

Pretending to be in love never
tasted better.



THE



Spanish LOVE DECEPTION



ELENA ARMAS

THE
Spanish
LOVE
DECEPTION

a novel

ELENA ARMAS

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*To those chasing dreams,
never give up on them.
We are not quitters, you hear me?*

CHAPTER ONE

'll be your date to the wedding."

Words I had never—not even in my wildest dreams, and trust me, I had a vivid imagination—conceived of hearing from that deep and rich tone reached my ears.

“*I* Looking down at my coffee, I squinted my eyes, trying to search for any signs of noxious substances floating around. That would at least explain what was happening. But nope.

Nothing. Just what was left of my Americano.

"I'll do it if you need someone that badly," the deep voice came again.

Eyes growing wide, I lifted my head. I opened my mouth and then snapped it closed again.

"Rosie ..." I trailed off, the word leaving me in a whisper. "Is *he* really there? Can you see him? Or did someone spike my coffee without me noticing?"

Rosie—my best friend and colleague in InTech, the New York City-based engineering consulting company, where we had met and worked—slowly nodded her head. I watched her dark curls bounce with the motion, an expression of disbelief marring her otherwise soft features. She lowered her voice. "Nope. He's right there." Her head peeked around me very quickly. "Hi. Good morning!" she said brightly before her attention returned to my face. "Right behind you."

Lips parted, I stared at my friend for a long moment. We were standing at the far end of the hallway of the eleventh floor of the InTech headquarters. Both our offices were relatively close together, so the moment I had entered the building located in the heart of Manhattan, in the vicinity of Central Park, I had gone straight to her office.

My plan had been to grab Rosie and plop down on the upholstered wooden armchairs that served as a waiting sitting area for visiting clients, which were usually unoccupied this early in the morning. But we never made it. I somehow dropped the bomb before we ever sat down. That was how much my predicament needed Rosie's immediate attention. And then ... then *he* had materialized out of nowhere.

"Should I repeat that a third time?" His question sent a new wave of disbelief rushing down my body, freezing the blood in my veins.

He wouldn't. Not because he couldn't, but because what he was saying did not make any freaking sense. Not in *our* world. One where we—

"All right, fine," he sighed. "You can take me." He paused, sending more of that ice-cold wariness through me. "To your sister's wedding."

My spine locked up.

My shoulders stiffened.

I even felt the satin blouse I had tucked into my camel slacks stretch with the sudden motion.

I can take him.

To my sister's wedding.

As my ... date?

I blinked, his words echoing inside my head.

Then, something unhitched inside of me. The absurdity of whatever this was—whatever perverse joke this man I knew not to trust was trying to pull off—made a snort bubble its way up my throat and reach my lips, leaving me quickly and loudly. As if it had been in a rush to get out.

A grunt came from behind me. "What's so funny?" His voice dropped, turning colder. "I'm completely serious."

I bit back another burst of laughter. I didn't believe that. Not for a second. "The chances of him," I told Rosie, "being actually serious are the same chances I have of having Chris Evans pop out of nowhere and confess his undying love for me." I made a show of looking right and left. "Nonexistent. So, Rosie, you were saying something about ... Mr. Frenkel, right?"

There was no Mr. Frenkel.

"Lina," Rosie said with that fake, toothy smile I knew she wore when she didn't want to be rude. "He looks like he's serious," she spoke through her freaky smile. Her gaze inspected the man standing behind me. "Yep. I think he might be serious."

"Nope. He can't be." I shook my head, still refusing to turn around and acknowledge that there was a possibility my friend was right.

There couldn't be. There was no way Aaron Blackford, colleague and well-established affliction of mine, would even attempt to offer something like that. No. Way.

An impatient sigh came from behind me. "This is getting repetitive, Catalina." A long pause. Then, another noisy exhale left his lips, this one much longer. But I did not turn around. I held my ground. "Ignoring me won't make me disappear. You know that."

I did. "But that doesn't mean I won't keep trying," I muttered under my breath.

Rosie leveled me with a look. Then, she peeked around me again, keeping that toothy grin in place. "Sorry about that, Aaron. We are not ignoring you." Her grin strained. "We are ... debating something."

"We are ignoring him though. You don't need to spare his feelings. He doesn't have any."

