she slipped into a half doze. Through it she could just hear Catalina prattling away in a non-stop monologue, punctuated by Sebastian's bored 'Really?', 'Indeed!' and 'Quite!'

At the hotel he ordered breakfast to be sent up. While he made phone calls the two women went to Catalina's room, where she stripped off and announced that she was going to have a bath. Maggie would have liked to do the same but she had to settle for borrowing one of Isabella's 'granny' cardigans in a shade of deadly grey, which she slipped on over her bare shoulders.

When she returned to the sitting room, breakfast had arrived. Sebastian grimaced at the sight of her dowdy attire. 'It suits Isabella better,' he said wryly. 'She is past being attractive to men.'

'And I,' Maggie retorted with spirit, 'am indifferent to men.'

'That is a lie and we both know it,' he asserted calmly. 'But this is neither the time nor the place to discuss that.'

'Never and nowhere! That's the time and place to discuss it.'

‘Sit down and eat. We have to decide what to do.’

‘We?’ Maggie enquired ironically.

He refused to rise to her bait. ‘Catalina and I will leave for Spain tomorrow. I need you to come with us and remain until the wedding.’

‘Certainly not!’ Maggie said without hesitation. ‘And leave Isabella alone here where she doesn’t know anyone? How can you be so inconsiderate?’

‘If you would allow me to finish,’ he said with some asperity, ‘I could tell you that while you were out of the room I arranged for her sister to fly to London. She will arrive this afternoon, and stay until Isabella can travel.’

‘I’m very happy for them both, but I gave you my notice yesterday, and nothing has changed.’

‘Nonsense, everything has changed,’ he said impatiently. ‘Even you must see that.’

‘Yesterday I was a disreputable woman who was dragging Catalina into dens of vice. Now you’re ready to forget that because I can be useful to you.’

He had the grace to redden. ‘I may have spoken hastily. Catalina has given me a full account of your evening, including the fact that she pressured you into buying that erotic dress.’

‘It’s not erotic,’ she said quickly, drawing the edges of the grey woolly together.

‘If it wasn’t erotic, you wouldn’t be wearing that thing over it.’

‘I’m surprised you believed Catalina,’ Maggie said, hastily changing tack. ‘Surely you know that under my influence she tells lies?’

‘She’s told lies since she was a little girl,’ Sebastian admitted wryly. ‘You have nothing to do with it. Besides, I always know when she’s lying, and this time she wasn’t.’

‘When did she tell you all this?’

‘In the cab, half an hour ago.’

‘Oh, that’s what she was saying. I was half asleep and just heard her voice distantly. And, of course, your replies. I could tell you were simply fascinated.’

He gave her a black look. ‘It’s true I don’t take easily to the prattling of children,’ he said defensively.

‘Well, you’d better get used to it, if you’re going to marry her.’

‘Can we stick to the matter in hand?’

‘That’s easy. You say, “Come to Spain”; I say, “No way.” End of conversation. What do you want me for, anyway?’

‘I’m Catalina’s guardian as well as her fiancé. From tomorrow she will be living in my house. She must have a chaperone.’

‘In this day and age?’

‘Spain is not England. Our belief in propriety may seem a little old-fashioned to you, but it’s important to us. I hope that you’ll change your mind, for her sake. She’ll need a female companion in the last weeks before our marriage.’

Something constrained in his manner caught Maggie’s attention and a suspicion crept into her mind. ‘I see what it is,’ she said. ‘Propriety, my foot! You want me to keep her occupied so that you won’t have to listen to her chattering.’

A hint of ruefulness crept into his eyes, and for a moment he almost allowed himself to grin. ‘I feel sure she would be happier for your presence. Please oblige me in this.’

‘But this is December. Your wedding isn’t until next March.’

‘I forgot to mention that I’ve arranged for it to be moved up to the second week in January.’

*‘Forgot to mention—?’* Did you forget to mention it to Catalina, too?’

‘I have every intention of telling her when she comes out to breakfast.’

‘And suppose she has other ideas?’ Maggie demanded, incensed almost past bearing by this high-handedness.

‘We’ll ask her, shall we?’

Catalina appeared at that moment, dressed in slacks and sweater. ‘Oh, good!’ she exclaimed when she saw the breakfast table. ‘I’m so hungry.’

‘I was just explaining to Señora Cortez that official business obliges me to bring forward our wedding date to next month,’ Sebastian said smoothly.

Catalina gave a little scream. ‘But I can’t be ready by then. I haven’t even chosen a bridal dress.’

‘Señora Cortez will help you decide when we return to Granada.’

‘Oh, Maggie, you’re coming to Spain? That will be wonderful.’

‘Now, wait—I haven’t said—besides, you’ve missed the point. He’s changed the date without consulting you.’

Catalina gave a resigned little shrug. ‘He does everything without consulting me. This bacon looks lovely.’

It was hopeless, Maggie realised, trying to make an impression on Catalina’s butterfly mind. Last night Catalina had talked bravely under the influence of Maggie’s strong personality. Today she was under Sebastian’s even stronger influence. She listened while he explained that Isabella’s sister would be arriving that

afternoon, and the three of them would be leaving next day.

‘As easy as that?’ Maggie said, nettled by this casual way of arranging matters.

‘Of course it’s as easy as that,’ he said in some surprise. ‘Why shouldn’t it be?’

‘It would take too long to tell you.’

‘Everything is easy for Sebastian,’ Catalina said, tucking into her food with relish. ‘People just do what he tells them.’

‘Other people,’ Maggie said firmly. ‘Not me.’

‘Oh, Maggie, please!’ Catalina wailed. ‘You can’t just abandon me. I thought you were my friend.’

‘I am, but—’

How could she explain to this wide-eyed girl that she had sworn never to return to Spain, and especially to Granada, where her heart had been broken and her spirit almost destroyed? If it had been anywhere else...

But perhaps, after all, it had to be Granada, where the ghosts she’d fled still raged. Maybe she’d run for long enough, and it was time to turn and face them.

‘All right,’ she said slowly. ‘Just for a short time.’

‘Oh good!’ Catalina exclaimed. ‘I’m so glad you’ve given in.’

Before Maggie could take exception to the phrase ‘give in’, Sebastian said, ‘You’re mistaken, my dear. Giving in is for weaklings. A strong person like Señora Cortez makes tactical concessions for reasons of her own.’

And this time there was no doubt of it. He smiled.

It was annoying that everyone and everything seemed to jump to do Sebastian’s bidding, but that was the reality, Maggie had to recognise. Isabella’s sister arrived later



that day, full of effusions at Don Sebastian's 'generosity'. He took her to the comfortable little hotel just around the corner from the hospital, and then to see Isabella. Watching the sisters greet each other, Maggie conceded that he'd done exactly the right thing.

She was less delighted by his insistence that she take over Isabella's old room for their last night in England. 'I can't stay alone in that suite with Catalina,' he said firmly. 'The world would assume that I'd allowed my—er—ardour to overcome me, and she would be compromised.'

He gave her a look in which humour and cynicism were combined, and she suddenly had to look away.

The next day the snow began in earnest as they reached the airport. Maggie knew she would miss spending Christmas in England, but it might be nice to fly away to a warmer climate.

In no time the plane had climbed out of the snow and they were heading south to Spain, where the land was still brown. For the last half hour of the flight Maggie resisted looking out of the window, but she shut out the thoughts that troubled her. Far below lay all the stark magnificence of the country that she wasn't quite ready to face yet, to which, eight years before, she had come as a bride.

In some respects she had been like Catalina, barely old enough to be called a woman, eager for life, sure that every mystery could be explained with reference to her own limited experience. And so terribly, tragically wrong.

At eighteen she'd lost both her parents in a car crash, and at first had been too stunned to realise anything but her loss. When she finally overcame the worst of her grief, she found that she was well off. Two insurance

policies and a house didn't amount to great wealth, but it was financial independence.

She had been close to her parents, and still living at home in a happy cocoon. Suddenly she was pitchforked into the world, deprived of the loving protection she'd always taken for granted, and with enough money at her disposal to make stupid mistakes.

She made several, mostly harmless ones. But then she met and fell in love with Roderigo Alva. And that had been the stupidest mistake of all.

They were introduced by friends on what was to be his last day before returning home to Granada. By the end of the evening he had deferred his departure indefinitely, to Maggie's delight. At thirty, he was older than any man she had dated before, yet he'd kept the light-heartedness of a boy. He was full of laughter, and he plunged into life's pleasures as though afraid they might be snatched away. His face was swarthily handsome, and his lean, elegant body moved with the grace of a cat. How wonderfully they danced together, and how desperately every dance increased her mounting passion for him.

He told her about his import-export business in Granada, the wonderful deal he had just pulled off. Everything about him seemed to confirm the picture of a successful man, son of a wealthy family who'd made his own fortune by hard work and skill. He was always well dressed and he showered expensive gifts on her.

He was enchanted to find her one quarter Spanish, and able to speak his language. Her dazzled eyes saw only a man of the world, who might have had any woman, but who declared that she was his first true love. She was eighteen. She believed him.

When she announced their engagement, the few fam-

ily members she had left begged her to wait. 'You know nothing about him—he's so much older than you—' She brushed the warnings aside with the blind confidence of youth. She loved Roderigo. He loved her. What else mattered?

Unlike the boys of her own age, he kept his hands to himself, insisting that his bride must be treated with respect. But he wanted to marry her in England. She would have liked to have the wedding in Spain, with his family there, but Roderigo overbore her.

Later she wondered what would have happened if she'd held out and seen his home before committing herself. Because then she might have discovered that his 'business' was little more than a shell, that his creditors were dunning him and some of his activities were under investigation by the law.

Or suppose he'd come to her bed before the wedding? With her passion slaked, she might have seen him with clearer eyes, and not rushed headlong into legal ties. That too he had prevented, ensuring that when they reached Spain the cage door had already slammed shut behind her.

She rubbed her eyes, knowing the moment was drawing nearer when they would land. Beside her, Catalina was checking her face in a small mirror. On the far side of the aisle Sebastian sat absorbed in papers, as he had been since they took off. There was something down-to-earth about that sight that made Maggie feel she had been fanciful.

Now she forced herself to look out of the window at the white-capped Sierra Nevada mountains far below her, just like her first view of them on her honeymoon. Then she'd been blissfully happy. Now her heart was grey and empty. But the mountains were unchanged.

Had any bride ever had such a romantic honeymoon, skiing by day and making love by night? Roderigo was technically a skilled lover and in many respects their physical life was good. Perhaps even then she sensed something wrong, but she was too young and ignorant to know what it was—that she was doing with her whole soul what he was doing only with his body.

She met his family, not the solid merchants he'd described, but shysters living on the edge of the law, prosperous one day, hand-to-mouth the next. If they made money, they spent it before it was in hand. His mother wore expensive jewellery which would vanish—reclaimed by outraged shopkeepers, tired of waiting for payment.

The only one of the family Maggie took to was a young cousin, José, a boy of fifteen, who idolised her and constantly found excuses to visit their house. His infatuation was so youthfully innocent that neither she nor Roderigo could take offence.

Maggie had blotted out many of the details of that time, so that now she could no longer be sure exactly when she'd begun to see that Roderigo lived mainly on credit. He had expensive habits and very little way of servicing them. The 'business' was a joke through which he could claim tax breaks without making a profit. And why should a man bother with profit when he'd just married a wife with money?

He went through Maggie's modest wealth like water. When the ready cash had gone the house in England was sold and the money brought to Spain. Maggie tried to insist that it should be banked for a rainy day, but he bought her an expensive gift and swept her off on vacation, both of which she paid for.

He silenced her protests with passion. In his view, as

long as he was a good husband in bed, she had nothing to complain of. When she argued he began to show the other side of his character, the bully. How dared she criticise her husband? This was Spain, where the man was the master.

Maggie began to see with dreadful clarity that Roderigo was a fair-weather charmer, delightful while things were going well, but unpleasant when life was hard. And over the four years of their marriage, life grew bitterly hard. In that time she grew up fast, changing from a naive girl into a clear-eyed woman, surviving the disintegration of her world. Romantic dreams vanished, replaced by a realism that was almost, but not quite, cynicism.

She managed to cling onto a little money, standing up to Roderigo in a way that once wouldn't have been possible. But it was a waste of time. When threats didn't work he simply forged her signature, and then the money was gone.

Why hadn't she left him, then? Looking back, she often wondered. Perhaps it was because, having paid such a terrible price for her love, she couldn't bear to admit that it had all been for nothing. And besides, she was pregnant.

When she found out she entertained one last pathetic hope that Roderigo would finally discover in himself a sense of responsibility, and put some work into his business. Instead, he resorted to crime, petty at first, then more serious, always just managing to get away with it. Success went to his head. He grew careless. A theft was traced to him, and only the best efforts of an expensive lawyer got him off. His confidence grew. He was untouchable.

Then the police called again. A man had broken into

a wealthy house in Granada, and been disturbed by the owner. The thief attacked him and fled, leaving the man in a coma. Roderigo's fingerprints had been found in the house.

He protested his innocence, swearing falsely that at the time he had been at home with his wife. Sick at heart, Maggie refused to confirm the lie. He was arrested, tried and found guilty.

The day before the trial began she went into premature labour. Her six-month daughter was born, and survived a week. During that time Maggie never left her side. The news that Roderigo had been found guilty and sentenced to ten years seemed to reach her from a great distance.

She would never forget the last time she saw him, in prison. Once this had been the man she loved. Now he stared at her, hard faced, his eyes bleak with hate. 'Be damned to you!' he raged. 'You put me here. What kind of a wife are you?'

Exhausted and grief stricken from the loss of her child, she fought for the strength to say, 'I couldn't lie. You weren't with me that night.'

'I wasn't in that house—not then. I went there once before, that's why my fingerprints were there—I stole a few trinkets, but I harmed nobody. I swear I wasn't there that night. I never attacked that man.'

She gazed at him, wondering why he seemed to be at the end of a long tunnel. 'I don't believe you,' she said bleakly.

'But you must believe me. My lawyer—there is to be an appeal—you must help him—'

'I'm going back to England. I never want to see you again.'

'Curse you,' he raged. '*Curse you for a false bitch!*'

'You curse me Roderigo, but I also curse you, for the

loss of our child. I curse the day I met you.' The tunnel was getting longer, taking him further and further. 'My baby is dead,' she whispered. 'My baby is dead.'

His anger collapsed, and he began to weep. 'Maggie, I beg you—don't go! Stay here and help me. *Maggie, don't go!*'

She had left the prison with his cries ringing in her ears. José, now a lanky young man of nineteen, was waiting for her. He took her to the airport and kissed her goodbye with tears in his eyes.

It was José who wrote to her three months later to say that Roderigo had died of pneumonia. He had simply lain there, refusing to fight for his life, waiting for the end. Maggie, who'd thought her misery could get no deeper, had discovered that she was wrong.

To despair was now added guilt. Her dreams were full of Roderigo's cries, swearing his innocence, begging her to stay and fight for him. He had been a bad husband, selfish and deceitful, spending her money, turning on her, destroying her life. But her conscience accused her of being a bad wife, deserting him in his hour of need. If she had stayed, perhaps he would be alive...

She had fought back in the only way she could, by denying the past. She resumed her maiden name, blotting out Roderigo from every corner of her life. Her passport, her driving licence, the rent book to the shabby little apartment which was now all she could afford, all proclaimed her Margaret Cortez. Roderigo Alva might never have existed.

It was only sometimes, in the darkness, that she heard him still, shrieking his desperation and fear. Then she would bury her head beneath the pillows and pray hopelessly for an absolution that would never come.

At Malaga Airport a car was waiting to take them the hour's journey through the Andalucian countryside to Granada. Catalina was filled with excitement. 'I'm so glad to be back,' she said. 'You will love it here, Maggie.'

'Whereabouts in Spain did you live before?' Sebastian asked from Catalina's other side.

'In the city of Granada,' Maggie replied briefly.

'So you know this place?' Catalina sounded disappointed. 'You didn't say. But then, you never talk of that time.' She patted her hand sympathetically. 'Forgive me.'

'We're not actually going to the city, are we?' Maggie said, anxious to forestall one of the girl's sentimental outbursts. 'I believe Don Sebastian's house is a few miles outside.'

'In the foothills of the Sierra Nevada,' he said. 'It is the most beautiful place on earth.' And for the first time Maggie thought she detected real emotion in his voice.

He was silent for a few miles, then he said, 'There,' in the same tone. And she began to understand.

Don Sebastian's 'house' could be seen on one of the lower slopes. It was actually more like a small Moorish palace, sitting serenely overlooking the valley. It seemed to be built on several levels, and even from a distance Maggie could perceive its beauty, how it extended into gardens, towers, rambling this way and that in leisurely style.

The car had begun to climb a road that twisted and turned among elm and cypress, giving her glimpses of the lovely building, that were snatched away almost at once, to be replaced a moment later with a closer look, even more beautiful.

They came at last to some wrought iron gates that



opened, apparently of their own accord, to let them sweep through. A little more climbing and they were there, the front doors standing open and a middle-aged man and woman waiting ready to greet them. Maggie guessed these were the chief steward and housekeeper. Behind them there was a crowd of servants, who had evidently come to see their new mistress arrive.

Hands reached out to open the car doors. Sebastian slipped a reassuring arm about Catalina's shoulders and led her forward to meet her household. But he glanced back to make sure Maggie was close behind, and introduced her with an easy courtesy that prevented any awkwardness.

The housekeeper showed Catalina to her room. It had a grandeur suitable for the future mistress of this mini palace, and she danced around it gleefully before seizing Maggie's hand and taking her along the corridor to another room, almost as lavish as the first.

'This is yours,' she said.

'This?' Maggie echoed, overwhelmed by the gorgeous red tiles on the floor, the mosaic-inlaid walls and the huge draped bed. There was history in this room as well as beauty, and a subtle, ancient magic that elicited her fascinated response. Along the outer wall were two tall, horseshoe arches, hung with heavy net curtains. Set between the arches were floor length windows that opened onto a balcony.

Dazed, Maggie allowed Catalina to lead her out onto the balcony with its magnificent view down the valley and across the distance to Granada, and the hill on which stood the glorious Alhambra Palace. It was early evening and darkness had fallen, showing the gleams of light from the collection of buildings that made up the palace.

Directly under the balcony Maggie could see one of

the courtyards of Sebastian's house, and something struck her.

'This is like a smaller version of the Alhambra,' she murmured. She had visited the splendid Moorish palace several times, and recognised the emphasis on highly decorative mosaics, the arches supported on pillars so impossibly delicate that it seemed as though the building was about to fly away.

'That's what it's supposed to be,' Catalina told her. 'They say that the Sultan Yusuf the First built it for his favourite, in the style of his own palace. All the other concubines lived in the harem, but he kept her here, hidden away from the world. He was murdered by another man who also loved her. When she heard, she came out onto this balcony where she could look across the valley, and stayed here until she too had died from grief. They say her ghost still walks in these rooms.'

'If they say that, they talk nonsense,' Sebastian said from the curtained window. He had come in behind them so quietly that neither of them had heard him. 'Why should any man force himself to travel fifteen miles for one woman when he could reach the harem in a moment?'

Maggie felt her annoyance rising at the sight of him standing there, so assured, his face full of wry amusement at what he plainly considered female fancies. Yet even then she had to concede that his tall body and proud head had a magnificence that matched his surroundings.

'He might want to keep her apart if he loved her very much,' she observed. 'You, of course, would find that incredible, Señor.'

'Totally incredible,' he agreed dryly.

'Oh, you're so unromantic!' Catalina scolded. 'I love to think of the Sultan standing at a window of the

Alhambra, gazing up to where the favourite stood on this balcony, calling her name across the valley. Maggie, why do you laugh? It isn't funny.'

'I'm sorry,' she choked. 'But you said he wanted to keep her hidden from the world. She wouldn't be much of a secret if he was bawling her name across fifteen miles.'

'How unromantic you are!' Sebastian chided her in Catalina's words, but he was grinning. 'And, for the record, Sultan Yusuf wasn't murdered by a jealous lover. He was assassinated by a madman. And no ghost walks these rooms, Señora—don't be alarmed.'

'I wasn't alarmed,' Maggie told him crisply. 'I don't believe in ghosts. Not that kind, anyway.'

The last words were spoken half to herself and made him glance at her with a quick frown. But he said nothing.

'You have no souls, either of you,' Catalina said crossly.

Sebastian stood back, indicating for them to return inside. 'Forgive my intrusion, ladies. Señora Cortez, welcome to my home. I hope the hospitality meets with your approval.'

'It's overwhelming,' she said, indicating the splendid apartment. 'Much too fine for me. I'll get lost in all this.'

'Be sure that I'll send out a search party for you,' he said. And he actually smiled right at her, almost inviting her to share a joke.

He shouldn't do that too often, she thought. It was dangerous.

## CHAPTER FOUR

AT THE centre of Sebastian's home was the Patio de los Pájaros, the garden of birds, an enclosed garden, with a pool and a softly plashing fountain. Elaborately carved stone birds sat in silence beneath the trees and between the shrubs, and more birds hovered beside the pool.

Beyond the trees and shrubs were elaborately decorated arches whose twisted pillars seemed too frail for their burden. And yet the total impression was of perfection. Everything here was of peaceful symmetry, joyful harmony.

A moon was rising high in the dazzlingly clear sky as Maggie slipped outside and took a breath of the sweet night air. It was hard to recall that England was under snow. This far south the December nights were often pleasant, although here in the foothills it was cooler than in the city below, and she wore only a thin nightdress and robe. But even the chill was pleasant, and perhaps the harmony of the garden could restore the harmony of her mind.

The evening meal had been awesome. A pack of Sebastian's relatives, living nearby, had flocked to see his bride's return, and they had been joined by some distinguished names from the local government.

The only one who stood out in Maggie's mind was Alfonso, a distant cousin in his twenties, who worked as Sebastian's secretary. He was aloofly handsome, and at first glance he had the haughty demeanour of a de Santiago. But his smile was charming, and when he

gazed at Catalina there was a kind of dumbfounded shock in his eyes that made Maggie pity him. He would have been a more suitable husband for her than Sebastian, yet even he, Maggie thought, was too grave and serious for such a flighty creature.

Catalina's butterfly moods changed this way and that with dizzying speed. When they arrived she'd been a girl, so thrilled with her expensive new toys that she'd forgotten the price she must pay. But as the evening wore on the price became more obvious, until she was almost drooping. Both she and Maggie were relieved when they could retire to bed.

Poor Catalina, Maggie thought as she trailed her hand in the water. How right I was to oppose this marriage. It will be terrible for her.

She leaned over, watching her own moonlit reflection, scattering as she moved her fingers, but then becoming one again as the water stilled.

'Like me,' she said to the night. 'All broken up one moment, peaceful the next. But the peace is an illusion; it can be shattered so easily. Why ever did I come here?'

'Why, indeed?' murmured a voice behind her.

In the same moment she saw him in the water, a man's shape, turned to silhouette by the moon. 'I didn't know you were there,' she said, turning.

'I'm sorry I startled you,' Sebastian said. 'It was wrong of me.'

She nodded. 'One should always wander in an enclosed garden alone. Thus you will find truth and paradise.'

He gave a small start of pleasure. 'So you understand the symbolism?'

'I know why so much Moorish architecture is built around places like this,' she said. 'But I'm not sure I

agree with it. How can you achieve truth or heaven when the enclosure shuts so much out?’

‘But you forget, it also symbolises the whole cosmos, the world and infinity. Here, all beauty can be held in the palm of your hand.’

He dipped his hand and raised it, so that the water streamed down, leaving just a little cupped in his palm, until he opened his fingers, allowing it to trickle away. In the moonlight it glittered like magic, holding Maggie’s gaze, almost hypnotising her. ‘You can turn the symbolism any way you like,’ he said.

