



MODERN™

SUSAN STEPHENS

The Man From her Wayward Past



Susan Stephens

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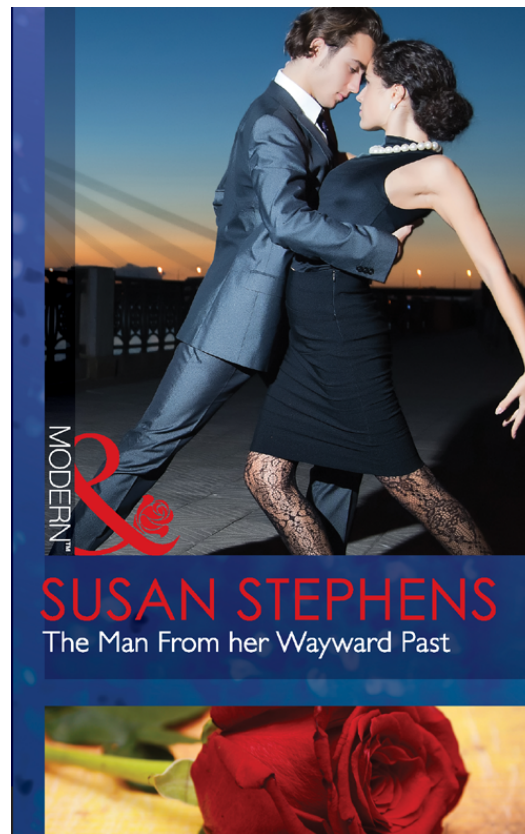
Would the real Lucia Acosta please stand up? Fun-loving and feisty Lucia Acosta was the girl everybody wanted at their party. With her sultry South American looks she captured every man's attention. One terrible secret later, a paler, quieter Lucia's gone from owning the dance floor to cleaning it, when a ghost from parties past walks in... Luke Forster would recognise those curves anywhere – he grew up hypnotised by them! But as his best friend's little sister she was strictly off-limits. He's shocked to see her fallen so low, but relieved her pride's still intact! The real Lucia Acosta is still in there somewhere, and he's the man to tempt her out... 'I think I must be Susan's biggest fan; I can't get enough of her books!' – Ruth, Web Developer, Brighton

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‘Lucia?’ Luke rapped sternly, staring down at her with knife-sharp eyes as she scrubbed the floor of the club. ‘Are you working here?’

Of course she should have said, *What’s it to you?* But a row might draw attention, and she couldn’t afford to lose this job.

‘No, of course I’m not working here,’ she protested with a laugh, glancing around to make sure no one had heard Luke calling her by her real name. ‘I come here so often they let me hang my coat in the stockroom.’

‘Really?’ Luke drawled, with an even more contemptuous expression in his brooding amber gaze.

‘Okay, I work here from time to time,’ she admitted, brushing it off as she continued to stare at a face that was mesmerising in its harsh masculine beauty. If you wanted hard there was no better hard to be had than Luke Forster—as her yearning and thoroughly confused body could now attest.

The crowd on the dance floor fell back at Luke’s advance like the Red Sea parting, and Luke paused at the entrance to the casino just long enough to shoot a stare at Lucia that assured her this wasn’t nearly over yet.

About the Author

SUSAN STEPHENS was a professional singer before meeting her husband on the tiny Mediterranean island of Malta. In true Modern™ Romance style they met on Monday, became engaged on Friday, and were married three months after that. Almost thirty years and three children later, they are still in love. (Susan does not advise her children to return home one day with a similar story, as she may not take the news with the same fortitude as her own mother!)

Susan had written several non-fiction books when fate took a hand. At a charity costume ball there was an after-dinner auction. One of the lots, 'Spend a Day with an Author', had been donated by Mills & Boon® author Penny Jordan. Susan's husband bought this lot, and Penny was to become not just a great friend but a wonderful mentor, who encouraged Susan to write romance.

Susan loves her family, her pets, her friends and her writing. She enjoys entertaining, travel, and going to the theatre. She reads, cooks, and plays the piano to relax, and can occasionally be found throwing herself off mountains on a pair of skis or galloping through the countryside. Visit Susan's website: www.susanstephens.net She loves to hear from her readers all around the world!

Recent titles by the same author:

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The Man From her Wayward Past

Susan Stephens



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For the Angry Sparrow

PROLOGUE

THE SINGLE GIRL'S TO-DO LIST

All roads lead to Rome and there is only one goal here.

He sits proudly at number 10!

1. Get a job
2. Get a flat
3. Get a wax
4. Get a tan
5. Get a hairdo
6. Get a cool new wardrobe
7. Get a gym membership
8. Get a great dance teacher
9. Get a gag for her polo-playing brothers
10. Get a (non-polo-playing) man

AS THE only girl in a family of four polo-playing brothers I've had enough—and I mean ENOUGH!—of whips, spurs and raging machismo morning, noon and night.

CHAPTER ONE

Get a job

Not exactly the job I imagined, but I have my reasons. What are these reasons?

Actually, I landed the dream job: management trainee in a top London hotel. It was the icing on the cake after achieving a good degree in Hotel Management back home in Argentina, where a career in hospitality seemed the obvious choice to me after years honing my craft on four demanding brothers. But I would rather eat my own feet than keep that dream job by sleeping with a slime-ball concierge who tried to blackmail me by threatening to reveal who 'Anita Costa' really was.

People who knew me before this diary entry might ask, what has happened to wild child Lucia, the glamorous, glitzy, fun girl who was always the life and soul of the party, and who now seems to have sunk lower than a whore's drawers? If you're one of them you'd better read on.

You will note that the one thing I have retained is my sense of humour. Just as well, as right now things couldn't be much bleaker.

NO ONE knew better than Lucia that a nightclub in daylight was a dismal, skanky place.

She should do. These past few days it had felt as if she spent most of her life on her hands and knees, scrubbing the sticky floor beneath a stark long-life bulb. Glittering and glamorous at night beneath the coloured lights, the club, located on the wild and rugged splendour of Cornwall's most popular coastline, was high on society's hot list—thanks to the many opportunities to see and be seen both in the club and on the fabulous beach, where the many sporting activities drew the best peccs around. Lucia's own dangerously charismatic polo-playing brothers had flaunted themselves in this same area when they were younger, with their hot friend Luke.

Luke ...

Was this a good time to be thinking about more muscles and intelligence than was good for a man, captured in one devastatingly desirable package?

A man who was out of Lucia's reach?

And who just happened to be a polo player. Which meant contravening number ten on her to-do list before she had ticked off numbers two to nine.

'Don't you have enough to do?'

Lucia shot up as the club manager hove into view. Van Rickter had been a star on the club circuit in his youth, as he had been at pains to explain to Lucia when she had first begged him for a job—any job. Now he was a middle-aged charmer with a chip on his shoulder the size of a rock, who liked nothing better than to bully his staff. Lucia quickly returned to scrubbing as Grace, another of Van Rickter's serfs, entered the club.