"Thanks, Rosie," Aaron told my friend, some of the usual coldness leaving his voice. Not that he'd be nice to anybody. Nice wasn't something Aaron did. I didn't even think he was able to pull off friendly. But he had always been less ... grim when it came to Rosie. A treatment that had never been for me. "Do you think you can tell Catalina to turn around? I'd

appreciate talking to her face and not to the back of her head.” His tone dropped back to minus zero degrees. “That is, of course, if this is not one of her jokes that I never seem to understand, much less find funny.”

Heat rushed up my body, reaching my face.

“Sure,” Rosie complied. “I think ... I think I can do that.” My friend’s gaze bounced from that point behind me to my face, her eyebrows raised. “Lina, so, erm, Aaron would like you to turn around if this is not one of those jokes that—”

“Thanks, Rosie. I got that,” I gritted out between my teeth. Feeling my cheeks burn, I refused to face him. That would mean letting him win whatever game he was playing. Plus, he had just called me unfunny. *Him*. “If you could, tell Aaron that I don’t think one can laugh at, or much less understand, jokes when one lacks a sense of humor, please. That would be great. Thanks.”

Rosie scratched the side of her head, looking pleadingly at me. *Don’t make me do this*, she seemed to ask me with her eyes.

I widened mine at her, ignoring her plea and begging her to go along.

She released a breath and then looked around me one more time. “Aaron,” she said, her fake grin getting bigger, “Lina thinks that—”

“I heard her, Rosie. Thank you.”

I was so attuned to him—to *this*—that I noticed the slight change in his tone that signaled the switch to the voice he only used with me. The one that was just as dry and cold but that would now come with an extra layer of disdain and distance. The one that would soon lead to a scowl. I didn’t even need to turn and take a look at him to know that. It was somehow always there when it came to me and to this ... *thing* between us.

“I’m pretty sure my words are reaching Catalina down there just fine, but if you could tell her that I have work to do and I cannot entertain this much longer, I would appreciate it.”

Down there?

Stupidly large man.

My size was average. Average for a Spaniard, sure. But average nonetheless. I was five foot three—almost four, thank you very much.

Rosie's green eyes were back on me. "So, Aaron has work, and he would appreciate—"

"If—" I stopped myself when I heard the word sounding high-pitched and squeaky. I cleared my throat and tried again. "If he is so busy, then please tell him to feel free to spare me. He can go back to his office and resume whatever workaholic activities he had shockingly paused to stick his nose in something that does not concern him."

I watched my friend's mouth open, but the man behind me spoke before a sound could come out of her lips, "So, you heard what I said. My offer. Good." A pause. In which I cursed under my breath. "Then, what's your answer?"

Rosie's face filled with shock one more time. My gaze remained on her, and I could picture how the dark brown in my eyes was turning to red with my growing exasperation.

My answer? What the hell was he even trying to accomplish? Was this a new, inventive way of playing with my head? My sanity?

"I have no idea what he's talking about. I heard nothing," I lied. "You can tell him that too."

Rosie tucked a curl behind her ear, her eyes jumping very briefly to Aaron and then returning to me. "I think he's referring to the moment he offered to be your date to your sister's wedding," she explained with a soft voice. "You know, right after you told me that things had changed and that you now needed to find someone—or anyone, I think you said—to go to Spain with you and attend that wedding because, otherwise, you'd die a slow, painful death and—"

"I think I got it," I rushed out, feeling my face burn again from the realization that Aaron had heard all of that. "Thanks, Rosie. You can stop with the recap." Or I'd be dying that slow, painful death right about now.

"I think you used the word *desperate*," Aaron chipped in.

My ears burned, probably flashing about five shades of radioactive red. “I did not,” I breathed out. “I did not use that word.”

“You ... sort of did, sweetie,” my best friend—no, former best friend as of right now—confirmed.

Eyes narrowed, I mouthed, *What the hell, traitor?*

But both of them were right.

“Fine. So, I said that. Doesn’t mean I’m *that* desperate.”

“That’s what truly helpless people would say. But whatever makes you sleep better at night, Catalina.”

Cursing under my breath for the umpteenth time that morning, I closed my eyes briefly. “This is none of your business, Blackford, but I’m not helpless, okay? And I sleep at night just fine. No, actually, I’ve never slept better.”

What was one more lie to the pile I was hoisting around, huh?

Contrary to what I had just denied, I was *truly, helplessly* desperate to find someone to be my date to that wedding. But that didn’t mean I’d—

“Sure.”

