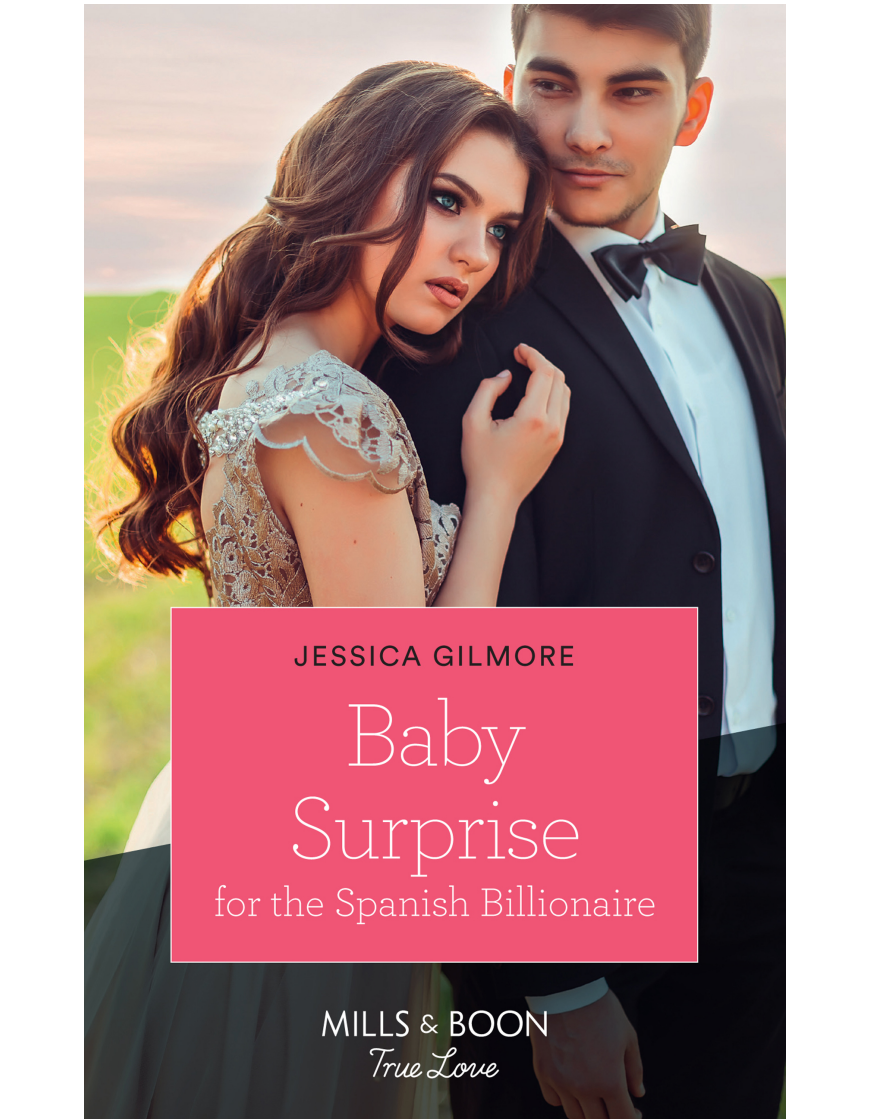


A romantic couple is featured in a formal setting. The woman, with long, wavy brown hair and striking blue eyes, is wearing an elegant, off-the-shoulder lace dress. She is leaning her head against the man's chest. The man, with short dark hair and a light beard, is wearing a black tuxedo with a white shirt and a black bow tie. They are standing outdoors in a grassy field under a soft, golden sunset sky. The overall mood is intimate and romantic.

JESSICA GILMORE

Baby
Surprise
for the Spanish Billionaire

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Jessica Gilmore
Baby Surprise For The
Spanish Billionaire

Аннотация

It started with an island romance.....and led to one very surprising consequence!More at home with a book than on the beach, Dr Anna Gray has stepped out of her comfort zone to help her mother prepare her Wedding Island resort for its first event. But when delicious Leo di Marquez sails to La Isla Marina Anna is tempted into dropping her guard, one kiss at a time—and with unexpected consequences!

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A former au pair, bookseller, marketing manager and seafront trader, **JESSICA GILMORE** now works for an environmental charity in York, England. Married with one daughter, one fluffy dog and two dog-loathing cats, she spends her time avoiding housework and can usually be found with her nose in a book. Jessica writes emotional romance with a hint of humour, a splash of sunshine and a great deal of delicious food—and equally delicious heroes!

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Jessica Gilmore

MILLS & BOON

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ISBN: 978-1-474-07734-7

BABY SURPRISE FOR THE SPANISH BILLIONAIRE

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Published in Great Britain 2018

by Mills & Boon, an imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* 1

London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF

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For Katy!

That was fun! Let's do it again some time...

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Extract

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

ANNA GRAY CLASPED her coffee cup in both hands, stepped gingerly out onto the creaking veranda and stared around in dismay. The island resort had looked charmingly ramshackle in the purple of twilight when she'd first arrived last night, but daylight revealed a very different picture. The low, white bungalows dotted around, each in its own private grove, should have made a beautiful scene, but even the mellow sun of an early May morning couldn't paint La Isla Marina in flattering colours.

From her vantage point Anna could see all around right

to the very tip of the island. The administrative buildings, including her mother's living quarters, were here at the palatial villa that marked the island's centre point, the swimming pools, tennis courts and relaxation areas all interspersed amongst the bungalows. If she stood on her tiptoes, Anna could just see the deep blue of the sea and the friendly waving of the palms that marked the beach boundaries. It was all so very nearly idyllic.

Very nearly... Until she looked a little closer and saw the reality behind the charm; the paint peeling off the whitewashed bungalows, the green shutters battered and hanging at odd angles. La Isla Marina was known for its lush greenery and profusion of flowers, but right now it resembled a jungle, not an upmarket resort. What had happened? True, everything had been a little faded when she was last here for her abuelo's funeral three years ago, but the hotel had still been recognisable as the idyllic magical place where she had run free every childhood summer.

The old familiar guilt prickled through her. She knew how disorganised her mother was, she should have foreseen this, not needed a tearful phone call begging her to come and help out.

The guilt intensified. It wasn't the unusual panic in her mother's voice that had persuaded her, it was Anna's own need for an escape, for time to think. If she hadn't been nearing crisis point would she have stayed in Oxford and allowed her mother to struggle on alone? She knew the answer to that. Every time they spoke her mother asked when she'd have time to come and visit, and Anna always found an excuse to put her off. Visiting

La Isla Marina knowing neither grandparent would be there to greet her had been too hard to contemplate—and it wasn't as if she and Sancia were close. Nor, she knew, did Sancia have any intention of making an effort to come and visit Anna.

No, she'd responded to her mother's pleas for her own selfish reasons, thinking a few weeks of relaxing in the sun, away from the pressures of Oxford, were just what she needed. Her heart sank as she looked around at the wild and untamed bushes. Relaxing was the last thing she was going to be able to do.

'Good morning, querida, how did you sleep?'

Anna turned at the sound of her mother's voice. 'Great, thanks. I was tired after my journey.' She eyed her mother critically, noting the extra grey threading through Sancia Garcia's thick dark mane, the lines around her mother's eyes, lines which hadn't been there three years before. 'How are you?'

'Everything is wonderful.' Anna stiffened as her mother flung her arms around her, pulling her in close. 'I'm glad you're here, querida. It's been too long.'