'I hear there's a big do on tonight,' Grace announced, dropping her bag on a nearby table. 'Wish I didn't have these sniffles. A red nose and leaking eyes doesn't do much for tips. I was hoping to meet someone fabulous tonight who would take me away from all this—'

As Grace gestured around Lucia reflected that not so long ago just the mention of a 'big do' would have been a call to arms. She had loved nothing better than to tease and flirt and dance. With four brothers ready to flatten any man who so much as looked at her the wrong way, she had grown up with no concept of danger when she turned it on, and had felt free to be as flirtatious as she liked. Her instant reaction to the merest suggestion of a party would have been on with the five-inch heels, the dress at least a size too small, followed swiftly by slap, glitter, lashes and nails, all topped off by the studiously perfected party pout. But that was then and this was now, and things were very different now.

Turning to Grace, Lucia thought her friend looked unusually pale tonight. 'Let me take your shift if you're not feeling well,' she suggested.

‘Another shift straight after this one?’ Grace shook her head in firm refusal ‘You haven’t stopped working since you got here. You’ll make yourself ill if you go on like this. Put on your heels tonight, walk in like you own the place, see who’s around. Save one for me if there are any likely men.’

Inwardly Lucia shuddered, but as Grace laughed she wiped her hot face on her sleeve and joined in the merriment. Grace had no idea what had happened to Lucia in London, and Lucia wasn’t about to burden her new friend with details of that experience.

‘Uh-oh, here comes trouble,’ Grace warned as Van Rickter returned.

While Grace hurried into the back to get changed for work, Van Rickter picked on Lucia. ‘Hey, Anita from the block,’ he sneered. ‘Put some elbow grease into that scrubbing. I can always find someone to replace you.’ With an ugly laugh, he spun on his Cuban heels.

Everyone at the club knew her as Anita. It was the name of Lucia’s favourite Puerto Rican character from the musical *West Side Story*. Finding a surname had been easy. Sitting in a coffee bar, she’d thought, *Just lose the ‘a’*. So Lucia Acosta had become Anita Costa. Why the subterfuge?

It wasn’t possible to have people treat you normally, let alone strike out for independence, when your four polo-playing brothers featured on every billboard in town.

Resting her hands on the small of her aching back, Lucia dreamed of Argentina and the endless freedom of the pampas. Her warm, safe home in South America had never seemed further away, especially when it turned out that she had a real talent for jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. Her life, since that rogue concierge in London had made staying on at her job there impossible, had been one long slide down. It made no difference that she came from a wealthy family, and anyway, she was determined to go it alone.

‘Okay?’ Grace trilled as she hurried past with a crate of drinks.

‘Never more so.’

Brushing her hair back, Lucia returned to scrubbing. After London she was glad to have a job at a club where no one knew her. Before she died, her mother had used to say to Lucia, ‘Keep your wits about you.’ Well, she’d certainly failed at that in London, believing the concierge was her friend.

It was hard to believe her mother had been killed almost ten years ago in a tragic flood. Demelza Acosta had been Cornish, which was why the family had always holidayed in St Oswalds. And why Lucia had fled here, she supposed, seeking refuge in the one corner of England where she remembered being truly happy.

Lucia’s head dipped over her scrubbing brush as Van Rickter came into view.

‘It’s your lucky day, Anita,’ he observed sarcastically. ‘I’ve sent Grace home. No one wants to be served cocktails by a waitress with a runny nose, so you’re on bar duty tonight. And don’t even *think* of complaining that your cleaning shift doesn’t end until seven,’ he warned. ‘You’ll have plenty of time to get ready.’

Half an hour to race over to the caravan, hose herself down in cold water and get back to the club. If she didn’t stop to eat it should be possible. ‘That’s fine with me.’ She needed the money.

Van Rickter’s piggy eyes almost disappeared into folds of unnaturally pale flesh as he eyed her suspiciously. ‘Make sure you clean yourself up. And put some hand cream on. Those wrinkled mitts are enough to put anyone off their champagne.’

‘I will,’ she said, flashing a smile she knew would rattle Van Rickter far more than an exhausted look. She got tips on the bar.

Being nice and clean was more important for work than a full stomach. No one wanted a stinky server leaning over them, and she sure as hell wouldn’t get any tips, Lucia reasoned, teeth chattering as she tied her wild black hair back neatly. She had just showered in shriekingly cold water in the beat-up caravan that came with her other job, and with ice on the insides of the windows it would take some considerable time before she warmed up.

Yes, she’d landed not one but two jobs—though the one that came with the caravan thrown in was rather more complicated than her work at the club, as she didn’t get paid. Not yet. She was trying

to help Margaret, the old lady who owned the Sundowner Guest House and Holiday Park, where Lucia had stayed as a child, to get back on her feet.

Teeth chattering, she rubbed herself down on a rough towel whilst shooting anxious glances at Grace's uniform. The tiny cocktail waitress ensemble looked far too small. She had put on a bit of weight since coming to Cornwall, having been plied with more Cornish cream teas than was good for her by Margaret. Not that she hadn't been what you might call voluptuous to start with.

Thanks to her handsome Argentinian father and her Cornish mother Lucia had been built to withstand not just the terrifying winds of the pampas but the frigid cold of a Cornish winter—genes that had made her infamous polo-playing brothers giants amongst men, but which had left *her* with the short straw. Now she was more a dumpy style of windbreak. Not that being curvy had seemed to put men off in the past. In fact at one time she'd used to have men—for men read her brothers' approved friends—eating out of her hand. Safe to say in London that hand had been well and truly bitten off.

Her brothers had definitely snaffled all the best growing genes, Lucia reflected as she heaved and tugged on Grace's minuscule boob-tube. Lucia was five foot three, while each of her brothers was at least a foot taller. Their width was breathtaking, whilst hers was merely distance across.

And that distance had never seemed greater, Lucia concluded, as she attempted to stuff one breast inside the elasticated boob-tube only to have the other spring out. And she had yet to tackle Grace's hot pants. Malevolently gleaming silver beneath the flickering light, they taunted her in silent reproach for a diet high on cheap and comforting junk food.

Having finally managed to subdue both breasts, she approached the hot pants warily, like an enemy that had to be put in its place.

Ouch!

The hot pants were definitely in place.

In tank top and jeans, ripped, tanned and pumped after exercise, Luke Forster was reclining with his cowboy boots crossed on an ornate coffee table at his hotel suite at the Grand Hotel in St Oswalds when he took a call from Argentina.

'Do me a favour and look Lucia up while you're there in Cornwall?' Luke's closest friend, Nacho Acosta asked him after they had finished discussing their latest polo match.

'Lucia's in Cornwall?'

'That's what she told me,' Nacho confirmed.

Luke stalled. *Must I?* Was his first thought. Lucia was Nacho's sister, and more trouble than any man needed. As Nacho recited Lucia's number he processed some swift mental imagery that seemed to centre mainly on Lucia's breasts.

That was *so* wrong. Nacho was his best friend and Lucia was the nearest thing Luke had to a sister. Breasts were definitely off the menu.

Lucia's breasts were pretty spectacular.

'She's gone off radar again, Luke.'

He shook himself round to take in what Nacho was saying.

'Though this time my sister *has* been good enough to leave a voicemail with the news that she's revisiting old haunts.'

Luke groaned inwardly. He was doing the same thing, so bang went his excuse not to look for her. Raking tense fingers through his thick brown hair, he added a couple of days to an already crammed schedule. Juggling wide-ranging business interests with his family's huge charitable foundation, as well as playing polo at the international level, demanded enough of his time without going on some wild goose chase looking for Nacho's wayward sister. It wasn't as if Lucia going off radar was anything new. The only female in a family with four forceful brothers, Lucia had broken away as soon as she could, quickly gaining the reputation of being a party girl extraordinaire.

