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HELEN BIANCHIN

Public Marriage, Private Secrets

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Содержание

Raúl. Ex-lover, estranged husband…and the man she had fervently hoped never to see again. Dear heaven. What was he doing here? 5
Public Marriage, Private Secrets 6
Helen Bianchin 7
About the Author 8
Chapter One 9
Chapter Two 25
Chapter Three 42
Chapter Four 56
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 57

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Gianna lingered a little too long on his mouth. The sensual curve revived a host of memories she fought hard to control. Vivid, primitive…so much so she could almost *feel* the touch of his lips, the wicked sweep of his tongue.

Oh, God. The silent despairing groan remained locked in her throat. *Don't go there.* It took all her effort to tilt her head a little and summon a wry smile.

She glimpsed a muscle bunch above the edge of his jaw and felt a moment of satisfaction as she enjoyed the small visible sign of his tension too.

'What brings you here, Raúl?'

One eyebrow lifted in cynical query. 'You.'

Public Marriage, Private Secrets

By

Helen Bianchin

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About the Author

HELEN BIANCHIN was born in New Zealand and travelled to Australia before marrying her Italian-born husband. After three years they moved, returned to New Zealand with their daughter, had two sons and then resettled in Australia. Encouraged by friends to recount anecdotes of her years as a tobacco share farmer's wife living in an Italian community, Helen began setting words on paper and her first novel was published in 1975. An animal lover, she says her terrier and Persian cat regard her study as as much theirs as hers.

Chapter One

GIANNA exited her Main Beach apartment block and walked the short distance to where the Pacific ocean's incoming tide brought rolling waves crashing gently into shore. The early morning sky was pale blue and cloudless, the spring sunshine promising warmth.

Change is *good,* Gianna assured herself, as she stepped onto the pale golden sand.

Although *why* she'd chosen a jog along the beach instead of her customary session in a local gym wasn't something she was prepared to examine in any depth.

The phase of the moon? A restless night due to intrusive dreams?

Whatever…Being outside in fresh sea air held an appeal, and here she was, ready to banish any lingering demons.

Forty minutes of exercise, coffee-to-go to kick-start the day, before returning to her apartment to shower, breakfast, dress and leave for work.

Bellissima, the luxury gift boutique she owned in one of the Gold Coast's trendiest suburbs, had gained a favourable reputation for its mix of imported and local stock. Exquisite scented candles, beautiful soaps, ornamental glassware, small sculptures whose graceful lines in crystal, ebony and silver drew attention. Embroidered napkins on fine Irish linen, silk pillow-

covers, quality gift cards were just some of the wares she offered for sale.

Fate had provided the opportunity for her to purchase the boutique almost a year after being employed as manager during the owner's absence. Now, two years on, a new shop-fit, quality stock, a twice-yearly catalogue, and turnover had increased dramatically.

Life, Gianna reflected as she broke into a jog along the tightly packed sand, was good. At the age of twenty-eight she owned a successful business, an apartment, and she had carved out a satisfactory existence.

Moved on, she assured herself as a faint sea breeze caressed her skin, from the break-up of her brief marriage to the powerful Spaniard she'd met four years ago at a party during a holiday in Mallorca.

Raúl Velez-Saldaña.

In his late thirties, tall, dark, ruggedly attractive…and dangerous to any woman's peace of mind.

Who could resist him? What woman would *want* to?

One look was all it had taken for her to melt into an ignominious puddle at his feet. Well, not quite.

She'd fought him at first, then herself. Knowing even then if she succumbed she'd be *lost*…completely, utterly.

Gianna shivered despite the increasing warmth of the sun as she headed south along the shoreline.

What they had shared had been more than just sex. It had

been intimacy at its zenith…intense, mesmeric, *primitive.* Six perfect months together, *living* in the moment, unable to bear being apart.

A time when Raúl had clocked up air miles as if they were nothing, and she'd used allocated holiday time and sick leave to meet him *wherever…*

Until the moment she had agreed to relocate to Madrid and move into his luxurious apartment in residential Salamanca. Dear heaven, the *life* she'd shared with him…

A slip, just *one* gap, where a differing time zone had ensured she slept during a long international flight to Sydney, to attend her brother Ben's wedding, and she had missed taking a low-dosage contraceptive pill.

She vividly recalled the day when she had first suspected she might be pregnant. Worse, the precise time the pregnancy test had registered positive…a test she'd taken *three* times within forty-eight hours to ensure there was no mistake.

How she'd agonised for days before telling him. The calm manner in which he had received the news. Even more controlled had been his solution…*marriage.*

Her spontaneous, 'Because…?' hadn't brought the avowal of love she'd longed to hear.

Somehow his, 'No child of mine will be born out of wedlock,' had failed to compensate.

The abortion route wasn't an alternative she'd been able to condone or consider. Nor his insistence that marriage was the

only option.

Yet what had been the alternative? A choice of returning to Australia and raising the child alone? Fighting a custody battle with Raúl…one he'd surely win? Or marriage?

At the end of the day…*days,* she amended, when she'd tortured herself in order to reach the *right* decision…it had been no contest.

Raúl's widowed mother's delight and genuine blessing had provided the persuasive factor. A child *deserved* to have a father in its life, *family.*

Something which struck a chord with Gianna, for her own mother had been killed in an auto accident years ago. Her father had met someone else, relocated to Paris and remarried. There was a step-family now. Gianna rarely saw them…just a series of e-mails, attachments with photographs, and the occasional phone call.

Ben, her brother, to whom she remained close, kept in weekly contact via phone and regular e-mail.

Girlfriends…the genuine kind with whom she maintained contact…were few, and located in different countries in the world.

Consequently she'd opted for a new beginning in a different locale from Sydney, the city in which she'd been born, educated and employed.

Another state—Queensland, with its sub-tropical climate, beautiful beaches and Australia's tourist mecca—had beckoned,

and now, almost three years later, it felt like *home.*

Raúl had *cared* for her, this much she knew. So what if it hadn't been *love*? Care was *enough*…and who could predict what the future might hold?

Bittersweet words, Gianna reflected, given she'd suffered a miscarriage within seven weeks of becoming Gianna Velez-Saldaña.

It had been a time when she'd desperately wanted, *needed* his comfort. At night she had lain awake, long after he slept, craving his touch. *More,* so much more, than simply being pulled close and held securely in his arms.

Grief, sorrow…dammit, *hormones,* had succeeded in providing an altered reasoning. Together with the sweetly delivered but nonetheless heartless words from Sierra, one of Raúl's ex-lovers, who had essayed it might have been prudent to wait until closer to the child's birth before rushing into marriage.

