

THE SPANISH PEARL

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Time. All I needed was a little more time to get used to the idea of me, Kate Vincent, being a parent. It wasn't that I didn't like the idea of giving a little boy a much-needed home—I did. And adopting was going to make my partner Anna so happy. She was wacko for kids, volunteering for the after-school reading program and helping out with story hour at the public library. She actually knew how to talk to kids. But me, driving around with a Parent bumper sticker on my car? More time, that was all I needed.

Unfortunately I was out of time, because today was *the* day. Too terrified to get out of the hotel bed, I reached under my pillow to re-read the letter from Arturo, opening it quietly so I wouldn't wake Anna. An adult at the orphanage had obviously penned the letter, but the paper was brightly decorated with Arturo's five-year-old kid art: *Dear Señorita Anna and Señorita Kate—*

Anna was officially going to be the adoptive parent, so Arturo would probably start calling her "Mom." When we returned to Chicago, I'd file for joint custody, but what would Arturo call me? "Mom Number Two?" "Kate?" "My other mom?"

Please come visit me, the letter said. Thank you for the photo of Max. He is a big dog. I like big dogs. Right now back in Chicago, my black lab Max was sleeping at my best friend Laura's house, dreaming of having his own little boy to play with.

I know I will like America. Are there caves in America? My favorite place to visit is the big cave. The adult scribe had written in parentheses that Arturo meant the Mirabueno Cave on the western edge of Zaragoza. *The Palacio is nice, but not as much fun as the cave.* I loved how the letter was half little kid, half travel guide. *When you come to Zaragoza, you should go to the big cave.* Yes, I should, Arturo, if I could only get out of bed.

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I finished the letter, folded it up, and let the mega-panic flow through me. Anna and I were two hours away from becoming adoptive parents, and I was sick with excitement and high with terror. No, that's not right. I was sick with terror and high with excitement.

I pulled the pillow over my head to shut out the traffic noises outside our third floor hotel room. Zaragoza, Spain sounded just like Chicago. It had been Anna's idea to adopt, and since she supported me, the starving artist, I'd felt it was important to support her desire to have a family. My best friend Laura said that was a dumb reason to adopt, but who listens to their best friend's advice?

Once Anna convinced me, she started checking at Illinois adoption agencies. Since the entire country had its boxer shorts in a bundle over gay marriage, two women adopting would surely destroy the world as we knew it. I got tired of the raised eyebrows and stern looks.

Because Anna taught Spanish History at Northwestern, she began looking to adopt a child from Spain. I was still dragging my heels a bit because, when it came to kids, my usual confidence withered into a hard, tiny raisin rattling around inside my body. But then Señora Cavelos from El Orfanato Benévolo de San Estéfan in Zaragoza, Spain, sent us a photo of five-year-old Arturo standing against a peeling plaster wall, hands stiff at his sides, brown hair combed back, dark eyes wide open, and wearing the most serious smile I'd ever seen. His blue jacket hung loosely on his small frame, a red bow tie tipped crookedly under his chin, and one navy knee sock slid down his calf. I moved my art studio from the spare room into the basement and turned the spare room into what I hoped would be a five-year-old boy's nirvana, complete with race car wallpaper, dragon-shaped headboard, and a baseball bat and glove. I hoped mixing all those themes wouldn't give the little guy nightmares.

A car honked outside, and I groped the bed behind me for Anna's comforting curves. Nada. I rolled over and faced a note, which read: *Dear Kate, Have gone downstairs for breakfast. Join me when you're up. Love, Paloma de Palma.*

I smiled. Paloma de Palma. It was all the rage for college professors to publish scholarly works, then pen a bloody mystery or trashy romance under a pseudonym. Anna had ached to join their ranks, so one night we had polished off a bottle of Chardonnay and come up

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with her romance novel pen name, Paloma de Palma. She liked teasing me about having an affair with the mysterious de Palma. Me—have an affair? Nope. I was a one-woman woman.