'Yes, well...' Stepping back, Anna attempted to extract both herself and her miraculously unspilt coffee. 'I've been busy, you know. With the book and teaching... What's happened, Mama?' 'Happened?'

Anna bit down on her irritation as her mother looked vaguely around the resort. This was how Sancia Garcia operated, floating through the world in a time and space of her own. She'd never seen why her daughters needed to be at school on time, or

even why they needed to attend school if the sun was shining, why dinner should be planned and at a set time, the point of timetables. Anna hadn't yet turned ten when she realised that if they were to be like other families she needed to take charge, to be responsible for both herself and her sister, Rosa. Her chest tightened. Nothing had changed; she was a fool to hope it ever would.

Sancia had even managed to separate from her husband in such a slow, dreamy way it almost seemed unintentional. And she never panicked, which was why her call for help was so out of character. Why Anna had booked the next flight over, leaving her father, her responsibilities, her teaching behind in Oxford. Not that Sancia seemed even slightly stressed now. Anna's grip tightened even more, the heat from the cup almost scalding her; no doubt as soon as Anna had shown up Sancia had thankfully abdicated all responsibility to her once again. 'To the hotel, Mama. It doesn't look like there's been any upkeep at all for goodness knows how long. How did it get to this stage?'

Sancia shrugged. 'You know Pedro retired when your abuelo died, then Bonita retired also and they both ran this place like clockwork. It's been hard to get staff to replace them, people who care, who stay. And everything happens at once, querida, one light breaks then another, then a toilet then the swimming pool filters and I just can't keep on top of it all.'

'No wonder bookings are down.' The real wonder was that anyone had booked to stay here at all. 'Why didn't you ask for

help before?’

‘You’re so busy, you have your own life, Anna, as does your sister. I didn’t want to worry you. I knew something would turn up and it has. This wedding will fix everything.’ Her mother clasped her hands. ‘The money, the publicity! The glamour! We can restore La Isla Marina to the way it was when I was young, when your grandparents first built the resort.’

The wedding. The magical ingredient on which her mother was banking all her hopes. The wedding she had agreed to host in exactly one month’s time despite the island not being anywhere near ready. It would be bad enough, Anna thought, if this were any normal wedding. Only her mother would blithely take on the exclusive wedding of a supermodel and her millionaire fiancé. These people looked down on five-star luxury, and right now the island would barely scrape two stars.

‘We have a lot of work to do before then. No one is going to want to have their dream wedding here, especially not some Internet sensation who posts every detail of their life online.’ Anna looked behind her, peering through the half-opened door that led into the office. A career spent researching in libraries, a life of compiling footnotes and organising sources meant Anna had some pretty kickass admin skills. Her mother most likely needed budgets, accounting, marketing and day-to-day working rotas as soon as possible and Anna was just the girl to sort that out for her.

Of course there was the little question of fifty-two bungalows

needing a lick of paint, a damn good clean and some DIY. Hopefully there was no need for Anna to get her hands dirty; DIY was not her forte. Luckily her sister was handy with a toolkit. ‘When is Rosa getting here?’ Anna’s stomach clenched apprehensively as she waited for her mother to reply. She hadn’t seen her sister in several years either, only in her case there weren’t any weekly phone calls, not even the odd tag on social media. If Sancia had mentioned earlier that she had also begged Rosa to come and help, would Anna have agreed to come too? The truth was she had no idea. Three years was a long time, but she hadn’t forgotten a single one of the bitter words she and her sister had exchanged back then. She wasn’t eager for a repeat performance.

‘As soon as she can. She’s on an important assignment, you know. She said she wouldn’t be able to get here in the next two weeks but she’ll do her best to get here as soon as possible after that.’

Anna compressed her lips. Of course, whatever Rosa chose to do was important as far as their mother was concerned. She was always far more impressed by Rosa’s unconventional approach to life than by Anna’s achievements and qualifications. At twenty-eight she should be too old to be hurt by her mother’s lack of interest in all Anna had worked so hard for. But Anna hadn’t been able to help noticing that her mother’s apartment was filled with framed copies of Rosa’s photos—and she hadn’t seen one copy of her book anywhere.

‘Two weeks?’ Anna looked back over the half of the resort visible from the terrace and swallowed. There was no way they would be able to wait two weeks before starting the practical work. Which meant, unfamiliar as she was with a paintbrush, Anna had little choice. She was going to need to learn—and fast.

* * *

‘First things first,’ Anna muttered. With two cups more of her mother’s excellent coffee buzzing through her veins, she was almost raring to go. First they needed a list. Lists. Lists of repairs, lists of things they needed to make the bungalows suitable for a supermodel’s wedding guests, lists of everything that needed repairing. Which meant inspecting every bungalow, every path, every deckchair and table, the beach bars, the tennis courts... She needed another list of all the lists she needed to make.

She left Sancia in the kitchen checking all the crockery for chips, dents and suspicious stains, glad of the solitude after spending a whole morning alone with her mother for the first time in more years than Anna could remember. The hotel used to be so vibrant; filled with her grandparents, their long-time staff, visitors and guests. Now it was a ghost of its old self, just one cleaner, one groundsman and a cook in residence, a couple of maids journeying over from the mainland. No guests at all. Anna suppressed a shiver. It was too quiet. Maybe she would head over to the mainland today after all, even if she only went to the small village just a few hundred metres away across the narrow strip of sea to have lunch.

The island wasn't very big, less than a mile from one end to the next, and it didn't take Anna long to reach the sheltered beach overlooking the mainland. Palms fringed the delicate yellow sand and Anna paused, taking in a deep breath, tasting the salt of sea, the lemon wafting over from the citrus trees. The sea was so blue it almost hurt, a deep turquoise that tugged at her, enticing her closer and closer. She shucked off her shoes, stepping onto the soft sand, wiggling her toes into the warm grains. When had she last been barefooted outside? Holding out her arms, she closed her eyes, feeling the sun penetrating every atom, every cell, warming her straight to her bones. The dark hair and olive skin she had inherited from her mother never really felt warm enough in Oxford; they craved this contact with the Mediterranean sun, even an early May sun better than none.

She took another deep breath, her bones aching as they absorbed the longed-for heat, inhaling the scents that always conjured up the island. For the first time in a long while she felt as if she was home.

She jumped, pulled back to the job at hand as the sound of a vacuum cleaner buzzed through the air. She wasn't on holiday, she was here to help her mother—and more importantly she was here to forget her troubles. A month away from her classes, from her research, from expectations, might give her overtired mind the reboot it so desperately needed.

Anna pulled out her notebook. She might as well start off by checking the seaworthiness of the boats. The jetty was in

the next cove along, situated by the natural rock harbour, which separated the gentle, sheltered mainland-facing beaches from the more rugged sea-facing ones. The wide wooden jetty housed all the small kayaks and rowing boats kept for guests who wanted to venture out in the safe strip of sea.

Pushing her refreshed feet back into her pumps, Anna followed the narrow path as it wound round the corner and past the trees until, pushing her way through a particularly overgrown fern, she emerged, blinking, onto the boardwalk, her hair falling over her eyes.

What is that? She skidded to a stop, staring at the jetty in disbelief. In addition to several kayaks pulled high onto the pebbly beach and the boats moored tightly to the wooden posts, a white and chrome boat sat proudly in the deeper water. It was large enough to be an ocean-going boat, but this was no practical craft. Every gleaming rail, every white sail, every fitting she could see screamed ‘rich man’s toy’ at her.

An equally gleaming dinghy was tied onto the jetty, a clear sign that someone had come ashore.