From there, it had been downhill all the way, with Raúl spending more time in his city office, caught up with meetings, leaving before she woke most mornings and frequently missing dinner for some seemingly valid reason or another, occasionally arriving home long after she'd retired to bed.

Communication between them had become reduced to the perfunctory. Polite exchanges in private, while maintaining the required image in public.

The explosive meltdown had come when she had called his cellphone one evening while he was on a business trip in

Argentina and Sierra had answered, *almost purring* with delight as she'd revealed that '*now* is not a good time…*comprende?*' As if the implication might be misunderstood, Sierra had sharpened the verbal barb with unvarnished clarity. 'Raúl is filling the spa-bath. Need I say I'm about to join him?' And cut the connection.

After the numbness had come anger, followed by a crying jag…then she'd calmly packed her bags and called a taxi to take her to the airport, where she'd caught the first available flight home.

Old news, she remonstrated in self-castigation.

She'd moved on, sought solace in the familiar, ensured a new life for herself…a successful one…and rebuilt her confidence and self-respect.

The cry of a lonely seagull rent the early morning quietness, providing a distraction, and Gianna watched the bird's graceful glide to settle at the water's edge. Its red beak dug into the wet sand and emerged with a tidbit…a baby sandcrab, perhaps? Then, apparently delighted with its find, it sent up a shrill, keening cry which soon brought several gulls to the scene.

Apartment towers lined the Esplanade—tall concrete sentinels of varying architectural design bearing exotic names.

Already the incoming tide was beginning to swell with white-crested waves that broke and rolled gently into shore…a precursor of bigger waves ideal for surfing.

Within minutes she changed direction and headed up the slight sandy incline to the boardwalk, where she crossed the road to a

pavement café and ordered a latte to go.

Already several tables were occupied, as holidaymakers sought an early breakfast beneath colourful shade umbrellas.

It was almost seven-thirty when Gianna entered her apartment, and she stripped off her clothes, showered, dressed, ate fresh fruit and yoghurt, then caught up her laptop and bag, filched her keys from the side-table adjacent to the front door, and took the lift down to the basement car park.

A short drive brought her to an upmarket complex, unique in design, with its arched sails reaching skywards, housing various boutiques of which Bellisima was one, and a faint smile softened her mouth as she took a moment to check the window display.

Visually attractive, she conceded as she bent low to unlock the front doors. Perhaps she could replace the pewter vase with the crystal conch-shell, add a collection of silk flowers. Exchange the stunning beaten silver platter with the pair of multi-coloured glass birds.

The gift boutique was so much *hers,* with the art of display reflecting her excellent taste, her instinctive knack of placing unusual items together to draw maximum attention to the mirrored walls with their glass shelving.

Each item gleamed beneath the fluorescent lighting, the colours like fine jewels in their brilliance, and she allowed herself a moment of pride before crossing to the service desk, where she prepared for the start of a new business day.

Morning trade was fairly brisk, with purchases made and those

chosen as gifts wrapped with exquisite care, earning delighted gratitude from each customer.

Gianna derived immense pleasure in providing warm and friendly service. Something which had earned her a loyal and select client base.

She'd made the boutique her *life,* constantly searching for unusual items to attract her customers. She also provided a comprehensive catalogue, and maintained a constantly updated Web page to showcase upcoming imports and deliveries.

The fact she'd achieved it on her own, with loan funds from the bank, was a source of pride. Monthly amounts paid by Raúl directly into a separate bank account remained untouched.

Work had become all-involving, filling her waking hours. Her focus was *now,* and the immediate future.

There were a few *good* friends, but, while she occasionally socialised, she didn't date. Dinner and pleasant conversation didn't include an automatic agreement for consensual sex at evening's end. At least not in her book.

She tried…she really did. Her friends meant well. They wanted to see her happy, content, with a regular man in her life who *cared.*

'*He's wonderful—a real gentleman*' didn't hold true, she had discovered to her cost.

'You'll adore him, he's so charming…' Uh-huh—if you enjoyed the obsequious type.

No matter how well-intentioned, their efforts failed. Or

perhaps *she* failed…for *moving on* from Raúl wasn't happening.

He was *there,* his physical image so easily summoned to mind she almost expected to see him, and occasionally felt the breath catch in her throat whenever she sighted a tall, broad-shouldered male whose stance at first glance seemed achingly familiar. Followed by a heart-lurching few seconds when everything within her peripheral vision froze into a fixed tableau…until she glimpsed his profile and saw the face of a stranger, and her personal world returned to its normal kilter.

Oh, for heaven's sake, she chastised in self-castigation. There was work to do. Stock to arrange. Deliveries to check. And her clientele. *A business to run.*

Busy was good. A steady flow of people wanting assistance ensured there was little time in which to think or reflect, and Gianna welcomed Annaliese, the part-time assistant who helped out in the boutique from ten-thirty to four, seven days a week.

It was an employment arrangement that worked well, and had done so for the past two years.

Attractive, intelligent, sunny-tempered, with a droll sense of humour, Annaliese was a superb salesperson and, importantly, dedicated.

'Hi. One double-shot skim latte for *madame.*'

Delivering coffee, hot and strong, had become a welcome habit Annaliese had initiated during the first week of her employment.

'Thanks.' Gianna's gratitude was genuine, and Annaliese

offered a warm smile as she took the capped takeaway cup to the small back room. 'Busy morning?'

The day brought several customers into the boutique. There were the serious buyers, and those who merely browsed, as well as a few regulars.

It was almost five when Gianna checked the sales register. The recorded total revealed a satisfactorily high figure…sufficient to warrant ordering replacement stock. Something she'd tend to prior to closing time.

A faint prickle began at her nape and slipped down her spine as she cut the phone connection to her supplier with bare minutes to spare before she was due to walk out through the door.

The electronic door buzzed, and she summoned a pleasant smile…only to have it freeze with shock at the sight of the man entering the boutique.

His powerful frame appeared no less imposing than she remembered, and his dark hair gleamed beneath the artificial lighting, emphasising broad-boned facial features, a strong jaw, wide cheekbones, the Mediterranean skin tone…and eyes so dark they appeared almost black.

Raúl.

Ex-lover, estranged husband…and a man she had fervently hoped never to see again.

Dear heaven. *What was he doing here?*

For a startling moment she was flung back to a time when her life had been everything she could want it to be.

Until it had all fallen apart in those wretched few months following her miscarriage, when the pain of grief had wrought such havoc.

He'd phoned, and when she had refused to take his calls he'd arrived on her doorstep, demanding she return with him to Madrid.

Except she'd stood her ground, wanting time and space alone…and he'd left, assuring her the next move had to be *hers.*

'Nothing to say, Gianna?'

The slightly accented drawl curled round her nerve-ends and brought her crashing back to reality as she took in his etched features.

