

The Spaniard's Defiant Virgin

*Jennie
Lucas*

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JENNIE LUCAS

The Spaniard's Defiant Virgin

Аннотация

In his Spanish castillo Marcos Ramirez has been planning his retribution for the Winter family. . . .And now it's time. Marcos will take Tamsin and destroy her family. But Tamsin isn't the hedonistic society girl he expected. She's beautiful and courageous—bedding her will be sweet.And it's then that Marcos realizes Tamsin's a virgin, and innocent of all she's been accused of!

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by Jennie Lucas

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Jennie Lucas
THE SPANIARD'S
DEFIANT VIRGIN



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All about the author...

Jennie Lucas

JENNIE LUCAS had a tragic beginning for any would-be writer: a very happy childhood. Her parents owned a bookstore, and she grew up surrounded by books, dreaming about faraway lands. When she was ten, her father secretly paid her a dollar for every classic novel (*Jane Eyre*, *War and Peace*) that she read.

At fifteen, she went to a Connecticut boarding school on scholarship. She took her first solo trip to Europe at sixteen, then put off college and traveled around the U.S., supporting herself with jobs as diverse as gas-station cashier and newspaper advertising assistant.

At twenty-two, she met the man who would be her husband. For the first time in her life, she wanted to stay in one place, as long as she could be with him. After their marriage, she graduated from Kent State University with a degree in English, and started writing books a year later.

Jennie was a finalist in the Romance Writers of America's Golden Heart contest in 2003, and won the award in 2005. A fellow 2003 finalist, Australian author Trish Morey, read Jennie's writing and told her that she should write for Harlequin Presents. It seemed like too big a dream, but Jennie took a deep breath and went for it. A year later, Jennie got the magical call from London

that turned her into a published author.

Since then, life has been hectic—juggling a writing career, a sexy husband and two young children—but Jennie loves her crazy, chaotic life. Now if she can only figure out how to pack up her family and live in all the places she's writing about!

For more about Jennie and her books, please visit her Web site at www.jennielucas.com.

To my husband, who is better than ice cream.

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CHAPTER ONE

Tarfaya, Morocco

HE WAS waiting for her outside the Dar el-Saladin.

Marcos Ramirez held up his binoculars, watching the flower-covered limousine leave the fishing village in a whirlwind of rose petals. From where Marcos stood, the sturdy gate that protected the village from sandstorms on one side and the sea on the other seemed riddled with red bullet holes.

Tamsin Winter, at last. He'd kept tabs on her through her ten cloistered years in boarding schools until she'd returned to London last year. Since then, the wild young heiress had frequently been in the tabloids, always with a different man on her arm. The spoiled beauty was reputedly the most accomplished flirt in Britain.

Breaking her would be a pleasure.

"The car's moving into position, Patrón," his chief bodyguard, Reyes, noted aloud.

"Sí." Marcos put down the binoculars. He knew his men could have kidnapped the Winter girl without his supervision, preventing her from arriving at her wedding in the Sheikh's kasbah to the north. Marcos could be taking his ease in Madrid right now, drinking coffee and checking the latest numbers on the London and New York stock exchanges instead of sweating in the dust-choked desert.

But he'd been dreaming of revenge for twenty years, and today was the culmination of everything. After he had the girl, both she and her family would be utterly destroyed. Finally. As they deserved.

Marcos smiled grimly to himself. He only wished he could see the expression on her bridegroom's face when he heard the news, the black-hearted bastard.

The limousine left the village, moving along the sand-covered road that separated the Sahara and the bright Atlantic shore. He pulled his black mask down over his face and turned to Reyes. "Vámonos."

Tamsin Winter had just sold her virginity to the highest bidder.

Her white bridal kaftan, intricately embroidered with silver thread and jewels, weighed on her like a shroud as she looked through the darkened windows. She felt almost envious of a wrinkled woman selling oranges on the street. Selling oranges seemed like a pleasant fate compared with marrying a man who'd already beaten one wife to death.

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes. It didn't matter, she told herself. She would let Aziz al-Maghrib paw at her with his meaty hands, kiss her with the stench of his foul breath and take her innocence with his flabby, wrinkled body. It would be a small price to pay, since it would save her young sister from a life of misery and neglect.

But, as recently as last month, she'd looked forward to falling in love and marrying a man she could cherish. She'd dreamed of starting a career and some day having children of her own. She'd spent all of her twenty-three years dreaming of the day her life would truly begin.

Strange to think that it was already over.

Saving her sister was the best choice she'd ever made. But, even knowing that, part of her ached for all the time she'd wasted, the romances she'd never had, the chances she'd never taken. If she'd known her life would be so short...

"Tamsin! Stop fidgeting. You'll wrinkle your dress. Oh, you're doing it on purpose, you stupid girl!"

Tamsin slowly opened her eyes, heavy with black kohl, and looked into the hated face of her half-brother's wife. Camilla Winter was twenty years older than Tamsin, and her surgery-smoothed skin stretched oddly over her skull.

"Did you pay for your face-lift out of Nicole's money, Camilla?" Tamsin asked curiously. "Is that why you were letting a ten-year-old girl starve? So you could look like a doll?"

Camilla gasped.

"Do not fear. My brother will beat the rebellious spirit out of her," Hatima, her future sister-in-law, said confidently. Hatima and Camilla comprised her negaffa—the older female relatives who, according to Moroccan tradition, were supposed to help a young bride, to counsel her, to calm her fears about her coming marriage.

Some help, Tamsin thought bitterly. She looked down at her henna-decorated hands folded carefully in her lap. But Hatima was right. Her husband would beat her, either before or after he took her virginity. Maybe both.

She stared out the window as they passed the gate that encircled the village. She never should have saved herself for love, she thought. She should have slept with the first boy who'd drunkenly kissed her at a college party. Then maybe it wouldn't hurt so much now.

"What? No snappy comeback?" Camilla sneered.

"Not so brave now, are you?"

Blinking hard to hold back the tears—she'd die before she cried in front of Camilla—Tamsin stared stonily at the fishing boats bobbing off the shore and the seagulls flying free over the ocean. Seemingly disappointed by her lack of spirit, the other women began to speak of recent attacks in nearby Laayoune.

"The wali's wife was kidnapped," Hatima whispered. "Taken in broad daylight."

"What's the world coming to?" Camilla replied gleefully. "What happened to her?"