'I know she's all grown up now, but I still feel responsible for her,' Nacho was explaining. 'You will do this for me, won't you, Luke?'

How could he refuse? Nacho had assumed responsibility for his siblings when their parents were killed in a flood, which had worked out great for Lucia's brothers, who were all older than Lucia, and had been okay for Lucia to begin with. But when she'd hit her teens ...

'I'll find her,' he confirmed. 'If she's revisiting old haunts, what about school?'

'Which school?' Nacho demanded.

They both laughed.

Super-bright and super-bad, Lucia had run several headmistresses ragged. 'If she's in Cornwall,' he murmured, thinking out loud, 'it shouldn't be hard to find her. The village is dead, apart from the club. Let me follow a hunch,' he said, remembering Lucia dancing at the wedding. That chick could *move*.

'I can't ask for more than that,' Nacho agreed.

They started talking polo again, but Lucia had taken up residence in Luke's head. Both their mothers were Cornish, which was how the two families had met each year, holidaying together at the same quaint guest house on the rugged Cornish coast. The Sundowner had excellent stables and immediate access to the beach, which had given it the edge over the rest of the local accommodation where Luke's parents were concerned. The Sundowner Guest House was intimate and private, plus the owner's quirky take on hospitality, treating every family as her own, meant it offered something money couldn't buy.

Luke loved Cornwall. He was glad to be back here doing business. It was the one place he felt free. Maybe he hadn't realised it as a boy, but when he'd galloped across the beach with Lucia's brothers he'd been true to himself. Now he was successful in his own right he wanted to recapture those feelings of elation and freedom.

'Let me know as soon as you hear something, Luke,' Nacho pressed him, adding, 'I envy you being back in St Oswalds. Do you remember tearing up the beach on those wild ponies?'

'How could I forget?' He liked that Nacho felt the same. 'Would you come back if I reinstated polo on the beach?'

'You bet I would,' Nacho assured him.

With one of the top polo players in the world on board, his plan was already starting to take shape, but as Nacho applied more pressure for him to bring polo back to Cornwall Luke was still thinking about Lucia.

He and Lucia were so different. Luke was an only child, brought up preppy and obedient, and when he was a boy the Acostas had seemed an exotic bunch to him, with their dark flashing eyes and outstanding horsemanship. He had made a point of riding on the beach at the same time as the brothers, wanting them to see his own skill on a horse. Nacho had taught him how to stand on a horse's back while it galloped, nearly killing him in the process, while Lucia had merely tossed her glorious black hair in his face and turned a dismissive back.

Remember those eyes when Lucia flashed a challenge? Those dark, mischievous eyes ...

Damn those eyes! Lucia was more trouble than she was worth. 'I'll be in touch when I've got something to tell you, Nacho.'

'That's good enough for me, Luke.'

He exchanged the usual pleasantries and ended the call with Lucia firmly fixed in his mind.

He was still thinking about her later that day, remembering the last time he'd seen her at an Acosta family wedding. Expecting a temperamental teen, he had found a woman who was all grown up. And *hot*. The way she had sashayed up to him, only to veer away at the very last moment on the pretext of seeking out one of her brothers, had left him with an ache in his groin and sweet revenge on his mind.

Forget Lucia, Luke told himself sternly as he waged the endless razor war on stubble that refused to surrender. Tonight he was meeting an attractive blonde who ran an events company, which dovetailed nicely with his plan to start investigating the possibility of reinstating the annual Polo on

the Beach event, which had been started way back by Lucia's father. His conversation with Nacho had crystallised his plans, and though it was a setback to find St Oswalds so run down, construction was one of the main planks of his business, so it made perfect sense for him to regenerate the village and bring the world back to its door.

And Lucia? What part would she play?

So much for forgetting about Lucia, Luke concluded, studying his freshly shaved face in the mirror. Shaving was a necessary habit rather than a purposeful exercise. Stubble was already shading his face, making him look more piratical than ever. His East Coast American father liked to protest that he could never understand where Luke's looks came from. 'All that thick, dark hair and the swarthy complexion ... and those muscles! So vulgar.' That was his father's verdict. At which point he would cast an accusing glance at Luke's mother and tell her that it must be her side of the family to blame.

That was the link between him and Lucia. They were both outsiders. Lucia was the girl yearning for independence in a household dominated by four alpha males, while he was the musclebound son of Princeton. Quite how that would help him combine a business dinner with a blonde with a hunt for a wild child on the loose remained to be seen.

Lucia's body had just gone into meltdown. *Luke Forster was in the club.* It wasn't possible ...

Unless there were two formidable warrior-type men who stood head and shoulders above every other man in the place, with the looks to make any pretty-boy film star pack up his bags and go home, it was a rock-hard certainty. No two men on earth looked as good as that.

So what was Luke Forster doing here?

Rooted to the spot, with a tray of drinks balanced precariously in her shaking hands, Lucia was hiding in the shadows by the bar, oblivious to the barman yelling, 'Get a move on, Anita. There's another order waiting. You know we're shorthanded tonight, babe.'

'Move it, Anita!'

She leapt into action at the sound of Van Rickter's voice. Why couldn't the manager keep his voice down? Her name-change wouldn't fool Luke for a second. To make matters worse, Luke had a woman on his arm—a very glamorous woman. Lucia could just imagine them both laughing when Luke explained in his husky, mocking tone that Lucia was running away again, and this time with a name that reflected her interest in music and coffee.

'Thanks, darling,' the barman said as he passed another loaded tray across the bar. 'You're the best.'

She zipped away, taking the long route round to her table of customers to avoid Luke. She didn't want him to see her like this ... Not just working here at the club. She would defend her right to work to the bitter end. But Luke knew her too well. He would sense how she'd changed. *Dirty ... Defiled ... Ashamed and afraid ...*

But she was fighting back in her own time, and on her own terms.

Stamping down on the recent past, Lucia returned her thoughts to Luke. She had tried everything to eject Luke from her head, but nothing worked. The more she tried the more she wanted him, and everything had changed since the last time they had met when she had flirted so outrageously with him. She had invited trouble by living up to her wild-child image and now she had to pay the price. The woman on his arm was more Luke's type. Smart, sharp, businesslike and neatly packaged. Lucia doubted Luke's girlfriend would get herself into any awkward position outside a yoga class. Her only consolation was that the girl's improbably whitened teeth attracted the club's ultraviolet light in a way no one would want unless they suffered chronic delusions of being a torch.

'Where do you think you're going?'

Lucia froze at the sound of Van Rickter's voice. She had dumped the tray of empty glasses and had been hoping to make it to the stockroom before Luke spotted her. Rubbing her arms energetically, she said, 'Don't you think it's cold in here? I thought I'd turn the heating up.'

‘Put some more clothes on while you’re at it,’ Van sneered. ‘The new uniform was designed with slimmer girls than you in mind. There should be some of the old shapeless ones in the back.’

‘That’s where I’m heading,’ she said brightly. Sloughing off Van’s insults, she glanced anxiously over her shoulder. Thankfully Luke was still in deep conversation with the blonde. Luke wasn’t just her brothers’ closest friend, he was a fully paid-up member of their over-protective, pain-in-the-ass, let’s-keep-Lucia-at-ten-years-old-for-ever gang. He certainly wasn’t someone she wanted to see her dressed in too-tight silver hot pants and an X-rated top.