Eyes as dark as sin, with tiny lines fanning out from the edges. Vertical grooves bracketing each cheek, which seemed slightly deeper and more clearly defined.

She lingered a little too long on his mouth…The sensual curve revived a host of memories she fought hard to control. Vivid, primitive…so much so she could almost *feel* the touch of his lips, the wicked sweep of his tongue.

Oh, God. The silent despairing groan remained locked in her throat. *Don't go there.*

It took all her effort to tilt her head a little and summon a wry smile.

'What would you have me offer? *Hello, how are you?* seems…' She paused deliberately.

'Inadequate?'

‘Incredibly banal,’ Gianna concluded, and saw his eyes darken.

‘Now, there’s an interesting word.’

She glimpsed a muscle bunch above the edge of his jaw and felt a moment of satisfaction as she enjoyed the small visible sign of his tension.

Even though she wore high heels Raúl still towered above her, and she tilted her head in order to align her eyes with his.

‘What brings you here?’

‘Australia? The Gold Coast in particular?’ he drawled, and she swept an arm to encompass the boutique.

‘Here.’

One eyebrow lifted in cynical query. ‘To see you.’

‘A phone call would have taken care of whatever you have to say.’

‘If you chose to take my call.’

Would she have? She still had his name on her caller register. So she could pick up or ignore if he rang. He hadn’t, but she’d felt the need to have the option.

‘I can’t imagine anything being sufficiently important to warrant your personal appearance.’

He looked at her carefully, examining her slender form…more slender than he remembered. Pale features beneath the skilled touch of light make-up, the almost undetectable shadows beneath her brilliant blue eyes. The deep-beating pulse at the base of her throat.

Not so calm beneath her projected persona, Raúl detected

with a degree of satisfaction.

'No?'

She couldn't quite restrain the faint edge to her voice. 'There's nothing you could say that I want to hear.'

At that moment the door buzzer sounded, and it took her a few seconds to ignore the silent *as if I need this now?* before she turned towards the entrance.

'Excuse me? Are you still open?'

Raúl inclined his head towards Gianna in silent query, admiring her switch to polite composure as she summoned a smile and moved forward to greet the customer.

'Is there anything I can help you with?'

'The large red bowl in the window display. As soon as I saw it I knew it would be perfect.'

'Exquisite, isn't it?' Gianna relayed with professional ease. 'Imported Venetian glass.' She crossed to the display and carefully removed the item. The ticket price was clearly visible and, although expensive, the woman didn't hesitate.

'I'll take it.'

Gianna produced a warm smile. 'Is it a gift? Would you like it gift-wrapped?'

'If it's no trouble.'

'It'll be a pleasure.' It took only minutes to extract the appropriate box and carefully package the bowl, select wrapping paper, ribbon and effect an elegant bow.

With deft movements the task was completed, credit card

swiped, a signature attached to the slip, and a very satisfied customer expressed gratitude as Gianna accompanied her to the entry, wished her good evening, then carefully locked the glass doors.

'Do whatever needs to be done, then we'll leave.'

'We?' Gianna queried with deliberate emphasis as she crossed to the sales counter. 'I'm not going anywhere with you.'

'I think you will.' His voice held a dangerous silkiness, and her eyes sharpened into deep blue shards.

The thought of sharing time with him and pretending to make polite conversation was the last thing she wanted to do.

'Give me one reason why I should.'

He didn't prevaricate or lead into it gently…just a single word, aware that it would get her attention as no other would. 'Teresa.'

Gianna's eyes widened, only to cloud with concern at the mention of his mother. For it had been Teresa Velez-Saldaña who had welcomed her son's lover with affection, fondly sanctioned the marriage and wept genuine tears at the loss of their child.

A very special woman, who'd kept wise counsel when Gianna had left Madrid, and who'd chosen to remain in contact at regular intervals…warm, quirky missives despatched in a continued bid to maintain their close bond, including an open invitation for Gianna to visit at any time.

Letters to which Gianna had responded with caution at first, managing to overcome her initial reserve only as the months passed with no mention of Raúl's name.

Her stomach clenched in pain at the thought Teresa might be ill, injured or…heaven forbid…worse.

'No.'

'No *what*?' Gianna demanded trenchantly, unbearably irked that he still retained the ability to read her mind. Somehow she'd imagined, *hoped,* she had acquired an impenetrable façade in the past few years.

Apparently not.

For a long moment she simply looked at him, silently daring him to shift his gaze. Except he didn't, and she became conscious of the pulse at the base of her throat kicking into a quickened thud.

Every cell in her body seemed to blaze into life, and she hated that he *knew.*

'Tell me, dammit.'

His eyes darkened measurably. 'A few weeks ago Teresa was diagnosed with inoperable cancer.'

For a few seemingly long seconds she was lost for words. 'Teresa made no mention of illness in any of her letters,' she managed at last—for affection, trust and mutual respect had developed into a genuinely warm friendship between both women. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Yes, I believe you are.' His eyes held her own, and she almost swayed at the intensity of his gaze. 'Enough,' he continued quietly, 'to fulfil one of her dearest wishes?'

She schooled her voice to remain calm in spite of the

premonition that she wasn't going to like what he intended to say. 'If it's possible,' she managed with instinctive caution.

'Teresa has requested the pleasure of your company.'

Gianna froze, the colour leaching from her cheeks, revealing starkly pale features as she contrived to control the onset of nerves threatening to play havoc with her emotions.

'In Madrid?' An unnecessary query, when she already knew the answer before he could confirm it.

'Initially.'

Chapter Two

MADRID.

The city where Raúl resided and ruled his late father's multibillion-dollar consortium.

A silent scream rose and died in her throat at the mere thought of seeing him, pretending politeness whenever he visited to spend time with Teresa.

As he would…often.

She couldn't do it.

Amend that…She didn't *want* to be anywhere near Raúl. She especially didn't want to be placed in a position over which she had little control.

'You can't be serious?

His eyes held hers, compellingly intent. 'Very serious.'

A host of conflicting thoughts swirled through her brain.

If she agreed…

Are you *insane?*

She had a business to run. She couldn't just pick up and leave at a moment's notice.

'A few weeks of your time, Gianna,' Raúl pursued, his voice dangerously soft. 'Is that too much to ask?'

Her first instinct was to offer a resounding *yes*…even as her head reeled at the mechanics involved.

She'd need to appoint Annaliese as interim manager, employ

another staff member, organise stock, orders…

A silent groan rose and died in her throat.

Oh, hell, why was she giving it consideration? The whole thing was impossible.

Raúl caught a glimpse of each fleeting emotion on her expressive features and was able to divine every one of them.

'Teresa looks upon you as her daughter,' he offered quietly. 'Irrespective of our estrangement. There are a few special items…heirlooms…she wants to gift to you in person.'

