RAFAEL'S
CONTRACT BRIDE
Nina Milne
Cherish

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Rafael's Contract Bride

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A proposal of convenience!Rafael Martinez is determined to prove his worth to the aristocratic family who disowned him. He’s one step away from a business deal that will seal his success, but first he needs an aristocratic wife!Cora Brookes knows exactly how much family disapproval can hurt—and accepting Rafael’s unexpected proposal is her chance to finally redeem herself. It was only supposed to be a paper marriage, but as Rafael helps Cora step out of the shadows, suddenly it seems possible their wedding vows could last a lifetime…

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“I want you to marry me.”

Marry him? The idea was so ludicrous, so incongruous, so impossible that Cora could only stare at Rafael, her brain unable to coordinate with her vocal chords or inform her feet to get her the heck out of there. Forget the Spanish Mafia, Rafael Martinez was obviously nuts. Loop-the-loop. A few bricks, a bucket of cement and a shedload of mortar short of a wall.

Then anger rushed in on a tide of outrage. “Is this your idea of a joke?” Some kind of mad reality TV show where billionaires humiliate the aristocracy?

“Of course it isn’t a joke.” There was that near amusement in the rich treacle of his voice.

Curiosity broke through and surfaced the haze of anger. “Why? Why would you even suggest something so insane?”

“Because I think marrying you will change Don Carlos’s mind.”

“I told you that I am not for sale. Nor is my title. End of.” Finally her body caught up with events and she pushed her chair back and rose to her feet. Tried to ignore the stew of hurt that bubbled under the broth of rage. There was no need for hurt. Why should she care that Rafael Martinez was only after her title? She’d already known that—but somehow the idea he would marry her for it made her feel … icky.

“Wait.” The word was a command. “Please.”

Rafael’s Contract Bride
Nina Milne

www.millsandboon.co.uk

NINA MILNE has always dreamed of writing for Mills & Boon—ever since as a child she played library with her mother’s stacks of Mills & Boon romances. On her way to this dream, Nina acquired an English degree, a hero of her own, three gorgeous children and (somehow) an accountancy qualification. She lives in Brighton and has filled her house with stacks of books—her very own real library.

To all the wonderful Dog Rescue charities and organisations who work so hard to find loving homes for dogs (like those included in this book!)

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CHAPTER ONE

CORA BROOKES LEANT down to ruffle the Border Collie’s head, and flopped down on the park bench. She adored Flash, just as she adored all the dogs she walked, but piled onto her day job, and on top of the extra accounts work, it meant exhaustion stretched her every muscle—physical and mental.

Still, she should look on the bright side—she had landed an excellent day job—an administrative position at Caversham Castle Hotel, part of Caversham Worldwide Holidays, and Ethan and Ruby Caversham were generous employers. So with her salary and all the extras one day she would be able to pay off the enormous debt that burdened her soul.

Determination banded her chest—she knew that repaying her parents wouldn't buy their love, or even their affection, but it would make Cora feel a whole lot better about how badly she had let her family down.

Don't go there, Cora.

Flash's sharp bark was a welcome relief from her thoughts and she squinted through the light spring mizzle at the tall, lean figure headed purposefully towards her.

Relief made a rapid exit as her forehead scrunched into disbelief. That couldn't possibly be Rafael Martinez. What would a billionaire Spanish-vineyard-owning playboy be doing in a park in the depths of Cornwall on a drizzly Saturday evening?

For a stupid second her heart skipped the smallest of beats. Hardly surprising—Rafael Martinez no doubt had that effect on the entire female population. Though in her case it wasn't attraction that caused the skitter effect—it was nerves. Logic told her that he wouldn't remember her—he'd shown no glimmer of recognition in the handful of times he'd seen her at the Cavershams'. Hadn't once indicated that he recognised Cora Brookes, Administrative Manager, as being Lady Cora Derwent, daughter of one of aristocracy's premier families.

And why should he? Cora had never been in the public eye. She had left that to her charismatic siblings, with their good looks and charm. She had kept her carroty-red hair, non-descript features and gaucheness out of the spotlight. Her only claim to distinction was the turquoise-blue of her eyes, and that hardly made her memorable. Plus, she and Rafael hadn't even been introduced at that one party years ago.

And yet she hunched down on the bench, busied herself with Flash, and prayed he would walk on by.

No such luck. Out of the corner of her eye she espied a pair of denim-clad muscular legs.

'Cora.'

The deep voice that always seemed laced with a tinge of amusement sent a shiver over her skin. Bracing herself, she straightened and looked up. Midnight-black hair. An aquiline face with eyes dark with a depth you could drown in. The jut of his nose spoke of determination and his jaw said the same thing. His lips charmed and allured, but his aura was one of danger.

This was a man who knew what he wanted and would take it. Not by force, but that only made him all the more dangerous—because what came with beauty was charm and arrogance. Her family demonstrated that in spades—and in clubs, diamond and hearts—the belief that they could succeed at anything because it was their God-given right.

'Rafael.'

'Evelyn told me I would find you here.'

Mentally Cora cursed Ethan's PA, but she could hardly blame her. Rafael Martinez was Ethan Caversham's business partner and friend, after all, plus Cora had little doubt that Rafael had charmed the information out of her. The question was why? Even if there was some admin work to be done on the Caversham-Martinez Venture surely it could wait until office hours.

'Is there a problem?' she asked. 'I assume you know Ethan isn't here?'

'I do. I understand he has whisked Ruby off to Paris.'

His deep tone was neutral, but the lines of baffled disdain on his face stoked her irritation further.

'It's very romantic.'

A shrug denoted indifference and caused her eyes to glance off the breadth of his shoulders.

‘I’ll bow to your greater knowledge. I thought it a bit of a cliché myself. But I’d be the first to admit romance isn’t my forte.’

No, but dalliance is. Cora bit back the words, though she couldn’t eradicate her frown—there was nothing clichéd about Ethan and Ruby’s palpable joy in each other.

‘Paris is the romantic capital of the world and I’m sure they’re having a fantastic time.’

Heaven knew why she had turned into a romance cheerleader—her experience on that particular playing field was nil.

‘Anyway, romance is not what I came here to discuss.’

Of course it wasn’t. The idea of a romance between them was laughable.

‘So what did you come here to discuss?’

Irritation fluttered inside her; she was not on the Caversham clock right now. Annoyance escalated as she caught herself in the act of smoothing her hands down her jeans, aware of a desire to smooth down her frizzed-by-drizzle hair.

‘How can I help? I assume it must be urgent to bring you here in person?’

Wariness made her neck prickle. This didn’t make any sort of sense.

His lips twisted in a sudden wry moue as he lowered himself to the bench next to her. ‘You could say that.’

To Cora’s surprise Flash sat up and put his chin on Rafael’s knee.

‘Flash—down.’

‘It’s fine.’ Rafael patted the black and white dog; his strong fingers kneaded the exact spot the dog liked best. ‘Is he yours?’

‘No.’

The thought of her own beloved dogs rekindled the tug of missing them. But she’d had no choice but to leave Poppy and Prue behind on the Derwent estate—it wouldn’t have been fair to bring them with her.

‘I’m a dog-walker in my spare time. Flash is a rescue dog and he needs a lot of attention. His owner is working long hours on a freelance assignment so I’m walking him. He doesn’t usually like strangers.’ Her tone was snippy but she couldn’t help herself.

‘Dogs like me.’

Of course they did. In a moment of silence, as Rafael focused his attention on the dog, Cora realised that she appeared to be mesmerised by the movements of his fingers. The small growls of pleasure Flash emitted pulled her attention away and she shifted apart from Rafael, suddenly all too aware of him—the strength of his body, the way he filled the space with an aura of...of...something she had no wish to analyse too closely.

‘So, as I said, how can I help?’

‘Ethan mentioned he is about to send you on secondment to another Caversham enterprise.’

Cora nodded. ‘He and Ruby want to focus on Caversham Castle, so he thought I would be better deployed elsewhere.’

‘How about the Caversham-Martinez venture? Working directly for me?’

‘You?’ Her jaw dropped kneewards.