‘Wait!’ Van Rickter barked in a way she was certain must draw Luke’s attention. ‘If you’re off the floor longer than five minutes, you’re fired. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Crystal,’ Lucia said, backing towards the stockroom.

‘Find the biggest uniform you can’ was Van’s parting shot.

‘Thank you. I will.’

She disappeared behind the door with a gust of relief. She couldn’t care less what Van Rickter thought about her. Ever since London she had wanted to be thought a sexless amoeba without cheekbones, breasts or a waist. Seeing Luke had only reinforced that desperate wish. Far from wanting to flirt with him, she would happily turn her back on all men with the greatest relief. And whatever sort of mess her life was in, *she* would sort it out. Not her brothers. And definitely not Luke.

Last year’s uniform wasn’t much better on her than this year’s, but at least it had a skirt. Well, almost. Wriggling into it, she plucked the matching satin shirt from its hanger and slipped it on, tying it beneath her ample breasts. She hesitated over the grubby plastic camellia blossom she was supposed to pin behind her ear. There were limits.

She walked out of the stockroom straight into Luke. Just her luck—he was at the bar buying drinks. Now she couldn’t breathe, let alone pull something out of the bag to defuse the shocked look in his eyes. ‘Luke!’ she said, feigning surprise as her heart threatened to explode. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I might ask you the same question,’ he said, taking a step back to eye her up and down.

Telling herself she was used to alpha males, having grown up with four of them, she lifted her chin. ‘This is where we always go,’ she said, gesturing around as if she was at the club with a huge gang of friends. This only succeeded in causing Luke’s eyes to narrow with disbelief.

With shock crackling between them as Luke scoffed disbelievingly, she drank him in. Luke was the essence of male. Bigger and more powerful than the other men in the club, he was infinitely better looking. Luke had always been able to melt her with a glance—though at the moment that glance was doing its best to incinerate her, which for once rested more comfortably with Lucia than the smouldering, sexy look Luke was so good at. He was even bigger than she remembered—harder, tougher—though, as always, immaculately groomed, with shoulders wide enough to hoist an ox and hard-muscled legs that went on and on to ... to a point from which she quickly averted her eyes.

While *she* had not only let herself go, but was wearing last year’s shabby club uniform, with her hair scraped back and her face glowing red and shiny beneath the lights. Perfect.

‘Lucia?’ Luke rapped sternly, staring down at her with knife-sharp eyes. ‘Are you working here?’

Of course she should have said, *What’s it to you?* But a row might draw attention and she couldn’t afford to lose this job. ‘No, of course I’m not working here,’ she protested with a laugh, glancing around to make sure no one had heard Luke calling her by her real name. ‘I come here so often they let me hang my coat in the stockroom.’

‘Really?’ Luke drawled, with an even more contemptuous expression in his brooding amber gaze.

‘Okay, from time to time,’ she admitted, brushing it off as she continued to stare at a face that was mesmerising in its harsh masculine beauty. If you wanted *hard* there was no better hard to be had than Luke Forster—as her yearning and thoroughly confused body would now attest. But Van

was prowling, Lucia noticed. ‘Gin and orange for your friend?’ she suggested as the blonde, having exited the restroom, made a beeline for them.

‘I have ordered our drinks, thank you,’ Luke said coolly. ‘Vanessa,’ he murmured, in what Lucia considered an unnecessarily indulgent tone, ‘I’d like you to meet an old friend of mine.’

‘Not so much of the old,’ Lucia joked weakly, feeling awkward and ridiculously exposed when she compared herself to Luke’s neatly styled friend. The blonde was even prettier close up, and was hanging on to Luke’s arm as if her life depended on it.

‘Do you work here?’ Vanessa enquired, visibly relaxing once she had assessed Lucia and found her lacking in—well, practically everything.

‘I help out here occasionally,’ Lucia said carefully.

‘How nice to have such a ... sociable job.’ The blonde looked at Luke for approval of her assessment, but Luke was too busy studying Lucia.

Van, having spotted money, was sniffing around. ‘Have you seen our new casino yet?’ he crowed.

Van clearly imagined he had found a high-roller in Luke, but Lucia knew Luke had never gambled in his life, and rarely drank. Having summoned another of his serfs—a far more attractive cocktail waitress than Lucia—Van ushered the small group away.

The only good thing about it, Lucia mused from the shelter of the bar, was that Van was so drunk on the scent of money he had chosen to walk backward in front of Luke—until he collided with a table and then had to turn and chase after his big-striding guest.

The crowd on the dance floor fell back at Luke’s advance like the Red Sea parting, and Luke paused at the entrance to the casino just long enough to shoot a stare at Lucia that assured her this wasn’t nearly over yet.

CHAPTER TWO

Get a flat

Admittedly, this is not quite the accommodation I had in mind. But, again, there are reasons. And holiday parks are all the rage, offering an unparalleled level of lifestyle, according to the ads I've read in magazines. Sadly, my des res is a leaking tin can on wheels, with no discernible braking system, parked in a ramshackle field on the edge of a crumbling cliff a good half-mile walk from the shelter of the guest house. Try that out for size in a sleet storm in winter.

SHE spent the rest of the shift swinging like a pendulum between kicking herself because Luke had caught her out and wondering how on earth to explain to her brothers' clearly bemused friend what she was doing there—without actually telling him what had happened, that was. Why hadn't she been frank with him and looked to Luke to keep her safe? He was the next best thing to a brother, wasn't he? Why hadn't she told him the truth?

Because it was none of Luke's damn business!

And because she had never felt more ashamed or more soiled in her life. He would never look at her the same way again if he knew ... She couldn't be further from her dream of building her own life, independent of Luke and her brothers, Lucia realised as Van switched off the soft lights in the club after another long night, turning on the harsh glare of factory-style strip-lighting.

There was a song about a girl from South America who was tall and young and lovely. Lucia had used to hum it beneath her breath when she was a pre-teen, never dreaming she would turn into the *other* girl from Ipanema—the one who was short and a bit too fat, plain and olive-skinned. And stupid. She had to be stupid to have got herself into such a mess in London. How could she go home and tell them the truth now? It was all too humiliating, too shameful.

So she would ride this storm out like any other, Lucia told herself firmly. She just hadn't fathomed out how yet.

She had been monumentally thrown at seeing Luke again, Lucia reasoned as she helped the barman clean the bar. She *was* making the climb back, though, however long it was taking, and she should cut herself some slack. Tonight the best thing she could do was to concentrate on cleaning up and earning a night's pay.

His attention on the blonde hadn't so much slipped as fallen down a ravine—a ravine with Lucia at the bottom of it. To say he was shocked at seeing her working here would be putting it mildly. It was a world away from the last time he'd seen her, dancing so hotly he hadn't been able to take his eyes off her. How had she gone from that to working for a toad like Van Rickter? How was that supposed to further Lucia's career? And where was she living? Who was she spending time with? What had happened to the girl who had blown him out of the water with her sass, her dancing, her brilliant smile, her world-class flirting, her breasts? Okay, so the breasts were still pretty amazing, but the rest ...

What the hell had happened to Lucia?

The thought that Van Rickter might have something to do with it made the hackles rise on the back of his neck. His call to Nacho could wait. There were a few enquiries he wanted to make first.