No. The negation rose and died in her throat.

Please don't do this to me.

'I couldn't possibly accept them.'

'Why not?'

'They should belong to you,' she said quickly. Too quickly. The words tumbled without thought. 'Your family. Your wife.'

Oh, God, what had she said?

With a sense of horrified dismay she saw one eyebrow slant with a hint of humour. 'You *are* my wife,' Raúl reminded her silkily. 'Or had you forgotten we're still legally married?'

Forgotten? How could she forget, when never a day went past when his image didn't come to mind? Or night…when he managed to invade her dreams.

'You can't expect me to agree,' she managed at last.

'There is a valid reason why you can't?'

Several, she longed to fling, truly torn as she mentally weighed her loyalty to a genuinely kind woman who had gifted

unconditional support at a time when she'd needed it most.

To give in would mean revisiting painful memories, not the least of which took the form of the indomitable man who now stood before her.

A man whose physical impact affected every nerve in her body, heightening tension to an electrifying degree.

Three years, she agonised silently, and *nothing had changed.*

'There's a lover you're reluctant to leave?'

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry at his assumption. *As if.* Any man she'd encountered after Raúl didn't come close, for there was no spark, no quickening of her pulse…*nothing.*

Yet how many lovers had *he* taken since she'd walked out on their marriage? Sierra Montefiore…had *she* quickly resumed her former place as one of them?

The mere thought sent a shaft of pain arrowing through her body.

'Yes,' she revealed with unaccustomed flippancy, knowing it to be false…unless Jazz, the black-and-white moggy she'd adopted from an animal rescue centre, counted. Male, he curled up on her bed every night, his warm, furry feline body a welcome comfort.

Raúl's eyes darkened, then narrowed a little so fleetingly she almost missed it.

'I'm sure he can exist without you for a few weeks,' he drawled with dispassionate coolness.

Gianna pretended to consider the possibility. 'Doubtful.' Jazz

would protest volubly at being deposited in a boarding cattery, and probably disdain gifting her his affection for days on her return. The little fluff-ball possessed a territorial personality… the apartment was *his.* Anyone who entered was duly inspected, reluctant approval given or denied, and thereafter subject to slit-eyed feline observance.

'Yes or no, Gianna.'

She cast him a disparaging look. 'In case you haven't done your homework, I run this boutique with one part-time member of staff. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't leave at a moment's notice.'

'I wasn't aware I'd asked that of you.'

'Really? The man who snaps his fingers and every employed minion jumps to obey your command?'

Amusement lifted the edges of his mouth. 'You are not one of my minions.'

'Hallelujah.'

'Have dinner with me, and we'll discuss whatever arrangements you need to make.'

'I don't recall saying yes, yet.'

'You didn't need to.' The dry tones held a degree of mockery…something she chose to ignore. There was the temptation to stand her ground, except it would prove an exercise in futility.

Without a further word, she crossed to the serving counter and dealt with the sales register, where it took only minutes to check folding money, credit slips, assemble the cash float. When

she was done, she dimmed the overhead lights, collected her bag, engaged security and indicated they should leave.

Raúl loomed large at her side as they walked towards the escalator, and she was all too aware of his close proximity not to mention how he affected her.

It *wasn't fair* to feel like this after an absence of three years. Hateful to be transported back to a time when she'd *lived* for him…only him. Even *thinking* about him had made her happy, and as soon as he'd appeared it had been all she could do not to break into a quickened pace and leap into his arms.

The way he'd laugh and hold her close, nuzzle the soft curve at the edge of her neck…then cover her mouth with his own in a kiss that reached down into her soul.

Heaven, she reflected as she stepped off the escalator, feeling momentarily bereft that what they'd once shared had been lost.

'I'm staying at the resort directly opposite.' Raúl indicated as he joined her. 'We'll eat there.'

'I have plans for the evening.' *Some plans,* she reiterated silently. Drive home, change, feed Jazz, make herself something to eat, watch television, then call it a night.

He spared her a level look. 'Postpone them.'

Gianna turned to confront him. 'And if I choose not to?'

'Do you particularly want to indulge in a verbal fencing match?'

He was standing too close, and she was suddenly all too aware of the subtle aroma of his cologne, light with musky undertones.

Indisputably *his,* as if crafted especially for him.

It stirred her senses and awakened too many sensitive nerve-endings for her peace of mind.

Raúl's eyes narrowed fractionally, almost as if he *knew,* and it irked unbearably…so much so she raked his tall frame from head to foot and back again with slow deliberation.

'Let's get one thing straight.' She took a deep calming breath. 'If I agree, it'll be on my terms,' she qualified as her eyes seared his own with unblinking determination. 'It'll take days, possibly a week, for me to organise staff, contact my clientele, suppliers, ensure there will be no hiccups with replacement stock arriving on time. When that's in place, I'll take the first available flight to Madrid, arrange hotel accommodation, and inform you of my arrival.' There was more, and she delivered the words with precise care. 'Meantime, I suggest you return to Madrid.'

'That's it?' he queried silkily.

'Yes.'

He regarded her with dispassionate imperturbability. 'No.'

'No—what?'

'We'll return together in my private jet, and hotel accommodation isn't an option.'

'That's *ridiculous.*'

Only a fool would refuse to travel in the maximum comfort afforded by luxury fittings which included a lounge that converted easily into a working office, a bedroom with en suite bathroom…and being served by a personal in-flight attendant.

Except it meant endless air hours secluded in Raúl's company something she'd do almost anything to avoid.

'I'd prefer to take a commercial flight.'

For a long moment he regarded her with lazy appreciation, and there was nothing she could do to still the increased tempo of her heart…or the faint shivery sensation feathering her fine body hairs.

'Teresa has a full complement of medical staff on hand. The villa in Mallorca is large, and she insists you stay there as her guest.'

Mallorca? 'I don't think…'

'Determined to fight me on every issue, Gianna?'

'You expect anything less?'

'Shall we call a temporary truce?'

She looked at him carefully. 'It's been a long day. I have work to do and calls to make.'

'In which case you can eat and leave. An hour, Gianna…or less.'

Reluctance vied with determination to prove she was immune to him. A distinct untruth, if ever there was one, but she refused to concede him so much as a glimmer of satisfaction. *You can do this,* she vaunted silently.

She effected a seemingly careless shrug. 'I guess so.'

Raúl spared her a musing glance and caught the faint air of tension apparent in her demeanour. She reminded him of a gazelle, uncertain whether to trust or flee.

With good reason, he admitted silently as he indicated the escalator at the eastern end of the spacious forecourt.

For flee she certainly would if she suspected there was another reason for Teresa's request. One infinitely more precious than the personal gift of a few heirlooms, or the pleasure of spending time in Gianna's company.