The island was private property, but occasionally day-trippers or passing boats did stop—and if they had money to spend were usually welcome. Anna looked around. She hadn’t seen anyone on the main path. ‘Hola!’ she called. ‘Hello. Can I help you?’

No answer.

She hesitated. The sign on the jetty clearly instructed visitors—in six different languages—to head straight along the main

path to Reception. Not that there was anyone actually on Reception...

‘Dammit, as if I don’t have enough to do.’ What was her mother thinking? How could she possibly think a staff of four enough to get the island into shape for the season, let alone prepare for the wedding of the year? Sancia’s airy assurances that she had enough seasonal staff ready to start soon rang hollow. They should be here by now, painting, cleaning and making sure the island was in tip-top condition.

Swivelling, Anna looked around, sucking in her breath as she saw a tall, broad figure casually strolling around the nearest bungalow, peering in through the shutters as if he had every right to be there. She thrust her shoulders back, indignation filling her. The signs were quite clear—this was private property. Without stopping to think twice she marched over to the bungalow by the straightest possible route, pushing her way through the overgrown trees and shrubs, barely noticing the branches scratching her skin.

‘Excuse me.’ Her Spanish completely escaped her as she reached hailing distance of the bungalow. ‘What on earth do you think you’re doing?’

Indignation had carried her within touching distance before common sense reasserted itself and she stopped abruptly, catching her breath as she took in the intruder. This was no overentitled, overweight businessman out for a gentle sail. This was a pirate. Over six feet of muscled pirate. There wasn’t an

inch of fat—no, not a centimetre of fat—on him; his bare torso, exposed by his open white shirt, could have served as the model for Michelangelo's David. His dark hair was cropped short, his even darker eyes raking her up and down with an arrogance that made her tremble with rage.

Rage and awareness of just how grubby she was, no make-up, a crumpled old T-shirt, hair bundled hastily up. She resisted the urge to straighten her top, to shake out her hair and did her best to ignore the zing that shot straight through her traitorous body as his gaze travelled over her.

'Doing? I'm wondering if this is a hotel or a film set for a disaster movie,' he replied in heavily accented English.

'We haven't finished preparing for the opening of the season yet,' she said as loftily as she could, the heat mounting in her cheeks at the contempt in the dark depths of his eyes.

'Finished? You haven't even started. I don't know what kind of scam you're running here, señorita, but my sister will not be part of it.'

'Your sister?'

'Rest assured she will find somewhere else for her wedding.' He turned, his business clearly done, setting off along the overgrown path leading back to the jetty.

Anna's brain tried to unscramble the words. The big wedding, the model, the event that had sent her mother into such a spin she had summoned both her daughters to her side, the event her mother was counting on to restore the hotel's fortunes. The mess

the island was in might be down to her mother's mismanagement, but how could Anna let the idyllic playground of her childhood, her beloved grandparents' legacy, fade away? Whoever this man was she had to try and persuade him not to give up on the island. 'You're the bride's brother?'

He barely paused. 'Sí.'

Casting a look around for help and coming up blank, Anna realised with a sinking heart that it was up to her to persuade him not to tell his sister to cancel the booking. Breaking into a light jog, she followed him up the path, breathlessly braking as she reached his side. 'Look, señor, I know the island is in a bit of a state, but, I promise you, it will be perfect for your sister's wedding.'

Halting, he turned a scathing look on her. 'How? You have an army of elves?'

'No. No army.' How did one get an army of elves? Maybe some could write her book for her while they were here. 'We're a little behind, I admit, but I always meet my deadlines, señor, and this is no different. Give us the opportunity and I promise your sister will have the wedding of her dreams.'

Her words echoed round her head. 'I always meet my deadlines', her stomach lurching with the same sickening jolt it always gave when she thought about her agent's increasingly urgent emails. But she held her head high and met his thoughtful gaze, that same unwanted zing zipping through her body as his attention focussed on her. 'Please,' she said again, not too proud

to beg, holding her breath while she waited for him to reply. ‘Just give me a chance to prove it to you.’

* * *

Leo stared at the tall woman as she stood imploringly opposite him, hands clasped before her. He’d been surprised when she’d spoken to him in English, her accent so clear cut she could only be a native of that damp island. With her thick mass of dark hair and clear olive skin she looked like some kind of mythological Mediterranean nymph, her eyes, fringed with long dark lashes, the colour of the sea, her lips the pink of a summer sunset.

‘Are you the owner?’ Not that it made any difference. He needed to get back to the boat, phone Valentina and warn her this venue was a no go.

It wasn’t as if his half-sister had no other choices for her wedding. Her fiancé’s mother had offered the couple her Victorian house on Martha’s Vineyard, but his sister had nixed that suggestion in no uncertain terms. ‘She wants to make the wedding all preppy and tasteful,’ she’d complained, scorn in her voice. Valentina’s brand was all about exuberance and she wanted to make sure her wedding reflected that—and what Valentina wanted she usually got. That determination had propelled her from part-time model and socialite to online queen and supermodel. Her willingness to share every instant of her life, complete with the perfect filter and hashtag, was partly what had elevated her above all the other pretty-girl wannabes, but it was hard work and a cool business brain that had turned her into

a global brand.

Leo didn't understand how Valentina could bear to live her life through millions of screens, but he didn't have to. All he wanted was for her to be happy, to make up for her childhood, for the neglect from his side of her family. Which was why, after he'd heard that a fire had destroyed her previous choice of wedding venue, he offered to head to La Isla Marina and check out why they could accommodate a lavish wedding at such short notice.

It had taken approximately five seconds to reach an answer. The island was completely unsuitable—and yet here he still was. Gaze still fixed on the sea nymph, feet still fixed to the ground, still wondering exactly what shade of pink her plump lips were.

'No, I'm not the owner, I'm her daughter. Look. I know it doesn't seem like it, but everything is under control.'

But her eyes couldn't quite meet his as she said the words. Leo folded his arms and regarded her sardonically, watching the faint blush of colour spread over her cheeks. 'You're an experienced wedding planner? Or maybe you're an events co-ordinator? A hotel manager? A plumber and builder? All of the above?'

She blinked. 'Well, no...'

'No? What do you do?'

'I'm a lecturer, I don't see...'

'A lecturer? In plumbing?'

Her colour heightened. 'In European history. I mostly look at history from a feminist perspective...' She caught his eye and stopped.

‘That will be very useful, I’m sure. I don’t think I need to see any more.’ There was no point in staying, no matter how pretty the help. He turned, ready to leave when his phone buzzed. He pulled it out. Valentina. ‘Hola.’

‘Is it amazing? I wish I could be there with you. I have to fly to Japan tomorrow, and then I’m off to Australia for a week and there’s a shoot booked in here in New York after that so it’s impossible for me to get there before the wedding, but, Leo darling, I am so grateful that you are there making sure everything is perfect. Is it perfect? Just as I remember?’

‘Valentina.’ He tried to interrupt her, but his sister babbled on.

‘This feels right, Leo. It is such a shame about the villa, but I spent such happy summers on La Isla Marina, that has to be a good omen, doesn’t it? It will be like coming home in some ways. Todd won’t know what’s hit him,’ she added. ‘I know the Vineyard is beautiful, but I want this wedding to reflect me, to be as un-New York as possible.’

Leo paused. Valentina was extremely well off now, and she was marrying into serious old New York money, but she had been brought up on the edge of poverty thanks to his father’s nasty habit of discarding his mistresses and their offspring as soon as their demands got too inconvenient. While Leo had been brought up in the solitary, austere luxury of the castillo, she had spent her childhood years in a tiny apartment in the rougher side of the city. Who could blame her for wanting to live the fairy tale she’d been denied? She was the daughter of a conde after all, even if

the illustrious Lord refused to acknowledge her.

