

DIANA HAMILTON

The Spaniard's Woman



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Аннотация

Sebastian Garcia is shaken by the overwhelming attraction he feels for Rosie Lambert. Maybe it's because she seems innocent and trustworthy, so unlike the many fortune hunters who've pursued him before? Soon Sebastian makes Rosie his woman. So how can Rosie tell him the real reason for her sudden appearance in his life, when it could destroy his faith in her? And she may be pregnant with his child....

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“You were a virgin.

“Rosie, I should regret what happened, apologize, but in all honesty I can’t. You were so…” He paused, as if his aptitude for the English language had suddenly deserted him. His fingers slid from her jawbone and tracked gently down the side of her throat. “Sensational.”

The intensity of his level silver gaze, the stark masculine beauty of his features, the touch of his hand against her skin made her feel helplessly dizzy. She wanted to hold him, to wrap her arms around him and tell him how swollen her heart felt, swollen with so much love she could hardly contain it. But his next statement made her go cold all over.

“As this was your first time, I don’t expect you’re protected.”

Her mouth dropped open. She hadn’t given the matter any thought at all.

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The Spaniard's Woman

Diana Hamilton



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CHAPTER ONE

SEBASTIAN GARCIA'S mood was blacker than a coalminer's finger-nails as he faced the rambling sixteenth-century façade of Troone Manor. His smoke-grey eyes narrowed then glittered with angry determination. He'd claw his heart out of his breast with his own hands before he'd allow Terrina Dysart to get her gold-digger's talons on his godfather's extensive property!

For the first time in his twenty-nine years a visit to the charming old house that had been like a second home to him for most of his life was lacking in anything remotely approaching pleasure.

The cold March wind pushed icy fingers through the sleek blackness of his hair, reminding him that his family home in Southern Spain and the village of Hope Baggot in the uplands of west Shropshire might as well be poles apart.

Firming his already hard jaw, he reached a leather suitcase from the back seat of the silver Mercedes and strode over the circular sweep of gravel to the main door where Madge Partridge was waiting to greet him. His tersely snapped, 'Is everything in hand?' wiped the welcoming smile from the housekeeper's lined face, and she took a flinching step backwards.

Silently cursing himself for losing his cool, he dredged up a smile. A lift of one ebony brow was enough to have his

business staff jumping if the occasion demanded it. But dear old Madge was his godfather's housekeeper and she was only following Marcus's orders—as he himself was reluctantly doing. And making good and sure Marcus Troone got to see what Terrina really was, was his problem, not Madge's.

'Sorry,' he apologised through the smile he was doing his best to keep in place. 'I didn't mean to bite your head off.' He lifted wide, leather-coated shoulders in an expressive shrug. 'I've been driving through the night; put it down to that and forgive me?'

'Of course.' Briefly, Madge put a workworn hand to the side of his face, her gaunt features relaxing as she grumbled at him, 'You wouldn't take the easy way out and fly over in comfort, get a driver from the London office to meet you at the airport and chauffeur you here, not you!'

Her brown eyes glinted with affectionate amusement as he walked past her into the huge, raftered hall where a log fire was burning brightly in the stone fireplace. 'The first time you ever stayed here without your parents—you'd have been six years old—you decided that coming down to breakfast via your bedroom window and the wisteria would be more of a challenge than using the stairs. So nothing's changed, has it?'

The memory of the truly awe-inspiring scolding he'd received from Tia Lucia on that long-ago occasion made his heart dip with sadness. Marcus Troone and Sebastian's father, Rafael, had been business partners and Marcus had married Rafael's younger sister, Lucia. They had regarded themselves as one

family. Sebastian had spent long weeks every summer at Troone Manor, and life had seemed happy and uncomplicated.

But shadows had invaded the scene, invaded and deepened. To their sadness, his aunt and Marcus—who was also his godfather—had remained childless, and he had been approaching his eighth birthday when the unthinkable had happened and his lively, loving Tia Lucia had been stricken with multiple sclerosis. The next time he'd visited she'd been confined to a wheelchair, almost as helpless as a baby.

Two years ago Lucia had died and now Marcus, lonely and childless, was on the point of marrying a gold-digging witch!

'Not knowing exactly when to expect you, I held lunch back. It will be about an hour, so would you like coffee before you freshen up?'

With difficulty, Sebastian hauled himself out of the pit of his seething anger and grunted an affirmative to the housekeeper's question, dumping his case on the worn flagstones and following her through to the comfortably homely kitchen regions.

The whole place reeked of fresh emulsion. It made him shudder. Not the smell of the paint itself, but the implications. If Terrina got her hands on this property, the comfortable, slightly shabby ambience of what he'd always regarded as the essence of an English country house would be replaced by smart, over-decorated, expensive tat.

Not that he begrudged his godfather the happiness and companionship of a second marriage—Lord knows his role of

husband had been reduced to that of dedicated carer for well over twenty years—but marriage to a greedy little harpy who would do anything, say anything, to get her hands on his enormous wealth and then, inevitably, break his heart—no way!

‘Sir Marcus is more himself now?’ Madge asked, motioning Sebastian to the old armchair at the side of the vast kitchen range as she busied herself with the coffee things. ‘I was shocked, but not surprised, when he collapsed just before Christmas. He’d been working himself to a standstill since Lady Troone passed away, poor thing.’

‘Much better,’ Sebastian conceded as he accepted the coffee she handed him; strong, black and un-sweetened, just the way he liked it. ‘A few weeks on the warm shoreline below Jerez with my mother to cluck over him, and me, as his partner since my father’s death, to report back on both the London and Cadiz ends of the business, and he’s fighting fit again.’

‘Must be, if he’s gone and got himself engaged.’

He noted the questioning tone, the undercurrent of anxiety, understood exactly where she was coming from, but decided to ignore it. Faithful and loyal though the good soul was, there was nothing the housekeeper could do. It would be unkind to tell her of his own deep misgivings and add to her worries. It was his problem and, utterly distasteful though it was, he knew how he had to handle it. But, for the time being at least, he would comply with his godfather’s request.

‘The decorators have finished?’ He deliberately changed the

subject.

‘Yesterday.’ She sat at the central scrubbed pine table and ladled sugar into her milky coffee. ‘Sir’s instructions were just a plain, freshening-up job. No doubt his new wife will have her own ideas of how she wants to redecorate the house.’

Visions of expensive designer chic—stark, shiny and completely soulless—flooded his brain again. He quickly ousted them and asked, ‘And the temporary staff?’