The fervent hope Teresa held for a reconciliation between her son and the young woman he'd taken as his wife.

A young woman so well matched to his needs it seemed almost a crime for the marriage to have fallen apart.

Dusk was falling as they crossed the overhead pedestrian walkway to the popular low-level resort. Already streetlights shone, and in the distance the tall concrete sentinels harbouring luxury apartments bore illumination against a darkening skyscape.

The expansive resort foyer, with its plush oriental carpet squares and large comfortable chairs, bore a Caribbean air which extended to a wide marble staircase leading down to ground level. A magnificent waterfall cascaded into a decorative pool, and beyond huge thick plate glass lay an extensive swimming pool, with an island bar fronting on to a sandy foreshore and the sparkling blue waters of the Pacific Ocean.

The *à la carte* restaurant held a small clientele as the *maître d'* led the way to a table by the window, saw them seated, and summoned the drinks steward.

Raúl's presence garnered discreet attention especially from

the women present. Not surprising, Gianna reluctantly conceded, given his attractive broad-boned Mediterranean features.

There was something that set him apart from his contemporaries. An elusive ruthlessness lay beneath the sophisticated exterior, meshing an inherent masculine vitality with latent sensuality. Add an animalistic sense of power, and the combination proved electric…dramatic.

Fine tailoring, handcrafted shoes, the faint glimpse of a Rolex gracing his wrist, merely showcased a man whose presence was equally dynamic in anything he chose to wear…or not.

As she could attest to…and she hated the sensation that shook her slender form as an image of his splendid body unadorned rose to taunt her.

The broad shoulders, superb musculature, lean waist and hips, tight butt, long powerful legs. Awesome…in every area.

She recalled how it felt to be held close to him, the faint muskiness of aroused male combining with his elusive cologne…*oh, God,* his skilled touch with his mouth, tongue, fingers, as he sought out every sensitive pulse, each erotic nerve-end in a bid to escalate her emotions to fever-pitch…

Stop!

For a wild moment she imagined she'd screamed the word out loud.

What was wrong with her?

Somehow she managed a seemingly polite façade as the drinks steward approached and offered a formal greeting and presented

Raúl with the wine list.

'We have an excellent selection. Do you have a particular preference, or would you prefer me to offer a suggestion?'

Dark eyes captured her own. 'Gianna?'

It was easy to defer, and she did so with a polite smile. 'You choose.'

He did…a mild red, well-known as one of Australia's finest vintages.

'Mineral water—still,' she added, and earned Raúl's faintly arched eyebrow.

'The need for a clear head?'

'An aversion to drink-driving.'

'Wise.'

She summoned a sweet smile as she accepted the proffered menu, and pretended to study the various selections while attempting to deal with a host of conflicting emotions.

It didn't make sense.

She was over him…had been for a while, she reiterated silently.

To the point of weighing up the need to initiate divorce. *Three years*…Even discounting the initial few months of separation, when she'd retreated into despair, sufficient time had elapsed to reach a decision.

So…*why* the nervous tension? Or the wildly beating pulse-rate that threatened to go off the Richter scale?

She couldn't be susceptible to him…*surely*?

The mere thought was untenable. *Impossible.*

She was unaware of her teeth worrying the soft swell of her lower lip or of the faint narrowing of Raúl's eyes as he caught the gesture.

'Shall we order?'

The thought of forking morsels of food in his presence held little appeal. Consequently she settled for an entree as a main, with a side salad, and declined dessert.

It was as he lifted his goblet of wine that she noticed a gleam of gold on his left hand, and her eyes widened in recognition of the unique handcrafted band she'd placed there on the day of their wedding.

He still wore it?

Why so surprised, when her own still graced *her* hand?

Admittedly transferred to her right hand. A wide bevelled gold band encrusted with diamonds. She had been morally unable to discard it while the marriage remained valid.

Gianna searched for something to say…and came up with nothing that made any sense.

You're looking well didn't cut it.

How is business these days? seemed ludicrous, given his consortium had inevitably diversified into areas she had little or no comprehension of, racking up millions in the process.

Failure and Raúl Velez-Saldaña did not equate.

He was a hard-hearted ruthless entrepreneur, wellrespected for his uncanny ability to successfully manipulate and strategise,

forging ahead with unfailing resolve when colleagues and adversaries chose to opt out.

Yet each acquisition was carefully and painstakingly researched, every possible angle examined to the *nth* degree.

She could recall the times she'd awakened alone in their bed in the late-night hours, only to find him closeted in his home office studying graphs and projections on-screen.

Then she would go to him, ease the tension in tight shoulder and neck muscles, and suggest he needed sleep…only to have him smile, press *save* and pull her onto his lap. *Sleep,* as such, had rarely happened for a while.

Dear heaven…why were such memories surfacing *now*?

It was madness. A brief moment of insanity she immediately banished to the nether regions of hell.

'I suggest you tell me precisely what Teresa will expect of me.' Her voice sounded calm, even to her own ears…amazing, given she was an emotional mess.

'The pleasure of your company. One-on-one time.' His eyes speared her own—dark, enigmatic. 'She occasionally lunches with a few close friends, and I imagine she will delight in having you join her.'

Not a difficult ask. She held his gaze, silently wishing it wasn't so hard to do so. 'I'll be happy to fit in with whatever Teresa wants me to do.'

A woman Gianna held in high esteem, whose compassion, genuine affection and loyalty had helped fill the void left by

losing her own mother at a young age.

The only stumbling block was Raúl himself, for spending any time in his company would be *difficult,* to say the least.

Yet a few weeks wasn't a lifetime, she rationalised. Primarily, her purpose was to fulfil Teresa's wish to be able to say goodbye in person.

Time to focus on the prosaic…and she did it by forking delicate morsels of food without tasting a thing.

Soon the meal would conclude and she could leave, retrieve her car from the shopping complex and retreat to the sanctuary of her apartment.

If only it were that simple.

Yet *nothing* about the man seated opposite could be categorised as *simple.* For how was it possible for her to feel as if she'd been caught up in a sensual whirlpool when she'd vowed to hate him?

It didn't make sense.

So? a tiny voice taunted. *Why waste time and energy attempting to solve the impossible?*

Raúl ate with evident enjoyment, and she found it annoying that he could appear so totally at ease when she felt as if she was caught up in an emotional maelstrom.

'Perhaps you'd care to enlighten me about *your* life in the intervening three years?'

'Specifically?'

'Insignificant personal details.'

‘Such as?’

Oh, spit it out, why don’t you? ‘Your current lover.’

His eyes darkened measurably, and she glimpsed a muscle bunch at the edge of his jaw. ‘Do you particularly want to cover old ground?’