Traffic waned as they traveled northwards along the Atlantic, but the car weaved back and forth across the road. Frowning, Tamsin glanced up at the driver. Though the car was cold with air-conditioning, the back of his neck was covered with sweat.

"The wali had to sell everything he owned to pay the ransom. The family is ruined, of course, but at least the wife was

returned.”

“You mean they didn’t hurt her?” Camilla sounded disappointed.

“No, they just wanted money. It was—”

Hatima’s voice ended in a scream as their driver veered hard right and slammed on the brakes. The limousine spun around twice, skidding across the road before it crashed heavily into a sandbank.

The driver threw open his door and ran back towards Tarfaya.

“Where are you going?” Camilla cried. Her long nails scraped against the handle as she reached for her door.

The door handle was abruptly yanked out of her hand from the other side. Three men in black masks and desert camouflage leaned threateningly into the back seat, shouting orders in a language that Tamsin didn’t understand.

Her own side door was yanked open. She whirled around with a gasp.

A man, taller than the others, towered over her. Beneath his black mask, she could see a cruel mouth and steel-gray eyes that bored into her like a revolver pressing into her flesh.

“Tamsin Winter,” he said in English. “At last you are mine.”

He knew her name. A strange sort of bandit, she thought dimly, even as she heard the other women screaming behind her. Why would a desert bandit know her name?

Had her prayers been answered and he’d come to save her?

No! she thought desperately. No one could save her. Tamsin

had to marry Aziz or her sister would pay the price.

What had Hatima said the bandits wanted? Money? Licking her lips nervously, she sat up straight, trying to stare him down.

"I am the future bride of Aziz ibn Mohamed al-Maghrib," she said. "Touch a hair on my head and he will kill you. Return me safely, and you will be rewarded."

"Ah." The man's mouth stretched into a smile, showing white, even teeth. "And how would he reward me?"

He had a strange accent, the flat vowels of an American punctuated with something more exotic—the rolling Rs of a Spaniard. Who was this man? He was more than a mere brigand. The thought frightened her.

"A million euros," she said recklessly.

"A fine number."

"You'll be rich," she agreed, praying that Aziz's uncle, who held the wealth in the family, would actually pay it.

"A generous offer," the brigand said. "But, unfortunately for you, money is not what I'm after."

He reached into the back seat, grabbing her shoulders. Tamsin screamed, kicking and clawing at his face.

"Don't fight me," he growled.

She only screamed and kicked harder. One of her shoes slammed hard against his groin. Cursing, he restrained her wrists with one hand. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a white cloth and pressed it against her mouth.

He was drugging her! She tried not to breathe, but after a

minute she couldn't stop herself from taking a gasping breath. The air tasted sickly sweet through the cloth. She tried to twist her face away, but the man wouldn't allow it. She took another breath, and the desert horizon started to spin before it all went black.

Tamsin woke up in a very soft bed.

She opened her eyes slowly. Her head pounded. She could hear the lapping of water, the creaking of wood, the caw of seagulls overhead.

And she realized she was naked.

Sitting up straight in bed, she pulled the luxurious cotton sheets away from her body. She was wearing her see-through white lace bra and panties—her wedding-night lingerie—and nothing else.

“I trust you slept well.”

She yanked the sheets up to her chin. A handsome stranger was leaning against the doorway. He was tall, broad-shouldered and olive-skinned, with short, wavy dark hair. He wore a crisp white shirt and dark pants that molded to his muscular body.

She'd never seen him before, but she recognized his voice. That cruel, sensual mouth. Most of all, those dark, cold eyes.

“Where am I?” She had a hazy memory of being on a helicopter and then driven through the streets of Tangiers. “What did you do with Camilla and Hatima?”

He stepped into the cabin, his gray eyes alight with malignant

hatred as he looked at her. "You should be worried about what I'm going to do with you."

That was exactly what she was trying not to think about. If she did, she'd start screaming with terror and fear. Not just for herself but for ten-year-old Nicole, who was still held hostage in Tarfaya, depending on her to get through this.

She had to hold herself together long enough to come up with a plan of escape.

"Did you kidnap them as well?" she asked, despising the involuntary tremble in her voice. "Where have you taken me? Have you sent a ransom note to the Sheikh?"

He folded his arms. "There will be no ransom note."

"What?"

He took a step closer to the bed. His whole body was muscular and taut beneath his fine clothes, as if only sheer will kept him from grabbing her.

"I left the others in Tarfaya," he said. "I only need you."

She swallowed. "Me? Why?"

He just stared down at her, his face a handsome, arrogant mask.

She tried again. "Where are we?"

His full, sensual lip curled into a line of contempt. "My yacht."

Well, yes, even she could have guessed that much. She glanced through the port window. The sun was just starting to set, trailing a pathway of crimson and orange across the water. She couldn't see a trace of land. They were out on the open sea, she thought,

where no one would hear her scream.

If he hadn't kidnapped her for ransom, then why? No matter what the tabloids seemed to believe, nothing about her was special. And her family had nothing he could want. Her brother's company was hanging on by a thread.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"Your captor. That's all you need to know."

Tasmin pressed her shaking hands against the sheet to hide their tremor. She couldn't let him see her fear. Bullies lived to control, to inspire terror. She'd learned that from her father. The only way to survive was to respond with defiance. "What do you want with me?"

He sat on the edge of the bed and reached to caress her cheek. "You are a beautiful woman, señorita, famed for your power over men. Can't you guess what I want?"

She shivered at his brief touch. Up close, he was even more handsome. Dark and dangerous, he emanated power. If they'd met at a London club, she would have been attracted to him, fascinated even.

Could she really fight a man like this and hope to win?

Her fingers clutched the sheet between them like a shield. Nicole, she thought. Remember Nicole.

She'd found her little sister alone last month in their brother's cold, darkened Yorkshire mansion, left without food or money while Sheldon and Camilla used her money to support their jet-setting lifestyle. Tamsin still felt a chill of horror when she

remembered stepping into the dark house, calling her sister's name; Nicole had run to her crying and flung her thin, shivering body against her. She'd believed that Tamsin had abandoned her.

She would never forgive their half-brother for that. God, she hated Sheldon, she hated Camilla, she despised everyone who hurt innocent, helpless people in pursuit of their own selfish desires.

Like the man in front of her now. She narrowed her eyes. She wouldn't let him prevent her marriage to Aziz.