‘Ah.’ Madge’s mouth turned down at the corners. ‘Only two responded to the advertisement so it was Hobson’s choice. Sharon Hodges from the village—you might have seen her around? Big, bulgy, mouthy lass. Knowing that feckless, lie-abled family, I insisted she live in for the full six weeks; that way I can make sure she gets out of bed and starts work on time. And the other girl comes from Wolverhampton. A little bit of a thing, she is. Looks as though a puff of wind would blow her over—I did explain there was a good deal of hard physical work involved, but if that bothered her she didn’t say so. Come to think of it, she didn’t say much, just that her mother had died a few months ago and she wanted a stop-gap job while she decided what she wanted to do. Name of Rosie Lambert. She’ll be twenty the day after tomorrow, blushes if you so much as look at her and hangs her head as if she’s got something to be ashamed of.’

‘Still.’ Madge Partridge heaved a resigned sigh. ‘Beggars can’t be choosers. They both moved in yesterday and they’ve started on the bedrooms, getting rid of the paint splodges the decorators

left. Quite frankly, I don't think either of them will be what I'd call satisfactory.'

'Leave them to me.' Sebastian gave her the benefit of his warmly confident smile. If anyone knew how to get the best out of hired staff, he did. Madge had enough on her plate and for the time being, until he worked out exactly how and when and with the least hurt he could wipe the scales from his beloved godfather's eyes, he would go along with his instructions.

'The whole place has been run down for years,' Marcus had confided. 'Madge can't cope with a place that size on her own and what help she has been getting from a village daily doesn't make much difference. My fault. I should have had a firm of cleaners come in regularly, but Lucia, bless her, was dead against it. She couldn't stand the upheaval and hated the thought of strangers touching her things. So hire a gang of live-in temporary domestics to get the place spotless before I bring Terrina back to organise the engagement party she's set her heart on. After we're married she can decide what she wants to do about staffing the place.' His smile had broadened into what Sebastian had described to himself as a grin besotted enough to earn the title of imbecilic. 'The first on her list of priorities will be a nanny!'

In the way of manipulative, greedy women the world over—and Sebastian had had enough experience of the breed to recognise one when he saw one—Terrina had quickly found her prey's Achilles' heel. Marcus's abiding regret was that his marriage had been childless. Armed with that knowledge,

Terrina had allowed her sweetly confided desire to have a large family to become sickeningly repetitive.

Making a conscious effort to stop himself from scowling, Sebastian announced, 'Don't worry about it, Madge, I'll stick around long enough to make sure the show's well on the road,' before taking himself off to the room he'd always occupied on his visits there.

Rosie Lambert sat back on her heels and pushed a descending strand of long pale blonde hair out of her eyes with a rubber-gloved hand. It left a trail of scrubbing water down the side of her face. Two tears slid down her cheeks, adding to the mess. She could feel a huge sob building up inside her narrow ribcage as she fumblingly tried to mop her face on the sleeve of the giant brown overall Mrs Partridge had given her to wear.

She truly wished she had never come here, wished she'd never found the letter that had told her who her father was, wished she'd never listened to her friend and erstwhile employer, Jean Edwards.

It had been a quiet Monday morning in the street corner mini-market owned by Jean and Jeff Edwards. Rosie had been working there full-time since her mother's death and had gratefully accepted the invitation to move into the spare room in the living premises above until she found her feet. Anything to escape the flat in the high-rise block on the sink estate where she and Mum had lived for the past nineteen years.

'You won't want to work as a check-out girl and shelf-

stacker all your life—not a bright girl like you,’ Jean had stated unequivocally. ‘You could even try to take the place at university you gave up when your poor mother became so ill.’

Rosie had had no idea about the direction her life would take. She’d been angry, saddened and confused since absorbing what her mother had told her a few days before her death, since finding that letter afterwards. Not a state of mind conducive to clear forward thinking. And, because her mother had refused to let her have anything to do with the other children who roamed the estate like packs of half-wild little animals, Rosie hadn’t a friend in the world except Jean and her husband Jeff.

She’d needed to confide in someone and Jean had listened. Two months later, on that quiet Monday morning, the older woman had produced the local paper she’d taken from her sister-in-law’s house in Bridgnorth when they’d been visiting the day before.

‘I was just glancing through it and saw this. It’s fate. Got to be. Read it.’

And there, in the Situations Vacant column, something that had made Rosie’s heart emulate a steam hammer:

Temporary live-in domestic staff required for six weeks from the beginning of March. Excellent pay and conditions. Apply Troone Manor, Hope Baggot.

Followed by a phone number.

‘Apply,’ Jean had advised when Rosie had got over her shock sufficiently to stop shaking. ‘You needn’t actually take the job,

but getting interviewed would give you the chance to at least get a look at the village where your grandparents lived and where your mother was born and grew up. You could get a look at your father, too—there's obviously no doubt about Marcus Troone being the selfish wretch who got your poor mum pregnant, not from what you've told me—and decide whether you take to him enough to want to take it further. And, even if you loathe him on sight, he owes you big time. Stands to reason.'

Like the clown that she obviously was, Rosie had truly expected to be interviewed by Sir Marcus Troone himself and had steeled herself to decide whether she wanted to explain who she was, or whether she'd hit him with her handbag for treating her poor mother so badly and risk being charged with criminal assault.

Of course he wouldn't lower himself to interview a humble cleaner, she'd chided herself, when she'd faced Mrs Partridge over the kitchen table. And had gone on to remind herself bitterly that Sir Marcus would only notice an employee if she happened to be young, pretty and a likely pushover.

Towards the end of her life her mother had confessed that she'd fallen in love with the man who had fathered Rosie while working in the gardens of his home during the long summer break from the horticultural college she was attending. And, after finding the letter on the Troone Manor headed notepaper, that snippet had fallen neatly into place. Her grandfather had worked in the Manor's gardens; she knew that much. What would be

more natural than that he should choose his daughter to help out during her summer break when temporary staff would be taken on to help with the extra seasonal work?

Her mother had gone on to confide that her lover had been married and that they'd both known that what they were doing was dreadfully wrong but had loved each other so much they simply couldn't help themselves.

A likely story! Rosie had thought, hanging her head in case Mrs Partridge should see the burning mixture of anger and pain in her eyes and think she was demented. She knew her mother had adored her lover, but what kind of man would leave the girl he'd seduced—barely eighteen years old at the time—to abandon her career to care for the child he refused to acknowledge or support, to live out her life in borderline poverty?

And the wretch wasn't even here! During the interview it had been revealed that Sir Marcus was in Spain and would be returning in a few weeks' time with his new wife-to-be, which was why the neglect of years had to be swept, dusted and polished away.

At that point Rosie had known she should terminate the interview, apologise, and walk away. But doubts, and, let's face it, she told herself now as she bent to her task of locating the off-white spots of paint on the broad oak boards, the need to find out everything she could about her father and hope to goodness he wasn't as black as her imagination had painted him, had her dumbly accepting the offered temporary position.