‘Not really.’ Amazing how much it still hurt. ‘I think it’s reasonable to ask if I’m likely to be confronted by a woman in your life.’

‘That isn’t a consideration.’

Which didn’t answer the question.

‘Sierra?’

‘A brief testament to her superb acting and my poor judgement well before I met you,’ Raúl insisted silkily. ‘And never afterwards.’

It surprised her how much she wanted to believe him. Yet the evidence was stacked heavily against him.

It was a relief when the meal concluded. She declined coffee, then retrieved a few notes to cover her share and placed them on the table.

‘You choose to insult me?’

His voice was silky soft and dangerous. Something Gianna elected to ignore.

‘Not at all.’ She stood to her feet, and felt a moment’s reservation when Raúl followed suit. ‘I imagine we’ll be in touch?’ she offered, with the utmost politeness.

She didn’t wait for his answer as she turned from the table,

acknowledging the *maître d'* with a faint smile as she exited the restaurant into the main lobby.

The sense of relief was enormous, and she was conscious of the click of her stiletto heels on the tiled floor as she crossed to the automatic front doors.

The concierge inclined his head as she passed through into the spacious courtyard, and she'd almost reached the overhead pedestrian bridge when Raúl joined her.

He had the tread of a cat, and she sent him a level look as she kept walking. 'We've already said goodnight.'

'I don't recall *goodnight* being mentioned.' His voice held drawled cynicism.

'How remiss of me,' Gianna said sweetly. *'Buenas noches.'*

Traffic flowed freely on the dual carriageway beneath them. In all probability patrons heading towards the parking facilities offered by the many restaurants situated in the immediate vicinity.

'There's no need for you to play the gentleman,' she voiced as they reached the upper level of the shopping complex. 'I'm perfectly capable of reaching my car unaided.'

'Of course you are.'

He followed her onto the escalator, and when she stepped onto ground level he accompanied her down to the underground parking area.

She ignored him and crossed to the bay containing her small Lexus sedan, released the remote locking mechanism, slid in

behind the wheel and ignited the engine.

'Satisfied?'

Far from it, he admitted. But she would keep.

He removed a card from his pocket and handed it to her through the open window. 'My cellphone number.'

The overhead fluorescent lighting threw his features into shadow, making his expression difficult to define.

'Thanks.'

The window slid closed, and she lifted a hand in a polite wave as she sent the car towards the exit ramp.

With care she entered the stream of traffic, turned left towards the roundabout, then circled back along the southbound carriageway leading towards Main Beach.

It wasn't until she reached the solitude of her apartment that she allowed herself to relax, and she scooped up the fluff-ball patiently awaiting her arrival.

'Hi, there, gorgeous.' She stroked the soft fur beneath his chin. 'Miss me?'

His response was to curl his head into the palm of her hand as she made for the kitchen to feed him.

When he was happily eating, she removed her stilettos and crossed to her bedroom, where she discarded her clothes, showered. Then, attired in her night wear, she took a cup of tea into the room she'd converted into her home office, set up her laptop, and worked until Jazz leapt up onto the desk in protest.

'Yes, I know. Time to call it a night.'

She lifted both arms and stretched, felt the stiffness of neck and shoulder muscles, then saved her work, closed down, placed Jazz in his sleep basket and entered her bedroom.

It was late, much later than she usually chose to retire, and she slid beneath the bedcovers, switched off the bedside lamp… aware that within minutes the adorable fluff-ball would disdain his sleep basket, enter her room, and leap onto the foot of the bed, where he'd settle comfortably and remain until morning.

Raúl's disturbing image intruded, and she replayed the evening from the moment he entered the boutique until she left the underground car parking area. An hour and a half, that was all, yet she could recall every detail.

None of which aided an easy passage into restful sleep, and it didn't help that he entered her dreams…sequences that switched from happy to sad without rhyme or reason.

Consequently she woke feeling as if she hadn't slept at all. Worse, her head threatened a doozy of a headache, and she'd have given almost anything to be able to take the day off.

Except it wasn't an option. She had work to do, things to organise…

Rise and shine, she bade herself silently as she slid from the bed. Time to shower, dress, eat breakfast, grab a caffeine fix, then *move it.*

Chapter Three

ONE day bled into another: hectic long hours where multitasking became a necessity, not an option, and sleep was something Gianna sought in the late-night hours, only to wake at dawn and repeat the process all over again.

Somewhere in there she factored in a call to Ben, explained her decision, and listened to his voiced caution.

It didn't help that he disapproved…for good reason. He didn't want to see her hurt again.

'Two weeks, Ben,' she reassured him. 'I'll be with Teresa in Mallorca. Raúl will remain in Madrid most of the time.'

'I hope so, for your sake. You're determined to do this?'

'Yes. For Teresa.'

'OK, but take care,' he warned. 'And stay in touch.'

'I will.' A promise she'd keep, without fail.

Annaliese accepted the managerial position with remarkable ease, and together they conducted the interviewing, trial and selection of a new team member for Bellissima, choosing a capable salesperson with an impressive CV and a pleasant personality. Gianna elected to retain another applicant on call, should the need arise for back-up.

By week's end most everything was in place, and when the weekend—the boutique's busiest days—passed without a hitch, there seemed no logical reason not to contact Raúl.

There were, of course, any number of the *illogical* kind…most of which she'd considered and discarded several times in any one day.

Except she'd given her word and, failing an accident or illness, in a matter of days she'd board a private jet *en route* to Madrid, with Raúl in attendance.

Something she'd give almost anything to avoid.

Oh…suck it up, she chastised herself in silent admonition.

He was CEO of the Velez-Saldaña conglomerate. A man who worked long hours and travelled extensively.

Two weeks. Why, she'd probably only see him a few times, and then she could excuse herself on the pretext of giving mother and son quality time.

Raúl had only phoned *once* since the evening they'd shared dinner. And then the conversation had been a brief, matter-of-fact request for an update with a view to fixing a departure time.

So she made the call, and ignored the faint shivery sensation that slithered down her spine at the sound of his deep faintly accented drawl.

'Gianna.'

Why should she be surprised he had her number listed on his caller ID register? Except it was recorded as a private listing, and only essential business colleagues and close friends had been given it.

For a moment she felt inclined to pull him up on it—except he had sources, influence and possessed the manipulative power

to acquire almost any information he wanted.

Cool? She could do *cool.* 'I can be available to leave Wednesday.'

'I'll have a car waiting outside your apartment complex at six Wednesday morning.'

Her back stiffened. 'I'd prefer to take a taxi and meet you at the airport.'

'Your bid for independence is admirable. Although totally unnecessary. given we'll both be heading in the same direction.' He paused imperceptibly. *'Six,* Gianna.'

