CASTLES IN SPAIN

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Holly was delighted to have the chance of visiting the Spanish castle where her aunt Nan Delgaro had lived since her marriage.

Don Jose Delgaro gave her a charming welcome, but it was his son Marcos whose attitude really puzzled Holly. Was he trifling with her until he married the attractive Helena Mendez?
CHAPTER ONE

Holly Gilmour had been growing progressively more excited ever since she boarded the plane at Seville, although she kept telling herself that she was behaving rather like a child who was being taken on a school treat. But it was so long since she had seen Aunt Nan, not since Holly was a child at school, and some excitement was surely permissible in the circumstances.

Her aunt’s sudden and quite unexpected marriage nearly ten years ago had been the cause of their long parting, and the fact that Aunt Nan was now Senora Delgaro and the wife of a very wealthy man was another reason for Holly's rather mixed emotions as she neared her destination. At one time she had been very close to her mother's eldest sister, and the prospect of seeing her again in such different surroundings, combined with seeing a new country for the first time, gave her feelings of both pleasure and apprehension.

Holly smiled when she thought of Aunt Nan as she remembered her. Plump and homely in her nurse's uniform, or in sensible skirts and twin-sets with discreet pearls at her throat. A very English picture, set and unchangeable so that no one had even thought of her getting married at all, and certainly not in the rather romantic circumstances she had.

How Aunt Nan had surprised them all by announcing out of the blue that she was getting married to one of her private patients. Only a very short time before she had taken an unprecedented step by accepting a post abroad, doubtful if she was doing the right thing and wary of changing her routine. Apparently, however, both the job and the patient had proved very much to her liking and she had married Don Jose Delgaro within four months of arriving in Spain.

Don Jose was a man quite a number of years older than herself, a widower with one son, and a native of Spain. It was the latter fact that had come as more of a shock than anything else to the people who thought they knew her well, for Nan had seldom bothered about male company since an unhappy love affair in her youth, and she had always had a very British reserve on the subject of foreigners.

Perhaps, it had been suggested, the Spanish sun had gone to her head, mellowed her and made her less reserved. Or perhaps she had simply wanted company and companionship in her later years. Whatever the reason, her aunt sounded very happy and contented with her present circumstances, and Holly, being a romantic at heart, was looking forward to meeting her new uncle by marriage.

Don Jose, Holly thought, must be quite a man to have overcome her aunt's reservations to the point of marriage, and in her letters she sounded quite blithely uninhibited about her husband and her new country, so that there was no doubt that she loved him very deeply.

When Holly had written to say that she was taking a holiday in Spain and would like to call in and see her, if it was possible, Nan Delgaro had extended an invitation to come and stay with her and her husband for as long as she liked. The invitation must have had Don Jose's full approval, Holly knew, for although she was very happy in her married life, her aunt made no secret of the fact that her husband was the traditional Spaniard in his attitude towards women.

Don Jose, because of his illness, did little these days to maintain his huge estates, but his son, Marcos, ran the very profitable ranch they owned in the lush countryside of Andalucia. They bred horses, so her aunt had said, beautiful thoroughbred horses that were well known throughout Spain and beyond.

Somehow, despite her aunt's enthusiasm for his efficiency and her apparent liking for her stepson, Holly had some reservations about whether or not she would take to Marcos Delgaro. He sounded, so Holly had observed to her mother, rather an autocrat, and she fervently hoped she would not come into conflict with him during her stay, for she was inclined to be outspoken when she saw or heard anything that she especially disapproved of.

But it was no matter who else she had to contend with, it would be worthwhile to see her aunt again, and she wondered if she would see as much change in Aunt Nan, as her aunt was bound to see in her. Holly had been a rather gawky twelve-year-old when they saw each other last, and she was now a slim and lovely twenty-two.

The small plane banked suddenly and startled her, and she looked down from the small window as they began to
descend on what looked like an incredibly tiny landing field. The sea was immediately below them, a deep, deep blue and calm as a millpond, but glittering like gold silk in the afternoon sunlight, with ruffled white lace edges where it rolled lazily up on to a golden sanded beach. It looked everything Holly had expected and more.

A ribbon of road wound inland through what appeared to be a small village, little white houses set among dark patches of vineyards and olive groves. There were palms too, she noticed with some surprise, and they gave the coast an African look which was, to Holly at least, unexpected and exciting.

Lazuro must surely be the tiniest landing strip in existence, but it was served, as most of them were, by the ubiquitous Iberian Airways, and Holly wondered how much more travelling she had still to do before she finally reached her destination. The Castillo de la Valeroso was situated some way inland and meant a fairly long drive on not very good roads, so her aunt had warned her.

Being so near now to her destination, she felt that familiar, slightly sickening sensation of apprehensive excitement churning away in her stomach as the plane landed, and realized for the first time that even her once so familiar aunt was now virtually a stranger to her. Aunt Nan was now well into her fifties and would perhaps be less inclined to be tolerant towards young women than she had been to a little girl of twelve. That was something she would have to discover when she arrived.

It was hot, strikingly hot, after the air-conditioned cabin of the aircraft, and Holly stood for a moment after she left the plane, trying to accustom herself to the change in temperature. Andalucia, she thought, even smelled different. The short while she had spent changing planes at Seville could have been spent anywhere, it had the usual, universal big city smell about it, but here it was different.

There was nothing much to be seen from the runway but an expanse of rather scorched-looking grass, bordered by those intriguing palm trees. Behind them grew what she knew to be the source of that distinctive smell that had struck her as different. Orange trees, and possibly lemons too, although their scent, so her aunt had informed her, was less sweet than the orange.

Over to her right stood a motley collection of low white buildings, dazzling in the blazing sunshine and probably serving as offices and passenger reception. She turned to follow her fellow passengers across the open space, straggling along in the heat to the waiting smiles of the airfield officials.

As she went Holly registered the appearance of a man standing alone in one of the doorways, and she could not help noticing how tall and striking-looking he was as he smoked a cigarette and watched the arrivals with a certain air of condescension. A native, she thought wryly, making no secret of his opinion of tourists.

She lagged behind the others rather, wondering what arrangements had been made for her transport to the Castillo de la Valeroso. Aunt Nan had assured her that she would organize everything from this end, and not to worry, but she could not help but feel a slight twinge of anxiety at the possibility of there being no one to meet her.

Only partly aware of what was going on around her, because she was preoccupied with the prospect of being stranded, she started visibly when someone stepped in front of her. Biting on her lower lip to smother the audible gasp she made, she looked up and saw the man she had noticed standing in the doorway of the reception office. He was grinding the remains of the cigarette he had been smoking under one booted heel and the ruthlessness of the gesture startled her further.

'Senorita Gilmour?'

He had barely a trace of accent and his voice was deep and quiet, but she would not have called the brief question exactly welcoming. She nodded her head, surreptitiously looking at him from the concealment of her long lashes, and again registering the fact that he was very striking - even more so at closer quarters.

He was what she decided was a typical Spaniard, with jet black hair, cut rather shorter than the fashions she was used to, and eyes almost as black, with long thick lashes and straight brows He was even taller, she realized, than he had appeared at a distance, and he looked lean and hard and quite ruthless, and she was not encouraged. Arrogant was the word that sprang to mind, and she thought she guessed who was to drive her the Castillo de la Valeroso.
'Yes, I'm Holly Gilmour,' she said, and smiled, despite the marked lack of encouragement in the black eyes that looked down at her with more curiosity than friendliness.

He extended a large brown hand that almost swallowed hers up in its grasp, and shook it briefly. 'Bien-venida, Senorita Gilmour. I am Marcos Esteban de Delgaro y Peronda.'

Her aunt had prepared her for the very formal Spanish approach to introductions, so she was not as taken aback by the grandeur of his name as she might otherwise have been. 'I thought you might be,' she said impulsively, and one black brow arched swiftly towards a fall of thick black hair on his forehead.

'Dona Ana told you that I would be meeting you, senorita?' he asked, as if such a forewarning was not possible. 'I did not know myself until last night.'

'Oh no, no one told me!' Holly shook her head, already regretting that she had said so much. She could scarcely tell such a man that she had recognized him from her own interpretation of her aunt's description of him, and dubbing him autocratic. 'I - I just - guessed you might be,' she told him.

He regarded her steadily for a moment, with some suspicion, she thought, then he gave a barely perceptible shrug of his broad shoulders and took her overnight case from her. 'If you will come with me, senorita, we will leave as soon as possible.'

Obediently Holly followed him across the blazing hot stretch of runway to the cooler interior of the buildings he had just left. She collected her other luggage and was passed through in a very few minutes, then Marcos Delgaro led the way out of the other side of the building to a kind of forecourt-cum-car park where a large American type car stood under the welcome shade of a cluster of palms.

He saw her into her seat with a cool politeness that did nothing to cheer the prospect of a long hot drive with him. She watched him as he walked round the car and took his own seat, using her own long lashes again to cover her scrutiny. He wore a light, pale grey suit, very formal with a white shirt and a grey tie, and somehow he gave the impression of being ascetically unaware of her as a woman.

Most men immediately and unhesitatingly made some sign that they found her attractive when they were confronted with a girl as lovely as Holly, and somehow this man's lack of response rankled. Not that she really cared, she told herself, but he had not even smiled at her so far, and she wondered at her own annoyance for his apparent immunity.

She put up a hand to brush back her long dark hair as he took his seat beside her and, perhaps unknowingly, she tossed her head in a gesture of defiance for his indifference. She had deep blue eyes, small regular features and an exquisitely fair skin which would never go brown if she spent a year in the Spanish sun. She made a pretty enough picture to attract the eye of any man, except, apparently, the tall, arrogant Spaniard who sat beside her, starting up the engine without even a glance in her direction.

'Is it very far to the castle?' she ventured as they turned out of the car park and out on to the winding road she had seen from the air.

He shook his head. 'Not very far,' he said quietly. 'About twenty kilometres, that is all.'

Discouraged again, she dared not admit her complete mystification in the matter of kilometres and miles, so she gave her attention to the countryside, although part of her was still very much aware of her companion. Marcos Delgaro was not an easy man to ignore, in fact she found herself rather annoyingly conscious of him as they picked up speed and began to wind their way upwards on the narrow, dusty road. It was not going to be easy driving with him through twenty kilometres of Spanish countryside, however far it might prove to be.

As they drove further inland, the changing scene grew more intriguing and delightful. Away from the coast there seemed fewer palm trees, but many more oranges, lemons and olives, particularly olives, with their distinctive grey and twisted trunks and straggling, untidy branches. The whole variety of crops made possible only by the ancient, but still efficient system of irrigation.

Little dams and streams channelled the water to the places it was most needed, making a pattern of shiny little runs
among the trees. Artificial it may have been, but it had a charmingly natural look and Holly found it enchanting.

Enchanting too, were more of those little white houses, like the ones she had spotted from the air, just before they landed. Then they had looked like dolls' houses and pretty enough, but now they appeared even prettier with each one set about by its own tiny patio, shaded by trees - oranges and lemons, and the occasional palm.

It all looked so very different and so very Spanish, as she had imagined Spain would look, but rather as if they had stepped back several hundred years. Aunt Nan had said that Spain changed more slowly than most places, but had much to offer that those same countries had long since lost, and at the moment Holly was ready to agree with her wholeheartedly.

Where the irrigation system did not reach, there were areas of more barren land and this, she thought, had a harsh, sun-dried look that was much less attractive and yet still had a kind of severe, more rugged, beauty.

They seemed to be climbing all the time, and she remembered that her aunt had told her that the Castillo de la Valeroso was set in the higher country, in the hills around the edge of the sherry country. They would pass through the rich, productive vineyards on their way, and she hoped to be able to take photographs later on, to take back with her. Although Marcos Delgaro would probably view such a suggestion with a jaundiced eye.

Taking pictures of the castle itself, too, would no doubt not be encouraged, but she intended to take some just the same. How else would she be able to prove to anyone that she had actually stayed in a castle in Spain? If she could get a shot of her host's son too, so much the better, but she would have to be very sure he did not see her do it.

The road was very narrow and unbelievably bad in places, but Marcos Delgaro drove the big car as if he was impatient to have the journey over and done with, although he was a careful and competent driver and took some of the more hair-raising corners they encountered with the skill and precision of a racing driver.

'It looks wonderful country,' Holly observed at one point, again trying to pierce the rather heavy silence between them, and he turned his head briefly and looked at her for a second before nodding agreement.

'It is good country,' he said. 'Better away from the coast because it is so far unspoiled, a Dios gracias!'

Holly turned and looked at the dark discouraging profile presented to her and almost smiled her realization. 'You don't like tourists, Senor Delgaro?'

The wide shoulders under the light jacket shrugged briefly, as if such people were not even worthy of his disdain. 'I thank heaven that I do not have to come into contact with them,' he remarked, and Holly felt that the remark was in some way aimed at her, so that the colour flooded her cheeks warmly.

'It's a good job every Spaniard doesn't think as you do, senor,' she retorted, 'or your country would be very much poorer!'

'No doubt!' The firm smooth mouth was as unrelenting as ever, and he did not turn and look at her, even briefly. 'But I merely thanked heaven on my own behalf, senorita. I am not in the tourist trade, it does not concern me.'

Holly considered that perhaps silence was the safest thing after all, for it seemed they were unlikely to find a point of contact on any subject. He simply seemed disinclined to converse with her at all, so instead she turned again to the countryside.

Vineyards predominated on the landscape now and she managed to notice a signpost showing the way to Jerez de la Frontera, the very centre of the sherry industry. They even drove through part of it and thanks to their enforced slower pace she was able to see and appreciate something of the charming old town.

Ancient palaces, graceful towers and wonderful old churches seemed to dominate its streets. Streets that were made shady and cool by orange and palm trees, the oranges scenting the warm air with their heady perfume. It seemed so very Spanish that she was delighted with it and would have loved to share her excitement with her companion, had he given her the slightest encouragement.
One thing that caused her some surprise was the very small number of people who wore hats, despite the blazing sun. She wished she had thought to get herself a hat from the rather gaudy selection offered in the small shop at the airfield, but of course Senor Marcos Delgaro would probably have refused to be seen with her in one of those outlandish concoctions.

'There seems to be a terrific lot to see,' Holly ventured. 'I never realized Spain was so-so different, somehow.'

'But of course,' Marcos Delgaro told her brusquely. He changed gear and increased speed as they left the town behind them, and almost unwillingly Holly noticed how strong and brown his hands were, and how capably and efficiently they coped with the big car on these difficult roads. 'You are in Andalucia, Senorita Gilmour, it is much less European than the rest of Spain.'

'It's fascinating,' Holly declared, glad to have drawn even that much from him. 'I'd like to see a lot of the countryside while I'm here.' She glanced at him from the corners of her eyes, watching for his reaction. 'Of course I realize it must sound very much too touristy for your taste, Senor Delgaro, but I'm sure some one would be willing to show me around.'

The set mouth, she noticed with some surprise, did not tighten disapprovingly as she expected it to, but briefly flicked up at one corner in a ghost of a smile, although he did not turn his head. 'I am sure of it, senorita, but if you will allow me, I will be your guide while you are here.'

Holly looked startled, taken aback by the offer and a little ashamed of her jibe. Then she looked at the arrogant profile and wondered if he was merely being polite to his stepmother's guest. 'That's very kind of you,' she said. 'If you're sure it won't be—'

'I will arrange it whenever it suits you best, senorita.'

'Thank you.' She glanced at him again, and half smiled to herself. Being polite and obliging as he was now, she thought, Marcos Delgaro was a very attractive man. In fact, if she was quite honest with herself, he was the most overpoweringly, sexually attractive man she had ever met and the realization made her silent again.

Her first glimpse of the Castillo de la Valeroso came as something of a surprise. For some reason she had expected it to be perched high in the mountains somewhere, and surrounded by rugged and rocky country. Instead it was set amid the tree-clad hills above a small village, looking down over a rich fertile valley whose acres of vineyards, and lush pastures were irrigated by an artificially made river, damned and channelled like those she had seen nearer the coast.

The castle itself was everything she had expected and more, with tall towers and turrets in yellowish grey stone that looked mellow and tranquil in the hot sun. It looked exactly like something from a fairy-tale and she instinctively gave a cry of pleasure at the sight of it.

'It impresses you, senorita?' The quiet question took her by surprise and she turned and looked at him, a wide smile lighting her eyes.

'It's quite beautiful!' Her uninhibited response brought a glimpse of white teeth in the dark face, and the revelation of it so surprised her that she stared at him for a moment after he had turned his head away again. She felt a sudden lightness in her heart at the sight of that smile, and could not understand her own reaction.

'It is over five hundred years old,' Marcos Delgaro told her. 'And the Delgaro family have lived in it for most of that time.'

'How wonderful!' She had not meant to sound quite so naively impressed, and she did not miss the look in the sideways glance of the black eyes as he turned the big car into a wide tree-bordered driveway. 'It's Moorish in origin, isn't it?' she ventured, her knowledge coming from her aunt's letters, but perhaps he would not know that and think her more learned than she was. Though why she should bother to try and impress him she could not imagine.
He glanced at her again and one dark brow was raised as if in comment. 'You are very knowledgeable, Senorita Gilmour!'

Holly never knew what made her confess the truth, but she spoke without hesitation. 'Aunt Nan told me about it in one of her letters,' she said, and he nodded.

'I see.'

Those very dark features too. she ventured to guess, were probably Moorish in origin. That arrogant profile probably owed its hawklike pride to the Moorish conquerors of eighth-century Spain who had impressed their power, their culture and their dusky looks on the people they had ruled over for seven hundred years. There was the look of a conqueror in that autocratic head and the craggy, ruthless features and she felt a sudden shiver run through her body when a sudden sharp corner flung her against him.

'I'm - I'm sorry!' She apologized hastily, startled as much by her own reaction as by the unexpected turn.

'Why do you not make use of the handle beside you?' he asked. 'Then you would not be thrown off balance.'

'Yes, I'm sorry I didn't.'

'There are a number of these sharp turns on the private road,' he warned her, and Holly hastily grabbed the leather handle on the door and hung on tightly when he put the car into another tight turn. Expert as Marcos Delgaro obviously was, driving along a road like this was hair-raising to say the least. Briefly those white teeth flashed again against the dark brown of his face. 'Perdone, senorita,' he said softly.

Holly refused to acknowledge the swift breathtaking way her heart flipped over when she saw that smile again, and kept her eyes on the castle ahead of them, constantly appearing and disappearing behind the palms and other trees that bordered the private road. 'I'm very excited about seeing Aunt Nan again after so long,' she said.

'You have not seen her for ten years, is it not so?'

'Just about ten years,' Holly agreed. 'I'm - I'm almost nervous of meeting her again after so long.'

He cast her a brief glance over one shoulder, and his mouth twitched without actually smiling again. 'There is no need for you to be nervous at all, Senorita Gilmour. Dona Ana is exactly as she was when she first came here to nurse my father ten years ago. She does not change.'

'I'm glad,' Holly said simply.

For a moment, while they drove along a straight section of the winding driveway up to the castle, he turned his head and looked at her fully for the first time, and the black eyes actually showed some sort of appreciation of her looks. 'You, I think, senorita,' he said softly, 'are not the same as you were ten years ago.'

Even that brief, almost offhand scrutiny sent her heart thudding wildly in her breast again, and Holly was appalled that he could have such an effect on her, especially after such short acquaintance. There was something darkly and excitingly different about Marcos Delgaro that she was going to find very difficult to ignore.

'I'm very different from what I was ten years ago,' she said. 'There's quite a lot of changes between a child of twelve and a woman of twenty-two.'

One brow flicked briefly at her in curiosity. 'You are very young to be travelling so far alone, senorita. I am surprised that your family permit you to do so.'

The hint of criticism was enough to incite Holly to protest and she turned indignant blue eyes on him. 'I'm perfectly capable of travelling alone, Senor Delgaro, and my family have no hesitation in trusting me!'

Surprisingly a hint of amusement showed for a moment in the black eyes that looked at her, and again the white teeth showed momentarily in his dark face. 'I was not referring to the trust put in yourself, senorita, but in my
countrymen.' He drove the car along in front of an impressive flight of stone steps with huge iron-studded double doors at the top, and braked to a halt, then turned in his seat to face her for a moment. His black eyes raked over her with a glittering insolence that brought swift colour to her cheeks. 'Never underestimate us, senorita, you would be very unwise to do so,' he said softly.

Holly was too stunned for a moment to do anything but stare, with parted lips and wide eyes, at the tall arrogance of his back as he got out of the car and came round to open the door for her. 'Thank you.' Her voice was quiet and surprisingly meek as she allowed him to help her from her seat and she found the firm, confident clasp of his hand caused further disturbing thoughts to enter her head.

'No hay de que, senorita!'

The double doors at the top of the steps opened suddenly and gave her no time to ponder on the meaning of his reply, and a woman came down the steps swiftly, despite a rather dumpy figure. A moment later

Holly was clasped in the friendly and familiar hug she remembered from childhood.

'Holly, my baby! Oh, it's so good to see you!' Warm, kindly blue eyes regarded her steadily for a moment, then gradually misted over, and Holly was hugged again to that ample bosom that had so often consoled her when she was a schoolgirl. 'Let me look at you, baby!'

Holly was conscious of Marcos Delgaro's black eyes watching the reunion with a faint hint of ironic amusement which she disliked because it made her feel oddly shy and uneasy. 'I'm not a baby now, Aunt Nan,' she told her, glancing at that dark, interested face from the shadow of her lashes. 'I'm a grown woman!'

'So you are!' Her aunt put a hand to touch her cheek gently, smiling fondly. 'And such a pretty one too, isn't she, Marcos? Isn't she lovely?'

'Indeed she is, Dona Ana.' The deep, quiet voice offered only approval and Holly could feel the scrutiny of those black eyes. Never, she thought, had anyone ever made her feel as nervous and unsure of herself as Marcos Delgaro did and she wished he would go and leave her alone with her aunt.

Aunt Nan had changed less than Holly expected and that at least was something of a relief. She was still plump and smiling and there seemed very little more grey in her light brown hair Her friendly blue eyes were still clear and bright and apparently did not yet need spectacles. Most important of all, to Holly, she was so obviously glad to see her.

'Come along in, darling!' Her aunt put an arm around her shoulders as she took her up those wide, impressive steps to the wide open doors. 'Don't be overawed by the grandeur of the castle. I was at first, but I soon got over it. It's a home, like anywhere else, and you're very, very welcome!'

Thank you,' Holly said softly, hoping Marcos Delgaro would not catch her words. 'I'm relieved to hear it'

'But, my dear, of course you're welcome!' Her aunt smiled curiously at her. 'Whatever made you think you weren't?'

'I don't really know,' Holly confessed, and turned to see that they were alone at last, Marcos Delgaro having apparently gone to organize the disposal of her luggage. 'I - I just thought that Senor Delgaro didn't-

Her aunt's familiar laughter cut her short, and a hug reassured her. 'You mustn't take Marcos at face value, darling,' she told Holly. 'He isn't nearly as autocratic as he gives the impression of being at first sight. Confidentially,' she added with a soft chuckle, 'he rather frightened me at first sight!'

'You?' Holly started at her unbelievingly. 'But you were—'

'Fair, fat and forty!' her aunt laughed blithely. 'But even ten years ago Marcos had quite an air about him, my dear, and I almost said no to my dear Jose because I wondered what Marcos would say to his father marrying a foreigner, and after such a short time too.' She laughed delightedly at her own impulsiveness. 'I rather surprised myself too,' she confessed. 'And I can well imagine what a stir it caused among the family at home.'
'It did rather,' Holly smiled. 'But we knew you'd be sensible enough to know what you were about, Aunt Nan.'

'Oh, I knew very well what I was about!' Nan Delgaro assured her quietly. She looked around the vast and beautiful hall they were in, and then at Holly. 'Well, darling, how do castles in Spain compare with your preconceived ideas?'

'This one's quite beautiful,' Holly said unhesitatingly. 'It's simply lovely - I thought so when I first caught a glimpse of it as we turned into the approach road up here.'

'And you told Marcos so, I hope,' her aunt smiled. 'He's very proud of his heritage, and very Spanish about it.'

'I did mention it.' She looked around the hall and shook her head. 'It's all rather hard to believe that you're mistress of a castle, Aunt Nan.'

Exquisite tiles covered the floor, the azulejos of the Moors, bright and colourful and with beautiful designs. White, almost stark walls, with portraits of men as proudly arrogant as Marcos Delgaro, and obviously his ancestors, had wrought iron holders for the electric lights that now did the service of candles and oil lanterns of previous times. It was so vast and high-ceilinged that Holly gazed upwards in amazement.

The staircase was magnificently wide and carpeted for most of its width, covering the worn stone beneath that had been trodden with the feet of the Delgaro family for almost five hundred years. A beautifully wrought, iron balustrade swept upwards with it and gave yet another aspect of beauty to this quite incredible place.

'I just can't believe it,' Holly said again, shaking her head. 'It's - it's like something out of another age. I'd no idea there were people still living in surroundings like this.'

'It is rather fantastic,' her aunt agreed. 'And it took me a little time to get used to it, but it's just like home to me now, and I love it here. But I have Jose, of course, that makes a big difference.'

'Of course.' Holly looked at her aunt curiously. 'Didn't he - didn't Senor Delgaro mind his father marrying again?' she ventured, and her aunt shook her head, still smiling, as she walked with her arm tucked through hers.

'No, darling, of course he didn't. After all,' she made a wry face, 'there's little fear of my producing a stepbrother for him, is there? The family honour isn't at stake because two middle-aged - elderly people, if you like, chose to keep one another company in their later years.'

'You're not elderly!' Holly laughed, squeezing the arm linked with hers. She felt a sudden surge of affection for the aunt who had changed so little in the passing years. 'Why, you can't be much older than your - your stepson!'

Aunt Nan laughed, shaking her head firmly. 'Old enough to be his mother, my dear!' she said. 'I suppose from the security of your delicious twenty-two years a man of thirty-six seems like Methuselah, but Marcos is a long way from being elderly, darling, or even middle-aged!'

'I - I didn't say he was that,' Holly protested. She certainly did not think of Marcos Delgaro as anything but a dangerously attractive man, no matter what age he was, but she had no intention of letting her aunt know that.

She had not even considered how much older he was than herself, for he was a man on whom any age would sit easily. And definitely at the moment his powerful personal magnetism made it ridiculous to think of him in the way her aunt had suggested. The wonder was that he had not yet taken steps to provide heirs of his own for the family tradition.

'Now come and meet Jose,' Aunt Nan said softly, breaking into her reverie, and Holly could not help but notice how her eyes shone softly when she mentioned her husband. Aunt Nan was very much in love, however old she was.

A pair of incredibly tall double doors opened off the far end of the hall, and her aunt opened them both wide as they approached, closing them carefully before turning to follow Holly across the room to where a man sat in a chair near the window.