"If you're going to have me, get it over with," she said flatly. "And take me back to Morocco so I can be married."

His eyes widened and she saw that she'd surprised him. But, almost as quickly as the expression had appeared, it was gone. He stood up, looking as cold and unreachable as the stars. "I can see why you're known as a flirt."

"Forgive me if I don't know the proper etiquette when I'm kidnapped on my wedding day and wake up naked on a stranger's yacht."

"You're not naked."

"How do you know? Are you the one who undressed me?"

He lifted a sardonic eyebrow. "Alas, I haven't had that pleasure," he said but, before she could relax and be grateful for that small blessing, he added darkly, "yet."

The look he gave her could have melted stone. It was full of hatred, yes, but something more. She felt it simmering through her body, a strange electricity humming through her veins. She

found herself staring at his lips. Wondering what he looked like beneath the shirt. Wondering how it would feel to have his body pressed against her own.

She shook the thought away. The only thing that mattered now was finding out what he wanted with her so she could get away. She had to protect Nicole.

Especially since what had happened was Tamsin's fault. It was true they'd never been close—Tamsin had been sent to an American boarding school when her sister was a baby. Their mother had died when they were young, and their father a few years later. But Tamsin never should have trusted Sheldon to be Nicole's guardian. Never. And while she'd been in London enjoying her first taste of freedom, Sheldon had been ransacking both sisters' trust funds. He'd fired Nicole's nanny, leaving her alone.

Tamsin should have known. She should have protected her...

"We're almost there." Her handsome, arrogant captor moved across the cabin towards the window.

"Where?"

"Andalusia. My home."

Spain! A burst of hope went through Tamsin. Spain meant land beneath her feet, civilization—and freedom! She could catch a high-speed ferry from Algeciras and be back in Morocco by nightfall.

The man turned back abruptly to face her and she lowered her eyes, afraid that he would see her plans written across her face.

“Tell me, Señorita Winter, do you speak Spanish?”

“No, I don’t,” she lied, trying to keep all emotion from her voice. “Do you?”

“Of course.” He gave her a smile that wasn’t a smile at all. “But my mother was American. I lived in Boston for six years after she died. I will speak English for your sake.”

“Then explain to me, in English, why you’ve kidnapped me.”

“Missing your fiancé already?” he asked coldly.

Caught off guard, she stammered, “No...that is to say, yes.” She took a breath. “Whether I miss him is beside the point. I made a promise to marry him, so I must. Some people,” she said succinctly, “have honor.”

His eyes flashed, but were quickly veiled. “So you admit you do not love him.”

“I never said that.”

“No, you did not, but Aziz al-Maghrib has a reputation for cruelty.” His dark gaze skimmed over her, making her wonder if he could somehow see her naked body beneath the sheet. “Are you so shallow that his uncle’s wealth makes you wish to be his bride?”

She had no intention of discussing her reasons for the marriage. “If you know Aziz’s reputation and you still kidnapped me, you’re a fool. He will kill you for this.”

He sat on the bed. Close. Too close. She wanted to move away, but his weight held down most of the sheet and what was left was barely enough for modesty. She’d never let any man see her in

knickers and a bra and she wasn't going to start now. Especially when just having him close was causing such strange reactions in her own body.

She opened her mouth to demand that he move away. But their eyes met and his gaze was dark, so dark. And full of such emotion that it was an ocean to drown in.

To call him handsome wasn't nearly enough, she thought. His face was breathtaking in its sinister beauty, with his Roman nose, high cheekbones and sharp jaw line. His dark gray eyes contrasted with olive skin and black wavy hair that was just long enough for her to run her hands through, if she'd dared. He was so tall that, even sitting next to her on the bed, she had to look up; he was so broad-shouldered and muscular that she knew he could easily overpower her. He could do anything he wished with her. The thought frightened her.

He reached his hand towards her. She braced for a hit but, to her surprise, he just stroked her cheek.

"I've waited a long time for this." His touch was possessive, gentle, as if she were a wild horse to be tamed to his command. "A lifetime."

"For what?" she managed.

"For you."

"For me?" She almost wished that he would hit her. She would have known how to deal with that. Instead, she was trembling beneath his touch. He didn't even need brute force. Just the brush of his fingers was enough to make her agree to anything he asked,

and he was only touching her cheek. What would happen if he stroked her breast, kissed her mouth, pulled her down beneath him on the bed...?

She wrenched her face away. "Why did you kidnap me? What are you going to do to me?"

"You're the spoils of war, Tamsin." He leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "And I want to find out if revenge tastes sweet..."

As he spoke, his lips brushed against the sensitive flesh of her ear. His breath was hot against her neck, causing prickles to run the length of her body.

"Please," she whispered, hardly knowing what she was asking for. Her body felt so strange. Tense and tingly, cold and hot.

He ran his hand down her cheek, past the sensitive flesh of her ear, down her neck. He stroked her hair as he gently pulled back her head, exposing her vulnerable throat, her aching mouth. Involuntarily, she licked her lips. For a suspended instant, his eyes followed the movement of her tongue.

Then his mouth was on hers.

His kiss was hungry, demanding. His tongue stroked inside her mouth, intertwining with hers, teasing her. Longing set her whole body aflame and she wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders. She ran her hands through his dark hair as he deepened the kiss.

"The pictures didn't do you justice," he whispered against her cheek when he drew away. "Men start wars over women like

you...”

The hair of his arms brushed against the bare skin of her torso and she looked down with a gasp. The sheet had fallen from her hands and was now crumpled around her waist. His eyes roved over her breasts, her belly, the aroused nipples pushing through the translucent white lace of her bra.

Before she could pull up the sheet, his hands were on her naked skin, grasping her waist as he pulled her roughly against his body.

She didn't fight him. She couldn't. He kissed her, his large hands massaging the bare warmth of her back, and all she could think was that she'd never been kissed like this before. She was lost—lost in him—and the whole world seemed to spin around her as if they were at the center of a whirlwind.

Without thinking, she reached beneath his shirt to imitate the way he touched her, caressing his flat belly, moving her fingertips up his muscular chest. A groan escaped him as he touched her bra clasp.

A hard knock sounded at the door.

He wrenched away. Breathing hard, the two of them stared at each other. He looked dazed, she thought, but not nearly so dazed as she felt.

His expression suddenly changed.

“You're good,” he said, and his voice was an accusation.