‘You sound surprised.’

‘I am. Or rather I’m confused.’ She was an excellent administrator—it might not be the job of her heart and dreams, but she was darn good at it—but... ‘Why not just email me and set up an interview? Turning up in person seems extreme.’

‘I think it’s eminently sensible. I like the element of surprise and this way what I see is what I get.’

His dark eyes rested on her face and Cora resisted the urge to squirm in her seat. The prolonged scrutiny made her uncomfortable—too aware that compared to his usual eye candy she wasn’t anywhere near to measuring up. Especially kitted out in mud-spattered jeans, hiking boots and an

oversized hoodie, with her red hair scraped back into a frizzy ponytail. But she forced herself to maintain eye contact, to keep her back straight and her gaze cooler than iced water.

'Or don't get,' she pointed out.

'So you wouldn't be interested in working for me?'

Cora tried to think, swallowed the instinctive no that had leapt to her vocal cords. Surely by now she had learned not to blurt out the first thing that came into her mind? How many times had her mother sighed and wrinkled her face in lines of distaste at her younger daughter's lack of social grace?

The constant refrain of her childhood had been, 'Why can't you be more like your sister?' Why, indeed? Cora had always wondered. What cruel fate had decreed that her twin should be so beautiful, vibrant and perfect and that she, Cora, should be so different? So average, so invisible—Kaitlin's pale shadow.

As if in reminder, she tugged at a strand of her hair and looked at it. Carroty-red whereas Kaitlin's hair was a beautiful red-gold that caught the light with magical hues. If Kaitlin were here she'd lean forward, enthral Rafael Martinez with her smile, her throaty voice and a hint of cleavage. She'd lead him on to tell her more, and then decline in a way that somehow robbed her refusal of all sting.

Well, Kaitlin wasn't here, and Cora didn't want to work for Rafael. Every instinct told her that Rafael Martinez was every bit as lethal as her very own family. Well, she couldn't choose her family—but she could choose who to work for.

'I appreciate the offer, but I don't think that is the right move for me.'

'Why not? I haven't even told you about the role I have in mind for you.'

'It doesn't matter. Really, I don't want to waste your valuable time.'

Please don't let her have put a sarcastic inflexion on 'valuable'.

'It's my valuable time to waste.'

His eyebrows rose, though his black eyes held more amusement than chagrin. And then he smiled—a smile that had no doubt brought more women than she could count to their knees. Heaven help her, she could see why—but she knew the exact value of such smiles. What she did wonder was why Rafael Martinez was wasting one on her.

A flicker of curiosity ignited—one that she suppressed. No doubt Rafael expected her to roll over and beg to work for him. Tough.

'I appreciate that, but it would also be a waste of my valuable time.' A smile of saccharine-sweetness sugared her tone as she rose to her feet. 'I'm sorry, but I'm not interested.'

The man simply sat there, made no move to stand. 'Trust me, Cora. What I have in mind you will want to hear.'

The easy assurance in his voice flicked her on the raw.

'Hear me out. I accept that your time is valuable—I'll pay you well for it.'

Cora stared at him—heard the steel under the silk of his voice, saw the sculpted line of his jaw harden. Curiosity surged, despite all resolution, instinct and common sense. This was important to Rafael Martinez, but for the life of her she didn't know why. Administrative staff were ten a penny. Yet Rafael Martinez was willing to pay for her time...

Her brain emitted a reminder flare of her need for cash. 'No strings. I hear you out and then if I don't want the job I say no.'

'Deal.'

That worked for her—in truth there would be satisfaction in saying no. In pulling down his arrogance a notch or two.

'Fine. Five hundred for an hour of my time.' It was outrageous, but Cora didn't care—she would almost be relieved if he got up and walked away. Almost.

'I'll give you five thousand for a day.'

'A day?' Once again drop-jaw-itis had arrived.

‘Yup. I’ll pick you up from Cavershams at nine tomorrow morning.’ In one lithe movement he rose to his feet—clearly her consent was a token he didn’t need. ‘See you then.’

Part of her itched to tell him to forget it, but common sense yelled at her that five thousand pounds was a windfall she couldn’t afford to refuse. Suspicion whispered that he had orchestrated this entire encounter. And then there was a part of her that she didn’t want to acknowledge—the one that fizzed with a stupid sense of anticipation.

He turned. ‘And don’t forget your passport.’

* * *

Rafael Martinez parked on the gravelled drive of the renovated Caversham Castle Hotel and for a scant second wondered if he had run mad—whether this whole enterprise qualified him for bedlam.

No. Resolve tightened his gut and clenched his hands around the steering wheel. This was the best way forward—the only way to persuade Don Carlos de Guzman, Duque de Aiza, to sell his vineyard.

Correction. The only way to persuade Don Carlos to sell his vineyard to Rafael Martinez. Because Don Carlos despised Rafael without even knowing his true identity.

Anger burned as the voice of Don Carlos echoed in his brain and raked his soul. ‘Men like you, Rafael, are not the kind of men I like to deal with.’

Well, they’d soon see about that. Soon, Grandpapa. Soon. The taste of anticipated revenge was one to savour, but actual revenge would be better yet. Full-bodied and fiery and with a hint of spice—like the Rioja the Martinez vineyards produced.

But first things first—right now he had to persuade Cora to join his scheme. It was more than clear that Cora disliked him—and the only reason he could think of was the fact she too disapproved of his background. To Lady Cora Derwent, as to Don Carlos, he must appear the epitome of jumped-up new money and bad blood.

That new money might be despised but it would be the key—he was sure of that. The previous evening Cora had obviously wanted to tell him to take a hike, but the idea of filthy lucre had prevented her.

A glance out of the car window demonstrated that Cora herself was headed towards the car through the light smattering of rain. She was dressed in a dark blue trouser suit expressly designed, it seemed to him, to minimise her assets, and sensible blue pumps. She looked...muted.

He swung the door of the sleek silver two-seater up and climbed out of the car; stroked the roof of his pride and joy—the glorious creation that was proof he’d left his childhood in the dust.

Not that Cora looked impressed—in fact her lips had thinned into a line of disapproval that Don Carlos himself would have applauded.

‘Good morning.’

‘Good morning.’

Up close, Rafael could see that her ensemble didn’t just mute her: it almost rendered her invisible. Her red hair was pulled back in a severe bun, her posture was slightly slouched, her face ducked down. Perhaps it was a bid not to be recognised. Though why Lady Cora Derwent was masquerading as Cora Brookes was a mystery he fully intended to solve.

True, she had always kept out of the limelight, whilst the rest of her family played social media and celebrity rags for all they were worth. Nothing sold a paper like aristocracy, after all, and the Derwents were as aristocratic as they came—a family that traced its bloodline back to Tudor times.

The thought of bloodlines served as a reminder of his own and he felt the familiar pulse of anger. An anger he crystallised into purpose.

‘You ready to go?’

‘I am.’

Rafael walked round and swung the passenger door up, waited whilst Cora slid inside the low-slung car, censure radiating from every pore. Perhaps she felt the car to be a vulgar show of wealth.

Yet he caught her slight exhalation of appreciation as she nestled back on the sumptuous carbon fibre seat.

As he revved the engine he shifted to face her. 'Cora, say hello to Lucille.' Another push of the accelerator elicited a throaty purr. 'See—I think she likes you.'

A very small smile tilted her mouth, and for a second his gaze snagged on her lips. Unadorned with lipstick, they were full and generous, and when she smiled he wondered why she didn't do so more often.

'You can't fool me. Or Lucille. You are impressed.'

A decisive shake of her head emphatically denied the statement. 'Nope. Not impressed.' Then, as if relenting, she reached out to stroke the dashboard. 'But you can tell Lucille that I prefer a British sports car to an Italian or German one any day. I like it that a UK designer came up with the idea, and I love it that it can compete with those European giants and come out the winner. Apparently Lucille is based on the "Blackbird" spy plane, and—'

She broke off and Rafael blinked. Genuine enthusiasm had illuminated her face and totally eradicated the dowdy image.

'You're a car buff!'

