



A Price Worth Paying?

By Trish Morey

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When two bitter rivals...

Why, why does her grandfather's dying wish dictate that Simone Hamilton must marry a man she hates? The marriage might unite their warring families, but formidable Spaniard Alesander Esquivel is the last man on earth Simone would want to be in the same room as—let alone share a marital bed with!

Are forced to take one solemn vow...

Alesander's strongest desire used to be gaining the final piece of his business empire—but now it seems there are more pleasurable diversions for the taking... Having a wife could be useful, especially to entertain him during those sultry hot Spanish nights!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Trish Morey lives with her husband and four daughters in a special part of South Australia, surrounded by orchards and bushland, and visited by the occasional koala and kangaroo. With a lifelong love of reading, she penned her first book at the age of eleven, after which life, career and a growing family kept her busy until once again she could indulge her desire to create characters and stories – this time in romance. Visit Trish at her website: www.trishmorey.com.

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Felipe was dying. Six months to live. Maybe twelve at a stretch. *Dying!*

Simone swiped away a tear from her cheek, stumbling a little as she ran between the rows of vines clinging to the mountainside. Her grandfather would hate it if he knew she was crying over him. 'I am old,' he'd said, when finally he'd let her learn the truth, 'I've had my time. I have few regrets...' But then his eyes had misted over and she'd seen the enormity of those 'few' regrets swirling in their watery depths.

The sorrow at losing his wife of fifty years to her battle with cancer.

The despair when his recently reconciled daughter and her husband—*Simone's parents*—were lost in a joy flight crash whilst holidaying not three months later.

And the shame of succumbing to drink and then to the cards in the depths of his resultant depression, gambling away three-quarters of the estate before he was discovered and dragged bodily from the table by a friend before he could lose his own home.

It was the regret that was killing him. Oh yes, there was cancer too—that was doing its worst to eat away at his bones and shorten his life—but it was the regret that was sucking away his will to fight his disease and give in to it instead; regret that was telling him that there was no point because he had nothing left to live for.

And nothing anybody could say or do seemed to make a difference. Not when every time he looked out of his window he saw the vines that were no longer his, and he was reminded all over again of all that he had lost.

She stopped at the edge of the estate, where the recently erected fence marked the new border between her grandfather's remaining property and the neighbouring Esquivel estate. Here, where there was a break between the rows of vines staked and trellised high above her head, she could look down over the spectacular coastline of northern Spain. Below her the town of Getaria nestled behind a rocky headland that jutted out into the Bay of Biscay. Beyond that the sea swelled in brilliant shades of blue that changed with the wind and with the sun, a view so unlike what she had at home in Australia that it took her breath away every time she looked at it.

She inhaled deeply of the salt-tinged air, the scene of terraced hills, the tiered vines, the ancient town below all too picture perfect to be real. It wouldn't seem real when she was back home in Melbourne and living again in one of the cheap, outer-city student flats she was used to. But Melbourne and her deferred university studies would have to wait a bit longer. She'd come expecting to stay just a few weeks between semesters. Then Felipe had fallen ill and she'd promised to stay until he was back on his feet. But after this latest news,

it was clear she wasn't returning home any time soon. Because there was no way she could leave him now. *Dying.*

Hadn't there been enough death lately without losing Felipe too? She was only just getting to know him properly—the long-term rift between him and his daughter keeping the families apart ever since she was a child, Felipe and his wife here in Spain, their wayward daughter, her forbidden lover and their granddaughter living in self-imposed exile in Australia.

All those wasted years, only to be reunited now, when mere months remained.

How could she make those last few months better for Felipe? How to ease the pain of all he had lost? She shook her head, searching for answers as she gazed across the fence at the acres of vines that were once his and that now belonged to others, sensing the enormity of his loss, his guilt, his shame, and wishing there was some way she could make things better.

For there was no way to bring back his wife or his daughter and son-in-law.

There was no money to buy back the acreage he had lost.

And given the long-running rivalry between the two neighbouring families, there was no way the Es-quivels were going to hand it back when they had seized such a powerful advantage.

Which left her with only one crazy option.

So crazy there was no way it could ever work.

But was she crazy enough to try?

'You sacked her!' Alesander Manuel Esquivel forgot all about the coffee he was about to pour and glared incredulously at his mother, who stood there with her hands folded meekly in front of her looking as cool and unflurried in the face of his outburst as a quintessential Mother Superior. Her composure only served to feed his outrage. 'What the hell gave you the right to sack Bianca?'

'You were gone the entire month,' Isobel Esquivel countered coolly, 'and you knew what a dreadful housekeeper she was before you left. This apartment was a pigsty. Of course I took the opportunity to sack her and engage a professional cleaner while you were gone. And just look around you,' she said with a flourish of her diamondencrusted fingers around the now spotless room. 'I don't know how you can possibly be so irritated.'

His mother thought him irritated? Now there was an understatement. After a fifteen-hour flight from California, he'd been looking forward to the simple pleasure of a hot shower before tumbling into bed and tumbling a willing woman beneath him in the process. He suppressed a growl. During her brief tenure, Bianca had proven to be particularly willing.

Finding his mother waiting for him in Bianca's place had not been part of his plans. And so he dredged up a smile to go with the words he knew would irritate his mother right back. 'You know as well as I do, Madre querida, that I didn't employ Bianca for her cleaning skills.'

His mother sighed distastefully, turning her face towards the view afforded by the large glass windows that

overlooked the Bahia de la Concha, the stunning bay that made San Sebastian famous. 'You don't have to be crude, Alesander,' she said wearily, her back to her son. 'I understand very well why you "*employed*" her. The point is, the longer she was here, the less interested you were in finding a wife.'