It was a grand, impressive room, as one would expect in such a place, not cosy, for such a thing was impossible in a
room of that size, but comfortable for all that. Thick Turkish carpet softened their tread, and arched windows admitted only the suffused light of the sun, filtered past the pillared balconies that ran along in front of the room above. The pillars, yellowish stone like the rest of the building, and ornately carved, were twined, almost hidden, by the soft purple blossoms of bougainvillea and the scented beauty of scarlet and yellow roses.

The white walls of the room, as in the hall, were filled with portraits of past generations of Delgaros — dark-visaged men with hawklike countenances and an air of arrogance that Holly somehow found fascinating, despite knowing how disturbing the modern version could be. It was somehow awe-inspiring to have so many of those dark, autocratic faces looking down at her, and Holly felt a slight shiver as she walked across the room.

The man seated in the armchair near the window seemed, at first sight, to bear a little resemblance to his son, but when one looked more closely it was possible to see the same strong, proud features, now shrunken and aged, but still recognizable.

Black eyes, sunken into hollow sockets and lined at their corners with pain, turned to them as they came nearer and Holly realized with a start that they could actually see very little. Don Jose Delgaro appeared to be almost blind, and she felt a sudden, unbidden sense of pity when she thought of such a man laid low by sickness and near blindness, for now that she saw him more clearly she could see that he must once have been a man very much like his son was now.

'Jose, mi amado,' Aunt Nan said softly, laying one hand on his shoulder. 'I've brought Holly to see you.'

'Ah, sí!' A long thin hand reached out towards her and, without hesitation, Holly put her own into it and allowed herself to be drawn closer to the ornate gilt chair and the man in it. 'Please forgive me for not rising, Senorita Gilmour, you will understand that I am not able to rise without assistance.'

'Yes, of course, Don Jose, I understand.' She smiled down at the dark, gaunt features and glittering eyes and suddenly felt something of her aunt's admiration for the man. He was so proud, so unbowed by his misfortune, and yet so helpless. It was a combination that inspired admiration and affection and she knew that her aunt would have been immediately affected by it, and unhesitating about marrying him.

'You are most welcome to the Castillo de la Valeroso, senorita. Please stay as long as you would like to. I know that my wife would welcome your staying.'

'You're very kind, Don Jose,' Holly told him softly. 'And the castle is - well, it's all I've ever dreamed a castle in Spain would be. It's beautiful!'

'Ah, but of course!' Don Jose's white head nodded understanding and the brown pain-wrinkled face creased into a smile. 'It is a saying in England, I believe, is it not? Looking for castles in Spain? A - a kind of dream, sí?'

'Something like that,' Holly agreed. 'And I'm very grateful to you for allowing me to find my castle in Spain, Don Jose, even for a short time.'
CHAPTER TWO

It took Holly a moment or two to realize where she was when she woke the following morning. Opening her eyes she looked up hazily at the ceiling above her bed and wondered how there came to be heavy dark beams and dim cool arches where the sun did not reach, then she realized and smiled to herself, snuggling down luxuriously into the soft pillows.

The sun was already strong and bright outside, but in her room it was still cool and the glare filtered by slatted shutters that made bright gold stripes on the red carpet. The ancient bed was far more comfortable than the original occupiers had found it, she had no doubt, and she slid her fingers over the beautiful silk cover and sighed. The castle was well up to expectations as far as comfort was concerned, but the Delgaros were a very wealthy family.

She lay there for a moment thinking about her arrival the day before. It was lovely to see Aunt Nan again, and she liked Don Jose, her uncle, she supposed, since he was married to her aunt. The only one she had reservations about was Marcos Delgaro, and those reservations were influenced as much by wariness as by dislike, she freely admitted. He was the most disturbing man she had ever met, and she wondered how much more so she would find him when she had been at the castle a little longer and knew him better.

She stretched lazily and decided that it was time she thought about getting up, although there was plenty of time before breakfast yet. Breakfast, so her aunt had told her, was never a very substantial meal, but if she wanted an English type breakfast she could have it. Holly had decided that when in Spain she would do as the Spaniards did, however, and not bother too much about it.

Just about to swing her feet out of bed, she paused when someone rapped on her bedroom door, and called out a tentative 'come in'. It was not one of the maids, as Holly had half expected, but her aunt, and she smiled a welcome.

'Hello, Aunt Nan.'

'Did you sleep well, baby?' her aunt asked, still, it seemed, intent on calling her by her childish title.

'Fine, thanks,' Holly told her. 'This is a marvellously comfortable mattress.'

Her aunt smiled. 'Yes, it's a little more up-to-date than the bed itself, darling. Jose believes in his comfort, for all his pride in the past.'

'The best of two worlds,' Holly surmised, and her aunt nodded, coming to sit on the edge of her bed.

'I'm so glad you've got a nice long time for your holiday, my dear, there's such a lot for you to see, and it's very fortunate that Helena's away for most of the time you're here, because it means that Marcos can take you around.'

'Helena?' Holly frowned curiously, and her aunt pulled a wry face as she answered.

'Helena Mendez, the girl Marcos is supposed to be going to marry.'

'Holly considered that for a moment, then raised a brow at her aunt's tone of voice, and the way she had worded her answer. 'Supposed to be going to marry?' she asked.

'It's one of those family arrangements,' Aunt Nan said by way of explanation.

'You mean an arranged marriage?' Holly asked, not quite believing it. 'Surely that doesn't still go on, does it?'

Aunt Nan nodded. 'In some instances it does, Holly. The Delgaros and the Mendez are both ancient families and it's considered an excellent match by both families.'

'What about the main participants?' Holly asked with a wry smile. 'Do they think it's an excellent match too?'

Her aunt laughed shortly 'Well, Helena is very definitely in favour, but I sometimes think Marcos is merely doing
what's expected of him.'

For a moment Holly said nothing. It was difficult for her to imagine Marcos Delgaro, as she had so far visualized him, being prepared to accept a wife he had not chosen for himself, but she supposed that fierce family pride would be enough to make him take a suitable wife, regardless of how he felt about her personally.

'I don't think Senor Delgaro will take very kindly to acting as guide for me,' Holly said with a wry smile.

He doesn't approve of tourists, Aunt Nan.'

'I know,' her aunt admitted blandly, 'but he can't very well refuse to take his stepmother's niece around and show her the country, can he, darling? I suppose,' she added with a puzzling frown, 'he's your cousin in a somewhat complicated way, isn't he?'

'Is he?' The idea was not displeasing, but she doubted that Marcos Delgaro would feel as pleased about it.

'In a way,' Aunt Nan said. 'Now let me see, Helena leaves for Paris tomorrow, so Marcos will be free after that. She's coming to dinner tonight, darling, so you'll be able to meet her.'

'Oh! Oh, will I?'

Her aunt laughed, patting her hands reassuringly. 'Don't let her over-awe you, my dear. Helena's rather an autocrat, but you have no need to worry about her.'

'Then she should be a good match for Marcos,' Holly said without thinking, and smiled apologetically when her aunt shook her head reproachfully. 'I'm sorry, Aunt Nan, I shouldn't say things like that, and I promise I won't again.'

'Oh, don't worry,' her aunt reassured her. 'I know what Marcos is like at first glance, but don't be fooled, my dear. I'm sure you'll get along fine, once you get used to one another.'

Holly saw very little of Marcos Delgaro for most of the day, but she was walking along the approach road to the castle, later that afternoon, when he drove up alongside her and stopped the car.

'May I give you a lift?' he asked, and opened the door, obviously not anticipating her refusal, so she nodded and climbed in beside him.

'Thank you, I'm rather hot from walking, and it's further than I thought.'

'You should not take long walks until you are better used to the climate; he informed her, and the black eyes flicked briefly to her bare head. 'And you should also wear a hat, senorita.'

There was something so discouragingly formal about that very precise senorita and she found herself resenting it without quite knowing why. There was a warmth and sense of intimacy sitting next to him in the much smaller car he drove today, and she wished she had refused to ride with him.

Her hands were quite unsteady and her pulses were doing the most amazing things when her bare arm came into contact with his brown skin. He wore a shirt with short sleeves and the bare, brown muscular arms looked somehow sensuous as he guided the car round the tortuous bends in the approach road, making her imagine all sorts of crazy things.

The black eyes were, for the moment fixed on the road, but in profile those long thick lashes stood out prominently and the proud, hawklike nose gave him a look of strength that was irresistible. The shirt, open at the neck, was white and made him look more dark than ever, betraying his Moorish ancestors undeniably.

'I don't possess a hat,' she told him, trying to quell the wild and quite inexplicable feelings he aroused in her.

'Then you will get one when we go down into San Adolfo.' It was an order, she realized, and felt the flush of colour in her cheeks as she prepared to argue the point.
'I don't think I need a hat,' she told him. 'I'll get used to the sun soon enough, like Aunt Nan did.'

For a brief moment the black eyes turned on her and one brow flicked swiftly upwards. 'You are expecting to stay ten years, senorita?' he asked softly, and Holly looked at him reproachfully.

'I probably shan't even stay ten days,' she retorted. 'I have the feeling that you'd rather I hadn't come at all, Senor Delgaro!'

'So?' Again one black brow expressed surprise. 'And why do you think that, Senorita Gilmour?'

There was a definite hint of mockery in the question and Holly suspected he was enjoying the exchange because he was firmly convinced that he would get the best of it. For a moment she sat quite still and silent, refusing to be drawn, then she looked down at her hands in her lap and shook her head.

'It's true,' she said, firmly convinced. 'In fact I'm sure that if it had been up to you and not your father I wouldn't have been able to come and see Aunt Nan at all.'

The brown hands swung the steering wheel round again as they took the last corner before driving up to the castle and she could have sworn that a hint of smile touched the corners of his mouth. 'You are very wrong, nina,' he said softly. 'I do not mind having you here in I he least.' For a brief moment the black eyes turned in her direction, holding her own gaze irresistibly. 'It could prove very—' The broad shoulders shrugged expressively and a soft, deep laugh shivered along her spine like ice water. 'Si,' he said softly, 'mucho alegre!'

He braked the car to a halt and came round to help her, his hand strong and warm as his fingers curled round her arm, a glint of amusement still in the black eyes as he looked down at her. 'Senor Delgaro—' She was not very sure just what she had been going to say, but his next words made her forget even what she had been thinking of.

'Dona Ana thinks that we are in some way — cousins,' he said. 'It is therefore permitted, I think, that you call me Marcos, if you wish to.'

She said nothing for a moment, the shading palms casting little shifting dark shadows across her face and darkening her deep blue eyes until they looked almost as black as his. 'I - I suppose we are sort of cousins by marriage,' she allowed at last.

'So - I must call you Holly!'

He made her name sound completely foreign and she looked up at him for a moment in some surprise. 'There's no obligation,' she told him shortly when his actual words sank in. 'You can go on calling me that rather distant and unfriendly "senorita", if you prefer it!'

For a moment he simply stood there, looking down at her, such a glitter in his black eyes that she felt herself shiver involuntarily, then he raised his chin and looked at her sternly down the length of that hawklike nose. 'As you wish, senorita!' he said, and turned and left her standing there while he strode on up the steps to the doors.

Helena Mendez arrived only a very short time before dinner so that there was very little time for Holly to take stock of the Spanish girl before they were all seated round the table in the huge, dark-raftered dining hall.

The dining hall, once the banqueting hall, no doubt, was the room that most impressed Holly with its sheer size and grandeur. More portraits hung on the white walls, with great banners and standards between them, worn and faded but still redolent of past glories and bloody battles. Wrought iron baskets which had once held torches and candles now cradled the more innocuous light of electric lamps and shed a bright yellow light over the small company at the huge table.

Despite his illness, Don Jose still sat at the head of his table, with his son on his right and Helena Mendez on his left. Holly sat further along, near to her aunt, and thankful to be in familiar company. She had decided on a short but pretty pink dress in soft nylon jersey, and it flattered her fair skin and dark hair, lending a soft flush of colour to her cheeks.
She made, she realized, a distinct contrast to the dark sophistication of their guest, for one of the big Paris houses had surely dressed Helena Mendez. Her gown of deep blue slipper satin made the most of her rather voluptuous figure and she wore her black hair in the traditional chignon at the back of her head, a perfect style for her Latin looks and very effective as part of a stunning whole.

Helena Mendez, Holly decided, on closer inspection, would be formidable competition, and immediately felt a flush of colour in her cheeks when she realized what had been in her mind.

A surreptitious scrutiny of Marcos Delgardo from the concealment of her lashes revealed another facet to his undoubted attraction. Formal evening dress did as much for him as more casual clothes did, and she wondered if he had ever looked more darkly arrogant and proud than he did tonight.

'Are you to stay very long in Spain, Senorita Gilmour?' Helena Mendez asked suddenly, and Holly looked first at Marcos Delgaro before she answered. The gesture was instinctive and she saw from the corner of her eye the way her aunt registered surprise.

'I—I hope to stay in Spain for about two months, senorita,' she said, receiving no response to her hasty glance. 'But not,' she added hastily, 'here at the castle, of course.'

'But why do you say that, Senorita Gilmour?' It was Don Jose, his dark, almost blind eyes turned in her direction, and she instinctively smiled.

'I couldn't impose on your hospitality for so long, Don Jose,' she told him. 'It's very good of you to have me at all.'

'Then you will please not talk of leaving,' the old man told her, with a smile softening the sternness of his words. 'Unless, of course, you wish to see other parts of our country, in which case I must forgo the pleasure of your company.'

'You're very kind, Don Jose, thank you.' She looked briefly and surreptitiously at his son. 'I'd love to stay for the whole two months, but I don't want to outstay my welcome.'

'You are always welcome here,' the old man assured her - an opinion his son did not endorse, she noticed.

'You do not have to - work?' Helena Mendez hesitated over the word as if it offended her sensibilities, and Holly hesitated before answering.

'I do have to work for my living, Senorita Mendez,' she said quietly. 'But - well, for a long time now I've had a theory about holidays. I think it's good policy to work for several years and save money, and then have a long, really good holiday. That's what I'm doing now.'

Fine dark brows expressed surprise and there was a hint of amusement in Helena Mendez's eyes as she raised a glass of wine to her lips, not quite quickly enough to hide their curl of derision. It was Don Jose who answered her, and he too smiled, although not derisively.

That is an estimable aim for a young woman,

Senorita Gilmour, and now that you have attained your goal, I hope you may enjoy your holiday with us.'

'Oh, I'm sure I shall,' Holly assured him.

Helena Mendez, however, was not to be so easily deprived of her amusement, and the glittering black eyes still regarded Holly down the length of the table. 'Perhaps you are thinking to follow the example of your aunt, senorita,' she suggested in a soft, meaningful voice, and Holly felt Aunt Nan's eyes on her, anxious, she thought, for her not to be too angered by the obvious intent of the Spanish girl.

'I'm not sure I follow your meaning,' Holly said, knowing full well what she was implying, and trying to do something about the rising temper that threatened to make her forget her manners.
Those fine brows rose again, and Helena Mendez glanced briefly at Nan Delgaro as she spoke. 'Senora Delgaro was fortunate enough to marry within a very short time of her arrival,' she said quietly, and with a faint hint of smile on her lips. 'I thought perhaps your own thoughts might—' An expressive Latin shrug conveyed the rest of her meaning unmistakably, and Holly's hands clenched tightly in front of her.

Her resentment was as much for Aunt Nan as for herself, and she could see plainly enough what Don Jose thought of the allusion to his wife's good fortune. The dark, drawn features flushed, and a fine fire showed in the sunken eyes as he looked at Helena Mendez.

'The good fortune of our early marriage was mine, Helena,' he said in a cold, hard voice that Holly would never have believed him capable of. 'That Ana consented to be my wife is still a source of delight to me, and I could wish one other of my compatriots may be as fortunate, enough to capture the heart of Senorita Gilmour.' The white head turned and bobbed briefly in her direction. 'Holly, if I may be permitted, senorita.'

'Of course, Don Jose.' She smiled warily and hastily lowered her gaze because she knew Marcos Delgaro was watching her.

Perhaps he resented his future wife being put so firmly in her place by his father, but whatever it was that prompted it, he sounded coldly quiet when he spoke. "You are honoured, Padre. I have been refused the privilege of using the senorita's first name.' The black eyes looked at her steadily and with such intensity that she was at last forced to raise her own eyes and look at him. 'Of course it is possibly my own fault.'

Don Jose frowned at him, his fading sight making him narrow his eyes as he studied his son curiously. 'I do not understand you, Marcos.'

Marcos still held her gaze and Holly could feel the flush of warm colour that betrayed how she felt. 'I warned Senorita Gilmour of the dangers of travelling alone,' he said in that deep, quiet voice. 'I warned her of the dangers of being too trusting with our male population.' A short laugh trickled along Holly's spine like a warning. 'I had not anticipated being included among them, however.'

'Oh, Marcos!' It was Aunt Nan, and unbelievably, she sounded as if she was laughing as she scolded her stepson. 'You shouldn't have done that!'

Marcos Delgaro shrugged ruefully. 'I can see that now, Dona Ana, but I had not expected to be - how is It? Taken seriously!'

Aunt Nan turned to Holly, one hand reaching out to her, gently inquiring, perhaps suspecting something of how she felt at being the centre of such a discussion. 'You did take Marcos much too seriously, baby, if you really thought he was warning you - well, in the way you took it. You have no need to be any more afraid of walking around in Spain than at home.'

'I would beg to differ on that point, Dona Ana,' Marcos said, and appeared quite serious about it. 'Your niece is a very beautiful young woman, it would not be wise for her to just wander about anywhere alone. Please believe me, I know what I am saying.'

For a moment Nan Delgaro looked at him curiously, then she nodded, and Holly thought there was a small, secret smile about her mouth. 'Of course you would know best, Marcos,' she said. 'It's very fortunate, in the circumstances, that you will have enough free time to show Holly around while she's here.'

That prospect, Holly thought, trying not to feel as if she was being too organized, did not suit Helena Mendez at all, and a quick glance from under her lashes revealed a straight black frown on the other girl's face.

'It is expected that Marcos will be - a tourist guide for your niece?' she asked, with such obvious distaste that Holly felt the colour warm her face again, and wished to heaven they would not discuss her as if she was not there. Aunt Nan was as guilty as the rest of them and she was beginning to resent it.

"Not exactly that, Helena,' Aunt Nan said, smiling with deceptive mildness. 'But you'll be away, won't you? And I'm sure Marcos wouldn't mind showing Holly some of our lovely countryside while she's here. Will you, Marcos?"
Again the black eyes looked across at Holly and she felt a steady and insistent tap-tapping at her ribs, a disturbing flutter in her pulse when she glanced up at him hastily and down again. 'If the senorita will permit me, I will be delighted to show her our countryside,' he said softly. One black brow arched expressively, and for a brief second white teeth showed in the brown face. 'And I can assure you, senorita, that you will be in no danger from me!'

After six days at the Castillo de la Valeroso Holly still felt a little unsure of herself, still felt uneasy whenever she was near Marcos Delgaro, although he was never other than strictly polite and formal. He still called her either by her full name, or that strictly formal 'senorita.'

Helena Mendez had left for Paris the day following that eventful dinner as planned, but Holly felt convinced that they would see her back long before she was scheduled to return. The idea of Marcos Delgaro showing her around did not suit the other girl at all, no matter how unwilling a guide he was, and somehow her suspicion gave Holly a secret feeling of pleasure.

Marcos Delgaro took her down to the little village of San Adolfo the first evening, although their visit had been brief and mainly for the purpose of buying her a hat, since he had said she must have one. The only available headgear, however, was a kind of wide-brimmed, coarse straw stetson which was not exactly flattering and she had instantly decided against it as soon as she saw it.

In fact she was given little say in the matter, for she was given little option but to wear it when it was paid for by her companion and put firmly on to her head before they went outside again. She looked, she felt sure, much more like one of his much disliked tourists with it on than she had without it.

Today she had managed to leave it behind in her bedroom, since she had no intention of leaving the grounds, and gone out bare-headed. Now, as she walked across the sun-dried grass towards the stables and the paddock, she was already regretting her decision, for the sun was almost unbearably hot on the back of her neck. There was something relentless about the Spanish sun, she thought; as relentless as the man who had insisted she wear a hat for protection against it.

After a moment or two she felt she could stand it no longer and she unknotted the silk square she wore at her throat to fill in the rather low-fastening neckline of a pale green shirtwaister dress, and tied it over her head, the point of it shading her neck from the sun. It was rather annoying to have to admit it, even to herself, but in this case Marcos Delgaro had been right — she did need a hat.

The horses he bred and of which he was so proud were, she had to agree with her aunt, quite beautiful. Descendants of pure Arab stock, they were exquisite creatures of beauty and temperament, but far different from the quiet-tempered horses she was more used to.

She had never yet ventured near them on her own, for their wide, wary eyes were constantly alert and they needed little enough excuse to whinny in protest at any unexpected move or sound and then lift their forefeet in the air like circus horses. Holly thought they were beautiful, but she was just a little afraid of them, no matter how much she admired them.

She was close to the paddock now, a big expanse of lush grass, irrigated by the river that came down from the hills and was channelled into use, just as it was lower down in the fields. The mares were gently grazing and the foals skittering around the enclosed space, expending their surplus energy. Marcos, she knew, was out somewhere riding, and she wondered if she dared, in his absence, go and look at the horses. The grown ones were beautiful enough, but the foals enchanted her.

The sun was so hot that she made her way along the side of the paddock where the heavy shade of a row of fig trees gave shelter from its fierceness. Along this side too, the paddock was fenced with the more conventional type of ranch fencing that was so familiar at home, and on which she could perch, if she ever felt brave enough to do so.

There was a magnificent view from here too, down over the valley and the dark patches of fruit-laden vineyards, with those tiny white houses tucked against the hillsides as if they were part of the natural order of things. Clear blue skies, and not a cloud to be seen, with the glint of those life-giving channels of water winking like silver snakes in the brilliant sun. It was perfect, Holly decided, and so were the animals in the paddock.
Three of the sleek-looking mares already had foals running with them; leggy, dainty little creatures with huge eyes and the same wary skittishness as their mothers, while two more were still waiting for their young to be born. One of them, a lovely silky black, stood in the shade of the fig trees quite near the fence and close enough to tempt Holly over to her, smiling and hoping that her advances would not be greeted with general panic. Their owner would never forgive her if she panicked his valuable stock.

Those with their families already did little more than raise their heads and look across at her, and the other mare merely tossed her head and walked a little further away. Only the black made no move, possibly because she was reluctant to leave the shade of the trees, and Holly leaned on the rail, a couple of feet away, making soft, encouraging little noises.

The mare's big eyes regarded her warily, and her ears were pricked forward, but she did not move, and Holly was pleased with even that small success. 'Come on, my lovely, come to me,' Holly whispered softly, extending a hand. 'Come and make friends.'

The mare still stood her ground and, flushed with success, Holly moved closer, her hand still extended, making more encouraging sounds as she advanced, although what she intended doing when she got close enough to touch the animal and not yet occurred to her.

It was so incredibly quiet and peaceful, with the high, umbrella shape of the fig trees giving a cool, almost moist shade to the spot where she stood, that she did not for one minute envisage anything untoward happening.

Much more confident, now that the mare seemed to have accepted her presence, Holly climbed carefully up on to the top bar of the fence with her feet on the paddock side, and sat there for a second with her eyes still watching the black mare hopefully. 'I won't hurt you,' she told the animal, putting out a friendly hand again. 'Come on, lovely, come and make friends.'

But if the mare had been ready to tolerate her when she was safely on her own side of the fence, she was much less ready now that her own territory had been invaded, and as Holly leaned towards her, she shied. Giving a high-pitched whinny of dislike, she tossed her head, then rose swiftly on to her hind legs, despite her bulk, her front legs pawing the air.

Being off balance with reaching forward, the mare's sudden panic made her start violently and before she realized what was happening, she felt herself falling, tumbling from the narrow board fence without a hope of saving herself. She let out a cry as she hit the ground, close to the mare's feet, and in a further panic of fear the nervous animal rose again into the air, her shrill cries shattering the still air, determined to deal with the intruder in the only way she knew how.

Holly, stunned by her fall, but still conscious of her danger, closed her eyes and rolled hastily sideways, trying to avoid being beaten to a pulp by those flailing hooves when they came down again.

'Fuera! Bastante, fuera!'

That voice raised in curt command was dismayingly familiar, and for a moment Holly almost wished the mare would bring her hooves down and kick her senseless, for surely that would be the only way she would escape Marcos Delgaro's inevitable anger. She winced when she recognized the sound of the sharp slap of his crop on the mare's shiny hide, and a protesting whinny, but there was no crushing weight on her own head, and she ventured to open her eyes at last.

She had only time to catch a glimpse of the mare moving away, tossing her head indignantly, before she felt herself lifted into a pair of strong arms and her face rolled against the softness of a silk shirt. He carried her as if she weighed no more than a child and she could feel the warmth of his body against her face through the thin shirt as he went through the gate of the paddock with her, and the tenseness of the muscular arms that carried her so easily.

She did not dare to move for fear his reaction would be to drop her immediately when he realized she was not hurt, and also because there was a wildly sensuous pleasure in his proximity that she did not attempt to seek an excuse for.
Once out of the paddock he laid her down on the grass, gently and carefully, and pressed one hand to the throbbing pulse in her neck. She allowed the strong fingers to reassure him that she was still alive, then she opened her eyes slowly and looked up at him. The dark face, with its stern, hawklike features, had an unexpected look of anxiety about it, and for a moment he simply knelt there beside her, without moving or saying a word.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

She wished she could think of something less trite to say, but the nearness of him, and the warm strength of his arms still impressed on her body, made her silent and tongue-tied. He was angry, she could see that, but that look of anxiety she had seen gave her hope that he would not deal too harshly with her.

'You are not hurt?'

His voice was as quiet and calm as ever, but a small pulse throbbed near one corner of his mouth and she knew his quietness was deceptive. The hand that still held the crop, too, was gripped tightly so that the knuckles showed white-boned on the strong brown fingers.

'No, I'm not hurt,' she said, and attempted to sit up. The movement brought her disturbingly close to him, and she could feel the tenseness of the muscles beneath the brown skin when her arm brushed against his, as if he held himself in check only with difficulty.

He looked at her for a moment longer, then got to his feet, reaching down with both hands to help her to stand, holding her hands for a moment longer than was necessary after she stood in front of him. Her eyes were downcast and she was trying to do something about the wildly throbbing pulse at her temple.

'Bueno!'

'I - I hope the mare's all right,' she said, and raised her eyes for a moment, reproachfully. 'You didn't have to hit her.'

The black eyes glittered down at her and she felt a flick of panic when she saw the fierce anger that resented her criticism. 'Would you rather I had allowed her to smash your skull?' he asked coldly.