A big mistake. She felt really sneaky and it wasn't a nice feeling.

'Hunt him down! He should know who you are,' Jean had said. But it was unworthy. Her mother had been wise enough to put the past behind her, accept that the father of her child was no part of her life, and in honour of her memory Rosie knew she should have done the same.

More tears threatened. Rosie sniffed loudly and started to scrub ferociously at a spot that stubbornly refused to budge.

Sebastian walked through the open door of his usual bedroom and did a double take at what appeared to be a mound of brown nylon fabric, the soles of a pair of beat-up plimsolls and a bucket.

The mound emitted a loudly prolonged sniff and a smile played at the edges of his mouth in instinctive male appreciation as a neat little backside began to sway to and fro as the scrubbing brush was wielded in a sudden burst of savage energy.

This was not the big, bulgy girl of Madge's description so it had to be the other. Rosie Lambert. That bobbing backside couldn't be called big by any stretch of the imagination. Neat, curvy and very, very feminine.

He cleared his throat brusquely to slap down his libido and gain her attention. Then widened his eyes as 'the little bit of a thing' scrambled to her feet as if she'd been shot, clutching her scrubbing brush in front of her in rubber-gloved hands.

The vulnerable beauty of her wide sapphire eyes stunned him. She'd been crying. Bright drops were tangled in her thick lashes

and when the scarlet receded, leaving her delicately hollowed cheeks milky pale, he could see grubby streaks marring the perfection of her skin.

Compassion, or something very like it, stirred sharply inside him. Hadn't Madge said she'd recently lost her mother? What about her father, siblings? Such a little scrap of a thing needed someone to look out for her!

Surprised by the powerful intensity of his thoughts, he placed his suitcase at the foot of the bed, black brows meeting in a frown. Such fraternal feelings were totally unlike him and he didn't know where they were coming from. He'd naturally felt protective towards his mother and Aunt Lucia. And that was it. In his experience, the female of the species was pretty good at looking out for number one.

'You must be Rosie,' he stated softly when he became aware that his scowl was making the poor scrap quiver, his eyes drawn, for some reason, to her parted lips. Bee-stung? Rosebud? He searched for the most appropriate adjective and whimsically decided on kissable.

Dios! He was either losing his marbles or he had been without a woman for far too long! Plastering a smile that he hoped was reassuring on a face that felt oddly stiff, he introduced himself, 'I'm Sebastian Garcia. I'll be around for a while making sure that everything's as it should be when Sir Marcus returns.'

'You know my—' Rosie smartly zipped her mouth. Heaven help her—she'd been about to say 'father' and had only just

stopped herself in time. Blushing hotly, she lowered her head and added, 'Employer?'

Oh, my, she didn't know what had come over her; she really didn't. When she'd heard that masculine attention-commanding throat-clearing thing she'd immediately and foolishly assumed that the father she had never known had unexpectedly returned.

Wild and conflicting emotions had propelled her upright at the speed of light and she'd found herself staring at the most compulsively attractive male she'd ever clapped eyes on. So heart-thumpingly sexy she just couldn't force her eyes off him.

Gorgeous smoky-grey eyes with unbelievable dark lashes, midnight hair, a thin blade of a nose that made him look a real aristo and a wide narrow mouth that sent unaccountable shudders up and down her spine. Add a lean but powerful physique and a slight but oh-so-sexy Spanish accent and it was no wonder she was feeling a bit—overwhelmed.

'Marcus is my business partner, my godfather and a long-time family friend.' A slight smile curved the sculpted lines of that wicked mouth and Rosie felt her stomach turn over. A lump of irrational disappointment lodged behind her breastbone; she had hoped he was just another employee, more on her level, not a member of the wealthy, exalted clan she and her poor dead mother had been excluded from. Though why she should think that way, she had no idea. Except—

To her shame she felt another of those wretched blushes crawling over her face and dipped her head so that her hair, which

had finally escaped its ponytail, fell forward and hid her burning cheeks. Trust her to have silly thoughts about a man who was so far out of her reach he might just as well be inhabiting a parallel universe, a man who had the kind of looks which only existed in female fantasies!

Sebastian grinned with wry amusement. Females who moved in his social circles didn't blush when spoken to. They bridled, pouted, husked, and sent explicit messages from calculating eyes. Rosie Lambert's reaction to him was a new and intriguing experience. And she had beautiful hair. It fell around her face like a waterfall of softest, palest silk and a curl of string, presumably used to tie it out of the way, was tangled up in the silky strands.

Ignoring the impulse to pluck the string away—she would probably faint like a Victorian virgin if he so much as touched her—he heard her mumble, 'I'll get out of your way.'

Her slight body was trembling as she turned back to her bucket, her spine rigid with tension. Unaccountably, he had a compelling urge to ask why she was so uptight, try to help. Sensibly, he ignored it. She would probably run a mile if he became personal on such a short acquaintanceship. It would have to wait. Instead, he said blandly, 'No, please carry on with your work. It's got to be done and you won't be bothering me.'

Somehow Rosie found the strength to turn and look at him. He was shrugging out of his leather jacket, revealing a torso of utterly perfect proportions covered by a dark, fine wool sweater. And he had endless legs; sexily narrow hips. Her mouth ran dry

and she couldn't breathe, because there was the strangest, most unnerving sensation of heat deep inside her.

And, for a big man—he had to be well over six feet tall to her diminutive almost three inches over five feet—he moved with surprising grace, she noted as he walked to the vast hanging cupboard to stow away his jacket.

Sebastian Garcia was the first man who had ever made her feel this weird, almost as if she no longer had any control over her body or her thoughts. But thankfully he hadn't noticed the way she was gawping at him or suspected the effect he was having on her, she told herself as she finally turned back to her bucket and dropped down on her knees.

As he'd said, her presence in what was obviously his bedroom didn't bother him. Why should it? She attacked the few remaining drops of dried paint with a violent surge of energy. She was just a cleaning lady—someone who, if she wasn't being given instructions, became completely invisible.

So admitting, even to herself, that he really turned her on, would be stupid. As stupid as coming here in search of a father who had never wanted her.

CHAPTER TWO

ROSIE sat on the edge of her bed, her shoulders slumped dejectedly. It was her birthday and she had never felt so lonely.

She had no problem with the fact that she had spent the whole day on her hands and knees; she was being paid as a cleaner, after all. She didn't want fuss or fanfares or piles of gift-wrapped goodies, nothing like that. It was the long evening ahead she dreaded.