Moaning, I rolled out of bed, then stood in front of the mirror, inhaling deeply. Did I look like a parent? Unruly brown hair curling around my neck, a pleasant enough smile, decent curves, average smarts, but no athletic ability whatsoever. I hated skiing, hated softball, and as for Laura's passion, horseback riding, forget it. What sane person gets on top of one thousand pounds of beast and says, "Giddyup, horsie?"

What did parents look like anyway? They drove sensible cars and ate vegetables with every meal, balanced their checkbooks every month and never doubted their parenting abilities. That described *my* parents, but Holy Frijoles, it didn't describe me. I drove a black Thunderbird, ate vegetables only at gunpoint, used my unopened bank statements as door stops, and my Parental Doubt-O-Meter was off the scale.

Somehow I managed to drag myself into the minuscule shower and get cleaned up. Expecting another Zaragoza scorcher like yesterday, which we'd spent in an unairconditioned office drowning in adoption paperwork, I pulled on khaki shorts with huge cargo pockets, then cinched the narrow leather belt. I tugged on a dark purple T-shirt, blazoned with a perfectly reasonable message about our nation's current president and his demented policy advisors, and matching purple socks. I added wallet, passport, tissue, chewing gum, and a Snickers bar for Arturo to my fanny pack. At the last minute I threw in some Benadryl because Señora Cavelos's office reeked of mold, and then added the note from Paloma de Palma as teasing material for Anna. I still felt naked without my cell and Blackberry, but hey, I was on vacation, so I'd left them at home.

Anna had already finished her breakfast and was reading a newspaper. She glanced up, her blond hair swinging like a curtain away from her face, then checked her watch. "Cutting it a little close, aren't we?" As a starving artist-type, I felt compelled to live a less-structured life than Ms. Punctuality, which was yet another difference between the two of us. Sometimes I got frustrated with Anna, but I loved her. She was steady, sweet, and loyal.

I'd barely started on my eggs and toast when Anna put down her paper. "How about another history lesson?"

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“No thanks,” I said. History just wasn’t my thing. I spoke fluent Spanish thanks to years of high school and college Spanish, but my interest stopped there.

“Kate, it’s important for Arturo to know Spain’s history.”

“Babe, I can see only one use for history. Say you’re walking down a dark alley and some guy jumps out, sticks a knife in your face, and growls ‘Tell me the year the Moors invaded Spain or you’re dead.’ You wipe the sweat from your eyes, then squeak out—” I waited.

“711 A.D.” Anna loved showing off.

“Right. 711. Satisfied, the guy lets you go.”

Anna’s smile made me feel good whenever it appeared. “Here’s another use for history,” she said. “You’re on *Jeopardy* and it’s Final Jeopardy and you’ve got \$10,000 riding on this answer: The Christian soldier credited with beginning the drive to kick the Moors out of Spain.”

I gulped the last of my orange juice and flashed her my most charming grin. “Who is Rodrigo Díaz, otherwise known as El Cid.”

“Wow. Not bad.”

“Are you kidding? You’ve made me watch that El Cid movie a hundred times, which is only bearable because Sophia Loren is so hot.”

A wistful look passed over Anna’s face. “I do love that movie, but I still think it was a horrible mistake to kick the Moors out of Spain. They were more advanced and more civilized, and I think the whole country would have been better off if the Moors had remained in power.”

I checked my watch. “Righto. And when you’re done fantasizing about the totally impossible idea of changing history, maybe we could get ourselves to the orphanage and pick up our son.”

“Our son.” Anna hugged herself. “I love the way that sounds.” We grinned like fools, and I stuffed my fear deep into the tips of my Doc Martens.



I glared at Señora Cavelos but she just shook her alarmingly hair-sprayed head. “I’m sorry,” she said. “We cannot release a child if he’s running a temperature.”

“It could just be the excitement,” I said. Maybe if we found her a new hairdresser, she’d relent.

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She fussed with her papers, her hands like two nervous moths fluttering over her desk.