She was good? As if she were the one who'd been seducing him?

He crossed to the door. A young woman waited outside with

her arms full. "The clothes for the señorita, Patrón," she said in Spanish, and left.

Turning back to Tamsin, he tossed a black dress and high-heeled shoes on the bed. "Here. Maria took off your kaftan so you'd be comfortable in bed." His voice was almost a sneer. "These clothes should suit you."

"Y-you're leaving?" she stammered. Her defiance had been burned away in his searing kiss. She could hardly imagine standing, let alone walking, with her knees so weak.

He stared at her for a moment, his face angry and brooding. Then, without answer, he turned back towards the door.

"Wait," she said in a low voice. The day had been a roller coaster of emotion and exhaustion. Tears filled her eyes, threatening to spill over her lashes. "Is that all you have to say to me? You've dragged me from my wedding, kidnapped me across the Mediterranean, kissed me, and now you're going to leave without a single word of explanation?"

His dark eyes narrowed. Dislike emanated from his body like waves of heat in the desert.

"Very well. I will give you that much," he said. "What did you ask? My name? Marcos Ramirez. What do I want with you? It's simple, Miss Winter. I intend to destroy your fiancé and your family, and you're going to help me do it."

CHAPTER TWO

MAYBE he should have let Reyes kidnap the girl after all.

Marcos glanced at the girl sitting next to him in the Rolls-Royce as the chauffeur drove them three miles inland from the coast.

Silent at last. It was an improvement from the previous few hours, when she'd demanded for him to let her go so she could rush back and marry Aziz al-Maghrib. When her demands hadn't worked, she'd tried insults and threats. Thinking about it now almost made him laugh. He was not one of her suitors. Her moods held no sway over him.

Or did they? An image of their kiss flooded his mind. He hadn't meant to kiss her in the cabin of his yacht, but she'd just looked so damned desirable. And the kiss itself...

He pushed the disturbing memory from his mind. The woman was an experienced coquette. According to the tabloids, she'd slept with every male celebrity who set foot in the London boroughs; of course she knew how to kiss. It changed nothing. If anything, it only lowered his opinion of her. Her pretense of bewildered innocence, the way she'd blushed after pretending to drop the sheet—was there anything the woman wouldn't do in order to return to Morocco and get her claws into the al-Maghrib fortune?

He'd actually told her the truth about his plan to destroy her

family, but she hadn't asked a word about it. Apparently, her whole family could starve, so long as she herself was slathered with diamonds and rubies as the honored wife of the Sheikh's nephew.

Shallow-hearted and greedy, he thought contemptuously. As venal as her bridegroom, and probably as brainless as her half-brother into the bargain.

A pity she was also the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Her beauty wasn't just in her porcelain skin, her pink lips or her wide blue eyes. It was more than that. Her charm was in the way she moved, like a flamenco dancer. It was in the way her long red hair swayed gracefully against her pale shoulders. It was in the sound of her voice, deep and melodic. It was in her slender, reed-like waist, long legs and full, high breasts. Put all of that together, and he could see why she'd been called the most desirable woman in Britain. A lesser man would instantly be a slave to her charm.

It would serve her right to seduce her, he thought suddenly, glancing at her. She was pressed against the opposite side of his car, glaring at the passing Spanish countryside. How he would love to break her will. To make her sigh and scream with pleasure. To overwhelm her rudeness and insults with an onslaught of desire. His whole body tightened as he thought of it. It would serve the spoiled girl right...

Damn it to hell. He clenched his jaw, realizing that his attraction to her was in danger of overriding his reason.

Obviously he was just as susceptible to her charm as any other man. It infuriated him. He had no doubt that he could resist her, but that he'd even thought of taking her to bed proved how dangerous she was.

As the car pulled to the castle's front steps, his gaze unwillingly followed the curves of her body in the low-cut black dress. The Andalusian summer night was sultry and fragrant with jasmine as, with a dismissive motion to the chauffeur, Marcos walked around to her door.

She continued to ignore him. Without a word, he grabbed her arm and pulled her from the car. He dragged her up the wide steps, followed by Reyes, Maria and the others from the van.

She stumbled on the top step, looking up at the crenellated battlements of the fourteenth-century castle. "This is your home?"

"Yes," he said shortly. "And your home for the next few weeks."

Her face shut down in that rebellious expression he knew so well. "I won't stay here. You can't make me."

In spite of everything, he could feel himself starting to lose his patience. Between her beauty and her insolence, she seemed to know just how to get under his skin. "You're here as long as I want you."

She yanked away from him, folding her arms over her deliciously full breasts as she entered the castle. He let her go, confident that she could not escape with the tall, heavy doors

closed behind them. The reluctant clack-clack-clack of her high heels echoed against the walls as she followed him, staring upward in amazement. Long ago, the magnificent foyer had been built to impress, with high ceilings carved in intricate designs of flowers, Arabic letters and geometric patterns.

He remembered she'd briefly majored in medieval studies before switching to economics. Hopefully the foyer was impressing her, he thought grimly. She wasn't in London any more. It was time she realized who was in power here.

Holding her prisoner here would financially decimate both of his enemies. Without the wedding between the two families, Sheikh Mohamed ibn Battuta al-Maghrib would not sell the argan oil harvest on credit to Sheldon Winter, which he needed for the relaunch of his only profitable product. The board members of Winter International would sell the company off for parts, and Sheldon would be swamped beneath the weight of his personal debts.

Aziz would be hurt even worse. Without his uncle's promised wedding gift, he would no longer be able to hide his gambling addiction. The Sheikh, an honorable but strict man, would likely disinherit him, and his creditors would break both his legs. A perfect end, in Marcos's opinion.

The only thing that might be even more satisfying would be if Aziz came to Spain to start a war over Tamsin. After what the man had done to his father, nothing would give Marcos more pleasure than to rip him apart with his bare hands. He was sick of

secrets. Sick of lies. And, most of all, sick of waiting. He wanted the men who'd destroyed his family punished.

In the meantime, he was stuck with Tamsin Winter as his prisoner.

His eyes traced the outline of her gorgeous figure and the red hair tumbling down her bare back. Her skin was as creamy-pale as winter and looked as soft as a summer breeze. His hands longed to stroke her back, to see if she was as soft as she looked, to see if the fire of her hair was reflected in the tumultuous passion of her embrace.

