

*Excerpt from The Spanish Bride*

*Spain, 1811*

I pronounce you man and wife. In the name of 1 the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Carmen Montero, known in her Seville home as the Condesa Carmen Pilar Maria de Santiago y Montero, trembled as the priest made the sign of the cross over her head. Her fingers were chill in her bridegroom's grasp.

It was done. She was married.

Again.

And she had always sworn to herself that she would never again enter the unwelcome bonds of matrimony! She had relished her widowhood, the freedom to live as she pleased, apart from restrictive Seville society. The freedom to work for the cause of ridding Spain of the French interloper.

Her husband, Joaquin, Conde de Santiago, had been good for nothing in life. She shuddered still to think of his cold cruel hands, his rages when, every month, she was *not* pregnant with a son and heir. At least in death his money had proved useful, working to help free Spain from the French.

Yes, she had sworn never to marry again.

Yet she had not foreseen that there could be anything like this man in the world.

When she had first seen Major Lord Peter Everdean, the Earl of Clifton, her heart had skipped a beat, just as in the silly novels her friends had slipped into their convent

school so long ago. Then it had leaped to life again. He was just as handsome as she had heard whispered by her friends at balls in Seville, the Ice Earl, as the ladies gigglingly called him.

But it had not been only his golden good looks that drew her. There was something in his beautiful ice-blue eyes: a loneliness, an isolation that she had understood so deeply. It had been what she had felt all her life, this sense of not belonging.

Now perhaps she had found a place she *could* belong, even in the midst of war. Perhaps they both had.

Carmen peeked up through her lashes at the man beside her, only to find him watching her intently, a faint smile on his lips.

She smiled slowly in return, once she could catch her breath. The only word that could describe Peter was *beautiful*. He was as elegant and golden as an archangel, his fair hair and sun-bronzed skin gleaming in the candlelight of the small church. His broad shoulders gave a muscular contour to his red coat and his impossibly lean hips looked charming in tight-fitting white pantaloons. His rare smiles enticed women the entire length of Andalucia, and every place he went.

Now his ring was on *her* finger. Tall, skinny, bookish Carmen. This extraordinary man was her husband, her lover, even her friend.

It was all suddenly overwhelming, the incense in the church, the emotions in her heart. She swayed precariously, only to be caught in her husband's strong arms.

"Carmen!" he said. "What is it?"

"I just need some fresh air," she whispered.

Nicholas Hollingsworth, Peter's fellow officer and their only witness, hurried down the aisle ahead of them to throw open the carved doors. "She is probably exhausted, Peter," he pointed out. "She rode all day to get here!"

"Yes," Carmen agreed. "I am just a bit tired. But the air is a great help."

Indeed it was. Her head was clearer already, in the cool, dry night. She leaned her forehead against her husband's shoulder and closed her eyes, breathing deeply of his heady scent of wool, leather, and sandalwood soap.

"I am a brute," he murmured against her hair. "You should have been asleep these many hours, and here I have insisted on dragging you before the priest."

Carmen laughed. "Oh, I do not think I mind so very much."

"It was past time for the two of you to make it respectable," Nicholas said. "You have been making calves' eyes at each other for weeks, every time Carmen comes into camp. It was quite the scandal."

"Untrue!" Carmen cried, laughing. "You are the scandal, Nick, chasing all the *señoritas* in the village."

"I do not have to chase them! I stand still and they come to me." Nicholas saluted them smartly, and turned to make his way back down the hill to the lights of the British encampment. "Good night, Lord and Lady Clifton!"

Carmen and Peter watched him go, silent together in the warm, starlit night, and in the sense of the profundity of the step they had just taken.

They had known each other only about two months, in intermittent visits Carmen made to the various encampments of Peter's regiment. Yet Carmen had somehow known, the moment she had seen him, that he was quite special.

"I remember when I first saw you," she said. "Do you?"

"Yes. The day I rode in from Seville to speak to Colonel Smith-Mason. You were playing cards with Nicholas outside your tent, in just your shirtsleeves. Most improper. The sun was shining in your hair, and you were laughing. You were quite the most handsome thing I had ever seen."

"I also remember that day. You were riding hell for-leather through the camp, on that demon you call your horse. You were wearing trousers and that ridiculous hat you love so much." He laughed. "I had never seen a woman like you."