Leo looked around, assessing the island with fresh eyes. It was battered, sure, but it didn't need a fortune to bring it up to scratch; it needed some time and care. Leo could easily make that happen. It could be his wedding gift to the sister he had spent too many years not knowing. 'It needs some work, but nothing that can't be easily fixed. Don't panic.'

'How can I panic when you're there taking care of things for me, mi hermano? Will you keep an eye on it until I can get there? I don't need it to be perfect for the sponsors or all the people who will be watching and judging. I just want it to be perfect for me. For Todd.'

'It will be,' Leo promised. He snapped his phone shut. His options were clear: find his sister another whimsical Spanish island wedding venue able and willing to accommodate over one hundred bright young things in a month's time or make sure this place was transformed into the venue of her dreams. Besides, what else did he have to do? He fixed the nymph with a hard stare. 'Pass me that notebook,' he said. 'We have a lot of work to do.'

CHAPTER TWO

THE NYMPH CLUTCHED her notebook tightly and glared. 'We?'

'We,' Leo confirmed. 'Right now this hotel is only fit for a Halloween-themed wedding. I'm sure your knowledge of European feminist history will be very useful when it comes to

sorting out the dripping showers, but just in case it isn't I am intending to stay and oversee.'

'Really?' The bright blue eyes were hard. 'And you know how to fix a dripping tap, I suppose?'

'I can fix a tap, tile a wall, paint woodwork. Can you?' It was all true, not that many people knew that. It would ruin his carefully cultivated, trust-funded euro-playboy image if anyone knew just how handy he was with a spanner, just as no one knew that every penny that slipped so seemingly carelessly through his fingers he had earned. His father had cut him off at eighteen expecting a repentant and obedient son to beg for the purse strings to be reinstated. He was still waiting.

It drove him mad, not having the financial control he yearned for over his son, drove him to distraction that he had no idea where or how Leo obtained the funds for his extravagant lifestyle. And the lifestyle he saw his only son, the future Conde de Olvares, choose to lead drove him craziest of all. Every photo of Leo at another party, in a new casino, with a new model on his arm guaranteed it, Leo made sure of that. In the Conde de Olvares's rulebook appearances were everything, vices were to be hidden away.

Leo had taken his father's rule and reversed it. Every vice on the surface for everyone to see, the virtues hidden far beneath. Truth was he barely attended any parties any more—and when he did usually stayed just long enough to be photographed. Valentina had taught him well. Perception was everything.

The nymph tilted her chin defiantly. 'I'm sure I can learn. I can follow instructions.'

'That's good to know,' Leo said softly and her cheeks burned a deeper red.

'Look. I can see why you're worried.' Her gaze slid over to the nearest bungalow. 'But I have assured you, repeatedly, that everything is under control.'

Leo followed her gaze. The bungalow was dirty, the white paint peeling off the external walls, the trees and flowers growing so close it was only a matter of time till nature recolonised the building. It needed nails in the roof, a lick of paint and a damn good clean. Hot, sweaty, hard manual work.

His eyes narrowed. Maybe the work would help fix the melancholy he couldn't quite shake. Leo wasn't sure he'd ever experienced real, unadulterated happiness, but for the past twelve years he had managed something resembling content; always on the move, always making money, always his own man. But ever since Valentina had announced her engagement, that contentment had become elusive, her glowing happiness a sharp contrast to his darkness.

Leo had always thought that they were cut from the same cloth, but now his baby sister was proving braver—or more foolhardy—than him. Either way Leo was left in her wake. It was an uncomfortable place to be.

His original intention had been to make a few phone calls and get a team of labourers despatched to La Isla Marina then return

in a month's time to enjoy the wedding, but maybe a few weeks getting his hands dirty on a beautiful island with a beautiful girl was exactly what he needed. Time out from his usual regime.

Turning, he held out his hand. 'Leo di Marquez y Correa,' he said and braced himself. There was no flare of recognition in her blue eyes, no rise of her straight, no nonsense brows. Nearly everyone Leo met had already formed an opinion of him. Most people either disapproved of him, wanted to party with him or wanted to sleep with him. A very few, those in the know, wanted his investment. He rarely, however, met with blank politeness bordering on disdain.

It would be an interesting challenge to turn that disdain to desire. His blood stirred at the very thought; he did have a few weeks with no plans after all...

'Anna Gray,' she said after a moment, making no move to take his hand. 'Dr Anna Gray.'

'A doctor as well as an expert on feminism in Europe's history?' He smiled to show he was joking, turning on the full force of his charm to see if he could tempt those pink lips to smile.

She didn't respond in kind, folding her arms defensively. 'I have a PhD from Oxford, not that it's any of your business. Look, Señor di Marquez...'

'Leo.'

'I appreciate that things look a little ramshackle right now, and I know your sister's wedding is going to get a lot of publicity...'

‘Publicity which will benefit you.’

‘But I assure you, we are quite capable of getting everything ready in plenty of time...’

‘Then I’m very sure another pair of hands will come in very useful. I’ll make it easy for you, Dr Gray. I’ll sleep on my boat and work for food alone. I won’t even tell my sister just how much needs to be done here. Tell me, are you really in a position to refuse?’

* * *

Anna hugged her notebook tighter, her mind working furiously. She should be snatching Leo’s offer with both hands, but something held her back. She didn’t know whether it was the sardonic look in his dark eyes, the smirk playing about his mouth or the teasing tone in his voice. It didn’t help that he was one of the most insanely handsome men she had ever seen in the flesh. Oxford wasn’t exactly short of overconfident men thinking they could win using their charm alone, but the city didn’t run to Spanish pirates, nor was she used to conducting conversations with practically bare-chested men.

It also didn’t help that her knees weakened every time he fixed that intense gaze on her, that she could feel her pulse speeding up faster and faster. Her friends had been telling her to get out and date more. This must be her body’s way of agreeing if one hard-eyed, hard-chested man could have this effect on her.

Anna dragged her thoughts away from Leo’s chest and back to the matter at hand, her eyes narrowing as she considered his far-

too-good-to-be-true offer. 'Don't you have a job to go to? How will you manage to take a month off work with no notice?'

'I work for myself and I am a famously forgiving boss.'

Lucrative boss if that boat was anything to judge by. 'It's not up to me,' Anna said finally. 'My mother owns the island.'

'Then lead on. I'll present my credentials to your leader.'

Anna tried to hold his amused gaze, but to her frustration her own dropped first. She could stand up in front of a full lecture theatre without breaking a sweat, turn overly confident undergraduates into shaking shadows of their former selves with one disbelieving arch of an eyebrow, but in front of this man her defences crumbled. 'Fine,' she said tightly. 'Follow me.'

As she led him along the overgrown paths, Anna was aware of Leo's keen gaze taking in every crack, every break in the path and the surrounding buildings and worry shivered through her once again. Had the resort been on the road to such dilapidation when her grandparents were still alive? They had been pretty old, after all, their staff of a similar age. It would have been too easy for things to start to slide unnoticed by them. Her mother, though, had little excuse. She'd been living here for nearly a decade, ever since she had drifted away from the family home for a holiday, a holiday that bled into an extended stay, which in turn became a separation. The same old frustration bubbled up and Anna curled her hands into loose fists. No doubt her mother had just employed her usual mantra of *mañana*, never worrying that one day she would have to deal with the rapidly escalating problems.