He glanced round impatiently as Vanessa waved an empty glass in his face. 'The club's closed,' he pointed out sharply, knowing he was the one to blame for hanging on to watch Lucia.

Making his excuses before the evening became even more uncomfortable than it had already been, he called a cab for the blonde and took Van Rickter into the back room to make a few things clear to him.

'How long has that girl called Lucia worked here?'

'Lucia?' Van Rickter seemed genuinely confused. 'There's no one called Lucia working here,' he protested, with a shifty, guilty look.

‘The dark-haired girl with the attitude and—’

‘Oh, you mean Anita,’ Van Rickter said on a wave of relief. ‘At least that’s what she calls herself here,’ he said, quickly covering himself in case Lucia had done something wrong. ‘Don’t tell me she’s an illegal?’ Van exclaimed, wiping his brow as if hiring vulnerable people for cash and far less than the minimum wage had never occurred to him.

‘I mean Anita,’ Luke agreed offhandedly. ‘I must have misheard her name,’ He might be all out of patience with Lucia, but this was private business. He wasn’t going to give Van Rickter anything that he could hurt Lucia with, or make money out of.

‘I could arrange a meeting, if you like,’ Van Rickter said, in a way that made Luke’s pupils shrink to arrowheads. ‘All the girls owe me ...’

I bet they do, Luke thought with distaste.

‘She has a second job at the local guest house,’ Van Rickter revealed, toadying up to him. ‘The Sundowner? You might have heard of it. Maybe the owner there can tell you more.’

Luke hid his rush of triumph. Lucia wouldn’t be using the alias Anita at the guest house, where the owner knew her, so Margaret must be in on Lucia’s life plan—whatever that might be. But there was something else worrying him. If he hadn’t known better he would have said Lucia had flinched from him, almost as if she had some communicable disease. That wasn’t the girl he knew—the girl who would happily take any man down with her repartee. So what the hell was going on?

In spite of his distaste at being forced to discuss Lucia with a man like Van Rickter, he was amused at the thought of Lucia choosing the name of a Puerto Rican firecracker in a musical. It made him think back to her brothers, yelling at her to turn the caterwauling down when they had wanted heavy metal to rule the house. He could imagine Lucia had dreamed of being Anita, a woman free to express herself without four brothers drowning her out—though in his opinion Lucia had far more going for her than a fantasy figure.

Kill those thoughts. Lucia was trouble. Whatever mess she had got herself into this time, it wasn’t up to him to sort it out. He’d tell Nacho he’d found her and then his job was done.

Lucia had a second job? Luke mused, turning to stare at the entrance to the club. No wonder she looked exhausted. Two lousy jobs in the wilds of Cornwall didn’t come close to equalling one good job in the heart of London. So what had happened to the management position at the top London hotel Nacho had been telling him about? He consoled himself with the thought that whatever she was hiding he would find out. Lucia was living at the Sundowner, and Margaret, the owner, was a big part of his plan to revive the area.

‘Luke ...’

She was thrashing about in bed in that half-world between sleeping and waking where anything was possible—even a man making love to her. But this wasn’t any man.

Shifting restlessly on what passed for her pillow, she pulled the scratchy blanket round her shoulders and slipped deeper into the world of dreams, where her body was still capable of quivering with awareness, with warmth and with arousal—where Luke’s brooding amber gaze needed no explanation and the care in his big, strong hands was all the reassurance she needed.

Seeing Luke again tonight had been bound to lead to this, Lucia’s drifting mind soothed. Her eyes were open and yet they were closed. She was sleeping, surely? The air was misty with a golden glow. Candles were flickering. Seductive scents tickled her nostrils. Luke was stripped to the waist and leaning over her. He was as magnificent as ever. His golden torso, so powerful and so shielding, made her feel small, made her feel safe, made her feel that anything was possible—even Luke looking at her with desire in his eyes ...

Thrashing her head on the pillow, she knew this was wrong. Luke was taboo. She should not be lying here naked with him. Luke was older, established, confident, experienced. Luke was her brothers’ friend—upright and principled.

Her body didn't care about any of that and responded urgently. Reaching out, she mapped the wealth of muscle from his shoulders to his iron-hard belly, glorying in his strength. And when Luke quivered beneath her touch she revelled in her power over him. But Luke refused to accept her dominance and, swinging her beneath him, brushed his fingertips across her breasts, watching without pity as she gasped for air and arced towards him, seeking more contact.

What was she doing? Luke was built on a heroic scale, and when he discovered the truth about her he would throw her off in disgust.

Luke knew how much she wanted him. Holding her gaze, he caressed her, and she groaned as pleasure spiralled through her body. Reaching up, she laid her palm against his stubble-roughened cheek. Luke answered by teasing her lips apart and taking her mouth in a scorching reminder of what else he'd like to do to her.

'I have no other duty but to please you,' he said.

Quite right too, she thought, though the longing to pleasure Luke was overcoming her, and to be pleased by him, to forget her fear. But just as she reached for him he slowed the pace. Turning away, he poured champagne, then reached for some fruit in the bowl by the bed. He dipped a ripe berry in melted chocolate before holding it to her lips. She sat forward. He took it away. He moved to kiss her. She moved away. Luke's eyes held so much understanding, and when his lips claimed hers he tasted of strawberries and chocolate. Gaining in confidence, she rubbed her naked breasts against his chest and felt her nipples tighten. Drawing deeply on his warm male scent, she placed her hands flat against Luke's hard, hot torso and drew him down.

'Tell me what you want, Lucia.'

'Kiss me,' she begged, reaching up.

'Is that all?'

'It's enough.'

'I don't believe you.'

As Luke cupped her with his hand, almost but not quite granting her the contact she craved, a wave of pleasure stole away her fear. But then he drove his thigh between her legs and demanded harshly, 'What's wrong, Anita?'

Anita?

She shrieked in terror as the fantasy collapsed and instead of Luke the fat, flabby, pale-skinned concierge loomed naked and aroused above her, red-faced and lecherous. His reptilian eyes glistened yellow in the light, while his fat red lips, wet with saliva, just as she remembered them, were drawn back in a snarl over rotting teeth. She fought him, fighting furiously for her honour, for her life—

Waking with a start, Lucia sucked in a sharp breath, staring round fearfully. It took her a moment to realise where she was. The caravan slowly took on a reassuring form. There was no concierge. There was no Luke. There was no satin bed-linen. There were just bobbly grey sheets, and she had been slithering about on top of one of her magazines. Luke hadn't been feeding her chocolate sauce and fruit. And there certainly wasn't any champagne. There were just some dregs of hot chocolate left in the flask on a shelf by the bed.

She was still shaking as the nightmare faded. Climbing out of bed, she realised the dream was the closest she'd come to sex with Luke—was ever likely to come to sex with Luke—and even in her dreams she couldn't get it right.

Because the concierge had taken over.

Perhaps it would always be like that from now on. Perhaps her dream of becoming a strong, independent woman was just a pipe dream. Perhaps she would never be able to make love properly, because the concierge would always be waiting in the wings to spoil things for her.

And after a dream like that, how could she ever face Luke again?

It was eleven o' clock on a Friday night and the club was heaving. A whole seven Luke-free days had passed. And that was good.

Was it?