He shook himself in annoyance. She was his prisoner, he told himself, nothing more. Setting his jaw, he looked at her coldly. "You will join me for dinner tonight."

Her full pink lip curled. "I'd rather starve."

"As you wish." With a flare of his nostril, he turned to his head of security standing discreetly behind them. "Reyes, lock Miss Winter in the tower."

"No!" Her eyes went wide and she took a step towards him. "You can't lock me up!"

"I can and I will." The room he'd prepared for her was luxurious and comfortable, and far from the tower, but he had no intention of sharing that with her. Not after all she'd put him through today. "You've given me no reason to seek your company."

Her hands clenched as she visibly struggled to contain her anger. Her cheeks were red with the effort.

"I've changed my mind," she said through gritted teeth. "I would love to have dinner with you."

About time, he thought. Her constant insults were growing thin. He turned to his housekeeper, who'd just entered the foyer.

"We will take our supper in the sala, Nelida. It is late. Bring the whole meal at once."

"Sí, Patrón," she replied.

"I will keep you apprised," he told Reyes. The man left with a nod, followed by the rest of the security team.

Marcos held out his arm. "This way."

Tamsin stared at his arm distrustfully. Her blue eyes, emphasized by the dark fringe of kohl and thick lashes, seemed as wide and deep as the sea. Taking his arm was obviously the last thing she wanted to do.

But, to his surprise, she gave him a smile before tucking her small hand in the crook of his arm. The glow in her expression was so unexpected it nearly took his breath away.

"Thank you." Her voice was a sultry purr, her eyes half-veiled by sweeping dark lashes, luring him on with the promise of some feminine mystery. Intrigued, he drew closer.

"Follow me, Miss Winter," he said, feeling off-kilter again.

She laughed, and it was as crystalline and pure as a melody. She touched him softly on the shoulder. "If I'm really going to be here for weeks, I think we can dispense with the formalities, don't you? Call me Tamsin. Marcos."

Watching her lush, full lips speak his name, he suddenly was

hungry for more than dinner. In the space of a moment, the ice princess had become a fiery temptress and, in spite of his better judgment all he could think was that he wanted to throw himself into her flames.

But why the change in her behavior? Surely she wasn't that terrified of being locked in the tower?

Then it all became clear. She had changed her strategy. Rather than insulting him, she thought she could charm him into letting her go.

It wouldn't work, of course. She took him for a halfwit if she thought he'd fall for such an obvious ploy. But, as she moved closer to him, her body swaying like music, he thought that after all her abuse of the past few hours it might be enjoyable for him to let her try.

He wouldn't be tempted by her, he told himself.

He was just curious to see how far she'd go.

Tamsin realized now that she'd been a fool to waste time with insults.

Unlike her pompous, rather oblivious half-brother, Marcos Ramirez wouldn't be baited so easily. He was smart, organized and ruthless. He'd gone all the way to Morocco to kidnap her. He'd obviously spent a great deal of time and money to set up his revenge against Aziz and her family. And she'd thought he'd let her go for being rude?

It was time for a new plan.

Marcos gave her a quick glance as they ascended the sweeping stone staircase towards the sala. His desire was plain in his eyes, though he quickly veiled his expression with a smile. He obviously believed her to be a shallow, promiscuous socialite. And, judging by the clothes he'd provided for her—a black Gucci halter dress with a plunging neckline and Christian Louboutin pumps—he'd been watching her for some time. The outfit was a duplicate of the one she'd famously worn to a party. It had caused the tabloids to proclaim her London's new 'it' girl—for that month, at least.

But now she wished with all her heart for a tracksuit and trainers instead. The peep-toe heels in crêpe chiffon mesh, beautiful as they were, weren't exactly made to scale down stone walls or sneak past guards.

A sexy dress had other benefits, though. She glanced at him beneath her lashes. She could flirt with him. Lull him into complacency. Make him believe she might actually sleep with him.

Yes. She would deal with this arrogant Spaniard.

All she had to do was make sure Marcos continued to think she was everything the tabloids said—a shallow flirt who cared only for fashion and the admiration of men. She'd convince him that she was content to remain here in luxury while he prevented her marriage and ruined her family. Then, when his guard was lowered and he least expected it, she would escape to Morocco and stop him.

She smiled to herself, imagining the look on his face when his plans were destroyed by the woman he'd underestimated.

"Here we are," he said as they reached a wide dining hall. His hand lingered possessively on the small of her back.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, smiling up at him until her cheeks hurt.

It wasn't a lie. The architecture was medieval in appearance, though the plasterwork on the walls was covered with expensive modern art. She recognized a Picasso. The ceilings were high and the long darkwood table was decorated with a vase of exotic fresh flowers. The outside doors were open, overlooking a wide balcony and stone balustrade. She took a deep breath of night-blooming jasmine.

He escorted her to a seat near the end of the table facing the open windows. He was still wearing the same white shirt and fitted black trousers he'd had on the yacht, and she caught his scent on the breeze. He smelled of warm sun and Mediterranean sea and something else—something indefinable but totally male. Very different from Aziz, who wore enough cologne to make her gasp for air.

Marcos's scent, his body, his voice, all made her body hum with delicious tension. It was...confusing. How could she be attracted to him when she longed to crack him over the head with a heavy vase?

"Care for a drink?" he asked shortly.

She hesitated. "Yes. Thank you."

He went to the bar at the end of the dining room and her eyes followed his every step. Tall and broad-shouldered, he walked with lazy, sinuous movements, like a lion prowling the savannah. His crisp white shirt and finely cut trousers silhouetted the muscular shape of his body.

He turned back to face her. His strong jawline was dark with late-day shadow and his hair was black and full of curl. With his aquiline profile and full lips, his face was as perfectly chiseled and as cold in expression as a statue by Michelangelo.

Marcos Ramirez was a dark angel, she thought with a shiver. Beautiful, cruel and utterly without remorse.

“The brandy is from my own vineyards.” He put her snifter on the table and sat next to her. She jumped when she felt his knee brush against her bare leg.

He quirked an eyebrow. “Did I startle you?”

She blushed in embarrassment, furious at herself for acting like the virgin she was. She tried to recover. “No. Your legs are just very...big.”

“Gracias.”

So far, so good. She leaned forward to lightly brush her hand on his knee. “I admire strong legs on a man. Big hands. Big feet.” She gave them a conspicuous glance. “So good for heavy lifting.”