"Hmph, thank you *very* much! I will have you know that that hat is the height of fashion right now."

"I stand corrected, Condesa. But I could not believe that anyone so very lovely, so refined, could be a spy."

"I am not a spy," she corrected him. "I simply sometimes overhear useful information that could perhaps aid you in ridding my country of this French infestation."

"So that is not spying."

"No. It is—helping."

Peter laughed, the rumble of it warm against her. "Then, I am very glad indeed that you have decided to help us. You, my dear, could be a formidable foe."

"Not as formidable as you." Carmen fell silent, turning her new ring in the moonlight to admire the flash of the single, square-cut emerald. Peter had told her that the ring had been his mother's, who had died when he was a small child. "This war cannot go on forever."

"No." Peter's hand covered hers, tracing the ring with his thumb. "Are you sorry now, Carmen, that we married so hastily? Are you having second thoughts about sharing your life with mine after the war?"

"No! Are you?"

"Of course not. You are the only woman I have ever loved."

Carmen's brow arched doubtfully. "Really?"

His laugh was rueful. "I did not say the only woman I have ever *known*. You would see that for a sham immediately. But you are the only woman I have ever loved."

"Then, you did not ask me to marry you out of some sense of obligation, after—well, after what occurred last week?"

"Are you referring to the fact that we anticipated our wedding vows?" Peter clicked his tongue. "My dear, how indelicate!"

Carmen couldn't help but blush just a bit at the memory of that night, when, tipsy with brandy and kisses and a dance beside a river, they had fallen into his bed and done such incredibly wonderful, wicked things. Peter's hands, his sorcerer's mouth...

A giggle escaped.

"No," Peter continued. "I married you because I think it is so charming that, despite the fact that you can ride and shoot like the veriest rifle sergeant, you still blush at the mention of the, ah, small preview of our marital bed."

"Small, *querido*?"

"Well, perhaps not *so* small."

"No." Carmen smiled. "Yet have you thought of after the war, when we must leave here and go to England, and you must present me as your countess?"

"Of course I have thought of it! It is almost all I do when we are apart. It will be wonderful. I have a sister and an estate that I have neglected these many years, so we must go there as soon as we can."

"You have been doing your duty for your country 'these many years.' Surely your family must understand that?"

"Yes, but it does not make it any easier to be parted from them. Sometimes, when I cannot sleep at night, I think of them, Elizabeth and Clifton Manor. I can almost smell the green English rain . . ." His voice trailed faintly away.

Carmen looked out over the lights of the camp. She had never been to England, or indeed anywhere but Spain. It was all she knew, warm, sunny, tradition-bound Spain. How would she fare in a new, English life?

She leaned her head against his shoulder, her eyes tightly shut. "Will they like me at your home? Will your sister like me?"

Peter tipped her chin up with one long finger, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Elizabeth will love you; you are very much like her. They will all love you at Clifton. As I do. Believe me, darling, it is much easier to be an English countess than a Spanish one, and you have done that wonderfully. You must not be afraid."

Her jaw tightened. "I am not afraid."

Peter laughed "Excellent! I knew that a woman who does the things you do could not possibly be frightened of the English *ton*." He kissed her lightly on her nose. "Are you ready to return to camp?"

"Oh, yes."

The encampment was uncharacteristically quiet as they made their way hand in hand to Peter's tent. A few groups of men played desultory games of cards around the fires. Outside the largest tent, Colonel Smith-Mason stood with some of his officers, talking in low voices over a sheaf of dispatches.

Peter glanced at them with a small frown.

"Do you think there is something amiss?" Carmen whispered. She had lived long enough with the intrigues of war to know that events could change in an instant, but she had hoped, prayed, that her wedding night at least could prove uneventful.

Outside the bedchamber, anyway.

"I do not know," Peter answered, his watchful gaze still on the small group.

"Surely not."

"But you do not *know*?"

He shrugged, "We have more important things to think of tonight," he said, bending his head to softly kiss her ear.

Carmen shivered, but waved him away. "No, you must find out. I will wait."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. Go on. We have many hours before dawn." He kissed her again, and she watched him walk away, his polished buttons gleaming in the firelight. Then she turned to duck into his tent. *Their* tent, for that night.