She heard the faint click as he ended the call, and she tamped down the faint growl threatening to emerge from her throat.

'Problems?'

She schooled her expression at the sound of Annaliese's voice and summoned a faint smile. 'No.'

None that she couldn't deal with, she assured herself silently as she prepared to leave the boutique at midday on Tuesday. She needed to collect Jazz and deliver him to the boarding cattery, alert Reception she'd be absent from her apartment for two weeks, then pack.

At some stage she also needed to eat. And clear her refrigerator of any food liable to expire before her return.

Just do it.

Don't allow yourself to *think.*

It was late when she finally made it to bed, and she set the alarm, then prepared to sleep…only to toss and turn and wake at

dawn, aware that the last thing she remembered was the digital clock read-out signalling 2:15 a.m. in luminous green.

The urge to bury her head beneath the pillow was difficult to ignore. Although the risk of sleeping through the alarm proved a sufficient deterrent, and she determinedly threw back the bedcovers.

Coffee, hot, strong and sweet, then she'd shower, do a final check of the apartment, her travel documents, dress…

It was almost six when Gianna took the elevator down to Reception, and it came as no surprise to see Raúl's tall figure positioned in the adjoining lounge area.

For a few timeless seconds his eyes locked with hers, and she determinedly ignored the slow curl of nerves set on causing havoc deep within, even while she silently damned them to hell.

His sexual alchemy proved a powerful force—something of which he was surely aware. How could he not be? she thought cynically. Women of all ages vied for his attention…openly flirting while issuing silent and not so silent invitations in a bid to discover for themselves if his reputation between the sheets held true.

To Gianna's knowledge he never took up with any of them. Except how could she know for sure?

Absent this morning was the corporate business suit, buttoned shirt and tie. Instead he'd chosen casual attire—tailored black trousers, black butter-soft leather jacket, and a white chambray shirt unbuttoned at the neck.

An overall look which emphasised his blatant masculinity and gave Gianna pause to question her sanity.

Two weeks, she reminded herself stoically. Fourteen days… most of which would pass without her seeing him at all.

So what is the problem? Begin as you mean to go on, she cautioned herself staunchly as he crossed to her side.

'Good morning.' Her voice sounded matter-of-fact, and for a second she thought she caught a glimpse of wry humour in his dark eyes before he returned the greeting.

'Ready?'

As she'd ever be, she assured herself silently as she deliberately summoned a slight smile. 'Yes.'

Except she wasn't quick enough to release her bag as Raúl reached for it, and something deep inside her quivered as his fingers came into brief contact with her own before she snatched her hand away.

So much for remaining cool, calm and collected. They hadn't even reached the airport, let alone left Australia, and already she was *twitchy.*

Oh, *great.* She had to get through a long flight before she'd be free of him. *Hours…* Too many of them, she perceived as she preceded him out to the car.

Was he aware how *unsettled* he made her feel?

For sure, Gianna conceded wryly as she slid into the passenger seat while he stowed her bag in the boot.

What did one discover as a suitable topic of conversation with

an ex-lover who also happened to be her husband? Soon to be *ex,* she amended, for the path to divorce was merely a formality.

The weather? The state of world affairs? She pondered as Raúl took the ocean-front route to the airport.

What would his reaction be if she aimed straight for the jugular and queried him sweetly about his ex-lover, the self-possessed Sierra Montefiore, who'd sensed a slender crack in Gianna's marriage and closed in for the kill?

Not a good way to begin the day, the flight, or a two-week sojourn in Mallorca. So sticking to the prosaic seemed safe, not to mention wise.

Pretend, Gianna bade silently. And she did…with polite charm and considerable poise. She even played Gold Coast host by pointing out new high-rise apartment buildings, and proposed ventures in the pipeline for the rapidly growing tourist city.

Conversation carried them the thirty-minute drive to the airport, where, given Raúl's private Lear jet, passage through Customs proved a mere formality before they were cleared to board.

There were introductions to the pilot and flight staff, whereupon Raúl discarded his jacket, turned back his sleeve-cuffs, they took their seats and all too quickly were in the air.

Gianna reached down into her carry-on bag and extracted a thick new release by a favourite author, and spared Raúl a glance.

'Please don't feel you need to entertain me.' She even managed a faint smile. 'I'll be perfectly happy reading.'

‘Breakfast will be served in about an hour.’ Was that her imagination, or did the edge of his mouth twitch in amusement? ‘You have no objection if I work?’

She met his dark eyes with equanimity. ‘Not at all.’

Raúl inclined his head, extracted a laptop, and set to work, wrapping up configurations on screen, then transferring data from various files to update various graphs.

The ability to achieve total focus had been something he’d acquired during university studies. That and a photographic mind had ensured a smooth passage as he earned one degree after another, choosing employment for three years in New York before returning to Madrid to join his father in the Velez-Saldaña conglomerate.

On his father’s demise Raúl had assumed the position of CEO and developed the firm into a worldwide conglomerate, accumulating a personal fortune which included prime real estate in several cities around the world, industrial holdings—you name it.

He had it all…amend that to *nearly* all. One thing was missing. Perhaps the most important, he mused. The love of a good woman…*family.*

Not *any* woman. Gianna…who had been *his,* until life had thrown a curve ball and she had walked.

Divorce hadn’t been on his agenda. Nor hers, apparently. *Yet.*

Circumstance had presented him with a two-week window in which to ensure she would never consider it an option.

Flight staff served a full breakfast an hour later, from which Gianna selected muesli, fruit and coffee.

Given the time zone, she calculated they were due to arrive in Madrid late Tuesday, thereby gaining almost a full day.

'Won't it be an imposition to arrive at Teresa's villa at such a late hour?' The query held no validity, for, although the villa was fully staffed, Raúl would naturally possess the relevant keys to gain access.

He regarded her thoughtfully as he reached for his coffee. He drained his cup and refilled it from the carafe. 'We'll stay overnight at my apartment, then fly to Mallorca tomorrow morning.'

His apartment? *Not in this millennium.*

Her eyes sparked brilliant blue fire. 'I'll book into a hotel.'

'Afraid, Gianna?'

'Of you? *No.*'

'In which case you have no reason for concern,' he drawled in response.

Sure, she decided silently. *And pigs might fly.*

It was relatively simple to pretend an intense interest in the book she was reading—except in truth she barely retained a paragraph or two on each page she turned. The plot was predictable, but she was a fan of the author's style and individual voice.

Raúl's presence provided a distraction, one she found impossible to ignore, and after a while she simply secured a

marker, closed the book, then, feeling strangely restless, stood to her feet and stretched her legs by covering the length of the jet several times.