“With any temperature above normal, we must keep and observe the child.”

“But—” I stopped at Anna’s light touch on my arm.

“No, Kate, fevers in children are serious. He should be kept quiet until his fever drops.”

Señora Cavelos beamed at Anna. “He’s the only child in the infirmary, so he’ll have plenty of quiet. He’ll be fine in a day or two. Then we can complete the adoption, and you can take him back to America.”

We left her office and I closed the door behind us. “Well,” Anna said. “I guess we’re tourists today.”

“Babe, look.” I nodded toward a small white sign at the base of the staircase, which read *Enfermería*.

“You aren’t suggesting we kidnap him,” she said, incredulous.

“No, but we can visit.”

“Kate, no, we can’t—” but I was already heading for the staircase. I couldn’t get this far and not meet him. I’d burned up all my terror cells this morning and had nothing left for tomorrow. Besides, the poor kid had to be as anxious as we were. A smile and a hug just might help. Anger and frustration and excitement drove me, the rule-breaker, up the stairs and into the infirmary, but then I froze at the sight of a lone boy sitting on a narrow bed with tight-as-drums hospital corners and sunshine streaming in through the bank of windows.

My mouth fell open. I moved my jaw but nothing came out. As Anna reached me, struggling to catch her breath, the boy turned toward us, brown eyes curious and unafraid. He looked at the photo in his hand, then back at us, eyes now big as Sacajawea dollars, mouth rounded to a perfect ‘o.’ He held the photo we’d sent him. I think I forgot to breathe.

“Arturo?” Anna stepped forward. The boy jumped off the bed and flew toward us. As Anna swept him up in a huge hug, something stuck in my throat. “Oh, Arturo,” Anna crooned. “We are so happy to finally meet you.” She squeezed him, his thin arms tight around her neck.

When two sparkling brown eyes peeked at me over Anna’s shoulder, I still couldn’t speak, so I winked. Arturo giggled into Anna’s neck. She introduced herself, kissing his cheek, then reached for me. “And this is Kate. We are so excited you are going to join our family.”

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Arturo slipped into my open arms as if he'd been doing so all his life. "Kate," he said joyfully.

"Arturo," I whispered hoarsely as I held his slender frame, inhaling strong soap, warm child, and crayon wax. He squeezed me just as tightly as I squeezed him. The lump in my throat got bigger so I stepped back, blinking furiously.

Anna held Arturo's hand and stroked his hair. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, but the big, scary nurse makes me stay in bed." He pulled us toward a small table at the end of the long room, where he'd scattered a box of crayons.

"I drew this all by myself. It's not done, but you can have it." He thrust the thin paper toward me.

Three stick figures held hands under a lopsided yellow sun, and a stick dog sat nearby. Anna's yellow hair stuck out like spikes, Max's eyes glowed orange, and the little boy had brown hair like Arturo. The remaining figure, who must have been me, lacked a head, which bothered me a little, but I was pleased Arturo shared my interest in art.

"It's lovely," Anna said. "You're a very good artist."

"I can draw race cars, too," he said, face round and flushed. Shyly, I touched his silky hair. Score one for me and my race car wallpaper.

"Young man!" boomed a voice from behind us. "What are you doing out of bed?" Windows rattled as a uniformed nurse stomped down the aisle. With a guilty grin and adorable yelp, Arturo flung himself onto his bed, laughing as the gruff nurse, fooling no one, lovingly tucked him in. We only had time to kiss his forehead before she hustled us out, complaining of unauthorized visitors.

We fled the building, collapsing on the steps outside. My hands and head tingled. "Anna, you were great. You really know kids."

She smiled, panting from our run. "I earned my spending money by babysitting. You delivered papers." I *had* babysat once, but I'd never told her, or anyone, what had happened. It had been a close call, and I still had nightmares now and then about overflowing bathtubs and unsupervised toddlers. Anna tapped Arturo's drawing, still in my hand. "Most of you is missing."