It was a goodly size, but almost spartan in its tidiness. The cot was made up with linen-cased pillows and a blue woolen blanket; a stack of papers and books was lined up exactly on the table, and the chairs pushed in at precise angles. His shaving kit and monogrammed ivory hairbrush were flush with his small shaving mirror. The only bit of

personal expression was in the miniature portrait on a small stand beside the cot: of his younger sister, Elizabeth. Next to it was a portrait of Carmen, painted when she was sixteen, which she had given him as a wedding gift.

Carmen laid her small bouquet of wild red roses beside the paintings and went to open her own small trunk, which had been brought there while they were at the church. In it were the only things she had brought away on her journey from Seville: two muslin dresses and a satin gown, a pair of boots, rosary beads, men's trousers and shirts, and a cotton nightgown that was far too practical for a wedding night.

She slipped out of her simple white muslin dress, and took the high ivory comb and white lace mantilla from her hair. She brushed out her waist-length black hair. Then she sat down on the cot to wait.

She was quite asleep when she at last felt Peter's kiss on her cheek, his hand on her back, warm through her silk chemise. She blinked up at him and smiled. "What was it?"

"It is nothing." He sat down beside her and gathered her into his arms. He had shed his coat and shirt, and Carmen rubbed her cheek against the golden satin of his skin. "There were rumors of a French regiment nearby, much closer than they should be."

"Only rumors?"

"Yes. For tonight." He wrapped his fingers in her loose hair and tilted her face up to his, trailing small, soft kisses along the line of her throat. "Tonight is only ours, my wife."

"Oh, yes. My husband. *Mi esposo.*" Carmen moaned as his mouth found the crest of her breast through the silk. Her fingernails dug into his bare shoulders. "Only ours."

The bridal couple was torn from blissful sleep near dawn by the horrifying sounds of gunfire, panicked shouts, and braying horses.

Peter was out of bed in an instant, pulling on his uniform as he threw back the tent flaps.

Carmen stumbled after him in bewilderment, drawing the sheet around her naked shoulders. "What is it?" she cried. "A battle?"

"Stay here!" Peter ordered. Then she was alone.

Carmen hastily donned her shirt and trousers, and tied her hair back with a scarf. She was searching for her boots when she heard her husband's voice and that of Lieutenant Robert Means, a young man she had sometimes played cards with of a quiet evening. And fleeced regularly.

"By damn!" Peter cursed. "How could they be so close? How could they have gotten so far without us knowing?"

"Someone must have informed them," Robert answered. "But we are marching out within the quarter hour."

"Of course. I shall be ready. Has Captain Hollingsworth been alerted?"

"Yes. What of . . ." Robert's voice lowered. "What of your wife, Major?"

"I will see to her."

Carmen stuck her head outside the tent. "She will see to herself, thank you very much! And what are you doing running about unarmed, *husband?*" She rattled his saber at him.

"Carmen!" Peter pushed her back into the tent. "You must ride into the hills and wait. I will send an escort with you."

"Certainly not! You require every man. I have ridden about the country without an escort for months. Shall I ride to General Morecambe's encampment and tell him you require reinforcements?"

"No! You are to find a safe place, and wait there until I come for you."

"*Madre de Dios!*" Carmen pulled her leather jacket out of her trunk and thrust her arms into the sleeves, glaring at him all the while. "I will not hide! I cannot play the coward now. I will ride for reinforcements."

"Carmen! Be sensible!"

"You be sensible, Peter! I have been doing this sort of thing for a long time."

"But you were not my wife then!" he shouted.

"Ah. So that is it." Carmen left off loading her pistol to go to him, and framed his handsome, beloved face in her hands. "I cannot give up what I am doing to become a fine, frail, sheltered lady again, simply because I am now your wife. No more than you can stay safely here in camp because you are now my husband."

He turned his head to kiss her palm. "No. Even though I wish it so, you are quite right."

"We shall have many, many years to sit calmly by the fire, *querido*."

He smiled against her skin. "And will you long for your grand adventures, Carmen, when you are chasing babies about Clifton Manor?"

"Never!"

Peter caught her against him and kissed her Mouth, hard, desperate. "I will see you at supper, then, Lady Clifton."

"Yes." Carmen clung to him for an instant, an eternal moment, then stepped away. "Promise me you will fight very, very carefully today, Peter."

"Of course, my love." He grinned at her, the white, crooked grin that had won her heart. "I never fight any other way."

Then he was gone.