There was simply no answer to that, and she merely shook her head. After a moment he turned swiftly and walked across to the paddock fence, leaning on it for a second with his hands held close together in front of him. They looked strong and hard, and somehow conveyed his anger and the tension that held him. That hawklike profile was presented to her in all its forbidding sternness and it made her feel at once both apprehensive and strangely elated.

'What were you doing in there with the yeguas?' he asked, not looking at her, but speaking over his shoulder, and Holly shrugged resignedly.

'I - I was trying to make friends with them,' she explained, knowing he would find the reason idiotic. A Spaniard would just not think like that and he would have little patience with her English way of thinking.

Sure enough he turned and looked at her, his black eyes glittering derisively, leaned back against the fence, one hand tapping the crop impatiently against a leg. 'So!' he said softly. 'You would risk your neck to make friends with an animal, but you will not even allow me to use your first name.' His wide mouth curled scornfully and he made a short, harsh sound that was meant to be a laugh, she supposed. 'Your English logic!'

'I didn't say—' Holly began, but he cut her short, one large hand indicating the scarf that covered her head instead of the hat he had insisted on buying for her.

'You would rather wear a banda on your head like a peasant woman than the hat you have, because I gave it to you!' she had, without realizing it, moved over to stand beside him at the fence, and without warning he suddenly reached out with one hand for the silk square that covered her head, loosening it with strong firm fingers, and it cracked like a whip in the air when he pulled it roughly from her hair and dropped it on the ground behind him.

'It is time you learnt that people come first, poco de hielo!' he said softly, his eyes glittering darkly.
The sudden fierce hardness of his mouth took her by surprise, forcing her lips apart and, after the first swift sense of alarm, robbing her of all feeling except a wild exhilaration. His hands were on the wooden fence either side of her and his body pressed her hard against the boards until she could have cried out.

Her hands, that had started held tightly together in front of her, were crushed against his chest and she opened them slowly, feeling the warmth and the throbbing vibrancy of his heartbeat under her fingertips. The board fence at her back was pressed cruelly hard against her, but she could not move and neither did she have the slightest inclination to do so.

She was breathless and felt incredibly weak when he released her at last, but it was something of a shock when he let fall his arms so suddenly and stepped back, looking down at her with a glowing darkness in his eyes that stirred her senses into chaos again.

She leaned weakly against the fence, her hands going behind her to act as a support, her eyes looking at him wide and a little vague, as she sought for a reason for his sudden change. 'You will see now, senorita,' he said after a moment, 'why I warned you of my countrymen.' A hint of wry amusement touched the corners of his wide mouth. 'Perhaps I should have included myself in their number after all.'

'Please don't—' Holly began, but he was already turning away.

'I apologize for taking you by surprise, senorita, but

I am sure you will forgive me.'

'Marcos!' She waited until he turned back to her, his black eyes curious, perhaps speculative, it was difficult to guess what was going on in his mind and she was not at all sure what she wanted to say to him. 'I'm - I'm sorry - if you think I'm unfriendly towards you.'

For a moment he said nothing, then the white teeth gleamed briefly in his brown face, and the soft sound of a laugh slid icily along Holly's spine. 'I think you are well named, little Holly,' he said softly. 'You are prickly, but perhaps your prickles can be smoothed, si?' He made a gesture with one large hand and conveyed a meaning that there was no mistaking, bringing a flush of hot colour to her cheeks as he turned away again.

She said nothing, but watched him walk across to where his horse waited for him patiently in the shade of the fig trees, waving a casual hand at her as he rode off, tall and arrogant, and dismayingly disturbing.

It was just as well, she thought, that Helena Mendez had not been around to witness that scene just now. But then it occurred to her that he would probably never have behaved as he did, if he had thought there was the slightest chance of his future wife seeing him - and somehow the realization left a bitter taste in her mouth.
CHAPTER THREE

It was now nearly three weeks since she had arrived in Spain, and Holly's easy adaptation to a very different way of life had surprised her. She loved the grandeur of her surroundings and the rather formal atmosphere at mealtimes, and she was growing quite fond of her uncle by marriage, Don Jose.

On the subject of his son she was still a little wary of committing herself, but he had taken her driving several times, to see the surrounding countryside, apparently quite willingly. He had even tried to persuade her to ride one of the quieter horses, but that idea she had turned down adamantly, fearing she would make a fool of herself on those spirited creatures.

Holly had said nothing to her aunt about that somewhat disturbing incident by the paddock, and she presumed Marcos Delgaro would be discreet enough not to mention it. It was a relief to have him behaving with quite formal politeness again, although they did use each other's christian names now. Not to do so, she felt, would probably have incurred further disapproval and perhaps, even more disquieting, prompted another incident like that disturbing kiss.

Tonight he was driving her down to San Adolfo so that she could take some photographs of the castle from the valley below, where it was just visible up there on the hillside, like a fairytale castle among its surrounding trees. She had half expected him to refuse to take her on such an obviously tourist type trip, but to her surprise he had complied, if somewhat offhandedly.

It was a gloriously golden evening and the sun gave a bright glitter to the little streams and channels of water, and a deep, rich tapestry look to the chequered crops of grapes and olives. The little white adobe cottages looked more mellow than in the harsher light of full day, and incredibly picturesque, although her guide had disillusioned her some time ago by describing the less than picturesque standard of living of their occupants. She supposed it was rather unrealistic of her, but she hated to have her idyllic picture spoiled and she still insisted on seeing them as pretty.

It was harder still to believe that the bigger whitewashed farmhouses, or cortijas, with their big patios enclosed by the houses themselves often as not housed the farmworkers and their livestock too, in a close proximity of noise and very basic hygiene. They looked good from the outside and Holly determinedly photographed them, despite Marcos's ill-concealed scorn for her shortsightedness.

They were approaching the village itself now, and she suddenly caught the faint sound of something in the distance that made her raise her head and listen intently. It was only faint at the moment, but Holly knew it for what it was as soon as the first high, wailing notes reached her, and she recognized the exciting, irresistible sound of a flamenco singer.

She turned to Marcos, her eyes appealing, wondering if he would stop for her to see and hear them, or if he would draw the line at sitting in the car while she went off on her own. He would almost certainly not wish to come with her. She had always wanted to see real flamenco dancing in its right setting, and that did not mean a night club in Seville or Madrid. Now she had the chance, and it would be wicked to waste such an opportunity.

'Flamenco dancers?' she asked hopefully, as Marcos drove the big car carefully down the narrow hill through the village, and he shrugged his broad shoulders carelessly.

'Gitanos,' he said briefly, and left no doubt of his opinion.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Gypsies,' he translated. 'Very dusty, very ragged and not what you expect at all, nina.' Lately he had taken to using the Spanish version of her aunt's childish name for her, and she had not so far had the nerve to object to it. Also it did sound rather pretty.

'I'd like to see them, just the same,' she told him, and glanced at the stern, unrelenting profile hopefully.
He took the car round another bend in the narrow street, his brown hands strong and competent and making light work of the twisty road they were travelling. 'You will be disappointed if you expect frilled dresses and mantillas, Holly,' he told her. 'These are gypsy dancers, they only visit the villages.'

'I know,' she said. 'But they're the real thing, aren't they?'

The meaningful look he gave her over his shoulder was meant to remind her of those outwardly picturesque little cottages. 'I thought you preferred not to see the real thing,' he said. 'You will be sadly disillusioned if you expect very much here.'

'I promise I won't complain.' Almost without realizing it, she leaned a little nearer to him, her bare arm pressed against his persuasively, her pulses skipping not only at the contact with him, but in response to that insistent and ever louder voice singing its plaintive rhythm. 'Please can I see them, Marcos?'

She had never spoken to him like that before and she was surprised at her own lack of inhibition in trying to persuade him. He said nothing for a moment, but she felt the muscles in his arm more taut suddenly, her own pulses leaping in response.

'Madre de Dios!' he breathed piously at last. 'You will have your way, will you not, nina?'

'I only-'

'So!' He braked the car to a halt as they turned another bend and were almost upon a small crowd gathered on the roadside, leaning against the white adobe walls of cottages and standing in the gutter.

Without waiting to see if he approved or not Holly slipped out of the car and hurried to join the gathering. This was no sophisticated audience, but the village people of San Adolfo; brown-faced country people and half naked little brown children with huge eyes and bare dusty feet, and she stood out like a pale ghost among the edge of the gathering.

They had seen it all before, of course, but the flamenco was part of their tradition, and the gypsies the traditional dancers of flamenco. The man singing and accompanying himself on the guitar looked middle-aged, although it was difficult to tell with these people, and the dancer could as easily have been his wife or his daughter.

A swarthy-skinned, rather dumpy figure made more so by several bulky cotton skirts in assorted colours, and a short-sleeved blouse worn under a kind of tunic top. A few frills on the sleeves of the blouse were the only concession to what most people thought of as flamenco costume, and instead of the mantilla and comb her coarse black hair was partly covered by a spotted scarf tied in the traditional gypsy fashion at the back of her head.

Her shoes were thick and heavy with low heels, but her steps were as intricate and skilled as any well-drilled performer in one of the city night clubs and Holly was fascinated. The castanets in her thick-fingered hands clicked and snapped to the rhythm of her dance, and those heavily shod feet beat out the same rhythm on the dusty road, thin gold bracelets clinking together on her thick, tanned wrists.

Holly was intrigued and enchanted by it. Dusty and untidy or not, the woman had skill, and the repetitive, almost hypnotic wail of the man's singing cast a kind of spell that she was willing enough to fall under.

One or two of the people watching looked at her curiously at first, but then they parted their ranks as if by mutual consent, and made way for her to come through, dark eyes smiling at her obvious interest, happy enough to let her join in their traditional entertainment.

She had no idea where Marcos was, nor, for the moment, did she care as she watched the dancer, beating out the rhythm, sending up little clouds of dust with each step, and it was only minutes before she too took up the rhythmic foot-tapping of the watchers.

The performance finished all too soon for Holly, although she realized that she had better not be too long or Marcos would be not only impatient but angry with her for keeping him waiting. He was probably annoyed with her for going off as she had anyway, but she had at least seen what she wanted to see.
Turning around in the cluster of people about her, she found them already making way for him through their ranks, as they had for her, but with less open friendliness and more wariness when they recognized him for what he was.

His height made him stand above them all and his proud autocratic features seemed to look more arrogant than ever as he came through to her. One hand took her arm firmly, as if to discourage any attempt on her part to remain, and the other threw a handful of coins to the dancer.

No one said a word, but the woman carefully counted the pesetas in her hand and the man with the guitar was already strumming more notes, trying out his hoarse flutey voice on another plaintive wail, when they made their way back to the car. It all seemed hardly credible to Holly. The dancer on the dusty road, the dusky, dark-eyed crowd gathered in the village street had a strange mediaeval feel about it.

It was when she thought of that tall, arrogant figure breaking through the crowd to fetch her, throwing a handful of coins to the woman in that grand gesture, that the whole thing struck her as funny suddenly, and, without any reasonable explanation for her reaction, she found herself laughing aloud as she walked back to the car with him.

Marcos looked down at her curiously and from the way his fingers tightened on her arm suddenly, she thought he at least suspected the cause of her laughter. 'What is it that you find so amusing?' he asked, and Holly shook her head hastily as he saw her into the car and closed the door on her.

'It's — it's nothing really,' she said, unwilling to try and explain, for obviously he would not share her feelings about that scarcely believable scene back there.

He did not immediately start the car after he was seated beside her, but turned and looked at her steadily, one arm laid along the back of the seat behind her. There was something infinitely disturbing about the way his black eyes were watching her, and a hint of tension in the way he held himself, almost like a warning, she thought irrationally.

'Suddenly you laugh,' he said. 'For no reason apparently; am I to believe that you have suddenly gone mad with the sun?'

'No, of course not!' She looked at him through the thickness of her lashes, then shook her head. 'It's - it's just something - I'd rather not tell you,' she insisted, knowing she had little hope of being allowed to get away with that explanation.

'Why not?'

The question was blunt and she took a deep breath before she looked up at him warily. 'Because I - I don't want to quarrel with you, Marcos, and - and I know you'll take it the wrong way if I tell you."

'So!' He nodded, as if his suspicion had been confirmed. 'Now I am sure that you were laughing at me!' The black eyes watched her narrowly. 'Now I will know why!'

For a moment Holly said nothing, then she looked down at her hands. 'It was when you - when you threw the money to the dancer,' she told him, watching through her lashes for the first signs of anger. 'It reminded me of—'

'Si?' he prompted relentlessly, and she took a deep breath and stuck out her chin.

'It was a bit like a - a rather corny film,' she told him defiantly. 'The lord of the manor, generously distributing alms to the lesser hoi-polloi.'

'I see!' He turned and put his hands on the wheel and she could see how the long fingers were taut and somehow cruel-looking as they curled round the leather cover.

She had been rude, she knew, unforgivably rude in the circumstances, and she could not expect him to accept it lightly. 'I didn't mean to be rude,' she said, putting a hand on his arm and feeling the hard, unyielding strength of the muscles under her fingers. 'I'm sorry I laughed, but—'

'But you found me so amusing that you could not control yourself!'
'No!' she denied vehemently.

'I'm sorry if my behaviour embarrassed you,' he said, and his voice was cold and hard so that she felt her heart sink at the sound of it. 'You are not yet used to our customs, perhaps. It is usual to pay these people when they entertain, and they had, I assumed, entertained you, judging by your response.'

'Yes, yes, of course they had!'

She wished now that she had controlled that instinctive laughter, for Marcos had seen his gesture in paying the woman as perfectly natural, as had the rest of the people there, and she disliked the idea of his being so angry with her for her lack of understanding.

'But you do not think I should have paid them?' he demanded, turning again to look at her, and she shook her head, wishing he would start up the car and take them away from there, for there was more than one pair of curious dark eyes looking in their direction.

'Oh, Marcos, of course I don't mean that!' She looked down at her hands. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have laughed.'

'No, pequena,' he said softly. 'You should not have laughed!'

Holly looked up, hastily, suspiciously, but he was already starting up the engine and in a matter of seconds they were off down the hill again, and gathering speed at an alarming rate. By the time they reached the edge of the village they were going so fast that dust, chickens and children scattered before them in a flurry of confusion.

'Marcos!'

She was frightened and she hoped he would realize it enough to slow down, but he said nothing, simply drove on, his hands dark and taut on the wheel, the muscular brown arms coping with the sudden turns in the twisting road expertly as always, his dark, hawklike profile set and stern. He did not relax their speed until they turned off the road suddenly and on to a rough cart track, then he only slowed down a little, bouncing the big car over the ruts in a way that frightened her into putting her hands to her mouth and holding her breath.

He braked hard suddenly and she was thrown forward, almost banging her head on the windscreen, and when she recovered her breath sufficiently she turned and looked at him indignantly. 'You don't have to try and kill me just because you don't like being laughed at,' she told him, and put a hand to her head, brushing back the dark hair from her forehead with a trembling hand.

'You deserve to have your neck broken when you are so childishly and deliberately rude,' he informed her brusquely. He sat there looking at her, his eyes glittering blackly, a feeling of tension about him that communicated itself to her. Her hands were trembling, in fact she was shaking all over, and she could feel the shuddering unevenness of her breathing and the rapid flutter of the pulse in her throat. She did not move but sat there with wide, uncertain eyes.

'I didn't mean it,' she said. 'I told you I was sorry.'

'I am very glad to hear it,' he said shortly. 'I gave up an evening with Helena to bring you here so that you could take your fotografier. I will not be treated like one of your lovesick English boy-friends, mi pequena You may laugh at them as often as you wish, with me you will behave, or you will be sorry!'

He came round and opened the door for her, and Holly looked up at him indignantly. He had no right to scold her like a child, nor to be so high and mighty about her English boy-friends. 'You have no right to—' she began.

'If you wish to take pictures,' he interrupted shortly, 'you will do well to take them now while the sun is still high enough.'

But Holly was not listening to him. Something he had said a moment earlier had only now struck her. 'Did - did you say you could have seen Senorita Mendez?' she asked, and he nodded. 'I did.'
She looked puzzled for a moment, still sitting in the car while he stood with one hand on the open door. 'I see,' she said at last. 'I'm sorry, I didn't realize she was back. You should have said so, then you needn't have bothered with me.'

She thought there was a hint of a smile about his mouth, but could not be sure. 'I do not break my word,' he informed her quietly. 'You wished to come and take photographs here, and I had arranged to bring you. Helena understands.'

Somehow the idea of Helena Mendez being understanding and tolerant about allowing her fiance to escort what was, as far as he was concerned, an unwelcome guest, struck Holly as pretty hard to swallow. She felt her face flush warmly when she imagined the scene between them. Marcos shrugging his broad, eloquent shoulders and asking for understanding because he had already promised to take his stepmother's niece somewhere - and of course he would much rather be with Helena. No wonder he had been so annoyed because she had laughed at him back there, it had been the last straw.

'You shouldn't have bothered,' she told him, suddenly feeling cross and unhappy, and staying firmly in her seat. 'Take me back now and you'll still have plenty of time to go and see Senorita Mendez!'

For a moment he neither moved nor spoke, but she could feel the glittering, black-eyed gaze fixed on her, and suddenly he gripped her arm with his strong fingers and almost lifted her bodily out of the car. 'You will not play games with me, muchacha,' he said brusquely. 'You wish to take pictures and I have brought you here to do so, now - take your pictures!'

'Don't do that!' Holly objected, pulling at the arm he gripped so tightly. 'You hurt me when you grab like that!'

He gave a short, harsh laugh and let go of her arm. 'For very little, mi espinosa' he told her shortly, 'I would put you across my knee!'

She glared at him, reproachfully angry, for a moment, then leaned into the car and took out her camera. "Very gallant!' she jeered as she moved away to get a better view.

He did not accompany her, but stayed by the car, lighting up one of the long, dark Spanish cheroots he smoked, watching her with a gaze that set her pulses racing, without her quite knowing why. Her camera was a simple one and she focused it on the castle, half hidden by its picturesque setting, hoping she was expert enough to convey at least some of the slightly unreal beauty of it.

But whether it was his steady scrutiny, or whether it was the certain knowledge that he would much rather be with Helena Mendez, something made her strangely uneasy and she found she lacked much of her original enthusiasm for the task. At last, after taking only two pictures, she gave up and walked slowly back to the car.

'That is all?'

He regarded her with raised brows, and she suspected he knew exactly why she was giving up so soon. She shrugged her shoulders. 'I've got all I

need, thank you.'

'You have plenty of time to take more, if you wish to.'

Holly shook her head, determined not to stay any longer. 'No, it's all right, thank you.'

For a moment white teeth showed against the dark brown of his face and she was reminded of the devastating effect of his smile at their first meeting, she had thought him incapable of smiling then. The soft, deep sound of his laugh quickened her heartbeat alarmingly, and she began to wish more than ever that she had not asked him to bring her.

'I think you are being - how is it? Sacrificing, eh, pequena?'

'It's self-sacrificing,' Holly told him shortly, 'and I'm not!'
'No?' He did not open the car door for her, but leaned against the side of the car, his eyes narrowed against the smoke from the cheroot, regarding her steadily. 'I think you are lying, mi pichon!' He spoke softly, almost seductively, and she knew that in Spanish pichon meant pigeon, and was also used frequently as an endearment between lovers. He had absolutely no right to stand there and speak to her like that, she thought wildly, when he knew that Helena Mendez was waiting for him to join her. Her knees felt weak and she dared not look at him directly. Whether or not he was supposed to be marrying Helena Mendez, he could still have the most disturbing effect on her, and she fervently wished she could do something about it. She stood by the car, her camera clutched in both hands to try and steady them, her eyes lowered so that long lashes hid what was in her eyes. Did he not realize what he was doing to her - or did he not care? 'Please take me back,' she said huskily. 'Holly!' There it was again! That soft, seductive note in his voice that made her tremble. One large hand reached out and rested against her cheek and she longed to lean her face against it, but instead she closed her eyes and resisted. 'Please, Marcos! Take me back!' Instead of opening the car door for her, however, he flung the smouldering cheroot away from him, took her camera out of her unresisting hands and dropped it into the car. Then he put his hands on the door, either side of her, bringing his body close against hers, so that she was tinglingly aware of the warmth and the lithe energy that emanated from him as his face came closer. 'No!' Her voice was sharp with urgency and she turned her head swiftly before he could touch her mouth. 'Save your kisses for Helena Mendez, she has a right to them!' 'You little bitch!' His eyes glittered like coals and he brought his hands up swiftly to grip her arms in a bruising hold, pulling her against the hard leanness of his body. Holly struggled hopelessly, fighting with such a jumble of emotions that she was unsure whether she was terrified, or crazily longing for him to kiss her, whether she wanted it or not, and her heart was beating so hard that it almost deafened her. Hawklike savagery of his dark features was so close that she could see the fine lines at the corners of his eyes and the pulse that beat with a disturbing throb at the corner of his wide mouth. There was something in the way he held her, in the tanned strength of his hands and in the way he gazed so intently at her mouth, that weakened her resolve and roused her to such a sense of need that she knew she could not resist. 'Please, Marcos!' She just managed to whisper her plea before his mouth silenced her, pressing hard on to hers, as fierce and demanding as the arms that swept her against him and offered no hope of escape. Never in her life before had she been kissed like that, and her whole being responded to him without stopping to think of possible consequences, and certainly not of Helena Mendez who was going to marry him. When he freed her mouth at last, his strong fingers gently moved aside the thick, dark hair on her neck and he pressed his lips to the warm softness of her skin in a slow, lingering kiss that made her shiver with a sensuous pleasure, almost frightening in its intensity. Her fingers, trembling and uncertain, unfastened the buttons of the white shirt still further until she could slide her hand over the roughness of dark hair on his chest. 'Mi bella pequena.' he whispered softly, his breath whispering warmly against her car. 'Such a beautiful nina!' 'I'm not a baby!' she reproached him, but gently, and laid her cheek against the dark head that bent to kiss her shoulder. His fingers slid the soft material of her dress to one side with a touch so infinitely gentle and evocative that she again felt that involuntary shiver trickle along her spine.
He raised his head and looked down at her with such a look in his black eyes that she half closed her eyes and reached up to put her hands either side of his face, her fingers caressing the dark, lean cheeks, her thumbs pressed gently over his mouth. 'To me you are a baby,' he said softly, kissing the soft cushion of flesh against his lips. 'A beautiful baby with a fine temper, eh, mi pichdni?'

'I have it's your fault,' Holly said, her mouth pouting softly in reproach. 'You shouldn't talk as if you'd rather be with Helena!' She tiptoed and kissed him lingeringly on his mouth, then shook her head, a small frown between her brows. 'What will you say to her, Marcos?'

He looked down at her steadily for a moment, and something in the black eyes made her put her hands to his chest and lean away from him, a sudden coldness in her heart. 'I shall say nothing to Helena, nina, and neither will you. It would be most unwise.'

'But - Marcos!'

She knew, of course. She had known at the back of her mind, all the time he was kissing her like that, that he would never want Helena Mendez to know about it. Whatever happened, he would marry Helena because it had all been arranged years before, and Helena was a suitable bride for Don Jose's only son - the last of the autocratic Delgaros. She was a fool to have supposed it could ever be any different.

'You will not do anything foolish, mi pequena?' He spoke softly, but there was more than a hint of warning in the words, and his black eyes hinted at that ruthless look again.

'Like telling Senorita Mendez about this - this little episode?' She sounded bitter, and she knew it, but she had never before felt so utterly let down in her life. Of course it was ridiculous to suppose that anyone could fall in love in the few weeks that she and Marcos Delgaro had known one another, but she had thought herself very close to it, and even now she could feel her heart beat responding to the touch of those strong brown hands that still encircled her arms, and the dark, almost sensuous look of his wide mouth. She laughed shortly, easing herself out of his grasp, her eyes carefully concealed by long, dark lashes. 'Oh, don't worry, senor,' she told him. 'I won't give you away!'

'Holly!'

Take me home,' Holly said in a shaking voice. 'Or at least take me back to your castle, Don Marcos, but don't ever - don't ever touch me again!'

He swore softly in Spanish, and Holly, despite her own anger and misery, shrank before the glitter in those fierce black eyes, then he opened the car door and bobbed his head in a mock bow as he saw her into the car. 'I cannot promise that, senorita,' he told her harshly as he slammed the door on her. 'You are very beautiful, and very provocative, and since I am a man as sensitive to encouragement as any other, I cannot guarantee that you will be safe from my attentions.'

'You're—' Holly's eyes widened in disbelief and she stared at him for a moment as he stood there with one hand on the door, the knuckles tight and white-boned as if he contained temper, or some other equally harrowing emotion, only with difficulty. 'You can't blame me for what happened,' she said. 'How could you say it was my fault?'

He said nothing for a moment, then he shook his head. 'It was no one's - fault, Holly,' he said quietly. 'It was just one of those things that happen, and one is not meant to take them so-so seriously.'

'I see.'

She sat with her hands in her lap, holding the small camera tightly, barely controlling the wild and quite unreasonable instinct that wanted her to fling the camera at him. One large hand reached out and touched her cheek lightly, and she shied away as if he had struck her.

'You are more a baby than I thought,' he said softly. 'I shall have to treat you more kindly, nina.'

He walked round and got into the driving seat and started up the engine in one swift lithe movement, while Holly coped with anger, tears and a dozen other emotions that she did not attempt to interpret. There was one certain way
of avoiding any further complications of this kind, and that was to leave the castle and go elsewhere for the remainder of her holiday. Only, she told herself, she hated to disappoint Aunt Nan.
CHAPTER FOUR

Helena Mendez, now that she was back from Paris, made no secret of the fact that she intended Marcos to have as little time as possible free for Holly, and she had been to the castle several times during the week since her return. Holly avoided her whenever she could, partly because she felt a certain sense of guilt when she remembered how she had responded to Marcos's advances and partly because she frankly admitted to disliking the other girl. A dislike that she felt was reciprocated in full.

Helena certainly took little pains to hide how she felt about Holly being there still, and more than once Holly had seen the way her aunt frowned when the Spanish girl made some scarcely veiled jibe. Quite often she made remarks about Holly's less than aristocratic background, and on such occasions Don Jose was vocal in his objections, for remarks of that kind could apply equally well to his wife, and that he would not tolerate.

Marcos had not so far made any verbal objection, but had left it to his father to defend his guest. Once or twice, however, he had managed to catch Holly's eye and she could have sworn that there was a hint of apology in the black-eyed gaze, although she seldom held it long enough to be sure.

It was a week since Helena's return and after a particularly trying evening in her company, Holly was thankful to see the Spanish girl depart quite early, giving her ample time to go for a short walk before she went to bed. It would help to blow the cobwebs away and also help her to throw off the annoying sense of inferiority that Helena always gave her.