Well, she wasn't dealing, was she? Anna was here dealing for her. As usual.

Only, who was she to cast aspersions? Wasn't she doing exactly the same thing with her book? Hoping that somehow something miraculous would happen and it would all fall into place. Running away from her problems...

'So tell me, what does being a Professor of European history with a feminist slant entail these days?' Anna started, guiltily. It was as if Leo had read her mind. 'You seem very young to be a professor.'

'You're not the first to say that.' Although most people also snidely insinuated her renowned historian father had helped her climb the academic ladder faster than usual, that her name was responsible for her success, not her credentials. Or they looked down at the success of her first book, convinced a popular history book couldn't be as well-researched, as important, as an academic paper read only by other specialists in her field. It had been easier to hold her head high when she hadn't doubted herself, when she had been sure that the academic life was all she needed.

'I'm sure I'm not. Is it all libraries and lectures?'

'Mostly,' she admitted. 'There's a huge pressure to publish papers as well as teach.'

'And do you?'

'Papers, books. A book,' she amended, trying not to think about the mess that was book number two.

‘An author? How impressive. Would I have read your book?’

‘Only if you’re interested in a rehabilitation of Joanna the Mad from a feminist standpoint, looking at how difficult it was for intelligent women to thrive in a male-dominated world.’

‘I definitely missed that one. Joanna the Mad? Is she the one who carted her dead husband’s body all over Spain?’

‘That’s one of the myths my book works to dispel.’

‘Pity, I’ve always felt that if I got married I’d want my wife to love me enough to keep my corpse by her side at all times.’ Anna shot him a quick glance. Joanna’s husband had been famously known as Philip the Handsome, but surely even he would have paled into plainness next to the rugged good looks of Leo di Marquez. She caught his eye and felt her cheeks heat up yet again. What on earth was wrong with her? She’d never been a blusher before. If she carried on at this rate they could save money on an electrician and use her face as a lamp.

To Anna’s relief they finally reached the villa. Leo looked at the ornate, white building, more like a Moorish palace than a hotel reception and office, and whistled. ‘Nice.’

Despite herself Anna felt the old ripples of pride. As a child she had always felt so special, so chosen, to be part of the island’s heritage, to spend her summers in her little turret room surveying the island like some kind of medieval queen. ‘It’s not as old as it looks. It’s a turn-of-the-last-century reproduction built by my great-grandfather as a wedding gift for his bride,’ she explained. ‘This was their own private island, but when my grandfather

inherited, he couldn't afford to keep it as a second home. He and my grandmother turned the island into a resort. At one time, back in the fifties, this was one of the most exclusive resorts in the Mediterranean.' Anna looked up at the veranda's cobweb-infested ceiling and tried not to sigh. It was hard to imagine the island in its glamorous heyday right now.

'And now?'

'It's been a while since I visited,' Anna admitted. 'Things are a little less glamorous than they used to be.'

The problem was the island was expensive to run. Her grandfather had often bemoaned the price of labour and food, all of which needed shipping out; the mainland might be just a few hundred metres away, but the island was still only accessible by boat. Maybe they needed to think differently, turn the island into an event destination rather than a hotel, for weddings and other special occasions?

They? She pursed her lips. There was no way her mother would be capable of running that kind of business, and it was unlikely Rosa would want to stay in one place and help. Maybe, much as the idea broke Anna's heart, her mother should sell the island to someone who could look after it.

She'd broach the subject after the wedding. There was no point getting embroiled in a family drama before.

She led Leo through the grand hallway, now a hotel reception area, a board behind the huge desk holding the big iron keys that still unlocked the bungalow doors—no flimsy key cards here—

and along the wooden panelled hallway until they reached the vast kitchen where her mother was still sorting crockery.

‘Mama?’

Piles of brightly painted terracotta plates, bowls and cups covered every surface and most of the floor. In the middle of the chaos Sancia stood swaying, her hair falling out of its customary loose bun, her eyes closed as she sang along to the ear-piercingly loud music blaring from the radio. Anna winced, unable to even glance in Leo’s direction.

The scene was all too reminiscent, a flashback to her teenage years. She’d soon stopped bringing friends home, no idea what would greet them once they walked through the front door into the untidy hallway. Sancia was usually at home, but she would be preoccupied with her current fad; dancing, painting, sculpting, cooking. Whatever it was tended to take over the whole house, a chaotic tangle of colour and mess. It was all about the creative journey, Sancia would say, whenever Anna or her father suggested she keep her artistic endeavours confined to one room. Which was a good thing as usually the end result was good for nothing at all. Anna preferred to spend her after-school time at her friends’ houses instead, in ordered, peaceful homes where everything had its place and routines ruled.

‘Mama!’ she said again, this time loudly and sharply, and Sancia’s eyes flew open, fastening onto her daughter reproachfully.

‘Querida, there is no need to shout.’ She switched her gaze

over to Leo and her dark eyes widened, her still-full mouth curving into a smile. ‘Hola.’

Anna’s heart sank; she recognised that particular flirtatious smile. It was her mother’s default smile for any reasonably attractive man and Anna had seen it used, always to great effect, on friends of her father’s, and on her own friends’ fathers. No girl should have to grow up seeing grown men reduced to red-faced boys by her own mother. Anna knew it wasn’t conscious, that warm smile of appreciation, it wasn’t meant with malice or intent or even deliberate flirtatiousness, but it was all the more devastating for that.

Leo didn’t seem to be immune, his own smile wide as he bent over Sancia’s outstretched hand. ‘Hola,’ he answered, his voice so low it was a cross between a purr and a growl, a deep rumble Anna suspected was used as often as her mother’s smile and with a similar effect—only she was pretty sure Leo di Marquez knew exactly what he was doing.

Sancia preened. ‘Who is your charming amigo, Anna?’

Anna made a concerted effort not to grind her teeth. ‘Mama, this is Señor di Marquez, he is Valentina’s brother and he’s come to check the island is suitable for his sister’s wedding.’

Sancia turned her smile up another watt. ‘What a lucky girl to have such an involved brother.’ She gazed up at Leo as if he were edible and Anna tried not to follow her mother’s gaze, especially as she seemed fixated on Leo’s half-bared chest.

‘Your resort is beautiful, señora,’ Leo said, a smile still playing

around his beautifully sculpted mouth.

‘Gracias, and please, call me Sancia. Señora always makes me feel so old. I trust you’re happy with everything? We are so looking forward to welcoming Valentina and her fiancé in a month’s time.’

Anna stared at her mother in disbelief. Did she really think anyone would be happy with the state of the island? After all, it wasn’t as if she didn’t know what a huge task she had in front of her—she had called both her daughters to beg them to drop everything to come and help. Maybe now Anna was here Sancia considered her own job done. She had always relied on Anna to look after the dreary practicalities in the past. ‘That’s my sensible, organised girl,’ she would say, as if sensible and organised were things to be tolerated, to be pitied, not to emulate.

By the way Leo’s mouth quirked he was evidently amused by Sancia’s blind optimism. ‘Obviously you are not quite ready for the season,’ he said. Why was he being so diplomatic with Sancia when he hadn’t minced one of his words with Anna? ‘As you know Valentina needs everything to be perfect and so I have promised to help you prepare the island for her wedding. I trust this is acceptable?’

If Sancia’s eyes grew any wider they would fall right out of her head. As it was she was currently resembling a cartoon character more than a real human being. ‘That is so kind of you.’