He, on the other hand, didn't appear a *wit* disturbed as he worked throughout the flight, logging in the hours as if it was a normal day at the office…his focus total.

Did he even notice she was *there*?

Somehow it annoyed her, the fact that he might not—which hardly made any sense. *What was wrong with her?*

Something she silently questioned as the hours wound down to arrival time, and the nerves in her stomach began tightening into a painful ball as the jet began to lose altitude in preparation for landing.

There was something vaguely surreal about disembarking in the night hours after a long flight, and seeing Raúl's driver, Carlos, move forward to meet them as they entered the arrivals lounge.

Within a matter of minutes they were comfortably seated in Raúl's luxury Mercedes, their luggage stowed in the boot, and the car eased towards an exit.

Gianna leaned forward a little. 'Could you please check hotel accommodation and book a room for me, Carlos?'

She glimpsed the driver's questioning look via the rear vision mirror. *'Señor?'*

'The apartment,' Raúl countered smoothly.

She threw him a dark glare, which lost much of its impact in

the shadowy interior. 'I'd prefer a hotel,' she reiterated with quiet vehemence.

Only to have him remind her, 'There are three guest suites.'

As if she didn't know this. She'd *lived* there with him for a time.

The rational part of her brain registered that it was late at night, it had been a long day, and all she wanted to do was shower, then climb into bed and sleep.

What difference did it make *where*?

Except for the niggle of resentment at his intent to take control.

His eyes locked with her own. 'Give it up, Gianna.' His voice was deceptively quiet, and her eyes sparked retaliatory anger for a few long seconds before she deliberately turned her attention to the passing nightscape as Carlos joined the main arterial route into the city.

The thought of revisiting the penthouse apartment she'd shared with Raúl in the exclusive area of Salamanca meant a revival of memories she'd chosen to mentally compartmentalise in a box labeled *'Past,'* where they lay buried in the deep recesses of her mind. Never to be retrieved, opened and re-examined… except in the intrusive dreams she was unable to control.

When she had left Madrid, she'd only taken what she had brought into the relationship. All the gifts he'd generously bestowed…clothing, lingerie, jewellery…had been left behind.

Had he changed anything? Redecorated? Removed all traces

of her occupation?

Oh, get over yourself, Gianna silently chided. Why balk at *one night* in a luxury two-level penthouse apartment? Raúl's master suite and his home office occupied the upper level. The guest suites, lounge, dining room and service rooms were situated on the lower level.

Why, she'd probably only see him in the morning, when Carlos drove them to the airport.

So what was the big deal?

There was none…except in her mind.

Consequently she exited the Mercedes as it drew to a halt in the forecourt, rode a lift to the apartment, allowed Raúl to deposit her bag in one of the guest suites, then politely bade him goodnight.

Unpack, shower, then bed, she determined, and completed each before sliding beneath the covers.

Yet sleep eluded her, and she tossed and turned, caught up in a number of complex reactions. Vivid memories of happier times, the starkness of their break-up…and inevitably wondering if she'd made the right decision in coming here.

Teresa—think only of Teresa.

Except nothing eased the haunting pain, until with a low growl of anguish she slid from the bed and moved quietly into the kitchen.

Hot milk with a dash of brandy might soothe her jangling nerves, overcome the jetlag and tension and allow her a few

hours' rest.

Easy to fill a beaker with milk from the refrigerator and heat it in the microwave. When it was done she added a generous nip of brandy, hesitated, added another, then cupped her hands around the beaker and crossed to the window to look out at the nightscape, where pinpricks of light illuminated tall buildings and bright neon advertisements blazed in cascading colour.

Raúl stirred at the faint beeping sound of the security monitor, saw the flashing sensor light position the lounge, and moved quietly from the bed, taking only a brief moment to pull on jeans before descending the stairs to investigate.

Had the main entrance been breached, several security measures would have been automatically activated and a security team would already be on their way.

As it was internal there was only one logical explanation… Gianna.

He entered the lounge and saw her standing before the floor-to-ceiling plate glass.

Her slender form silhouetted there aroused a tug of emotion he tamped down.

She was attired in cotton sleep trousers and tank top, hair pulled into a loose ponytail, and her features appeared pale beneath the dimmed lighting.

'Unable to sleep?'

The sound of his voice startled her, and she turned, eyes widening as he crossed to stand at her side.

He had the soft tread of a cat, and she instinctively hugged her arms across her midriff.

'Several hours of air travel, I guess,' she managed evenly.

'You didn't sleep during the flight.'

How did he know that she'd simply closed her eyes and pretended sleep because she was unable to relax sufficiently in his presence? She hadn't expected to feel vulnerable, or so acutely sensitive…and it made her cross.

*Oh, for heaven's sake, call it like it is…*She was edgy, uncertain in hindsight if she'd made the right decision to place herself in a position where she'd be constantly reminded of what had been, not to mention the fallout of leaving Spain, leaving *Raúl.* Revisiting it again now seemed to be the height of foolishness.

Yet she was here, and after breakfast the Velez-Saldaña private jet would transport her to Mallorca, where Teresa's villa in Cala Fornells, Calvià, would provide panoramic views of the sea and an escape from Raúl's disturbing presence.

None of which helped *now,* as he stood close, within touching distance, his tall, partly clothed frame a vivid reminder of times past when she'd slipped from their bed unable to sleep. Occasions when he'd gently massaged her neck, shoulders, easing the kinks, before sweeping her into his arms and carrying her back to bed.

For one brief moment she almost longed for the soporific effect…the comfort. She was aware the sensual tension still existed on her part. But on his?

He was impossible to read, and she tried to convince herself

she didn't *want* to.

Worse, to stand here, *aware* and almost compliant, was the antithesis of the image she cared to present. *Dammit,* she could sense the clean male scent of him, the faint muskiness merging with his brand of aftershave.

It evoked too many memories…places she was loath to go.

With determined effort, she drank the rest of her milk, then indicated the empty beaker. 'I'll take this through to the kitchen, then go back to bed.' She waited a beat, then added, 'Goodnight…' with the utmost politeness.

He made no attempt to stop her, and there was a small part of her that almost wished he would.

Are you insane?

The words echoed silently as she slid into bed and snapped off the bed-lamp, becoming the last thing she remembered before she fell asleep.

Chapter Four

A NOTE propped within easy visibility rested on the counter when Gianna entered the kitchen.

I've eaten. Help yourself. The jet leaves at nine for Mallorca. R

There was a sense of relief in eating alone, and she selected cereal, fruit, and strong sweet black coffee, then checked the newspaper headlines, surprised at how easily she recalled her fluency with the Spanish language.

Soon Carlos would drive her to the airport where she'd board the Velez-Saldaña jet for Mallorca. Where at least she'd be free from Raúl's presence.

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