She smiled at her aunt when she announced her intention of going for a walk, letting her know the reason. 'I'm sorry about Helena, baby,' Aunt Nan said softly as they stood together in the vast grandeur of the great hall. She put a hand on her arm consolingly and shook her head. 'I wish there was something I could do about her, but - you see how it is, and I'm sure she doesn't really mean half of it. She—' She shrugged uneasily. 'I suppose she wouldn't have to resort to such - such cattiness if she was more sure of Marcos.'

'More sure of him?' Holly looked puzzled. 'I wouldn't have thought she had any fears in that direction, Aunt Nan.'

'I'm afraid she does,' her aunt said. 'I know the marriage is all arranged and has been for years, but it's been a very long wait and Helena's a - a very passionate woman, like most Spaniards, and I'm not sure she finds Marcos quite as - well, as loving as he might be.'

'I see.' It surprised her, when she remembered her own experience with Marcos; she would have expected him to be a very satisfactory lover, especially with a girl he was going to marry. 'Well, she need not be afraid of me getting in her way, Aunt Nan. Marcos is very single-minded when it comes to the subject of marrying Helena Mendez, I can assure you - and I can't believe she finds him all that disappointing as a lover, either!'

'Holly!' Her aunt put out a hand, touching her face lightly, her blue eyes searching and a little anxious. 'I don't want to pry, darling, but if you—'

'Oh yes, I did, Aunt Nan!' Holly said quickly and with a short laugh that sounded much too harsh. 'I am speaking from experience. Believe me, Marcos Delgaro's no novice when it comes to making love, only you just don't have to take him seriously. Unless you happen to be going to marry him, of course, which Helena is, as he left me in no doubt!'

'Oh, Holly dear!' The gentle arms enfolded her as they had done when she was a little girl, and, for a moment only, Holly allowed herself the comfort of burying her face against that ample shoulder and closing her eyes, then she raised her head, smiling determinedly, her deep blue eyes bright and shining.

'Don't worry, dear Aunt Nan, I won't be swept off my feet by your dashing stepson! I've got more sense than that, although he is rather potent, as I'm sure you'll have guessed!'

Aunt Nan looked at her for a long moment in silence, her brow wrinkled worriedly, then she shook her head, as if she was still very uncertain. 'I hope you won't allow yourself to be swept off your feet, baby,' she said gently. 'I
know Marcos is very much a man, but I thought - I hoped, that in your case he would— She shrugged her plump shoulders expressively, in a way that Holly was beginning to look upon as typically Spanish, so that she could not restrain a smile as she kissed her aunt lightly on her forehead.

'Aunt Nan, you're becoming a real dyed-in-the-wool Spaniard,' she teased her. 'That shrug is pure Latin - that's what comes of spending ten years in Spain!'

'I suppose so,' her aunt allowed, still looking uncertain. She took Holly by her arms and smiled at her anxiously. 'You will tell me if - if anything happens to make you unhappy, won't you, baby?'

'Yes, of course I will, Aunt Nan!' She hugged her affectionately and smiled. 'Now I'm going for a walk to blow the cobwebs away before I go to bed, it's a lovely night, with a huge Spanish moon and everything.'

'Well, don't go too far, darling,' her aunt said, then shook her head in self-admonishment. 'I must stop thinking of you as still a little girl,' she apologized. 'Enjoy your walk, Holly dear.'

It was a beautiful night, with a full moon and so many stars that Holly felt sure there must be more here than she could see in English skies. It was a perfect night for what the books called romance, the air scented with the orange blossom and the cooler breeze drifting down from the hills.

It was almost without thinking that she found herself walking down towards the stables and the paddock, for she was thinking about nothing in particular and only sought that pleasant state of peaceful tiredness that comes on a quiet evening. It was only when she raised her head suddenly, and listened to the sound of a guitar somewhere not too far away, that she realized how near she was to the stables.

A voice joined the plucking strings of the instrument and Holly smiled to herself, thinking it could only be Carlos, the stableboy. Stableboy was what she termed his position on the estate, but in fact he was a young man, very near her own age, and swarthily good-looking. She had seen him several times when she had been about near the horses with Marcos, and his dark eyes had left no doubt of his appreciation of her, despite the presence of his employer.

It might be as well, she thought, in the circumstances, not to go any further, but she was in no mind yet to abandon her walk. Furthermore, coming back to earth from her self-induced reverie had reminded her again of Helena Mendez's scathing remarks, and the scarcely veiled implications that she belonged to the lower orders. In which case she would surely not be out of place talking to the stableboy.

With only a brief hesitation, and one brief guess at what Marcos Delgaro would have to say about her consorting with his employees, she went on down to where the white stable buildings looked squat and ghostly clear in the brilliant moonlight.

There was a soft yellow light in the window of one of the smallest buildings, and an open door. Not really a cottage but a one-roomed building with the bare necessities for life, where Carlos lived alone. Unless, of course, he had some bright-eyed senorita in there with him, sharing his softly-lit room and his music.

But he was alone and sitting outside, she could see when she got nearer, his back leaned against the cottage wall, his knees raised in front of him, cradling the guitar, while he plucked the strings with a skill that told of long practice. He leaned back his head and sang softly in a voice that was inexpert but full and quite sweet to listen to, apparently oblivious of anyone being near until he came to the end of his song. Then he raised his head and looked across at Holly, who had hoped to remain unseen in the shadow of the trees.

'Buenas noches, senorita,' he called out softly, and Holly stepped, hesitantly, out of the shadows.

In her short pale yellow dress, she looked small and pale and not quite real as she looked at him uncertainly. Carlos got to his feet, slowly, his dark eyes glittering in the bright moonlight and reminding Holly that she had probably been very rash to have come here at all.

'Good evening, Carlos, please don't let me interrupt your singing.'

She tried to sound cool and off-hand, but she stood only a foot or two away from him and her heart was suddenly
and warmingly tapping at her ribs as she sensed that dark gaze raking over her from head to toe. Without the
discouraging presence of his employer Carlos seemed to behave with less reticence, had less need to hide his
obvious admiration.

As she faced him there in the quiet and darkness, with no one else within calling distance, she remembered Marcos's
words to her, and wondered if he could possibly be right about her. She had come down here on her own, and she
had known that Carlos lived down here alone in the little cottage by the stables. Beautiful and provocative, Marcos
had called her, and perhaps Carlos would think she was being provocative, coming down here to the stables alone at
this time of night.

'You find my canción pleasing, senorita?' He spoke in a low voice and it was obvious what was going through his
mind.

'Your song was very nice,' she said, to let him know she understood at least a word or two of Spanish. 'You have a
very good voice, Carlos.'

'Muchas gracias, senorita.' There might have been a hint of mockery in his answer, but she was not going to panic
for nothing and he had made no move towards her so far.

'Do you often sing down here where no one can hear you?' she asked, and he laughed softly, his dark eyes glinting at
her in the moonlight.

'Ah, but I am heard, senorita,' he said softly. 'You heard me, did you not?' She did not answer and he laughed again,
plucking the guitar strings gently, his white teeth gleaming in the darkness of his face. 'Always there is a senorita to
hear a love song, si?'

'Perhaps.' She must go, she realized that, before her being there precipitated a scene she was not at all sure she could
cope with. She glanced up at the bright moon, intending to make some trite remark about it being a lovely night, and
then turn and go back to the castle, but as she took her eyes off him and half turned to look up at the sky, he moved
closer and put down the guitar, leaning it against the white wall of the cottage.

'Senorita!'

The moist warmth of his hands curled about her arms from behind, and she was pulled roughly against the rather
plump softness of his body while his voice, garlic-laden and hoarse with passion, breathed in her ear. Words she
could not understand but whose meaning was made only too clear by the accompanying gestures.

'Let me go!'

She pulled herself free only with difficulty and spun round to face him, seeing his eyes glittering like coals in the
moonlight, his thick throat, revealed by an open-necked shirt, jerking violently as he swallowed. For a moment they
faced each other, and then he shook his head and she saw anger replace the desire that had been there only a moment
before.

His large, work-rough hands reached out for her again and she was pulled hard against him until his face was only
inches from hers, and his lips drawn back from those excellent teeth in a travesty of a smile. 'So! You are
atormentar, senorita! You do not find Carlos to your liking now that you have come to me, huh?'

'I did not come to you!' Holly denied, struggling against his hold and against a rising nausea brought on by the
pungency of garlic at close quarters. 'Let me go, Carlos! Let me go or I'll scream!'

His smile told her that he was perfectly well aware no one would hear her, no matter how loud she screamed, and he
brought his face even closer. Her scream, when it came, was promoted by sheer fright, and it was loud and piercing
as she clawed at his face while turning her own away, twisting and pushing at him as she fought to escape.

Then, without warning, she was free and staring at him with wide, unbelieving eyes as he staggered back against
the wall of the cottage, the guitar falling with a splintering crash under his weight as he fell.
'Go back to the house!' The order was directed at Holly, and Marcos's curt voice had a coldness that chilled her as he stood over the fallen Carlos like an avenging angel. He looked tall and much darker, somehow menacing, and when she did not immediately obey he turned back to her, his black eyes glittering in the silver light like chips of jet. 'Siga adelante,' he ordered. 'Immediatamente!' 

Her heart was racing so hard that she felt it would burst at any moment, but she could not run off and let him vent his anger on Carlos. Not when she had been at least in part to blame for the situation, so she stood her ground a small, light figure with the starry sky behind her and her hands clasped together appealingly. 

'What - what are you going to do?' she whispered, and he looked at her for a moment as if he doubted he had heard her correctly. 

'What do you want me to do, senorita?' he asked in a cold, hard voice, and Holly shook her head, her gaze going to Carlos. He stood wiping one hand across the trickle of dark blood from the corner of his mouth, his eyes half wary, half defiant and waiting to see what she would say. 

'You - you can't take it out on Carlos,' she said, in a voice that sounded strangely thin and trembly. 'It - it wasn't altogether his fault.' 

For a moment Marcos said nothing, then he looked down at the stableboy and again at Holly. 'Madre de Dios!' he murmured hoarsely. 

'Senor—' Carlos was already half on his feet and prepared to put the blame fairly and squarely on to Holly. He looked across at her as she pleaded silently with Marcos, his eyes shifty and malicious, but Marcos would not hear him. 

'Silencio!' he ordered, and turned his back on the man with a deliberate contempt, facing Holly again, his hands tightly clenched. 'You will accompany me, senorita. Immediatamente!' he added sharply when she would have protested. 

Without a word Holly turned and started to walk back the way she had come, her heart rapping wildly at her ribs in an emotion she could not even begin to recognize. In a few seconds Marcos was beside her, striding along, his pace shortened to match hers, tall, silent and coldly angry, so that she dared not look back over her shoulder to see how Carlos was faring. 

They were passing the end of the paddock, in the dark shadow of the fig trees, before she ventured to say anything, and then only nervously, glancing at the stern, dark face, harsh and more unrelenting than ever she had seen it, in the cold white light of the moon. 

'Marcos, I'm—' 

'Please do not apologize,' he interrupted harshly, one hand dismissing her contemptuously. 'You owe me no explanations, senorita. What you do with your own time is your own affair, but please be so kind - when you are having an affair with one of my empleados, tell me before I make the same mistake again. Carlos is very useful to me, I would dislike it if I lost him on your account!' 

'How dare you!' 

Holly stopped in her tracks, her hands tightly clenched at her sides, her eyes blazing at him furiously as she sought for words to tell him exactly what she thought of him. He too, came to a halt, his dark features betraying the violence of anger that gripped him, making his lips tight and cruel-looking, and putting a cold, sharp edge on his voice. 

'You are telling me that you were in no way to blame for that - the incident, senorita?' he asked, and Holly shook her head. 

'Not altogether,' she told him. 'But you're wrong to - to word it as you do. I was partly to blame because I went down that way for a walk, but I didn't realize I'd see Carlos, or that he'd behave the way he did when I did see him.'
"But you knew he would be down there.'

He was not going to believe her, she could see that and she felt cold and miserable inside at being so misjudged. 'I - I suppose I did,' she admitted, and could not imagine why she should be looking at him so appealingly, as if he had every right to question her as he was. 'I just didn't think where I was going.'

'Huh!

The snort of disbelief and the expression she saw glittering in his black eyes made her clench her hands even more tightly. It was such a beautiful night, with masses of stars and that incredibly big silver moon, everything should have been set for a tender, romantic scene, and yet here she was fighting with the only man who had ever come close to making her fall deeply in love.

'Oh, you can believe what you like!' she cried in despair. She felt small and tearful as she looked up at that hawklike face and remembered how her hands had caressed it only a few short days ago. How that wide, cruel-looking mouth could kiss her in such a way that she was ready to forget everything and everybody, including the girl he was going to marry.

'Am I to believe that you just happened to go down that way by chance?' he asked. His hands were spread wide and the glitter in his eyes doubted every word she said.

'Of course I did!

'After I had warned you?

'After you'd warned me!' She echoed the words harshly. 'You should have warned me about yourself, senor! Until tonight you're the only one I've had reason to be wary of! Not that I'm likely to make that mistake again, not with Senorita Mendez going to such lengths to warn me off!'

'Holly!

There was a note of warning in his voice, but Holly was past caring. 'I went for a walk to try and — and clear my head,' she went on rashly. 'After an evening with the senorita I needed to get out into the fresh air for a while. Who knows, maybe it was instinct that took me in the direction of the stables - maybe I was seeking what Senorita Mendez would consider my own level!'

'Parar!' He gripped her arms in a grip that made her wince, and shook her. 'You will not speak like that!'

'About Senorita Mendez?' She shook her head, angry and hurt. 'I'm sorry, senor! Of course it isn't allowed, is it?'

'About yourself, poca idiota!'

'Oh, but surely you share the view of Senorita Mendez,' Holly said, her voice husky and trembling. 'You could scarcely do anything else, senor!'

He looked at her in silence for a long moment and Holly felt that merciless grip on her arms relax gradually, and his thumbs begin a gentle, caressing movement on her soft skin. 'Do you think I hold so low opinion of you?' he asked softly.

'Don't you?'

She was trembling; her hands were shaking like leaves and she wanted to reach out and touch the soft white shirt, spread them over the place where his heart beat would pulse strongly under her fingers. She was much too conscious of him and she must never allow herself to get into that dangerously vulnerable position again.

He did not answer at once, but the black eyes looked at her steadily and disconcertingly, making her heart respond to what she thought she saw there. Then he raised one hand and touched her cheek lightly with his fingertips. 'I cannot blame you too much for what happened,' he said softly. 'Nor Carlos either. You are a very beautiful nina, and Carlos
—' He shrugged eloquent shoulders. 'He is a man, how can I blame him for falling into a trap that I fell into myself?'

Holly's eyes looked huge and shiny and she looked up at him uncertainly. Given even that much encouragement, it would be so easy to precipitate another situation like that earlier one, in the field below the castle, it all depended on her, she realized that. The temptation to take advantage of it was almost irresistible, but before she could say or do anything about it, either way, he was shaking his head, and sliding one hand under her arm to turn her back towards the castle.

'You must go back, nina' he told her. 'It is getting late, and Dona Ana thinks you already in bed.'

So that was what Aunt Nan had told him! Her aunt would realize, of course, that Marcos was the last person she wanted to meet on her moonlight walk, especially after that frank discussion they had had in the hall just before she came out. It had evidently not occurred to her that Holly would go in the direction of the stables.

Holly looked at him for a second, uncertainly. His anger, she thought, was spent for the moment, but she wondered if he contemplated going back down to the stables, and if he did, what he would say to Carlos. More to the point, what Carlos would say to him.

'You're - you're going back to the stables?' she asked, and he nodded, looking at her curiously.

'As I do every night before I go to bed, nina.'

'Oh—oh, I see!'

Either Carlos must have forgotten that nightly visit from his employer, or he had not expected him so soon, most likely the latter, for Marcos was never very early retiring for the night, she had heard him quite often when she was in the hazy state of just going off to sleep, and often wondered where he got to. It was unfortunate for Carlos that he had chosen tonight to pay an early visit, and she worried again about the possible consequences to Carlos. She had seen a sample of Marcos's temper, and remembered that ominous dark trickle at one corner of Carlos's mouth. Only her own presence, she felt sure, had saved the man from worse violence.

Marcos, it seemed, must have sensed her uneasiness and the reason for it, for he shook his head slowly, and a slight smile tipped one corner of his wide mouth, softening its hard line for a moment. 'I can see what is troubling you,' he said, and Holly looked at him with a frown, suspecting that he found her anxiety amusing, in some perverse way.

'You can't—' Holly began, but he was shaking his head again, that hint of a smile still in evidence.

"Do not worry, mi pequena' he said quietly. 'I will not beat Carlos insensible, as you seem to fear!"

'I -1 didn't think that at all,' Holly denied. 'It's just that I - well, in the circumstances, I thought—' She sought for words for a moment or two, then shook her head. 'It doesn't matter,' she said, and he smiled briefly one hand reaching out to cup her chin.

'Buenas noches, mi pichon/ he said softly, and bent his head, his lips brushing hers lightly for a moment.

Perhaps it was instinct that made her mouth respond to the light pressure, and she did not even realize that she put up a hand to curl its fingers over the one that cupped her chin, its gentle pressure unmistakable in its message. Whatever the reason was, his lips left hers for barely a second.

In the bright, silvery white of the moonlight his eyes glittered like jet when he looked down at her, and in a moment she was crushed against him, his arms holding her so tightly that the hard muscular strength of his body seemed to envelop her, and his mouth found hers again, but with a hard, fierce possessiveness that left her breathless and bereft of all sense except the certainty that she wanted nothing else but to be where she was, with him.

Her hand slid up around the strong column of his neck, and she twined her fingers in the thick black hair at the back of his head, clinging to him with such a wild, uncontrollable longing that for a time her passion matched his.

It was only when she was on the brink of complete oblivion that cold reason, and the memory of her vow never to be
in such a situation again, brought her slowly back to realization, and she put her hands to his face, forcing their lips apart and shaking her head slowly.

'No, Marcos!' 

Her voice had a soft, husky sound and he must have known that her protest was as reluctant as his relinquishing of her, but he slid his arms from around her, and instead held her arms tightly, looking down at her with those glittering black eyes. There was a tightness about his mouth again as he shook his head slowly.

'So!' he said, in a voice that was still hoarse with emotion. 'You would make certain that I cannot punish Carlos for what he did, by putting me in the same position, eh? You are very clever, nina!' 

Holly stared at him for a moment, unbelievingly. It seemed scarcely credible that he was blaming her for what had happened, and yet evidently he was. 'You - you're not saying that that was my fault too?' she said huskily, and he said nothing for a moment, then he sighed deeply and, so it seemed, sincerely.

'Go to bed, poca bruja,' he said softly, shaking his head. 'The combination of you and a warm moonlit night are too potent a wine for any man. Vayase, haga usted el favor! Go for your own sake as well as for mine!' 

Holly hesitated for only a moment, then she turned and walked back up the hillside to the castle, dreamily unreal under the bright Spanish moon, its tall towers piercing the star-scattered sky. It was a temptation to turn and look back at him, for she felt so certain that he stood watching her go, but she resisted it because if she had looked back and seen him still there she knew she would have run back to him, and that would have made the situation irrevocable.
CHAPTER FIVE

It was something of a surprise, after their last encounter, to find Marcos behaving as if nothing had happened, and Holly could not help feeling oddly let down, yet again. Encounters like that with Marcos invariably left her feeling disappointed, although she could not help being slightly ashamed of herself for it. It was almost as if Marcos treated such episodes as no more than moments of light relief in his normally well run life, and certainly not to be taken seriously.

Holly, however, found it much less easy to treat them so lightly, and staying under the same roof with Marcos had become a definite strain lately. Much as she tried to deny it to herself, she was afraid that she was already more than a little in love with him and she could never tell when she would be faced with another similar situation. Sooner or later it was bound to happen.

For a whole week now she had spent considerable time looking at the question from all sides and she had at last decided that her position at the castle was quite untenable and that it would be better for everyone if she left and spent the rest of her holiday somewhere else in Spain.

It was obvious that Aunt Nan would miss her, and so too would Don Jose, for he made no secret of the fact that he liked her very much and enjoyed having her there. She would miss them too, of course, and the type of life she had led for the past few weeks, but weighed against that there was Helena Mendez's attitude towards her, and try as she would, Holly had to admit to disliking the Spanish girl intensely. Helena, she knew, would never change, and she doubted if she would herself.

There was a hope too, that away from the undeniably romantic atmosphere of the Castillo de la Valeroso she would be able to forget about Marcos, although at the moment the possibility seemed a remote one. He was not a man who would be easy to forget, and feeling as she did about him made it more difficult. Such a situation could not be allowed to develop any further and the sooner she left the castle and the proximity of Marcos, the better.

It was no surprise to learn that Helena was coming to dinner, yet again, but Holly faced the prospect bleakly, as always. She dreaded those meals with Helena's malicious and determinedly unfriendly presence at the table, and she knew, via her aunt, that such frequent visits to the castle were a new departure since the arrival of Holly.

As she always did on these occasions, Holly dressed with extra care, although she told herself that no one was likely to be any wiser of the fact, except herself. A mid-length dress of jade-coloured chiffon that clung softly and closely to her figure and swirled into fullness at the waist was the most flattering dress she owned, and she had chosen it with deliberation.

She brushed out her dark hair and let it fall softly about her shoulders, realizing that she looked not only younger like that, but also much more vulnerable. Perhaps unconsciously seeking an effect that was appealingly feminine, to contrast with Helena's sleek, dark sophistication. Satisfied at last, she gave a final smoothing touch to her dress and her hair, and turned to go.

A moment later in the carpeted passageway outside, she closed her bedroom door, then, unable to resist doing it just once more, she spun round and round. Under the stern, dark gaze of Marcos's haughty ancestors, she whirled about, the full skirt of her dress flying out, then swirling softly about her slim legs.

Holly had noticed no one else about, but as she stopped, a little breathlessly, she heard the sound of hands clapping quietly behind her, and Marcos's voice spoke from the shadows of one of the arched alcoves. 'Bravo! Otra vez, senorita!'

'Marcos!' Holly spun round swiftly to face him, her cheeks colouring furiously at being caught in such a childish pleasure. What a fool he would think her for indulging in such naive pranks.

Marcos came out of the shadows to join her, tall and heart-stoppingly attractive in dinner dress, a black cummerbund hugging tightly about his lean waist. He stood with his feet slightly apart, as he was inclined to do, the black trousers fitting smoothly over his long, muscular legs and a frilled white shirt adding a slightly
Victorian look.

He stood looking down at her for a moment, down the length of that hawklike nose, and there was just a glimmer of humour in his black eyes. 'Are you going to dance flamenco for me, nina?' he asked softly, and took one of her hands in both of his, raising it to his lips.

It was an unexpected and courtly gesture that set her pulses racing wildly, and she despaired of herself, yet again, for responding to him so readily. 'I didn't - I didn't expect anyone to see me,' Holly said, wishing she could control the disturbing desires that the touch of his strong fingers aroused in her.

'So much I could guess, pequena,' Marcos said softly. His black eyes swept over her slowly, disturbingly aware of every curving feature revealed by the low cut of the dress. 'You look very beautiful,' he said.

Holly kept her decision to leave firmly in her mind and wished she had waited just a minute more before leaving her room, then she could have avoided meeting him. Even a couple of minutes alone with Marcos in such circumstances, could persuade her to change her mind, no matter how senseless it would prove eventually.

She glanced down at her wrist watch, seeking escape, and managed to free her fingers at last. 'It's getting late,' she said. 'We should go, Marcos.'

He nodded agreement, a small half smile just touching his lips as he offered her his crooked arm. 'Senorita?'

After a second's hesitation Holly slipped her hand through his arm and almost gasped audibly a moment later when it was crushed tightly against the warmth of his body as he led her along to the stairs, a glance from those black eyes challenging her to protest about the familiarity of the gesture.

They walked side by side down that magnificent staircase, and as they went Holly's brain was spinning when she considered the kind of impression they would have given a stranger. There was a strange sense of intimacy about coming downstairs with him like that, arm in arm, and she briefly closed her eyes when she heard Helena Mendez's unmistakable voice in the hall, speaking to one of the servants.

It was much earlier than usual for Helena to arrive, and Holly mourned the mischance that had made her choose tonight of all nights to be early. There was no doubt that Helena had seen them, for she stepped back into full view and looked up at them as they came down the last few feet, her black eyes glittering when she saw their linked arms.

'Buenas noches, Marcos,' Helena said, and swept her gaze over Holly, leaving no doubt how she felt about such familiarity. 'Dandose el brazo, mi amor? Como amigable!'

Whatever the sharp words meant, they appeared to have little effect on Marcos, for he continued down the rest of the stairs with Holly's arm through his, the pressure he exerted foiling any attempt on her part to remove it. He bowed his black head briefly in a formally polite bow when he faced Helena, and smiled quite blandly at her angry face.

'Buenas noches, Helena,' he said, and Holly marvelled, not for the first time, at the very formal way he always spoke to the woman he was supposed to be going to marry. Perhaps Aunt Nan was right about Helena finding him a less than ardent lover, although from her own experience it was difficult to believe.

'Marcos—' Helena was trembling with anger, her eyes blazing, but Holly had no doubt who was the villain of the piece in her eyes.

Marcos, however, merely bowed again and extended his other arm, his black gaze challenging her to refuse the offer. 'Shall we go in, senoritas?' he asked softly.

After a moment's hesitation Helena slid a long hand through his arm, her fingers curling possessively, her long red nails looking uncomfortably like claws to Holly's uneasy gaze. Marcos walked with them, one either side of him, across the hall to the dining-hall where a manservant opened the huge double doors to admit them, still three abreast.

Holly noted surprise and a hint of dismay, too, in her aunt's face when they came in, but Don Jose seemed unaware of anything untoward as he sat already at the head of the table with his wife beside him, one gentle, reassuring hand
on his shoulder.

'Marcos,' Aunt Nan said with a faint smile. 'How gallant of you!

'It is my pleasure, Dona Ana,' Marcos told her, and bowed each of his ladies in turn into their seats, then did the same service for his stepmother. 'I am humbled by the presence of so much beauty!' he said, catching his stepmother's eye and smiling slowly.

It was quite unlike Marcos to even profess humility, or to play the gallant quite so obviously, and it took Holly a moment or two to realize that he was showing off. It was an unexpectedly juvenile trait to find in a man of Marcos's calibre and for a moment it startled her, until he caught her eye. The expression in his eyes left her in no doubt that he was doing it purely for her benefit, probably to show her that he could indulge in childish behaviour too, and she felt the colour in her cheeks, praying that Aunt Nan would not notice and guess the reason.

The conversation, during dinner, almost inevitably came around to horses, and, while Holly admired the beautiful Arab thoroughbreds that Marcos and his father bred, she knew nothing about them. Consequently, as always happened, she was excluded from the conversation, for even her aunt knew enough, after ten years, to talk fairly easily on the subject.