'Oh, I assumed finding me a wife was your job.'

Her head snapped back around as the seemingly cool facade cracked. 'This is not a joke, Alesander! You need to face up to your responsibilities. The Esquivel name goes back centuries. Do you intend to let it die out because you are too busy entertaining yourself with the latest *puta-del-dia*?'

'I'm thirty-two years old, Madre. I think my breeding potential might be good for another few years yet.'

'Perhaps, but don't expect Ezmerelda de la Silva to wait for ever.'

'Of course I would expect no such thing. That would be completely unreasonable.'

'It would,' his mother said speculatively, her eyes narrowing, but nowhere near enough to hide the hopeful sheen that glazed their surface. She took a tentative step closer to her son. 'Do you mean to say you've come to your senses while you've been away and decided to settle down at last?' She gave a tinkling little laugh, the sound so false it all but rattled against the windows. 'Oh, Alesander, you might have said.'

'I mean,' he said, his lips curling at his mother's pointless hopes, 'there is no *point* in Ezmerelda waiting a moment longer when there is no way on this earth that I'm marrying her.'

His mother's expression grew tight and hard as she crossed her arms and turned pointedly back towards the window. 'You know our families have had an understanding ever since you were both children. Ezmerelda is the obvious choice for you.'

'Your choice, not mine!' He would sooner choose a shark for a wife than the likes of Ezmerelda de la Silva.

She was a beauty, it was true, and once in his distant past he had been tempted, but he had soon learned there was no warmth to her, no fire, indeed nothing behind the polished facade, nothing but a cold fish who had been raised with the sole imperative to marry well.

Whether married or not, he would settle for nothing less than a hot-blooded woman to share his bed. Was it any wonder he had populated his bed with nothing less?

'So what about grandchildren then?' Isobel pleaded, changing tack, her hand flat over her heart. 'If you won't consider marrying for the sake of the family name, what about for my sake? When will you give me grandchildren of my own?'

It was Alesander's turn to laugh. 'You overplay your hand, Madre. I seem to recall you don't like children all that much. At least, that's how I remember it.'

The older woman sniffed. 'You were raised to be the best,' she said without a hint of remorse. 'You were raised to be strong.'

'Then is it any wonder I wish to make my own decisions?'

His mother suddenly looked so tightly wound he thought she might snap. 'You cannot play this game forever, Alesander, no matter how much you seem to enjoy it. Next week it is Markel de la Silva's sixtieth birthday celebration. Ezmerelda's mother and I were hoping that you might accompany Ezmerelda to the party. Couldn't you at least honour the friendship between our families by doing that much?'

To what end? To have the news of their 'surprise' betrothal announced the same night as some bizarre kind of birthday treat? He wouldn't be surprised. His mother was particularly fond of concocting such treats.

She would love to put him on the spot and force the issue.

'How unfortunate. I do believe I'm busy that night.'

'You have to be there! It would be a deliberate snub to the family not to appear.'

He sighed, suddenly tired of the sport of baiting his mother. Because of course he would be there. Markel de la Silva was a good man; a man he respected greatly. It wasn't his fault his daughter took after her grasping mother.

'Of course I will be there. But what part of "there is no way I'm marrying Ezmerelda", did you not understand?'

'Yes, you say that now, but you know there is no one else suitable and sooner or later you will have to fulfil your destiny as sole heir to the Esquivel estate,' his mother said, giving up any pretence that securing a marriage between their two families wasn't her ultimate goal. 'When are you going to realise that?'

'I can't give you the answer you want but, rest assured, Madre, when I do decide to marry, you'll be the first to know.'

His mother left then, all bristling indignation and pursed lips in a perfumed, perfectly coiffed package, her perfume lingering on the air along with his irritation long after she'd gone. He stared out of the same window Isobel had blindly stared out of a short time ago, but the view didn't escape him. Between the mountains Igueldo and Urgull, with its huge statue of Christ looking down and blessing the city, sprouted the wooded Isla de Santa Clara, forming a magnificent backdrop to the finest city beach in Europe.

He'd bought this apartment some years ago sight unseen after yet another argument with his mother. At the time he'd simply wanted a bolt-hole away from the family estate in Getaria, a twenty-minute drive away.

He'd got more than a bolt-hole as it turned out. He'd got the best view in the city. Today the white sandy curve of the bay was less crowded than it had been when he had left a month ago at the height of summer, most tourists content in September's milder weather to promenade around the Concha rather than swim in its protected waters.

His gaze focused in on the beach, the insistent ache in his groin returning. Bianca used to spend her days on the sand, working on her tan. To good effect, if he remembered correctly, even if his mother couldn't see the advantages of long tanned limbs over a spotless floor.

He scanned the beach. Maybe Bianca was down there right now. He pulled his phone from his pocket and searched for her number. Isobel must have paid her extremely well for her to keep the news of her sudden eviction from him. But if she was still in the area...

Halfway to calling he paused, before repocketing the phone. What was he doing? It was one thing to have her waiting here for him. It was another entirely to go searching for her. Did he really want to give her the wrong idea? After all, she'd been almost at her use-by date as it was.

Bianca had known that. He'd made it plain when she'd started that she'd be looking for another position inside three months. Which probably explained why she'd gone so quietly. Because she'd always known the position was temporary.

Still he growled his displeasure as he tugged at his tie and pushed himself away from the windows. Because on top of having to find himself a new live-in cleaner, it meant that tonight he'd just have to settle for a cold shower.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Diana Elliott:

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