She and Mum had always made birthdays special. There had been no money for fancy gifts but there had always been something extra nice for supper, a candle on the table and a bottle of inexpensive wine to share—an innovation that had appeared on her sixteenth birthday.

It was her mother she missed so dreadfully, her tired features magically seeming youthful and carefree again in the candlelight, her chatter and laughter.

A hard knot of anger turned her stomach upside down. It needn't have been like that, her mother taking any menial job she could find to support them, scrimping and scraping, making light of hardship, while her father lived in the lap of luxury here, completely unconcerned as to the fate of the girl he'd seduced, their baby.

As the anger threatened to pull her slender frame to pieces, she leapt to her feet and began to pace the small attic room she'd

been given.

Growing up, she'd learned not to ask about her father. She had always got the same answer. 'We loved each other so much. But it wasn't to be.' Which had told her nothing, so she'd stopped asking, primarily because whenever she brought the subject up her mother looked so sad.

But a few days before her death, as if sensing her end was near, her mother had confessed, 'Your father never knew of your existence. I was still living with your grandparents and I left home as soon as I knew I was pregnant. He was married and if I'd told him I was expecting you he would have been put in a terrible position. So, as far as he was concerned, I just disappeared. I thought it best for all of us.' Her eyes had flooded with tears. 'I don't want you to think badly of him; I couldn't bear that. He was a fine man.'

Rosie hadn't believed that. She still didn't. She really would like to, but she couldn't. She was pretty sure her mother had been trying to put her lover in a better light just so her daughter wouldn't spend her life bearing a grudge against the man her poor mother had so obviously still loved.

Unconsciously, she put her hand to her breast. She could feel the pendant through the faded fabric of her T-shirt. Proof of her identity, she supposed, should she ever try to use it.

Her face went pale as she recalled how her mother had asked her to pass her the small tin box she'd found at the bottom of her underwear drawer and had opened it to reveal a dazzling starburst

of sapphires and diamonds on a heavy gold chain.

‘Your father gave it to me all those years ago, as a token of his love, so it’s very special. I want you to have it.’

‘Is it real?’ Rosie’s face had felt so tight she’d barely been able to get the words out, and her mother’s radiant, dewy-eyed smile had cancelled out her immediate and uncharitable thought that the glittering thing was just as much a tawdry sham as his love had been.

‘It’s very valuable, darling. So you must take great care of it. He told me it had been in his family for many years.’

Then you should have sold it, made life a bit easier for yourself—but Rosie had bitten the words back. She really couldn’t be so cruel when the wretched ‘love token’—or pay-off?—had meant so much to her mother.

Coming up against the dressing table, Rosie met her stormy eyes in the looking glass and vowed that if she ever got to meet her father she’d give the pendant right back to him. He could give it to his new wife, she thought furiously. She didn’t want the hateful thing!

Screwing her eyes shut, Rosie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The situation was really getting to her. She wasn’t a vindictive person; on the contrary Jean had always maintained that she was too trusting and anxious to please for her own good. So she would stop thinking nasty thoughts about the man her mother had loved, the man she was in no position to judge, and get on with what she’d come here to do.

Though precisely what that was she had no clear idea. Coming face to face with her father had been her objective; in his absence all she could do was explore the house that his family had inhabited for many generations and hope, somehow, to pick up some clues to his personality.

There were four bedrooms and a bathroom on the attic floor. Sharon had grumbled. She didn't see why they should be stuffed up there when there were loads of unoccupied grand bedrooms on the first floor. She fancied living in luxury for once in her life. 'I only took this poxy job to get some cash for when I move into my boyfriend's pad in town. I've had it up to here with being stuck in this village—it's a one-horse dump!'

Privately, Rosie thought that the rooms they'd been given were lovely. Full of character, with their sloping ceilings, uneven plaster and dipping floors and pretty sprigged curtains at the windows set high beneath the eaves. And from the little she'd seen of the village it was lovely, too, and she was looking forward to Sunday, her day off, when she could explore and find the cottage where her grandparents had lived all their married lives and see where her mother had been born and raised.

But she'd kept her opinions to herself because—short though their acquaintance had been—she'd quickly learned that when Sharon grumbled she wasn't to be argued with.

Picking her way down to the first floor, she stood for a while listening to the silence. She had the house to herself.

Sharon's boyfriend had picked her up as soon as they'd

finished supper. She'd been dressed in a purple mini skirt and a glittery black sweater, neither garment doing anything to disguise her bountiful lumpiness. Mrs Partridge, rising from the table to stack the dishwasher, had reminded her, 'I lock up at eleven and, no, you can't have a key, Sharon, so don't bother asking. If you're not back by then you'll be locked out.' To Rosie, when the other girl had swung out of the room with a defiant toss of her startlingly red curls, she'd added, 'Feel free to watch television and make yourself a hot drink if you want one. I'm off to my own quarters to put my feet up.'

And, in spite of the Spaniard's saying that he was here to oversee the mammoth spring cleaning exercise, Rosie hadn't clapped eyes on him since that encounter in his bedroom. From what she could gather, from Sharon's gossipy chattering and probing over the meals they'd shared with Mrs Partridge, Sebastian Garcia had had a call from the London head office of Troone and Garcia and had made a swift exit.

Which was just as well, Rosie thought, with a wry smile for the sheer immensity of her folly. He had just about knocked her for six at that initial, brief meeting and she wasn't here to embarrass herself by mooning over someone so completely unattainable and show herself up for the naive and foolish creature that she was by blushing and stammering whenever he was around.

So she had her father's unnervingly large, rambly and upper-crusty home to herself. It was the sort of place whose interiors she'd seen in the quality magazines she'd flicked through in the

dentist's waiting room. Her legs beginning to shake because she was feeling like a sneak thief all over again, she turned her back on the narrow stairs that led down to the kitchen regions and headed for the main polished oak staircase.

Creeping down, she had to remind herself very sternly that she wasn't doing anything wrong. She had a right to be here—well, a sort of right, surely? And all she wanted to do was soak up the atmosphere and see if she could find out from the books he read, family photographs, maybe, what kind of man her father really was.

The main hall was lit by a solitary table lamp and the glow from the dying fire, and just as she set her feet on the massive flagstones a grandfather clock chimed the hour of eight from a dim and shadowy corner and made her jump out of her skin.

She'd been about to scurry back to her attic room, and her hand shot up to steady her bumping heart. It was the shape of the pendant beneath her T-shirt that gave her the courage to go on. To stiffen her spine and cross the floor to open doors and flick on lights. Large rooms led to much smaller, tucked-away ones, the furniture shrouded against the depredations of the departed and unlamented decorators.