She could watch the water for ever, feeling the peace invade her bones. This was a magic place, and it would be fatally easy to surrender to that magic. She too slid her hand into the water and lifted it high, fascinated by the droplets. Sebastian took her fingers between his, holding them lightly.

‘Thank you for everything,’ he said. ‘For calming Isabella’s fears and befriending Catalina, for being wise and strong.’

Through the cold water she could feel the warmth of his hand, holding hers in a grip whose power was concealed but inescapable. She tried to speak, but couldn’t. Something was impeding her breathing.

‘I think you belong in an enclosed garden,’ he said.

‘Shut away from the world?’ she asked, struggling to escape the spell. ‘Not me.’

‘No, not shut away. You would bring the world inside with you, and contain it here in your hand, and the man who came seeking truth and wisdom would find it in you. Then he could truly shut out the rest of the world, having all he needed here.’

The words were ravishing, seductive, seeming to swim in the air. With an effort Maggie gave herself a

little mental shake. 'Is it wise to make so much of symbolism?' she asked softly. 'If we blind ourselves with symbols, where is the reality?'

'I wonder which reality you are speaking of?'

'Is there more than one?'

'There are a million, and each man chooses his own.'

'Each man, perhaps,' she said wryly. 'But how often can a woman choose? Mostly she has a man's reality forced upon her.'

'Was it forced on you? Or did you choose it freely—and then find that you had chosen in blindness?'

'Aren't all choices made in blindness? And we discover too late.' She gave a little shiver.

'You should have been more sensibly dressed to come out here,' Sebastian told her. Swiftly he removed his jacket and draped it around her shoulders. Unconsciously she sighed at the warmth. 'If you become ill I shall be in disfavour with my bride. She's already angry with me for "brutally forcing" you—her words—to come here, where your heart will be broken by memories of your great lost love.'

'Oh, dear! I've told her not to see me through a filter of tragic romance.'

'You're wasting your time. She loves seeing you that way. Next she'll be wanting you to wander the streets of Granada, seeking out the places you knew with him.'

Suddenly she was aware of danger. It had been there all the time, but he'd managed to make her ignore it until almost too late. She stepped back from him. 'You are wasting your time, Don Sebastian. I don't discuss my husband with Catalina, and I won't discuss him with you.'

'And yet you came to Andalucia to find him—or to be finally rid of him. I wonder which.'

'You can go on wondering. It is none of your business.'

'That was what you meant by ghosts, wasn't it?'

'Please drop this subject.'

'How angry you become when he is mentioned!'

'Neither is my anger any of your business!'

'Then let me give you a word of advice. If you wish to keep your secrets, hide your anger. It reveals too much about you.'

The last of the spell vanished. How dare he think he could bemuse her with his pretty nonsense about gardens and truth!

'You know nothing about me,' she said firmly, 'except that I can be useful to you. That's all you need to know, and all you will ever know. My "secrets" don't concern you, my private life doesn't concern you, and if you ever mention this again I will walk out.'

She was dismayed to find herself trembling. To hide it from him she began to turn away, but he detained her with a hand on her arm.

'I'm sorry. I hadn't realised it was as painful as that.'

She took a deep breath. 'Goodnight, Don Sebastian.'

'Don't go yet.'

'I said goodnight.'

His fingers tightened on her arm. But he found himself holding nothing. Maggie had slipped away, leaving him holding the empty jacket.

The time before the wedding was short, and Catalina's first priority was a visit to Señora Diego, a dressmaker in Granada, where she would find a selection of bridal gowns to choose from. The car was ready to take them early next day, and on the journey Maggie noted wryly that the girl's mood had changed again. The gloom of



the previous evening had vanished, replaced by excitement at the thought of an expensive shopping trip.

Catalina tried on dress after dress, until at last the three of them agreed on a garment of lace that enhanced her delicate attractions. It was a little too large, but the alterations could be made at once. Catalina flopped down, worn out by her exertions, and prepared to gorge herself on sticky cakes until she was needed for a fitting.

'Would you mind if I left you for a moment?' Maggie asked. 'I'll be back in an hour.'

Catalina, her mouth full, waved her off, and Maggie slipped away. She'd been taken aback to find that the gown shop was only a few streets from the place where Roderigo's business had been located. Now it seemed an excellent chance to lay a ghost. Just two more streets, then one...

At the last moment she almost changed her mind, but something drove her on to turn the corner, and there it was, the building she had once viewed with such dread, wondering what lies it was sheltering, what bills it was generating for her to pay.

It was different now, neater, more prosperous looking. Whoever had taken it over had made a success. The name over the door was José Ruiz, which struck a chord.

Suddenly the door opened and an extremely handsome young man stepped out. As his eyes fell on her an expression of pure delight spread over his face.

'Maggie!' he cried, advancing on her with outstretched hands. He stopped before her. 'Don't you remember me?'

Then she recognised him as the young cousin who had been constantly in and out of her home with Roderigo. 'José!' she said, pleased. 'For a moment I didn't recognise you.'

'I was a boy then, now I am a man,' he said proudly.

The years from nineteen to twenty-three had been kind to José. He had filled out. His shoulders were broader, the set of his head more mature, but there was still laughter in his eyes.

'I'm so glad to see you again,' he told her. 'I've always remembered how kind you were to me.'

Somebody jostled them on the pavement and he took her arm. 'There's a little place in the next street where we can have coffee.'

When they were seated he said, 'I thought you would never come back here.'

'I never meant to. It's only chance that brought me.'

She explained about her employment and José's eyes widened. 'I have heard of Don Sebastian, of course. Who in these parts has not? He is a great man.'

'Hm! That's as may be. I could find other words. I don't think you'd like him any more than I do.'

'Like?' José seemed mildly shocked. 'But Maggie, he is a man of authority, of respect, of *power*. His land-holdings are vast, he has orange and lemon groves, vineyards. One does not dare to like or dislike such a man. One merely prays not to come under his disapproval.'

'I've no patience with that kind of talk. He's a man like any other. As a matter of fact I *have* come under his disapproval, but that's fine, because he's come under *mine*.'

José eyed her in fascination. 'Have you told him so?'

'Certainly.'

'How brave you must be!'

'Tell me about yourself. What are you doing in that place?'

'I took over the remainder of Roderigo's lease, and started my own little business. I export fruit from this

region, and I import small luxury goods from all over the world.'

'So did Roderigo, I recall, when he bothered to do anything.'

José looked uncomfortable. 'We do not speak of him,' he said. 'Luckily my last name is Ruiz, not Alva, so I renamed the business, and I don't run it the way he did.'

'You're wise. I too no longer bear his name.' She looked at her watch. 'I must be getting back. Catalina will be wondering where I am.'

'She is Don Sebastian's betrothed?'

'Yes. I left her trying on wedding dresses.'

The light of commerce came into José's eyes. 'Let me escort you, Maggie.'

She smiled. 'These luxury goods you import—they wouldn't be suitable for weddings, would they?'

'Many, yes. But I was thinking more of getting an introduction to Don Sebastian. He has influence in the government—not the Spanish government, but the Andalucian.'

Maggie nodded. She knew Andalucia was a self-governing region where contacts and influence were important. Roderigo had been constantly seeking to 'meet a man who knows someone'.

'If you could introduce me to the great man,' José pleaded. 'There are contracts I could tender for—he will know people—please, Maggie.' He took her hand between his and implored, 'In the name of our old friendship.'

'All right,' she said, unable not to smile, 'I'll do my best for you. But remember, to these people I am Señora Cortez. That happened by mistake, but it would take too long to put right.'

'I won't mention Roderigo,' José swore. 'I can't thank you enough.'

'One more thing,' Maggie said firmly, getting to her feet. 'If you ever again refer to Sebastian as "a great man", you and I are no longer friends.'

'Ai, ai, ai!' he said, impressed.

He walked back to the bridal shop with her and they arrived just as Catalina was dancing about in a flurry of white lace.

'Isn't it perfect, Maggie?' Catalina cried. 'Aren't I beautiful?'

'Beautiful,' she said indulgently. 'Catalina, this is José, an old friend.'

The girl gave a theatrical curtsy, becoming a flower of white lace. José responded with a correct little bow.

'José will be coming to see me after supper this evening,' Maggie added.

'Oh, no, you must come much earlier,' Catalina pouted. 'It's going to be such a boring supper, full of elderly aunts. You must eat with us, and then it won't be so dull.'

José accepted gratefully, and they parted on the promise that they would all see each other later. Maggie had qualms about whether she'd done the right thing, but the evening went off better than she had dared to hope.

As Catalina had said, the huge table was filled with elderly relatives. José's behaviour was perfect. He was courteous to his elders, charming the old ladies and listening deferentially to advice from the men. Maggie introduced him to Sebastian, who nodded politely before turning away. José betrayed no impatience, and was finally rewarded with fifteen minutes in Sebastian's study. Before leaving he pressed Maggie's hands and said,

‘Thank you,’ so fervently that she knew the interview must have gone well.

That night she strolled in the garden again, choosing a different path from last time. She wandered slowly amongst the flowers, finding her way by the moonlight that lit up silver paths that twisted and curved and ended in shadows. Birds called softly in the night, and wherever she turned there was beauty too great to be true.

At last she told herself that she must go indoors in case Sebastian should appear. There mustn’t be another encounter like last night. But still she found herself lingering.

‘Does my home please you now that you know it better?’ came a voice from the darkness. He appeared from beneath the trees, a silvered outline in the moonlight. He was wearing the clothes in which he’d dined, but now the frilled evening shirt was torn open to the waist. His chest was thick with hair, rising and falling as though he had been running.

‘I think you live in the most beautiful place on earth,’ she agreed.

He was carrying two wine glasses, one of which he gave to her, almost as if he had known that she would be there. ‘How does Catalina seem to you?’ he asked. ‘Is she happy?’

‘She is now, because she’s surrounded by pretty things and she’s going to be the centre of attention on the big day. But after that?’

‘After that, I shall spoil her, like the child she is, and she will want for nothing. Of course, she may find life a little short of intellectual pursuits—’

‘We’ve already agreed that Catalina isn’t an intellectual,’ Maggie said wryly.

‘She’s a scatterbrain who’ll always be content as long as she has a large dress allowance and girlfriends to gossip with,’ he said indulgently.

It annoyed Maggie not to be able to dispute the point, but she’d come to see that Sebastian’s assessment of his bride was largely correct. That didn’t make her agree with him about his marriage, but it did make him hard to fight.

‘And what about you?’ she asked. ‘How will you manage with a wife who cannot share your thoughts?’

He shrugged. ‘I share my thoughts with men, not women.’

‘For heaven’s sake!’ she cried to the sky.

‘You demand too much of marriage. No relationship can fulfil all needs. Catalina and I will make a home together. I will keep her safe, give her children, and satisfy her need for passion.’

‘You’re very sure you can satisfy that?’ she snapped.

He shrugged. ‘I’ve had no complaints so far.’

‘Stop right there. I don’t want to hear about your easy conquests.’

‘Why do you assume that they were easy?’

‘Because I know about you now. I know how they speak of you—Don Sebastian, the man of authority, of respect, of *power*. The man whose eye everyone wants to catch—’

‘Like your friend tonight,’ he murmured.

‘Yes. Good heavens, he nearly jumped through hoops when he heard I knew you.’

‘Why, Margarita,’ he said softly, ‘I didn’t realise that I filled so large a part of your conversation—or your thoughts.’

‘Don’t try to lay traps for me—’

‘You lay them for yourself. Why do you dislike me so much?’

‘Because—’ it was suddenly hard to answer ‘—because I feel sorry for Catalina. You mean to be a good husband by your lights, but your lights are very narrow. I see her being frog-marched into this marriage without having a chance to find something better.’

‘Something better than a home in which she will be petted and indulged, and given safety in which to rear her children? Yes, I shall be a good husband *by my lights*. But my lights include something you never speak of, perhaps because you think it doesn’t matter.’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘I think you do. She is beautiful. I am a man who knows how to please a woman, and how to teach her to please him. Strange, how you never allow for passion, Margarita. A man might almost think you knew nothing of it.’

‘Oh, I know about passion,’ she said with a bitterness she couldn’t suppress. ‘I know how dangerous it is, and how overrated. You think if you blind her like that nothing else will matter.’

‘I think that a man who satisfies his wife in bed is a good husband, and has protected the sanctity of his home.’

Suddenly time rolled back and she was confronting Roderigo again, beating her head against his selfish conviction that his technical skill as a lover should silence all argument. Terrified, she hurled the cruellest words she could find.

‘And how will he know if she’s truly satisfied, Sebastian? How can he be sure that what he sees isn’t a pretence, the prisoner placating her gaoler? That’s the

trouble when a man has too much power. He's never quite certain, is he?"

The sharp intake of his breath told her that she'd struck home. 'Be careful,' he said harshly.

'It's true. Admit it!'

She didn't know what demon was lashing her on to drive him past the point of safety. She only knew that she would do anything to crack his control and wipe the complacency from his face. And that she was succeeding.

'Stop there,' he said harshly.

'Why should I? What did you think I meant when I spoke of your "easy conquests"? They're very easy, aren't they, Sebastian? I'm sure women flock to your bed, but is it you that pleases them, or your money and power? You'll never be sure, will you?'

'Then you can be the judge,' he snapped.

She read the intention in his eyes and backed off, but too late. His hand was behind her head and his mouth on hers before she had time to think. There was no chance to even try to push him away as his other arm clamped itself around her waist, grinding her body against his. She had driven him too far. Now he had a point to make, and she knew within seconds that he was going to make it with devastating force. No quarter asked or given.

But that went for her too, she thought furiously. What a pleasure it would be to lie, frozen, in his arms, and let him know how little impact he made on a woman who wanted nothing from him. It would be satisfying to teach him a lesson.

She let her hands fall to her side and stood, unresisting, while his lips moved over hers, skilled, purposeful. There was coaxing in those movements, but she ignored



it. It was harder to ignore the hot, spicy smell of him and the feel of his body moulded against hers. She was conscious of the lines of his thighs, his lean hips, and the fact that he had come swiftly to full arousal.

To her dismay, that knowledge sent little sparks of excitement through her. That wasn't what she'd meant to happen, and she wouldn't give in to it. She must remember how much she disliked him, because then she couldn't possibly want to press herself closer to him.

He raised his head and looked down at her face, closed against him in the moonlight. He smiled.

'It isn't going to be that easy,' he said softly. 'For either of us.'

'Go to the devil!'

'Of course. That's where you're driving me. Let's go together.'

'No!'

'Too late to say no. Too late for both of us. You should have thought of this before you taunted me. Now we have to go on to the end.'

He covered her mouth with a swift, ravishing movement, and she clenched her hands. It was hard to keep them at her side when they wanted to touch him, excite him. She resisted the impulse, but she guessed he must sense her struggle. At all costs she must prove herself stronger than him at this moment.

As though he read her thoughts he murmured against her lips, 'Why do you fight me?'

'Because somebody must,' she said fiercely, trying not to let her voice shake.

Astonished, he drew back and searched her face.

'You have more power than any man should have,' she flung at him. 'But while I'm alive, it will never be

complete. I'll never give you power over me. Not for an instant.'

'I believe you really would fight me to the last moment,' he murmured huskily.

'Believe it! Because I've seen through you.'

'And what do you think you see?'

'This is all an act. You don't really want me at all, any more than I want you. You just can't bear someone who doesn't jump when you snap your fingers. If I let you overcome me, you'd shrug at another conquest and forget me the next moment.'

'Are you so sure?'

'Completely sure.'

'Shall we find out?'

'It will never happen,' she said slowly and deliberately. She wrenched herself free and backed away from him. She was breathing hard, but in command of herself. She wasn't so sure of Sebastian's control. There was a wild look in his eyes, and she was suddenly aware how isolated they were in this distant part of the garden. He was a man used to taking what he wanted.

'I'm leaving this house,' she said.

*'I forbid it!'*

'And you think you have only to give your orders? Don't try to order me, Sebastian. I'm going first thing tomorrow. And think yourself lucky if I don't tell Catalina the kind of man she's marrying.'

'Do you know the kind of man she's marrying?'

'I know that whatever else you offer your wife, it isn't fidelity.'

'I find it hard to think of fidelity when you're around. Perhaps you should blame yourself for that. Why do you incite me if you have nothing to give?'

'Don't try to blame me! I don't incite you.'

'You incite me just by living and breathing. You incite me when you walk in the room, when I see you—'

'Then the sooner you see me no more, the better.'

She walked away from him quickly. As she went she listened for his footsteps coming after her, but there was only the silence and she managed to reach the building. She was shaking with the violence of what had happened to her, not what he had done, but what she had felt. Her heart was thundering and her whole body shook with the force of the sensations he had aroused. Everything he said was true. She was no girl but a woman who had learned the secrets of desire and couldn't forget them. She'd forced them back, tried to deny what she knew, but they were there, waiting for the wrong man to bring them back to life.

She hurried to her room, longing to get out of sight, but suddenly Catalina appeared, smiling at the sight of her. Now was her chance, Maggie thought. She'd wanted to stop this wedding, and if she told the girl the truth about her future husband, that was all it would take.

Or would it? Catalina probably didn't expect perfect behaviour from Sebastian, but she would expect it from her friend. Her revelations might cause pain without doing any good.

'I thought you were in bed and asleep,' she said.

'I can't sleep. I think and think about my lovely dress. I shall be the most beautiful bride.'

'And after? Will he be a good husband?'

The girl shrugged. 'He will take care of me, and I shall have lots of lovely new clothes.'

This was so nearly what Sebastian had said that Maggie was startled. There was something about Catalina's prosaic attitude to her marriage that made the dreadful words die before they could be spoken. The

next moment, she knew they would never be said. Catalina put her arms around Maggie's neck and kissed her softly on the cheek. 'I'm so happy you're here,' she said. 'Nobody has ever been as good to me as you.'

She drifted away down the corridor. At her door, she stopped, blew Maggie a kiss, and slipped inside.

'Oh, heavens!' Maggie said to the silence.

'Thank you.'

She whirled at the sound of Sebastian's voice as he reached the top of the stair. 'How long have you been there?'

'Long enough to know that you might have betrayed me, and didn't.'

'For her sake, not for yours.'

'I know that.' In the dusky light of the corridor she could see that his face was gaunt and strained. 'I behaved badly tonight. You are living under my roof—I forgot my honour, the honour of my house. If you will consent to remain, I give you my word that such a thing will not occur again.' She hesitated and he said, 'You will be safe, on my sacred word!'

'Very well, I'll stay. But hear this, Sebastian. I couldn't give you away tonight, but I'll still use every chance I have to undermine you in her eyes. Do you understand me? If I can talk her out of this wedding—I'll do it.'

He inclined his head. 'At least I can see the battle lines. I have no complaints.'

'You may have if she jilts you.'

'She won't jilt me, because you're too honourable to use your strongest weapon. I thank you, for that and for declaring war openly.'

'As long as you remember that war is what it is.'

## CHAPTER FIVE

‘OH, MAGGIE, it’s wonderful up here. I’m so glad we came!’

Laughing, Catalina flopped down into a seat on the terrace café and looked out over the snow. An energetic session on the piste had left her with bright eyes and glowing cheeks.

They had been three days in Sol y Nieve, the chief ski resort of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Here, surrounded by snow, they could be carefree for just a little time, and it was almost possible to forget Sebastian and all the turbulent emotions below. By day there was skiing and shopping, and in the evening there was good food, wine, and music.

A waiter brought them coffee and cream cakes. Watching the girl tuck in, Maggie said, ‘If you’re not careful, you won’t be able to get into your wedding dress.’

‘I eat anything and I never put on weight,’ Catalina said with a giggle. ‘It makes other women so mad.’ She leaned back with her eyes closed, letting the sun play on her face. She looked prettier than ever.

‘How did you ever persuade Sebastian to let me out of the cage?’ she asked, keeping her eyes closed.

Maggie regarded her wryly, no longer impressed by talk of cages. She knew now that this was Catalina’s ‘line’, and it would be dropped the next time she was enjoying being the star attraction in a big, glamorous, set piece.

‘There was no problem,’ she said. ‘He agreed to my suggestion at once.’

That was true, but there had been a silent subtext. She had gone to Sebastian the morning after their fierce encounter in the garden and told him flatly that she wanted to take Catalina away for a few days.

‘Is this really necessary?’ he’d asked mildly. ‘There’s much to do—and I gave you my word—’

‘I want to get out of this house for at least a week,’ she’d replied. When he still hesitated, she said quietly, ‘It is a question of honour.’

She knew those words had revealed something that would have been better kept secret. He would guess now that she wasn’t as immune to him as she’d claimed. But at the word ‘honour’ he’d nodded and agreed without further argument.

While she was getting ready to leave there was a phone call for her. It was José, to thank her for her help yesterday, and to ask her to meet him for coffee.

‘I’d love to, but it’ll have to wait until we return,’ she said.

‘You’re going away?’

‘Catalina and I are going up to Sol y Nieve for a few days skiing. I’ll call you when we get back,’ she promised.

An hour later the car departed, laden with five suitcases for Catalina and two for Maggie, to start the short journey up the mountain to the ski resort.

It had taken less than an hour for them to remove themselves into what felt like another world. Gone was the balmy air of the foothills, replaced by freezing temperatures and dazzling snow as far as the eye could see. In this cheerful place, where the tourist season was just under way, Maggie could lose herself in mindless activ-

ity, and forget that she'd come within an inch of doing something for which her conscience would have reproached her. Or at least, she could try to forget.

Skiing with Catalina could be frustrating. The girl was at home only on the 'green' and 'blue' runs, the two lowest rungs of difficulty. But Maggie had honed her skills on these mountains in the dark days of her marriage, when she scarcely cared what happened to her. From difficult 'red' runs she had progressed to hair-raising 'black'. The Sierra Nevada had five black runs, two of them almost sheer drops, and she was longing to return to them, but with Catalina that was impossible.

When they had finished eating they began to head back in the direction of the ski lift. Suddenly she heard a voice call, 'Hey, Maggie!'

Turning she saw two young men in ski clothes, making their way towards her. Against the blinding snow she didn't recognise either of them until Catalina squealed with excitement, and cried, '*José!*'

'Goodness, yes, it is,' she said. 'I wonder who the other boy is.'

José's companion was an undistinguished looking youth with a slightly sloping chin and prominent eyes. He was extremely tall with long, awkward legs and no social graces whatever.

'Allow me to introduce my friend Horacio,' José said, when he'd approached them. 'We are taking a brief skiing holiday.'

His eyes, meeting Maggie's, were too innocent to be true, and an incredible thought came to her. Once, José had fancied himself in love with her. Surely it wasn't possible that...?

'Permit us to buy you both coffee,' José offered smoothly.

'We've just eaten, thank you,' Maggie said. 'We were about to return to the slopes.'

'So were we. What a coincidence!'

'Yes, isn't it?' she said, her lips twitching.

The four of them skied together for the rest of the day, and after that it seemed natural to meet up for a meal that evening. By now Horacio was smitten by Catalina, and goofily unable to hide it. The girl's natural kindness stopped her snubbing him too firmly. Luckily he turned out to be a good dancer, so she was able to keep him content with a few energetic turns about the floor. This left Maggie and José together at the table.

'Where on earth did you find him?' she chuckled.

'He works for me. He's a good lad, but he doesn't have much social life, so when I hauled him up here he jumped at it.' He smiled at her outrageously. 'Well, I could hardly come on my own. And, now that I'm here—' He held out his hands invitingly.

She laughed and let him lead her onto the floor, discovering that she was in the mood for a harmless flirtation. They danced together a couple of times, then everyone changed partners and she found herself with Horacio. The next few minutes were a trial, as he kept trying to look over his shoulder at Catalina. The sight of her happily dancing and giggling with José reduced him to anguish. Maggie was glad when it was time for them all to say goodnight.

In the privacy of their suite, the two young women indulged themselves in a hearty burst of laughter.