Ironically, out of all the damn words Aaron Blackford had said to the back of my head that morning, that one word was what made me break my stance to pretend I remained unaffected.

That *sure*, sounding all condescending and bored and dismissive and just so Aaron.

Sure.

My blood bubbled.

It was so impulsive, such a knee-jerk reaction to that four-letter word—which, uttered by anybody else, would have meant nothing—that I didn’t even realize my body was turning until it was too late.

Because of his unearthly height, I was welcomed by a broad chest covered in a pressed white button-down that made me itch to fist the fabric and wrinkle it with my hands because who pranced through life so sleek and spotless all the damn time? Aaron Blackford—that was who.

My gaze trailed up rounded shoulders and a strong neck, reaching the straight line of his jaw. His lips pressed flatly, just like I had known they would. My eyes traveled further up then, reaching his blue ones—blue that reminded me of the depths of the ocean, where everything was cold and deadly—and finding them on me.

One of his brows rose.

“*Sure?*” I hissed.

“Yes.” That head, topped with raven hair, gave one single nod, his gaze not leaving mine. “I don’t want to waste more time arguing about something you are too stubborn to admit, so yes. *Sure.*”

This infuriating blue-eyed man who probably spent more time ironing his clothes than interacting with other human beings was *not* going to make me lose my temper this early in the morning.

Fighting to keep my body under control, I inhaled a long, deep breath. I tucked a lock of chestnut hair behind my ear. “If this is such a waste of time, I genuinely don’t know what you are still doing here. Please don’t stay on my or Rosie’s account.”

A noncommittal noise left *Miss Traitor*’s mouth.

“I would have,” Aaron admitted in a level tone. “But you still haven’t answered my question.”

“*That* wasn’t a question,” I said, the words tasting sour in my tongue. “Whatever you said was not a question. But that’s not important because I don’t need you, thank you very much.”

“Sure,” he repeated, turning my exasperation one notch up. “Although I think you do.”

“You think wrong.”

That brow rose higher. “And yet it sounded like you really do need me.”

“Then, you must be experiencing serious hearing issues because, yet again, you heard wrong. I don’t need you, Aaron Blackford.” I swallowed, willing some of the dryness away. “I could write it down for you if you want. Send you an email, too, if that’d help at all.”

He seemed to think about it for a second, looking uninterested. But I knew better than to believe he'd let it go so easily. Which he proved as soon as he opened his mouth again. "Didn't you say the wedding is in a month and you don't have a date?"

My lips pressed in a tight line. "Maybe. I can't recall exactly."

I had said that. Word for word.

"Didn't Rosie suggest that if you perhaps sat in the back and tried not to draw any attention to yourself, nobody would notice you were attending on your own?"

My friend's head popped into my field of vision. "I did. I also suggested to wear a dull color and not the stunning red dress that—"

"Rosie," I interrupted her. "Not really helping here."

Aaron's eyes didn't waver when he resumed his walk down memory lane. "Didn't you follow that by reminding Rosie that you were the *motherfreaking*—your word—maid of honor and therefore *everybody and their mother*—your words again—would notice you anyway?"

"She did," I heard Miss Traitor confirm. My head whirled in her direction. "What?" She shrugged, signing her death sentence. "You did, honey."

I needed new friends. ASAP.

"She did," Aaron corroborated, drawing my gaze and attention back to him. "And did you not say that your ex-boyfriend is the best man and thinking of standing in the vicinity of him, *alone and lame and pathetically single*—those were your words again—made you want to tear off your own skin?"

I had. I had said that. But I hadn't thought Aaron was listening; otherwise, I would have never admitted it out loud.

But he had been right there, apparently. He knew now. He had heard me openly admit that and had just thrown it at my face. And as much as I told myself I didn't care—that I shouldn't care—the pang of hurt was there all the same. It made me feel all the more alone, lame, and pathetic.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I averted my eyes, letting them rest somewhere close to his Adam's apple. I didn't want to see whatever was in his face. Mockery. Pity. I didn't care. I could spare the knowledge of one more person thinking of me that way.

His throat was the one that worked then. I knew because it was the only part of him I allowed myself to look at.

"You *are* desperate."