“I don’t just have strength, but stamina,” he observed, looking at her over his glass with an amused expression. “I can lift anything you want. All night.”

Oh, my God.

Flirting with Marcos was very different from dancing with a pallid young earl or drinking with a bull-headed celebrity at a London club. Marcos was a full-grown man, and a dangerous one at that. She was his prisoner, in his castle. He could do anything he wanted with her.

Playing with him was playing with fire.

You can do this, she told herself. Make him think you want him. Act like the promiscuous woman he believes you to be. Lean forward and kiss him now.

But she couldn't do it. He was too powerful, too masculine, too in control of himself. It made her lose her nerve.

Grabbing her snifter, she lifted the brandy to her lips and drank deeply until the potency of the liquor caused her to choke and cough.

"Careful." He pounded on her back with his left hand. "Inexperienced with brandy?"

She felt inexperienced, and not just with brandy, either.

"I was thirsty," she responded lamely.

"Yes, I can see that." His gray eyes gleamed. "Are you hungry as well?"

"Very." She took another sip of brandy, more carefully this time. "By the way, I owe you my thanks."

He regarded her with some suspicion. "For what?"

"For kidnapping me," she said, keeping her eyes wide with admiration. "For saving me from Aziz."

"Saving you? You were so desperate to marry him that you

wanted to jump in the sea and swim back to Morocco.”

“That was just because I was frightened. I didn’t know what you meant to do to me. But I never wanted to marry Aziz—never. He would have stuck me away in the desert, a million miles away from shops, clubs, Harrods, everything.” She shivered prettily. “What kind of life is that for a girl to lead?”

His lip curled. “Qué lástima, you are right. It would be a tragedy.”

The only tragedy is how easily you’re buying this, she thought. She leaned forward to put her hand over his. “I’m not your enemy, Marcos. I have no love for my brother or Aziz. Perhaps we can... help each other.”

He glanced down at her hand. “What did you have in mind?”

His eyes had fallen to her mouth, and she licked her lips. Again, she had the feeling of being out of her league, out of her depth, and out of her mind. She couldn’t manipulate a man like this. Could she?

She swallowed the last of the brandy with a gulp and held up the snifter, looking at him with her best smile. “Would you get me some more brandy?” She gave a little giggle. “My head is starting to spin in such a wonderful way.”

Without a word, he took the glass and strode across the old stone floor to the wet bar. She watched him with narrowed eyes, but the moment he turned back to face her she simpered at him, dimpling.

“Tell me your plans, and I’ll tell you how I can help.” She

stretched her arms above her head with a dainty yawn, well aware that it would cause her breasts to rise against the low-cut halter dress. "I still don't understand why you think kidnapping me will hurt Aziz and my brother."

His eyes followed the swell of her breasts against the plunging black neckline. "It's enough that it will."

"But why do you want to hurt us?"

"Not you, querida. Them."

"Why do you want to hurt them?"

He shrugged. "They've got it coming."

Selfish bastard, she thought, irritated that he wouldn't explain further. I won't let Nicole's life be ruined because of your stupid desire for revenge.

Tamsin had already seen enough in her life, thank you, especially from her father's example. When he'd finally died of apoplexy, he'd been friendless and un-mourned, and all Tamsin had felt was relief that he couldn't hurt them ever again.

"Here's your brandy." Marcos placed it on the table next to her.

"Thank you." She crossed her legs, trying to show them to their best advantage, then pretended to accidentally drop one of her high-heeled shoes to the floor. She leaned forward to pick it up, just to give him a nice view down her neckline.

When she sat up, he was looking at her like a hungry wolf waiting to devour a lamb.

Perhaps it had worked too well, she thought as he slowly

walked around her. She could feel his hot stare move up and down her body and nearly jumped when his hands touched her bare shoulders. She hadn't expected her own senses to have such a strong reaction. Her voice trembled. "What are you doing?"

He smiled down at her, softly brushing her hair aside, causing shivers of awareness to spread from her scalp down her body. "You've had a difficult day, but we have the whole night ahead of us. To eat. To drink. To...enjoy."

Her heart gave a strange little thump as he massaged her shoulders. She felt his hands move lower on the bare skin of her upper back, rubbing the tense muscles around her shoulder blades. She closed her eyes, unable to resist leaning back.

"Qué belleza," he whispered. His fingers lightly traced the edge of her shoulder, the crook of her neck, the curl of her hair. "You are so beautiful."

"It's not me," she gasped. "It's just the dress."

"It's the woman in the dress." He bent forward to wrap his arms around her, pulling her against his chest.

"Perhaps you are right," he said. "Perhaps we can help each other."

"Tell me your plans," she said, hardly able to believe that he was falling for her act, "and I will tell you how I can help you."

Running his hands down her arms, he gave her an enigmatic smile. "Perhaps. We shall see."

It was working! He thought he could trust her! But, just as triumph was coursing through her, the housekeeper and two

waiters entered the sala with trays of dinner, interrupting them. To her chagrin, Marcos moved away to his own chair.

"I'm serving dinner all at once, as you wanted," the housekeeper said in Spanish, throwing a hard glare toward Tamsin. It bewildered her. Why would the housekeeper dislike her? "For your romantic night," the woman added sourly.

"Thank you, Nelida," Marcos replied in the same language, taking the tray from her. "I would be helpless without you."

The plump middle-aged woman looked mollified. "You'd starve, that's for sure. You'd live off coffee and tapas, or else forget to eat entirely. You always lose weight in Madrid."

"But I always come back so you can fatten me up. Good night, Nelida."

"I don't think your housekeeper likes me," Tamsin said after the woman and her assistants left.

"It's nothing personal," he said, buttering a thick slice of bread. "Nelida was my nanny when I was a child. She's old-fashioned and possessive. She doesn't approve of loose women."

Loose women! Tamsin thought indignantly. She looked down at her meal. "What's this?"

"The soup is salmorejo. Tomato soup, thickened with breadcrumbs, topped with chopped eggs and ham."

She hesitantly took a mouthful of soup. It was cold, but delicious. "It tastes like gazpacho."

"Yes."

"And this?"

“Pato a la Sevillana. Roast duck with onion, leeks and carrots, cooked in sherry. And bread, of course. That’s Nelida’s specialty.”

Tamsin took several bites and realized two things: first, that she was starving, and second, that if she were prisoner here for long she would soon be putting on weight too.