Helena often came to the stables and rode with Marcos, so it was obvious that she must have known that Holly either did not ride or was not prepared to risk handling one of those mettlesome thoroughbreds. But the temptation to point out Holly's exclusion from such matters was bound to prove too much for Helena before long, and her sharp, dark eyes looked across the table at Holly suddenly, her wide, thin-lipped mouth formed into a brief smile.

"You do not know anything of horses, senorita?" she asked, and her tone implied that she knew the answer well enough but wanted to hear her admit it.

'No, I'm afraid I don't,' Holly agreed, refusing to be any more than formally polite.

Helena's thin lips curled derisively. 'And of course you do not ride!' "

'Oh, I have ridden,' Holly told her quietly. 'But not lately.'

'Really?' Helena's fine brows expressed polite surprise. 'I had not supposed that—' An eloquent shrug lent meaning to her words. 'One does not think of people who earn their living, as you do, senorita, as having the means to indulge in such activities.' She smiled down the table at her hostess. 'You must enlighten me further on the customs of your country, Senora Delgaro!'

'I'll do so with pleasure, Helena,' Aunt Nan told her, gently polite and catching her niece's eye as she spoke. Trying to be reassuring, Holly realized. 'I think you're probably labouring under a lot of delusions about England and the English, my dear.'

Helena's elegant shoulders shrugged carelessly. 'It is possible,' she said offhandedly. 'I have been to London once only, and then only for a very brief time. I was not very much impressed.'

'Oh, but you wouldn't be impressed by the horses you saw in London,' Aunt Nan said mildly, deliberately misunderstanding. 'Unless of course you happened to see the Household Cavalry. You should have gone further afield, Helena - you'd probably have been surprised.'

Aunt Nan had every appearance of being serious, and Holly, glancing up at him, saw Marcos's wide mouth twitch betrayingly at one corner, while Don Josh's white head nodded briefly in approval. He would defend his wife to his last breath, but at the moment she needed no champion, and Holly wished she had as much aplomb when she was faced with Helena's malice.

'Possibly.' Elegant shoulders shrugged carelessly, but Helena was already giving her attention to Holly again, possibly seeing her as a less able opponent than her aunt, and she raked her dark gaze over her in a brief, swift, unflattering appraisal. 'Do you get your clothes in London, senorita?' she asked. 'I know that London is supposed to be one of the world's fashion centres.'
'I believe so,' Holly agreed, steeling herself for the inevitable onslaught.

'Of course—' another shrug dismissed the idea as unlikely, 'I have always considered Paris to be the only place for clothes that have real chic. Do you not agree?*

Holly swallowed hard on the temper that sat like a tight little ball in her throat and threatened to break out at any moment, but she managed to smile, a somewhat strained effort, as her antagonist probably recognized. Yet again it seemed she was to be subjected to Helena's malicious snobbery, and she renewed her vow to leave the castle at the earliest opportunity.

'I suppose it all depends on what one is looking for,' Holly said quietly at last, aware that Marcos was watching her with more than a little interest. Her blue eyes shone deeply blue in the yellow light from the lamps and they challenged Helena across the table.

They studied the sleekly cut black silk dress the other girl wore. It was long and clinging, but it had a cowled neckline, almost like a nun's habit, and it took a woman like Helena to make it look anything but hideously unflattering. 'Personally I find the Paris houses are inclined to produce some rather outlandish styles at times,' Holly said quietly at last. 'But it's all a matter of taste, of course.'

Helena's dark eyes glowed maliciously. 'Of course,' she echoed. 'And your own tastes so obviously are for the plain and simple, senorita. Also, of course,' she added with a faint smile, 'Paris is rather expensive.'

It was the coup de grace, Holly recognized, and felt the sympathy of at least two of the listeners, although she did not look up at any of them. She had tried playing Helena at her own game and, inevitably, lost, for she stood no chance against the other girl's long practice.

'It's very expensive,' Holly admitted. 'Far more than I can afford, Senorita Mendez.'

'Naturally!' Again those dark, malicious eyes raked over Holly's pretty jade dress that she had felt so good in until now, and a small, tight smile condemned its simple flattery. 'Such a pity,' she murmured with pseudo sympathy, and Holly curled her fingers round the handle of her fork to control her temper.

From the corner of her eye she saw one of Marcos's long brown hands go out and touch his father's arm, as if the old man had been going to say something and he stopped him. 'You should have a dress the colour of deep jade, Helena,' Marcos said softly. 'It is much more becoming than black, is it not, Dona Ana?'

Whatever Aunt Nan replied, or even if she answered him at all, Holly did not know, for her head was spinning wildly with the realization that Marcos had put his fiancee firmly in her place in Holly's defence. And without a doubt, it would do nothing to endear her to Helena, but it gave Holly herself a sudden feeling of elation that she strove hard to quell. Nothing, but nothing, must be allowed to change her mind about leaving.

It was only two days later that Aunt Nan broke the news that Helena would be coming to lunch again, and Holly made no pretence of being glad about the news. She had no real right to express such a forcible opinion about one of her aunt's guests, she supposed, but in this case she felt pretty sure that, given a choice, Aunt Nan would never have had Helena Mendez in her home. In the circumstances, she had no option.

'You really don't like Helena, do you, baby?' she asked, and Holly smiled ruefully.

'It isn't for me to express an opinion one way or the other,' she said. 'And it isn't me that has to like her, Aunt Nan. You're the one who'll have her for a daughter-in-law.'

'Yes, I suppose I shall, shan't I? Her aunt smiled and patted her hands. 'Oh well, I've learned to adapt to a lot of things since I came here, darling, and Helena's one of them. I know she doesn't like me, in fact,' she added with a rueful smile, 'I think she rather despises me! Poor Helena!' She sighed, apparently in sympathy with her future stepdaughter-in-law. 'She's never lived in close proximity with the lower orders before, and I rather think I - we make her uneasy.'
’If she was a little more friendly to the lower orders,’ Holly said shortly, ’she wouldn't have to be uneasy.’

Aunt Nan shrugged, in that so typically Spanish way again. ’Ah well,’ she said, ’with Jose to take the sting out of anything Helena can do or say, I don't worry too much about her.’

’Neither do I, I suppose,’ Holly said thoughtfully, and wondered if this was as good a time as any to make known her decision to leave. ’I - I thought of going on, Aunt Nan. Visiting another part of Spain for the rest of my holiday.’

Her aunt looked taken aback for a moment, then she frowned anxiously. ’Is it because of Helena?’ she asked. ’But, Holly dear—’

’Not especially because of Helena,’ Holly interrupted. She took her aunt's hands, anxious to reassure her, but wondering if she could do so without revealing the true reason for her decision. ’I love it here, Aunt Nan, and I love being with you and Don Jose, you've made me marvellously welcome, it's just that—’

one broke off there, shaking her head, not quite sure how to put into words some reasonable excuse for leaving, and Aunt Nan looked at her with gentle understanding. ’I think perhaps I understand, darling,’ she told her softly.

’Do you?’ Holly looked at her anxiously, wondering how much to take her aunt into her confidence. After all, Marcos was her aunt's close family now. The man in both their minds was not a stranger to her aunt, he was her stepson and had been closer to her than Holly herself had been for the past ten years.

’When you spoke about it before, I should have realized. It is because of Marcos, isn't it?’ Aunt Nan asked gently, and Holly hesitated before she nodded. It was discomfiting to realize how close to tears she felt.

’Yes,’ she said resignedly. ’I suppose you could say it was because of Marcos.’

’Oh, baby, I'm so sorry!’ Her aunt's blue eyes looked at her anxiously, torn between the devil and the deep, Holly thought, and sympathized with her predicament.

Holly shrugged, smiling to dispel any notion that she was leaving as a heartbroken innocent. That was the last impression she wanted to give. ’It's not as bad as all that, Aunt Nan,’ she told her. ’But - well, your gallant stepson is rather heady wine for a poor working girl, and I think it would be better if I left before I really am swept off my feet in the proverbial manner.’

’Is it likely to happen, darling?’ her aunt asked, and

Holly pulled a wry face.

’It's possible, if I stay on,’ she admitted frankly. ’And in the circumstances I'm not prepared to take any chances, Aunt Nan. It isn't as if it would do any good to make an all-out fight of it with Helena,’ she added with a short laugh. ’I'd only be fighting Marcos as well, he's very firmly set on the course mapped out for him!’

’I'm afraid so, darling,’ Aunt Nan looked very thoughtful for a moment or two. ’I only wish there was some way of changing things,’ she said with a small sigh. ’I'd encourage you to stay on, you know that, dear, don't you? But—’

again that Latin shrug of resignation, ’it was all cut and dried, long before either of us came on the scene, and there's nothing we can do about it.’

’Oh no, of course there isn't,’ Holly agreed hastily. ’Except the obvious, and I intend doing that without delay!’ It appalled her to discover herself on the brink of crying again, but she could not imagine anything worse for creating the wrong impression, so she shook her head and smiled determinedly. ’I shall just put it down to one more holiday romance,’ she said brightly. ’I'll arrange to go as soon as I can. Aunt Nan.’

Her aunt sighed deeply. ’Yes, all right, baby.’

For a moment Holly looked at her thoughtfully, then she put a tentative hand on her arm, hesitating to put into words what was in her mind. ’But - please, Aunt Nan, don't say anything to anyone about my going, will you?’
Her aunt looked at her curiously for a moment, frowning. 'Not if you'd rather I didn't, Holly, but - well, wouldn't it be more polite, more kind, if you let Jose know at least a day or so before you leave?'

'Oh yes, of course,' Holly conceded, anxious not to be misunderstood. 'But please, don't let Marcos know!'

'I won't, since you seem so adamant about it, dear.' She studied Holly's face for a moment in silence, then gently squeezed her fingers. 'You surely don't think he'll—'

'Try to persuade me to stay on?' Holly asked, and laughed, a little unsteadily. 'I don't know, Aunt Nan. Maybe I'm being - conceited and he won't even bother if I'm here or not, but - well, he might just try, for the sheer pleasure of proving to himself that he could do it!' Her blue eyes were huge and shiny and she somehow looked very young and vulnerable suddenly as she shook her head slowly. 'And I'm afraid I'm all too easily persuadable by your stepson, Aunt Nan!'

When Don Jose was told about her decision to leave, he was flatteringly unenthusiastic about the idea, and sought to make her change her mind, but when he realized how firmly decided she was, he smiled resignedly.

'It is our loss, mi cara,' he told her quietly. 'But young ladies these days know their own minds well enough not to be persuaded, hmm?' He took one of her hands and held it for a moment in one of his long, thin ones, his almost blind eyes looking at her anxiously. 'But you have been happy here with us, Holly mi cara, si?' he asked. 'I would not like to think that something here had — disturbed you enough to drive you away from us.'

It was going to be even harder than she had anticipated, Holly realized, but she resolutely hardened her heart against weakening. 'I've been wonderfully happy here, Don Jose,' she said softly. 'You've been wonderful to me, and I appreciate it more than I can say.' Impulsively she bent forward and planted a gentle kiss on his drawn face, with its features a mere ghost of the hawklike arrogance of his son. 'Thank you, Tio Jose.'

She had learned the Spanish for uncle from Aunt Nan, and she saw that he was touched by the gesture as well as by the gentle kiss. 'I shall miss you, pequena,' he said gently. 'Please do not wait ten years again before you visit us, hmm?'

'I won't,' Holly promised, but wondered if it was a promise she would be able to keep. So much depended on circumstances.
CHAPTER SIX

Holly contacted a branch of the same travel firm that had arranged her passage out, and booked a flight to Barcelona leaving in four days' time. If she was going away, she meant to go far enough for there to be no chance of her running into Marcos at any time, and Barcelona was just about as far as she could get and still be in Spain.

She could, of course, have taken an earlier flight out, but she did not want to make her departure too abrupt and appear discourteous to her host. Four days would give her long enough to make the most of her castle-in-Spain dream and enjoy the company of her aunt for a few days longer.

The trouble with anticipating the end of something pleasurable was that the time went so quickly, and she had never known three days go by so fast. Before she knew where she was she was spending what was to be her last day at the Castillo de la Valeroso, and she was feeling more low-spirited than she had ever done in her life before.

The fact that she felt so low had nothing to do with the thought of never seeing Marcos again either, she told herself, but the prospect of another meeting being unlikely was what was foremost in her mind, for all that.

It had been in her mind when she saw Marcos ride off this morning, just before she left the castle herself to go for a last walk, and it was now as she watched him, quite clearly visible despite the distance between them. He was riding up into the hills on one of those beautiful, temperamental Arab horses he bred, and she thought how absolutely right he looked in this setting.

The hills, with their lower reaches clothed in green vines and the verdant multi-colours of other growing crops, while the higher slopes were stark and arid, where there was no irrigation. The hot sun blazed out of a coppery blue sky, harsh and relentless as the man who rode with his black head bared to its scorching heat, his dark, hawklike profile arrogant as the unyielding rock of the hills.

Man and horse were such a perfect combination of grace and strength that the sight of them made her catch her breath as she watched them from the shadow of the trees along the approach road. It was amazing how clearly she could see, and what she could not actually see, she could visualize easily enough.

She knew the way Marcos's strong hands would be keeping the mettlesome Arab in check, and yet appear relaxed and easy, and his posture in the saddle, straight and proud as he always was, and somehow ageless, against the hot, primitive background. He looked every inch a conqueror and she felt the blood racing through her body like fire as she watched him, understanding properly for the first time why it was that Helena

Mendez was prepared to go to any lengths to keep him for her own.

It was only reluctantly that she turned away at last, and began to walk down the twisting, dusty road from the castle, her mind still busy with the last sight she had had of Marcos riding towards the high cool of the hills. Already, she realized with dismay, she was ready to abandon her plans to fly off somewhere else tomorrow, although she knew it was useless to stay on.

Holly had not meant to walk so far, but her preoccupation had made her blind to her surroundings, even to the relentless heat of the sun, and she suddenly realized that she was walking down the hot, narrow road to the village. The castle and its concealing screen of trees looked far away, up there on the sweeping green hillside, and she was already nearing the first of the big cortijas, its white walls tall and dazzling in the hot sun.

The big communal farmhouses always looked to Holly much more oriental than European and she was always reminded, at first sight, of the Arabian Nights. It was an illusion that was quickly shattered, however, by closer acquaintance. There was nothing fairytale about the cortijas.

The noise of its inhabitants, both human and animal, assailed her ears from behind the walls, with their protective wrought iron grilles, and her initial impression of the Orient was fostered by the dusky-faced children who peered at her through the grilles and became suddenly quiet when she smiled at them.
The Moorish influence was stronger in these swarthy-skinned people and their white houses, with shaded courtyards, cool with palm and orange trees, than anywhere else in Spain, and Holly felt as if she had stepped back into another age.

She was strongly tempted to stop and speak to the children, perhaps even the adults too, if they showed any inclination, but the babble of noise and the distinct farmyard odour that lay heavy on the air deterred her from going any closer than the edge of the road. The faces she saw behind the iron grilles looked friendly enough and they would probably have greeted her with the grave courtesy which was a feature of the Spanish character, but her senses rebelled at the overpowering primitiveness of their living conditions.

Passing the cortija served to remind her that it was high time she turned back, for the walk back was all uphill and practically without shade. She had remembered to wear the big shady hat that Marcos had bought for her, but she was already feeling limp with the heat and rather tired.

With a sigh for her own rashness in coming so far, she crossed to the other side of the road and began her upward climb, feeling the unbearable pressure of the heat almost at once. Downhill she had created a certain amount of breeze, and the sun was at her back, but now she was faced with its full force and even her big hat did not protect her face very much.

She realized, too, that it was getting close to the time that no sensible Spaniard would think of being out, let alone of toiling up a steep hill. It would seem like an awful long way back, and she called herself a fool many times over as she made her way upwards.

Going uphill too, her sandals seemed to gather up small stones along with the inevitable dust, and they wedged themselves uncomfortably between her toes and under the balls of her feet, making walking quite painful unless she stopped every few minutes and removed them.

In the few weeks she had been in Spain, her skin had acquired a certain amount of natural protection against the scorching sun, despite its refusal to tan, but her bare arms now seemed to be affected more than ever before, and she rubbed her hands over them to try and soothe the burning sensation.

She was less than half-way back to the approach road when she heard the sound of an approaching car, and looked around hopefully, not even bothering what kind of an impression she would give to a passing driver. A girl alone on a lonely road and looking round for a lift. She was tired and hot, and she had never felt so thirsty in her life before.

The driver, however, was a woman, she had time to register as much as the big shiny car sped towards her, but it showed no signs of stopping, and it needed only one, quick startled glance for Holly to realize why.

The car had seemed familiar at first glance, now she recognized it as belonging to Helena Mendez. Holly had seen it often enough, parked in front of the Castillo de la Valeroso, and there could be no mistaking the sleek black head of its driver with the traditional chignon in the nape of her neck, nor the arrogant posture of the head.

Those malicious black eyes were hidden behind dark glasses, and she did not even turn her head as she passed, but there was no doubt in Holly's mind that she too had been recognized, for as the big car went past her it cut in so close that Holly gave a cry when the rear wing swept against her, knocking her off her feet.

She went rolling down into a stone gully beside the road, her arms instinctively going up to protect her head as she went, from the punishing chunks of rock that lay in her path. It could have been that she was already dizzy from the intense heat, or the blow from the car's wing might have been harder than she realized, but Holly found herself unable to get up once she had landed in the dusty hard bottom of the gully.

She was aware of a sickening pain in her left leg and a sharper one on the back of her head, and after a moment of staring dazedly at the sun, she sank back again, her head spinning dizzily round and round until she fell into unconsciousness.

Holly was unsure how long she lay there, but something, somewhere stirred in her brain at last, and she sat up, slowly and painfully, a hand to her spinning head, trying to get her bearings. Her arms and legs were grazed from her fall, and her face too, judging by the way it stung, but by far the worst was her left leg, now swollen and red, and
the throbbing pain at the back of her head, where her exploring fingers discovered a large bump.

She felt sick and dizzy and horribly like crying when she thought of how far she was from any form of help. Somehow she had to get back on to the road, but how she would fare from then on did not bear thinking about.

Her injured leg proved useless and much too painful to assist in her climb out of the gully, and she was forced to literally drag herself up the sloping bank of rock. It took several tries and many tears of pain before she was at last on the road again, sitting there for a moment to get enough breath to stand up on her one good leg.

Her hat, she realized with a sinking heart, was still down there in the gully, but she simply could not climb down and get it, and more tears flowed as she stood there, balancing on one leg, feeling faint and sick, and wondering what on earth she was going to do to get back.

It was the sun that gave her the first clue as to how long she had been there, for its position was much different now from what she remembered it before she was knocked down, and she immediately thought about Aunt Nan, and how she would be worrying about her being so long.

With Helena's action so fresh in her mind, it gave her cause to wonder if the other girl would even mention having seen her at all, in which case no one would know in which direction she had come, and it could be ages before she was found.

She tried again to walk, but she had no doubt now that her left leg was, if not broken, at least badly sprained, and it was impossible to put any weight on it. She found a stout wooden stump close by, and she leaned against it, her breathing erratic, bordering on panic, her head spinning dizzily again, and crying unrestrainedly.

It was with a sudden jolt of hope that she heard the sound of another car coming. Even though it was coming from the other direction, the driver might be prepared to stop and help her, and she waited for it to appear, clinging to the old stump with anxious hands.

At last the car swept round the bend just ahead of her, going recklessly fast, but in one sudden flash of giddying joy, Holly realized that it was Marcos's car. He saw her and braked hard, sending up a cloud of dust on the narrow road, and, incredibly, he managed to turn the long vehicle in a matter of seconds and draw up beside her, a dark angry look on his face.

He kept his head averted and without a word opened the passenger door, and Holly grabbed at its hot, shiny edge thankfully. 'Get in!' Even then he did not turn and she shook her head slowly. Her leg was too painful and too stiff for her to lift it even the few inches into the car.

Her slowness to obey brought his head round sharply, ready to reprimand her, but his expression changed in an instant when he saw her for the first time. It was obvious that he had not realized she had been hurt, and in a moment he was out of the car and round beside her, his strong arms supporting her, lifting her into the seat with a gentleness that brought a fresh flow of tears to her eyes.

Holly closed her eyes gratefully as she leaned her head back against the seat, although the leather upholstery smelled hot and pungent in the sun, and burned her neck even through the thickness of her hair. She felt a hand on her forehead, and another on her left cheek, gentle, anxious and almost sensual in their touch.

'Holly?' Her eyelids fluttered in response to the anxious query, but she felt too spent to open them. 'Holly, what on earth have you been doing, pequena?' he asked. His voice was comfortingly soft, and his warm breath wafted against her face.

'I-I fell.'

It was as much as Holly could manage at the moment, and her throat felt unbearably dry. She felt drowsy and oddly floaty, for all the pain from her leg and her head, but if Marcos was going to be so sweet and gentle to her, she was going to try and open her eyes and talk as best she could.

She raised incredibly heavy lids and found his face so close to hers that she could see how his black eyes looked
anxious, and the small black frown of his drawn brows. One gentle hand touched the grazes on her face again, in a
gesture that was unbelievably soothing and his wide, straight mouth curved into an understanding smile.

'You will not wear your hat, will you?' he asked, but much less harshly than he would normally have done. 'Why, nina?'

'I - I lost it,' Holly explained, trying hard to stop herself from drifting off into unconsciousness again. It would be
such a pity not to make the most of Marcos in this new, solicitous mood. 'I - I was—' Her head rolled sideways
suddenly, and she did not even see the stark look of dismay that crossed Marcos's face before he eased her more
securely into her seat, then closed the door and went round quickly to his own seat.

It was cool and shaded and that hot dusty road must surely have been a mirage, Holly thought, when she looked
around at the now familiar comfort of her bedroom. The shutters were closed, but she could see through the slats
that it was still bright and sunny outside, and the shadows of bougainvillea were drawn in silhouette against them.

Her head throbbed, but oddly enough her leg pained her less now, and it took her a moment to realize that it was
held stiffly in a splint. The throbbing in her head became worse when she tried to turn and see what time it was by
the clock beside her bed, and she abandoned the attempt as not worthwhile.

Her movement, however, stirred into action a figure sitting on the other side of her. 'Senorita?'

It was Maria, one of the maids, and Holly turned her head slowly to look at her, smiling when she saw the anxious
expression on the girl's face. 'Hello, Maria,' she said shakily.

The girl got to her feet hastily. 'I will fetch Dona Ana, senorita' she said in a whisper, her huge dark eyes wide and a
little scared. 'Excusa, por favor, senorita'

After she had gone Holly closed her eyes again. It was all too easy to drift back into sleep, or unconsciousness, again
and she was not really anxious to talk to anyone yet, even Aunt Nan. She had to consider Helena's part in her
mishap, for one thing.

Telling of Helena's deliberately dangerous driving was not a prospect she relished, and especially when it came to
Marcos's ears. Probably no one else would believe her either, but certainly Marcos would consider she was just
getting back at Helena for past injustices, and dismiss the idea out of hand.

A few moments later she heard the bedroom door open after a light knock, and slowly and rather reluctantly Holly
opened her eyes again. She expected to see Aunt Nan and for a moment she blinked unbelievingly when she saw
Marcos's tall figure blocking the doorway. His black eyes looked across the room at her, warily, as if he was not sure
what kind of a welcome he could expect, and such uncertainty in Marcos was unusual enough to make her smile,
however she felt.

'So! You can still smile!' He came across the room, striding swiftly on long legs and having the inevitable effect on
her, despite her drowsiness and the pain in her head. He wore slim-fitting grey trousers, and a pale blue shirt made
him look even darker as he came and rested one hand on the tall corner post of the bed, looking down at her.

'Dona Ana is with the doctor and my father,' he explained in a quiet, soothing voice. 'Both are coming in a moment.
It was fortunate that the doctor was here to see my father, was it not?' He looked at her intently, his gaze lingering
for a moment on her mouth in a way that set her heart racing wildly and making her throbbing head feel worse than
ever. 'What happened to you, nina mia?' he asked softly.

'I - I walked too far.' Her voice sounded horribly hoarse and dry.

'And without your hat, huh?'

'I - I did have my hat,' she told him. 'But I lost it in - in the gully.'

'Gully?' He looked puzzled, as if the word was new to him. 'What gully, pequena?'
'Beside the road,' Holly explained, and put a hand to her throat as her voice threatened to break at any moment.

'And you fell into this - gully?' Holly nodded. 'Is that how you broke your leg?' She nodded again, it hurt a little less than trying to speak. 'Well—' He shrugged his expressive shoulders, 'the doctor has cleaned up your scratches and put your leg into a splint, but you still have that chichon which is like an egg?'

Holly recognized the description of the bump on her head and she put up a tentative hand to it. 'It hurts,' the said plaintively, and Marcos smiled as he shook his head.

'Poor nina' he said softly, and set her pulses racing again at the tone of his voice.

'You're - you're not blaming me?' Holly asked, her eyes appealing, hardly believing he would not sooner or later decide it was her own fault she was hurt.

He shrugged again. 'How do I know?' he asked. 'Always you are involved in things you cannot cope with, nina, and I cannot think what you have done this time to be so badly hurt.'

'But this time I—' She put a hand to her throat again. It felt so dry and hoarse and she could not speak without it hurting. 'My throat,' she whispered huskily, and reached for a glass of lemonade that stood on the table beside the bed.

Marcos anticipated her, however, and his fingers took the long cool glass from the table, while with his other arm he raised her gently from the pillows and supported her while he held the glass to her lips. Holly drank gratefully, but most of her attention was trying to cope with the renewed wild and dizzying effect he was having on her senses, responding as they always did to the strong support of his arm about her shoulders, and the warm touch of his hand on her arm.

'Thank you.' She pushed the glass away and rubbed her fingers on the hot tightness of her throat.

'Perhaps you should not talk,' Marcos suggested, but Holly shook her head, despite the pain it cost her.

'I - I might as well get it over with,' she told him, hiding her eyes with the thickness of her lashes. She lay back, reluctantly, on the pillows again when his arm was withdrawn and wondered how swiftly his mood would change if she told him about Helena. She had almost come out with it, impulsively, but already she was wishing she had not been so rash.

'Perdone?' He still stood beside the bed, but where he stood by the top corner post, his face was in the shadows, and looked dark and inscrutable. Almost as if he guessed that what she was about to say would not be to his liking.

'I-I said-'

'I heard what you said,' he interrupted quietly. 'I was merely questioning your choice of phrase. What is it that you might as well get over, Holly?'

Holly bit her lip anxiously. If she told him about Helena it would, without doubt, break this new and exciting rapport between them, and she was reluctant to have that broken after so short a time. The black eyes, however, were showing signs of impatience, and she bit her lip again anxiously, then took a deep breath.