At last, descending two worn stone steps, she thrust open an ancient door of highly polished broad oak planks and found herself in what had to be Marcus Troone's work room. Her eyes widened as she took in the book-lined study with its low, heavily beamed ceiling. It had been brought into the twenty-

first century by the addition of a long custom-built desk which housed a computer system, fax machine, a bank of files and two telephones.

The book-filled shelves drew her. Beautifully bound classics—both ancient and modern—tomes devoted to viticulture, the poems of Wilfred Owen, masses of biographies, three yards worth of paperback whodunits and a whole tranche of gardening books. And, what she'd been looking for, right at the far end of one of the lower shelves: a bulky photograph album.

Her mouth going dry, Rosie carried it to the desk. Her hands shook as she opened it to a series of wedding photographs. Her father? A blond, craggily handsome young man with a beautiful dark-haired girl wearing a dream of a wedding dress, posing outside a small weathered stone church. Lots more—she flicked through the pages, met the smiling eyes of the dark-haired girl holding the reins of a pony, a small grinning boy on top. The same girl in a wheelchair, apparently directing operations while a middle-aged man was planting a tree. Could it be her grandfather? It was difficult to tell.

So far there were no more photographs of Marcus Troone: presumably he'd been behind the camera, she decided frustratedly. Until, right at the back of the album, a threesome standing in front of a huge greenhouse. Her grandfather, the stern features she remembered from her childhood relaxed and happy, her mother, a slender slip of a girl, clad in a checked shirt and old corduroy trousers, her blonde hair blowing in the breeze, her

smile radiant. And Marcus Troone—her father—standing at her side, smiling down at the vitally lovely young Molly Lambert. Her mother.

Rosie felt sick.

Her mother had looked so happy back then. She would have had no idea what the future held for her on that long-ago summer's day.

Hands shaking, her heart thumping, she closed the album and carried it back to where she'd found it. But putting it back proved a problem. It just wouldn't go!

Biting her lip, she got down on her hands and knees and pulled out a book that seemed to be obstructing progress. That last photograph had really upset her; the album seemed to be burning her unsteady hands. She wanted rid of it.

She dropped it and could have screamed her head off when a few loose pictures fluttered to the floor. She shouldn't have touched the wretched thing. She wished she hadn't!

Passing through the hall, Sebastian paused to throw more logs on the dying fire. He was tired and hungry. The place felt deserted. Madge would have retired to her rooms. He guessed he could stretch to making himself an omelette and wind down in front of the fire with a glass of wine. Or two.

His tense features began to relax just a little. Driving back had been a nightmare of roadworks and clogged motorways. He should have spent the night in town and now he wondered why he hadn't. At least he'd sorted out the head office panic over a

planning permission hiccup concerning the new hotel complex in Greenwich. And, barring more cries for help from a business manager who should have looked at things more logically instead of flapping, he should be able to get the Troone Manor show on the road.

Just one more chore—checking Marcus’s fax machine—then he could fix himself something to eat. Heading for his partner’s study, he wondered how the new recruits were settling in.

Sharon Hodges had quite a reputation in the village. Bone idle and no better than she should be, so the gossips said. Grinning wryly to himself, he decided she was either lying on her bed eating chocolates or dyeing her hair a new and startling colour and trying to decide which of her current boyfriends was most likely to come up to scratch, whisk her away to the bright lights and keep her in the manner to which she would like to become accustomed.

And the other one, Rosie Lambert. Hadn’t Madge mentioned that today was her birthday? Was she out celebrating with friends? A special boyfriend, maybe? From what he recalled from their brief meeting she was quite a looker. But vulnerable, too. Fragile.

The idea of some callow youth sniffing around her brought his brows down as he opened the door to his partner’s study. Then he held his breath just before his scowl fled and was replaced by a grin that threatened to split his face.

‘This is getting to be a habit.’

On her hands and knees, Rosie froze. She knew that voice. Her slender body was suffused with pleasure, it wriggled with sharply sweet sensations all over her. But, oh my goodness, what would he be thinking? That she had no business being in this room?

‘I’m sorry.’

She had to grit her teeth and force herself to her feet, clutching at one of the loose photographs she’d been scrabbling around to retrieve. Her face felt hot and she felt such a fool, especially when he gave her that slow, sexy smile and said, ‘Don’t be.’

He could get used to opening doors to be met by the sight of that curvy little backside, clad tonight in shape-hugging worn denim!

He smiled into her anxious eyes, hiding a stab of annoyance. ‘Surely you’re not still working?’

What was Madge thinking of? Granted, there was a lot of hard physical graft to get through here, but making this delicate little creature work overtime was way out of order and he’d make damn sure it didn’t happen again!

Butterflies were rampaging around in Rosie’s stomach and she couldn’t get her lungs to work properly. She’d tried to stop gawping at him but how could she when he was so gorgeous? The sharp grey business suit he was wearing did nothing to disguise the raw power of his magnificent physique and, try as she might, she couldn’t help wondering what would happen if he kissed her.

She’d probably go into a terminal swoon, she thought in dire agitation and managed, finally, to give him the answer he was

waiting for. ‘No. I knocked off ages ago. I was looking for something to read,’ she mumbled, uncomfortably aware that her face was bright scarlet. Lying to him made her feel horrible, but what choice did she have? She could hardly tell him the truth.

And she’d have to explain away the photograph she was holding. Bend the truth again. And the way those sultry, smoky eyes were pinned on her wasn’t helping any. She felt as if she were drowning in wicked sensation. Her throat strangely tight, she croaked out, ‘I was clumsy, I knocked that off the shelf—’ she gestured jerkily to the album on the floor ‘—and photographs fell out.’

‘No damage done.’

Sebastian’s dark brows met. Dio mio—why was she so nervous? She looked like a puppy waiting to be beaten for some minor misdemeanour! Was she accustomed to being chastised for the slightest accident? A powerful surge of anger tightened the muscles of his shoulders. He’d like to meet the brute who had done that to her!

Madre di Dio!—her soft, full mouth was trembling now! He made a conscious effort to stop frowning—it was obviously giving her the jitters—relax his shoulders and approach her slowly.

‘May I?’

Sebastian plucked the photograph from Rosie’s suddenly nerveless fingers and his gentle, velvety tone made a wave of startling heat wash right through her. Her breath coming in short

stabs, she tried to come to terms with the weird effect he had on her. It was a new phenomenon as far as she was concerned and one she could well do without, she decided grittily, as she felt her breasts lift beneath their thin cotton covering and crossed her arms over them to hide the embarrassing evidence.

His lips curved as he glanced at the image he held in his long fingers. 'This brings back memories—my aunt Lucia giving me my first riding lesson.'