Anna couldn’t stop her toe tapping impatiently on the tiled floor. Was her mother going to look at this practically in any

way? Check that Leo was who he said he was, that Valentina wanted his input and, most importantly, that his presence here for a month wouldn't result in any reduction of the lavish payment Valentina had offered in return for a week's exclusivity? She took her mother's arm and steered her through the piles of bowls and plates to the open back door, lowering her voice and doing her best to ignore Leo's sardonic glance. 'Mama, don't you think you should check with your client first, and make sure this doesn't mean there will be any renegotiation on the price? That Leo is who he says he is.' But she knew she was wasting her breath.

'Querida, the fates have brought you a handsome young man and you want to check his references? Live a little, Anna. You're getting hunched, all that time over a keyboard, and you look positively sallow. A few weeks in the sunshine with some agreeable company is exactly what you need.'

'I'm not here for my health, Mama. I'm here to help you...'

'And thanks to Señor di Marquez your job will be a lot easier. After all, Anna, you're not the most practical of people, are you?' And while the gobsmacked Anna was still trying to formulate an articulate response her mother stepped away, turning back to Leo. 'We have plenty of space here in the villa, Señor di Marquez. I would be very happy to accommodate you.'

'Señor di Marquez has his own accommodation,' Anna interjected quickly.

Her mother's smile barely wavered. 'But we will feed you, I insist, it's the least I can do. Lunch will be served in just a couple

of hours so shall we meet back here at two? I'm really looking forward to getting to know you better.'

Uh-oh. Anna knew exactly what that meant. At least four courses, wine and two hours of the day wasted. Then, no doubt, her mother would suggest a siesta and before Anna had had a chance to make even one list the day would be over. 'There's no need for a formal lunch. There's far too much to do. We can easily just grab a roll and some cheese and work through. It's only early May. It's not as if the sun will be too unbearable,' she finished a little doubtfully as she glanced out of the window at the perfectly blue, cloudless sky.

'Oh, Anna...' Her mother couldn't have sounded more reproachful if Anna had suggested drowning kittens, but her sorrowful protestation was drowned out by Leo, who leaned against the huge scrubbed table, arms folded and a sardonic gleam in his eyes.

'Skip lunch? Absolutely not. I'm looking forward to it, señora—I mean, Sancia. What's life without time out for good food and good conversation?'

Narrowing her eyes, Anna stared over at the insouciant Spaniard. 'I thought you wanted everything to be perfect for your sister's wedding?'

'I do, it will be, but there's no reason we can't have a little fun while we're working, now, is there?'

CHAPTER THREE

LEO TOOK A small sip of his coffee and grinned over

at Anna. She had become increasingly, obviously impatient as lunch had meandered from course to course: fish soup followed by an excellent soufflé, chicken with garlic-roasted potatoes, and a cheese course, all washed down with a rather good rioja. Sancia Garcia might not know how to run a hotel, but she did know how to employ a good cook and right now, sitting on a sheltered patio with a view of white beaches and an azure-blue sea, Leo felt a stir of that elusive contentment for the first time in months.

Sure, there was an entire island to be renovated and made fit for Valentina's arrival in just under a month, but the sense of urgency was lessened by the rich dark coffee, the richer wine and the last sliver of cheese temptingly within reach. Lessened by the knowledge he could make a phone call and an army of labourers would be despatched forth to take care of every detail. But mostly lessened by Dr Anna Gray's palatable disapproval. She had only eaten soup and a little cheese, had refused wine and was very obviously making copious lists proving just how busy she really was.

It was quite adorable. Not that Leo looked for adorable in women. He didn't really look for anything beyond the very, very superficial. What was the point when he had no intention of getting into anything deeper than casual? He chose carefully, ensuring the women he dated were as uninterested in his inner life as he was in theirs. He needed to be sure that they wouldn't be looking too closely at him. Too closely into him. That all they were interested in was his blue blood and deep pockets.

Of course here, out of the public eye, the usual rules didn't apply. It would be an interesting challenge to see just what it took to make Dr Anna Gray put down her pen and notepad, wipe those frown lines off her forehead and smile. Interesting, but all too risky. He'd known Anna for less than three hours and he already knew that she was the type who would always dig deeper—and that made her dangerous. Besides, he was pretty sure she didn't understand the 'good time' rule and that made her absolutely off-limits.

'Hit me.' He pushed his coffee cup to one side, propping his elbows on the table as he turned towards Anna. 'What's first?'

Anna brushed a lock of dark hair away from her forehead and Leo froze, awareness of her every movement shivering through him. For one endless second she was imprinted on him, her long graceful neck, her sweep of long, wavy hair, the shrewd expression in her clear blue eyes, and the vulnerability he saw behind them, a vulnerability he sensed was usually kept well hidden.

'First?'

Leo nodded at the notebook Anna carried like a talisman. 'On your list.'

'Oh.' Her hand lay over the page protectively. 'I've put together a list of supplies we need before we can really get started so I think I need to take a trip over to the mainland today. There really isn't any time to waste.' She glared meaningfully at his plate. 'Mama, I'll need to take your dinghy. Is that okay? Is the car still

kept in the same place?’

‘No need to borrow your mother’s boat. I’ll sail you over.’ Leo sat back in his chair and watched Anna try and come up with an excuse to avoid his company.

Anna blinked. ‘There’s no point taking your boat such a short distance.’

‘No, but my dinghy is at your dock.’

Sancia glanced from Leo to Anna, her expression amused. ‘The car is parked in the harbour lot as always, querida. There’s a big store on the outskirts of town, about five kilometres from the harbour. You can’t miss it.’

‘Right.’ Anna pushed her chair back and stood up. ‘Let’s go.’

Leo didn’t move.

She tapped her foot, her eyes gleaming dangerously. ‘In your own time, señor.’

Sancia sighed, shaking her head at her daughter. ‘Querida, you are in Spain now. The store will be closed for siesta. There’s no point in going now.’

‘A siesta sounds like an excellent suggestion.’ Leo winked at Anna. ‘I’ll see you at the jetty in two hours, Dr Gray. Bring your lists.’ And he stood up. ‘Thank you, Sancia, that was delicious.’ He bowed over Sancia’s hand and tossed another wink in Anna’s direction before sauntering away, fully aware that Anna was glaring at him. His back prickled with awareness; he could almost feel the burn as her eyes bored into him.

Funny to think he had had no agenda this morning beyond

popping over to what he had assumed to be a perfectly run luxury resort in order to reassure his sister. Now he had a month's work ahead of him and a hostile colleague. He couldn't wait to get started.

* * *

Anna stared down at the bucket of tepid, dirty water resentfully. She'd decided not to waste the two hours her mother and Leo were choosing to spend sleeping and instead had got started scrubbing down the outside of a couple of bungalows. Not that she had got very far. Right now getting the island into any kind of order seemed like a Sisyphean task—especially if long lunches and longer siestas were going to be the order of the day.

Still, at least she had made a start. She would get the groundskeeper and chambermaid to continue while she was on the mainland; but she really needed to talk to her mother and find out when the seasonal staff were due to start, and how many they were expecting. Without adequate staffing they would never get the island ready in time. Luckily the interiors of the bungalows were in a better state than she'd expected. They needed some cosmetic work, a good clean, taps and showers fixing, a quick paint, but the furniture was still good, simple, but well-crafted. A few luxurious touches, new cushions, rugs and accessories should bring them up to date. After all, if Valentina wanted marble and gilt she would have booked a hotel. She was after an authentic Spanish touch and that, at least, La Isla Marina could provide.