'If only he'd stick to dancing, everything would be fine,' Catalina gasped. 'But he will talk about balance sheets and import regulations.' She went off in another convulsion of mirth, and Maggie joined her. It made a good end to an enjoyable day.



The four of them spent the next morning wandering around the town on a shopping expedition. It was an enchanted place, covered in snow and full of coloured lights. Dazzling Christmas trees stood on every corner, the shop windows were packed with gifts, and silver bells hung overhead. Maggie and José had gotten a little ahead of the other two when it was time to return to the hotel, and they walked up the steps and into the reception area together. There Maggie stopped, astonished.

‘Good afternoon, Señora Cortez,’ Sebastian said affably.

‘Señor, I had no idea that you meant to come here.’

‘The snow reports are encouraging, and as both Alfonso and myself are keen skiers, we couldn’t resist.’

Alfonso, a little way behind, inclined his head courteously. Maggie brought José forward and there were murmured greetings all round.

‘I wonder if that was the only reason,’ she challenged Sebastian. ‘If I was suspicious, I might think you were checking up on me.’

‘And if I was suspicious, I might ask you where your charge is. There seems to be no sign of Catalina.’

‘She’ll be here in a moment. We’ve all been on a shopping trip.’

‘All?’

‘José’s friend is also with us. He’ll be arriving with Catalina in a moment.’

Sebastian frowned. ‘And you’ve permitted them to be alone together?’

‘As alone as anyone can be in this place.’

A hint of amusement in her manner made him bite back whatever he might have said, and the next moment Catalina appeared, accompanied by what seemed to be a mountain of parcels on beanpole legs. She waved to

them and took hold of the mountain's arm, guiding it gently in the right direction and causing it to halt just in time. The removal of the top two parcels revealed Horacio, puffed, amiable and red-faced.

'I apologise for misjudging you,' Sebastian murmured to Maggie when the introductions were over. 'The most prurient gossip in the world couldn't associate scandal with that idiot. But what about the other one?'

'José came to see me,' she murmured. 'I knew him years ago and he had a boy's infatuation for me.'

'And now he plans to make up for lost time?'

'So it would seem.'

'He's far too young for you.'

'Thank you!' she said, half-laughing, half-indignant. 'It's a matter of three years.'

'Years,' he said dismissively. 'Did you think I was talking about years?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said tartly, although she actually knew very well.

She told herself she was annoyed with Sebastian for coming here. They had agreed that it was a question of honour. Where was his honour now? But then, where was hers to have felt that lifting of the heart at the sight of him? Was it honourable to notice how handsome he was, how much taller than every other man, and how everyone looked at him, especially the women?

But then she told herself to stop being melodramatic. There were six of them. What could happen?

Sebastian gallantly informed the ladies that he would meet them for lunch in an hour. José and Horacio would also be welcome. Horacio prepared to carry Catalina's booty up to her suite, but at a nod from Sebastian Alfonso firmly removed the parcels.

They ate in the open at the hotel's balcony restaurant,

which seemed to hang over a sheer drop. Above them rose the splendid vista of the mountains, the white broken only by little coloured figures dashing down the slopes.

‘How can they do that when it’s as steep as a wall?’ Catalina squealed, covering her eyes with her hand.

‘Catalina is happiest on very easy runs,’ Maggie explained to Sebastian.

‘But if you want to try the red or black,’ Catalina offered, ‘I shall—I shall *watch you*.’

She finished with an air of triumph. Everyone laughed at this anticlimax, and Sebastian said something polite about her forbearance.

Catalina was as good as her word. When the meal was over, they all went up to the top of a red run that made her gulp, but raised Maggie’s spirits. She looked at it so longingly that Sebastian read her face.

‘Go on,’ he said, grinning. ‘You can leave Catalina with me.’

She needed no more urging, but raced away with José in hot pursuit. It was glorious. For the first time since coming to Spain she felt free, speeding down the slope so fast that her furies were left far behind. José could barely keep up. At the bottom they immediately joined the queue for the ski lift, and reached the top in time to see the other four beginning the descent in a careful convoy, Catalina flanked by Sebastian and Alfonso, with Horacio bringing up the rear.

‘This I have to see.’ José chuckled. ‘Coming?’

‘You bet!’ she cried, taking off ahead of him.

They passed the others on the way down, reaching the bottom first and waiting for them with grins on their faces. Sebastian scowled. He was an expert skier who’d had his sport ruined by a nervous novice and, since he

was no saint but a fallible man whose pleasures were few, he wasn't in the best of moods.

'I'm sorry,' Catalina said, at her most charming.

'It wasn't your fault,' he said resignedly. 'But be off with you to the nursery slopes. I'll see you at dinner. Not you,' he detained Maggie.

'I must go with Catalina,' she protested.

'Horacio can go with her,' he growled. 'So can Alfonso, and José, and every man on the mountain for all I care. Did you say something?'

'Nothing,' she said, trying to keep a straight face.

In the end they separated into two parties. Sebastian and Maggie returned to the top of the 'red', while the other four made their way to a nice, safe 'green'.

'Whose idea was it for Catalina to try that run?' Maggie asked as they settled themselves on either side of the lift and felt the chain tighten, beginning to pull them up again.

'Mine, for my sins,' he growled. 'I thought she just needed a little encouragement, but we proceeded at a snail's pace, then she freaked out and we nearly had a collision with the skiers behind us—stop laughing, damn you!' But he was grinning.

'You'll feel better when you've had a good dash down the slope,' she said cheerfully. 'There's nothing like it for getting rid of the tensions. Mind you, "black" is even better.'

'You ski "black"?' he asked, turning his head and looking at her with interest.

'When I can. How about you?'

'I like it above everything.'

She looked him in the eyes. 'Really?' she said brightly. 'Then I hope you're not planning to spend your honeymoon skiing.'

Sebastian ground his teeth. 'Perhaps you should give your attention to the snow. We're nearly there.'

Skiing with Sebastian was even more exhilarating than with José, who either travelled beside or just behind her. Sebastian edged in front in what might or might not have been a silent challenge. She tested him, urging her skis faster, but he kept just ahead.

He was beautiful to watch, smooth and graceful, turning with ease, never losing his rhythm or his control. It took all Maggie's skill to match him at every point, but she managed it. At the bottom they stood for a moment, leaning on their skis, breathing hard, smiling.

'Again?' he asked.

She nodded.

They took the lift again, and as they glided upwards Sebastian suddenly turned his head and gave her a full-hearted grin. He was almost a different man and she guessed, because it was the same with her, that the hell-for-leather run had done this to him. He too had known the joy of cares left far behind as he flew down the mountain, and for the first time she wondered about the weight of those cares. He was an autocrat, and sometimes a heavy-handed one, but she had seen how he'd looked after Isabella, not merely making phone calls and giving orders, but taking the old woman's hand between his, speaking to her gently, and calming her fears with kindness.

The next moment, almost as though their minds were connected, he said, 'When I was a boy I practically lived in these mountains. Nothing mattered to me but skiing. I lived and breathed it, and dreamed of competing in the Olympics. They say I would have won a medal, perhaps a gold.'

The last words were said without arrogance, only a touch of wistfulness.

‘What happened?’ Maggie asked.

‘When I was eighteen my father died, and I had to take charge of everything.’

‘Couldn’t you have done the Olympics first?’ Maggie asked sympathetically.

‘That’s what I thought at the time. But the lawyers explained all that I needed to do, how many people on my lands depended on me.’ He shrugged. ‘And that was that.’

That was that. With this bleak little phrase he consigned the boy’s dream to perdition, shouldering a burden years before his time. He had been the same age that Catalina was now.

‘How sad for you,’ she said.

‘Nonsense!’ he growled. ‘I always knew what my life had to be. My father trained me for it.’

‘But you didn’t expect him to die so soon, surely? There should have been a few years for your own dreams first.’

‘Yes,’ he said after a moment. ‘There should have been. Here we are at the top.’

The moment had passed. He was Sebastian again, scowling to cover his embarrassment at having given her a glimpse into his heart.

They did the run five times. As they walked back to the hotel through the snow Maggie said wistfully, ‘There’s a run here that’s so steep it’s known as the “Wall of Death”. I’ve never dared try it yet, but I’m going to come back and do it just once before I go.’

‘Don’t!’ he said at once. ‘I’ve done that run and it’s no place for a woman.’

‘How nice to know that you’ll be on your honey-

moon,' she said tartly, 'well away from me, and unable to give me orders.'

'You take precious little notice of any order of mine anyway.'

'True. And this one I shall ignore completely.'

He stopped in the entrance to the hotel. 'It's not an order, Margarita. It's a plea. I've done that run and it isn't known as the "Wall of Death" for nothing. You're a good skier, and perhaps if there was somebody there with you—a friend to care for you—but there won't be. It would worry me to think of you doing it alone. Promise me that you won't.'

There was an unfamiliar note in his voice, almost the warmth and gentleness of a true friend. It made Maggie say impulsively, 'All right, I promise.'

He took her hand. 'Thank you. That means a lot to me.'

But then she recollected herself, remembered that in a few weeks he would be married to another woman and out of her life forever. She swiftly withdrew her hand and said brightly, 'I'll hire a professional for the day and he'll guard me like a mother hen. Now, shall we get inside? I'm hungry.'

They found the others already in the balcony café. The three young men rose at their approach, and Alfonso went off to find a waiter. Sebastian seated himself beside Catalina, and waved José to the seat on his other side. This left Horacio sitting blissfully next to Catalina. Watching the moonstruck youth strain her good nature to the limit Maggie wondered if Sebastian had more sense of humour than she'd credited him with.

Sebastian turned his attention to José. 'I've been meaning to talk to you. I know someone who's interested in exactly the kind of goods you supply, and would

like to arrange an early meeting.' He pushed a small paper over to José. 'That's his number. Call him now.'

José vanished and returned with the news that he had an appointment for the next afternoon.

'Then you should leave immediately and spend this evening with your files,' Sebastian said with a smile of ice. 'This man will expect you to be extremely well prepared. Let's say our goodbyes now, to avoid delaying you.'

Put as bluntly as that, there was no mistaking the message. José forced a smile, nodded and departed, hauling the reluctant Horacio with him.

Catalina was indignant. 'How can you just steamroller over people like that?'

'He practises,' Maggie observed dryly.

'No need—it comes naturally,' Sebastian capped. 'That young man was in the way. Now forget about him. I believe they have ballroom dancing in this hotel in the evenings, is that right?'

'I've got nothing to wear,' Catalina sulked.

'Then go and buy something and charge it to me,' he said with the air of a man patting a child on the head.

Catalina flounced off. Maggie rose to follow her, but Sebastian detained her and nodded to Alfonso, who slipped away.

Maggie glared. 'I just hope that one day I see that girl toss your credit card back in your face.'

'Do you think you will?'

'No,' she snapped. 'Now I'm going up for an early night.'

'You can have a nap, but you're on duty this evening. Someone has to keep Alfonso company.'

Maggie returned to her room in a temper. After their exhilarating afternoon she'd felt charitable towards



Sebastian, but that had vanished in the face of his casual demonstration of power. Her mood wasn't improved by the realisation that she had only her black cocktail dress, and if she wore it tonight Sebastian might think she was sending him a message.

Determined not to let him take another trick, she stormed down to the hotel's boutique, found nothing there that she would have been seen dead in, and stormed back up to her room. In the end she presented herself for dinner, wearing the black dress, in a sulphurous mood and mentally daring Sebastian to react by so much as the raising of an eyebrow. But he gave no sign of having seen it before, or even noticing her particularly.

Which should have made her feel better.

But it didn't.

The four of them met up in the late evening, in the hotel's restaurant and dance area. It was on the second floor, with windows overlooking the main street where coloured lamps glowed against the snow. By day there was also a glorious view up the mountains, but now the summits were cloaked in darkness.

The men, too, had dressed for the occasion, in dinner jackets and frilled shirts. Sebastian's swarthy skin was startling against the brilliant white of his shirt, and his dark eyes seemed almost to swallow light.

When he had ordered, he said, 'Isabella will be flying home next week.'

'I'm so glad she's well again,' Catalina said warmly.

'Not quite. She's recovering very slowly, and she'll have to go into a hospital in Granada for a while. But I hope to have her with us for Christmas. You look surprised.' This was to Maggie.

'It's just that I've spoken to her a few times on the

phone, the last time yesterday, and she didn't mention returning to Spain.'

'She didn't know. It took me a while to arrange, and I only told her this morning. She's thrilled.'

This was Sebastian at his best, Maggie realised—shouldering, without complaint, the duties for which he'd been born. She had a sudden fierce wish that she could have known him as a carefree boy.

The band struck up. Sebastian took the floor with his fiancée and Maggie accepted Alfonso's polite invitation. But he didn't dance well and fairly soon they returned to the table and settled down to talk.

She liked the young man a lot. Perhaps he would never set the world on fire, but she sensed that there was a lot more to him than met the eye. He gave her all his attention—probably, she thought, to avoid having to look at Catalina in Sebastian's arms. This was something she understood. She didn't want to look at them, either.

Sebastian and Catalina came off the floor to find the other two deep in a political discussion.

'Andalucia is potentially the wealthiest part of Spain,' Maggie was saying eagerly. 'You've got the tourist areas, and some of the most fertile ground in the country. Yet this is the poorest region, and that's a scandal—'

Alfonso nodded and rattled off a list of opportunities wasted. She countered with some examples of her own, gleaned from her years in Granada. So deeply absorbed were they that they didn't notice they were no longer alone until Sebastian coughed, and they looked up to find him and Catalina sitting at the table.

'Maggie!' Catalina squealed in horror. 'How can you talk about such boring things?'

'I don't find them boring, and neither should you. This

is your country and what happens in it should interest you.'

Catalina shuddered. 'You sound like a schoolmistress.'

'Exactly,' Sebastian said. 'And when there is wine and music, to sound like a schoolmistress is an unforgivable crime. Come.' He seized her hand and rose. 'I shall dance it out of you.'

To her dismay, a waltz was beginning: the worst possible dance for a woman who wanted to keep a man at a distance. His light clasp on her hand called up the evening of their first meeting. She didn't want to remember that night when she'd been caught off guard, reacting with her body and her instincts instead of her head, like a rational woman.

Well, she was on guard tonight. She would ignore the feel of his hand in the small of her back, and the way his hot breath drifted against her bare shoulder.

One dance and she was through.

Full of resolution, she took the battle into the enemy's camp. 'You thought that was shocking, didn't you?' she challenged him. 'A woman, talking politics! Why doesn't she keep quiet and know her place?'

'Is that what I was thinking?' he asked mildly.

'You know it was.'

He shook his head, smiling. 'You make a brave battle, Margarita, but your technique is flawed. Never try to put words into your opponent's mouth. It merely puts you in his power, which is where he wants you.'

'I don't admit that I am in your power.'

'But you do know that that's where I want you, don't you?'

She recovered herself. 'You'll die wanting.'

He laughed at that. 'Bravo!'

‘Anyway, I didn’t put words in your mouth. I know what you think because you’ve said so. “I share my thoughts with men, not women,”’ she quoted.

‘*Touché!* I’d forgotten that. And now of course I’m supposed to add to my crimes by saying that a woman shouldn’t discuss serious matters, that her body counts more than her mind, and that her place is in my bed, using a woman’s intimate skills to please me and letting me please her.’

She tried to fight down the heat that rose in her at this frankness, but Sebastian was a devil who knew how to excite her with words alone. Worse still was the stunning ease with which he’d turned the trick against her. This was exactly what she’d resolved not to let happen. And the wretched man knew it.

‘That was roughly the script you’d written for me, wasn’t it?’ Sebastian continued. ‘Well, I’m sorry, I can’t oblige.’

‘Wh-what?’

‘I was impressed by the way you spoke to Alfonso. Clearly, you know your subject. There’s a lot wrong in this region, and it’ll take a great deal of work to put it right. That’s my job. For me, that’s what it’s all about. I’ve met very few people who understood. You must have learned a lot during your marriage. Was your husband in politics?’

‘No, but my father-in-law was a natural moaner,’ Maggie said with feeling. ‘He would hold the floor for hours, complaining about the national government, the regional government—this was wrong, that was wrong—and nobody else could ever get a word in edgewise.’

The waltz was ending. Immediately the band struck up a tango, which Sebastian swept her into without a

pause. Like everything else, he did this well, but so did she. It was like the skiing all over again, a subtle battle for mastery, with the honours even. They were both breathless and smiling when the music ended.

'You dance well,' he said. 'But I always knew you would.'

A wise woman wouldn't answer that. His eyes were dangerous. So was the heat that came from his body, so powerfully that she could feel it.

'I think we should sit down,' she murmured.

'Not until we've had another waltz.'

But to waltz in his arms, held close against him, wasn't for her. She wanted it too much. She must walk away from him, ignoring the tempting look in his eyes. She must be strong. She *must*.

'Margarita,' he said softly.

'Stop this. Stop it.'

'You stop it. Be strong for both of us.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes.' But she didn't know what she was saying any more.

Suddenly the cry went up, 'There they are!' And suddenly everyone was hurrying off the dance floor and crowding the windows that looked out onto the street below. Maggie and Sebastian were swept along with the crowd. Catalina was also on her feet, waving to attract their attention.

'What is it?' Maggie asked, bewildered.

'Santa Claus,' Catalina told her excitedly. 'Every night until Christmas he has a torchlit procession, and tonight is the first one. Come along.'

In her eagerness she seized Sebastian's hand and pulled him after her, leaving Maggie to follow more sedately. Someone opened the doors to the balcony and they all crowded out into the night air.

Far up the mountain they could see the glint of coloured lights against the darkness, making a long, wavy tail speeding down the slope. As it neared, the lights seemed to separate, revealing that each one was fixed to the head of a skier. There were fifty skiers, in fancy dress, some elves, some angels, some fairies, forming a guard of honour to a sleigh, drawn by more skiers, wearing horns to suggest reindeer.

The sleigh itself was magnificent, decorated with tinsel that reflected back every light, the back filled with sacks and parcels. And there, holding the reins, was a big, red-garbed, white-bearded, ho-ho-hoing Santa Claus. Swiftly they came on, growing bigger as they reached the village and glided through the main street, a long stream of glittering colour.

Everywhere doors and windows were open and people came out to look, to cheer and applaud while the procession swept on in glory.

And then it was gone, and there were only the lights fading in the distance, until they had vanished altogether. A collective sigh went up, and the spectators suddenly seemed to realise how cold it was. They retreated back into their well-lit buildings, with only memories of the beauty that had lived so briefly.

And that was how it would have been, Maggie realised, if she'd yielded to the pounding in her blood. Sebastian had said she must be strong for both of them, and for a brief instant strength had seemed too hard.

She could have had her moment, but it would have been like the torchlit procession—beautiful, brilliant, fleeting, leaving only a memory in the darkness.

Thank heavens all this would soon be over. Isabella was returning, Sebastian and Catalina would be married, and she could return to her humdrum life in England, and forget.

## CHAPTER SIX

AS HER wedding grew closer Catalina's mood veered wildly. Sometimes she was calm, and almost indifferent, at other times she would indulge in bursts of tears.

She entered a lively dispute with Sebastian about their honeymoon. Catalina's choice was a trip to New York. Sebastian's idea was a slow tour of his estates, introducing her to his people, and also her new duties. Maggie threw up her hands in despair at this notion of a honeymoon, and she came within an ace of kicking Sebastian's shins before he belatedly saw sense, and gave in.

Isabella arrived amid much rejoicing, and after another week in hospital she was well enough to move into Sebastian's house, with two nurses.

Some of Catalina's responsibilities came with the season. Nearby was the tiny parish church of San Nicolas, where it was a tradition for the de Santiago family to provide the crib. Sebastian drove her and Maggie the short distance to the charming little building, and played his part in setting the scene. At last, everything was finished, except for the manger, which was still empty.

Maggie gently unwrapped the tissue paper and handed Catalina the tiny wooden figure of a child. It was exquisitely carved and painted, with a peacefully sleeping face, and she felt a sudden tremor go through her. There had been another child that had lain in her arms and slept like that. But the baby had not woken again.

Catalina laid the baby in the manger, and turned away

in answer to some remark of the priest's. Feeling sure she was unnoticed, Maggie moved quietly forward and looked into the crib.

'Isn't it beautiful, Señora?' Father Basilio appeared beside her.

'Beautiful,' she said softly. 'And the real miracle was that he lived.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'All that stress, and the journey on the donkey—he was probably born early. Children sometimes die when they're premature.'

The old man's eyes were kind and understanding. 'Yes, Señora. Sometimes that happens. Was your baby blessed with any life at all?'

'Just a few days,' she whispered.

Somebody spoke to the priest. While his attention was distracted Maggie laid her hand gently on the infant. Suddenly she couldn't see properly. She closed her eyes and took a long breath, and when she opened them again she found Sebastian looking at her. For a moment she thought he would speak, but Catalina burst in with, 'Maggie, isn't it just beautiful?'

'Beautiful,' she said brightly, forcing herself back to reality.

'Sebastian, don't you think everything is perfect?'

'Perfect, my dear.'

'Have I performed my duties to your liking?'

'You've done admirably,' he said, and it might have been Maggie's imagination, but she thought he smiled with an effort.

Christmas passed fairly quietly, as was common in continental Europe. On Christmas Eve the entire household attended the great cathedral in Granada, and on Christmas Day they went to the little parish church.



The time for colourful festivities was the New Year, and in particular, the Feast of The Three Kings, in January. This would be celebrated with the jollity that in England was associated with Christmas, with much wine, good food and giving of gifts. Ten days later Sebastian and Catalina would be married in Granada Cathedral, and Maggie would be free to return home.

She was looking forward to that, she told herself many times. Once back in England she would be able to put these strange, hectic weeks behind her and get Sebastian in proportion, a man who loomed large because of his power and arrogance, but who wasn't really very important after all.

Between New Year and the Feast the place was a bedlam of preparation. Of all the parties in town, Don Sebastian's celebration for his bride was *the* party. Anyone who was everyone had been invited. Those who hadn't took to their beds or retired to the country to hide their shame. Even José had received an invitation, although Sebastian drew the line at Horacio.

Extra cooks were brought in to cater for the armies of guests. An internationally famous chef was installed the week before and began the preparations for garlic soup, mussels steamed in sherry, giant prawns cooked in olive oil, roast suckling pig, almond sponge cake and marzipan coated with bitter chocolate. He had several lively discussions with the steward in charge of Sebastian's huge cellar, and the two of them nearly came to blows over the rival merits of Gramona Chardonnay and Solar Gran Blanco Crianza.

Cleaners polished the place from top to bottom. Every lamp was washed until it sparkled and glowed against the tiles and mosaics. With two days to go the weather struck a warm spell and outdoor festivities became pos-

sible. Lights were hung throughout the courtyards, throwing into vivid relief the delicate arches and casting reflections in the water.

Catalina was having a new gown created for the occasion by the same establishment that had made her wedding dress, and insisted on buying Maggie a gown also. Catalina helped her study fabrics and styles, but when it came to the fitting she would lose interest and wander out for a quick shopping trip.

The gown was splendid, long, sweeping and made of dark crimson velvet. Most fair-haired women would have had trouble with the colour, but Maggie's Mediterranean eyes set it off perfectly.

Sebastian's expression said he thought so, on the night of the party, when she came downstairs in her glorious creation, and he gave her a heavy, solid gold antique locket, set with rubies, to wear with it.

'Catalina told me how you would look, so that I could choose your gift correctly,' he said, draping it around her neck.

'It's beautiful,' she said breathlessly. 'But—it's too much—'

'Too much for all I owe you? No, Margarita. No gift is good enough for you. How wise you were to keep me at a distance. By doing so, you restored my honour. For you, I would have thrown it away—'

'And regretted it.'

'Perhaps,' he said after a moment.