"He can finish it later." I carefully folded the drawing and stuck it in my fanny pack. "I can't believe this amazing, adorable kid is going to be our son."

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Anna hugged herself. “It’s going to happen. It’s really going to happen.”

For Anna’s sake, I hid my terror. I could do this. I could love this little boy and be a fine parent.

Twenty kids screamed from the orphanage’s soccer field, so Anna had to raise her voice. “Since we can’t take Arturo home today, let’s tour the Palacio de la Aljafería. It’s one of the few Moorish palaces left in Spain.”

“But Arturo’s favorite is the cave,” I said. “Let’s go there first.” We spoke in English, which I hoped gave us a little privacy among the social workers in practical shoes hustling past us to the orphanage, or from the small, dark man sweeping the sidewalk.

Anna waved a slender hand. “Kate, I didn’t come to Spain to visit a wet, dripping cave.” Her mouth settled into that iron thin line I’d seen her use on difficult students. I moved aside as a delivery man pushed a cart past me, wheels clattering on the broken flagstone.

“Cave,” I said.

“Palace,” she snapped.

“Anna, yesterday we toured three cathedrals, one Roman forum, and four historical sites. It’s my turn now.”

Anna growled, dropping onto the granite steps. “You are *so* impossible.”

“Me?” I sat down next to her, stretching out my right leg. My sore heel throbbed, and I wished I’d seen a doctor before we left Chicago, but when the orphanage said ‘come,’ we came. I untied my Doc Martens and rubbed my heel as we watched the traffic in silence. At 10:30 a.m. Zaragoza was a snarl of honking cars and lumbering buses. Two crows fought over a soggy cracker on the orphanage’s lawn.

“Poor Arturo,” I muttered. “We’d all counted on taking him today.”

Zaragoza glowed brown, probably because all the buildings seemed constructed of the same light chocolate brick. Even the air radiated brown, as if the hot bricks had melted into the exhaust-filled air. Behind us the janitor’s broom bristles rasped like a rhythmic cymbal; soon we’d have to get out of his way. I took a deep breath. “Anna, let’s do both. Cave first, then the Palacio.”

Anna rubbed her long, slender nose, which curved slightly near the end, a feature that didn’t mar her good looks, but only made her more

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intriguing. “Okay, but the Palacio de la Aljafería is more important. El Cid lived there during his exile from Castile in the 1080s, over nine hundred years ago.” Hands on wide hips, Anna thrust her pointed chin out slightly, a warning sign I knew well. Short and cool, Anna kicked her uncanny ability to sway people into high gear.

I put on my shoe. “Enough of El Cid. The guy’s really starting to get on my nerves. I want to go to the cave.” I didn’t put my foot down that often, but I was determined to see Arturo’s cave before we left the country.

“No go cave,” came a low male voice from behind us. The man had stopped sweeping and stood frozen, broom hovering above the sidewalk. A deep frown furrowed his tanned, lined face. His silver-streaked black hair was combed straight back.

“What?” I asked.

His fierce black eyes, shiny as wet marbles, bore into me. “Do not go Mirabueno. Cave dangerous.” He smelled of onion and garlic.

My gaze met Anna’s. Did she put this guy up to this? No, her brows knit together with irritation. “Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ve been in lots of caves.”

“Not Mirabueno. No go,” he said.

The small man, in his early sixties, wore a blue service uniform with Roberto stitched in orange on the pocket. Another man, also dressed in the same blue uniform, called to Roberto from the side of the building. Roberto gave us one last fierce glare. “No go,” he warned, then left us with our mouths hanging open as he trotted out of sight.

How much more melodramatic could you get? I turned to Anna. “Did you have anything to do with this?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Now forget the cave. Let’s catch the bus to the Palacio.”

I had this handy stubborn gene that rarely made an appearance, but when it did, Holy Toledo, it really kicked in. Anna didn’t want me to go to the cave. Some weird stranger didn’t want me to go to the cave.

Ha. That meant I was headed for the Mirabueno Cave, and right now. Nothing was going to stop me.