'No. My brother is, so I know a bit about it.'

Her brother. Gabriel Derwent. Super-charismatic, super-intelligent, currently abroad and off the radar for a while, following a public break-up with Lady Isobel Petersen. There had been a harvest of rumours along the celebrity grapevine of a family rift, but these had been countered by the Derwent publicity machine with assurances that the Derwent heir was involved in an exciting, new project, details yet to be revealed.

Cora frowned—perhaps in regret at the mention of her brother, given the identity charade she wished to maintain. Then her lips snapped back into a thin line and she folded her arms across her chest.

'That doesn't mean I understand why anyone would spend such an exorbitant amount of money on a car. For the sake of a status symbol.'

'I can't answer for "anyone", but I bought Lucille because of the immense pleasure it brings me to drive her.'

Cora shrugged. 'I'll stick to chocolate. Cheaper.'

'But if you had the money...?'

Her expression clouded. 'I'd buy more expensive chocolate. Anyway, what you do with your money is your business. I wish you and Lucille well. In the meantime, what's the plan for the day?'

'We're on our way to Newquay airport. Then we fly to Spain.'

Shock etched her features. 'You're kidding, right?'

'Nope. We're going to one of the Martinez vineyards in La Rioja.'

'But why?'

So that I can propose to you.

Somehow he couldn't see that answer flying. 'So I can outline the job I have in mind.'

'So let me get this straight. You are paying me five grand to spend a day at a Spanish vineyard with you so that you can outline a job offer. What's the catch?'

'Hold on.' This conversation needed his full attention. 'I'll find a place to stop.'

Minutes later he'd pulled into a layby and shifted his body to face her.

'There is no catch.'

Her blue eyes focused on his face as her shoulders lifted. 'There is always a catch.'

'Not this time. I told you—all I want is for you to hear me out, and if you're not interested so be it.'

Cora shook her head. 'You seem mighty sure that I will be.'

‘And you seem mighty sure that you won’t. It’s a risk I’m willing to take. It’s a day of my life—if you refuse, so be it.’

‘So no catch? Nothing nefarious? Everything above board?’

‘No, no and yes.’

Rafael allowed his most reassuring smile to come to the fore but to no avail. Instead of bringing reassurance, his legendary charm seemed to have made her even jumpier.

‘It just seems a little OTT.’

Not given the enormity of his plan.

‘That’s not your worry. Loosen up. Life is full of opportunities. Take this one.’

‘I’m not keen on opportunity.’

The hint of bitterness in her voice didn’t elude him, and a small stab of unexpected sympathy jabbed him even as he filed the information away.

‘You don’t have to take the opportunity,’ he pointed out. ‘You only need to consider it. What have you got to lose? Worst-case scenario: I tell you the job, you say no, and you’ve benefited from a trip to Spain and lunch with me.’

‘Yay...’

Despite the sarcastic inflexion he was sure there was a smidgeon of a smile in her voice.

‘Come on. Enjoy the day. When’s the last time you took a day off?’

A long time if the slightly peaky look of her skin and the smudges under her eyes were clues.

‘The temperature in La Rioja is twenty-two degrees. Plus it is an incredibly soothing place to be. Snow-capped mountains, leafy vineyards, vast blue skies, medieval villages...’

Enough, already.

An exhalation puffed from her lips and she relaxed back in the seat. ‘OK. I’m sold. But just so we’re clear upfront, this won’t make me swoon at your feet. Or make me want to work for you.’

‘Understood.’ He winked at her as he started Lucille. ‘I love a challenge.’

And this one was a doozy.

CHAPTER TWO

‘YOU HIRED A private jet?’ Cora gazed around the interior of the plane as further misgivings heaped up. This was a bad idea. There was no way that Rafael Martinez would go to these lengths to hire her as an administrator. That was fact.

Mad thoughts filtered through her mind—maybe he was part of a drug-smuggling gang and this was an attempt to dazzle her with his wealth as part of a recruitment drive. Maybe the whole holiday venture was a cover-up. Maybe he was part of the Spanish mafia.

Maybe she should curb her over-active imagination.

‘Is that a problem?’

‘Yes, it is!’

Though higher in the problem stakes was the whirl of emotion that unfortunately wasn’t only to do with the sheer insanity of proceedings. Ever since she’d set eyes on Rafael Martinez the previous day she’d been restless—edgy, even. The couple of hours she’d spent researching him probably hadn’t helped either. Had only ensured that his image had haunted her dreams.

‘Nobody hires a private jet for something like this.’

‘Well, I do. Otherwise it would have taken us all day to get to La Rioja.’

Oh, no fair. The way he said the Spanish syllables evoked a strange sensation inside her and she had to force her feet to adhere to the floor of the jet. So he spoke fluent Spanish? No big deal. The man owned a Spanish vineyard, and for all she knew he was Spanish.

Her research hadn’t been clear on that point—it had simply told her what the world already knew: Rafael Martinez had been a teenage phenomenon, a millionaire by the time he was twenty, and he had developed a technological app that had taken the business world by storm. But right now that wasn’t the point.

‘But the expense...to say nothing of the carbon footprint...’

‘I don’t use a private jet every day. I do understand about the carbon footprint, but I also understand about the pilots who work for this company, the beauty of this aircraft, the mechanics who work on it. And I enjoy the luxury of not having to queue up at the airport, change flights and hire a car. I like the idea of not being spotted by some celebrity-spotter who then announces my destination on social media.’

The words arrested her—come to that, she wouldn’t be too keen on recognition either. Her family knew she was safe, but they didn’t know where she was or what she was doing—and right now she wanted to keep it that way. Wanted time and space to lick her wounds. More than that, there was her pride to consider. Next time she saw her parents she wanted to be in a position to hand over at least a fraction of the money she owed them.

Rafael Martinez was giving her five thousand pounds towards that goal, so maybe she should stop carping at his use of a private jet. Especially when in reality it suited her.

‘Fine. I just feel bad that you’re expending all this money on a losing prospect.’

As the roar of the engines signalled their departure he sat down on a chocolate-coloured leather chair that yelled luxury. ‘Why are you so adamant that you don’t want to work for me?’

It was a fair question, she supposed—and not easy to answer.

You’re too good-looking, too arrogant, too successful, too dangerous...

Whilst true, that all sounded stupid. Then there were the fast cars, the private jets, and worst of all that aura that unsettled her more and more with every passing second.

‘I have got to know the Caversham brand very well and I like working for Ethan and Ruby. I only have contacts in the company, and there is also the fact that I know nothing about wine.’

Her eyes narrowed as he shook his head at her. ‘Very good, Cora. Top marks for politeness. Now tell me the real reasons. Tell you what...’ He pulled his laptop towards him. ‘How about I transfer your fee for today into your account now? Then you can feel free to say whatever you like to my face.’

A flush touched her cheeks. ‘That’s not necessary.’

‘Then tell me the truth. Unvarnished. I can take it.’

There was that smile again—the tilt of his lips that somehow indicated that he knew he would win her over.

He tipped his palms upward. ‘How can I hope to persuade you to work for me if I don’t know what I’m up against?’

‘Fine.’

If he wanted straight shooting she’d give it to him. After all, right now she didn’t have to be a lady, and he’d given her carte blanche to be honest. Better for him to understand that her desire not to work for him was genuine and absolute. This was a man who went for what he wanted, and for unfathomable reasons he wanted her—Cora Brookes. Not Lady Cora Derwent.

For a second the idea held a fascination and, yes, a lure all of its own...

Time for a mental shakedown. The words fascination and lure were not apposite, and it was time to prove to Rafael and herself that she had no intention of calling him her boss. Ever. All her life she’d been surrounded by people like him, and for the past few years she’d worked for her parents—she knew what it was like.

‘I don’t like the way you think your wealth and your looks entitle you to—’ She broke off at the sudden flash of something that crossed his face.

‘Entitle me to what?’ he asked, his voice smooth as silk.

‘Entitle you to whatever you want—glamorous women, fast cars, private jets, endless favours... I don’t like the sense of superiority...’