She met his eyes. 'Yes.'

He didn't answer this directly, but said with a rueful smile, 'You were always wiser than I.'

'Sebastian, can I give you a little advice?'

'Of course.'

'Be kind to Catalina.'

‘That was always my intention.’

‘No, I mean more. I mean, be faithful to her. She’s young and very vulnerable. You could make her fall in love with you—’

‘Is it so easy to claim a woman’s love?’ he asked quietly. ‘Well, maybe I thought so once. I will do as you ask—in gratitude. And you? What will you do?’

‘Go home as soon as you are married.’

‘And then?’

‘Get another job.’

‘And live alone?’

She hesitated. ‘You mustn’t ask me that. We must never talk like this again.’

He sighed. ‘I think tonight, and the next few days, are going to be very difficult.’

Catalina appeared. She seemed nervous and distracted, but Maggie put that down to the nature of the occasion. Afterwards she was to wonder how she could have been so blind.

First the long receiving line, with Catalina standing beside Sebastian, smiling mechanically, looking tinier than ever. Everything seemed to swamp her, from the way her long black hair had been taken up and elaborately dressed, to the huge diamond engagement ring that flashed on her finger.

Then everyone crowded to the long tables, with Sebastian’s immediate household on the raised top table. Isabella was there, and so was Maggie, although she wished she wasn’t. She would have been glad to blend in with the crowd, and steal a glance at Sebastian unobserved. But perhaps, she reflected, it was better for her to be near Catalina. The poor girl was looking deathly pale, almost ill.

‘You’re doing wonderfully,’ Maggie whispered as the

meal, and the speeches came to an end. 'Are you all right?'

Catalina turned a distraught face to her. 'Oh, Maggie, this is too much for me. I must be alone for a few moments.'

'Do you want me to come with you?'

'No, no! I must be alone.' She almost ran in her desire to escape.

Soon it was time for the guests to move from one great hall into another. Here stood the tree, nearly twenty feet tall, brilliant with decorations, packed with gifts at the base, with more gifts piled on tables nearby.

'Where is Catalina?' Sebastian murmured to Maggie. 'She must help me distribute the presents.'

'She was feeling a little overwhelmed. She slipped out for a breath of fresh air.'

'But that was nearly half an hour ago. Come, we must find her.'

The search began quietly, for it seemed certain that Catalina would appear at any moment, but soon it became clear that she had really vanished, and Sebastian's brow darkened. Worse still, some of the guests had realised what was happening and joined in the search with half-malicious interest.

'Damn them!' Sebastian said with soft violence. 'I don't want this all over town. Where the hell is she?'

'What about those doors over there?'

'They lead to the part of the house I use for business. Catalina never goes there. Besides, they're always kept locked.'

'This one isn't,' Maggie said, trying a handle and finding herself in a corridor.

A plump middle-aged man called Marcos was advancing on them, an insincere smile on his face. He was

a political opponent of Sebastian, and—to quote Catalina—a creep.

‘The poor young lady has probably gone to lie down. Is this where you keep your study? A hotbed of secrets, I’m sure.’ He headed for the next door.

‘No!’ Maggie cried. For suddenly everything had become clear to her, and she knew what was about to happen. If only Catalina had had the sense to lock the door behind her...

But she hadn’t. The next moment Marcos had pulled Sebastian’s study door open, revealing Catalina standing there, locked in a passionate embrace with José.

Time seemed to stop. In that awful pause, a gaggle of fascinated spectators crowded after them into the room. Both Catalina and José seemed too frozen to move. Her elaborately arranged hair had been torn down and hung in disarray about her shoulders. One shoulder of her dress was pushed down, almost exposing a white, beautiful breast. Her lipstick was smeared and her eyes had the cloudy look of a woman driven to madness by kisses.

Of the two, it was the girl who pulled herself together first. Stepping forward, she faced the crowd accusingly.

‘What are you staring at? Have you never seen a woman in love before? This is José. He loves me and I love him. I’m going to marry him.’ She whirled on Sebastian. ‘*Him*, not *you*!’

‘Be silent!’ Sebastian said warningly.

‘I won’t be silent. Who do you think you are to bring me here and say I must marry you, whether I like it or not?’

‘I never—’

‘You did, you did! What choice did I have? The great Sebastian de Santiago favours me, and I’m supposed to

faint with the honour. Well, I say no! I won't marry you. I hate you.'

A guffaw of laughter broke from the ever-increasing crowd. As though the sound was the last straw, Catalina's courage collapsed and she flung herself, sobbing, into José's arms.

Sebastian took a step forward to Catalina, but in the same moment something snapped in Maggie. Moving quickly, she placed herself in front of the two young people.

'Leave them alone,' she told Sebastian quietly. 'Whatever you have to say, this isn't the time or place. And you—' she addressed the grinning spectators '—have you no pity for her? She's a child. She should never have been brought to this. How dare you stand there and enjoy her misery? You should be ashamed, all of you.'

Sebastian was as pale as death, but when he spoke he was in command of himself. 'As you say, this isn't the time or the place. Please take Catalina away and look after her. You—' he indicated José '—have abused the hospitality of my house and will leave immediately.'

Maggie put a gentle arm about Catalina and led her away. José looked confused. 'Get out of here while you're still safe,' Sebastian told him savagely.

The next moment he'd become the host again, smiling, ushering everybody out, apologising for the early end to the party. It wasn't hard to get rid of the guests. Don Sebastian de Santiago was too rich, too powerful, too handsome, not to have enemies, and they were all eager to start spreading the hilarious news.

When the last guest had gone and Maggie had finished calming first an hysterical Catalina, and then an hyster-

ical Isabella, she returned downstairs and faced Sebastian in his study.

She hadn't known what to expect, but she was unprepared for what awaited her. The man whose gentle resignation had touched her heart earlier had vanished. In his place was a stranger with glittering, hate-filled eyes.

'Do you think I don't know who to blame for this?' he said in a hard, icy voice.

'The only person to blame is yourself,' Maggie told him firmly.

'Who told me that she would make this happen? Who warned me weeks ago that she would work to undermine me, and humiliate me before the world? Like a fool I didn't believe her. I trusted her, and I tell you that never again will I trust a woman.'

As his meaning became clear, Maggie turned on him in outrage. 'Do you mean *me*?'

'Who else? You threatened to do all in your power to make Catalina betray me. Don't deny it.'

'I said I'd try to open her eyes. I never meant anything like this to happen.'

'Don't lie to me!' he said savagely. 'You practically threw her into that pretty boy's arms. You invited him to this house, you told him about your skiing trip so that he could follow, and when I found him there you told me it was you he was chasing.'

'Because I believed it,' she cried. Horrified, she was beginning to see how everything looked.

'You told him you were going to Sol y Nieve.'

'Only in passing. It wasn't a hint for him to follow.'

'To be sure, I believe you,' he said bitterly.

'How dare you call me a liar?' Maggie snapped.

'That is nothing to what I would like to call you. I've

been insulted in front of the world, and that lies at your door, you scheming, manipulative witch.'

'It wasn't like that. It was a chapter of accidents, and—'

'To think that I brought you into this house!' he brooded, not seeming to hear her.

'And I didn't want to come,' she reminded him. 'But you were so set on having your own way that you mowed me down, as you do everyone. You brought me here as your fiancée's chaperone, and I hadn't been under your roof two days before you tried to seduce me.'

'Don't talk like an ignorant girl, because you're not one. You're a woman of the world who'd only take a man to her bed as an equal.'

'But I didn't take you to my bed. And how glad I am now that I didn't. To you it's nothing but a kind of power game and, I told you before, you'll never have power over me.'

'No, you prefer the power to be on your side,' he said, his eyes glinting with a strange light. 'You demonstrated that very effectively tonight.'

'How can I make you believe that it wasn't some kind of conspiracy?' she demanded.

'Don't try. It was all just a little bit too convenient to be an accident.'

Maggie sighed. 'Believe what you like, Sebastian. You will anyway. Let's just make an end of this.'

'And how do you suggest we do that?'

'I'd have thought it was obvious. It's time for me to go. You must be longing to see the last of me.'

He stared at her. 'Do you really think you're going to simply walk out of here without putting right the injury you've done me?'



‘How can I do that? If you think I’m going to bully Catalina into marrying you—’

He made a gesture of impatience. ‘Of course not. Our marriage is impossible now. But there’s still the inconvenient matter of the cathedral, the archbishop and several hundred guests, all arranged for ten days’ time.’

‘You’ll have to cancel them. People will understand.’

‘Oh, yes, they’ll understand—and they’ll laugh themselves sick.’

‘Well, what else can you do? It’s happened now.’

‘Don’t be stupid, Margarita. The answer must be as obvious to you as it is to me. I have arranged to be married on the sixteenth, and that’s what I mean to do. Anything else would simply give the town more cause for derision.’

‘But you haven’t got a bride,’ she said incredulously, wondering if she was dealing with a deaf man. ‘What are you going to do? Call in one of your conquests to make up the numbers? Will any woman do?’

The strange light was there in his eyes again. ‘Not any woman,’ he said. ‘You.’

She stared at him. Then something caught in her throat and she forced herself to give a brief, choking laugh.

‘I’m not laughing,’ he said quietly.

‘You’re right. It’s the unfunniest joke I’ve ever heard.’

‘I was never further from making jokes in my life. You don’t understand Spanish honour. Perhaps your race has no honour, but here it’s a deadly serious matter. The one who does the injury is the one who makes reparation. You have injured me, and it is you, and nobody else, who must make it right.’

‘I think you must have gone mad,’ she said coldly.

He nodded. ‘Maybe that’s it. My brain is whirling

with so many terrible thoughts that perhaps I've gone mad. But beware my madness, Margarita, because it will brook no opposition. A madman isn't civilised. A madman will do whatever he has to in order to gain his end.'

'Then he'd better listen to some common sense,' she flashed. 'It's not me who's forgotten that this is Spain, but you—this is one of the most bureaucratic countries in the world. First we would have to apply to the authorities for permission, and that can take a month—'

'I have friends who will see that it doesn't.'

'Oh, yes, your friends in high places. Will they also get my birth certificate from England, and translate it into Spanish, and my husband's death certificate?'

'That will be Alfonso's job.'

'It's impossible in the time.'

'He'll leave for England first thing tomorrow morning.'

'And so will I.'

He laid a hand on her arm. 'No,' he said, so quietly that she almost didn't hear. 'You will stay here, because in ten days' time, we are going to be married.'

She began to sense the force of his will. He spoke softly because his steely inflexibility left no need for noise. Sebastian had said what he wanted, and that was what he would have. Meeting his eyes, it was almost possible to believe that she would meekly do his will.

Almost. But she too had a core of strength deep within that would tolerate no surrender. It asserted itself now, making her throw him off.

'We are not going to be married,' she said clearly. 'I'm sorry for what's happened to you, but I think you brought it on yourself. We'll never agree on this, and the sooner I'm gone the better. I'll say goodbye now,

because I'm going very early tomorrow, and we won't see each other again.'

She half expected him to stop her, but he only stood in silence as she walked out of the room.

'Are you really going to leave me?' Catalina asked mournfully as she watched Maggie packing.

'Now, you stop that! You've got your own way to-night, so don't ask me to feel sorry for you.'

'How have I got my own way? Sebastian says he won't let me marry José.'

'What did you expect him to say, after the way you dumped him?' Maggie demanded. After having urged Catalina to just this course, she now found herself exasperated at the girl's youthful egotism.

'You wanted me to dump him.'

'Not in front of nearly six hundred people. Why couldn't you have spoken to him quietly?'

'I lost my nerve. Anyway, I never meant to be found like that.'

No, Catalina would never mean anything, Maggie realised. Despite her fire and charm, she wasn't a strong character. She would let things drift until they reached a crisis, but she wouldn't voluntarily confront the crisis.

'I suppose I needn't ask where you went while I was having dress fittings?' Maggie added.

'I went to visit José. We loved each other from the moment you introduced us—'

'All right, there's no need to rub it in that I played a part in this. I suppose he really came up to Sol y Nieve to see you?'

'Oh, yes, only then Sebastian was there, and we had to snatch a few moments of love under his nose.'

'If you don't stop seeing yourself as the heroine of a

tragic romance, I shall get cross. Sebastian isn't an ogre, even if he acts like one sometimes. You're eighteen, legally of age. He can hardly stop you getting married.'

'He controls my fortune until I'm twenty-one,' Catalina said tragically.

'Well, if José's so worried about your fortune, you're better off without him,' Maggie said, speaking more sharply than Catalina had ever heard her before.

She had never felt so little charity towards the girl, who seemed to have no understanding of the earthquake she'd caused in Sebastian's life. Despite his outrageous accusations and demands Maggie felt he was entitled to more sympathy than he was getting. He was certainly right about one thing. The world would laugh itself silly at his public humiliation.

Her packing was finished now. In a few hours she would be free of this place, its emotions and tensions that threatened to tear her apart. She switched off the light and stepped out onto the balcony. Down below she could see the lights, and their reflections in the water. After the turbulence of the evening, the place was silent and deserted.

No, not quite deserted. The man who sat by the water was so still that at first Maggie didn't see him. He might have been made of stone, like the birds who flanked the pool. Once she'd discerned his outline she could see him clearly under the lights, a man who had lost his bride, honour, dignity and reputation in one night.

That was nonsense, she told herself. Other men had been jilted before without making a major tragedy of it. He didn't even love Catalina, and much of it was his own fault.

But they were rationalisations, and they had no power to quell her twinge of sympathy. His attempt to coerce

her into marriage had been disgraceful, but she should allow for the feelings of a man at the end of his tether. Impulsively Maggie left her room and went downstairs.

The ruins of the party were all around. She found two clean glasses, filled them with wine and went quietly out to the courtyard, moving so quietly that he didn't hear her. For a moment she caught a glimpse of his face and what she saw made her catch her breath. All the arrogance had been stripped from it, leaving behind only a kind of desolation. It was as though he'd retreated into his own inner world, and found nobody there but himself.

And that was true, she thought. He had power, but no warmth. Respect, but no love. Now, perhaps, he didn't even have respect.

He glanced up and saw her, giving her a slight frown of surprise. She held out a glass and he took it. 'Thank you,' he said with a touch of wryness. 'How did you know that I needed this?'

'I guessed.' She smiled to let him know that all was forgiven.

'Have you got one? Yes? Then what do we drink to? Your last evening?'

'It's for the best.'

'If you say so.'

'Well, you must admit, it was a mad idea.'

'It seemed to have some merit at the time.'

'It was the voice of desperation,' she informed him. 'But Don Sebastian de Santiago only listens to the voice of reason.'

'Are you making fun of me?' he asked in a strained voice.

She laid a hand on his shoulder. 'No, I wouldn't do that.'

‘Of course, I should have listened to you in the first place. I admit it. Do you think it makes it any easier to know that I set myself up for this?’

‘No. It makes it far, far harder to bear,’ she said gently.

Suddenly they were in darkness. The lamps around the water had gone out. Sebastian gave a grunt.

‘They’re on a time-switch. I’d forgotten. Let’s go inside. You can go on talking reason to me. Maybe I’ll even come to believe it.’

## CHAPTER SEVEN

MAGGIE had never been inside Sebastian's study before tonight, and her first visit had been too crowded with incident to leave her time to observe anything. Now she saw that it was decorated in the same style as the rest of the building, but with dark, masculine colours. Although functional, it was beautiful. One wall was taken up by a huge, oriental rug, and a counterpane that exactly matched it lay over a large couch in the corner. Maggie remembered Catalina saying that sometimes Sebastian worked in this room all night, pausing to cat-nap briefly before returning to his desk.

On one wall hung two large portraits of men with sharp eyes and beaky noses. They were sufficiently like Sebastian for Maggie to guess that this was his father and grandfather.

He took a bottle of wine and two clean glasses from a cupboard, handing one to her. 'Tonight I wish I could get very drunk,' he said grimly. 'I won't, but the thought is tempting.'

'Why won't you?'

He shrugged. 'I never do.'

'Perhaps you should,' she said sympathetically. 'Stop being so much in control all the time. Drown your sorrows tonight, pass out on that couch and wake up with a hangover that will make you forget your other troubles. It might help you get it in proportion.'

He gave a faint smile. 'You almost make me want to try. But I long ago resolved never to drink more than

my capacity. My father's brother was a drunkard. People laughed at him and imposed on him. He was the family fool and I—oh, God!—I swore that would never happen to me. And yet now—*now!*' His voice was suddenly savage. 'It was a really good night's entertainment, wasn't it? There was the groom, throwing open his home, showing off his bride to the neighbourhood, introducing her to friend and foe alike—because there were as many enemies as friends there tonight—so proud, just asking to be cast down and turned into a complete idiot. Oh, yes, let's all have a good laugh at that!'

He rose and went to stand in front of the two portraits.

'If anyone had treated my father so, he would have made them sorry they were born,' he said bitterly. 'If they'd done it to my grandfather, he would have killed them. But me, I have to behave as a modern man. I can only writhe at my shame.'

He turned to look back at her, watching him. 'You don't understand what I'm talking about, do you?'

'A little. My grandfather came from these parts. There's enough of him in me to know that this has to be felt deeply. But murder—'

'It was never considered murder when a man avenged his honour. That's what your cold English blood fails to understand, because you no longer know how to take the tie between men and women seriously. Off with the old, on with the new. People change their minds all the time. Find a new girl next week. That's how you think in your country of mists and fogs.

'But here, we know better. We know that the union of a man and a woman is the centre of life, and all else springs from it.'

'But if the choice was mistaken in the first place,'



Maggie argued, 'isn't it better to pass on and make a new choice, rather than suffer for ever? You're wrong when you say I don't understand. But the choice must be good, so that the foundations are strong.'

He gave a grunt. 'You have a clever way with words. You can always make me doubt my own wisdom.'

'Which makes me a woman to avoid,' she said lightly, and he flung her a suspicious glance. 'Don't brood about it, Sebastian. It'll be a nine-day wonder. Then they'll find something else to talk about.'

He drained his glass, and she took it from him to set down. Somehow her fingers became entwined with his. He looked at their clasped hands for a moment. 'They'll never quite forget to laugh at me,' he murmured. 'I'm too good a target.'

It was true. And he wouldn't be able to cope, because nobody had ever dared to laugh at him before. Maggie felt a wave of pity for him. She had told herself that it was his own fault, but faced with his bleak self-knowledge she suddenly felt as though she had seen a lion brought low by jackals.

He gave her a crooked smile. 'Why don't you help me, Margarita? Rescue me with some of that English humour I've heard so much about.'

'I don't think English humour would be much use in this situation.'

'Can't you teach me to laugh at myself?'

'Could anyone do that?' she asked gently.

'I don't really have a sense of humour at all, do I?'

'I've thought sometimes that there was one fighting to get out, but it isn't a large part of you, no. And tonight—well—you'd have to be a saint.'

'I'm no saint, just a man who wants to lash out at those who hurt him, and use force to make the world do

his will. But the world turns out to be one silly little girl, and a boy with a pretty face.'

'And you can't murder them,' she said gently. 'It would be overreacting.'

He managed a half-smile. 'When English humour doesn't work, English common sense. What dull lives you must live in that island.'

'Sebastian—do you really think I made this happen on purpose?'

'No. You'd never stoop so low. I shouldn't have spoken as I did, but I was crazy with anger.' He met her eyes. 'Forgive me.'

'Of course.'

'And shall we part friends?'

'Friends.'

He looked down to where their fingers were still entwined. Lifting her hand, he laid his lips against the back of it, and then his cheek. Something in the defeated droop of his head hurt her.

'Sebastian,' she whispered. 'Please don't mind so much.'

'Of course not. It isn't sensible to mind, is it? Tell me, Margarita, what do *you* mind about?'

She was silent so long that he glanced up, and a fleeting look he saw in her face made him catch his breath. She became aware of him and he realised that a door had closed in her.

'I don't mind about anything very much,' she said softly. 'Not any more.'

'God help you if that's true!' he said at once.

'God help me if it isn't. It's dangerous to mind.'

'There's something in your eyes at this moment that I've briefly glimpsed there before.' He drew a swift breath. 'If you leave now, I'll never know your mystery.'

‘There’s no mystery, Sebastian. Just a girl who took a wrong turning when she was too young and ignorant to know better, and then found that there was no way back.’

‘I refuse to believe that you ever did anything bad.’

‘I was worse than bad. I was stupid. That’s the real crime, and all the worst punishments are reserved for it.’

‘I know,’ he said simply. ‘I found out tonight, remember?’

He rested his cheek against her hand once more. Her heart aching for him, Maggie rested her own cheek against his black head. This was what she would remember about him—not his imperiousness but his vulnerability. When he looked up she drew a breath at the sight of his eyes, more naked and defenceless than she had ever seen them. Thinking only to comfort him, she laid her mouth against his.

At first he didn’t seem certain how to respond. His lips moved slightly, then stilled, waiting for her. A sweet warmth pervaded her. It felt good to kiss him freely, without anger or guilt. It felt right, just as it felt right to stroke his face with her fingertips, and then to relax against him when he reached out to hold her.

His arms had never felt so gentle as he cradled her head against his shoulder, but his lips passed swiftly from tenderness to purpose, as though the feel of her own was a touchlight. His mouth moved over hers again and again, each time a little more intent, while her pulse quickened and she felt her control begin to slip. This was not what she had meant to happen—or was it?

She made one last effort. ‘Sebastian—let me go,’ she murmured hazily.

‘Never. You kissed me, and now you must take the consequences.’

'You must be the devil,' she murmured.

'Only me? There's a devil in you too, Margarita. He taught you how to look at a man with eyes that promise everything, so that he knows what you're thinking, and what you want him to think.'

'Can you read my mind?'

'From the first moment!' he said against her lips. 'Your thoughts are the same as mine—hot, fierce thoughts of the two of us together, naked, enjoying each other and to hell with the world. You know what you want from me—don't you—*don't you?*'

'Yes,' she said mindlessly, scarcely knowing what words she used, or what they meant.

'And you also know what you would do to urge me on to fulfil your desires. I think you're very skilled at the caresses that drive a man to madness. Be damned to the devil in you! He put witchcraft in your lips so that kisses are never enough. There'll be no peace until I have you in my bed.'

There was no doubt of his intentions. She had walked into a trap with her eyes wide open. He was determined to make her marry him—if not one way, then another. When talk failed, he'd taken direct action, giving her a false sense of security while he lured her to come to him. Now he had her where he wanted her, and she knew she wouldn't be allowed to leave until she'd said yes, and meant it.

That would never happen, her mind cried. But her mind drowned in her body's clamour. Part of her—the only part that counted when she was in his arms—was saying yes wildly, determinedly, impatiently. She tried to feel anger but she couldn't convince herself. No man had the right to behave like this, but that thought paled

beside the knowledge that he was free. She could give her desire full rein and feel no guilt.

He wasn't an admirable character. He was a harsh, cynical man who seized what he wanted arrogantly and without pity. But his lips possessed ancient skills of persuasion and coercion, and they could drive her to the edge of madness.

His hands were working on the fastenings of the beautiful velvet dress, slipping them open, pulling it down with swift, purposeful movements, until he could toss it onto the floor. Her slip followed, then her panties, and now she was tearing at his clothes, as impatient as he, until the moment when they were both naked.

He pulled her against him, kissing with lips that burned, caressing her with fingers that knew how to touch lightly and be gone, leaving a scorching memory behind. This had been waiting for them both since the night in the garden when she had fended him off and fled. What had she been running away from? The depth of her own response, which even then had alarmed her?

Now she could yield to that response, explore it to its depths, explore him. She felt him drawing her down onto the couch, pressing her naked body against his.

She looked into his face, expecting to see him triumphant. But if there was any triumph in him it was confused by other emotions—shock, bewilderment, alarm at losing control, eagerness to discover the unknown. All these feelings were hers, and for a blazing instant she saw them reflected in his eyes as though she were looking into a mirror.