Yes, of course it was. She could do without any more of those dreams seeing Luke seemed to provoke. He had probably returned to the States by now, after taking the same trip down memory lane in Cornwall that she had. She could only hope for Luke's sake he had had a better result. She was currently putting in a second shift as another cocktail waitress had gone off sick, and she was so tired she was seriously considering nabbing a couple of cocktail sticks from the bar to prop her eyes open. There must be a convention on at the Grand, Lucia guessed, as more people poured in through the door.

'Anita.'

Van was approaching. There had been a distinct improvement in Van's mood since Luke's visit. He couldn't take the risk that Lucia had friends in high places, she supposed, though that had been wearing a bit thin this evening, as if Van suspected her influential friend might have deserted her finally.

The holiday had definitely ended, Lucia concluded, as Van snapped, 'There's been a spillage on the dance floor. Do something about it, will you?' Van's piggy eyes continued darting back and forth as he spoke, counting money as it walked through the door. 'Now,' he spelled out, turning to glare at her. 'We have some important patrons stopping by tonight.'

'Yes, sir,' Lucia murmured, hurrying away to get her mop and bucket.

'And, Anita?'

'Yes?' She stopped and turned around.

'You need to lose weight.'

She nodded agreement. Van was always right. That was the mindset you had to have if you wanted a quiet life at the club. But in this instance Van *was* right. She felt humiliated in the too-tight boob tube and hot pants ensemble, over which she overflowed with all the glorious abundance of a chocolate fountain. But since Van had made her revert back to the original cocktail waitress uniform so she 'blended in', as he put it, she would just have to suck it up.

Emerging from the stockroom with her cleaning tackle, she grabbed a clean apron from a hook by the door. She would have preferred a tent, but that might have looked a bit obvious, and at least the apron partially concealed her body.

She had to put out cones to keep the area clear so no one would slip on the dance floor while she was working. She'd done plenty of clean-ups at the club, but this one was particularly revolting. Suffice it to say unmentionable substances, still with the distinct tang of brandy and cola about them, had spread widely across the black glass tiles. She was making good progress while customers gyrated around her unconcerned. She was invisible. Wasn't that great?

Not so great when she got stomped on a couple of times. But she was nearly finished.

Lucia's heart bounced once and then stopped. There was only one man who would have the balls to wear cowboy boots with a sharp Italian suit. She stiffened as a pair of very large feet halted within inches of her nose.

Important patron? Van had got that right. Conscious that her XXL silver-clad backside was poking up in the air, she quickly drew it down and remained quite still, as if she might somehow become invisible again.

But sadly no.

'Lucia?'

How could her life get any worse?

Luke Forster, Lucia's childhood crush, and more recently her erotic dream buddy, was back.

CHAPTER THREE

Where in my list does it say that one of the bad boys of polo can crack his whip over my head while I'm on my hands and knees in front of him?

Blech! That does not sound good.

Did that possibility even cross my mind when I was a fourteen-year-old dreamer with only gallant knights in shining armour ahead of me?

No. It did not.

'Up.'

People turned to stare. Luke's voice sounded like a pistol crack, blotting out the music as well as the overheated chatter in the club.

'Hello, Luke,' Lucia said mildly, determined there wouldn't be a scene. Van would sack her on the spot. And wouldn't Luke relish ammunition like that when he made his report to her brothers? 'How nice to see you again.' With clothes on, she amended silently, trying hard not to blink.

'Imagine my surprise to see you here *working*,' Luke countered with bite. He returned her upturned gaze with an expressionless stare.

Attack was the only form of defence in this situation. Why was she still down on her knees? Standing, she said coolly, 'You didn't think to say goodbye last time you were in the club. Oh, no—I forgot,' she added. 'You had better things to do.' A spear of inconvenient jealousy hit her as she looked in vain for the blonde.

'She's not here,' Luke said, reading her with ease. 'And you're leaving.'

'I beg your pardon?' Now she was upset. One of the upsides of seeing Luke again was that it had restored some of her old fire. She hadn't broken free of her brothers only to be ordered about by Luke!

'You heard me,' Luke said stonily.

Breaking eye contact, she reached for her bucket.

'You're leaving that where it is,' he rapped.

'No!' Luke's big tanned hand seized hold of her arm, and it was bad enough seeing those sensitive fingers sinking into pale, plump flesh without remembering the magic those hands had wrought in her dream ...

This was reality, Lucia reminded herself sharply.

But wasn't this what she had waited for all her life? Luke riding to her rescue. Luke holding her. Luke ...

'Get off me,' she fired out furiously, shaking herself free. 'I'm not a horse you can grab hold of and lead where you like. I make my own plans, Luke. And I'm working. Do you want me to lose my job?'

Luke's arrogant head dipped so he could glare straight into her eyes. 'I would love you to lose your job,' he assured her grimly.

'I come off shift at three a.m. I can talk to you then, but not before,' she said, aware that Van the Terrible was lurking in the shadows, watching them.

Picking up her mop and bucket, she stalked off the dance floor before Luke had the chance to say a word.

There was only one small consolation in all of this. Her body might be trembling like a leaf, but she was earning a living, and however small that living might be when compared to Luke's vast income she was living independently. *Two* small consolations, Lucia conceded with surprise. Confronting Luke hadn't frightened her. She hadn't backed down and slithered away to do his bidding. She had felt as if she'd been in a perpetual state of fear since London—finally she was beginning to feel alive again.

So she didn't need him. *Good.* He shouldn't get involved. He would call Nacho—let him take over. Lucia was wild and had set herself on a very different path from him. He was all about polo

and business, and had no intention of being distracted or pulled down by anyone. Lucia was clearly on a downward trajectory. With every advantage in the world, she had chosen to work in a club.

Really? Did he believe that?

All he knew for certain at this point was that in his family no one went against expectation, and feelings were curbed as stringently as any horse in a dressage arena. Lucia was composed entirely of emotion. She was an untameable Acosta. He should put her out of his mind for good

Which was easier said than done. He was becoming increasingly worried about her, and in spite of the cold facts he owed Nacho.

Was that all?

So she was attractive. He would soon tire of all the drama.

Wasn't it entertaining to be around someone with so much character for a change?

Didn't he love to hunt?

He liked the chase best of all.

What the hell was he thinking?

Lucia was the kid sister of his closest friend. She was out of bounds. And, in the unlikely event that he found himself in the mood for a walk on the wild side, he'd choose someone as worldly as he was—not some pampered Argentinian princess.

Who wasn't too proud to get down on her hands and knees and scrub a filthy club if that was what it took.

And who was one hell of a good-looking woman, Luke conceded, even in the extraordinary outfit Lucia was forced to wear at work.

All the more reason for him to keep his distance. With his blood boiling in his veins she was safer away from him.

Three o'clock in the morning came and went. The last patron had left the club. They had swept up and tidied and Luke had gone. She'd been too busy to notice when he left. He had left with the blonde, she presumed, feeling sick inside. He definitely hadn't remembered what day it was today.

So what? Why should she care if Luke had forgotten it was her birthday? She didn't need him. Luke Forster could go to hell in a bucket for all she cared.

'Didn't your birthday start at midnight?' Grace asked, giving Lucia's arm a squeeze as they left the club together.

'How did you know?' Lucia asked as they took shelter for a moment before braving the rain.

'I know everything about you,' Grace teased fondly.

Including Lucia's real name. Grace was too good a friend for Lucia to want to deceive her. 'So you've heard the party-girl rumours too?'