‘My wealth entitles me to whatever I can afford, as long as I’m not hurting anyone or doing anything illegal.’ There was no sign of a smile now, no hint of charm or allure.

‘It doesn’t entitle you to feel superior.’

Any more than her family's bloodline entitled them to do that.

'I don't feel superior.'

'But you do feel entitled.'

'To what? To buy a sports car? To hire a private jet? Yes.'

'What about the women?' Because, in all honesty, that was what stuck in her craw the most. 'They are flesh and blood—not carbon fibre or titanium.'

'I know that, and I'm thankful for it.'

The amusement in the tilt of his arrogant lips made her palm itch.

'I get that—but you still see them on a par with the car and the jet. As accessories.'

How many pictures had she seen of Rafael with a different model, actress or celebrity on his arm?

Rafael opened his mouth and then closed it again; a flush touched the angle of his cheekbones. 'I don't see women as accessories.'

Aha! 'Do I sense a touch of defensiveness there?'

'No.' A scowl shadowed his face and his dark eyes positively blazed. 'I don't accessorise myself with women. I don't collect them and I make it very clear upfront that my maximum relationship span is a few days and that I don't believe in love.'

Although the heat had simmered down in his eyes every instinct told her she'd hit a nerve.

'But you do admit these women all have to look good?'

'I admit I have to be attracted to them.'

For a second she saw the smallest hint of discomfort flash across his expression.

'But that would be true regardless of my wealth.'

'I think you'd find that without your wealth and looks you would have to lower your standards.'

'In which case the women I date are as shallow as I am.'

'And you don't have a problem with that?'

'Nope. I see no need to apologise for dating beautiful women.'

'What about the fact you only go out with beautiful women?'

'I don't force them to go out with me, and I make them no promises.'

'But even you admit it's shallow?'

'It's called having fun, Cora. I believe in fun. As long as no one gets hurt. I've earned my money fair and square and if I choose to spend it on living life to the full then I won't apologise for it.'

'So the whole fast cars, beautiful women, party lifestyle is all you want from life?'

Why did it matter so much to her?

Because she wanted to shout, What about women like me? Don't we rate a look-in? What about those less endowed with natural charm and grace? People like me, who knock things over, say the wrong thing or—worse—say nothing at all. The ones who haven't been touched by the brush of success. What about us?

'Not all I want, no.' His lips were set to grim and a clenching of his fist on the mahogany tabletop suddenly made him appear oceans apart from shallow playboy.

'What else do you want?'

'I want to make Martinez Wines a success, I want to run the London Marathon, to climb Ben Nevis, travel the world with a backpack, sail the oceans... I want to live life to the full and set the world to rights.'

Cora stared at him, unsure whether he meant it or was mocking her.

'What do you want, Cora?'

The question was smooth, but laced with a sting.

What did she want right now? A vast amount of money—enough to repay her parents for the loss of the Derwent diamonds, stolen thanks to her naïve stupidity.

What did she want from life? She wanted the impossible—approval, love, acceptance from her parents, who had shown nothing but indifference to the child they perceived as surplus to requirements.

For an instant she envied Rafael Martinez his brash desire to live his life as he wanted, by his own rules. He wanted to live life to the full and she wanted...

'I want... I want...' Her voice trailed off. 'I want to get on with my life. Be happy.'

But as she stared at him, so handsome, so arrogant, smouldering, for an instant she wanted him—wanted to be one of those gorgeous women he was attracted to. She wanted, coveted, yearned for Kaitlin's looks and her presence—that elusive 'It' factor her sister possessed in abundance. How shallow was that? Clearly the atmosphere was affecting her and it was time to get a grip.

'Are you happy now?' he asked. 'Do you enjoy being an administrator?'

'It's what I need to do.'

It had been a cry for approval. Another step on her quest to be a useful daughter. She had slogged through a business studies degree and offered to help manage the Derwent estate. Had been doing just that when she had messed up—big-time. Following the diamond heist her parents had told her they could no longer trust her to carry out her job 'with any level of competence'. The memory of the ice-cold disdain in her mother's tone brought back a rush of humiliation and guilt. Reminded her of her imperative need to repay her debt.

'It pays the bills.'

Her minimal bills. For an instant the depressing contents of her weekly supermarket shop paraded before her eyes. Every spare penny put aside.

For a second a look of puzzlement crossed his face as he surveyed her. 'Well, the role I have on offer will definitely help with that. If you can get over your prejudice.'

'What prejudice?'

'The "I can't work for you because I disapprove of your lifestyle" prejudice.'

'It's not a prejudice. It's a principle.'

'No it's not. A principle is when you don't do something for moral reasons. Working for me wouldn't be immoral. So...' His voice was deep, serious, seductive. 'Promise you'll hear me out.'

'I'll hear you out,' she heard herself say, even as cautionary bells clamoured in her ears. Fool. Last time she'd heard someone out it had ended in disaster. A pseudo-journalist who had turned out to be a conman extraordinaire and had stolen the Derwent diamonds.

Turning, she stared out of the window as the turquoise sky and the scud of white clouds receded and the airport loomed.

* * *

Rafael led the way out of the small airport, glanced round and spotted Tomás and his pick-up truck. 'There's our ride.'

Cora's blue eyes widened in exaggerated surprise. 'And here was me expecting nothing less than a limo.'

'Tomás loves that truck like a child. In fact, according to his wife María he loves it more than he loves his children. Tomás is a great guy—he has worked at the vineyard his whole life, as his father did before him. I was lucky he and María agreed to stay on when I bought it.'

It had been touch and go—Tomás had deeply disapproved of the sale and hadn't believed Rafael was serious. Yet he had given him a chance to prove himself.

'He brings knowledge better than the most cutting edge technology and most importantly he loves the grapes, the soil, the very essence of the wine.' Rafael set off towards the truck. 'He is, however, the embodiment of the word taciturn, and doesn't speak much English, so don't be offended by him and try and remember he is a valued Martinez employee.'

Cora frowned. 'What do you think I'll do?'

Fair question. He bit back the answer that sprang to his lips. In truth he had been worried that she would look down her haughty, aristocratic nose at the hired help. Only Cora's nose was more retroussé style and...and maybe he was at risk of being a touch stereotypical. Aristocratic did not have to equal Don Carlos.

'Hey, boss.' Tomás's grizzled face relaxed into a fraction of a smile as they reached the car.

'Tomás. This is Cora. Cora—Tomás.'

Cora stepped forward and touched the bonnet of the truck, then bestowed a friendly smile on Tomás. Rafael's eyes snagged right on her lips and a funny little awareness fluttered—he'd like Cora to smile at him like that.

'This is wonderful,' she said, and turned to Rafael. 'Could you tell him that I'm truly impressed? It's better than a limo—this is a classic. I didn't know there were any pick-ups this age on the road any more. And it's immaculate.'

Rafael translated, and blinked as the old man's weather-beaten face cracked a genuine smile. One forty-five-minute journey later and, despite the language barrier, it was clear that Tomás and Cora had struck up a definite rapport. Tomás even went so far as to smile again in farewell as he entered the white villa he and María shared on the outskirts of the vineyard he loved.

'So.' Rafael gestured around, filled with a familiar sense of pride. 'How about a tour?'

As she stood there in the shapeless blue suit, her face tipped up to the sun, Rafael could almost see its rays and the sultry Spanish air spin its magic.

'Sounds great.' Cora inhaled deeply. 'It's incredible. It smells like...sun-kissed melons mingled with a slice of fresh green apple and—' She broke off and gave a delicious gurgle of laughter. 'Listen to me! The vines have gone to my head. Honestly, I could almost get tipsy on the smell alone. But they don't smell like grapes.'

Rafael glanced down at her face and a strange little jab of emotion kicked at his ribcage. Cora looked genuinely entranced—the most relaxed he'd ever seen her. Almost as if she'd decided to lay aside her burdens and the prickle of suspicion for a few moments. The sun glinted off the colour of her hair. It was a hue he'd never seen anywhere, as if woven by fairies.

He blinked. What? As if what by what? There clearly was a spell in the air.

Focus on the vines, Rafael.