Then the moment passed as he kissed her again with lips that were hot and fierce as they teased hers, taking her ever closer to the moment of truth. She kissed him back, seeking and demanding as an equal. A strange

thing was happening to her. Sebastian had said she would know how to urge him on to fulfil her desires, and now she found that it was mysteriously true. Deep, unfathomable instinct told her about him, what he wanted, what he could give.

New life streamed through her like wine. For four years her body had lain cold and sullen, bitterly resentful of the passion that had betrayed her to a life of misery. Now it was asserting itself again, reclaiming its rights, and its rights included a man who could discover its secrets by instinct, and play on them for his own pleasure and hers: a man to whom seduction was more than a skill, it was a black art. This man, and no other.

He'd spoken of 'the caresses that drive a man to madness', and now she offered him those caresses without shame, with a kind of glory in her own power, lashing his desire on with her own. When he slipped his knee between her legs, she pulled him over her at once.

Then he surprised her yet again. Instead of claiming her in fierce triumph, he entered her slowly, almost tenderly, giving her the time she needed to become familiar once more with the sensation of a man inside her. It was such a good feeling. Once she'd sworn never to know it again. Now she wondered how she had endured so long. She threw her head back in a gesture of total sensual abandon, grasping him and driving herself against him.

Only when he felt that movement and knew that he was welcome, did he allow the last of his control to slip. He knew her now, knew that she was a woman who could match him as a man, returning vigour for vigour, demand for demand in the all-consuming death-in-life of mutual abandon. When the moment came they were at each other's mercy, carrying each other down the long

drop to oblivion, while each clasped the other as the only safety in a vanished world.

He parted from her, but only by a little. One arm still lay beneath her shoulders, holding her firmly at the same time that he pillowed her head. Sebastian would always be like that, she thought: enticement, the offering of pleasure and perhaps something even sweeter, and behind it, always the hint of ruthlessness.

It was there in his voice now, saying quietly, 'We will marry on the sixteenth. You know that we must, don't you?'

'I don't know what I know,' she whispered, 'except that you're the last man in the world I ought to marry—if I had any sense.'

'Are you a sensible woman?'

'I try to be.' She gave a little gasp of laughter. 'Sometimes it's hard.'

'And I'm a man of no sense at all,' he growled. 'Because if I had, I'd throw you out of my house as a man would throw a fiend who'd come to torment him.'

She made a slight movement and instantly the arm tightened about her shoulders, drawing her over him again. 'But all my sense seems to have deserted me,' he growled. 'I'm going to keep my fiend here to torment me, in defiance of all sanity.'

'And if she has other ideas?'

He grinned. 'She has nothing to say about it.'

'You're forgetting that I heard you say some pretty damning things about what made a good husband. "Keep her happy in bed and the rest will follow." But that's not good enough for me. I want fidelity, and I think you'd find that hard.'

He eyed her sardonically. 'It might have been hard

with Catalina, but not with you. No other woman, I swear it. Do we have a deal?’

She smiled. ‘I guess we have a deal.’

She let her head fall until it rested against his chest. She could hear the soft thunder of his heart and knew that it matched her own. The lines of their bodies fitted well together, and she knew now that together they had a magic that could take them to the brink of ecstasy and beyond. It would be so easy simply to let herself be carried forward by his inevitable momentum.

But it wasn’t enough. She knew that, even while she prepared to surrender to it. If only her mind would take command, instead of being in thrall to her treacherous senses. It couldn’t, because deep down she didn’t really want it too, but as she lay there, pillowed on his chest, she knew that she’d made a terribly dangerous decision, one that she might regret, but couldn’t go back on.

Sebastian had predicted no trouble about getting the necessary documents, and sure enough Alfonso visited her next day, saying that he was just about to leave for the airport, and needed her instructions. Maggie explained the confusion over her name, and gave him the dates of her birth and her husband’s death.

Slightly to her surprise, he shrugged aside any thought that this might cause problems. But of course, Alfonso was thrilled at the developments. He no longer had to endure the sight of Catalina marrying his employer. True, she’d now set her heart on José, but while Sebastian was forbidding that match, Alfonso could hope. And if Sebastian planned to marry Maggie, Alfonso would make sure that all problems were ironed out.

There were a million matters to be seen to before her



wedding, such a short time away. First Catalina must be told, and Maggie was dreading this job. For surely the girl would now divine the truth about the attraction that had smouldered between herself and Sebastian from the first moment, and feel betrayed?

But Catalina astonished her by exploding with laughter. 'You and Sebastian?' she shrieked. 'Oh, Maggie! Maggie!'

'I know it must seem a bit sudden—' she began awkwardly.

'Oh, but I understand. I know everything,' Catalina gasped.

'You—do?'

'You are doing it for me. OK, perhaps a little bit for yourself, because it's good for you to have "an establishment" of your own, and you must be thinking of these things.'

Maggie remembered how Catalina had dismissed Sebastian as 'old', and realised that she herself now ranked in the same category: a widow who had to be thinking of her future because time was rushing on. She concealed a smile.

'You are such a good friend,' Catalina said eagerly. 'And you will speak to Sebastian about my wedding to José?'

'One thing at a time. Let the dust settle before you say anything about that.'

'But I must marry José,' Catalina pouted. 'I love him desperately, passionately.'

It was a child talking. Catalina still hadn't discovered true passion, and her only desperation was to have her own way. She proved it the next moment when her face fell and she said, 'Oh, but now I don't get to go to New York.'

Maggie nearly tore her hair. 'Since that was to be your honeymoon, I should think not.'

'Perhaps I could go anyway, if—'

'Forget it,' Maggie said wryly. 'I get New York as a consolation prize for taking Sebastian off your hands.'

'You are right,' Catalina agreed. 'You will suffer enough.'

She plunged eagerly into helping with the wedding, especially the making of a new dress. Together they visited Señora Diego and selected a roll of pale cream satin, which Maggie felt was more suitable to her widowed status than white.

Señora Diego pulled in all her seamstresses who had it ready for a fitting in a day. The satin had a special weave that made it extremely heavy, trailing slowly as Maggie walked in a way that spoke of grandeur and magnificence, an effect that was greatly increased by the matching lace with which it was heavily trimmed. When Maggie ventured to demur at the spiralling cost, Catalina was scandalised.

'Do you want people to say I helped choose you a dress that wasn't as nice as my own? And you must also have clothes to wear for your honeymoon, so why don't you try on something else while I—?'

'Slip round the corner to see José,' Maggie finished. 'I've got a better idea. While I try on other clothes, you stay right here and give me your opinion.'

'You have no heart,' Catalina said mournfully.

Then a crisis blew up on one of Sebastian's distant estates. Anxious to get it dealt with before the wedding, he announced that he was leaving for a few days.

'Now's your chance to escape,' Maggie teased him. 'A man who was regretting a rash proposal could use this opportunity to vanish into the mists.'

‘If it comes to that, this is *your* chance to escape,’ he observed. ‘Shall I return to find you fled back to England?’

‘I’ve given my word.’

‘And so have I.’ He brushed a finger against her cheek. ‘I think neither of us is going to seek escape.’

## CHAPTER EIGHT

SEBASTIAN was due home two days before the wedding. As the time neared, Maggie found she was anticipating him with an urgency that made her blush. She didn't know whether she loved this man, but she knew that they were bound together by a mysterious power. She'd promised herself that this would never happen again, but she had no regrets. Her feelings could flare into love, perhaps soon. If only...

If only he would let them.

For she knew that something was still unsettled between them, would not be settled for a long time—if ever. She had yet to penetrate the dark secret of the man. She knew his pride, and had glimpsed his gentleness. To the world he showed his strength, but she wanted to know his weaknesses. When he let her see them, she would know that he trusted her.

By the same token, she thought with a little smile, when she showed him her own weakness, she would know that she trusted him.

On the day he was expected a storm blew up. Rain and lightning lashed the house and hadn't abated by the evening. At bedtime there was still no sign of Sebastian. Maggie wished she could sleep, but the wind howled and raged with a violence she'd never heard before. She wondered where he was now: probably stopped somewhere for the night rather than risk the remainder of the journey in this weather.

Suddenly a door banged. It sounded loud, as though

it had come from the corridor outside her room. She sat up for a while, listening intently, but now there was only the wind, a low, insistent moan. She felt uneasy sitting like this, waiting for something, not knowing what. Sliding out of bed, she hurried across the floor and opened her door. Outside the wall lamps glowed, casting soft light, filling the corridor with shadows.

'Is anyone there?' she called.

'Yes,' came a growl from the darkness.

Now she could just make him out, walking from the direction of his bedroom. In the light of the wall lamp above him his eyes were no more than dark sockets with something burning in their depths. He came closer and now she could see that he looked as though he hadn't slept for several nights.

'I'd given you up for today,' she said.

He came to stand beside her in her doorway. He was wearing a long bathrobe that revealed his broad chest that rose and fell as though he was under some tremendous strain.

'I hurried back,' he said. 'I had the strangest fear that you might have gone away, after all.' His eyes were haggard, haunted.

'How could you think that, Sebastian? I promised to stay, and I'm a woman of my word.'

She heard a faint click and realised that Sebastian had closed her bedroom door, shutting out the world.

'Is that the only reason that you're here, Margarita? From duty?'

'No,' she whispered.

'Are you sure? I want only what you can give freely. Tell me to go away, and I'll go.'

He was lying and they both knew it. No power on earth could have made him leave her bedroom now, just

as no power on earth could have made her order him out.

‘Tell me to go,’ he repeated.

For answer she leaned forward and laid her mouth on his. Still keeping her hands at her sides, she turned her head, so that her lips moved against his in soft, inciting movements that made him tremble. Sighing into his mouth, she teased him.

She knew at once that she’d driven him beyond the point of safety. His control had been hanging by a thread, and now she’d done the thing that snapped it. His arms tightened fiercely about her, lifting her just a few inches as he hurriedly crossed the floor to the bed. They fell on it together. Her nightdress had vanished, she didn’t know where, and somehow he too was naked. His hands seemed to be touching her everywhere, tracing curves and valleys with skilful fingers that teased and incited her, moving fast because he was driven by an impatience that matched her own.

Tenderness could come later. This was raw, unslaked need, thrilling, imperative, and it had dominated her thoughts since the moment he left. Behind the decorum, the planning, the wedding dress fittings, the demure veil, her being had been secretly concentrated on what was happening here and now, in this bed, in Sebastian’s arms. The way he could make her feel, the things he could make her want: nothing else mattered.

Her kiss was as devouring as his, her embrace as fiercely demanding. She twined her legs in his, urging him on with all her power. When she tried to speak his name, no words would come, only a gasp as he entered her and the pleasure mounted fast. She clasped him close, wanting more of him, wanting everything. And

when she had everything, she wanted more. Then he gave more, and she gave back, and gave, and gave.

They were both trembling with the vigour of their mating as they fell apart, but not far apart. They still held on to each other while they recovered.

‘You were away too long,’ she said at last.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes, I was.’

Suddenly she gave a little gasp of laughter.

‘What is it?’ Sebastian demanded quickly.

‘I was just thinking of me, walking up the aisle in a bridal gown,’ she said. ‘It hardly seems appropriate somehow—after tonight, and the other night.’

‘The things we know are for us alone.’

‘Yes, but you have to admit that it has its funny side.’

He only scowled, and she realised he couldn’t admit anything of the kind. He was a Spaniard, and Spanish men never understood humour in anything that even remotely touched on sex. She smiled fondly. Sebastian wasn’t going to be easy to be married to.

But then he surprised her again, by laying his head between her breasts in a way that spoke of trust and tenderness. She put her arms about him, and held him tenderly.

There would be this too, she thought. Tenderness and the quiet moments when they would grow close in a different way from the wildness of their meetings. And the years would pass, and perhaps they would share love. Or perhaps they would only share something so like love that nobody could tell the difference.

When his head suddenly grew heavier she knew that he had fallen asleep, and then she slept too.

In the dawn light he stirred and sat up in bed. ‘I suppose I should go,’ he said reluctantly. ‘We don’t want a scandal.’

'True,' Maggie murmured, still half-asleep. She felt, rather than saw, him stand, shrug his shirt on and wander over to stand looking out of the window.

At last she yawned and stretched, sat up in bed, and realised that he was still there, looking down curiously at a small table by the wall, on which lay some papers.

'It's the paperwork for our marriage,' she said. 'You were right, Alfonso did everything in time—got all the certificates, the translations, the permission.' She became aware of a strange silence. 'What is it?'

'Who is Señora Margarita Alva?' he asked slowly.

'Oh, that's me. Cortez was my maiden name. I took it back after my husband died, but for our wedding formalities I had to give his name. I explained it all to Alfonso. I meant to tell you, but I forgot.'

'You—forgot—'

'Well, it's not important, is it?'

He regarded her strangely. 'All this time, you've let me refer to you as Señora Cortez, when you were really—Señora Alva.'

'I told you, I rejected my husband's name. And it wasn't really anybody's business, after all. I had no way of knowing it would matter. Anyway, all the paperwork is correct, and that's what counts.'

'And your husband was—Roderigo Alva?'

'Yes. It says so there.'

'How did he die?'

'In prison.'

She wished Sebastian would turn and face her, but he stayed as he was, slowly looking through the papers, until at last he laid them back on the desk and left the room.



Her wedding was a flower-filled dream. By custom a Spanish bride had flowers hung around her home, and Maggie stepped out of her room to find that Catalina and Isabella had been to work. Winter roses were hung about her door, petals were strewn along the corridor as she made her way, more roses hung about the great front doors.

All Granada was in the cathedral. Maggie entered on the arm of one of Sebastian's elderly uncles, and there were gasps of admiration at the sight of her. The heavy cream satin dress suited her tall figure admirably, and, for a veil, Catalina had persuaded her to wear a lace mantilla, which added to her air of magnificence. Everyone agreed that she was a fitting bride for a great man.

She had wondered how he would behave during the service, and wasn't very surprised that his manner was distant. What they knew in the heat of their bed was for them alone, and Sebastian wasn't the man to parade his feelings.

So she imitated his lofty bearing as the great choir sang them to their marriage, and the archbishop pronounced them united for ever. Their time would come, a time of hot lips and fevered bodies gasping, seeking, claiming, uniting. It would concern nobody but themselves.

After the wedding came the reception in the great hall, with five hundred guests standing, cheering as Don Sebastian de Santiago entered with his bride on his arm. As he walked the length of the huge room there was nothing on his face but pride and hauteur.

By tradition there were nine wedding cakes, made of sponge with caramel topping, lavishly adorned with fresh cream, and mounted on a spiral stand. For the wed-

ding festivities of Don Sebastian de Santiago there were no less than a hundred and eighty cakes, mounted on twenty stands. Each cake must be officially 'cut' by the bride, for fear of offending many guests, so Sebastian led Maggie ceremoniously around the long tables so that she could briefly touch each cake with a silver knife.

By the time the long reception was over Maggie was feeling tired, but she knew the feeling wouldn't last. The mere thought of Sebastian could drive out everything but eager anticipation.

The wedding dress was gone, its grandeur no longer needed. In its place was a nightdress of simple white silk, gossamer thin, an invitation to the man she had chosen to remove it.

Now, as she prepared for her wedding night, her thoughts were full of the last time she had lain in his arms, driven almost to madness by the force of her own desire. She didn't know what else marriage to Sebastian might mean, but she knew it meant heart-stopping sensations, her very self burned up in the furnace heat of the passion they created between them. For the moment, that would be enough. The rest could come later.

For just a moment she was assailed by qualms. There was an uneasy echo in her head, an echo of herself in times past. Once there had been a young girl who tried to console herself for her failing marriage with the thought that their passion would bind them until matters improved. Because passion meant love. Didn't it?

She'd learned better in bitterness and grief, and she wished that sad little ghost hadn't come to haunt her tonight. She rubbed her eyes, banishing that other girl back into the past, where she belonged. Because Sebastian wasn't Roderigo. He wasn't a weakling, always taking the easy way. He was a difficult man in

many ways, but she could trust his strength and his honesty.

As for herself, she knew that she was mentally the right wife for Sebastian as the scatterbrained Catalina could never have been. And he knew it too. They would have a good marriage.

Then she heard Sebastian's step outside, and something quickened in her. She gave a wry smile of self-mockery. She'd been fooling herself with prosaic talk about mental suitability. She had married Sebastian de Santiago because he could bring her body to life, because the mere sound of his footstep could throw her into a fever. She thought of the night to come, and the joyous pleasure that would soon be hers...

The door opened, and Sebastian stood there with a bottle of champagne and two glasses. Maggie knew a twinge of disappointment. She'd pictured him as he'd been on their last night together, when he'd been as eager for their union as she. But Sebastian was still dressed as he had been all day, except that he'd discarded his tie and torn open the throat of his shirt. Still, she thought, consoling herself, she would have the pleasure of undressing him. She smiled into his eyes and was shocked to find there was no answering light.

She closed the door behind him as he came into the room and set the glasses down. His movements were measured, as though he were under great strain and enduring it with difficulty. He opened the bottle, filled both glasses and handed one to her.

'It has been a long day, filled with toasts,' he said. 'But this is the one I've been looking forward to—with interest.'

How strange his voice sounded, she thought. How flat. How dead. How coldly angry. No, that couldn't be right.

But she'd never known until this moment that 'interest' was such a dismaying word.

'The interest, of course, lies in deciding what she shall drink to,' he continued. 'To deceit, to treachery, to the poor fool taken in for the second time?'

'What are you talking about?'

For answer he held up his glass sardonically. 'I drink to you—Señora Alva.'

The old hated name could still make a cold hand clutch at her heart. And to it was added a nameless fear that he had chosen this moment to say such a thing.

'Surely, I am Señora de Santiago now?'

'To others, yes. But to me, you will always be Señora Roderigo Alva.'

His tone put her on her mettle, and she faced him. 'In that case, it hardly seems worth your while to have married me.'

'I married you because I had no choice. To have cancelled a second wedding within a few days would have given the gossips and the sneerers all they needed. Rather than endure that, I will endure the appearance of marriage to you.'

'Cancel a second wedding?' she echoed, bewildered. 'But—why?'

'Because Felipe Mayorez was my father's closest friend,' he said bleakly.

'Felipe—Mayorez?' she whispered.

'You don't even remember his name,' Sebastian said scornfully.

But she did. Against her will it came shrieking out of the black night of things she didn't dare look at. Felipe Mayorez, a kindly old man, who had surprised an intruder in his house one night, and been left bleeding on the floor.

‘He—was the man who—’

‘The man your husband half-killed, a man who has never been the same since. Since my childhood he visited our house many times and was a second father to me. And when I visit him and see him staring into space, trapped in his own head—alive and yet not alive—and when I think that I have shared a woman with the criminal who did that to him—*amor de Dios!*’

He slammed a hand down on the table, tormented by some violent emotion. Maggie watched him in horror.

‘You knew all this,’ she whispered. ‘As soon as you saw those papers—’

‘I couldn’t be sure. There might be two men of that name, but you told me he died in prison—’

‘You *knew*,’ she flung at him. ‘You knew I was the last person you should marry, and you didn’t tell me—’

‘Because our marriage had to go ahead,’ he responded harshly. ‘It was too late to change anything.’

‘You had no right to make that decision on your own,’ she cried. ‘It concerned me, too. Did you ever think that I might be as horrified by this discovery as you? Why do you think I changed my name back? Because I didn’t want to be the wife of Roderigo Alva. I’ve spent years trying to hide it even from myself, and now, every time I look at you, I’m going to remember. You should have warned me in time.’

‘It was already too late,’ he snapped.

‘Too late for you, not for me. Oh, God, how could this have happened?’

‘It happened because you concealed the truth about yourself,’ he grated. ‘If I’d known this months ago, I would never have employed you, never have let you near my household. For me, the mere name of Alva is horrible.’

‘For me, too, can’t you understand? I wanted to escape it.’

‘How convenient,’ he scoffed. ‘Felipe Mayorez can never escape it. He lives in a wheelchair, hardly able to move. Some days he can manage to whisper a few words. Some days not. He has nothing to look forward to but death. That’s right, turn away. Block your ears. Shut out the truth. If only he could do the same.’

‘I’m sorry for what happened to him, but it wasn’t my fault.’

‘So you say. And yet you tried to give your husband a false alibi.’

‘That’s not true,’ she said violently. ‘Roderigo wanted me to say he was with me that evening, but I denied it. That’s why—’

She stopped herself. She’d been going to say that was why she felt so bad about Roderigo’s fate. If she had told the lie he wanted, he might have lived. But she couldn’t say any of this to the harsh, judgmental man she’d married.

‘That’s why what?’

‘It doesn’t matter. You’ve made up your mind and nothing I could say will change it. Don’t judge me, Sebastian. You have no right. You don’t know the real truth.’

‘I know that my dear friend is a speechless cripple.’

‘And my husband is dead. There’s your revenge, if you want it.’

‘But you’re forgetting, I am your husband now.’

‘Heaven help us both,’ she whispered.

Suddenly she was seized by a burst of racking laughter. It convulsed her until she was almost sobbing.

‘What is it?’ Sebastian demanded.

‘I told Catalina that no woman in her senses would

marry a Spaniard. I thought I'd learned my lesson. You're not the only one who was duped a second time, Sebastian. Oh, dear God! I thought you were different. More fool me! No Spaniard is different. No *man* is different. You had no right to keep this to yourself. I'll never forgive you for that.'

'And I,' he said biting, 'will never forgive you for your part in this. For you too kept something vital to yourself, didn't you?'

'I've explained about my name—'

'I don't just mean your name. I mean José Ruiz. He came here as your friend from the days of your marriage. Tell me, how did you come to know him? *Tell me.*'

'He's one of the family,' she admitted.

'One of the Alva family?'

'Yes, but his name isn't Alva.'

'His name!' he said contemptuously. 'As though his name mattered when he carries Alva blood. And you introduced that creature into my house to corrupt Catalina.'

'He won't corrupt her; he loves her. He's a nice boy.'

'*He is an Alva.*'

They looked at each other across a deep abyss.

'We're going to have a very interesting marriage,' Sebastian said at last.

'Marriage,' she echoed. 'You don't call this a marriage, do you?' She could hardly get out the last words. A bout of shivering had seized her and her teeth had begun to chatter. She fought to control it but she was in shock. Waves of uncontrollable horror swept over her and she felt as though she were freezing.

Sebastian frowned. With an abrupt movement, he whisked the counterpane from the bed and tried to put

it about her but she fended him off with one hand flung out and eyes that burned.

‘Get away from me,’ she said hoarsely. ‘Don’t touch me. Don’t ever try to touch me again.’

‘You must put something on against the cold.’

‘My robe is behind you. Just lay it on the bed and leave it there.’

He did as she said and stepped back, frowning as she seized up the garment and pulled it on, wrapping it right around her as though seeking protection.

‘Now go,’ Maggie said.

‘I don’t want to leave you like this—’

‘Can’t you understand that I hate the sight of you? Go, and don’t try to come near me again tonight.’

‘And tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow,’ she sighed. ‘Yes, tomorrow is going to come, isn’t it? I can’t think of it now. Go away.’ Her eyes fell on the champagne he’d brought in. ‘Perhaps you should take that with you. There’s nothing to celebrate here.’

She watched as he left the room. She was still shivering, and tried to control it by getting into bed and pulling the covers around her. But it was horror that afflicted her, not cold, and at last she got out of bed and went to sit by the window. She remained there, motionless, for hours.

It was her wedding night, the night she’d looked forward to with joyful anticipation. They should have watched the dawn creep in, wrapped in each other’s arms. Instead she watched it alone, dry-eyed, hugging her arms across her chest as though trying to defend herself from some threatened evil.