Picking up the bucket, Anna tipped the water down the drain.

She'd worked her way through several buckets of water, lugging them to the desired spot, sloshing water down her legs as she did so. Her hands were red, two nails already broken. She made a mental note to add gloves to her list.

Had it really only been half an hour of work? It felt like eternity and she had barely started. This morning she'd been full of a sense of purpose, if a little daunted. Now she just felt like Cinderella, toiling away while the rest of the household slumbered, and just because she had volunteered for domestic drudgery didn't mean she couldn't help feeling resentful. She wouldn't mind so much if Rosa weren't swanking about somewhere, carefree, on the other side of the world, if her mother didn't look at her as if she were being fussy, if Leo di Marquez hadn't shown up...

Anna pushed her hair off her forehead, grimacing as she realised just how sweaty she was. What was Leo's deal anyway? What kind of man just decided to put a month aside for his sister's wedding with no planning, no notice? Placing the bucket on the floor, Anna tried to stop her mind dwelling on the planes of Leo's chest, the strong, sensual mouth, his mocking eyes. He knew how attractive he was all right—and there was nothing Anna distrusted more than a man convinced of his own worth, his own desirability. After all, she'd been taken in before, been badly burnt before.

She'd mishandled him from the first, allowing him to put her on the back foot even though he was the trespasser. It wouldn't

—couldn't—happen again. She needed weapons, she needed armour, she needed control, she needed facts.

Her mother and sister might rely on intuition and spontaneity, but there was much more comfort in knowledge and plans. That was why she had become an academic, not because of her father's pre-eminence or because it was expected of her, but because she liked to dig deep, to find out the facts, to draw her own interpretation. If Leo's sister was some kind of media star then it shouldn't be too hard to find out exactly who he was, what he was. And then she would be prepared.

Mind made up, Anna headed back to the villa, letting herself through the hidden door that separated the public spaces from the family's private rooms. The wooden staircase was narrow and dark as she climbed all the way to the top floor and the turret bedroom that had been hers since she was a baby. Nothing had changed: the same iron bedstead stood in the corner, the same pictures hung on the whitewashed walls, the same colourful blankets were heaped on the bed. It was sparse and small, but Anna liked the memories of when they had been a proper family, Rosa in the other turret, her parents nearby, her grandparents still alive.

A pang of guilt hit her at the thought of her father home alone, rattling around their huge Oxford house. She'd left him a schedule, all his pills laid out ready, labelled meals in the freezer for the evenings he didn't dine in college. And she'd promised to text him reminders every day—he probably wouldn't even notice

she was gone. She bit her lip, his lined, grey face clear in her mind. The only time he had ever relaxed was here on the island, when he would push his research and work aside for a few days, sometimes even weeks. When had he last taken a real holiday? Not since Sancia had left him. Left them.

Her laptop was already set up on the desk, her notebooks stacked neatly by its side, colour-coded by theme. Anna averted her eyes from the notebooks, an all too visual reminder that she still had no book, not even the bare bones of one. The usual wave of nausea swirled low in her stomach, the age-old fear that she would be revealed as an imposter, a fraud, whispering in her mind. Had she really thought that if she ran away to the island her doubts would stay meekly in Oxford? They were just as strong as ever—except when she had been engrossed in painting. Except when she had been sparring with Leo di Marquez... Pushing her notebooks to one side, she switched on her laptop, typed in Valentina's name and began to read.

Half an hour later Anna sat back and stared at the screen; she still had no idea what Valentina did or why she was famous. Sure, the curvy brunette modelled, but she'd started modelling after she had got famous; for all her prominence she was a little shorter, a little bustier than the usual top models. Valentina seemed to spend her time photographing herself, her friends, her clothes and her food and posting the pictures up for comment. And she received them in their thousands, more, hundreds of thousands. Anna frowned as she looked at the photo posted just

this morning, a photo of breakfast laid out on a patio table, every colour popping off the screen. How on earth was this a job? Judging by the lavish apartment, the designer clothes, the parties, it was lucrative even if it made no sense.

Most of the recent posts and tweets focussed on the forthcoming wedding. Anna's stomach clenched as she read through them; Valentina's expectations were high and the results would be instantly seen around the world. If they could make it a success then the island's fortunes would turn around overnight, but if they failed then they would fall very publicly. She had no choice; if there was to be any chance of pulling this off she simply had to work with Leo.

Except not once had she seen his name mentioned. Valentina made reference to growing up on the Barcelona coast, to working in a beach bar, to her mother, who had died a few years back—but there was no mention of a brother or a father. Not one.

Okay, then more research was needed. Anna poised her fingers over the keyboard for a second and then typed in Leo di Marquez y Correa.

'Bingo,' she said softly. The picture on the very first link looked very familiar indeed. The same close-cropped dark hair, the same sharp cheekbones set off by stubble too perfect to be completely natural. This Leo was dressed a lot more formally, in a light grey suit, a smiling blonde in a skin-tight dress hanging off his arm. Anna read the caption. 'Leo's new model.' Hmm, it looked as if he was as at home in the gossip pages as his sister.

‘He’s not a pirate, he’s a playboy,’ she muttered as she brought up article after article. Leo on his boat, bare-chested in the sun, Leo in a casino, on a superyacht surrounded by the most glamorous people Anna had ever seen, Leo spraying champagne. Her stomach tightened. ‘Spoilt, rich boys.’ She could taste the contempt, bitter on her tongue.

The facts were there in clear black and white. Not just spoilt, not just rich, but Spanish aristocracy. The only son—only child—of the Conde de Olvares, a haughty grey-haired man, and his even haughtier-looking wife, Leo had been a fixture on the party scene since he was eighteen years old. No job, no occupation beyond sailing, gambling, drinking and women.

Anna stood up and stalked over to the window. From her vantage point high in the tower she could see the jetty and the gleaming boat moored out in the sea. A boat he hadn’t worked to buy, a toy for a pampered princeling. Disappointment twisted her chest and she had no idea why. She didn’t know Leo, and it wasn’t as if she had liked what she had seen after all. Well, not beyond the physical at least. It was just she hadn’t expected anything quite this shallow.

Anna knew the type all too well. They weren’t as prevalent at Oxford as they had once been, but there were still plenty of entitled lordlings, their places secured by their name, their lineage, their education, their futures assured no matter what. They didn’t care what anyone thought about them, didn’t care what the consequences of their actions might be. At eighteen

she might have been stupid enough to mistake that arrogant confidence for magnetism, found the frivolity and extravagance glamorous, but not any more. Now she valued work, reliability, sense. Old-fashioned values maybe, but her values.

And not only was Leo di Marquez a playboy, he was a liar. Valentina wasn't his sister, he was an only child. So what on earth was he doing here?

* * *

Of course he was late. Anna had known he would be and yet she had still arrived at the jetty at the agreed time, her shorts swapped for light cotton trousers, her T-shirt for a loose shirt, her notebook tucked away in a waterproof bag.

She'd deliberated sailing across alone and not waiting for Leo, but she wanted answers. Nothing added up. Why did a party playboy want to spend a month doing DIY on a tiny island with barely any inhabitants, no nightlife, no fun? And why had he claimed Valentina was his sister when she clearly wasn't?

She squinted over to the boat, lounging out in the flat sea like the embodiment of entitlement, blowing out a frustrated breath when she saw a tall figure swing over the side and climb down to the dinghy bobbing alongside. Finally.