'I think of it as the scent of anticipation and wonder...the whole vineyard is on the brink of what will eventually lead to this year's harvest.'

'So how does it work? I always imagine a vineyard looking as it does just before harvest.'

'Most people do, but this is a special time too. Bloom time.' Rafael halted. 'It's when the developing grape clusters actually flower, get fertilised. Look.'

He pushed aside a saucer-sized vine leaf and beckoned Cora closer to see the thumb's-length yellow-green nub, wreathed with a crown of cream-coloured threadlike petals. A step brought her right next to him and she leant forward to smell the cluster.

His throat tightened and his lungs squeezed at her nearness, at her scent—a heady mix of vanilla with a blueberry overtone. Her bowed head was so close he felt an insane urge to stroke the sure-to-be-silky strands of hair. The drone of a bumblebee, the heat of the sun on the back of his neck seemed intensified—and then she stepped back and the spell broke. Reality interceded. There was no room for attraction here.

The whole moment had been an illusion, a strange misfiring of his synapses—no more. Maybe brought on by the importance of his mission.

Her face flushed as she looked up at him. 'The smell is...intoxicating. You should work out a way to sell it. So tell me—what happens next?'

He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her.

The unexpected thought made him step away. Fast. 'You really want to know?'

'Yes.'

Fifteen minutes later Rafael broke off—at this rate he'd bore her comatose. Which would not further his plan at all. Yet Cora's interest seemed genuine—the questions she asked were pertinent and proof of that.

'Sorry. I get a bit carried away.'

She shook her head, the crease in her forehead in contrast to the small smile on her lips. 'It's fascinating. I didn't realise that you were so passionate about the whole process.'

'How can I not be? The whole process is magical. Though I've made sure we have the best technology too. I truly believe that the mix of the traditional and the new works. It took me a while to convince Tomás, but I've even brought him round. So it's a combination of his eye and modern technology that picks the grapes.'

'So you're involved the whole time?'

'Absolutely.'

'To be honest, I assumed it was a hobby for you. You know...kind of like most people buy a bottle of wine you bought a vineyard. But it sounds like you care.'

'Of course I do. These vineyards are people's livelihoods, and they have been here for years—in some cases for centuries. But it's more than that—this is a job I love.'

'More than you loved being a global CEO? More than you love your lifestyle?'

'Yes. The whole CEO gig wasn't me. Too much time spent in boardrooms. It was restrictive. I mean, I loved it that I invented an app that took the world by storm, but after a while it was all about marketing and shares and advertising and I knew it was time to sell.'

'So why do you think the wine business will be any different?'

'Maybe it won't be.'

'So if times get tough or you get bored you'll just move on?'

Cora's lips were pursed in what looked to be yet more disapproval, yet he'd swear there was a hint of wistfulness in her voice. He shrugged. 'Why not? Life is too short.'

'But surely some things are worth sticking around for?'

If so he hadn't found them yet, and he'd make no apology for the way he lived his life.

His mother's life had been wasted—years of apathy and might-have-beens because she had never got over his father's betrayal. At his father's behest Ramon de Guzman of the house of Aiza had deceived and then abandoned Rafael's mother, and Emma Martinez had never recovered—hadn't been able to live her life as it should have been lived. Until it had been too late—when the diagnosis of terminal illness had jolted her into a fervent desire to pack years of life into her last remaining months.

The thought darkened his mood, and it was only lightened by the idea of winning restitution in his mother's name.

Once Don Carlos sold him the vineyard, Rafael would tell him the truth. That he had sold his precious Aiza land to his own illegitimate grandson, whom he had once named the tainted son of a whore. Don Carlos and his son Ramon would seethe with humiliation and Rafael would watch with pleasure.

'Come on. Lunch should be ready.'

Time to get this show on the road.

CHAPTER THREE

AS CORA WALKED through the beauty of the flowering vines curiosity swirled with anticipation. Over lunch presumably Rafael would outline the role he had in mind for her, and she had to concede he'd played his hand well.

The vineyard had enticed her with its scents and its atmosphere, and in the glorious heat of the Spanish sun it would be hard to refuse whatever he offered. But she would—because she knew with deep-seated certainty that whatever Rafael offered there would be a catch—a veritable tangle of strings attached. As the saying went, there was no such thing as a free lunch—let alone a lunch you were being paid thousands to eat.

Plus—she might as well be honest—it wasn't only the vineyard that exerted heady temptation. It was Rafael himself. Her prejudices against Rafael Martinez seemed to be in the process of disintegration. After her harangue on the plane about his lifestyle the very last thing she had expected was what she'd seen on the vineyard tour.

Rafael took his wine seriously—he'd spoken of the grapes with passion and a deep knowledge—and it was also clear that he had ethics and environmental morals she couldn't fault.

But, be that as it might, it didn't alter the fact that Rafael Martinez was dangerous. Because there had been moments when her heart had skipped a beat and his proximity had made her shiver despite the heat of the Mediterranean sun. Made her believe that all those beautiful glamorous women might well count themselves lucky.

The thought made her blood simmer. How could she, of all people, be at even the smallest risk of attraction? Rafael was like both her siblings—he only dallied with the beautiful and all he touched turned to gold. Cora was ordinary and average and went pink in the sunshine. Plus, she disapproved of his lifestyle, for heaven's sake.

As they approached the cool white villa a small plump woman bustled towards them, a beaming smile on her face as she surveyed Cora, and burst into a stream of voluble Spanish.

'This is María—Tomás's wife,' Rafael said.

Cora returned the smile, though a sudden hint of wariness made her hackles rise as María continued to speak, gestured to Cora, and then wagged her finger at Rafael, whose tautened jaw surely indicated a smidgeon of tension?

'Is everything OK?' Cora asked.

'Yes. María seems to feel that you are probably a bit hot and uncomfortable in a suit and is giving me a hard time for not telling you I was bringing you to Spain. She would like to give you a dress.'

Another torrent of Spanish.

'María says you mustn't worry. It is not her clothes she is offering.'

María chuckled and waved her hands.

'She says once she was as slim as you, but that the years have not been good to her.'

Cora shook her head. 'Tell her I am more scrawny than slim, and that if I look half as good as her in twenty years I will be a happy woman.'

'Her daughter owns a clothes store in Laguardia and there is some of her stock here. María insists you change so you can eat the lunch she has prepared in comfort.'

'Um...' Cora looked down at her suit. 'It feels a bit unprofessional to change, but I don't want María to think I don't appreciate her kindness.'

And she was hot, and it would be a relief to clear her head of all foolish thoughts of attraction and temptation.

'Come, come.'

The plump woman gestured and Cora followed her into the welcome cool of the whitewashed villa.

María smiled at her, a smile that took away the disapproval indicated by a wag of her finger as she gestured at Cora's suit. 'Not right,' she said. 'Un dia especial.'

Cora frowned. A special day? Was that what María meant?

The question was forgotten as María led her into a small bedroom, opened a large wardrobe and pulled out a brand-new dress. 'Perfecto,' she announced, in a tone that brooked no denial.

Though denial flooded Cora's system. The T-shirt-style dress was vividly patterned with a butterfly motif. Bright, bold and eye-catching, it represented everything Cora avoided in her wardrobe.

'Um...'

María beamed. 'Perfecto,' she repeated. 'Rafael. He love.'

The thumbs-up sign that accompanied the words did little to assuage Cora's sense of panic. Clearly María had grasped the wrong end of the stick. But how could she vault the language barrier and explain that really Rafael's opinion of the dress meant less than nothing? That she was here on a strictly professional footing?

What really mattered right now was the fact that she could not wear the dress. It was the sort of dress that Kaitlin would pull off, no problem—but Kaitlin would look good in a bin bag. The point was the dress did not constitute 'professional'.

But as she looked at María's beaming face Cora managed to manufacture a smile and nodded. 'Thank you.'

No need to panic, she told herself as María left the room. How bad could it be?

Ten minutes later Cora had the answer. Pretty darn bad. Self-consciousness swamped her, along with a dose of discomfort in the knowledge that there was way more of her on show than she felt the world deserved to see.