As the light changed from darkness to grey she could see her bags, ready packed for her honeymoon. A hon-



eymoon that would never take place, she resolved, pulling herself together. At last she forced life into her stiff limbs. She took the smallest bag, emptied it of its beautiful clothes, and began thrusting in a few things that she would need, including nothing that Sebastian had ever bought her. The clothes she had brought to Spain with her would be enough. From now on, she was her own woman, and that was how it would stay.

She showered and dressed quickly. She tried to think of the future, but all she could see was a blank.

At last there was a light knock on her door. Sebastian stood there, fully dressed, his drawn face telling of the night he'd spent, a night that seemed to have been as bad as hers.

'May I come in?'

She stepped back to let him pass.

'You're a little ahead of time,' he observed. 'Our plane for New York doesn't leave until three o'clock this afternoon.'

'I'm not going to New York,' she said bleakly. 'I'm finished with you, Sebastian. I won't stay married to a man who could do something so cruel as going through with this farce and not tell me until afterwards. You can go alone, and don't tell me about your reputation, because I don't care.'

'You may not, but I have to. Wherever you go, we must go together, and people must think we are enjoying a blissful honeymoon. England, then?'

'No, Sol y Nieve. I'm going to ski the "Wall of Death"', and find out if it deserves its reputation.'

'You're not going there alone,' he said at once.

'I shall do as I please.'

'Not in this mood. I'm not taking chances on you

being reckless. We'll just alter our honeymoon arrangements and go skiing instead.'

'Whatever you like. But for pity's sake, let's get out of this house.'

## CHAPTER NINE

THE "Wall of Death" started near the top of Veleta, the second highest peak of the Sierra Nevada, and the highest from which skiing was possible. From here it dropped a distance of four miles, almost sheer in many places, until it ended near Sol y Nieve.

Within an hour of their arrival they had taken the ski lift up the mountain, riding side by side. Now and then Sebastian glanced at Maggie, but he didn't speak. There was something about her brooding silence that he was unwilling to interrupt. But when they stood together at the top of the run he said, 'Wait until tomorrow. You're not ready.'

'I'll never be more ready than I am this minute,' she said, looking down the run, not at him.

'More reckless, you mean. Margarita, listen to me—'

He reached for her arm, but as though his touch had detonated a flash she was off, darting out of his reach so fast that she was almost out of sight before he'd recovered. Cursing violently he sped after her, suddenly full of dread. He'd descended the wall himself often before, but never unless he was stone cold sober. And he knew that to tackle it in her present mood was almost an invitation to injury, or worse.

He managed to catch her but there was little more he could do. To get in front, hoping to slow her down, could bring about exactly the crash he feared.

After her first explosive dash, Maggie knew it was going to take all her skill and concentration to get down

in one piece. A jagged rock appeared in her path, threatened her, vanished. She could feel the surface spotted with moguls, bumps left by turns in the snow from other skiers, but her legs seemed to move instinctively, balancing her weight to deal with them. Her excitement rose as she realised that she was good enough to do this. Best of all, she was outrunning her ghosts.

And then the end was in sight. She began to slow as Sol y Nieve appeared and grew larger. She reached the end breathless, and feeling as though a cleansing wind had blown through her mind, leaving it empty of everything. There was no pain, no fear, no despair, no joy, no love. There was nothing.

Sebastian appeared almost at once, watching her face. It seemed to him that the hostility had gone, but he searched in vain for anything softer that might have taken its place.

‘Fine, you’ve done it now,’ he said, breathing hard.

‘Yes, I have. And I’m going to do it again. You don’t have to.’

He took hold of her as she turned away. ‘Understand me,’ he said grimly. ‘If you insist on doing this, then we do it together.’

‘There’s no need!’

‘There’s every need, because when you break your neck *I want to be there to say I told you so.*’

‘Fine! On that understanding.’

When they reached the top she darted away again, but this time he was ready for her. They took the mountain almost side by side and reached the bottom together.

‘That’s it!’ he said.

‘It may be it for you, but I’m going back.’

‘What’s the matter with you?’ he shouted. ‘What are you trying to prove?’

‘Nothing that you have to prove with me.’

His face was strained. ‘You know better than that,’ he said harshly.

Stubbornly she returned to the top, but this time she knew that she’d made a mistake. She was tired, and had lost the edge that had carried her successfully through the first two runs. Except that now she had experience of the slope, she assured herself. That would make all the difference.

But she’d miscalculated. This time the drop felt steeper, faster, her reactions slower. She tried to ease up. Would the end never come?

What happened next was too fast to follow. Suddenly, the ground, which had been sloping away steeply, seemed to vanish altogether. She had a sickening view of the long drop down into the valley, of nothingness rushing up to greet her. She fought for some footing but the mountain had become an enemy. She heard Sebastian cry out and the next moment she seemed to be in free fall. She called to her aid everything she knew about falling, not fighting it but trying to control it. Even so, she knew she was lucky to reach the bottom in one piece.

The knowledge did nothing to ease her anger at having failed in front of him. As the world ceased its spinning she sat up and slammed her fist into the snow just as he reached her and dropped to his knees.

‘You could have been killed,’ he cried hoarsely. He seized her. ‘Do you understand me? You could have been killed!’

‘Well, that would have solved your problem for you,’ she yelled back.

His fingers dug painfully into her shoulders. ‘Of all the stupid—idiotic—come on.’ He helped her to her feet.

She winced and was forced to cling to him for support, but she freed herself at once.

‘As soon as we get back to the hotel you’ll see a doctor,’ he said.

‘I’m all right. Just a few bruises.’

‘You’re going to see a doctor,’ he said with exasperated patience. ‘Since you’ve marked me down as a domineering bully, I may as well act the part.’

She didn’t answer. She was trying to hoist her skis over her shoulder, but she was all aches. Silently Sebastian took them from her, and they returned the short distance to the hotel. She found the walk harder than she would have admitted to. The mountains seemed to be still spinning around her and she was looking forward to a long sleep.

They had booked into the most luxurious room of the Hotel Frontera. It had two double beds, both big enough to take three, and a huge fireplace with logs. The actual heating was done by radiators, but the fireplace created the right rustic atmosphere, and the hotel maintained it diligently.

Maggie began to remove her outer clothing, moving slowly, and wincing a good deal. But she couldn’t reach her boots.

‘Let me,’ Sebastian said quietly, and knelt down to work on the straps. Maggie took a long breath as he slipped them off.

‘I’m sorry. Did that hurt?’

‘No more than I deserve, I dare say,’ she replied with a gruff laugh.

‘For the sake of domestic harmony, I won’t answer that.’

There was a knock on the door. Sebastian answered

it and returned with two glasses of brandy, one of which he gave her. 'It will make you feel better.'

It was a very fine brandy and it did make her feel better. He watched her drink it, then offered her the remaining half of his. She accepted it.

The doctor arrived, a pleasant middle-aged man, who looked her over efficiently and announced that she had no bones broken, or even cracked.

'Lots of bruises, but nothing worse,' he announced. 'Don't try that run again until you are well. I've seen people break their necks on it.'

When they were alone Sebastian asked gravely, 'Will you tell me the truth? Was that what you were trying to do?'

'Break my neck? No, of course not. But—I don't know how to put it—it sometimes feels good to take risks and leave it in the hands of fate. When you don't know what the answer is—just to shrug and say, what will be, will be. It can be the most exciting feeling in the world.'

'I know it can. I've done it myself. Nobody would ever ski a black run if they didn't have a touch of the fatalist about them.'

'When I'm better, I'm going back,' she said firmly.

'Very well, we'll go together. But this time, side by side. No races. Whatever you may think, seeing you get killed would not solve my problem. I don't know what the answer is—perhaps there isn't one. But it's not that. Of course,' he added ironically, 'the broken neck might be mine, and then *your* problem would be solved.'

'No,' she said. 'Roderigo died, but it didn't make me free of him. He just became more and more destructive. I thought I'd escaped from his shadow, but now it looms larger than ever.'

'Because of me?' Sebastian asked tensely.

'In some ways you're just like him.'

His head went up. '*I* am like that shiftless criminal?'

'He did what suited him and told me about it afterwards, just like you with our wedding.'

He frowned. 'I did what I thought was right, but maybe—maybe I was wrong.'

'What about what *I* thought was right? It didn't count, did it? Never mind. It's done now. I'm going to bed.'

She got carefully into her bed and curled up at the edge. Sebastian stayed up, drinking brandy until, about one in the morning, he got into the other bed.

Next day she rested, while Sebastian went out onto the slopes. He took the Wall of Death twice in the morning and twice in the afternoon, wondering what he was trying to prove to himself, and not caring to search too far for the answer. He had lunch out, rather than return to the hotel where he knew he wasn't welcome.

In the evening he found Maggie up and dressed, looking better, although she still moved stiffly. She asked politely after his day, and said she thought she might venture out tomorrow, not to ski, but to wander around the town. This kind of small talk carried them through a full half hour.

'You must be hungry,' he said at last. 'Shall I call Room Service?'

'No need. I'm well enough to come downstairs.'

Of course, he thought. The restaurant, where there were other guests and waiters to be spoken to, and the silence wouldn't yawn so terribly between them.

The carefully polite meal that followed was more dreadful than the most bitter quarrel. When it was over she said she would have an early night, but why didn't he spend half an hour in the bar, if he wished? He



agreed, and when he returned upstairs found the light out and Maggie apparently asleep.

He was awoken by the sound of water running. Through the crack in the bathroom door he could see a light, and her shadow as she stepped into the tub. After a while he heard what sounded like a gasp of pain, followed by a muttered, 'Damn!' He got up, slipped on a silk robe and went to the door.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'No,' she said after a moment.

'May I come in?'

'Yes.' She was sitting in the bath, clasping the sides, a look of frustration on her face.

'I thought a hot soak would help,' she said. 'But now I can't pull myself up. It hurts when I try.'

He leaned down. 'Put your arms about my neck.'

She did so and he straightened up slowly, taking her whole weight. As her naked body came into view he gave a sharp exclamation. The bruises had come right out now and she seemed to be black and blue all over.

'There's a towelling robe on the door,' she said.

He draped it carefully around her and helped her out. Then he picked her up gently and carried her over to the fireplace, setting her down on the sofa. Then, to her surprise, he fetched a towel from the bathroom and sat down beside her, taking hold of one of her feet and beginning to dry it gently.

'I can do that,' she protested.

'You can't. See what happens if you try to reach this far.' She tried, and gave up, wincing. 'You shouldn't have to go into that bath alone. Why a bath, and not a shower?'

'I wanted a hot soak. I thought it would make me feel better.'

‘And if I hadn’t woken up?’

‘I’d have sat there until morning, I suppose. Anyway, thank you.’

‘I think we should go home tomorrow.’

‘No way. I’ve had a day’s rest and a bath, and I’m feeling better. I’ll be out tomorrow.’

‘No more Wall of Death,’ Sebastian said at once.

‘No. I’ve done that.’

‘Did it work?’ he asked shrewdly.

‘Up to a point.’ She fell silent.

‘Tell me about him,’ Sebastian said at last. He saw her eyebrows rise faintly and said, ‘Yes, I should have asked before. But I should like to know what a woman like you saw in such a man.’

‘I wasn’t a “woman like me”, in those days. I was a girl of Catalina’s age, and just as ignorant and naive as she is. Now, I’m the woman Roderigo made me: not a very nice one, I often think. I don’t really trust anyone—not really, deep down trust with my whole heart—because I trusted him so much.’

She was silent for a long time, before Sebastian said, ‘Tell me, please.’

‘My parents had died, and I was on my own. I thought Roderigo was wonderful, so handsome and charming. He told me he was on a business trip, buying and selling things.’

‘He never made an honest penny in his life,’ Sebastian couldn’t resist interrupting.

‘That’s not true,’ she said quickly, impelled to defend Roderigo by an impulse that she didn’t understand. Or perhaps it wasn’t him she was defending but the eighteen-year-old Maggie and everything she had believed in. ‘The business was real enough. It just didn’t do very well. At the start, he really was trying, I know he was.

And sometimes he pulled off very successful deals. But then he got carried away and spent the profits before he had them.'

'So how did he turn into what he became?'

'He didn't have much head for money, I suppose. He always thought money would turn up, and when it didn't, well—I had a little, only that disappeared too. I kept thinking he'd grow up, become more responsible, but he wasn't a boy. He was twelve years older than me. I guess he just couldn't grow up. And when the money was gone he started to panic.'

'Did he hit you?'

'No,' she said quickly, 'he didn't do that.'

He watched her, wondering if she knew what she'd revealed. The speed with which she'd said, 'No, he didn't do that,' implied that it was virtually the only thing he hadn't done.

'He liked to take the easiest way,' Maggie went on. 'In the end, he couldn't do any work. I think he'd forgotten how. So the only way to get money was stealing.' She gave a mirthless laugh. 'He was quite good at that. So, of course, he went on.'

'Why did you stay with such a man?'

'Maybe it was a kind of stubbornness. I couldn't bear to admit that our love had turned into such a mess.'

'You loved him?' Contempt and disbelief mingled in his voice.

'Oh, yes,' she whispered. 'I loved him once. He'd been everything to me, and it was so hard to let it go. And then—I found I was pregnant.'

She was looking into the fire, and didn't see him start.

'I had such high hopes when I knew about the baby. I thought Roderigo might change, become responsible.' She gave the little mirthless laugh again. To Sebastian

it sounded almost like choking. 'As though a man's basic nature could change. He grew worse. He thought it justified him being a thief. He kept saying, "I did it for you and our son," until I wanted to scream.

'He was so sure it would be a son. He kept making grandiose plans for the boy, and then going out to steal. I think that's when I noticed that his face was changing. It became thinner, withered and—mean.'

'I remember seeing him at the trial and thinking how like a rat he looked,' Sebastian said. 'A miserable, cornered rat, twisting this way and that to avoid his guilt. Luckily he didn't succeed. Even his own confederates were disgusted with him. One of them gave evidence against him.'

'Yes, I heard.'

'I never saw you at the trial or I would have remembered you.'

'I wasn't there. The day before it started, I went into premature labour. My baby was born at six months. She lived for a week in an incubator. I stayed with her all that time. I knew the trial was going on, but it was like something on another planet. For me, the whole world was in that little incubator.'

'Now I understand what I saw in your face when you looked at the crib,' Sebastian said heavily.

'That wooden baby was almost the same size as mine. Six-month babies are so tiny—you could hold one in your hand—except that I couldn't touch her, only look.' She sighed. 'Until the end. When she died they took her out and wrapped her in a shawl, and I could hold her. She was still warm, almost as though she were still alive. I kept wanting to tell them there was a mistake. She must be alive because she was so warm. But then I felt her start to go cold, and I knew she was dead.'

When she'd said that there was a long silence. Maggie wrapped her arms about herself and rocked back and forth, her head bent. Sebastian watched her, appalled. Whatever he had expected, it wasn't this. He reached out to lay a gentle hand on her shoulder, but she flinched away from him.

He too dropped his head and covered his face. Helplessness, frustration, the feeling that he'd done harm and couldn't put it right, these were things he found hard to handle. Don Sebastian de Santiago always had the answer. That was why people came to him. But tonight she was hurt beyond bearing and he wanted to punish someone for doing it. But the someone was himself, and he didn't know what to do.

'She was so tiny, and she fought so hard to live,' Maggie whispered. 'I'd have given my own life to save her, but I couldn't. I was her mother, but I couldn't help her. My little girl! My sweet, brave little girl! She never had a chance.' Anguish racked her.

Sebastian reached out to touch her but withdrew his hand at once, knowing that there was nothing he could do or say that wouldn't seem like a crass impertinence. So he stayed as he was, cursing silently, and after a while Maggie raised her head and spoke again.

'Nobody cared but me. She was only a girl. José came to her funeral. Nobody else from the family bothered.

'A strange thing happened then. I stopped feeling. And I was glad, because that way there was no more pain. I knew it was still hurting really, deep down. But I couldn't feel it. I saw Roderigo in prison and he screamed at me. I know he did, but it was as though I didn't hear it. I told him I hated him because our baby was dead but I couldn't feel the hate either, although I knew it was there.

'I went back to England. José took me to the airport. He was only a boy, but he was very kind. None of Roderigo's immediate family would help me. They blamed me for not supporting his alibi.'

'It would have made no difference,' Sebastian said. 'Who would have believed you?'

'That's true. But José wasn't like them. He wrote to me when Roderigo died. And that's when—' She stopped and a shudder went through her. 'That's when I started to feel things again. I began to hear him screaming at me. At night—in my dreams—he was always there—crying out that it was all my fault—'

'But that's nonsense!' Sebastian exclaimed. 'How can it be your fault?'

'You thought it was. When you discovered my real name, as far as you were concerned I was just an Alva, one of a tainted family.'

'I was wrong,' he said at once. 'I behaved badly to you. But can't you forgive?'

'And who will forgive me?'

'For what?'

'He's dead. Perhaps I should have lied and saved him.'

'You can't really believe that.'

'By day I don't believe it. But at night, when he accuses me in my nightmares—' She shuddered and put her hands over her ears.

'Stop it!' Sebastian said urgently. He took hold of her and this time she didn't draw away. He wasn't sure how much she was even aware of him. 'Maggie,' he said, shaking her gently, 'Maggie, listen to me. It's over. He was bad and he was punished. It's over. But you have to get on with your life.'

'What kind of life can an Alva have? Bad stock, tainted, incapable of good—'

'Don't!' he said, in a torment almost as great as hers. 'You're not an Alva. You never were. Your name is de Santiago, and you are my wife.'

'I'm *his* wife!' she cried.

'No. You belong to me, now. Feel my arms about you. Feel how much I want you. Don't let the dead claim you. There's so much life for us.'

He kissed her eyes, her mouth, desperately trying to recall her from the cold place that threatened to suck her in. With all her heart she longed to respond to him. Perhaps Sebastian's passion could recall her to life.

But almost at once they knew the truth. Sebastian looked into her face and saw not coldness but despair. Slowly he released his grip.

'It's too soon,' he said haltingly. 'You're not well. Go back to bed. Try to sleep. We'll talk again tomorrow.'

'No more talking,' she said. 'There's no point.'

She let him help her back to bed and tuck her up, then she turned away at once, closing her eyes.

They stayed a week, skiing until they were exhausted, eating together, talking little but with great courtesy. To their own ears they sounded like strangers shouting across a deep valley. He didn't try to make love to her again.

On the night before their departure, as they were packing, Sebastian said, 'What happens now?'

'We go home. You'd better take me on that tour of your estates, introducing me to people.'

Almost imperceptibly he relaxed. 'Thank you, Margarita, for staying with me,' he said quietly. 'I was afraid you would run away.'

She looked at him in astonishment. 'Where to? There's no escape.'

## CHAPTER TEN

THEY returned home to find the house in a state of tension. Isabella had recovered her health well enough to enforce Sebastian's prohibition on Catalina seeing José, and the girl was seething with rebellion. She telephoned José every day, but had been unable to slip out to see him.

'And nor will you,' Sebastian told her furiously. 'He is an Alva, cousin of the man who destroyed my friend. You will not see him, and your marriage is out of the question.'

He didn't think Maggie could hear, but she chanced to be within earshot. To her, he never mentioned Roderigo, and she had come to understand that his restraint grew out of concern for her. His manner to her now was always gentle and kind. But when she heard him speak of the Alva family in such a way she knew that the abyss between them was as wide and deep as ever.

Catalina sought tearful refuge with Maggie, who explained the situation as best she could.

'It's not his fault,' Catalina said passionately.

'No, it isn't José's fault,' Maggie agreed. 'But this goes very deep with Sebastian, so don't hope for him to change his mind.'

'I thought you would be on my side,' Catalina said accusingly.

'I might be if you were a little more mature, and if I thought your love for José was deep and true, instead of



being just a reaction to your engagement to Sebastian. Now you're free to make a choice, don't rush to choose the first man you see.'

She told Sebastian frankly that she was going to see José.

'Acting as go-between?' he asked wryly.

'Catalina is no nineteenth-century miss, to be locked in her room until she obeys. If I keep the lines of communication open, you're less likely to have a full-scale rebellion on your hands. I'm not going to help them elope—just trying to keep the situation under control. But I won't do it in secret.'

'Thank you. I appreciate that.'

Her visit to José left her more uncertain than ever. There was no doubt of his true feelings, but he struck her as an infatuated boy rather than a serious man. Maggie explained about Sebastian's friendship with Felipe Mayorez, delivered loving messages from Catalina, advised José to be very patient, and promised to work on Sebastian if possible.

Returning home, she went to see him to put in a good word for José, and found him frowning over a letter, willing to give her only half of his attention.

'What's the matter? Who is that from?'

'From Felipe Mayorez,' he said with a sigh. 'He wants me to take you to visit him.' He saw her horrified look and added, 'Naturally he was invited to the wedding, as a matter of courtesy, but he couldn't attend.'

'What state is he in, these days?' Maggie asked awkwardly.

'Almost like a vegetable. He lives in a wheelchair. He has an attendant, Carlos, who feeds him and cares for his every need. Sometimes he can mumble a few words; some days he can speak clearly for a short time.'

'Oh, God!' she whispered. She began to walk around the room, seeking some release from tension. 'I can't see him. It's too risky. There were photographs in the press at the time—'

'Of you?'

'No—I don't think so—but suppose there was a picture I didn't know about—and he saw it—and recognises me? Think how it would upset him.'

'He was in a coma for months. He never saw anything in the papers. Besides, I read everything the press ever printed, and I never saw your picture. Otherwise I'd have known you from the start.' He looked at her. 'It's all right. I have to go but I'll make some excuse for you.'

'What excuse can you make for such a grave discourtesy?'

'I'll think of something. I won't ask you to do this.'

'You must,' she said calmly. 'It's expected.' She saw him looking at her and added, 'You're a public man. You can't afford not to do what is expected.'

In a land where ceremony still counted, Sebastian had been dreading having to explain his wife's absence on a visit of form. He was grateful to Maggie for making it easy, yet something in her ready compliance troubled him. After her first protest, she had seemed to shrug mentally and decide that it didn't matter, because nothing really mattered to her. The old Maggie, who fought him at every turn, seemed to have vanished, and he would have given anything to have her back.

The thought struck him again when he saw her ready for the visit. She was attired in a conventional dress of sober hue, the very picture of a respectable Spanish matron. But the sight brought him no pleasure. She had said appearances must be preserved, and he knew that some-

times people clung to appearances to cover an emptiness within.

He wasn't usually sensitive to people's moods, but he could sense Maggie's despair and confusion. She was lost in a desert, functioning automatically as she waited for something to happen that would show her the way out. And much as he longed to, he knew he couldn't help her. It was he who had raised her demons to howl at her, but he had no power to calm them again, and he wanted to bang his head against the wall. He would have done so if that would have helped her.

The Casa Mayorez was in the heart of Granada, near the foot of the great hill on which stood the Alhambra Palace. In his own way, Felipe Mayorez was a prince, and he had lived as one until the day four years ago when he had been robbed and attacked. Now he existed unheeding, amidst his magnificent possessions.

Carlos, his carer, came to meet them. He was an amiable young man, devoted to his employer—able to read his every mood, even when the words were blurred. But today the news was good.

'He is much brighter than usual,' he told them. 'And he can speak fairly clearly. It will make him so happy that you have come.'

He led the way to the conservatory where Felipe Mayorez lay in a wheelchair that was half a bed. A heavy rug was laid over his wasted knees, and his head rested on pillows. With a great effort he managed to turn it as his visitors approached.

'Welcome to my house,' he said slowly. 'Welcome, my old friend. And to your wife—a very special welcome.'

Sebastian leaned down and kissed the old man with complete naturalness. Maggie was afraid they would see

her trembling, but she forced herself to be calm as her husband introduced her. Felipe Mayorez smiled at her, not knowing that she had been the wife of the man who'd destroyed him.