Silvery eyes met hers, inviting her to share, and, desperately afraid that he would guess that she was helplessly attracted to him and laugh his socks off, she obliged and stared at the picture of the lovely young woman, the fat pony and the grinning little boy.

He would have been about six or seven, she thought moonily, then made herself snap out of it and tried to sound borderline intelligent as she hazarded, 'Your aunt was Sir Marcus's wife?'

'She was.' A flicker of sadness darkened those sultry eyes as he bent and slotted the loose photographs back in the album. 'Lucia was a truly beautiful person, both inside and out. But unlucky. Shortly after that snapshot was taken she was diagnosed with MS. It progressed rapidly. The unfairness of it used to make me angry. Still does, whenever I think about what her life became.'

Watching him replace the album in its original position, Rosie felt decidedly queasy. He would be absolutely furious if he ever discovered that his godfather and present business partner had betrayed the aunt he had so clearly idolised and that she, the humble cleaning lady, was the unfortunate by-product of that

long ago affair!

She lowered her eyes in humiliation. She knew she ought to scrub her plans for making herself known to her father before any real damage was done, and yet part of her stubbornly yearned to find out if Sir Marcus really had loved her mother, to discover whether she could trust him or if she should despise him. She couldn't help wanting to be accepted, to have someone she could call family.

'You OK?' Sebastian swept her drooping figure with narrowing eyes. He held out the book she had obviously selected, leaving it leaning against the lower shelf when she'd dislodged the album. British Military Swords seemed a strange choice for such a scrap of a kid. 'You're very pale.'

'I'm fine,' she mumbled, mortified, clutching the book to her heaving breasts, hoping against hope that he hadn't noted the title and marvelled at her supposed choice of reading matter and wouldn't start to ask awkward questions, like how long had she been interested in the subject.

She looked far from 'fine', Sebastian decided. And she wasn't a scrap of a kid, either. She was twenty years old today, he remembered, and said warmly, 'Happy birthday, Rosie.'

The commonplace salutation evoked a response way out of proportion to its significance. But it had been worth it to see those drowning sapphire eyes dance as they met his, and her sudden radiant smile was so lovely it took his breath away.

'How did you know? No one else does.' It was the first birthday

greeting she'd had all day, and coming from him it was very special, making up for the fact that she'd not had a card from Jean, who had never—ever since she'd been little and shopping at the mini-market with her mother and Jean had told her to choose from the exciting selection of sweets on offer—forgotten to mark the day.

'Madge happened to mention it,' Sebastian offered gruffly, his veiled eyes lingering on the flush of wild rose colour that deepened the clear deep blue of her fantastic eyes. In his experience, such genuine pleasure was a rarity in the female of the species. It would take more than a birthday greeting to get a reaction like that from the female sophisticates who moved in his circle—would take something in the order of a suite of diamond jewellery or a new car!

He felt strangely humble and not a little proprietorial as he commanded a touch thickly, 'Share a bottle of wine with me to mark the occasion.'

Now where had that come from? He was as surprised as Rosie looked. After the twenty-four hours of aggravation and frustration he'd just had he'd wanted nothing more than a simple meal and the chance to relax.

Her soft mouth had dropped open. She had to clamp it shut and clear her throat before she could say a single thing. She stared at his knock-'em-dead features, the taut bones beneath the smooth bronzed skin and gulped shakily, 'No, thanks. There's no need, honestly.'

The invitation had been the very last thing she'd expected and she knew he'd only asked because he felt sorry for her, the birthday girl with no party to go to.

He probably gave to every beggar he came across and rescued stray cats and dogs—and, as far as she was concerned, spending time with him, drinking wine with him, would be disastrous. She'd only go and give herself away and he'd end up knowing what up to now he couldn't even suspect—that she fancied him rotten!

If he'd wanted a let-out he'd been handed one on a plate. But, perversely, he wasn't going to take it. All traces of tiredness had fled. Obviously her birthday had gone unnoticed, Sebastian thought with a stab of annoyance. Remedying that would be his good deed for the day, he decided, finding he rather like the idea.

'You'd be doing me a favour, Rosie. The last twenty-four hours have been hectic. I want to unwind over a glass of wine and I don't care to drink alone.'

That had got her, he thought on a surge of satisfaction as he saw her brilliant eyes widen with sympathy, her delicate brows peak. Find the weak spot and go for it was a rule that worked well both in business and personal relationships. He knew little about Rosie Lambert, but his gut instincts told him she had a soft, sympathetic nature and would always answer a cry for help.

He pressed home his advantage. 'Please?'

That dark drawl, the honeyed Spanish accent, sent quivers of something fiery racing down her spine, making her gasp. She met

the smoky sultriness of those black-fringed eyes and her mouth ran dry. At least his invitation hadn't sprung from pity, he was asking a favour, and that gave her the confidence to push out croakily, 'OK, if that's what you want.'

'Gracias.'

His smile made her head spin, and when he put a casual arm around her shoulders and led her from the room it was all she could do to stay upright. The touch of his hand through the thin fabric of her T-shirt scorched her skin right through to the bone and the heat of her body's instinctive and immediate response curled and tightened low down in her pelvis.

Get a grip! she snarled silently at herself as she sternly resisted the pressing temptation to sag against him, lay her head against that wide chest, slip a hand beneath that beautifully tailored jacket and feel the warmth of his body beneath the crisp fabric of his shirt.

So, OK, Sebastian Garcia was lethally attractive, and without even trying he could make things happen to her body that had never happened before, but he wouldn't look twice at the likes of her, she reasoned as he disappeared to fetch the promised wine after guiding her to one of the squashy sofas in front of the glowing hall fire.

She sat gingerly in one corner and tucked the book under a cushion out of sight. She'd have to replace it in the morning. Bedtime reading—as if! He must think she was pretty strange!

Dismissing it from her mind, she tried to relax. She'd drink

one small glass of wine, toss a few aimless remarks in his direction and keep her eyes firmly fixed on anything other than him. Looking at all that masculine perfection would be her downfall. She would never survive the humiliation if he guessed she was hopelessly attracted to him.

He was taking much longer than she'd expected and with every minute Rosie got more uptight. Had he got sidetracked, forgotten all about her? Unlike him, she was easy to forget, she thought on a sickening surge of shame. She felt a real fool, sitting here like a lemon, and was about to slink off to bed when he re-entered the hall.

Her heart jumped and she forgot to breathe as he put two glasses and an opened wine bottle on a side table, then turned to her. In the dim light his smoky eyes mesmerised her. She could drown in those silvery depths, she thought helplessly, forgetting her earlier clear-headed decision not to look at him if at all possible.

Trouble was, her head was a total muddle when he was around.

He took something from the tray and walked towards her with the indolent grace that made her toes curl in her scuffed old plimsolls.