The door opened and María bustled in. 'Bella!' She handed over a pair of jewelled flip-flops and a sun hat and gestured for Cora to follow her.

Minutes later they approached a paved mosaic courtyard, dappled with sun and shadow and awash with the smell of flowering grapes, the aromatic smell of spices and the tang of olives.

Cora's legs gave a sudden wobble as Rafael rose from a wooden chair and any last vestige of confidence soared away. No man had the right to look so good. His rolled up shirtsleeves exposed tanned forearms that made the breath hitch in her throat, and as her gaze travelled up his body her eyes drank in the breadth of his chest, the column of his throat, and the sheer arrogant strength of his features.

María said something and then turned to walk away. From somewhere Cora found her voice and a smile and said, 'Gracias,' before turning back to Rafael. From somewhere she found the courage to stand tall, not to tug the hem of the wretched dress down.

Something flashed across his dark eyes: surprise and a flicker of heat that made her heart thud against her ribcage.

'That looks way more comfortable,' he said eventually.

Comfortable? She must have imagined that flicker—of course she had. She was not Rafael's type and best she remembered that she didn't even want to be.

'It is,' she said coolly, and headed to the table—at least once she was sitting down the dress would be less obvious.

But before she could take a seat her gaze alighted on the table and she came to a halt. Crystal glasses gleamed, and a cut-glass vase of beautifully arranged flowers sat next to a silver wine cooler amidst an array of dishes that smelt to die for. This didn't look like a business lunch—and it didn't feel like a business lunch.

But what else could it be? Maybe this was the billionaire version. But María's words echoed in her brain. 'Un dia especial.'

'This looks incredible.'

'I asked María to produce some regional specialities. We have piquillo peppers, wood-roasted and then dipped in batter and fried. Plus the same peppers stuffed with lamb. And white asparagus, whose shoots never see sunlight—which makes them incredibly tender. And one of my favourites—patatas riojanas—cooked with chorizo and smoky paprika. And chuletas a la riojana—perfectly grilled lamb chops over vine cuttings.'

A special meal for a special day?

'Is this how you usually entertain your business guests?'

'No. I don't usually give my business guests lunch here.'

'So who do you entertain here?'

'No one. I don't bring my dates here either.'

‘So why me? Why have you brought me here?’

Wrapping one arm round her waist, she tried to subdue the prickle of apprehension as she awaited his answer.

* * *

Crunch time, and a small droplet of moisture beaded his neck as he surveyed Cora’s body language. Doubt whispered as he considered his own. He had not anticipated an attraction factor. In all the times he’d seen Cora at Cavershams he’d noticed her, been intrigued by the itch of memory that told him he’d seen her before, but there hadn’t been any hint of attraction.

Instead he’d written her off as cold, aloof, and set on avoiding him. And once he’d figured out her identity he had assumed she didn’t like him because of her social position—that she was a snob.

But now... Well, now for some bizarre reason his body was more than aware of her. Because it turned out that Cora Derwent wasn’t cold or aloof or a snob. There was a feistiness to her, countered by the sense of her vulnerability, and he’d felt a tug of attraction even when she’d been hidden beneath that hideous blue trouser suit.

Now that she was clothed in a dress that showed off long legs and curves in all the right places his libido was paying close attention. Which was not good.

Especially as she was waiting for an answer to the million-dollar question.

‘Well, why don’t you sit down and I can explain. Have an olive. And a glass of wine.’

For a moment he wasn’t sure that she’d comply, and before she sat her eyes narrowed. ‘OK. But eating your food does not mean I will agree to anything.’

‘Understood.’

He poured the pale golden wine for them and then settled back on the wooden chair. ‘OK. Here goes.’

Cora speared an olive. ‘I’m all ears.’

‘So, I’ve explained how the wine business sucked me in—and I now own four vineyards across Rioja. You also know that Ethan and I have set up a Martinez-Caversham venture which will offer vineyard holidays. As part of that venture I want to buy another vineyard, which is owned by Don Carlos de Guzman, the fifteenth Duque de Aiza—it would link my vineyards beautifully and it is for sale. I arranged a meeting, but...’

His skin grew clammy as he recalled the churning of hope, anger and anticipation. He had even wondered if the old man would somehow recognise him—even though he’d known it would have been impossible for his grandfather to have kept tabs on him. His mother had changed their surnames and gone to ground.

‘Unfortunately the Duque is...’ A stubborn old man and my paternal grandfather—although he doesn’t know it. Yet. ‘Unwilling to sell it to the likes of me.’

Rafael kept his voice even, though it was hard. Each word stuck in his craw. But he didn’t want Cora to garner even a glimmer of the truth. Though really there was no risk of that. Who would believe that Rafael Martinez was the illegitimate grandson of the Duque de Aiza? He’d had difficulty believing it himself. But there had been no disputing the facts in the letter his mother had left with a solicitor, to be given to him on his thirtieth birthday. The phrases were etched on his brain as if his mother had been alive to read them to him herself.

Cora frowned, confusion evident in the crease on her brow and the expression in her bright blue eyes. ‘I don’t understand...’

Careful, Martinez. Stick to facts and keep emotions off the table.

‘Don Carlos doesn’t approve of my background or my lifestyle, so I need to change his mind.’

And he was pretty sure his marriage into the crème de la crème of British aristocracy would do exactly that.

He sipped his wine, savoured its silkiness. ‘That’s where you come in.’

‘Me? I don’t see how I can help.’

There was a faint hint of trepidation in her voice and he saw her hand tighten round the stem of the glass.

'I'm an administrator.'

'You're more than that, Cora.' Rafael kept his voice even, gentle—he didn't know why Cora was hiding her identity, and he didn't want to spook her, but... 'You're Lady Cora Derwent.'

Her turquoise eyes widened and the sudden vulnerability in them smote him. For a second he thought she'd push her chair back and run, but instead she sat immobile.

'How long have you known?' she asked eventually.

'You looked vaguely familiar—I've got a good memory for faces.'

Probably because he had spent so many years studying them—always wondering if that person was his father, or related to him in some way. He'd constructed so many fantasies as a child, each more farfetched than the last, and yet none had been as out there as the truth.

'Then, when I was trying to figure out a way to persuade Don Carlos to reconsider my credentials, something clicked in my brain and I remembered that I had seen you years ago at some party. I knew exactly who you were. After that it was easy to make sure.'

Cora inhaled a deep breath. Her face was still leeched of colour but she managed a shrug. 'OK. Fine. I'm Lady Cora Derwent.'

Her voice was tight, but he could hear the supressed hurt mixed with a tangible anger.

'I still don't see how that helps you. I'm a lady, not a magician. I can't convince Don Carlos that your lifestyle is moral and upright. It wouldn't wash—the Duque de Aiza won't listen to me. I don't even get why you would want him to. Why not tell him to shove his stupid hidebound ideas? I wouldn't have the nerve, but I'm pretty sure that you do.'

'An enticing option, but that wouldn't get me the vineyard.'

'Surely there are other vineyards?'

'True. But not that many are for sale—plus, the Duque de Aiza made it more than clear that he would consider selling to the right sort of person.' With the right sort of blood. The supreme irony had nearly made him laugh out loud. 'Let's say this is the optimum vineyard, and therefore I am prepared to go the extra mile to get it.'

'Well, I'm not.' The scrape of her chair on the terracotta mosaic indicated that as far as she was concerned this lunch was over.

'Wait. You haven't even heard what I want you to do. Or what the salary is.'

Her blue eyes narrowed. 'I'm not for sale, Rafael, and neither is my title.'

'Do you agree with Don Carlos?'

For a second he thought she would fling the wine at him.

'Of course I don't. In fact I can't stand the man.'

'So you know him?'

'My family knows him. I went to his grandson's wedding a year or two back. Alvaro.'

Rafael froze—it took every ounce of his iron control to keep his face neutral, to keep the questions from spewing forth. Cora had met Alvaro—his half-brother—and Juanita his half-sister. She might have spoken with Ramon. His father. No—the heir to a Spanish dukedom wasn't his father in any way that counted. The man had abandoned him without mercy.