She made the proper reply, and thanked him for his wedding present, a huge, gold-decorated dinner service of the finest porcelain.

'That was my gift to your house,' Felipe said. 'But I have another gift, only for you. On that table.'

Sebastian handed her a small packet. Inside was a pair of heavy gold earrings.

'They're beautiful,' she gasped. 'But I can't take them. They look like valuable antiques.'

'They are,' Sebastian told her. 'They belonged to his wife.'

'His wife,' she said faintly.

'He gives them to you as a great compliment.'

She drew a sharp breath, longing to run away and hide. Why had she come here, when she could have gotten out of it? Then she saw Sebastian's eyes on her, steadying her, felt the warm pressure of his fingers on her hand, and the dreadful moment passed.

'Help me put them on,' she said, taking them up.

He lifted her hair back and she felt his warm breath on the nape of her neck. Then his fingers brushed lightly against her ears, fastening the gold clasps. Maggie drew a slow breath, startled at the way her heart had started to beat.

It was the first time he'd touched her intimately since the night in Sol y Nieve when he'd tried to make love to her, and given up in the face of her despairing chill. Since then, he'd never touched her except by chance, or to give her his hand formally.

And now, when she was least prepared, her sensations

returned, making the blood rush to her cheeks. She met Sebastian's eyes, and saw there that he'd understood. Something was making her breath come quickly. Then a sigh of pleasure from Felipe forced them back to the present, and it was all over.

'Beautiful,' he said. 'Magnificent.'

'Yes, they are beautiful,' she said. 'Thank you.'

Then the tears came to her eyes. It was so dreadful to see him there, his life ruined, and know that she was deceiving him.

'You must not weep,' Felipe said.

'I can't help it,' she said huskily, touching his wasted cheek. 'I'm sorry—I'm so sorry—'

'No need to be sorry for me—when I have a lovely woman to weep for me,' he said gallantly. He tried to raise his arm and failed. 'Sebastian, comfort her.'

She tried to stop crying but her pity for the old man welled up. She had wept for her baby, for Roderigo, for herself, but now she wept for Felipe and they were the bitterest tears of all. She felt Sebastian's arms go around her, drawing her head against his shoulder, and cried unrestrainedly.

After a moment she forced herself to be calm again, and raised her head, smiling at Felipe.

'You are a lucky man,' he said to Sebastian. 'By now, you might have made a different marriage. But this is the wife for you. She is a good and true woman. No man could ask for better. I, Felipe Mayorez, tell you that.'

'And you are right, old friend,' Sebastian said gravely. 'I have known it, but it pleases me to hear you say it.'

Suddenly the old man gave a sigh. His eyes closed and his head lolled.

'Carlos,' Sebastian called, and the young man appeared so quickly that he must have been nearby.

They said their goodbyes, but Felipe seemed hardly able to hear them, and they left. In the car home Maggie realised that she was still wearing the earrings and started to remove them.

‘Keep them on,’ Sebastian told her. ‘They were given from the heart.’

‘I never expected him to be so kind to me.’

‘He saw something in you that he loved,’ Sebastian said simply. ‘This I understand.’

He spoke so quietly that she wasn’t sure she’d heard him, and when she looked he was gazing out of the window.

Maggie had moved out of the room she first occupied, into one that befitted the mistress of the house, but Sebastian had kept his own room next door. Sometimes faint noises reached him through the connecting wall. He tried not to listen, but the noises tormented him.

On the night of their visit to Felipe he sat up late, listening and trying not to listen. As midnight passed into the small hours he could hear her walking about the room. But then the movements stopped, and the silence was worse.

He thought of her that afternoon, letting him hold her while she was torn by pity for the old man, but slipping quickly out of his arms again. And tonight, when she might have turned to him, she had pleaded a headache and gone to bed early. That was six hours ago and she was still awake.

When he could endure it no longer he went out into the corridor. There was no sound from behind her door, and at last he pushed it open and closed it quietly behind him. She was standing in the middle of the floor. She turned when she heard the click of the door.

'Can't you sleep?' he asked.

'I don't want to sleep. Not after this afternoon. Every time I close my eyes I see him.'

'Felipe?'

'No—*him!*'

There was no further need to ask who *he* was.

'I can't bear my nightmares,' Maggie said desolately. 'He's always there.'

He came close to her. 'He mustn't be there,' he said. 'Nobody must be there but me.'

'Then drive him away,' she said desperately. 'Can't you make him go?'

'Yes,' he said, taking her into his arms. 'I will make him go away, so that there is only me. Tell me that is what you want.'

'Yes,' she whispered, slipping her arms about his neck. 'It's what I want.'

Still he couldn't be sure, and his uncertainty was reflected in his kiss, gentle and loving, passion held in abeyance. There was something new in her response, a desperation, almost a plea, that hurt him. He kissed her repeatedly, trying to bring her back to him.

'Margarita,' he murmured, 'Margarita—where are you?'

'With you—where I want to be. Hold me.'

'What do you want?' he asked her urgently.

'I want you—*you.*'

He longed to ask her what she really meant by that, but the need was rising in him, making his caresses more urgent, his kisses deeper. As always her beauty entranced him, but tonight it had a special quality. He tossed her night dress away, then his own robe, and held her naked body against his.

'Sebastian—I do want you.'

It was all he needed. He reached the bed first and sat, drawing her against him so that he could lay his head between her breasts, revelling in their sweetness and warmth. They were already proudly peaked, testament to her desire. When he caressed them with his lips, she let out a long sigh of pleasure and satisfaction, clasping her hands behind his head, inviting him.

He leaned back so that she slid down onto the bed beside him and began to bestow subtle, lingering kisses on her face, her neck, silently calling her to return to him.

Maggie could feel the change in him through her skin, her sensations, the beating of her heart. Their other lovings had been wild encounters, each seeking and giving pleasure, almost like rivals. Now Sebastian was using desire to give her something else, something she needed far more than pleasure. With every touch he spoke of tenderness, protection, reassurance, and her terrors began to fade. In her need she reached out to him, and he was there.

His arms had always been strong to excite her, but now they were strong to keep her safe. Nobody had ever offered her safety before, and she reached for it, eagerly, blindly, startling him with the emotional depth of her response.

‘Margarita,’ he murmured.

‘Hold me,’ she begged. ‘Don’t let me go.’

‘Never,’ he said swiftly. ‘I’m here—always—’ His face was close to hers, his eyes holding hers. ‘Now,’ he whispered. ‘*Now!*’

She drew a long breath and suddenly she was a whirlwind in his arms, calling his name, drawing him closer, seeking something only he could give. For a blinding moment everything was well between them, just as it



had been when passion was uncomplicated and all they asked. Then suddenly it was over and his heart was beating as never before. Something had happened, beautiful, alarming and beyond his experience. He wasn't sure of anything, except that passion alone would never be enough again.

He lay on his back, his arm beneath Maggie's neck, while she turned towards him, flinging an arm confidently across his chest, snuggling against him as though seeking refuge.

He thought she murmured something. It might have been, '*My darling,*' or it might not. He listened, hoping she would speak again, but she had settled against him, sleeping as contentedly as a child. After a while he, too, slept.

He awoke in the small hours to find her asleep on his chest, still in the circle of his arm.

'Margarita,' he said softly, 'are you awake?'

There was no answer, only her soft rhythmic breathing. When he was sure she was still asleep, he kissed the top of her head.

'Where are we now?' he murmured. 'You came to me, but why? Was it only to drive him away? If so, how can I complain? Who should defend you from him but I, who brought him back to torment you?'

'I knew in Sol y Nieve that you'd returned to that place you spoke of, the place without feeling that you entered when your baby died. There was no hate there, but no love either, no warmth, no joy. Nothing for Roderigo—and nothing for me.'

'But now the feelings have returned, haven't they? Why am I afraid to look into your heart? What would I find there? Love for me? Love for him? Despite every-

thing, is some part of you still his? Is that why he haunts you?

‘What would you say if I spoke to you of love? Would that bring you closer to me, or drive you further off? Why haven’t I the courage to take the risk?’

He made a sudden convulsive movement, sitting up so sharply that he was afraid she would awaken. But she only rolled over and buried herself more deeply in the bed. He rose, pulled on his robe and went to the window overlooking the garden, opening it quietly and slipping out into the cool night air.

Down below he could see the Patio de los Pájaros, where he’d sat on the first evening and she had come wandering out amidst the stone birds, talking of truth and paradise, and they had mysteriously understood each other. But it had ended in a quarrel, as it always did, because this woman was born to torment him. And now that he’d discovered something of her heart and mind, she tormented him more than ever, posing questions that couldn’t be answered in bed, and that undermined everything he’d thought was certain in his life.

‘Margarita Alva,’ he murmured desperately to the night sky, ‘how I wish I had never met you!’

Maggie’s tour of the de Santiago estates was a triumphant success. Those she met knew only that she was English and had prepared themselves for the worst. But her fluency in their language disarmed them, and the discovery that she was a Cortez, born in the region and knowledgeable about it, completed her conquest. They even began to use her as a channel to Sebastian.

‘Of course, I realise that you find it incredibly boring to discuss these things with a woman,’ she teased him one evening.

'No, no, that horse won't run,' he defended himself, grinning. 'Not after things I heard you say to Alfonso in Sol y Nieve. Besides, I only said it in the first place to annoy you.' He glanced at the papers she'd put before him. 'Why didn't Señora Herez bring this problem to me ages ago? She's left it almost too late to do anything.'

'She finds you rather alarming.'

He was perturbed. 'I never knew.'

'Is it really too late?'

'We'll be in Seville next week for the opening of the regional parliament. I'll talk to some people.'

In Seville she found herself at the centre of a new world. Now it was Sebastian's fellow politicians who crowded around, eager to know her. Over a series of tiring but triumphant dinner parties she completed what her husband called, 'the conquest of Seville'. His pride in her was enormous. Their closeness seemed to grow every day. By the time they returned home three weeks later they both felt they could dare to hope that the problems were behind them.

Sebastian reached the Casa Mayorez in the middle of the afternoon. Carlos was waiting for him.

'I don't know if I did the right thing in calling you, Señor,' he said nervously.

'You were very vague and mysterious on the telephone. Why don't you simply tell me what had happened?'

Carlos picked up a newspaper, bearing the picture of a ruffianly, unshaven man, whose face Sebastian found unpleasantly familiar.

'It's him,' Carlos said, indicating the picture. 'His

name is Miguel Vargas, and he's just been arrested for murder. It was on television too, and when my master saw this man's face on the screen he became very agitated.'

Sebastian studied the picture and went cold. Now he knew where he'd seen Miguel Vargas before—at the trial of Roderigo Alva. He was an associate of Alva's and had given evidence against him. According to him, Alva had boasted of having robbed the Casa Mayorez once already—something which Alva had been eager to admit, since his defence had been that the previous burglary accounted for his fingerprints on the scene.

'He said the place was stacked with riches, and he was going back,' Vargas had claimed. But this Alva had frantically denied. The two men had had a screaming match across the court. Vargas was an unpleasant character, but nobody had doubted he was telling the truth about this.

'How—agitated?' Sebastian asked Carlos now.

'He kept saying, "Him", "Him", ' Carlos said. 'I asked him what he meant, and he said, "He killed me." And then he began to weep. He kept repeating over and over, "He killed me."'

Sebastian tried not to listen to the thoughts that were shouting at him. It was monstrous, impossible. For if it was true—

If it was true, then Roderigo Alva was innocent of the crime for which he had been convicted. And that meant...

He pulled himself together and read the rest of the newspaper story. Miguel Vargas had been arrested for shooting down a policeman in cold blood in the presence of witnesses. There was no doubt of his guilt, or the fact that he would spend the rest of his life behind bars for

this crime alone. Nothing Sebastian did or didn't do would make any difference to that.

'What am I to do, Señor?' Carlos asked. 'I thought of going to the police, but an identification by such a sick man after four years—'

'Would be very little use,' Sebastian agreed.

'And they would question my master and upset him further. Shouldn't I spare him that? Advise me, Señor.'

'Let me think about this,' Sebastian told him. 'In the meantime, say nothing. Try to keep him calm, and if possible, don't let him watch the news. I'll be in touch.'

He spent a troubled evening at home, glad that they were entertaining guests, and his preoccupation might pass unnoticed. When the guests had gone he told his wife that he would work late, and spent the night pacing his study.

On the face of it, there was no doubt where his duty lay. If an innocent man had been wrongly convicted, then, even though he was now dead he was entitled to have his name cleared. It was all very simple. Except that...

Except that the discovery of her husband's innocence would reconcile Maggie to his memory. At just the moment when she had begun to turn to himself, she would learn something that would be like a new barrier between them.

It dawned on Sebastian, with a kind of relief, that he could do nothing without first taking this up with the legitimate authorities. He thought of Hugo Ordonez, a good friend and local politician, influential in police circles. Early next morning he called him, received a warm greeting, and by lunchtime Sebastian was sitting in the man's study.

'It's about Miguel Vargas, who was arrested recently,' he said. 'Or, rather, it's about Felipe Mayorez.'

Ordenez looked surprised. 'However did you get to hear so soon?' he said.

'I don't understand. Hear what?'

'About Vargas having committed the attack on Señor Mayorez. Not that we're sure it's true, but it's hard to see why he should have confessed otherwise.'

Sebastian's head shot up. 'Confessed?'

'Taunted us with it. Why not? A dozen witnesses saw him murder that police officer, so he knows he's got nothing to lose. I suppose he thought he'd treat himself to the sight of authority with some explaining to do. Although, as I say, he may be lying for the hell of it.'

'No,' Sebastian said heavily. 'He isn't lying. Mayorez has identified him.'

He told the story of his talk with Carlos and Ordenez whistled thoughtfully.

'What happens next?' Sebastian asked.

'Hard to be sure. It would still be difficult to charge him on the basis of what we've got. He's just as likely to deny he ever confessed. We'll probably spend so much time arguing about the likely outcome that it will just vanish in the files.'

And then nobody would ever have to know, Sebastian thought as he left. Nobody, including the woman whose burdens would be doubled by the knowledge of Roderigo Alva's innocence.

Hadn't she suffered enough? Wouldn't it be an act of kindness to shield her from this revelation? But his conscience told him that he wanted Maggie kept in ignorance so that she would turn more fully to himself. If she knew what he'd discovered, would she ever truly be his? Fiercely, he longed to keep the truth to himself, and

not risk shattering the closeness that was building between them. But had he the right to stay quiet for his own sake?

All the way home he struggled with his fears. There were so many good reasons for doing what suited himself, and as a man of power he was familiar with most of them. But he was also a man with a rigid moral code, and he had always found temptation easy to resist.

Until now.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

SEBASTIAN had been wrong in thinking that Maggie hadn't noticed his preoccupation the night before. She'd seen it, and she'd also guessed that he hadn't stayed up to work. So when he returned home that afternoon with a heavy step, she was ready for him.

'What is it?' she asked, rising and coming to stand before him, searching his face.

Until this moment, he'd thought there was still doubt about what he would say. Now he knew the decision had already been taken, because there was no way he could lie to her.

'What has happened, Sebastian? Where have you been?'

'With a man called Hugo Ordonez. He has extensive contacts with the police. I went to ask him about Miguel Vargas, who was arrested the other day for killing a policeman.'

She became very still. 'Do you mean the man who gave evidence at Roderigo's trial?'

'Yes. Now it seems that evidence was false. It was Vargas himself who committed the attack on Felipe.'

She stared. 'What are you saying?'

The words almost choked him. 'I'm saying that Roderigo was innocent. Vargas was the guilty man.'

'Vargas *said* that?'

'Yes.'

'But why would he?'

'Because he has nothing to lose. He's facing a life



sentence, and he knows that this admission will cause trouble for the police but none for him.'

He couldn't be sure how much she had taken in. It was almost as though she were holding the news away from her, the better to examine it, and perhaps defend herself from it.

'And you think he's really the man who attacked Felipe?' she asked at last, slowly.

'I'm sure of it. Felipe saw Vargas' face on television on the day he was arrested, and managed to tell Carlos that he was the man. Maggie—!'

Her face had gone so white that he feared she was about to faint. He reached for her but she backed away, clutching a table to hold herself upright.

'Roderigo was innocent,' she said in a dazed voice. 'He was telling the truth all the time? No—that can't be right. It *can't* be!' The words were a plea.

'I'm afraid it is, though.'

'Oh, dear God!' she whispered. 'What am I going to do?'

'You don't have to do anything. I'll start the proceedings for clearing his name—'

But she hadn't meant that, he realised when he saw her desperate eyes. What was she to do now with her memories and her fears?

She began pacing up and down. 'All this time,' she was saying half to herself, 'all this time I hated him—and he was innocent—'

'You didn't just hate him because of this,' he reminded her. 'Even without it, he's still the man who took you for a very nasty ride.'

'I know, I know. I'm trying to be sensible about it, but it's hard. I deserted him, don't you see? If I'd stayed...'

'Maggie, he brought it on himself.'

She whirled on him. 'Did he bring it on himself that Vargas lied?'

'Yes,' he shouted. 'How did he know Vargas in the first place? Because they were fellow criminals. If he'd been an honest man, they'd never have met. Yes, he brought it on himself, and if you were thinking straight you'd see that.'

'How do you expect me to think straight when I can hear him in my head, begging me not to leave? I could cope with that when I thought him guilty, but— Oh, God! what shall I do now? If I'd stayed—fought for him—he might have had the will to live.'

'And he would have lived in prison. There was nothing to clear him, then. Vargas only confessed now because he's dead. You couldn't have freed him by staying.'

'But he begged me to believe him,' she cried, turning away, 'and I just assumed the worst.'

'Because he'd given you ample cause.'

When she didn't answer, something snapped in Sebastian. He seized her shoulders and pulled her around to face him. 'Listen to me,' he said fiercely, 'I've known you as a strong, sensible woman. That's how you've always wanted me to see you. Well, act like one. See him as he was, a waster and a scoundrel who lived off you and broke your heart. Don't give him a halo because he was innocent of this one crime. That's a piece of sentimentality I didn't expect from you.'

She stared at him, seeming dumbfounded. Sebastian had the dreadful feeling of fighting a mist. Nothing he said or did seemed to have any effect, and as his fear mounted it expressed itself as anger.

'You had the guts to fight me,' he shouted, giving her

a little shake. 'Why haven't you got the guts to fight him? *How much do you want to fight him?*'

'Wh-what?'

'Why don't you admit it?' he demanded bitterly. 'He's still the one. It's true, isn't it?'

'No—what are you saying?—of course it isn't true.'

'Words,' he snapped. 'Everything about your actions tell me you're still holding him in your heart.'

'Suppose I was?' she raged. 'Would you have any right to complain? You married me to ease your pride. Well, you got what you wanted. My feelings are none of your business. *Now, leave me alone!*'

She ran out of the room, leaving Sebastian alone, looking at the wreckage of what he had done.

He never knew where she went, and she never told him of the hours she had spent wandering in the further reaches of the grounds. There was nobody out here to see her violent storms of weeping, followed by trembling calm as she fought to get control of her dreadful thoughts. He'd been innocent, and she'd deserted him.

*'He's still the one. It's true, isn't it?'*

No, it isn't! Don't look at me like that—as though you saw what I was too appalled to see!

Then another burst of weeping, which went on until she was too tired to cry any more.

In the early evening she went in search of Sebastian and found him in his study.

'We both said a lot of things we didn't mean,' she said.

*Tell me you didn't mean it.*

His smile was constrained. 'I only wanted to help you through this. I probably did it clumsily, for which I apologise.'

*Tell me you no longer love him.*

‘No, no, you’re right,’ she said, ‘about me building him up now. It’s just a matter of common sense.’ She smiled. ‘Just give me a little time to get my head around this.’

‘Margarita, don’t pretend just because you feel you have to. I’m your husband. If this is hard for you, I want to share it.’

‘You and me? Share this?’ She gave a small choking laugh.

‘Don’t,’ he begged. ‘Don’t shut me out.’

‘I’m not,’ she said, too quickly. ‘There’s nothing to shut you out from. I’m all right about it, really I am. It won’t make any difference to us.’

His heart sank. He heard the sensible words, and saw her smile, as bright as a shield. And they were like a door slammed in his face.

A week later, Sebastian came into the room as Maggie was setting down the telephone. ‘What is it?’ he asked, seeing her face.

‘I was talking to my landlord, in England. He wants to know what’s going to happen. When I left I paid two months rent in advance, but I have to decide what I’m going to do now.’

‘What is there to decide?’ he asked quietly. ‘You’re my wife. This is your home now.’

‘Yes, of course, I just meant— there are things to be sorted out. When I left, I only meant to be away for a few weeks. You have to spend some time in Seville, so it’s a good time for me to return to England to arrange matters.’ She gave a shaky laugh. ‘I think I may have some overdue library books. The fines must have mounted by now.’

His silence had a bleak quality, as though a dark cloud had settled over him. Looking at his face she saw in it everything that was passing through his mind.

‘Call your landlord,’ he said at last. ‘He can return your books. I’ll send someone to collect your things—’

‘No—I don’t want anyone else going through my belongings. And I have people I must see—old friends—I need to say goodbye—’

‘Is it goodbye you’ll be saying?’

‘Of course,’ she said, too quickly.

A tremor shook him. ‘Don’t go, Margarita. It can all be done by others.’

‘I don’t—I want to do it myself.’

‘Very well,’ he said after a moment. ‘When will you leave?’

‘The sooner the better.’

He drove her to Malaga Airport himself, that very day. Inside the terminal he took her bags and waited while she checked in. Their manner to each other was calmly correct. There was nothing in Sebastian’s appearance to suggest that he was consumed by hideous fear.

He came with her as far as he could. ‘How long will you be gone?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she said with difficulty. ‘How long do these things take?’

‘Not very long, if somebody wants to hurry home. I wonder how much you want to hurry.’

‘Sebastian—’

‘Are you coming back to me?’ He was holding her hand tightly.

‘If I said I wasn’t—what would you do?’

His clasp tightened. ‘Margarita—’

A crowd was trying to press through. ‘Hurry along there, miss. It’s the last call.’

The crowd surged. Her hand was free. She didn't know how or why it had happened. Her last view was of Sebastian, reaching out to her across the barrier, touching only air, his face full of a terrible question. She thought he called her name, but she couldn't be sure, and then she could no longer see him.

As the plane landed in London, Maggie realised how badly she was looking forward to being back in her own little flat. It was small and shabby but it was the place where she was herself. It would welcome her.

But just at first, it didn't. She shivered at the cold as soon as she stepped inside. But of course, the heating had been off throughout the winter. She could soon have it warm again. Quickly she put on all the lights and switched on the central heating. As she felt the air grow warmer she looked around, trying to take pleasure in surroundings as familiar as old friends. Her books, her CDs, everything spoke of her taste, her personality.

But her personality seemed to have undergone a change. She wasn't the same woman she'd been when she left here. That woman lived in the past, the more intensely because she was trying to flee it. She had met Sebastian, disliked him, challenged him, been drawn to him against her will.

Now she was standing on a bridge. A future beckoned but it was still misty, and the past hadn't released her. With Sebastian she'd known the heat of desire, the unexpected thrill of anger. She ought to have left him behind, but he was here with her, filling the silence. He'd never been in this place, but somehow she had brought him with her. Once she had been pursued by Roderigo's ghost. Now, mysteriously, it was Sebastian who haunted her.

Whatever she did, his face was there. Sometimes it was hard and judgmental, as she'd seen it on their wedding night, blaming her. But that expression faded soon—as it had done at the time, she realised—and there was a new Sebastian, shocked by her wretchedness, concerned, puzzled, gentle. This was the man who'd stayed with her on the Wall of Death, refusing to leave her side while she was in danger. No coldness or insult had driven him away, she recalled with a faint smile. Not like Roderigo, who would have flounced off in a sulk with far less provocation.