A second later, however, she released the breath as a sigh of relief when the bedroom door was pushed wider to admit her aunt and a short, swarthy-skinned man who she assumed was the doctor. Aunt Nan, Holly thought, had not expected to see Marcos there with her and she frowned her disapproval in a way that quite startled Holly. Ten years in Spain, she thought, had instilled more of Spanish propriety into her aunt than Holly had realized.

'Marcos,' Aunt Nan said to her stepson, 'will you go and join your father and Helena? Doctor Valdare will want to speak to Holly.'
It must have been one of the few times in his life that Marcos had ever been dismissed so summarily, and Holly saw the swift instinctive frown that resented it, but after a second he bobbed his head in brief formality to his stepmother. 'Si, sin duda, Dona Ana,' he said. He looked at Holly for a long moment, and she could see from the expression in his black eyes that he disliked leaving their conversation in that unsatisfactory state of limbo, but there was little he could do about it at the moment. 'Adios, Holly,' he said quietly, and strode out of the room.

'How are you feeling, darling?' her aunt asked, taking her hand and looking down at her anxiously. 'I know your poor leg and your head must be very painful, but I think you look at least a little less pale, doesn't she, Doctor Valdare?'

'You are feeling a little better, senorita?' the doctor asked, and Holly was relieved to note that he spoke excellent English. He took her pulse and looked at the bump on her head, apparently to reassure himself that his first examination had missed nothing. 'Your leg will be painful, of course, but it will feel more comfortable when it has been put into plaster.' His dark, shrewd eyes looked down at her curiously. 'What happened to you, senorita?'

Horribly undecided about how much she should say, Holly glanced at her aunt first, but met with only a look as curious as the doctor's. 'I - I rolled down into a gully at the side of the road,' she said.

Doctor Valdare frowned, obviously not fully satisfied with that explanation. 'There is a mark on your thigh, senorita, that is consistent with your having been struck a blow of some kind. Can you explain that?'

Holly glanced again at Aunt Nan, but received no more encouragement than before. Her aunt was curious, and also a little suspicious, Holly thought, and bit her lip as she faced the prospect of telling them about Helena's dangerous trick.

Aunt Nan, sensing her reluctance, took her hands again and smiled down at her, but her eyes were even more anxious suddenly, and Holly did not yet realize that her own hesitation was the reason for it. 'Holly dear,' she told her quietly, 'you must tell us what happened, you know. Did someone run into you? Was it a car?'

Holly nodded, still strangely reluctant to name the driver of the car, because she still felt that no one would believe her. The Mendez family were as important in the area as the Delgaros, and probably even the good doctor would not be quite so insistent if he had any idea who had been responsible.

'Please, darling!' Her aunt sat on the side of her bed, both her hands covering Holly's, seeking to persuade her, and to comfort and reassure her at the same time.

**She scanned Holly's reluctant face for a long moment, then bit her lip before asking her question. 'Holly dear - was it Marcos?''**

'Marcos?' Holly's husky voice echoed the name hoarsely, her eyes huge with shock. So that was what it had all been leading up to! Marcos had brought her home in his car, white-faced and obviously shaken, and they had immediately assumed that he had been the one who had knocked her down. Her own reluctance to name her assailant had only served to foster that wrong impression, she could see that now.

'You can tell me, if it was, darling,' her aunt said gently. 'I must know, dear.'

'Oh no, Aunt Nan, it wasn't Marcos, of course it wasn't! How could you think he'd do such a thing and then not admit to it? No, no, of course it wasn't Marcos!'

Her fervent denial, Holly thought, both puzzled them and came as a relief, and her aunt shook her head at her as she still pressed for an answer. 'Then who was it, my dear?'

'Helena,' Holly said in her dry, husky voice. 'Helena Mendez.'

"Oh, Holly!" Whether her aunt's exclamation was made in surprise or reproach, Holly was uncertain, but Doctor Valdare's reaction was in no doubt.

'You have received a bad blow on your head, Senorita Gilmour,' he said in his stiff, precise English. 'And you have
been exposed to the sun for possibly longer than is wise for one unused to our climate. You are, I think, suffering from a delusion.'

'I knew no one would believe me,' Holly said resignedly. She felt suddenly very tired and tearful again and not a bit like being questioned. 'That's why I didn't want to tell you.'

'But, Holly dear, you must be mistaken,' Aunt Nan argued, and Holly flushed.

'Why should I have to be mistaken in the case of Helena but not in the case of Marcos?' she demanded. 'You were ready enough to believe it was him only a moment ago!'

The doctor and her aunt exchanged uneasy looks, unable to deny the truth of that at least, then Aunt Nan looked at Holly again and a small frown drew at her brows. 'Darling,' she said gently, taking her hands again, 'Helena's been here for some time, and she said nothing about seeing you along the road - you must be wrong, baby.'

'I'm not wrong, Aunt Nan,' Holly said wearily, her eyelids drooping, eyes suspiciously bright. 'But I didn't expect you to believe me, as I said.'

Again looks were exchanged, and Holly realized that her aunt at least was beginning to have some doubts about Helena's innocence in the matter. The doctor, however, remained to be convinced. 'I think you are mistaken, senorita,' he insisted quietly. 'It is an easy enough mistake to make in the circumstances, but as Senora Delgaro has told you, Senorita Mendez has been here for some time and she has said nothing of seeing you.'

'I know the car,' Holly told him flatly, 'and I know Senorita Mendez, well enough. They both came close enough for there to be no doubt in my mind. She saw the looks of doubt on the two faces still and wished she could feel more like arguing with them, making them see she was right. But already the tears were gathering in her eyes and she put a hand to her aching head. 'Anyway,' she said tearfully, 'it doesn't matter - I shall be gone tomorrow.'

Doctor Valdare shook his head, his cool dry fingers on her hot forehead. 'I think not, Senorita Gilmour,' he said firmly. 'First you must have your leg put into plaster and then you will have to rest. You will not be able to travel for some time yet. I am sorry.'
CHAPTER SEVEN

Holly looked at her aunt anxiously. She could guess how much disturbance her accident had caused in the household, but she did not yet know whether anyone had said anything to Helena about her part in it. It was the evening of the day following the accident and Holly still felt shaky and rather stunned.

She felt as if every bone in her body had been broken, instead of just her left leg, and she was still horribly prone to be tearful at the slightest cause, a state of affairs that she found very frustrating when she was so anxious to be cool and calm. She felt dismayingly close to tears now as she looked at her aunt.

'Oh, Aunt Nan, how can I stay on?' she asked in a husky and not very steady voice. 'You know how anxious I was to get away.' She looked again at her aunt's kindly, placid face and wondered if she was yet ready to accept that Helena had been responsible. 'And especially now,' she added.

Aunt Nan apparently chose, for the moment, not to be drawn, for she merely placed a gentle hand over Holly's and smiled. Her nurse's smile, Holly always, called it, and recognized its professionalism, to calm and console the patient.

'I'm afraid you haven't much choice but to stay on, dear,' her aunt told her. 'For the moment you're out of action, baby, and you just have to realize it. Anyway, you know that Jose and I don't mind how long you stay, although we'd rather it had been in happier circumstances, of course.'

'I know,' Holly said, and smiled ruefully. 'But my flight, Aunt Nan. I—'

'I cancelled it, of course, dear.'

'Oh! Oh, I see.' Somehow cancelling sounded so much more definite than postponement, and Holly pondered on how prolonged her stay was likely to be.

'I had to, naturally,' her aunt told her, and pulled a wry face, her eyes speculative as she looked at Holly. Unfortunately, dear, while I was calling the travel office about it, Marcos heard me. He's very cross to think he'd been left in the dark about your leaving, I'm afraid.'

Holly looked round-eyed, realizing how her well- laid plans had gone awry, and she could well imagine that Marcos would take his exclusion from them with bad grace. 'Oh dear!' she said. 'I'd forgotten that Marcos didn't even know about my leaving.' She looked at her aunt anxiously. 'Did he say anything?' she asked.

Aunt Nan nodded. 'Quite a bit,' she said. 'But he said most of it in rapid Spanish and under his breath, which was probably as well. However, I think he'll want to know why he wasn't told when he sees you next. You know Marcos!'

Then please don't let him see me,' Holly begged. She sighed deeply and leaned back against the supporting pillows. She looked pale and rather fragile in a white lawn nightdress that had tiny puff sleeves and a wide scoop neckline. Her eyes were dark-ringed and looked much too big for her face, giving her a soulful look. 'He was so nice yesterday when I was hurt,' she said wistfully. 'I knew it was too good to last!'

She felt a little better today than she had yesterday, but she was still in pain and dismayingly shaky, so that she was not really sorry to be confined to bed in comfortable ease in this cool airy room. Her head still ached and her broken leg throbbed dully, but here she could rest and not have to bother about anyone.

Aunt Nan sat on a chair beside her bed, and from the look on her face suddenly, Holly suspected what subject she was about to raise. 'Holly dear,' Aunt Nan said, slowly and as if she was not at all sure that she was saying the right thing, 'I know it's a difficult subject and perhaps—' A shrug resigned her to the inevitable. 'Have you thought any more, darling, about who caused your accident?'

For a moment Holly said nothing, but her fingers pleated the coverlet on the bed with deliberate care. 'I don't have to think about it, Aunt Nan,' she said quietly. 'I know who it was.'
'Oh, Holly!' It was almost an appeal to change her mind, and Holly set her soft mouth stubbornly, refusing to allow herself to be persuaded, no matter how politic it might be considered 'Please think about it, dear, for all our sakes,' her aunt urged. 'I know how you dislike Helena, and she has been dreadfully - bitchy to you at times, but you must be mistaken about it being her car.'

'I'm not,' Holly insisted. 'And no amount of persuasion will make me change my mind, Aunt Nan.' She remembered another prospect for a moment. 'Does Marcos know?' she asked, and Aunt Nan gave one of her expressive Latin shrugs.

'I don't know, dear,' she said. 'But he will before very long, I expect. Doctor Valdare told Jose, I know, and I think Jose is deliberating before he decides whether or not to say anything to Marcos.'

'Because he thinks I'm lying too,' Holly guessed bitterly. 'And it's certain whose side Marcos will take, if he's told!' She wished that getting annoyed did not make her headache so much worse.

'Not lying, baby,' Aunt Nan corrected her gently. 'Just making a mistake.'

'I suppose no one's said anything to Helena about it?' Holly asked.

'I don't know,' her aunt said, frowning over it. 'Probably not.'

'I see!' Aunt Nan looked vaguely uneasy. 'I think we thought it best to let you think about it again first, darling. In case you had second thoughts.'

This time it was Holly who shrugged, a resigned and weary shrug. 'I shan't,' she said, in no mood to argue, and especially with her aunt. She guessed she had little hope of being believed, so there was really not much point. After a moment or two she smiled, only too willing to let the matter drop. A huge alabaster vase filled with roses stood on the table beside her bed and she reached out a hand to them. 'These were here when I woke this morning,' she said. 'Someones knows I like roses, thank you, Aunt Nan.'

'I can't really take th credit for them, I'm afraid,' her aunt told her quietly, and the expression in her eyes struck Holly as oddly speculative. 'Marcos got them for you first thing, and Maria brought them up.'

'Oh! Oh, I see!' Holly felt the warmth of colour in her cheeks suddenly and she hastily drew back her hand, her fingers tingling with the cool softness of the rose petals. 'That was very thoughtful of him,' she said.

'He is thoughtful, baby,' her aunt said quietly, and was silent for a moment. 'You may not believe it, Holly dear,' she told her after a moment or two, 'but Marcos is much more sensitive than I think you realize. This - this business about you insisting that it was Helena's car that hit you, could hurt him as much as anyone.'

'Oh, Aunt Nan!' Holly's cry held despair as well as protest. 'What can I do? What do you want me to say - you and Doctor Valdare - all of you?'

'Just admit that you're making a mistake, dear, that's all.'

'But I can't,' Holly insisted desperately. 'I'm prepared to let the whole matter drop. Heaven knows I don't want to - to sue anybody, or make a big issue out of it, I just want the whole matter to be dropped, but you won't let it drop! You may be satisfied if I make all the right noises, but I won't - I can't say it wasn't Helena, when I know perfectly well that it was!'

Aunt Nan sighed, patting her hand gently, professional again, humouring the patient. 'All right, darling, all right,' she said soothingly. 'Don't get upset about it. I know how convinced you are, and I promise I won't mention it again.'

'Thank you, Aunt Nan.'

Holly did the best she could to control the tears, but they rolled dismally down her cheeks and her blue eyes looked
big and vulnerable as a child's. It would be so much easier for her to cope with her bumps and bruises if only she did not feel as if no one in the world wanted to believe that Helena Mendez could be guilty of dangerous driving.

If her aunt was so unwilling to be convinced, it was more certain than ever that Marcos would think she was simply being spiteful towards Helena, seeking retaliation for past wrongs - and somehow that prospect was hardest of all to accept.

She had her broken leg encased in plaster and she had been told to stay in bed for at least another two or three days, but Holly saw no reason why she should not at least hobble across the room to the window, when no one was looking.

She had spent the past five days in bed, and seen no one, except for an occasional visit by her aunt, and the attentions of Maria, the little maid. But Maria spoke very little English, and she was too nervous of the housekeeper to spend too much time away from her other duties, so that she was no use as company for Holly, and the patient was beginning to get restless.

She knew, of course, that Don Jose could not visit her and she could not expect her aunt to spend too much time with her when her husband required not only her company but her professional help as well, but she was in two minds whether or not to be relieved about Marcos staying away.

Admittedly she had asked her aunt not to let him come and see her, but she had not realized just how much she would miss seeing him, or that he would be quite so willing to comply. She understood too, that it would not be considered very proper, by Spanish rules, for a man to visit a young woman in her bedroom, Aunt Nan's reaction to finding him there had expressed as much, but what really bothered Holly was whether or not Don Jose had told him about Helena.

If he had been told about Holly's accusing Helena of being responsible for her accident, it could be that his continued absence, or inquiry after her, was an expression of his anger.

She sat for a moment on the end of the big bed, looking rather forlornly at her reflection in a dressing mirror that stood against the opposite wall. It was a huge, gilt-framed antique, almost seven feet tall, and it gave a head-to-toe reflection of her.

She was the first to admit that she made an oddly lopsided picture, with her heavily plastered left leg clumsily at variance with the delicate flimsiness of a pale pink negligee and nightdress. Her dark hair was loose, the colour of polished mahogany, and tied with a pale pink ribbon that added to the rather childlike and vulnerable effect, an impression further fostered by the wistful expression in her blue eyes. The marks on her grazed cheeks and forehead, she was glad to note, were already beginning to fade.

She gave a sigh, at last, and got awkwardly to her feet, hobbling across to the window to peer out between the slats of the shutters at the arched balcony outside. She could see very little for the heavy-headed bougainvillea that twined around the pillared arches and tried to inveigle its way into the room whenever the shutters were opened, but the scent of roses and orange trees, and the musky perfume of geraniums drifted up to her from the terraces below.

Holly felt suddenly lonely and rather sad, up there in her solitary room, and after a few moments, she raised the catch and opened the shutters a little way. From her balcony it was possible to see quite a long way, down over the vine-clad hillsides to the village, and the dusty ribbon of road appearing and disappearing wherever a gap in the trees allowed.

She could see as far as the far-off hills that shimmered in a distorting heat haze under a coppery blue sky, and the irrigation channels that looked like small, well-ordered streams as they ran between the thirsty crops. It gave one a strangely elated feeling, somehow, being up so high, surrounded by the solid stone walls of the castle and able to see for miles around. No wonder the conquering Moorish Delgaros had handed on such pride and arrogance with the more solid evidence of their victories.

Nearer to her view were the grassy slopes that ran down to the paddock, sheltered behind its fringe of fig trees, and the white stable buildings where the amorous Carlos lived, those buildings too half hidden by another grove of trees.
The whole scene looked hot and breathlessly still in the golden, sun-dried air.

It all looked so familiar and friendly suddenly, basking down there in the sun, and Holly realized with some surprise that she had grown quite attached to the magnificent old castle, in the weeks she had been there. She could now better understand Aunt Nan's opinion that it was a home, like any other. She had thought such a thing impossible at the time, now she felt much the same way about it as her aunt did, having grown used to its size and its ancient splendours.

She was distracted from her day-dreaming suddenly, by the appearance of someone coming up the slope from the stables, and she felt her pulses respond as they always did to the sight of Marcos's tall leanness as he strode out with that masculine grace that was so unmistakable, his black head bared to the full heat of the sun.

He saw her, Holly thought, at almost the same moment she became aware of him, and for a moment he seemed to pause in his stride, looking up at her, a pale pink shadow of a figure among the mass of flowers on the shadowed balcony. Holly hesitated to let him know that she had seen him, and before she could decide whether or not to acknowledge him, he moved on again without even raising a hand.

With her own hand half raised to him, Holly gazed at his rapidly disappearing figure in dismay. He must have seen her, she knew he had seen her, and yet he had not even waved a casual hand to acknowledge her existence. She bit hard on her lip and called herself all kinds of a fool, but there was nothing she could do about the wetness of the tears that rolled down her cheeks.

Marcos had never before so pointedly snubbed her, and it hurt far more than Holly cared to admit. What did concern her most, however, was whether it was the matter of Helena that was angering him most, or his own exclusion from her plans to leave, and at that moment she would have given anything to be able to talk to him.

She stood there for several minutes, her head resting against the cool green shutter frame, feeling even more small and miserable than before, wishing she could get away from the castle, and the general air of suspicion that she was lying, simply to be revenged on Helena Mendez.

It was most unfair that she should have to be subjected to such suspicion on top of everything else she had to suffer. Self-pity had never been an emotion she felt before, but she felt now that she was entitled to a little indulgence.

A light, but insistent, tap on her bedroom door brought her head up sharply a few minutes later, and she hastily rubbed the tears from her eyes, looking across at the empty bed guiltily. If it was Maria, as was most likely, the little maid would undoubtedly report her finding to Aunt Nan, but Holly knew she had no time to get back in before the door was opened.

She did not bother to answer the knock, but stood by the window waiting for whoever it was to come in, and looked across, wide-eyed and apprehensive, as the knob turned. The door was flung open suddenly and with something of a flourish and for a moment Holly stared at Marcos across the room, her mouth parted in surprise, her knees suddenly feeling even weaker and likely to collapse under her at any moment.

He had been riding, and Holly always secretly thought that Marcos looked better in riding clothes than anything else. Smart fawn breeches and highly polished brown boots with spurs, something one seldom saw on an English rider, made him appear incredibly virile and masculine and her senses responded inevitably and uncontrollably to him, no matter how she tried.

Somehow he seemed taller, too, and much darker with a white shirt open at the neck and showing that strong column of neck and throat, and the first suggestion of dark hair across the deep golden chest. He must have discarded the crop he normally carried, en route, for there was no sign of it.

His black eyes regarded her for a moment, but he said nothing, then he strode across the room suddenly, a grim determined look on his face, and his mouth set sternly in a firm straight line, so that for a moment Holly wondered what he meant to do.

She was not long in doubt, however, and she gave a soft cry of surprise when he scooped her up into his arms suddenly and without warning. Her own arms went instinctively around his neck and she was suddenly held close to
him, able to feel the warm strength of his body through the thinness of his shirt.

The warm, masculine scent of him went to her head like wine, a tingling blend of horses and some spicy after-shave that she remembered all too vividly from other times in his arms, and she found herself wishing that the big bedroom was endless so that he would never put her down.

He was either angry or some other emotion, deeper and more disturbing, made his arms steel-hard around her, and his mouth and chin as unyielding as rock. He set her down gently enough in her bed, however, and drew the covers up over her legs without a hint of embarrassment for her lack of covering.

'If you are so anxious to leave here,' he said in a tight, clipped voice, 'you should take care that you do nothing foolish to hinder your recovery.'

Holly had never felt so small and uncertain of herself in her life before, and she looked up at that dark, implacable face through the concealment of her lashes. Her flesh still retained the warmth of his body, and she had only reluctantly slid her arms from around his neck, but she was not at all encouraged by the fierce expression on those hawklike features.

'I'm all right,' she said at last, in a small, meek voice, and he looked at her down that arrogant nose as if she was being too stupid for words.

'If Doctor Valdare considered you to be "all right",' he told her scathingly, 'you would not have been told to remain in bed.'

Holly found the argument daunting for a moment, then she put her hands together in front of her and looked down at her twined fingers. 'I got tired of staying in bed,' she told him, and glanced up hopefully for some glimpse of understanding.

There was no sign of relenting, however, only that grim, tight-lipped look that was discouraging enough to send her heart plummeting into hopelessness. It was Helena, she guessed ruefully. His father had told him about Holly's suspicions and he was treating her with the contempt he thought she deserved.

'I think it far more likely that you simply object to doing as you are told,' Marcos said, and Holly would have protested. The steady, black-eyed gaze held her silent, however, and she merely shook her head.

He neither moved nor spoke for some moments and after a while it became unbearable. He stood at the head of the bed, his face in the shadows, and the dark implacability of him unnerved her at last.

'I'm - I'm sorry I didn't - I mean I'm sorry about you not knowing I was leaving,' she said, choosing what was probably the lesser of two evils, and one black brow arched in disbelief.

'Do you expect me to believe that, when you asked that I should not be told?' he asked. 'I find that very difficult to believe, senorita!' Holly's hands clenched hard over that unfriendly formality. 'Oh, don't start calling me senorita again!' she begged hastily. 'I've been here long enough now to know it isn't just polite, but a way of putting me firmly in my place!'

Marcos's black eyes looked down at her steadily. 'Since you seemed unwilling to allow me even the privilege of being told of your departure,' he said in the same cool voice, 'I assumed that you wished to be on formal terms. I have no wish to force my friendship upon you, senorita.'

'Oh, please don't!' Holly begged, and the tears again gathered in her eyes as she looked up at him appealingly. 'I - I don't feel well enough to quarrel with you, Marcos!'

'I am not quarrelling,' Marcos stated adamantly. 'I am merely trying to keep our - relationship,' one expressive hand gave double meaning to the word, 'on the formal footing you so obviously prefer.'

'But I don't!' Holly cried desperately, trying not to cry. 'I don't want - I don't—' She put a hand to her aching
head. 'Oh, I wish I could go! I wish I could have gone when I was supposed to, then you wouldn't even have to
bother being formally polite to me!'

Holly felt tired and exhausted, her head ached abominably and she wanted to cry like a baby as she leaned back on
the softness of the pillows and turned her face away from him. For a very long time he said nothing, but when he
spoke again his voice had lost a lot of its cool hardness and there was a hint of that thrilling warmth in it that
shivered along her spine like an icy finger.

'Are you so very anxious to leave us, Holly?' he asked, but Holly did not answer. Instead she shook her head and,
after a moment, one strong brown hand slid warmly against her neck, the strong fingers cupping her jaw and turning
her to face him again. One brief glance revealed a softer line to his mouth and his fingers lay against her face gently.
'Why, nina?' he asked softly.

'I - I have to go,' Holly told him, succumbing to the very emotions that had made her decision necessary. 'I - I think
I've been here long enough, Marcos.'

His thumb moved back and forth caressingly, almost sensually, on her cheek, and Holly was helpless to resist the
uncontrollable desire for him that even that light touch aroused in her. 'Is it Helena?' he asked softly, and Holly
hastily moved out of his reach, feeling that same cold chill of reality that his mentioning Helena always produced.

But Marcos was not prepared to let her escape so easily. "Holly?" He cupped her face again in his hand and she was
forced to look up, if not to meet his eyes. 'You are blaming Helena for your accident,' he said, and the inflection in
his voice made it all too clear that such a thing was too ridiculous for words. 'Why, pequena?' he insisted. 'Is it that
you seek revenge for the times Helena has been - unkind to you?'

'It's because it's the truth!' Holly said in a small, tight voice. 'Although it suits everyone not to believe it!'

'It does not suit everyone not to believe it,' Marcos argued quietly, still unbelievably calm when she had expected an
explosion of indignant denial in defence of Helena. 'But you have to be wrong, Holly, you must see that.'

'I don't see it!' Holly declared violently. 'Why do I have to be wrong? Is it because everyone finds it unbelievable
that Senorita Mendez could do such a thing and not admit to it? Or because the accusation comes from a - a nobody
like me?'

'Now you're being silly!'

'Oh, stop talking to me as if I was a stupid child!' Holly told him shortly. Her head was aching and she wished she
could decide whether she wished herself miles away from him at the moment, or even closer than that light touch on
her face. She was trapped, unable to even get up and walk away from him and sooner or later, she knew, she would
say something that would shatter his present calm and rekindle that stern implacable expression he had worn when
he came in.

'Naturally you don't want to believe anything against Helena,' she went on bitterly. 'She's too important to you, and
Doctor Valdare doesn't want to believe it because he's probably known her all her life!'

A hurt, childlike vulnerability showed in her eyes for a moment. 'I did think Aunt Nan would have believed me,' she
said wistfully. 'But I suppose she's become as Spanish as the rest of you in the ten years she's spent here and she
can't believe that a well-brought-up Spanish girl could do anything like running me down in her car.'

'Please don't blame Dona Ana,' Marcos told her firmly, a warning glint in his black eyes when she looked up at him.
'Perhaps your aunt has acquired some of our ways in the time she has lived here with us, but she would not judge
you unfairly, and you will not speak of her so.'

Tired of being blamed, of getting the worst of every attempt to tell them the truth, Holly felt the sudden need to
retaliate, and Marcos was nearest. She stuck her chin in the air and looked up at him meaningly, her soft mouth firm
and angry. 'Aunt Nan certainly has acquired some Spanish customs,' she told him. 'Such as not liking to find you in
my bedroom.' She challenged him deliberately with the provocative tilt of her head and the look in her eyes. 'And
now you're here again,' she said. 'That's surely not the done thing for a Spanish gentleman, is it?"
'Sagrada Madre de Dios!' Marco breathed softly, and dropped down swiftly beside her on the bed. His fingers dug cruelly into the tops of her arms, his mouth, hard and bruising and completely ruthless, stifling the cry she made, while the lean hardness of his body pressed her back into the pillows.

It occurred to Holly, briefly, that she should have made some attempt to push him away, but even had she had the strength to accomplish it, she had no desire at all to do anything other than respond to the almost savage way he kissed her. His hands and arms had a bruising strength, one arm holding her so close that she could feel the erratic throb of his heartbeat against her and the other hand twined in the soft darkness of her hair, keeping her firmly where he wanted her.

'Marcos!' Her mouth, freed of that fierce assault for a moment, breathed against his ear, and her hands curved either side of his head, bowed low to press his lips against her neck and throat.

It was staggering, therefore, when only seconds later he drew back, his hands strong but oddly trembling on her bare shoulders, a dark, unfathomable look on his face and in his black eyes as he looked down at her. Slowly he got to his feet, his hands sliding down her arms, leaving her reluctantly, it seemed.