He blinked, suddenly aware of Cora's eyes on him, a look of assessment in their turquoise depths.

Cool it, Rafael. Focus on Cora.

'So if you can't stand him why won't you help me? Help the Martinez-Caversham venture? This vineyard is important.'

'I really don't see what I could do even if I wanted to help. Truly, he won't listen to me.'

Rafael inhaled deeply and said the words he had never in his wildest dreams thought he would utter. 'I want you to marry me.'

CHAPTER FOUR

MARRY RAFAEL? THE IDEA was so ludicrous, so incongruous, so impossible that Cora could only stare at him, her brain unable to co-ordinate with her vocal cords or inform her feet to get her the heck out of there. Forget the Spanish mafia—Rafael Martinez was obviously nuts. Loop the loop. A few bricks, a bucket of cement and shedload of mortar short of a wall.

Then anger rushed in on a tide of outrage. 'Is this your idea of a joke?' Or some kind of mad reality TV show in which billionaires humiliated the aristocracy.

'Of course it isn't a joke. I'd be up the creek without a paddle if you agreed.'

There was near amusement in the rich treacle of his voice.

'There is no danger of that because of course I'm not going to agree. I mean... I—' Curiosity broke through and surfaced through the haze of anger. 'Why? Why would you even suggest something so insane?'

'Because I think marrying you will change Don Carlos's mind.'

'I told you that I am not for sale. Nor is my title. End of.'

Finally her body caught up with events and she pushed her chair back and rose to her feet. Tried to ignore the stew of hurt that bubbled under the broth of rage. There was no need for hurt. Why should she care that Rafael Martinez was only after her title? But somehow the idea he would marry her for it made her feel....icky.

'Wait.'

The word was a command.

'Please.'

The second word was a concession that didn't so much as make her pause.

'The answer is no.'

'I will pay you a substantial salary.'

Without hesitation he named an amount of money that boggled her mind. Shame trickled through her veins as the words resonated in her brain and flooded her with temptation. The figure of her debt flashed in neon colours—and the yoke of guilt relaxed its hold on her for a heartbeat. The salary he proposed would nearly wipe out the amount she owed her parents. Could be put towards the flood repairs on Derwent Manor. Then pride stiffened her spine. There was no universe in any parallel existence where this marriage could take place.

'Still no. The whole idea is ludicrous.'

To say nothing of stupid. And yet Rafael Martinez was many things...unscrupulous, arrogant...but he wasn't stupid.

'Wrong. This idea is an opportunity. For both of us.' He leant back and looked up at her, seemingly at ease with their positions. 'If I marry you Don Carlos will see that I have changed my lifestyle. He will also, I think, be happy to sell his vineyard to Lady Cora Derwent's husband. After all, the Derwent blood is as noble as his.'

Cora frowned at the note of bitterness in the honey of his voice. 'You want a vineyard so much that you are willing to get married? Doesn't that strike you as a little over the top?'

'No. And I am not proposing we stay married. Once the knot is tied I will move full speed ahead to secure the deal.'

'Won't that look a little odd?'

'Not if I handle it right. I don't want to risk Don Carlos selling it to someone else. This would be a very temporary marriage of convenience. The whole charade should only last a month, tops. Hopefully way less.'

'There would be nothing convenient about us being married.' This she knew.

'What about the money? Most people would agree that is a pretty convenient amount to have in the bank. Plus you'll be able to enjoy a few weeks of luxury.'

Cora closed her eyes, grasped the back of the wooden chair and tried to fend off temptation. An image of her parents' faces when she repaid them the worth of the Derwent diamonds seeped into her retina—surely that would win her a modicum of approval, a way back into the fold?

The price to pay: a temporary marriage. A few weeks, 'tops', with Rafael Martinez.

Opening her eyes, she regarded him, saw the incipient victory in his dark ironic gaze. 'And where would you be whilst I lolled about in the hypothetical lap of luxury?'

Perhaps sarcasm would hide the fact that she was still standing there, a participant in a conversation she should have closed down long ago.

'Lolling right alongside you. This marriage would have to look real. The world will have to believe that we were swept off our feet in a romantic storm.'

For reasons she did not want to look into a small shiver ran through her whole body at his words. Absurd. The need to hang on to reality was imperative.

'As if anyone would believe that.' Good. That had been exactly the right mix of scoffing and disdain.

One dark eyebrow rose. 'Why wouldn't they? It's plausible enough—we met at Cavershams in the line of business and bam.'

The snort that escaped her lips might not have been ladylike, but it was way more ladylike than the words on the tip of her tongue. 'Get real! You've admitted yourself that you don't do romance—you do fun.' With women so different from her it was laughable.

'So you're saying marriage can't be fun?'

The question stopped her in her tracks. Her parents' marriage was one of duty, not fun. Their commitment to the Derwent estate and the family name was unquestionable, and that was what their life revolved around. Fun wasn't part of the programme.

Rafael's lips curved up into a smile that turned all her thoughts into a fluffy white cotton ball. 'I promise you as much fun as you like in our marriage.'

Irritation permeated the after-effects of the Martinez smile. How could he sit there as if the whole idea of a fake temporary marriage was commonplace? Was he flirting with her, mocking her, or just having a good old laugh at her expense?

'No one in their right mind will believe the "romantic storm" theory.'

'Everyone will believe it. I promise.'

And suddenly the heat that surrounded her was nothing to do with the Spanish sun. Because Rafael rose, stepped around the table to within touching distance, where he halted.

'The world will believe that I have eyes only for my wife. That I am head over heels in love.'

The words were like molten chocolate—the expensive type...the type that tempted you to believe you could eat it by the bucketful and it would be positively good for you.

No. Chocolate—expensive or otherwise—was only good for you in moderation, and it seemed clear that this man didn't do moderation. Whereas 'Moderate' was Cora's middle name.

'It won't work.'

Thud, thud, thud. Any minute now her heart would leave her ribcage as he took another infinitesimal step towards her, his eyes resting on her face with a look so intense it took all her backbone to stay upright and not ooze into a puddle at his feet.

'Care to bet?' he drawled.

Right that second it was hard to care about anything but his proximity, the citrus clean scent of him, the sheer beauty of his lips and the look in his eyes as they darkened to jet-black pools of desire. Her lips parted and she released the back of the chair to bring her hand upwards—and then reality, mortification and the prospect of humiliation had her stepping backwards.

What was she thinking? Acting. The man is acting, Cora.

Something flashed across his face and was gone. 'We can pull this off.'

His words were a shade jerky and Cora forced her breathing to normal levels, prayed he couldn't sense the accelerated rate of her pulse.

'Your choice. Marry me...help me persuade Don Carlos it's a real union. In return you get a shedload of cash'

Cora tried to think. 'Then what happens? A few weeks after a massive high-profile wedding we announce our divorce?'

'Yup. We can make it an amicable split—say that we rushed into marriage and realised we weren't compatible. There will probably be a tabloid furore, but they usually die down.'

The idea made her insides curl in anticipated humiliation. As if anyone would believe the incompatibility story—the world would think that she hadn't measured up, hadn't been able to hold the attention of a man like Rafael Martinez. She would be able to add 'failed wife' to the résumé that already charted her failure as a daughter.

His dark eyes surveyed her with a hint of impatience and she shrugged. 'My tabloid experience is nil, so I'll bow to your better knowledge.' For that fee she could withstand a few days of paparazzi attention—the pay-off in parental approval would be worth it.

'Good. After that you could afford a career break, but if you'd rather return to work I'm sure the Caversham-Martinez venture could use an administrator when it launches.'

'That won't be necessary.' Because if all went to plan she would win back her job at Derwent Manor.

'Or, if you preferred, I'm equally sure Ethan will take you back.'

Her ahead awhirl with the surrealness of the situation, Cora tried to think. 'Hold on. Ethan. I can't leave Ethan and Ruby in the lurch. They took a risk taking me on in the first place, and...and they don't even know I'm Lady Cora Derwent... He and Ruby think I am plain Cora Brookes.'

