

Southern Spain
Summer 1880

Chapter One

Charlotte Wilton had never seen anything so beautiful.

An azure Mediterranean sea glittered under a brilliant sun, its gentle waves lapping the rugged hills of the coastline. Tall palm trees swayed with careless abandon in the breeze. The expansive blue sky overhead was not blemished by a single, solitary cloud. Charming white houses dotted the surrounding countryside. Exotic flowers and the scent of the sea perfumed the soft air around her. The small balcony on the hillside villa in the south of Spain afforded Charlotte an incredible view.

But it was not the glorious vista of the shore that had captured Charlotte's attention.

What caught her eye so thoroughly was the sight of a man.

A very handsome man. So handsome in fact that Charlotte's normally calm and sensible little heart skipped a beat or two as she stared fixedly at him, unable to break her gaze away from his strapping masculine form.

He moved with a carefree, easy grace for such a tall man. The muscles in his bare, tanned arms flexed and pulsed as he lifted and carried the massive, carved wood chair from one end of the terra-cotta tiled patio to the other. It was not that she had never seen a bare-chested male before, having far too many brothers for that to be the case. The fascination was due more in part to the sculpted beauty and chiseled lines of his broad chest itself.

Her eyes followed him as he finally positioned the wooden chair in a spot that pleased him and he stood back to admire it. It did not occur to Charlotte to wonder why he was doing such a thing, for she could not see past the perfection of his being. His tousled blonde hair glistened in the afternoon sun, giving the effect of a halo around his face. Oh, and his face! He possessed an aquiline nose, a strong jaw, and heavy-lidded eyes. Clean-shaven and youthful, she guessed him to be about her age. He was simply the handsomest man she had ever seen.

Indulging in this rare departure of character, Charlotte gazed down from her secluded spot on the balcony on the floor above him. She tried to distinguish what it was about him that so captivated her. She had certainly met handsome men before and some of those handsome men had even fancied themselves in love with her, but never had a man had caused her to feel this way. Never had she felt this completely powerless. Watching him was an involuntary reflex. The situation fascinated and flustered her. Not taking her eyes off him, she continued to ignore the breath-taking coastal scenery around her.

Somehow he suddenly sensed her presence and glanced up at her.

A warm, lazy smile, revealing a deep dimple on his right cheek and straight white teeth, lit his face. The effect was astonishing. The charm and humor in his grin sent a thrill of delight through her very bones. He was smiling at her! Almost giggling like a schoolgirl, Charlotte could not help but smile back.

He gave her a nod of acknowledgement. "Forgive me. Have I disturbed you? I was not aware I had an upstairs neighbor. Have you just arrived?" With casual grace, he

reached for the white shirt that was hanging on the balustrade and slipped his arms into the long sleeves, obscuring her view of his chiseled chest.

Feeling the deep tenor of his voice vibrate within her, Charlotte knew from his cultured accent he was English, just as she was. And a gentleman. For no man would remain bare-chested in the presence of a lady. At least now she would not be distracted by his rippling muscles. Self-conscious about being caught watching him for so long, she cleared her throat and found the wherewithal to speak. "Yes."

He chuckled at her brief response, while buttoning the front of his linen shirt. "Yes, I've disturbed you or yes, you've just arrived?"

She nodded her head and murmured, "Yes, I've just arrived. And no, you haven't disturbed me at all. I only stepped out on my balcony to admire the view." And what a view it was.

He turned his head toward the sea. "Yes, it's quite a spectacular vista from up here, is it not? That is why I was moving this chair. This way I can sit and enjoy the sea without that cluster of trees obstructing my view." He looked back up at her, and smiled. "However, now I see that there is a much prettier view just above me."

Charlotte felt her cheeks redden and her stomach did a little flip at his words. Thankful for the distance of height between them, she tried to breathe. Goodness! Whatever was wrong with her? It was ridiculous actually. She had been through a Season or two and had handsome men making all sorts of fools of themselves over her. And here this golden stranger just paid her a silly little compliment and she fell to pieces like a giddy debutante at her first ball!

"I don't believe we have met," she heard herself murmur, for lack of anything better to say.

He bowed graciously in her direction. "I'm Gavin Ellsworth, here on holiday, as part of a summer tour. And the beautiful blonde woman in the room above me must be..."

Again her heart fluttered ridiculously. She made a point to ignore it. "If you are referring to me, I am Charlotte Wilton."

"Would that be *Miss* Wilton?" he questioned pointedly.

"Yes," she answered reluctantly. "And I believe you are being rather impertinent."

"I'm more than impertinent, I should warn you." He flashed her another devastating smile. "However I am very pleased to meet you. I was afraid that this visit might be a bit dull, but now that you have arrived, things are looking up."

"Really? Why is that?" With both hands Charlotte tightly gripped the wrought iron railing of the balcony that held her over his head. It was a flirtatious question, for of course his point was obvious.

"Oh, Miss Wilton, I think you know very well what I mean." Again that lazy, sultry smile flashed at her.

She stared at him, saying nothing at all. Heavens, she had been rendered witless by him! The discovery of this weakness within herself was a revelation.

"Are you here as a guest of *Don* Francisco also?" he asked.

"His wife is a friend of my aunt," Charlotte explained, surprised that actual words came out of her mouth. "I am traveling with my aunt this summer and we stopped here

for a visit.” Charlotte was a houseguest at this home and apparently so was this handsome young man. The thought of spending the next few weeks sleeping above him caused her knees to tremble.

“I am most pleased that you have finally arrived.”

“Mr. Ellsworth, I believe I shall retire to my room now.”

“I suppose I shall see you at supper, then?” he suggested with a hopeful grin.

“I suppose.” She would most likely see him at every meal. Charlotte wondered how she would be able to eat anything in his presence. She might perish of hunger by the end of their visit.