'I should not have done that,' he said, in a quiet, cool voice, while Holly fought to ease the erratic shudder of her breath as she lay back on the soft pillows trying to understand what he was saying to her. 'Dona Ana is right to frown upon my coming into your room, and I will not do so again.'

Holly shook her spinning, throbbing head slowly, looking up at him, still half dazed with the sudden change in the situation. 'Why - why did you come, Marcos?' she asked in a whisper, and he held her gaze steadily for a moment, his black eyes quite unfathomable in the cool shadiness of the room.

'Perhaps for the same reason that you looked down from your window, pequena,' he said softly. 'We both dream too much, I think.' A small, rather bitter smile touched his wide straight mouth for a second. 'You are a dream I cannot afford to have too often, nina mia. Forgive me!'

With one of those stiff, formal little bows he turned and strode across the room to the door, turning momentarily to look at her, briefly and disturbingly. 'Adios, nina mia,' he called softly, and Holly tinned away her head, her eyes already misted with the tears she knew she could no longer hold back. That 'adios' had sounded so very final.
CHAPTER EIGHT

If Marcos's visit the previous day had been a surprise to her, Holly was even more stunned when Aunt Nan came in the following afternoon, to see that she was accompanied by Helena. 'A visitor to see you, baby,' her aunt announced as she came into the room, and it was easy to see that the visit was none of her choosing, and that she was plainly uneasy about it. 'Do you feel like visitors?' she asked, and Holly inclined her head, unsure just how to respond to that question without being rude. Helena Mendez was the last person she wanted, or had expected to see, but she could scarcely say as much.

Helena looked as stunningly eye-catching as always, and the sight of her did nothing to reassure Holly that some ulterior motive did not lay behind the visit. Her tall figure was flattered and revealed by a dress of clinging dark blue silk that wisped about her elegant long legs when she walked, and she wore a wide-brimmed hat over her black hair, the same blue as the dress, and with a band of pale blue and white chiffon circling the crown.

She looked smart and elegant and as hard as iron, and Holly's heart was already beating a little faster when she looked up at that dark, unfriendly face. 'It's good of you to come, Senorita Mendez,' Holly murmured politely.

Helena's black eyes went to the mound under the bedclothes where Holly's left leg bulged with its plaster cast. 'You have a broken leg?' she asked.

'Holly also has concussion from a bad bang on her head,' Aunt Nan told her, before Holly could answer for herself. 'She needs to rest a lot, Helena.'

Helena inclined her head, but showed no signs of expressing regret at having disturbed her, or sympathy for her injuries, and Holly wondered what on earth lay behind the visit. Certainly not concern for Holly's health, of that she was certain.

Aunt Nan looked anxious, as well she might, Holly thought ruefully, for in the circumstances Helena was even more likely than usual to have the upper hand Holly was vulnerable enough to her brand of malice when she was on her feet and in full command of her faculties, but being confined to bed and conscious of the clumsy hump of her plastered leg beneath the covers, she felt completely helpless.

'You are recovering, I understand,' Helena said. She stood beside the bed and from Holly's half sitting position in it, looked to be even taller than usual.

Holly nodded, her eyes wary. 'Yes - thank you, senorita.'

'Bueno! Then soon you will be fit enough to travel, si?'

The reason for the unexpected visit was quite clear suddenly, and Holly almost smiled when she realized it. Helena had obviously only just learned the truth at last; that Holly had been on the point of leaving when the accident occurred, and she could well imagine what a bitter pill it must have been for her to swallow, realizing that but for her own vicious action, Holly might have been gone a week ago.

'I hope to be fit enough very soon now,' Holly agreed. She was finding it very hard not to enjoy the thought of how Helena must be feeling, but even such a minor sense of revenge was rather sweet, and she felt quite entitled to it in the circumstances.

Helena turned to Aunt Nan after a moment or two of rather telling silence, but her smile was a mere caricature of friendliness. 'Please do not let me detain you, Senora Delgaro,' she said in her smoothest voice. 'I know Don Jose will be wanting you, and I would like to speak with Senorita Gilmour for a few moments, that is all.'

She might have been dismissing a servant, Holly thought, instead of her hostess, and she saw the way her aunt frowned. 'It is time for Jose's tablets,' she said, but was obviously loath to leave Holly to Helena's mercy. 'But - I think perhaps Holly would like me to stay, would you, baby?'

Helena's lip curled derisively at them both, and her black brows flicked upwards in a scornful arch. It was obvious
that she interpreted their fears all too easily. 'You need have no fears for the safety of your niece, senora,' she said. 'I wish only to speak with her.'

'Yes, of course you do,' Aunt Nan allowed, quietly. 'But please don't stay too long, Helena. Visitors aren't really very good for Holly at the moment.'

'You do not trust me, senora!' Helena asked softly, and her black eyes challenged Aunt Nan to deny it. 'I can assure you that I have only the interests of your niece at heart, Senora Delgaro.'

Aunt Nan looked from Helena to Holly, seeking a solution and apparently finding none but to leave them alone. It was difficult for her to refuse to leave them, Holly could see that, but just the same she faced the idea of her aunt's departure with a cold sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

'Will you be all right for a few moments, Holly dear?' her aunt asked, and Holly could do nothing else but nod agreement. Anything else would have branded her as afraid of being alone with Helena and, while it was true to a certain extent, she was unwilling to admit it, especially to Helena.

'Yes, of course I'll be all right, Aunt Nan,' she said. 'You go and see about Tio Jose's tablets.'

Holly seldom claimed the relationship with her host so openly, and she saw Helena frown over her familiarity, but she felt that in some way it put her in a stronger position. Holly was already part of the family, however remotely, while Helena still sought admission to it.

'All right, darling, I'll see you a little later.' Aunt Nan smoothed professional hands over the bedcovers, and brushed back Holly's hair from her forehead in the same soothing motion. 'Don't get too wound up, dear, will you?' she said, half under her breath, and Holly smiled at her.

'I'll try not to,' she promised.

If only Helena would sit down, Holly thought, she would not appear so overpoweringly tall as she stood beside the bed, and she tried to persuade her to do so as soon as the door had closed behind her aunt.

'Please sit down, Senorita Mendez,' she suggested, indicating a chair some distance away, but Helena shook her head, frowning impatiently.

'I prefer to stand,' she said, and narrowed her dark eyes as she looked down at Holly. 'I did not realize that you had intended to leave so soon,' she said after a moment of speculative scrutiny. 'You told no one that you were going.'

There was to be no preliminary sparring, it seemed. Helena meant to have everything out in the open from the start, and somehow Holly found it almost a relief. 'I told Aunt Nan and Don Jose,' she said quietly. 'I didn't consider it necessary to tell anyone else my plans, senorita.'

'You did not think that Marcos should be told?'

The black eyes were narrowed, challenging, and Holly lowered her own when she remembered her reasons for not wanting Marcos to know she was going. 'I didn't think it was necessary,' she agreed.

'Why?'

The one word was almost spat at her, and Holly looked up swiftly, startled by the vehemence of the question. 'I - I just didn't think so, that's all,' she said.

'Hah!' Again the vehemence of the reply made Holly blink. 'You did not tell Marcos, I think,' Helena said, 'because you would wish that he would ask you to stay on if you did, huh?'

'I did nothing—' Holly began, but Helena dismissed the interruption with a disdainful hand.

'You could not bear the thought of being wrong about it,' she went on. 'To have to face the fact that Marcos would
not care when or how you went, so you did not tell him about it!'

That's not true!' Holly denied quickly, and hoped her voice sounded more convincing to Helena than it did to herself.

'Pah! I do not believe you!'

It was difficult, in the face of such provocation, but Holly held her temper firmly in check, and sat with her hands in front of her, held tightly together. 'That's your privilege, Senorita Mendez,' she said quietly, and Helena stared at her for a moment, obviously puzzled by her lack of response.

Then she clamped her lips tightly together, and a faint flush coloured the olive skin over her high cheekbones. 'I also understand that you accuse me of being responsible for your accident,' she said, seeking another tack, since her first had failed to have the desired effect. Her black eyes glittered angrily and Holly noticed how much more pronounced her accent seemed than usual. 'You are foolish to make such accusations, sucia! No one will believe you!'

'I've already discovered that,' Holly admitted frankly. 'But it makes no difference to the truth, Senorita Mendez. I know it was you and so do you, but since I have no intention of suing you for dangerous driving or anything else, it doesn't really matter whether anyone else believes it or not.'

For a moment Helena's dark eyes regarded her suspiciously. 'You do not mean to go to the policial she asked, and Holly shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'It would hurt too many other people if I pursued it to the bitter end.' She looked at Helena steadily. 'Not that I wouldn't like to,' she added.

'Without proof? You would not dare to!' Helena declared confidently, and Holly faced the fact ruefully.

But it was not the fact that she had no proof that made her think as she did, and she wanted Helena to know it. 'Possibly not,' she said. 'But I really wouldn't like innocent parties to suffer just so that I could have my revenge on you, Senorita Mendez.'

'No?' She was obviously not believed.

'No,' Holly insisted. 'For myself I'd make you pay for the - the barbaric way you ran me down, but anything I did to you would hurt Aunt Nan and Don Jose, and I wouldn't want that to happen.' She looked up through the thickness of her lashes, watching for the reaction she felt was bound to come. 'And most of all I'd hate to hurt Marcos,' she added quietly.

She drew a sharp breath suddenly when she caught sight of the look in Helena's eyes, for it was something of a shock to realize for the first time in her life that someone actually hated her; hated her with an intensity that made her shiver.

She stared up at Helena and a small, cold flutter of panic clutched at her stomach when she remembered how helpless she was. Helena Mendez was tall, and probably a powerful, woman. If she was capable of handling those temperamental Arab horses of Marcos's, she would be more than capable of dealing with Holly, in her present position.

Helena said nothing for a moment, but her eyes glittered like jet in the olive smoothness of her face. Then she reached out suddenly and took a handful of Holly's dark hair, doing nothing more at first than twine it round her long fingers. Then the grip tightened suddenly and without warning and she twisted hard.

'Usted se ha equivocado, rustica,' she said softly, between tightly clenched teeth 'Lo siento!'

Holly bit her lip hard, not to cry out, but she instinctively put up her own hands to try and loosen that merciless grip in her hair. The bump on the back of her head made her scalp still tender enough to hurt with a sickening pain when it was subjected to such treatment, and she could feel the tears already running from her eyes and down her cheeks as she struggled to free herself.
'Let go!' she whispered huskily, clawing at the cruel fingers still gripping her hair. 'Please let go!'

'Rustica perra!' Helena twisted again, and Holly let out a cry, fighting to free herself.

'Let me go!' she begged, unable to do anything against the superior strength of the other girl, and Helena laughed shortly.

'I will let you go!' she said harshly, and gave another sharp tug before she released her. 'But be warned, perra,' she added. 'Do not dare to look at Marcos again. Comprende?'

Holly said nothing. Her voice was choked with the tears of anger and frustration as well as pain, that poured down her cheeks unchecked. She held her throbbing head in both hands, covering her eyes and leaning back against the pillows. But her hands were pulled roughly away from her eyes after only a moment, and through the haze of tears she saw Helena bending over her, those glittering black eyes hovering like a threat above her. An enveloping wave of some heavy, exotic perfume made Holly feel suddenly nauseated, both by the perfume and the woman who wore it.

'Did you hear me, perra?' Helena demanded, and Holly nodded, although she immediately regretted the movement and clutched her aching head again. 'Then you will go!' Helena told her in a cold harsh voice. 'As soon as you are well enough to travel, you will leave here and never come back again!'

For a moment Holly merely looked at her, swallowing hard on the humiliation of being so helpless, of being so angry and yet unable to do anything about it. 'I want to go,' she insisted, her voice husky and unsteady. 'I would have gone a week ago, if you hadn't done this to me! It's your fault I'm still here!'

'Si, that was a mistake I made.' Helena stood upright beside the bed again. Her tall, shapely figure and arrogant bearing, the ruthlessness of her anger, gave her a kind of savage grandeur, and even Holly, for all her own misery, was forced to recognize that such a woman would make a fitting mate for Marcos's hawklike pride, unbearable as the idea was.

She would give him tall, dark Spanish sons to carry on the Delgaro name into yet another century, and they would, in their turn, marry women like Helena Mendez because it was what they were meant to do. And if they too made occasional and casual love to some visiting English girl - well, it was a well established precedent, and why shouldn't they?

Holly shook her head, bringing herself out of a reverie that did nothing to ease her own misery, and almost overlooking the fact that Helena had finally admitted to being responsible for her accident.

'You - you've admitted it!' she said, watching Helena with half closed eyes, almost too tired to care. 'You admitted that you knocked me down and - and just drove off!'

Helena shrugged her elegant shoulders, evidently considering herself safe enough in admitting it, while there was no one but Holly to hear her. 'Why should I not admit I knocked you down?' she asked. 'As you have discovered, no one will believe it but you. I only regret that I did not know you were leaving so soon.'

Holly stared at her, still not quite able to grasp the fact that someone could actually hate her enough to do anything as deliberately callous. 'You - you really meant to hurt me?' she said, and Helena shrugged again.

'I meant for you to be - how is it? - scared. Scared enough to leave here.'

It was ironic really, Holly thought, and almost smiled. 'But it misfired,' she said. 'I'm still here.' She leaned back wearily against the softness of the pillows and closed her eyes, wishing with all her heart that Helena would go and leave her in peace.

'You are still here, but you are up here where no one sees you,' Helena said, and her ignorance of Marcos's visits gave Holly a certain grim satisfaction. 'Up here,' Helena went on, 'you cannot force your infantil co- queteria upon Marcos.' Her voice became soft and menacing again, and the smile that showed her excellent teeth owed nothing at all to good humour. 'And should you try to do so again when you are recovered,' she said, 'then I shall show you,
sucia, just how much I can hurt you! Comprende?'

Holly said nothing, there was nothing she could say in the face of such unrelenting malice, and she turned her head hopefully in the direction of the door, when it opened, closing her eyes in a brief prayer of relief when she saw her aunt standing there.

Aunt Nan looked almost as if she could guess something of what had taken place during her absence, and she frowned at the glisten of tears in Holly's eyes and the pale, drawn look of her face. Then she came across to the bed and looked at Helena steadily, her small, plump figure drawn up to its full height and her blue eyes shining with determination.

'I think it's time you left, Helena,' she told her. 'Holly's obviously not at all well, and I don't think your being here is doing anything at all to help. Please leave now. You'll find Marcos downstairs.'

If Helena's dismissal of her had been summary, Aunt Nan's banishment of Helena was even more crushing, and it looked for a moment as if Helena would object to it, but then she gave a last malicious look at Holly and stalked haughtily out of the room, banging the door firmly behind her. For a moment after she had gone Aunt Nan stood looking at the closed door, then she turned slowly and looked down at Holly.

Her blue eyes were gentle and curious, but speculative too, as she put a soothing hand on Holly's brow. 'What happened, darling?' she asked quietly, and Holly felt on the verge of tears again when she thought of all that had taken place, and how unlikely it was that her aunt would believe half of what she told her.

'She admitted it,' she said huskily. 'She admitted to running me down in her car, Aunt Nan, because she said she knew no one would believe it.'

Her aunt sat down on the edge of the bed, and for a moment or two she studied Holly's drawn face with anxious and uncertain eyes, then she reached out and covered her hands gently. 'Did you accuse her, Holly?' she asked.

'She raised the subject herself, Aunt Nan,' Holly said. 'I didn't. She raised several matters, in fact, including the reason she did it.'

'Did she, darling?' The gentle hands encouraged her, but there was still a look of doubt in her aunt's kind, friendly face, and Holly shook her head, although it cost her dear to do so.

'It doesn't matter,' she said in a soft, resigned voice. She leaned her head back on the pillows and closed her eyes against the tears that were already starting again. 'You wouldn't believe that, either.'

It was another two days before Doctor Valdare considered Holly fit enough to get up and two more before he allowed her downstairs. Anxious as she was to be on her feet again, she viewed the prospect of facing them all again with some trepidation.

It seemed to Holly that nearly two weeks was rather a long time to have been kept in bed for only a minor concussion. The broken leg would have healed as well if she simply rested it, and it occurred to her that perhaps Aunt Nan had thought it best if she spent as much of her recovery time as possible away from contact with Helena, and had persuaded the doctor to see it too.

Holly had to admit that she looked forward to seeing Marcos again, but the prospect of Helena gave her much less pleasure. It was with mixed feelings, therefore, that she prepared for her first day downstairs.

She had dressed herself slowly, realizing for the first time how much twelve days in bed had weakened her. She still looked rather pale, but it was a creamy paleness that flattered rather than detracted from her looks, and her eyes looked deep blue and huge between their fringe of dark lashes. A brief dress of rose pink with a demure little girl collar gave her a fragile and feminine look and she smiled as she took a last look at herself in the long mirror. Only the heavy plaster cast on her left leg struck a jarring note, and she frowned at it in dislike.

There was a soft tap on her bedroom door and she turned to smile a welcome at her aunt. But it wasn't Aunt Nan
who opened the door and stood smiling at her, it was Marcos, and she felt the sudden wild leap her heart gave at the sight of him. It seemed so much longer than six days since she had seen him and she was almost surprised to see him unchanged.

He wore slim-fitting dark blue trousers and a cream silk shirt, and instinctively her eyes sought that glimpse of deep golden chest and the first shadowy darkness of black hair where the shirt fastened. She shook her head slowly when he came across the room to her, remembering his parting words to her - that she was a dream he could not afford to have too often.

'You - you shouldn't be here,' she told him, her voice sounding dismayingly unsteady.

Marcos smiled, that rare and devastating smile, and his black eyes held hers steadily as he looked down at her. 'I came to fetch you, nina,' he said softly.

'Oh!' She sat with her hands held tightly together on her lap, trying to control the impulse to lift up her arms to him, accept any excuse to have him hold her close to him. 'Do - do they know you're here?' she asked, and Marcos cocked a questioning brow at her, surveying her curiously, his hands on his hips.

'If by they, you refer to my father and Dona Ana,' he said softly, 'yes, nina, they know I am here.'

'Oh, I see!' Apparently in this instance his coming to her room was not taken amiss, although she could not imagine that Aunt Nan had thought it a good idea.

'I persuaded them,' he told her, with a smile, as if he guessed what she was thinking. 'You have that clumsy cast on your leg and you could not be expected to walk down so many stairs when you have not walked at all for so long.' His eyes glittered a challenge at her, daring her to refuse to let him carry her, and she hastily lowered her gaze again.

'As it happens I can walk quite well,' she told him. 'I was practising all day yesterday and the day before. I'll make it all right.'

Marcos said nothing for a second, then he reached out his hands and put them on her shoulders, standing close enough to play havoc with her senses as he worked that special kind of magnetism he always did on her. His palms were warm through the thin cotton dress and his fingers moved caressingly, kneading gently at her shoulders, his thumbs smoothing softly against her neck.

'You have spent almost two weeks in bed, mi pichon,' he said quietly, his voice, as well as those hypnotic fingers, seeking to persuade her. 'You must be as weak as a baby, and yet you would rather struggle with that clumsy plaster cast than let me carry you. Why, mi tonta nina?'

Holly was shaking her head, partly to rid herself of the wild impulses that were making her head spin, and making it hard to resist laying her face against those caressing hands. 'Is - is Helena down there?' she asked huskily, and felt the fingers tighten on her shoulders suddenly until they dug into her.

'Helena is not here,' he said quietly, after several moments. 'And I cannot think why it should matter to you if she was.'

Holly looked up at him reproachfully. He must surely see how wrong that was, unless he refused to see things in any other way but the one that suited him. 'Marcos, you know it would matter,' she told him, and he shrugged.

'You are my cousin, and I cannot see why anyone would object if I carry you downstairs when you cannot walk. You are making mountains, Holly.'

'Out of molehills,' Holly supplied automatically, and raised her eyes to look at him. 'And I'm not your cousin at all, Marcos, not really. You know perfectly well I'm not, you just say that to - to —'

'Si?^3 Marcos prompted softly, and dug his fingers into her shoulders hard enough to make her shrug them in protest. 'What are you accusing me of now?'
'I didn't say I was accusing you of anything!' Holly protested.

His nearness, the warm vibrancy of him, filled her with a desperate hunger for him, and those hard unyielding hands on her shoulders had a strength that was irresistible, only the thumbs moving slowly, almost sensually against her neck.

'Then why do you refuse my help?' he asked.

'Because - because I'm capable of helping myself,' Holly declared, trying to shrug off his hands and to stand up at the same time.

He exerted enough pressure to keep her seated on the end of the bed, and she soon gave up the struggle. 'So,' he said, 'you are not my cousin and you do not need my help, and—' He shrugged his broad shoulders resignedly. 'It matters if Helena is here or not. Forgive me for listing your objections, pequena, but I am trying to follow your reasoning.'

'It's not difficult,' Holly told him, feeling now that she had been unreasonable, perhaps a little over-sensitive, but not prepared to simply give way. 'I'm not your cousin, Marcos, that's just a - a sop to your conscience, and—'

'My conscience?' He regarded her for a moment, his brows drawn. 'Why do you think I should have a conscience about you? Madre de Dips!' he breathed softly, but you must always try and make me feel guilty about Helena, must you not?

'You may not feel guilty about her!' Holly cried, 'but I do! And I'm the one who has to take the blame, get knocked down by a car, have my hair tugged and twisted until I could scream with the pain in my head, just because you don't think of the effect you can have, of the impression you give! Well, you may not care, but I-

'Parada!' Holly stopped there, her eyes wide, stunned by the black glittering anger that looked down at her. She had been too impulsive, saying so much to Marcos, but it was too late to retract now. His hands pulled her to her feet so that she found herself even closer to him, and felt the anger and tension that emanated from him like a physical force.

'You accused Helena of running you down in her car,' he said, in that cool, hard voice she hated so much. 'Are you now saying that she - assaulted you as well?'

'She came to see me while I was in bed,' Holly said, in a small reluctant voice. He looked so disbelieving that she immediately flew to her own defence. 'Ask Aunt Nan,' she told him. 'She brought Helena up to see me.'

The black eyes regarded her steadily. 'And Dona Ana was present when - it happened?'

'Oh no, of course not!' Holly's laugh had a short, hollow sound, for she recognized all too clearly that she was not going to be believed. 'No one was there when Helena admitted to running me down, either,' she said. 'I'm afraid she's much too clever for me!'

For a moment he said nothing, and Holly had a faint hope that he might perhaps be prepared to believe her, at least in part, but then he shook his head slowly and the hands on her shoulders squeezed gently, as if to convey some message of understanding. 'Holly, I know you do not like Helena, and perhaps she has—'

'She hates me!' Holly cried desperately, and flung away from him. She could no longer bear to have any physical contact with him, not knowing how he felt, how he was ready to defend Helena because he could do nothing else when she meant so much to him.

He was ready to go to any lengths to persuade Holly to let him carry her downstairs in his arms, perhaps even kiss her again in that savage, passionate way that deprived her of all sense, but he was still not prepared to hear a word of complaint against Helena. He still refused to believe that it was Holly who bore the brunt of Helena's spite.

'Perhaps it doesn't matter to you!' she said shakily, her hands smoothing down her dress in a quick nervous gesture. 'But I've had enough, Marcos. I'm leaving just as soon as Doctor Valdare says I can travel, and in the meantime I'd rather you didn't try to - help me! I'll walk downstairs! I don't need you!'
For a moment she had the wild idea that he would strike her, but then he turned suddenly and swiftly and strode out of the room, leaving the door open behind him, and the muffled sound of his footsteps as he went towards the stairs.

It was much more difficult walking than Holly had anticipated, and she felt emotionally spent after her argument with Marcos. A few feet back and forth across the bedroom was not like taking the long length of the carpeted passageway to the stairs, and she was feeling breathless and horribly weak-kneed before she was half-way there.

She rested for a while, sitting on one of the ornate gilt chairs beneath one of Marcos's black-browed ancestors, and she was nearly in tears at the frustration of being so weak. It took several moments before she felt even a little better, but if she did not appear downstairs soon, Aunt Nan would begin to wonder what had happened to her.

She got to her feet again and hobbled along the passageway, the heavy plaster cast thudding clumsily, hampering her like a shackle, so that by the time she reached the top of the stairs she was feeling ready to collapse again. She stopped, leaning against the wall at the top of the staircase, her head resting against the cool of a green marble urn.

It was only seconds that she stood there like that, but in that time Marcos had appeared from somewhere, downstairs, she suspected, and she felt a strong, comforting hand slide round her waist from behind, his long fingers almost spanning her slimness.

'Are you ready to give in?' he murmured against her ear, and Holly nodded. His dark hair brushed against her face when he bent his head, gently brushing aside her hair and pressing his lips to her neck. 'Then let me help you, nina' he whispered. His breath warmed her soft skin as he spoke and without a second thought, Holly reached up and lay her palm to his cheek.

'Please,' she said.

He lifted her easily into his arms, as he had done before, and again she was assailed by the warmth and strength of him, of that very masculine scent that reminded her of horses and after-shave, overwhelming when she was held close against the broadness of his chest. Her own arms went instinctively round his neck and she looked for a moment straight into his eyes.

He stood there at the head of the stairs with her in his arms, his black eyes glittering like jet, then he bent his head and brushed her mouth with his own - a light, gentle kiss that set her pulses racing with its promise. 'Poco sueno,' he whispered softly against her lips. 'Mi bello sueno.'

His arms tightened around her, holding her so close she could feel the strong muscles that surged under the smooth brown skin, and his mouth took possession of hers completely, depriving her of all sense and feeling, except her desire for him.

Holly looked up at him at last, through heavy fringed eyes, at the small, throbbing pulse near one corner of his mouth, and she slid her hand under the smooth softness of the silk shirt to the roughness of dark hair on his broad chest. 'Marcos—'

'Ssh, nina!' He kissed her mouth again, a light teasing kiss. 'I must take you downstairs or someone win come to look for you.' His black eyes glowed with a warmth that turned Holly's willpower to nothing, and her lips parted eagerly under his when he found her mouth again, with a hungry urgency there was no denying.

It seemed like an eternity until she became conscious of anything else but Marcos and her own quite frightening desire for him. Then she realized that another voice beside her own was speaking his name — a shocked, disapproving voice that she was some time in recognizing as her aunt's.

'Marcos!' Holly turned wide, surprised eyes and saw the group at the bottom of the stairs, and after one brief look, she moaned softly and hid her face against Marcos's shoulder. It would have been bad enough for Aunt Nan to have seen what she did, but Aunt Nan was not alone. Helena had presumably just arrived and she stood down there in the huge grandeur of the hall.
Tall and dark, she reminded Holly of an avenging goddess. Outwardly fairly composed, Holly could guess from the tightness of her mouth the tumult that was going on behind that elegant facade. Her black eyes glittered, taking Holly for their target, and glowing with such a chilling intensity that she shivered.