Grace laughed. 'You don't know the meaning of the word. You're not a party girl any more than I am, Lucia. But some of our friends at the club seem to think we should lighten up a bit.'

'I hope you're not referring to Van Rickter?'

Grace frowned. 'I wouldn't call him a friend, exactly, but there *are* other nice people working at the club.'

'What are you hiding under your jacket?' Lucia enquired as they crossed the road.

'We had a whip-round for your birthday,' Grace explained, starting to smile.

'What is it?' Lucia asked, her curiosity well and truly roused.

'I'm not saying. I don't want to spoil the surprise. But I will tell you this much—everyone seems determined to tempt at least one of us off the straight and narrow this year.'

'It might take a bit longer than that for me,' Lucia admitted, shivering as the cold wind whipped around her.

'Don't be such a defeatist,' Grace teased. 'A lot can happen quickly if you're lucky.'

Lucia huffed as Grace squeezed her arm again, and then both girls screamed as they splashed through an icy puddle in the middle of the road.

‘I stuck a couple of mags in the bag as well,’ Grace called out as they parted company at the entrance to the Sundowner Holiday Park. ‘You might recognise one of the centrefolds. You were talking to him in the club.’

Lucia’s heart went crazy with excitement. The centrefold was hardly going to be Van Rickter—unless the magazine in question was *Amphibian World*.

She ran all the way to the caravan and, throwing her shoulder against the buckled door, launched herself inside. Dropping her things on the floor, she snatched the magazines out of the gift bag and flung herself onto the lumpy bunk. Leafing through as fast as she could, she stalled at the centre page of the second magazine.

Luke Forster was *ROCK!*’s Torso of the Year.

Dropping the magazine, she threw herself back against the cold tin wall. ‘You blue-blooded hypocrite!’ Her main gripe was not how Luke looked—which was pretty spectacular by any standards—but the way he behaved when he was around her, as if he were a paragon of all the virtues. ‘So you’re incorruptible, are you?’

Now, this was worrying. Not only was she talking to herself, but she was involving a magazine in the conversation. With an angry huff, she plucked the gum from her mouth and stuck Luke’s centrefold to the wall. ‘Take that!’ A thump from her fist secured it. Standing back, she had to concede Luke’s centrefold *did* brighten things up a bit.

So where was he? Lucia wondered, going through her nightly routine of getting ready for bed in the freezing caravan by piling on more clothes. If Luke was still in Cornwall he was probably tucked up in a nice warm room at the Grand by now—with the blonde. *Ack!* And if he thought about Lucia at all it would only be to wonder if she was ready to go home yet.

‘No, I’m not ready,’ she snarled, glaring at Luke’s poster. ‘And I’m not giving up. I can’t give up. I can’t go home. Not like this....’

Their nice, warm kitchen in Argentina, where the roof never leaked and the floor was never cold, and she had never once had to pick ice off the insides of the windows ...

Unscrewing the top of the flask of hot chocolate that Margaret left on the table each night, she scowled at Luke’s centrefold as she gulped the warm liquid down. She tried not to think about the list of goals she had intended to achieve by now—goals Lucia had been so confident were achievable when she was fourteen.

Reaching beneath the bed, she drew out the precious tote full of memories and extracted the battered notebook in which, as a dreamy-eyed teen, she had written down her innermost hopes and dreams. She didn’t often do this. She saved it for when things were really bad. The bag of dreams, as she called the old canvas tote, was her comforter. It contained her journal from when she was fourteen, and her rather more neglected journal from now. She pulled the old one out and started to read.

It is imperative to follow this list to the letter if I’m ever going to break free from Conan the Barbarian and his gang of galloping gauchos—otherwise known as my brothers ...

Lucia smiled as she read the messy list, with all its scribbles and crossings-out. It was hard to believe she had ever been so naïve. Most of her ideas had been based on articles she’d read in teen magazines, which of course were essential reading for fourteen-year-olds with everything to learn. She would have to completely re-jig the list. Get a wax *after* she’d got a man? Well, that was wrong to start with. And, the way she felt right now, getting a wax could be number two-hundred and thirty-six on next year’s list. Yes, Luke was gorgeous, but ...

No. She couldn’t.

She just couldn’t, that’s all.

But just out of curiosity, and because trips down memory lane seemed to be in vogue right now, she straightened out the much-thumbed pages and began to read.

1. Get a job!—preferably promoting a bar, which is a great way to meet new people, according to *ROCK!* magazine

2. Get a flat!—something gorgeous and stylish in the best part of town. N.B. V. close to the bar!

3. Get a wax!

She remembered that last entry being based more on dreading what her rapidly changing body might do next rather than any horrific hirsute happenings. And how many times had that entry been deferred? And why did she still shift position nervously when she read it?

She pulled a face as she got up to check her top lip in the mirror. Flopping back down again, she remembered her mother's pale face when a visit to the beautician loomed. Perhaps that was the answer to her waxing phobia. She could still hear her young self asking, 'Are you all right, Mama?' And her mother's response: 'You'll understand one day what it means to be a woman, Lucia, and what we have to go through for our men ...' Hefty sigh at that point.

All sorts of images had flashed into Lucia's young brain—nostril-hair-plucking, blackhead-excising, even earwax-removal with one of those long, pointy things—but never had she imagined that her mother was referring to that most delicate of regions, let alone that some stranger was going to view her private bits close up prior to coating them in molten wax like some medieval torturer. And it didn't finish there—as Lucia had discovered in that invaluable teenage self-help tome known to one and all as *ROCK! Magazine*. Then this female Torquemada was going to rip away at those nether regions without so much as a by-your-leave.

Youch!

No way, José!

Back to the list. The next entry after wax, was

4. Get a tan

Lucia remembered a columnist in *ROCK!* insisting that this must be subtle—a mere sun-kissed whisper that would fool any man into thinking it was natural.

5. Get a cool new wardrobe!

One that did not include a bobbly polyester uniform in a shade that might once have been white, presumably.

6. Get a hairdo

This prompted another visit to the mirror, where she lifted up her haystack hair. Most people complained that their hair was too thin or too straight. She was currently experiencing the opposite problem, known as The Inexplicable Explosion of Frizz. Without her styling products and gadgets, and without money to get it done in a salon, she was on her own.

7. Get a gym membership

First off, gym memberships cost money. And there was a more important consideration: without the hairdo, the tan, the wax and the cool new wardrobe, she was never going to make it through the door of a decent gym.

8. Get a good dance teacher—for the Samba, preferably. Someone like the old gaucho Ignacio, on Nero Caracas's ranch. Judging by the way Ignacio vaulted the fence when I decided to ride Nero's fire-breathing monster stallion bareback, Ignacio has still got some moves in him!

9. Get a gag for her polo-playing brothers—so they can't share any embarrassing secrets with any men I might attract once I've completed all of the above.

10. Get a (non-polo-playing) man

And there the list ended. Lucia smiled as she remembered Ignacio teaching her to dance the Samba, and quite a few other dances as well, bringing his ancient ghetto blaster, as Ignacio had called his battered radio, to the hay barn, where she'd been able to blunder about undisturbed. Okay. Looking on the bright side. She was still podgy and in need of a suntan with a frizz ball on her head, but this babe could dance.

'Cheers, Margaret,' Lucia murmured, wrapping her frozen hands around the warm flask of chocolate. This small, kind act of someone who had so little made Lucia more determined than ever to help her elderly friend.