I exhaled, the air leaving my lips forcefully. One nod—that was all I gave him. And I didn't even understand why I had done it. This wasn't me. I usually fought back until I was the one who drew blood first. Because that was what we did. We didn't spare each other's feelings. This wasn't new.

"Then, take me. I will be your date to the wedding, Catalina."

My gaze drew up very slowly, a strange mix of wariness and embarrassment washing over me. Him witnessing all this was bad enough, but him somehow trying to use it to his advantage? To get the better of me?

Unless he wasn't. Unless perhaps there was an explanation, a reason, as to why he was doing this. Offering himself to be my date.

Studying his face, I pondered all these options and possible motivations, not coming to any kind of reasonable conclusion. Not finding any possible answer that would help me understand why or what he was trying to accomplish.

Only the truth. The reality. We weren't friends. We barely tolerated each other, Aaron Blackford and I. We were spiteful to each other, pointed out each other's mistakes, criticized how differently we worked, thought, and lived. We condemned our differences. At some point in the past, I would have thrown darts at a poster of his face. And I was pretty sure he would have done the same because I wasn't the only one driving along Hate Boulevard. It was a two-way road. Not only that, but it had actually been him, the one causing our fallout. I hadn't started this feud between us. So, why? Why was he pretending to offer me help, and why would I humor him by even considering it?

“I might be desperate to find a date, but I’m not *that* desperate,” I repeated. “Just like I said.”

His sigh was tired. Impatient. Infuriating. “I’ll let you think about it. You know you have no other options.”

“Nothing to think about.” I cut my hand through the air between us. Then, I smiled my version of Rosie’s fake, toothy grin. “I’d take a chimpanzee dressed in a tuxedo before taking *you*.”

His eyebrows rose, amusement barely entering his eyes. “Now, come on; we both know you wouldn’t. While there are chimpanzees that would rise up to the occasion, it will be your ex standing there. Your family. You said you need to make an impression, and I will accomplish exactly that.” He tilted his head. “I’m your best option.”

I snorted, clapping my hands once. *Smug blue-eyed pain in my ass*. “You are my best *nothing*, Blackford. And I have plenty of other options,” I countered, shrugging a shoulder. “I’ll find someone on Tinder. Maybe put out an ad in the *New York Times*. I can find someone.”

“In only a few weeks? Highly unlikely.”

“Rosie has friends. I’ll take one of them.”

That had been my plan all along. It was the reason why I had grabbed Rosie so early in the day. Rookie mistake on my part, I realized. I should have waited to get off work and gotten Rosie to a safe, Aaron-free place to talk. But after yesterday’s call with *Mamá* ... yeah. Things had changed. My situation had definitely changed. I needed someone, and I couldn’t stress enough that anyone would do. Anyone who wasn’t Aaron, of course. Rosie had been born and raised in the city. There had to be someone she knew.

“Right, Rosie? One of your friends must be available.”

My friend’s head popped in again. “Maybe Marty? He loves weddings.”

I shot a quick glance at her. “Wasn’t Marty the one who got drunk at your cousin’s wedding, stole the mic from the band, and sang ‘My Heart Will Go On’ until your brother had to drag him off the stage?”

“That would be him.” She winced.

“Yeah, no.” I couldn’t have that at my sister’s wedding. She’d rip his heart out of his chest and serve it as dessert. “What about Ryan?”

“Happily engaged.”

A sigh left my lips. “Not surprised. Ryan is a total catch.”

“I know. That’s why I tried so many times to get you two together, but you—”

I cleared my throat loudly, interrupting her. “We aren’t discussing why I am single.” I quickly glanced back at Aaron. His eyes were on me, narrowed. “How about ... Terry?”

“Moved to Chicago.”

“Dammit.” I shook my head, closing my eyes for an instant. This was useless. “Then, I’ll hire an actor. Pay him to act as my date.”

“That’s probably expensive,” Aaron said flatly. “And actors aren’t exactly lying around, waiting for single people to hire and parade them as their plus-ones.”

I pinned him with an exasperated look. “I’ll get a professional escort.”

His lips pressed in that tight, almost-hermetic way they did when he was extremely irritated. “You’d take a male prostitute to your sister’s wedding before taking me?”

“I said, an escort, Blackford. *Por Dios*,” I muttered, watching his eyebrows bunch and turn into *the* scowl. “I’m not looking for that kind of service. I just need a *companion*. That’s all they do. They *escort* you to events.”