It didn't take her long to walk to the end of the jetty, arriving there just as Leo executed a perfect, stylish turn to bring the small open boat alongside. 'Hop in,' he called. 'Unless you need me to help you?' He held out a hand, which Anna ignored as she stepped gingerly into the boat, seating herself at the furthest end

away from Leo. He barely waited until she was seated before releasing the throttle and, with a roar, the boat sped off towards the mainland.

Despite her trepidation Anna found herself relaxing on the short trip, leaning against the back rail enjoying the sun on her face, the splash of the water on her outstretched hand as the boat cut through the sea. In Oxford, she saw students punting or kayaking all the time and yet never made time to get out onto the water herself, which was odd when she remembered just what a water baby she had always been on the island; surfing, windsurfing, boating, swimming until her skin wrinkled, her hair thick with salt.

Steering the boat towards the public harbour, Leo found a mooring spot right next to the main jetty. Small boats bobbed all around, larger cruisers and yachts moored further out in the deeper water. Anna could see the perfect curve of the beach to one side, deserted despite the sun, and the cheerful fronts of the bars and restaurants that lined the shore road behind it. Cala del Mar had seemed like the height of sophistication when Anna was in her teens. Now she saw it as the sleepy, provincial seaside village it was, all the fonder of it for its simplicity.

Leo killed the engine then turned and eyed Anna quizzically as she stayed seated, making no attempt to climb out of the boat. ‘Are you stuck?’

‘Why are you here?’

‘That’s a very philosophical question. Why are any of us here?’

But the laughter drained out of his dark eyes despite the easy smile on his face.

‘You know what I mean. Why have you decided to stay on the island? Why announce your intention of helping? What does the son of the Conde de Olvares want with a tiny island resort? There’s no casino, no nightclub, no supermodels to entertain you.’

‘Someone’s been doing her homework.’ The smile still played around his mouth, but there was an edge to his voice.

Anna raised her chin. ‘It’s all a matter of public record, as is the fact you’re an only child. So why did you tell me Valentina was your sister?’

The smile disappeared, his eyes hardening to flints. ‘Because she is. And she wants the perfect wedding and I am going to make sure that happens. Any other questions, Sherlock Holmes, or shall we get on with the matter at hand?’ And without looking at Anna he climbed out of the boat and started along the jetty, head high, back ramrod straight. Anna stared at the set shoulders, the jerky stride. Somehow she had touched a nerve without getting any of the answers she sought and although Leo was the one lying, or at least omitting information, Anna felt as if she was the one in the wrong.

She blew out a frustrated breath before getting carefully to her feet and stepping out of the boat onto the dusty jetty. This wasn’t over and she would get her answers. Leo di Marquez was playing some kind of game and Anna wasn’t going to stop until she had worked out just what he was up to.

CHAPTER FOUR

LEO STEPPED BACK and surveyed the wooden wall, an unexpected pride swelling his chest. If he said so himself it looked rather professional. Sanding, filling and painting were proving to be unexpectedly soothing, each finished wall or window frame a tangible achievement in a way a successful deal or investment no longer seemed to be. Maybe that was because money was such an abstract thing. He didn't exactly sit counting gold coins, had more than enough, even for his fairly lavish needs.

Leo put the paintbrush back on the tray and stretched before reaching for his task list, a wry grin curving his mouth as he scanned the typed list, complete with timings and required equipment. Anna had, with the help of her trusty notebook, worked out a plan. A plan, Leo had not failed to notice, which kept him at one side of the island and her at the other. Nor could he help noticing that she no longer broke for lunch, and although she joined Sancia, himself and the staff for dinner she was usually distracted, spending the meal making even more lists or researching fixtures and fittings rather than joining in the conversation. He had a strong suspicion she was avoiding him.

Como sea. Let her keep her distance. Sure, he had enjoyed the brief one-sided flirtation, had thought it might be amusing to—metaphorically at least—unbutton the terminally uptight doctor, but there were limits to even his amusement and those limits had been reached when Anna had rounded on him with a scornful expression he knew only too well. It was the same expression he

saw on his parents' faces. The expression he sometimes saw in the mirror.

Still, over the last few days he had almost reached a state of contentment. It was repetitive work, this washing, sanding, filling and painting, but it had an end goal. Each task added up to a whole, a newly restored bungalow. Well, an almost restored bungalow because along with the repainting of the outside Leo was making a list of all the more specialised tasks that needed doing: the dripping taps, the underperforming showers, the broken tiles, the holes in roofs.

Right now it was just he and Anna with their buckets and ladders and paintbrushes. At the start of next week they would be joined by the seasonal staff including three more groundsmen and, for a week, a plumber, a joiner and a builder. That would leave two weeks for any internal repainting, replacement of furniture and adding in all the extras Valentina and her friends would expect to find in a luxury hotel. Anna seemed to spend any time she wasn't painting flicking through lifestyle blogs and upmarket magazines, every session resulting in even more copious notes and yet another list.

The full-time groundsman and maid were equally hard at work on the public and communal areas. With three separate beach bars as well as the main bar and restaurant, two lounges and the beautiful central pagoda, where the marriage ceremony was to be carried out, they had their work cut out and Maria, the maid, was volubly looking forward to the arrival of her seasonal

counterparts to help share the load. The island might shut over the winter, but it still seemed like a particularly sparse skeleton staff when the off season was surely the time to refresh and repair?

How on earth had this place survived over the last few years? Sancia swung from relaxed to mildly concerned—on the surface anyway—but Leo occasionally saw a flash of worry in the dark eyes when yet another dozen items were added to Anna's seemingly inexhaustible lists.

‘Here, Sancia sent this for you.’

A soft voice pulled him away from his thoughts and Leo turned, list still in hand, to see Anna standing under the shade of the overgrown copse of trees. His breath caught. Her mass of dark hair was pulled up into a ponytail, she wasn't wearing a scrap of make-up and her cut-off denims and simple navy T-shirt were strictly utilitarian yet a quiver of attraction still ran through him.

His gaze dropped to the tray she clasped tightly in her hands. It held a plate heaped with a roll, sliced meat and fresh tomatoes and a bottle of beer.

Anna held it out towards him. ‘You missed lunch.’

Leo glanced at his watch. Sure enough it was nearly three. ‘I got a little carried away.’

‘Obviously.’ She took a step nearer, eyes crinkled as she looked critically at the walls. ‘It's looking good though.’

‘Does that surprise you?’

‘Yes,’ she said and, jolted by surprise, Leo looked at her.

‘Okaaaay...’ he said slowly.

‘I thought you’d get bored after a couple of days, or you would spend most of your days lounging around on your boat, spend an hour with a paintbrush in your hand and expect us to fall at your feet in gratitude. But, you have more than pulled your weight.’ She took a visibly deep breath. ‘I was wrong.’

‘Sí.’ But he couldn’t bring himself to labour the point. She had good reasons for her misconceptions, reasons Leo himself had planted. He couldn’t blame her, just because for some reason he wanted her to look deeper. Wanted her to look beyond the playboy image and see what lay underneath—if anything lay beneath. He doubted it, but if there was anything there then surely Dr Anna Gray was the kind of woman to excavate it.

‘So.’ She hefted the tray up awkwardly. ‘Are you hungry?’

He was ravenous, he realised. Nothing like sheer physical labour to get a man’s appetite going. ‘Sí,’ he said again, taking the tray from her and heading over to the wrought-iron patio table each bungalow was furnished with, perfect for al fresco dining. This particular table was positioned to take advantage of the sea views and to get shelter from the midday sun and as Leo lowered himself onto the cool seat he realised how very hot and thirsty he was.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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