‘And hello, Luke,’ she added, addressing Luke’s smouldering poster just inches from her bed.

Hopping out again, she took a closer look. *Wow* hardly covered it. Lucia’s brothers frequently featured on billboards, but always in full polo rig and usually mounted on a horse. They were certainly never caught half-naked, sluicing themselves down, in a shot Lucia couldn’t imagine strait-laced Luke agreeing to in a million years.

‘You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?’ she murmured, taking full inventory of Luke’s previously hidden assets.

And then there was the pose. Brandishing a whip as he glared into the camera, Luke was naked to his washboard waist, his hard tanned torso accessorised by nothing more than sharp black stubble and a steel watch that could probably tell his position in relation to the moon. A pair of obscenely revealing riding breeches and knee-high leather boots completed an image guaranteed to make any girl’s day.

Posters were a safe way to appreciate the finer points of one of the world’s fittest men. She liked that. As she jumped about and blew on her hands to keep warm before hypothermia set in, Lucia guessed the only way Luke would have been caught out in a shot like that was through the involvement of her school friend and ruthless sister-in-law Holly. Holly was a journalist at *ROCK!* magazine, and had tamed—sorry—was *married* to Lucia’s brother Ruiz. Capturing Luke in such a provocative pose would have been an incredible scoop for her.

Three cheers for Holly the reporter! Lucia concluded, chalking one up for the girls. She took another look at Luke’s centrefold.

Goodness, Luke was big ...

No wonder she was having erotic dreams. Trying hard not to fixate on Luke’s clinging breeches and the improbable-sized bulge within, Lucia shook her head. She could admire all she liked, but it certainly would never happen now. It couldn’t. *She* couldn’t. One thing was sure: after this unveiling he could stick his disapproval the next time they met.

The next time they met?

There was nothing on her to-do list that ruled against meetings with an approved family friend, she reasoned, climbing into bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

I wandered lonely as a cloud that floats o'er vales and hill ...

I'm the only twenty-four-year-old I know who doesn't need to take her pill.

Anon.

Are all poets destined to end up on the (remainder) shelf?

Pull yourself together, Lucia!

RESTING her cheek against the cold wet glass the next morning, Lucia stopped scribbling in her journal and stared out of the caravan window at the windswept shore. If she had wanted distance from her brothers she had certainly got it here. She missed them, but no way was she going to ask them for the money to help Margaret. If she did she'd be right back to square one. Yes, she loved her brothers, but Nacho especially made no distinction between caring and smothering, which had left her gasping for freedom in the shadow of four powerful men and their saintly friend Luke.

Luke ...

Did her body *have* to respond with such unbridled delight to the idea of so much stern, glowering disapproval locked inside one hot man?

Maybe she liked Luke's steely self-control too much, Lucia reflected, glancing at his poster image. It was certainly enough to overrule her fear of men.

Most men. Picking up her bag, she made a mental note to get the strap repaired. It had suffered a few injuries when she had used it to beat off the concierge. Teeth, nails, handbag, heel of her shoe ... A frantic struggle which seemed so feeble now she looked back. But at least she had got away. Eventually.

The concierge had made her feel dirty, calling her names as she ran from the room, clutching her ripped shirt together. He'd said she was asking for it, when nothing could be further from the truth. She did like parties, and she liked flirting with hot guys, but now she could see that her fun-filled reputation had done her no favours. She could just imagine Luke's scorn if he ever found out what had happened. Getting changed in the staffroom without remembering to put the lock on the door? It was such a stupid thing to do. But she had to try to put it behind her or she would never get on with her life.

Tilting her chin, Lucia gave Luke's image one last confident stare, but the ache still remained. Where was he now? *With the blonde?* Perhaps Luke had sensed she was tainted—that the concierge had had his hands all over her. *Everywhere.* It made her stomach heave just thinking about it. She could still remember his fingers intimately feeling ... squeezing ... probing, and his sour breath choking her as she struggled to escape. If Luke knew that he would just think, *Party girl. What do you expect?*

She jumped as her phone rang, and then frowned as she checked the number. She had to take a moment before she could answer. Talk of the devil—though Luke would have no truck with hell. *What? No air-con?* Luke would be more likely to hold a season ticket to cloud extreme, where he could strum his whip beneath the glow of an oat-fed halo. No way would he waste his time on an aerodynamically inefficient tail and a totally useless pitchfork unless he could use it to strike a polo ball.

'Luke,' she said finally, when she had calmed down a little. 'What a nice surprise. Did you leave something at the club?'

'In the unlikely event I *had* left something at the club I would go back to pick it up. I wouldn't call you.'

Well. That told her. Luke couldn't have sounded less enthusiastic had he tried. Crouched on the bench seat, with her legs drawn up, she hugged the phone. 'Of course not,' she said, injecting energy into her voice. 'So, what can I do for you?'

‘I didn’t see you when I left the club. You were working, I expect.’

‘I’m sorry. I—’

‘Strange,’ he rapped over her. ‘The first time I saw you at the club you assured me you weren’t working there often. But the manager says you are. And he knows you as Anita. What’s going on, Lucia? Why are you lying to me?’

‘What I do or don’t do is none of your business, Luke.’

‘Nacho made it my business.’

‘So you’re my brother’s deputy now?’

‘I’m your brother’s friend,’ Luke argued quietly.

Luke couldn’t have disarmed her faster. There was no point starting a feud with someone Nacho loved when the very last thing she wanted was a total break with her family. ‘So why are you calling me?’

‘I’m concerned about you, Lucia.’

‘Well, don’t be. And if my brothers are so worried, why don’t they call? Or are they too busy playing polo?’

‘Why are you always so suspicious, Lucia?’

‘Because you’re all joined at the hip,’ she flashed. ‘And because my brothers never like me to have too long a leash. Isn’t that right, Luke?’

There was silence at the other end of the line.

Damn him! Luke had made her feel homesick, reminding her of all the warmth and support she received in Argentina. It made everything here seem bleaker—the wind rattling round the caravan, the freezing cold water, the hideous episode with the concierge which she was doing her best to block out, and then her subsequent high-speed drive through the night, reckless ...

And her lousy job at the club.

A dead-end job to end all dead-end jobs.

Her heart sank like a stone. She couldn’t bear for gorgeous, glorious, successful Luke to know her life was a complete and utter mess. And she certainly couldn’t bear for him to share that little nugget of information with her brothers. If they knew what had happened ... How they would blame her for her frivolous, careless party-girl lifestyle. She deserved this, didn’t she?

Sucking in a deep, steadying breath, she said briskly, ‘Is this a courtesy call, or does it have some purpose, Luke?’ She needed him to get off the line fast, before her voice broke.

‘I’ve never heard you in this mood before,’ he said suspiciously.

‘Independent, do you mean?’ Her fingers had turned white on the phone. It was one thing acting tough, but when she really wanted to cling to Luke’s disembodied presence like a brainless limpet until all the bad things went away it was far better to end the call as soon as she could.

‘Are you still there, Lucia?’

‘I’m here.’

Luke checking up on her was nothing new. She had been an object of amusement for Luke and her brothers for as long as Lucia could remember. They thought she was a fancy, frilly little joke—a novelty, a pet they would like to keep locked up in a box until they decided to bring her out and coo over her on those rare occasions when they weren’t trying to murder each other on the polo field.

‘Just tell my brothers everything’s fine.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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