“That’s not what they do, Catalina.” His voice was deep and icy. Covering me in his frosty judgment.

“Haven’t you watched any romantic comedies ever?” I watched the scowl deepen. “Not even *The Wedding Date*?”

No answer, just more of that arctic staring.

“Do you even watch movies? Or do you just ... work?”

There was a possibility that he didn’t even own a television. His expression didn’t change.

God, I don’t have time for this. For him.

“You know what? Not important. I don’t care.” I threw my hands up and then clasped them together. “Thank you for ... this. Whatever it was. Great input. But I don’t need you.”

“I think you do.”

I blinked at him. “I think you are annoying.”

“Catalina,” he started, making my irritation grow with the way he uttered my name. “You are delusional if you think you can find someone in such a short amount of time.”

Once more, Aaron Blackford wasn’t wrong.

I probably was a little delusional. And he didn’t even know about the lie. *My* lie. Not that he’d ever do. But that didn’t change the facts. I needed someone, anyone, but not him, not Aaron, to fly to Spain with me for Isabel’s wedding. Because (A) I was the bride’s sister and maid of honor. (B) My ex, Daniel, was the groom’s brother and best man. And as of yesterday, I had learned that he was happily engaged. Something that my family had been hiding from me. (C) If you didn’t count the few and pretty unsuccessful dates I had gone on, I had been technically single for roughly six years. Ever since I had left Spain and moved to the States, which had happened shortly after my one and only relationship exploded in my face. Something that every single attendee—because there were no secrets in families like mine and much less in small towns like the one I had come from—knew about and pitied me for. And (D) there was *my* lie.

The lie.

The one I had sort of fed my mother and consequently the whole Martín clan because privacy and boundaries did not exist when it came to us. Hell, by now, my lie was probably on the Announcements page of the local newspaper.

Catalina Martín, finally, not single. Her family is happy to announce that she will bring her American boyfriend to the wedding. Everyone is invited to come and witness the most magical event of the decade.

Because that was what I had done. Right after the news of Daniel’s engagement had slipped past my mother’s lips and reached my ears through

the speaker of my phone, I had said that I'd be bringing someone too. No, not just someone. I'd said—lied, deceived, falsely announced—that I'd be bringing *my boyfriend*.

Who technically did not exist.

Yet.

Okay, fine, or ever. Because Aaron was right. Finding a date in such a short amount of time was perhaps a little optimistic. Believing I'd find someone to pretend to be my made-up boyfriend was probably delusional. But accepting that Aaron was my only choice and taking him up on his offer? That was straight-up insanity.

"I see it's finally seeping in." Aaron's words brought me back to the present, and I found his blue eyes aimed at me. "I'll let you come to terms with it on your own. Just let me know when you do."

My lips pursed. And when I felt my cheeks burn again—because how lame was I for him, Aaron Blackford, who had never even liked me a tiny little bit, to pity me enough to offer himself to be my date?—I crossed my arms over my chest and averted my eyes from those two icy and ruthless spots.

"Oh, and, Catalina?"

"Yeah?" The word left my lips weakly. *Ugh, pathetic.*

"Try not to be late to our ten o'clock meeting. It's not cute anymore."

My gaze shot to him, a huff stuck in my throat.

Jerk.

I swore right then and there that one day, I'd find a ladder high enough, climb it, and chuck something really hard at his infuriating face.

One year and eight months. That was how long I had endured him. I had been counting, biding my time.

Then, with nothing more than a nod, he turned around, and I watched him walk away. Dismissed until further notice.

"Okay, that was ..." Rosie's voice trailed off, not ending the statement.

"Maddening? Insulting? Bizarre?" I offered, bringing my hands to my face.

“Unexpected,” she countered. “And interesting.”

Looking at her between my fingers, I watched the corners of her lips tug up.

“Your friendship has been revoked, Rosalyn Graham.”

She chuckled. “You know you don’t mean that.”

I didn’t; she’d never get rid of me.

“So ...” Rosie linked her arm with mine and ushered me down the hallway. “What are you going to do?”

A shaky exhale left my mouth, taking all my energy with it. “I ... I don’t have the slightest idea.”

But I knew something for sure: I was *not* taking Aaron Blackford up on his offer. He wasn’t my only option, and he surely wasn’t my best one either. Hell, he wasn’t my *anything*. Especially not my date to my sister’s wedding.