That was, if Nelida didn’t decide to poison her for being loose. She scowled.

“Do you like it?” Marcos’s slate-gray eyes looked into hers, as if he were asking another question entirely. For a moment, his dark gaze drew her, pulling her into a trance.

She shook herself out of it. Maybe I really am as stupid and shallow as he thinks, she considered grimly. Why else would she be attracted to such a cold, cruel, heartless man?

She forced herself to turn her attention back to the food.

“It’s delicious,” she replied and quickly ate more.

“Your housekeeper is a treasure.”

Over the next hour, she fluttered her eyelashes and smiled, trying her hardest to get him to reveal why he’d kidnapped her, what his plans were, what her brother and Aziz had done to make him desire revenge. But, in spite of his hint earlier that he’d share his plans, he spoke little and revealed nothing. It was like talking to a brick wall. She continued to try, skimming her mind desperately for any topic that might make him open up—travel, business, even football. Finally, she gave up.

She’d never met such a brooding, unhelpful man in her life.

Either that or she was losing her touch.

Fine, she thought resentfully. If that's how you want to be, let's see how you like it. She ate the rest of her meal in determined silence.

It seemed not to bother him a whit.

"You were hungry," Marcos observed when her plate was empty.

"Being kidnapped will do that to a person," she muttered, then gave a little laugh, as if it were a joke.

"Would you like more roast duck? Some dessert, perhaps?"

It was the most he'd spoken during their whole meal. But, unfortunately, any more roast duck and she'd burst out of her chic little dress. Another reason to wish she was wearing a track suit. "Thank you, but no. But there is something I do want."

He raised an eyebrow. "Your freedom, plus a quick flight to Morocco?"

She gave a nervous laugh, since that was exactly what she wanted. But she wasn't going to let him catch her so easily. Shaking her head, she folded her arms, resting them on the table with what she hoped was an earnest look. "I just want to know what my brother and Aziz did to you that made you so angry."

For a moment he looked as if he might tell her. Then he held out his hand. "Come out and see the view."

Reluctantly, she set down her napkin and let him draw her towards the open doors of the veranda. "You can see the valley all the way to the sea," he said. "See those lights? That's El Puerto de

las Estrellas. The village used to be known for smugglers, pirates, thieves.”

“Apparently it still is,” she muttered.

His dark eyebrows lowered. “Perhaps so, now that you are here. The Winters are liars and thieves, and your fiancé is worse.”

She bit back a tart retort, knowing it wouldn’t help her cause to argue. Besides...well, his accusation was true.

Sheldon had lied about many things. Particularly when he’d promised to watch out for Nicole. And, though she didn’t know Aziz very well, she was reasonably sure he was keeping a mistress and intended to keep doing so after their marriage. Plus there was that other small matter of murdering his first wife.

As they stood on the wide stone balcony a cool breeze blew through the valley, making her shiver in her tiny cocktail dress. Without hesitation, he put his arm around her.

“I am glad you are here with me,” he said softly.

Tamsin involuntarily leaned back into the warmth of his arms. Perhaps she had misjudged him, she thought suddenly. For all she knew, he had good reason to hate her family. Her brother and fiancé had certainly made enemies—even Tamsin despised them. Maybe trying to trick him and escape was a mistake. Maybe if she told Marcos the truth about why she was being forced to marry Aziz, he could truly help her...

“You are the pin in my grenade,” he said, giving her a hard smile. “Without you, I could not destroy Aziz al-Maghrib and your brother so easily.”

He was deliberately trying to bait her. She kept her expression bland, but inside she simmered. She wanted to kick him in the shins. Or maybe just kick herself for thinking well of him, if only for a moment.

What was it about him that kept luring her in? He was as relentless as the sea. The darkness of his beautiful eyes held a dangerous riptide that tempted her to drown in the murky depths...

“Getting warmer?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, looking at him. The moon was covered with gray clouds. The only light came from candles in the dining room behind them. They cast a glow around the edges of Marcos’s black hair, like a halo, leaving his face in shadow.

Dark angel, she thought again.

His gaze rested on her. “The cool air comes off the Atlantic at night.”

From the height of the castle, she thought she could see a glimpse of moonlight on the distant ocean. Something square and hard rubbed against her hip and she glanced down beneath her lashes. She saw a glimpse of silver in his pocket.

His mobile phone!

If she had his phone, she could call Aziz. He could pick her up with his uncle’s helicopter. Or she could call Bianca and Daisy, her two best friends from boarding school, who’d been her roommates over the summer. Bianca’s wealthy family kept private jets in New York and London. Whether by Aziz’s

helicopter or Bianca's plane, she could be back in Morocco tonight.

She had to get Marcos's phone.

But how?

Kiss him, an inner voice whispered. If she could get him to put his arms around her, she could slip the phone out of his pocket. She would tuck it down her dress and make an excuse to leave. Then she could call Aziz and tell him where to find her. It was the perfect plan.

A shame she wasn't sure she could do it.

Kiss Marcos? She licked her lips nervously. She was accustomed to being the recipient of kisses, not the initiator. And Marcos seemed like the kind of man who would have a great deal of experience. Unlike her.

Feeling both awkward and bold, she forced herself to take his hand in her own. "What did my brother and Aziz do?"

To her relief, he didn't pull away. "Why do you keep asking me? Do you care?"

"I care because I hate them too. They're evil. Not just to me, but to someone I love."

Kiss me, she thought, looking up at him. Kiss me.

The way he looked down at her, pulling her close in the Spanish moonlight, almost made her forget why she was doing this. All she could think of was that they both hated the same men, and that she wanted Marcos to kiss her.

She slowly ran her hands down his chest. She could feel the

muscles through his crisp linen shirt, feel the beat of his heart. “Tell me,” she whispered. “Tell me what they did, what you intend to do in return.”

He grabbed her hands, forced them to be still. His handsome face looked ferocious, almost savage.

Kiss me. She took the final step that pressed her body fully against his. She looked up. He was much taller than she was, but in this moment, as she looked up at him in the sultry jasmine-scented night, she realized she’d lost all fear.

“You aren’t alone, Marcos.” She pressed her cheek against his. His chin felt rough against her skin. Her lips brushed against his ear as she said softly, “Let me help you...”

She heard his sudden intake of breath. He pulled back, forcing her away from him.

“It won’t work,” he said harshly.