Worst of all, perhaps, was the presence of Maria, the little maid, who stood beside Aunt Nan with her mouth open and her eyes wide and startled. Both Helena and Aunt Nan would find it even harder to forgive Marcos for behaving as he had in front of one of the servants, and she wished with all her heart that she could go back to her bedroom again and hide herself until the storm was over.

Marcos looked down at them all, and Holly saw the gleam of defiance that glittered in his black eyes. The arrogant disregard for anyone's opinion but his own, that was a large part of his appeal.

'Courage, mi pichon,' he whispered in Holly's ear, and started downstairs with her in his arms.
CHAPTER NINE

Marcos carried Holly into the big salon and put her down gently into one of the ornate gilt armchairs. She slid her arms from around his neck only very reluctantly, for somehow physical contact with him gave her more courage, and she imagined that she would need all the nerve she could summon when Helena Mendez began taking her revenge.

Marcos straightened up, standing tall and arrogantly straight beside her for a moment, his feet apart, his hands clasped together behind his back. He looked down his hawklike nose at his father, as if it was to him that he owed an explanation, although Don Jose could not yet be aware that there was anything to explain.

Helena took a seat as near to Marcos as she could get, one elegant leg crossed over the other, her dark face set and brooding, ready to do her virulent worst, Holly guessed. She looked up at Marcos, but he was paying her no heed, his gaze still on his father.

He looked as if he would have said something to him, but his stepmother caught his eye and she shook her head very slightly. Enough to make him pause before he spoke, then, after looking at her curiously for a moment or two, he gave a resigned shrug and walked across to sit on the other side of his father.

If Don Jose suspected anything was amiss, he gave no sign, but looked across at Holly with his almost sightless eyes. 'It is you, Holly, si?' he asked, and Holly nodded, not immediately realizing that he could not see her very clearly.

'Yes, Don Jose.' She would like to have been near enough to touch his hand, let him know where she was, but she was still shaking a little so she did not attempt to get to her feet yet.

'Ah!' His pleasure was obvious. 'You are pleased to be with us again, si, cara?'

'It's nice to be able to move about again,' Holly agreed cautiously. 'Although I'm rather clumsy at the moment with this cast on my leg.'

Don Jose nodded understanding and like that, with his face turned sideways on to her, she was reminded of how much like him his son was. The same proud posture of the head and the strong hawklike profile, and her heart played her tricks when she imagined Marcos ever being like this.

'It was because of your difficulty in moving about, and because you have been inactive for so long,' Don Jose told her, as if his son's action needed explanation, that we thought it permissible for Marcos to come to your room and help you. I trust, in the circumstances, you did not consider it too—' His long thin hands lent delicate meaning to the pause, and Holly sighed her relief that he had not learned of Marcos's earlier visits to her room.

'It was very thoughtful of you,' she said, and felt Helena's virulent gaze on her again. 'Thank you, Don Jose.'

Don Jose shook his head regretfully. 'Soon you will be leaving us, hmm?' He held out his hands, and Holly could not resist responding to the rather touching gesture. She got to her feet and came to stand beside him, taking the proffered hands in her own.

From the corner of her eye she saw Marcos move swiftly, and a moment later he set down a velvet-seated gilt stool beside his father's chair, then he put his hands on her shoulders, exerting gentle pressure, urging her to sit down. She smiled up at him gratefully, aware of Helena's black eyes glittering across at her. Sooner or later, she thought, Helena was going to say something to precipitate a scene that the rest of them would go to almost any lengths to avoid.
'We shall miss you very much when you go,' Don Jose said, in his quiet voice, and looked across to where he knew his wife to be. 'Shall we not, Ana mi amada?'

'We shall indeed,' Aunt Nan agreed. 'It's been such a long time since I saw Holly, and now she's off again.'

'Then why do you not persuade her to stay, en-amorada?' Don Jose asked with a smile. 'I am sure you could, if you tried.'

It was obvious that the request put her aunt in something of a quandary, and Holly felt deeply for her. She wanted her niece to stay, and she knew Holly wanted to. She would not have hesitated in other circumstances, but there were things she could not face, like explaining to him that his long-laid plans for his son and the girl he looked upon as his future daughter-in-law were in danger if Holly stayed. She must have realized it even more surely, after witnessing that scene at the top of the stairs just now.

'It isn't possible for me to stay any longer, Tio Jose,' Holly told him gently, taking the onus of explaining from her aunt. 'I've had my allotted holiday time now. I have to go back, I'm afraid.'

'To England?'

'To England,' she agreed. 'It's been almost two months, Tio Jose, and you've been very kind to have me for so long, especially when I've been such a nuisance for the last two weeks.'

'You have been nothing of the sort,' the old man retorted with spirit, and again reminded her of his son. 'I am sure no one has found your presence here a nuisance, although we would far rather that you had been well, of course.'

'Ah well,' Holly sighed, unwilling to go into what other people's opinions were, 'all good things have to come to an end, and I am a working girl!'

"Your money has - run out?" It was Helena's harsh voice giving her own interpretation for Holly's departure, and laughing shortly, as if the idea pleased her.

Holly saw the old man frown, his firm mouth drawn tight in disapproval. He had, Holly thought, only now realized that Helena was there. 'Helena!' he said sharply. 'No es asunto de broma!'

Helena resented the reprimand, that was obvious from the cold haughtiness of her expression, and Holly saw the old man's defence as another fault chalked up against her. 'I have to go back, Tio Jose,' she said softly. 'I really must.'

His thin, fine-boned hands curled their long fingers over hers and a small frown appeared between his brows as he turned his failing eyes to try and read her expression. 'When one has little use in one's eyes, nina, one's other senses become - enlarged.' The pressure of his fingers increased briefly. 'Something is wrong, I hear it in your voice and in mi cara Ana's too. What is it that troubles you both, pequena?'

It was purely instinct that made Holly look at Marcos rather than at her aunt before she replied and she found the black eyes watching her with an intense curiosity for a moment, and then suddenly they became warmer, more understanding, and he smiled. The smile had its usual devastating effect on her, but it also gave her a strangely lost feeling.

Marcos knew at last exactly how she felt about him, exactly why she had to leave the Castillo de la Valeroso, but for her part, Holly was very uncertain just how he had reacted to the knowledge. The realization pleased him, that much was evident from his smile, but whether he also felt compassion for her in her lost cause, she could only guess. She almost hoped he did not, for his pity would be unbearable.

Holly hastily gave her attention to Don Jose again, her hands small and cool in his grasp. 'Nothing's troubling us, Tio Jose,' she told him softly. 'It's just as Senorita Mendez has said.'

One greying brow hovered delicately, no doubt finding the subject of finance distasteful in the circumstances. 'If that is your only reason, nina mia,' he told her quietly. 'Please do not concern yourself. Our home is yours for as long as
you like to remain here.'

Holly could feel the prickle of tears in her eyes as she looked up into that drawn, but still autocratic face. Still so bent on persuading her to stay on, when it was even more impossible now. She looked again at his son, from the shadow of her lashes. 'I can't, Tio Jose,' she said in a small, sad voice. 'I just can't.'

After a second or two Don Jose sighed, shrugging his resignation in that very Latin way that her aunt had learned. 'It seems nothing can persuade you, nina,' he said regretfully. 'It is a pity.'

No one else had said very much during their conversation, but now it seemed that something was needed to break the ensuing rather heavy silence, and

Aunt Nan turned to Helena, her smile a little strained. 'We did not expect to see you today, Helena,' she said, and the other girl looked at her down the length of her arrogant nose.

'I do not always give you prior notice of my coming, senora,' she said, a hint of curl to her upper lip. 'I am sorry if it was - inconvenient.' She looked across at Holly as she said that, and the implication was so obvious that Holly felt the colour flood into her cheeks.

'It is never inconvenient to receive friends, Helena,' Don Jose told her, his manners impeccable, as always. 'I do not think my wife was implying that you were not welcome, only that you were not expected.'

Marcos seemed to take very little interest in anything to do with Helena; Holly had noticed it before, and it never failed to puzzle her. How a man could be prepared to marry a girl, spend the rest of his life with her, and yet show so little interest in her was past understanding.

Helena's olive-skinned cheeks flushed faintly when she recognized her second reprimand of the day, no matter how politely it was worded. 'I came only because mi padre has been discussing with me the - the desirability of seeing Monsignor Berado,' she said, and Holly could almost feel the silence that fell on the group in the huge salon.

'Ah si, naturalmente.' His near-sightless eyes turned in the direction of his son. 'Marcos?'

Marcos said nothing for a moment, but sat looking down at the steepled fingers of his hands, his elbows resting on his knees. There was a dark, unfathomable expression on his face, and Holly, who thought she understood what subject was under discussion, almost held her breath waiting for him to reply.

He got to his feet after a moment or two, and stood in front of the massive fireplace, in that familiar attitude, his feet apart, his long muscular legs taut, as if he was tensed, ready to walk off at any moment. He put his hands behind his back again and his black head was held well back in that haughty attitude that Holly knew so well and found such an irresistible part of him.

Having so recently realized just how deeply she felt for him, she found the discussion of his marriage plans with Helena almost unbearable, and she sat with her hands held tightly together in her lap, praying that the subject would not have to be pursued. Helena, she felt sure, had raised it deliberately.

She would at least have some inkling of Holly's involvement, and she had probably interpreted that regrettable frank look as easily as Marcos had. The subject of her marriage to Marcos was probably meant to deliver the death blow to any hopes Holly might have had.

'No tengo prisa,' Marcos said quietly at last, and Holly could guess the gist of his reply by the look on Helena's face and the bright flush of anger on her cheeks. It was also evident from the way her black eyes glittered at him.

'Marcos,' she said slowly, and obviously keeping her temper with great difficulty, 'no es lo suficientemente favorable!'

But whether Helena thought it good enough or not, Marco seemed to have his mind set firmly against being finally committed and his black eyes had a determined, implacable look as he regarded her for a moment down his proud, hawklike nose.
'Estricamente hablando—' he began, then suddenly caught Holly's eye and for a moment held her gaze, his own showing a strange, glittering intensity that made her shiver. 'I do not think we need bore Holly any further with our private affairs,' he said. 'I would rather it waited until I can speak with my father alone.'

His refusal to discuss it further left Holly with rather mixed emotions. It seemed from his words as if he resented making his marriage plans with an outsider present, and yet she would have sworn that it was not resentment for her presence that had shown in his eyes for those few seconds he held her gaze.

'Pero—' Helena began, not ready to relinquish the argument, but Marcos held up one large imperious hand and silenced her.

'No ahora, Helena, haga usted el favor!' he told her firmly. 'We will discuss the matter later.'

Aunt Nan, Holly thought, looked vaguely disturbed at his refusal, as if she feared some resistance to her husband's plans. For the same reason Holly's own reaction was a sudden lifting of her spirits, although she told herself she was being utterly ridiculous to react in that way.

It was natural enough that a man like Marcos would not want to discuss his private affairs in front of anyone other than his family, especially now that he realized that she was more than a little in love with him. Marcos was not as insensitive as that.

'Perhaps,' Don Jose said in his quiet gentle voice, 'it would be better to speak of these things privately, at some later time. Do you agree, Helena?'

Whether Helena agreed or not, her upbringing had taught her to accept the decisions of her male counterparts, and she inclined her black head with gracious compliance. 'Si, naturalmente, Don Jose,' she said with deceptive quietness, but her black eyes were looking across at Holly with such an intense hatred that Holly shivered and hastily lowered her own gaze.

It was two days since Holly first came downstairs, since Helena had attempted to raise the matter of her marriage to Marcos, and Holly had heard nothing more of the matter since. Presumably the discussions had been held in more privacy, as Don Jose had suggested, and Holly wondered if Marcos had finally consented to change his mind about not being in any hurry. Aunt Nan had said nothing about it, and Holly had not dared question her, in case it gave the wrong impression, although by now she felt sure that her aunt must be well aware of how she felt.

'Holly!' Holly turned swiftly when her aunt called her from the stairs, smiling at the coincidence that had made solid the very person who had been in her mind. 'Yes, Aunt Nan?'

Her aunt, she thought, looked oddly aloof, almost unfriendly she would have said if she had not thought such a thing impossible. 'Are you going for a walk?'

'I was,' Holly agreed. 'Did you want me for something, Aunt Nan?'

Her aunt came across the great hall, her footsteps clicking softly on the azulejos that gave the huge place its character and beauty. There was a small frown between her brows and a kind of hesitancy about her that puzzled Holly. For a moment Aunt Nan said nothing, then she took Holly's hands in here, gently but firmly, and looked at her steadily with her kindly blue eyes.

'Holly - I don't quite know how to say this to you. I shouldn't perhaps say it at all, but—' She shrugged, one of those expressive Latin shrugs that she had learned from her husband and her stepson. 'I'm worried about Marcos.'

'Marcos?' Holly felt a sudden cold chill in the pit of her stomach, wondering what on earth could have happened to him since he left earlier that morning to go riding as he often did. He was perfectly capable of handling any one of those spirited Arabs, she felt sure, but just the same - if Aunt Nan was worried.

'I - I don't know what's happened between him and Jose,' her aunt went on, and relief flooded over Holly like a glow.
'I don't think they've actually quarrelled, but - oh, it's silly, I suppose, but something's happened between them, I'm sure, only Jose can't bring himself to tell me about it yet.'

'I see.'

She had no wish whatever to interfere in anything that arose between Marcos and his father, and her reluctance was evident in her voice, so much so that her aunt put out an anxious hand and touched her cheek softly.

'I - I wondered, baby, if you saw Marcos - if you could try and discover what's happened. Jose is so - so silent about it.' She hesitated, looking at Holly uncertainly, as if deciding whether or not to say what was in her mind. 'I wondered, baby, if Jose had learned about Marcos - flirting with you.'

She gave the same kind of delicate hesitation that her husband would have done, and Holly was struck yet again by how much Aunt Nan had grown like the man she had married. 'It's possible, I suppose,' Holly said, trying to sound as if it was of little importance. 'Would he mind, do you think?'

'I'm quite sure he would,' Aunt Nan affirmed stoutly. 'Jose is a man of honour and he's grown very fond of you in the time you've been here, Holly. He'd never forgive Marcos if he were the cause of you being hurt.' Holly said nothing, there was little she could say, she felt, in the circumstances, and after a moment her aunt put a hand to her face and looked at her steadily for a moment. 'It's true, isn't it, darling?' she said softly. 'You have been hurt?'

Holly shook her head hastily, her eyes only vaguely misty as she looked at Aunt Nan's kindly, concerned face. 'I'll recover, Aunt Nan,' she said. 'Don't worry.'

'And I asked you to find out— Aunt Nan hugged her close impulsively. 'I'm sorry, darling, I truly am,' she said gently. 'I wish it hadn't happened.'

Holly laughed, uncertain just what she felt about it. Loving Marcos was a kind of exquisite agony, and she supposed it would fade after a time, although she felt sure she would never completely recover from her love for him. 'So do I,' she said ruefully, and kissed her aunt gently. 'But it's no use crying over spilled milk, Aunt Nan. Now!' She looked out of the partly open doors to the sunshine outside. 'I think I'll make the most of what's left of my Spanish holiday.'

Today was the first day she had been out of doors since her accident, but despite the delight of warm sun on her skin and the bright peaceful scene around her, Holly felt restless and unhappy. Aunt Nan, by suggesting that Marcos and his father had quarrelled about her, had given her even more to be sorry about.

Very soon now she would be fit enough to travel, and no doubt she would soon adapt to the return to a more humdrum way of life after two months of living in another world, but whether she could adapt so easily to life without Marcos was doubtful. It was the hardest thing she would ever have to do, probably.

She found the heat of the sun rather too much without a hat, and she had none since she lost the big straw stetson that Marcos had insisted on buying her, so that she debated whether or not to go on with her walk. She had come further than she intended, but she could not resist visiting the paddock, for she loved it down here under the huge shady fig trees, and she could see such a long way down over the valley.

She was less afraid of the horses now too, although she never took liberties with them; not since that first time when she had fallen foul of the black mare and almost been trampled badly.

She could see the same mare now, across the far side of the paddock with her shiny black foal beside her, and she smiled. Despite Marcos's strictly Spanish view of animals, she would have liked to make friends with at least one of those beautiful creatures before she left.

Almost surreptitiously she approached the paddock fence and the mare looked across, as if she recognized her, but she made no move to come over, so Holly soon relinquished her efforts to attract her, instead, leaning on the top bar and gazing at the peaceful scene with a strange kind of longing in her heart.

She had been there several minutes when she heard someone behind her, someone coming on horseback. She could
hear the soft jingle of the harness and the deep, snorting breath of an animal ridden hard. She turned slowly, knowing almost certainly that it must be Marcos, for she had seen nothing of Helena for two days now, much to her relief.

It was Marcos, as she expected, and Holly felt the sickening lurch her heart gave when she saw him. He was riding one of the Arabs, a shiny golden-coated beauty with a pale cream mane, its neck arched and breathing noisily from the effort of a hard gallop. Marcos sat, tall and dark in the saddle, his black head bare to the scorching sun, a slash of brown throat and chest visible in the dazzling white shirt he wore.

Two such magnificent creatures belonged together, Holly thought, and watched them, trying to still the wild, urgent desire that ran through her uncontrollably, no matter how she fought against it. There was arrogance and strength about them both, but the man had the upper hand, as he was always bound to, and he brought the animal straight over to the spot where she stood under the fig trees.

His expression was dark and unfathomable as he sat looking down at her, and it was several moments before he dismounted, relinquishing the rein and taking the few steps that brought him closer to her. He said nothing, but noted the fact that she wore no hat and his wide mouth flicked briefly into a faint smile when he noticed it.

It was the first time Holly had been alone with him since she had unwittingly revealed her feelings for him in that brief betraying glance, and she gazed at him for a moment, wide-eyed, then, unable to face him, swiftly turned her back to him, her pulses throbbing relentlessly.

She heard him take another step and stand close behind her, the warmth of his body flowing over her coolness so that she shivered involuntarily when he laid his hands on her shoulders. His thumbs moved in that slow, seductive caress against her neck and each word fluttered warmly against her skin when he spoke.

'You have nothing on your head,' he said softly. 'Will you never learn, nina?'

Holly clung tightly to the top bar of the paddock fence, needing something firm to hold on to while she coped with the inevitable effect of his touch on her senses. 'I - I lost my hat in the gully,' she reminded him. 'I haven't another one.'

Then we must get you another one, hmm?'

'It isn't really worth it now,' Holly said, and was appalled to find how cold and empty it made her feel to say it, despite the hammering excitement in her heart. She had always thought herself a well composed creature, but Marcos could create havoc with her emotions, and there was nothing she could do about it.

'It is worth it if it stops you being burned by the sun,' he insisted, and Holly felt herself unable to stop the slightly hysterical laugh that she gave. No matter what happened, Marcos must always be right!

He slid his hands down to her waist and turned her to face him, something she was very reluctant to do, because she knew she would have to look up and see that small throbbing pulse at the corner of his mouth. And so many times that pulse had foretold what he would do next.

'You laughed,' he accused softly, his hands pressing her close against him, his strong fingers digging into her waist. 'You know I do not like to be laughed at, mi pichon, so why do you do it, huh?'

'I - I wasn't exactly laughing at you,' Holly denied, and wished she had the strength of will to even attempt to free herself from that inexorable grip he had on her.

Then at whom?' he demanded.

Holly looked up at last, a glistening, uncertain look in her eyes, and he pulled her closer still, so that she was forced to tip back her head to look at him, exposing the soft creaminess of her throat, seeing the way his eyes lingered on it with an expression that was almost savage in its intensity.

'I - I suppose I was laughing at you,' she confessed. 'At - at the way you always have to be right!'
'So?'

"But you're not always right, are you?" Holly said.

'Am I not?' he demanded, and Holly shook her head, keeping her eyes determinedly away from that fascinating pulse that throbbed beside his mouth.

Her hands were curled into tight little fists against his chest and she was excitingly aware of the increased rate of his heartbeat. She refused to meet his eyes, but looked instead at the strong brown column of his throat and that glimpse of dark hair where the shirt fastened.

'You're - you're wrong to be here with me,' she said, her voice huskily unsteady. 'Please don't, Marcos!'

One large brown hand cupped her face and lifted it, the soft ball of his thumb pressing gently against her lips in a slow, seductive movement back and forth. 'You say "please don't," mi pichon? What have I done, hmm?'

'Please don't give Helena cause to try and pull my hair out by its roots again! Oh, I know you don't believe me,' she said swiftly when he would have spoken, 'but she did hurt me, and she did run me down in her car, but - quite honestly—' She raised her eyes again at last and met the black-eyed, unfathomable gaze with a wildly racing heart. 'I can't altogether blame Helena. You're not very fair to either her or to me, Marcos.'

It was a much more serious accusation than she had meant to make, and the caressing stroke on her lips was stilled suddenly, while straight black brows drew together in a frown. Then he slid both arms around her and pulled her so hard against his body that she cried out with the fierceness of it.

'Muy bien, then I will be unfair to you, poca espina!' he said in a deep, harsh voice that tingled a warning along her spine.

'Marcos!'

He gave her no time to protest; his mouth found hers and was fierce and relentless, almost angry in its hardness, while his arms crushed her to his lean, warm body as if he would make her one with him. At first Holly tried to resist, but even in a vengeful mood Marcos was irresistible to her, and she responded with a passion that she would never have believed herself capable of, just two short months before.

She slid her arms up round his neck, her fingers curling into the thick black hair at the back of his head, yielding to a desire for him that was alarming in its intensity. He pressed his mouth to the soft creaminess of her throat, to her eyes her cheeks and the smooth soft skin of her shoulders, before seeking her mouth again.

Holly knew she was on the point of complete surrender when he picked her up in his arms and carried her over to the shady cool of the grass below the fig trees, but somehow she found the strength of will to shake her head, and move swiftly before his lithe hardness would have crushed her to the ground.

'Holly!'

He looked down at her, his black eyes glittering and bright with the passion that possessed him, his face only inches above hers, and his hands still seeking to draw her closer. Holly closed her eyes briefly, trying to regain control of her senses, wanting him with a desire as urgent as his, but unable to quite forget about Helena and the fact that it was Helena he was going to marry. No amount of wanting or dreaming on her part would alter that.

'Please, please don't!' she pleaded. 'It's - it's cruel of you, Marcos! You know you can't - you have to marry Helena! Please leave me alone - let me go home and try to forget about you! Please, Marcos!'

He said nothing more for a long moment, but simply lay there beside her on the warm earth, looking down at her with his gaze fixed on her lips as if they fascinated him, that little pulse at the corner of his mouth throbbing steadily. 'Helena,' he said at last, and in a cool, distant voice, as if he found the name only vaguely familiar. 'She tried to kill you, mi amada.'
Hearing him word it so bluntly, so calmly, Holly caught her breath, looking up at the dark, shadowed features that were so close, and yet so unrevealing. The words could as easily have been a question or a statement of fact and she was unsure which he meant them to be.

'Not - not kill me,' she said, searching his face for a clue as to whether or not he believed her at last. She had never suspected Helena of attempting anything as serious as that and she wondered if he really believed it himself. 'I - I think she only tried to frighten me, Marcos.'

'But she could as easily have killed you!' There was a hint of that implacable hardness in his voice, and she knew that at last he really believed her.

'You - you don't think I'm making it up?' she asked. 'You really believe it was Helena that ran me down?'

His mouth brushed lightly, teasingly against hers. 'I believe you, mi pequena,' he said. 'I have to - knowing Helena, and knowing you. I can believe that she ran you down, because she hates you.'

It was such a matter-of-fact statement of fact that Holly found it difficult to believe he could just accept it so calmly. 'You're - you're going to marry her,' she reminded him in a small unsteady voice that threatened to break, and Marcos eased himself nearer, until she felt the hard, exciting strength of his body warm against her side.

'Enamorada mia' he said softly against her lips, 'is it that you wish me to go back to Helena? Will you send me away from you when I have risked so much to be near you?'

Holly's eyes were big and uncertain as she looked up at him, at the dark glistening eyes and the mouth that could make her forget everything when he kissed her. 'You - you risked—' She shook her head slowly. 'I don't understand, Marcos.'

She remembered then what Aunt Nan had told her about something disturbing the relationship between Marcos and his father, ad she felt the rapid, half fearful flutter of her heartbeat. Not only Don Jose would turn against her, she felt sure, but Aunt Nan too, because anything that upset her husband she would take as a personal affront.

'Oh no!' she whispered, shaking her head, her eyes wide. 'Oh no, Marcos, you haven't—'

'I have told my father that I compromised you by coming to your bedroom not once, as he thought, but three times,' Marcos told her, and with such aplomb that Holly was breathless.

'Oh, Marcos, why? Why did you have to tell your father? Why couldn't you just let me - let me go home, and - and forget about you?'

'Because I do not wish you to go,' he said calmly, his black eyes looking at her down that arrogant nose, as if he dared her to argue with his decision.

For a moment Holly stared at him, dismay and elation fighting for precedence, then she shook her head again firmly. There was only one way she could stay and please Marcos, when he was married to Helena, and she was not prepared to do that, even for him.

'No,' she said huskily. 'I — I can't — I won't share you, Marcos! I won't!' She struggled to sit up, but the plaster on her leg made her movements clumsy and his body still kept her firmly on the cool grass, his right arm across her shoulders, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her upper arm.

'I do not intend that anyone shall do any sharing,' he informed her. For a moment his wide, straight mouth wore that devastating smile that played such havoc with her senses. 'I have gambled my honour to have you for my own, enamorada, would you have me do it in vain? My father forgives me only because he is very fond of you, el Conde de Mendez will never acknowledge me again and his daughter will hate us both for the rest of her life, perhaps, but I think you are worth losing such things for. Will you not now agree to stay with me?'

Holly said nothing for a moment, her eyes going slowly over that dark, familiar, and so beloved face. The black eyes, watching her with an anxiety she would never have expected to see there, that proud hawklike profile that
could be seen repeated a hundred times in those painted faces that hung in the castle.

With Helena he would have passed on those hawklike features to his sons, but now— 'I - I don't know,' she said, almost afraid to believe he meant it. 'Am I worth all that, Marcos? It was an - an arrangement you should have honoured, wasn't it?'

'It was,' he agreed soberly. 'But I am not prepared to lose you for the sake of honour or anything else, mi pichon. I would have hated Helena, had I gone on with that marriage, because I love you too much to be able to be a good husband to anyone else. So!' He could not shrug, as he would have done had he been standing, but the meaning was there in his voice. 'I have told my father that you received me in your bedroom, mi pequena, so unless you want to be shockingly compromised, you will marry me.'

Holly closed her eyes briefly, her mouth soft and her lips parted, sliding her arms up round his neck and pulling that black head down to her. 'I will,' she said softly.