'Once Ethan and Ruby are back we can explain our engagement and tell them who you really are. You can finish up this week in Cornwall and after that Ethan was going to send you on secondment elsewhere anyway. So you aren't deserting the Caversham ship. They'll understand. After all, their courtship was pretty whirlwind itself.'

'Can't we tell them the truth?'

'No.' Some reporter might get hold of them and Ruby couldn't lie her way out of a paper bag. 'Plus, the fewer people to know the truth the better.'

'OK.'

'So, any more questions?'

'What if it doesn't work? What if Don Carlos still won't sell you the vineyard?'

'You still get your money.'

As her thoughts seethed and whirled she studied his expression, the tension to his jaw, the haunted look in the dark depths of his eyes that spoke of a fierce need. This meant a lot more to Rafael than a mere business deal. Because no matter how reasonably he was spinning this idea—so much so that for a moment Cora had been caught up in the threads of the tale—it did not make sense.

'This is about more than a vineyard.'

'This is all about the vineyard. But my motivations are irrelevant—I am offering you a job, an opportunity. The question is, do you want it?'

For a long moment she stared at him, felt the sun soak her skin with warmth, and somewhere deep down inside her soul a remnant of the old Cora surfaced—the impulsive Cora, who still believed it was possible to even out the playing field with her siblings and win some love from her parents.

'Yes,' she said, and pulled out the chair, her tummy tumbling with a flotilla of acrobatic butterflies.

* * *

Tension seeped from Rafael's shoulders as victory coursed through his veins. The plan had paid off. Every woman had a price, after all, and he'd known money was Cora's Achilles' heel.

He pushed aside the small frisson of doubt. Turned out Cora was no different from those shallow women she'd dissed—cash and the promise of some luxurious living had been too much for her principles. Not that he would be fool enough to point that out. Yes, she had sat down, but she was still perched on the edge of the wooden slatted seat as if poised for flight.

She chewed her lip, and there came another wave of doubt as his gaze snagged on that luscious bow. Again. Only minutes before the desire to kiss her, really kiss her, had nigh on overwhelmed him. Rafael blinked. It had been an aberration brought on by adrenalin, by the knowledge that he was on the brink of success. Nothing to do with Cora and her absurdly kissable lips at all.

Focus.

He topped up her wine and lifted his own glass. 'To us,' he declared.

There was a moment of hesitation before she raised her glass and then replaced it on the table with a thunk.

'So how will this work? Exactly?'

'We announce our engagement; we organise a wedding. Pronto. We get married, I approach Don Carlos, secure the vineyard—marriage over. We move on to pastures new.'

'Define "pronto".'

'Two to three weeks.'

The potato she had just speared fell from her fork. 'We can't organise a wedding in that time. And anyway Don Carlos may not be able to make it at such short notice.'

Rafael shook his head. 'I can guarantee everyone will clear their diary for this. Lady Cora Derwent, from the highest echelons of English society, and Rafael Martinez, billionaire playboy from the gutters of London, get married after a romantic whirlwind courtship? I need the wedding to be soon—before Don Carlos sells the vineyard to someone else. Plus, a wedding shouts real commitment.'

A troubled look entered her turquoise eyes and a small frown creased her brow—almost spelt out the word qualm. 'Whereas this one's shout-out should be "great big lie".'

Ah. Her principles were obviously making another play for a win.

'Yes, it is a lie.'

There was no disputing that and he wouldn't try. But he didn't give a damn—he understood her scruples, but when it came to immorality the Aiza clan had graduated cum sum laude and Rafael didn't feel even a sliver of conscience at the way his moral compass pointed.

'That doesn't bother you?'

She'd tipped her head to one side and for a second the judgement in her gaze flicked at him.

'I totally disagree with Don Carlos's principles, but it is his vineyard to sell to whomever he wants. This plan is a con.'

The troubled look in her eyes intensified to one of distaste.

No. This plan is my birthright. This is my retribution.

The night he and his mother had left Spain was a blurred memory, seen through the eyes of a five-year-old, but he could still taste the fear—his mother's and his own. Through all the tears and the pleas had been the presence of a man who had come to see 'the whore' with his own eyes. Of course then the word had meant nothing to him, but he'd sensed the man's venom, had witnessed his delight in brutality and humiliation. Had watched those goons he'd brought terrorise his mother as they trashed her belongings.

But until recently he hadn't known the identity of the man he had dreamt about for long after their ignominious return to the London housing estate his mother had grown up on. Now, though, he did know—beyond the shadow of a doubt—and when he'd seen Don Carlos there had been a jolt of recognition so strong it had taken all his control to keep his hands unclenched.

'Rafael?'

He scrubbed his palm down his face and focused on Cora, whose troubled blue eyes studied him with concern. For a second of insanity he was almost lured into telling her the truth. An impulse he squashed without hesitation. To confide in Cora would be madness—the very last thing he wanted was for this news to go public. He didn't want Don Carlos to get a heads-up and the lawyers in.

All Rafael wanted was the personal satisfaction of getting some Aiza land and then telling his grandfather exactly who he was. Maybe that moment would in some way compensate for the way the de Guzman family had ruined his mother's life. Maybe the ownership of Aiza land would give him some satisfaction—he would produce Martinez wine from Aiza grapes and dedicate the wine to his mother.

'I will pay a fair price to Don Carlos, and if he makes the decision to sell based on the fact I have married a lady that is his look-out. We will be legally married. I will have changed my lifestyle. If you have a moral issue with that then now is the time to pull out, so I can find someone else. If you are on board I need you to be on board a hundred per cent.'

Her delicate features were scrunched into a frown, and the swirl of bright colours on her dress intensified the hue of her hair, emphasised the curves of her body. Cora looked miles away from the cool, aloof woman who had climbed into his car a few hours earlier.

He found himself holding his breath as he waited her response.

'So,' he said. 'Are you on board?'

CHAPTER FIVE

WAS SHE ON board with the idea of marrying Rafael Martinez? Faking a marriage for money and a vineyard? It was a con of gigantic proportions and as such it should fill her with disgust. After all, she herself had suffered hugely at the hands of a con artist. Yet it didn't feel wrong. Instinct told her that whatever Rafael Martinez was he wasn't immoral—this was more than a business deal to him, for sure, but she knew his hidden purpose wouldn't be sinister.

Stop it, Cora. Why was she kidding herself? Her instincts had let her down before and she knew nothing. Everyone had an agenda. Including herself. The point here was that Rafael would give Don Carlos a fair price for his land. If the Duque de Aiza chose to sell just because of their marriage that was his look-out, and she would win her way back to the Derwent fold.

'I'm in.'

The words filled her with apprehension, and yet exhilaration zinged through her body as he lifted his glass and this time she raised her own, and clinked it against his. The sunlight glinted off the cut crystal and the sound echoed in her ears like an omen.

'So what now?'

'We get engaged. I thought we could do it here. I've got a ring.'

As he reached into his pocket a small thread of sadness tugged at her heart. True, she'd written off the idea of romance in her life, had accepted that men only wanted her for her title or as a conduit to gain access to her infinitely more desirable sister. But the cool, clinical nature of this engagement made her swallow down a stupid regret that it wasn't real.

'Is there a problem?' His words were said with a surprising gentleness. 'We can do it somewhere else if you prefer.'

'No. You've put a lot of thought into this.'

A sweep of her hand encompassed the beauty of their surroundings, the tang of the food, the smooth burst of the wine on her tastebuds. She glanced round, inhaled the glorious scents, heard the lazy drone of bees, let the sun warm her skin. Every sensation was suddenly heightened. The only necessity lacking was love; the irony was bittersweet.

'It's the perfect setting for a proposal. Are you sure you want to waste it on a fake engagement?'

'It's not a waste. Believe me, I have no intention of ever doing this for real.'

‘How can you be so sure? Maybe there is an ideal woman for you out there.’ After all, surely a man who had put so much thought into a fake proposal must have a romantic side to him—however deep it was buried.

‘I’m sure. If I ever met my “ideal woman” I’d sprint a marathon in the opposite direction.’

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