That same Sebastian was there with her as she curled up on the sofa, listening to music with the lights out. In the darkness she might have been sitting on the sofa in the hotel at Sol y Nieve, where he had carried her in the bathrobe and dried her feet.

This was the other Sebastian, the one she'd longed to know, to set beside the autocrat. And now she saw that when she'd met him, she hadn't even recognised him.

'I had to leave you to know how much I love you,' she murmured. 'And if I return to you—will I love you still? Which man will you be then?'

But then she felt someone else there, a bitter unwelcome presence, reproaching her for her desertion, forbidding her to love again.

'Go away!' she screamed. *'I can't help you now.'*

Hurriedly she put the light on and looked around, shivering. But she was alone.

Sebastian stayed in Seville on parliamentary business until the last moment, then returned home just as February slipped into March. There was a pleasurable expectancy in the household, for this month would see Sebastian's birthday, the first since his marriage, and nat-

urally Donna Margarita would wish to make a big celebration. If only she would return soon and start giving instructions.

Working late in his study, Sebastian studied the calendar, noting uneasily how close the day was becoming. If his wife failed to be there, it would announce to the world that something was badly wrong, and his fierce pride rebelled at the thought.

But perhaps she didn't know the date? What could be more natural than that he should call, ask how she was, and slip it into the conversation? It needn't sound like pleading, not if he phrased it carefully.

He got as far as dialling, but at the first ring he slammed the receiver down, driven by sheer masculine stubbornness more than anything. To hell with it! To hell with her, if she could treat him like this!

He put his head in his hands.

He could hear Alfonso moving about outside, and called him. 'Do you know where Catalina is?'

'I, Señor?' The young man responded a fraction too quickly, and when he appeared the flush of embarrassment on his face told its own story.

'Yes, you. You're the one who follows her movements the most accurately.' He added wryly, 'Are you having any success?'

'No, Señor,' Alfonso replied despondently.

'No.' Sebastian added under his breath, 'That seems to be the common ailment around here.'

'Señor?'

'Nothing. See if you can find her.'

Alfonso was gone a long time and when he returned he reported awkwardly that Catalina had vanished.

'You mean she's gone out?'

'She didn't order a car.'



‘Then she’s still here somewhere.’

After ten minutes searching it was Alfonso who discovered Catalina in the bird garden, concealed behind some trees. She was not alone.

‘Why are you spying on us?’ she demanded fiercely.

‘Señorita—please—’ he said in dismay.

‘All right, Alfonso. I’ll take over from here,’ Sebastian said, appearing behind him. ‘Good evening, Señor Ruiz.’

‘Good evening,’ José replied with as much dignity as he could muster. ‘If I could explain—’

‘No, don’t explain,’ Catalina said defiantly. ‘Our love is nobody’s business but our own.’

‘You may be right,’ Sebastian said surprisingly. ‘But you should have let *him* say it, Catalina. I wanted to see you so that you could send for him. Señor Ruiz, no doubt my wife has told you that your cousin has been cleared?’

‘She has.’

‘Come to my study in ten minutes. That will give you time to wipe the lipstick off your face. I have things to say to you, and then I wish to listen while you do the talking.’

‘You mean—about my prospects—to support a wife?’

‘That can wait until another time. Tonight I want you to tell me everything you can remember about your cousin. There are questions that I should have asked long ago, but I was too proud. Had I not been—’ A shadow, as if of pain, crossed his face. ‘Well, some mistakes can be put right and others can only be lived with. Perhaps we never know the difference until it is too late.’

The second day became the third, the fourth, a week had passed. Maggie packed away her belongings, tidied up all loose ends until the only thing left to do was give up her apartment. She put that off for a day, and then an-

other. She wondered if Sebastian would telephone her. Perversely she even wished he was there, bracing her with an argument, laying down the law as of old, even making her angry.

Perhaps he would call to remind her that it was his birthday soon. In that country where proper appearances mattered so much, her absence would cause sniggering gossip of exactly the kind he dreaded. But the phone remained silent, and she understood. He was leaving her to make her own decision with no pressure of any kind.

In the end she found that the decision had already been made, not by her, and not then, but at some moment in the past that she couldn't pinpoint. She waited to be sure, then gave up her apartment, arranged for her belongings to be sent on, and caught the next plane to Malaga.

She told nobody that she was coming, and it was late in the evening when the taxi drove through the gates of the Residenza. She entered the house quietly, looking in on Catalina and Isabella, but only for a moment.

'Thank goodness you're home!' Catalina exclaimed. 'He's been like a bear, working into the small hours and growling at everyone. He's in his study now. Poor Alfonso is half dead.'

Poor Alfonso certainly looked up gratefully as Maggie appeared in the doorway of the anteroom where he had his desk. He beamed but she put her finger over her lips.

'Alfonso,' Sebastian called through the half-open door, 'are you going to be all night with that file?'

Alfonso hurriedly picked up the file but Maggie took it from him and slipped into the study. Sebastian was in his shirt-sleeves and looked not at all like an autocrat, just a weary man with a headache, who needed his bed but was uneasily reluctant to seek it. Maggie noticed that

the couch looked rumpled, and she guessed that he'd been mostly living in this room. Beside him on the desk was an empty wine glass and a half-full bottle. Suddenly her heart ached for him.

'Bring it over here quickly,' Sebastian said without looking up.

She came quietly to the edge of the desk and laid the file down without speaking.

'I hope you've read it as I asked,' Sebastian growled. 'What did you think?'

'I think it was about time I came home,' she said.

His head went up, and for a moment he simply stared, as if his eyes couldn't focus. He might have been gazing at an apparition that he longed for, but feared to believe in. Then understanding came, and what Maggie saw in his face made her draw a sharp breath. So that was it! And she hadn't known.

The glass overturned. The file vanished somewhere, his chair crashed to the floor, and Sebastian was round the desk, seizing her in his arms, enveloping her in the fiercest embrace he had ever given her.

'You returned,' he said huskily. '*You came back to me.*'

'Of course I did,' she said when she could speak. 'I had to bring your birthday gift.'

'The gift is you,' he said, kissing her again.

'But I have another. Here.' She took his hand and laid it gently on her stomach.

'What—what are you telling me?' His voice shook.

For answer she just smiled, and drew his head down so that his lips lay on hers. She kissed him tenderly, with reassurance, for that was what he needed most just now.

'When we were in the mountains, you said that you didn't know what the answer was, and that perhaps there

wasn't one,' she reminded him. 'I don't know what the answer for us is, either. But I believe there is one. And while I was away from you, I realised that we must find it here—together.'

## CHAPTER TWELVE

THE entire household settled to prepare for the birth of Sebastian's son, for it was unthinkable that a man of power and respect would not sire a son first time. The boy would, of course, take his first name from his father, but there were several other names to be chosen, and the cook and the steward argued incessantly about the rival merits of Federico and Eduardo.

Sebastian took no part in this, merely shrugging and saying that fate would send what fate would send. Nobody took this foolishness seriously, but they respected him for his gallantry to his wife. It was clear that they were the perfect couple, which was only to be expected with a great man.

Nobody suspected that behind the ideal façade Don Sebastian and Donna Margarita were holding their breaths. They had their child and their happiness, but something had yet to be resolved. There were thoughts they shared, but never spoke of.

She knew, from José, of the night he'd talked to Sebastian about Roderigo and his behaviour during their marriage, but Sebastian himself made no mention of the matter. And if his knowledge of what she had endured made him gentler than ever towards her, how could she tell? He was always gentle, these days.

Something precious was flowering between them, but it grew slowly and hadn't yet reached the point of mutual confidence. They both realised that on the night a pho-

tograph slipped out from the pages of a book Maggie had brought back with her from England.

'I didn't know it was there,' she said, apologetically reaching down to take it before her husband saw. But he reached it first, because she was growing large now, and moving slowly.

It was a wedding picture. The bride was very young, her face open, innocent and adoring. The groom wore a 'suitable' smile. To Sebastian's suspicious eyes, it seemed less adoring than predatory, but he knew better than to voice this thought.

The past was still a threatening shadow, but he knew that Maggie had somehow come to terms with it, and he wouldn't risk disturbing that delicate equilibrium. So he retrieved the picture and handed it to her, smiling to hide his jealousy.

'I thought I'd destroyed them all,' she said.

'There's no need to destroy it because of me,' he said, longing for her to do so.

He thought for a moment that she would, but then she gave a tense smile and slipped the picture away in a drawer.

'You still feel guilty?' he asked.

'Only because I have so much. It seems dreadful to be happy when he's dead.'

'Are you really?' he asked with a touch of wistfulness.

'You know I am.'

'I know only of the joy you give to me,' he said, dropping to one knee and laying his hand over her swelling. 'I wish there was some gift I could give you in return.'

'But you give me everything.'

'I don't mean that kind of gift. I mean peace of mind—the freedom to be happy—'

‘The freedom to be happy,’ she echoed longingly. ‘Does anybody have that?’

‘I have it—or rather, I would, if you had it too. I wish—’ He stopped and sighed. ‘But what can I do?’

‘Nothing,’ she said, understanding him. ‘We must treasure what we have, and not ask for more.’

He couldn’t find the words to say that this couldn’t be enough for him. Somehow, somewhere, there was a gift of love he could make her, and if he watched for the chance, it would surely come. If only, he thought, it didn’t take too long.

Yet when the moment did arrive, he almost missed it.

Catalina was passionately interested in Maggie’s pregnancy. She read baby books, she studied diets, she argued about names, and grew closer to Isabella who was similarly absorbed. Sebastian, noting these changes, observed that it was time she married.

‘Then you’d better ease up about José,’ Maggie observed as Sebastian gave her his arm to cross the short distance to their bed.

‘I have. I allow him to haunt the house like a sick donkey. She goes out with him, always returns home later than she promised, and I turn a blind eye. And today I told her that if she wished to become betrothed I could probably put up with it.’

Maggie chuckled as he settled her pillows. ‘Done with all your grace and charm, in fact.’

‘Well, I told you,’ he growled, ‘I don’t like it, and I’m damned if I’m going to pretend that I do.’

The following evening Catalina had dinner in town with José. When she returned she went straight to Sebastian’s

study. He looked up, surprised to see her alone. 'Where is José?'

'He didn't want to come in.'

Something constrained in her manner made him frown. 'But isn't this a night for celebration? Didn't you get engaged? Catalina, what has happened?' For the girl shrugged and looked awkward.

'I'm not sure—that is—we don't know each other so well.'

'After all this time? Besides, I thought you were determined to marry him.'

'That was when you were saying no,' Catalina said in a burst of honesty.

Sebastian grinned. 'I see. Now I've said yes, it becomes a boring, conventional courtship, without the spice of drama.'

'The world is full of handsome young men,' Catalina said dreamily. 'I've told José that I will still see him, but we can't be engaged, and I consider myself free to see other men.'

'You've *what*?'

'Alfonso is very nice.'

'Alfonso is a damned sight too good for you.'

Catalina giggled. 'He doesn't think so. He says I'm so far above him that he dare not hope—but I told him no man should give up hope.'

'Spare me the details. So you plan to keep them both on tenterhooks. I begin to pity José. I was thinking of you as his victim, but in fact he is yours. Was he very upset?'

Catalina shrugged. 'I may marry him one day—if I don't marry Alfonso—but I want some fun first.' Then her smile faded and she looked uneasy.

'Is something else the matter?' Sebastian asked.



‘José gave me this,’ she said, producing an envelope from her bag. ‘For Maggie.’

Frowning, he took the envelope. It bore no name, and was sealed. ‘Did he tell you what’s in it?’ he asked.

‘Only that it’s a letter, *from Roderigo*. He’s had it for years, and now he wants her to see it. He says he should have given it to her long ago, but she was so bitter and unhappy that he feared it would make things worse. Oh Sebastian, don’t you see what that means? Roderigo must have written this in prison, while he was dying, and entrusted it to José. It’s his last letter to her. Let me burn it.’

‘What?’

‘What good can it do her to read it now? You can guess what it says, can’t you?’

‘Doubtless he repeats his protestations of innocence,’ Sebastian said wearily. ‘Which we now know are true.’

‘But suppose it’s worse than that. Suppose he says he loves her? That’s just the sort of tricky thing he’d do to spoil everything for her. Maggie is yours, now, but if she reads this—’

Then her husband’s last declaration of love, made from his deathbed, would reconcile her to his memory with a completeness and finality that could shut out Sebastian again. He knew the bitter truth.

How much better, then, to do as Catalina said? It could only increase Maggie’s grief, while doing no practical good. To destroy it would help him keep her heart for himself, and her heart was the only thing in the world that mattered to him now. He turned away from Catalina’s shrewd eyes and went to stand by the window, racked with temptation.

‘Why do you hesitate?’ Catalina demanded. ‘Burn it, now—for both your sakes.’

'For *my* sake? Perhaps she needs to see this.'

'But what good could that do—now that it's too late?'

'I don't know,' he said heavily. 'I only know that not to give it to her would be dishonest. And if two people don't have honesty between them, they have nothing.'

'Is this you talking, Sebastian? I've heard you say that sometimes a man must deceive a woman a little, for her own good.'

'Did I say that? Well, perhaps—a long time ago, in another life.'

'So what am I to do?'

'Leave this with me. And, for the moment, say nothing to Margarita.'

When Catalina had gone Sebastian stared at the blank, unrevealing envelope. Now his own fine words rose up to mock him. Honesty, yes, but at what price? The price of seeing Roderigo Alva's memory vindicated in the heart of the woman who had loved him—perhaps, still did?

His life had been built on fine-sounding principles—honesty, duty, honour. Suddenly they were impossibly hard, demanding an act that could tear the heart out of him. But if it could ease her suffering and bring her peace—what right did he have to deny her that?

Once he had thought it would be so easy to love. A man loved a woman; she loved him. What more was there?

Now he saw that love could devastate a man, and give him nothing in return but the knowledge that he had sacrificed himself for a woman, and that she neither knew nor cared. Should anyone be asked to pay such a price?

He took up the envelope, turning it this way and that between his fingers, wishing he knew what was inside.

At last he rose and went to the fireplace. Summer had come, but in the foothills it was still sometimes chilly at night, and a few logs glowed. He stood for a long time, staring into the flickering light. Then, slowly, he held out the letter to the flames.

Maggie was almost ready for bed when he came to her. He found her sitting by the fire in her own room, looking at the wedding picture of herself and Roderigo that she'd brought from England. It struck him suddenly how often she gazed at that picture when she thought he didn't know.

She looked up quickly as he neared and showed him the picture. 'I was thinking it was time I got rid of it.'

'Don't,' he said. 'Wait until you see this.'

'What is it?' she asked, disturbed by his grave face.

'I've brought you something. José gave it to Catalina tonight, to give to you. It's a letter from Roderigo.'

'A letter—for me?' It seemed to him that she paled.

'He must have written it in prison just before he died and entrusted it to José. He's kept it all this time, waiting for the right moment.'

He held it out to her. Maggie took it with shaking hands, and glanced briefly at the scorch-marks on the envelope before tearing it open. Slowly she slid the letter out, opened it, and lay it flat on her lap. But she didn't read it. Then she said something strange.

'I wasn't a good wife. I was too young, and I knew nothing. If I'd been older I might have coped better with Roderigo, maybe helped him.'

He wanted to shout, 'Don't make excuses for him.' But it was too late. His heart was heavy as he realised that she'd guessed the contents of the letter, even as he

had, and was preparing herself. He had given her the thing that would destroy them.

‘Shall I leave you to read it alone?’ he asked.

She didn’t answer and he doubted she’d even heard. A stillness had come over her, like the stillness of death. She stared at the paper in her hands but he couldn’t tell if she saw it. At last she lifted it and read what was written. Then she read it again, and as she did so her head sank lower until she covered her eyes with her hand.

A cold fear gripped him. He felt he ought to leave her but he couldn’t have gone away if his life had depended on it.

‘Margarita,’ he whispered. He stepped closer and put his hands on her shoulders, dropping to his knees beside her. ‘Tell me, my dearest,’ he said.

She raised her head and stared into the distance. ‘I always knew,’ she said quietly. ‘In my heart, I always knew. I wish José had shown me this before. I know he thought he was acting for the best—but if I’d only read this sooner—’

‘Would it have made so much difference?’ Sebastian asked sadly.

‘Oh, yes—all the difference in the world. You can think you know what’s in a man’s heart, but when you see it set down in black and white, in his own words—’ She sighed, and his pain deepened.

‘And do you now know what was in his heart?’ he asked.

She nodded.

‘Margarita, don’t be sad,’ he begged. ‘I know it’s hard to read his words of love when it’s too late, but what you had can never be taken away. Cling to that. Love him if you must. One day, perhaps, you’ll turn to me

completely, but until then I can be content with what we have. You are worth waiting for.'

At last she raised her head and looked at him. 'What do you think this letter says?' she asked.

'I think it tells you of his love. That hurts you now, but one day it will bring you peace.'

Maggie pushed the letter towards him. 'Read it,' she said.

'Are you sure—?'

'Quite sure. I want you to read this, Sebastian, because if you don't, you and I will never understand each other.'

Slowly, almost reluctantly, he took the letter and ran his eyes over it. The first shock came at once. 'It's dated eight years ago—before you were married.'

'He didn't write it to me,' Maggie said. 'He wrote it to José, from England, soon after we met. Read it.'

Sebastian began to read.

Hey there, little cousin,

I did it! I found myself a real heiress. Her name's Maggie, she's eighteen, pretty enough in an English sort of way, which means she's a bit insipid for my taste. But she's loaded so I'll just have to put up with her looks. Her parents just died, leaving her a couple of hefty insurance policies, plus a house. You should see that house! It almost makes me want to stay here and live in it, but I guess my creditors would prefer it sold.

You never thought I could manage it, did you? Or maybe you just hoped I couldn't. Get real, boy! When I was your age I put women on pedestals, too, but believe me, that's not where they belong. A man needs money, especially a man like me.

She's young and she adores me. I can mould her,

and I'll be a good husband as long as she behaves herself. Besides, everyone knows women can't manage money. I'll be doing her a favour.

I've written to the most awkward of my creditors telling them money's on its way. That should stall them for a while, and with any luck I'll be back in a few weeks with a new wife and enough to set me up in style.

Life's going to be good. As for 'tying myself down'—who's going to? There are plenty of hot, spicy women who like having fun with a man as rich as I'm going to be. I'll live my own life, and my wife will do as she's told.

There was more, but Sebastian was too disgusted to read on. The whole man was there—selfish, faithless, treacherous, convinced of his own superiority, his divine right over the woman.

And there was something more, something he was ashamed to admit. There were words in that letter that could have been written by himself. *She's young... I can mould her...* Hadn't he said much the same, while preparing to marry a vulnerable young girl that he didn't love?

But that had been a long time ago, in another life, before he'd learned the value of a woman's heart.

Half-afraid, he looked at Maggie. She was staring into space.

'He never loved me at all,' she said quietly. 'I realised very soon that my money was a big attraction for him, but I made myself believe that there was some real love there too. But there was none. Some part of me must have suspected that, but I wouldn't *let* myself know it.

'After he died in that terrible way, I shut out the bad and magnified the good. And, when his name was

cleared, I felt so guilty that I made myself forget the truth about him.'

'The truth,' Sebastian said, 'was that he was a very nasty piece of work, who brought his troubles on himself.'

'Yes,' Maggie said. 'That really was the truth. Before we even married he was planning to make me pay for his girlfriends.'

'I wonder,' he said slowly, 'how you ever found the courage to trust yourself to another man.'

'Not all men are the same. I took too long to understand that. But what I still don't understand—' she rose and looked into his face '—is why you gave this letter to me, if you thought it was a love-letter.'

'I thought it might help you find peace. There is nothing I wouldn't give, or do, to bring you that peace.'

She touched his cheek. There was a strange, shining light in her eyes. 'You love me as much as that?'

'Yes,' he said simply. 'I love you as much as that.'

'And thanks to your love, I'm free. It's as though a terrible weight has gone from me. It might have crushed me all my life, but you freed me.'

He was dazed by the memory of how close he'd come to burning the letter, and destroying them both. Or perhaps he merely thought he had. He only knew that when he held it out to the flames some power had drawn him back before it was too late. Looking at her eyes, fixed on him, candid and unshadowed for the first time, he thought perhaps he knew the name of that power.

He couldn't tell her about his temptation. At least, not yet. One day, long in the future, he might say, 'You too set *me* free, and this is how it happened.'

Or perhaps, by then, they would no longer need words.

‘Sebastian,’ she said softly, ‘have I ever told you that I love you?’

He shook his head. ‘But then, I have never before told you.’

‘Not in words, but in many other ways.’

‘You are my whole being and existence,’ he said slowly. ‘You are my love and my life. You are everything to me. You are more, even, than our child.’

‘I lost faith in love. Thank you for giving me back my faith.’

‘And—him?’

‘You want to know if I love you as I loved Roderigo? No, I don’t. And I’m glad of it. You should be too. There was always something wrong with that love, and now I know what. He wasn’t worth loving. That’s the greatest pain of all, to waste love on someone who isn’t worth it. I shall never know that pain with you.’

She tossed the letter into the fire, then lifted the photograph and studied it, while Sebastian never took his eyes from her.

‘It’s there, isn’t it?’ she said at last. ‘The slyness and meanness—it was there in his face all the time. But I wouldn’t let myself see it.’

With a quick movement she cast the picture into the flames where it shrivelled. The last thing they saw was Roderigo’s face curling up, blurring, vanishing.

‘He’s gone at last,’ Maggie said. ‘Now there is only us.’

‘Only us,’ he echoed, taking her into his arms. ‘Yes, only us. Forever.’

In the church of San Nicolas the Christmas greenery was piled high about the pulpit, the font, up against the walls. Down below, the lights glowed softly over the manger.



The wooden child lay in the crib, his arms stretched slightly upward to the living baby looking down at him from wide dark eyes.

'Look, my darling,' Sebastian murmured. 'He is greeting you. Say hello to him.'

'Sebastian,' Maggie chided him, smiling, 'she's only three months old.'

'No matter,' he said. 'In years to come she'll know that she came here in her father's arms. She may not remember, but she will *know*.'

'A beautiful child,' Father Basilio said, reaching up to lay a finger against the baby's cheek. And then, being—for all his sanctity—a man and a Spaniard, he added consolingly, 'And the next one will probably be a boy.'

'Don't let Sebastian hear you say that,' Catalina laughed. 'He thinks his little Margarita is a queen.'

'Fate sends what fate sends,' Sebastian said, straightening up and settling his baby daughter lovingly against his shoulder. 'Fate sent this little one to be a jewel for her Papa.'

'Who's that in the doorway?' the priest asked, screwing up his eyes against the poor light.

'José and Alfonso,' Sebastian said, 'waiting to see who will be honoured with this baggage's company on the way home. It's time you decided between them, Catalina. You are bringing scandal on my house.'

Catalina went down the aisle to where José and Alfonso waited humbly. The old priest followed her to greet them.

Sebastian looked over the baby's head at his wife. He had more than one jewel, but he never spoke of the other one to outsiders, only to her. Maggie smiled at him, then

looked back at the crib, touching the wooden baby with a gentle hand.

‘That was how I saw you this time last year,’ Sebastian reminded her. ‘And I think I understood in that moment that you were far more to me than a woman I had tried and failed to conquer. You touched my heart, and that was when I began to be afraid.’

‘Afraid? You?’

‘You sought no quarter and you gave none. It was I who yielded. And I have been glad ever since. You took a robot, and brought him to life.’ He kissed his child. ‘And only life can give life.’

His wife reached up to where his cheek lay against their baby’s head, caressing them both at the same time. ‘Let’s go home now,’ she said fondly. ‘Life is only just beginning.’

They walked out of the church together. At the door she looked back at the Christmas scene and smiled, but she didn’t linger.

It would be there again next year.

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## THE STAND-IN BRIDE

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