“What won’t?” she asked, feeling dazed by her own sudden longing. All she could think about was him kissing her, feeling his lips on hers.

“Do you really think that you can just flirt and toss your hair and I’ll be so dazzled I’ll let you escape?”

Her cheeks burned red-hot. So he knew. He knew she was trying to lull him into letting her escape. “No, I—”

“I’m not that stupid. I won’t let you go just for a few cheap kisses.”

What was he trying to tell her? Shocked, she met his eyes. But she didn’t have time to feel humiliated. She didn’t have time to

think. She was desperate—desperate enough to offer anything. She took a deep breath. “And what if I offered you more than just kisses?”

“Your body, you mean?” Apparently unaware of what it cost her to even suggest such a thing, he snorted in derision. “If I wanted you, I could seduce you. Easily.”

“That’s not true!” she gasped, hurt.

His dark eyes regarded her smugly. “We both know it is.”

She ground her teeth. Perhaps it was true, that in her inexperience, she’d revealed that she wanted him, but she’d have died rather than admit it. “For your information, I’ve resisted much better men than you. Handsomer. Richer. Smarter.”

“Have you?” he said evenly. He ran his hand beneath her jaw line, forcing her to look up at him. “So if I were to kiss you now, you’re saying that you would feel nothing.”

“Not a thing,” she said defiantly.

“Really.” He wrapped his arms around her. Slowly, he lowered his mouth to hers, stopping when his lips were a millimeter from hers. “So this leaves you cold?”

She could feel his breath, smell the sweetness of brandy. Her lips felt swollen, tingling as if warming after frostbite, expanding towards his. “Completely.”

“And this?”

He drew her to him in a hot, hard embrace. As he kissed her, her blood boiled, her body felt consumed by fire. Her bones went limp. Dimly, she could hear some inner voice screaming.

There was something she was supposed to do while he kissed her. Something.

She felt his hands brush her bare back as he pressed her against the balustrade. His hips moved against her and she sighed beneath his mouth. She wanted something. What was it? To press her body against his? To let him lift her? To spread her legs and wrap them around his waist? To let him make love to her and finally learn the great mystery that most women her age already knew?

She felt dizzy in his arms. Trying to steady herself, she brushed her hand against his hip. She felt the small rectangle of the mobile phone in his pocket and her plans came rushing back.

His phone.

Later, she thought, dazed. Plenty of time for that later, after she'd had her fill of kisses...

But then she remembered Nicole's face, pinched and hungry as she'd seen it last month. She hated Marcos for his cold arrogance, for kidnapping her, for keeping her in captivity.

So why was it so hard for her to stop kissing him?

Hardening her heart, she forced herself to slip the phone out of his pocket. Hiding it in the palm of her hand, she pulled away, looked him straight in the eye and lied.

"I felt nothing."

He blinked at her. His voice was hoarse as he replied,

"You're lying."

"I'm a Winter," she said. "Just like you said. A liar and a thief."

She took a step backwards. “Perhaps you should send me to the tower.”

“Perhaps I should,” he muttered, raking his hand through his hair.

She turned to go and, for a moment, she thought he was actually going to let her leave with her prize. Then he wrapped his hand over her closed fist, pinning her to the stone balustrade. “Wait.”

“What?” Her heart was pounding. Any moment he’d discover that she was hiding his phone in her hand.

He bent his head to whisper in her ear and a pulse ran through her body as she felt his lips brush against the sensitive flesh of her earlobe. “I have to say, after all I’ve heard about your seductive skills, I’m disappointed. It was a clumsy attempt at best.”

Oh! His insult left her vibrating with humiliation and rage. “You’re the one who kissed me!”

He gave a derisive laugh.

“I just wanted to see how far you would go. Now I know. You’ve proved my point—you’ll fall into my bed at the slightest provocation. So please don’t try to bargain with your body again.” His lip curled. “I can obviously get that for free.”

She had to get out of here before he goaded her into saying something she’d regret. Still hiding the phone, she drew her hand away. Pressing her fist against the fabric of her skirt, she said furiously, “I’d rather be locked in the tower than spend another minute with you.”

“Fine,” he growled. “I’m sick of the sight of...” He stopped suddenly, his fingers tightening over her fist.

“What’s in your hand?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing!” He forced her fingers open to reveal the phone. Barking a laugh, he took it away from her.

“Why, you conniving little tart.” He looked at her in amazement. “You’re even more clever than I thought.”

Clever? She felt sick. She’d lost. It had almost killed her to laugh and flirt with the cold-hearted beast all night, but she’d done it. Now it was all for nothing.

But she couldn’t let him see her anguish. Ignoring the hard lump in her throat, she raised her chin, glaring at him.

“Why else would I let you kiss me? Just being near you makes my skin crawl.”

He gave her an amused smile, but his dark eyes glittered with anger and something more—bitterness? “And to think I almost believed your little show of compassion. ‘I care, Marcos’,” he mimicked. “‘You aren’t alone, Marcos’. You really are a Winter through and through—a thief and a liar. I almost believed that you actually hated Aziz.”

“I wasn’t lying about that!” she cried.

“Yes, you hate him so much you can’t wait to throw yourself in his bed. Fresh from mine, presumably. Tell me, does it ever get difficult to keep your lovers straight? Sleeping with multiple men each day must make it hard to keep count. Do you give out

tickets, or do men just queue up outside your bedroom door?”

With a gasp, she drew back her hand and slapped him across the face.

CHAPTER THREE

MARCOS touched his stinging cheek. He'd deserved that, he supposed.

But, damn it, she'd played him like a guitar. And he'd fallen for it. Kissing her had been far too intoxicating. He should have expected it after their kiss on the yacht, but he'd told himself that was a one-off. He'd thought he was completely in control where Tamsin Winter was concerned.

He had been wrong.

"You owe me an apology," she said.

His eyebrows lowered. "I owe you nothing."

"I'm not the tart you think I am."

He gave an expressive snort.

She shook her head wearily. "All right, so I dated a lot of men in London. For the first time in my life, I wasn't under anyone's control, and I did exactly as I pleased. I didn't care what it did to my reputation. I stayed out all night, but I never fell in love with any of the men I dated. And I never—"

"Never what?"

She turned away. "Forget it."

Her face looked so sad, he almost moved closer. He felt drawn to comfort her. And, most of all, to kiss her again.

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