'For you.' Bending slightly from the waist, one of his hands uncurled her bunched together fist while the other deposited a single, perfect white camellia, slightly tinged with pale lemon colour at the ruffled centre, in the palm of her small hand.

A corner of his mouth curled wryly. 'I stole it from Marcus's

greenhouse—though I'm sure he wouldn't mind. Not much of a birthday gift, ciertamente, but perhaps it will make you smile?

Sebastian straightened abruptly. Madre di Dio! She would think he was shooting a line! The impulse that had sent him to cut that bloom now seemed ridiculous.

Until he had what he'd unconsciously known he'd been missing. That smile. And then he knew that the impulse hadn't been ridiculous at all.

Her eyes were on the blossom she held cupped in the curve of her hands, thick sweeping lashes hiding her expression, her silky blonde hair falling forward, a stray tendril kissing the petal-soft skin of her cheek. And then it began. A slight trembling of those luscious lips, an upward curve and then that radiant, brilliant smile her fathomless eyes winging towards his, deepest purest blue sparkling with dancing lights.

'It's perfect,' she breathed, and then, propelled by something far stronger than his formidable will, he bent towards her again, dipped his dark head, and kissed her.

CHAPTER THREE

ROSIE'S enticing lips were even softer and sweeter than he could have imagined they would be in his wildest dreams. Cool and still for that first split second—a challenge to his male ego. Then warm, warmer, exploding into an earth-shattering response.

As Sebastian's body leapt with a charge of forceful passion he felt an answering deep shudder of pleasure pulse through her slight frame and he placed his hands on her shoulders to steady her, or himself—he wasn't sure which—as a wave of atavistic male lust gripped and tightened every muscle in his own body.

As her lips parted, welcoming his entry, his kiss deepened and his mindless hands slid down to find her breasts. And Dio mio! they were so very beautiful. Small, pertly rounded, peaking nipples, blatantly aroused—perfect—

Her husky mew of drowning pleasure finally penetrated the red mist of lust that had fogged his brain. He went still, turned to stone as her sweet mouth clung, her small hands rising, fingers tangling in his hair, inviting, tormenting.

He dragged in a harsh breath. What in the name of all that was sacred did he think he was doing?

With a ragged inner groan for his own crass stupidity, he jerked upright, away from her, away from a deeper temptation than he had ever known, struggling to regain some semblance of

his shattered self-control.

His heart crashing around against his ribs, he staunchly ignored the sudden, bewildered, lost look in her wide eyes, and turned away to hide the evidence of his aching sex.

‘Wine,’ he said, his voice roughened and raw. Dio! It had been a near disaster. A few more seconds and he’d have been making wild love to her right there on the sofa, and she would have been a push-over. Little Rosie Lambert deserved better than that!

His hand shook as he poured wine into two glasses. For the first time in his life he despised himself. It was a vile sensation! He’d been without a woman for so long he was turning into an animal!

Alcohol wasn’t the best idea in the world, not in his inflamed state. But if he removed himself from her presence, as common sense dictated he should, she would know that what had happened back there had affected him catastrophically.

He had to act as though that kiss hadn’t meant a thing to either of them. He wouldn’t even apologise and suggest it was best forgotten. Just act as though it had been neither here nor there. Transmit the message that it had been just one of those things, not worth a mention.

Rosie was in shock. Her body was threatening to go up in flames. Sensations she hadn’t known existed were bombarding her so that she didn’t know whether she was on her head or her heels.

Why had he kissed her?

Why had he stopped?

Didn't he know that she hadn't wanted him to stop?

That kiss had been magic, heaven and excitingly scary all rolled into one and she'd wanted it to happen ever since she'd first clapped eyes on him! Didn't he know that?

Of course he did, the cool voice of rapidly returning sanity tartly informed her. He'd only meant to give her a brotherly birthday peck.

Because he'd been sorry for her?

And what had she done? Practically eaten him alive, begging for something he would never want to give! Then, to make matters even worse, his hands had sort of slipped down off her shoulders and come into contact with breasts that were still straining avidly against her top.

And while she'd gone all delirious, and so much out of her head she would have done anything he wanted her to do, he had jumped away just as if he'd had a very nasty shock and she'd never felt so humiliated and ridiculous in the whole of her life!

A solitary tear slipped down the side of her face and dripped on to the mangled petals of the camellia she'd scrunched up in an excess of sexual excitement. She scrubbed her damp cheek with the back of her hand and tried to smooth out the tattered blossom. She would probably press it and keep it for ever; she was daft enough, she thought despairingly.

Sebastian had turned. He held two glasses of wine. He looked as cool as a cucumber, she noted numbly. She couldn't bear it if

he joked about her shameless behaviour or looked wary, as if he thought she was slightly insane and might jump on him and start tearing his clothes off!

But his gorgeous features were bland—just a small polite smile playing around the sexy mouth that had so recently played havoc with every last one of her senses. He handed her a glass and took his own to the other end of the sofa and angled himself into the corner, his endless legs outstretched, casually crossed at the ankles, as far away from her as he could get without looking as if he were trying to avoid contact.

‘You could have invited family or friends over this evening to help you celebrate your birthday, Rosie,’ he remarked carefully, hoping his voice didn’t give his dark thoughts away, give her the least intimation that he burned to kiss her again, run his hands through that tangled silky hair, explore every delicious inch of her lovely body, possess her.

He shifted uncomfortably, trying to blank the ache of sex from his mind and body, and said as levelly as he could manage, ‘You’re entitled to have visitors at any time when you’re not working; I hope you know that. Neither Madge nor I would want you to feel imprisoned while you’re working here.’

Relief shuddered through Rosie. Thank heavens he wasn’t going to mention her awful behaviour. He was back in kind-employer mode and she couldn’t regret that, not if she wanted to have some pride left.

So she cleared her throat and floundered for the cool part

she knew she was expected to play. ‘Thank you. But I don’t have anyone to invite.’ And could have bitten her tongue out when she saw his dark brows peak in what looked embarrassingly like sympathy. She had only been telling the truth, but how humiliating if he thought she was angling for his pity!

For something to do—something that didn’t involve scurrying up to her room to hide her head under the pillow—she took a healthy gulp of the wine in her glass. It wasn’t the cheap stuff, like the bottles she and Mum had shared on their birthdays because they couldn’t afford anything halfway decent. It slipped down her throat like the softest of dark velvet.

Sebastian expelled his breath slowly. ‘No one? Forgive me—Madge mentioned that you’d recently lost your mother—but what about your father, brothers, sisters?’

Skirting around the touchy subject of her father, Rosie said, ‘No siblings. There was only ever Mum and me.’ And took another long swallow of wine to disguise the sudden wobbling of her mouth.

Pretending to be cool and sophisticated was fine when it came to acting as if that kiss had been nothing special, merely the sort of thing that adults indulged in when there was nothing better to do. It was certainly salvaging her pride, but, my, was it difficult.

Leaning forward, his untouched glass of wine held loosely between his hands, Sebastian asked, ‘What about your boyfriend?’ and wondered why he had phrased the question so harshly. Why he’d phrased it at all, come to that.

It was none of his business but he'd bet his life on her having a string of them. Despite her ingenuous big blue eyes, the aura of vulnerability that had previously made his under-used protective genes work overtime, she was no novice when it came to sex. She'd been well and truly turned on a short while ago, more than willing.

He could have taken her just like that!

'I don't have a boyfriend.' Rosie lowered her eyes. His were glittering at her, as if she'd done something wrong. But he was only trying to make conversation and being nice about her having visitors. So why was she feeling so jumpy and on edge when it was patently obvious by now that he was being a gentleman and wasn't going to shame her by mentioning the way she'd kissed him as if she were a sex-mad trollop?

Meaning she was between men? Sebastian's mouth tightened. He wouldn't ask. It wasn't of the slightest importance. She was blushing again, he noted, her long thick lashes veiling her eyes, her full lips slightly parted. Kissable.

'You mean you haven't a man in your life at the moment?' He heard the words slip out and despaired of himself. Why couldn't he leave the subject alone? He was behaving totally out of character and didn't know why.

Rosie drained the last of her wine in sheer desperation. Why the inquisition? He was looking incredibly macho and domineering right now, his powerfully virile body really tense. And why didn't he just keep quiet and so give her the opportunity

to say goodnight, thanks for the wine, and take herself off to her room?

He couldn't be interested in the state of her love life. Could he? No, of course not.

If this was a soppy romantic film he would be asking because he wanted to know if the coast was clear for him to start up a relationship with her. But real life wasn't like that and she wasn't daft enough to think it was. Wealthy, handsome, hard-headed businessmen didn't have relationships with nobodies.

Metaphorically planting her feet firmly back on the ground, she told herself that as he was standing in for her absent employer he would naturally want to vet her thoroughly.

A horrible thought struck her and made her feel physically ill. He had doubtlessly decided that, after her lustful earlier display, she made a habit of inviting all and sundry into her bed and he might have to face the distasteful experience of finding a string of rampaging males queuing up outside!

The ridiculous scenario made her feel hysterical. She pulled in a steadying breath. She could at least put his mind at rest on that score!

'I have never had a boyfriend.' Red flags of embarrassment flamed over her face. Girls at school had teased her mercilessly because, unlike them, she'd never had loads of boyfriends and experimented with sex. Her mother had vetoed out of school friendships with the rough crowd who lived on their estate. Besides, she hadn't been interested. She had the first-hand

knowledge of what a casual fling had done to her mother.

Angry regret at that sorry fact tightened her voice as she scrambled to her feet and informed him, 'I left school to look after my mother. She was ill. Dying. Inoperable cancer. Towards the end she could have gone to a hospice, but she didn't want that. Neither did I. I nursed her. It didn't leave any time for socialising. So don't worry.' She huffed out a bitterly angry breath and put him straight. 'I'm not about to hang a red light outside Sir Marcus's front door!'

Placing her empty glass on the tray beside the half empty bottle with an angry little click, she bade Sebastian a cool goodnight and headed off up the stairs. She had never felt quite this assertive before in her entire life, or so cross. She placed her feet firmly on the treads and lifted her chin in the air. Right at this moment, she almost hated the gorgeous Sebastian Garcia!

In fact, when she really thought about it, she was damn sure she did!

Dismissed and firmly put in his place! Sebastian's mouth slanted wryly. Just like that!

A totally new experience and he rather liked the challenge it presented. Always provided he wanted to take it up, of course. Which he didn't. His eyes narrowed, he watched Rosie Lambert mount the broad staircase.

Never had a boyfriend? Did he really believe that? Initially, he'd been struck by her aura of naivety, his instinct to protect. He'd have believed anything she chose to tell him. But

her shattering response when his lips had brushed hers, the immediate arousal of her body, had told him she'd been down that road many times before.

Not that he'd seen it that way, not to begin with. He'd been fuddled by lust himself and had felt a real heel for getting so close and intimate in the first place. Only when his mind had cleared had he recognised the signals she'd been sending out. He could have taken her there and then and she would have encouraged him.

A dewy-eyed innocent? With instinctive male appreciation he watched the sway of her seductively rounded bottom as she neared the top of the stairs, and thought not.

Definitely not.

A girl that lovely would have had males swarming round her since she reached puberty.

He drank his wine and did his best to relax back on the sofa. Lying, or not, what did it matter? He'd be back in Spain in a couple of weeks and Rosie would be out of his life. Not that she was actually in it, he reminded himself forcibly. She was simply a temporary member of staff. Different from the women he normally mixed with and therefore intriguing in an odd sort of way. And sexy with it.

Shooting to his feet, he gave himself a refill and shrugged out of his suit jacket, removed his tie and opened the top two buttons of his shirt. He felt strangely overheated.

He had to concentrate on what was really important, put Rosie

Lambert right out of his mind. Opening Marcus's eyes to the type of woman Terrina really was before he brought her back to England as his future wife was his immediate priority. Once the greedy little gold-digger was here at Troone Manor, with her feet under the table, so to speak, and an engagement ring on her finger, there would be no getting rid of her. It was up to him to see that things didn't get that far.

Turning back to the sofa, wine glass in hand, he glimpsed a corner of the book Rosie must have stuffed underneath the cushion and swore softly. Just as he was getting her out of his head she had jumped right back in there again!

In her rush to pull him down a peg she had forgotten her bedtime reading matter. His brows peaking again at her strange choice, he came to a snap decision. He would take it up to her. She'd only been gone a few minutes, not long enough to already be in bed. It would give him the opportunity to hand it over with some polite pleasantries, letting her know there were no feelings—hard or otherwise—over the happenings of this evening and thereby close the chapter completely.

Rosie had had the quickest shower on record. She felt all churned up as she pattered barefooted back to her bedroom, tying the sash of her old cotton robe around her overheated body.

Her clothes were still in an untidy heap on the floor, just as she'd left them. She and Sharon had been expressly instructed to take their daily washing down to the laundry room every evening, where Mrs Partridge would deal with them first thing in the

morning and avoid a backlog.

Rosie kicked them under the bed. She was venturing nowhere. She couldn't run the risk of bumping into Sebastian again. Not this evening. Not ever, if she could somehow avoid it.

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