



Minding Her Boss's Business (Dynasties: The Montoros)

By Janice Maynard

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But Alex doesn't know that Maria has a longtime crush of her own—and it isn't on the playboy prince...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

In 2002 Janice Maynard left a career as an elementary teacher to pursue writing full-time. Her first love is creating sexy, character-driven, contemporary romance. She has written for Kensington and NAL, and is very happy to be part of the Harlequin family--a lifelong dream. Janice and her husband live in the shadow of the Great Smoky Mountains. They love to hike and travel. Visit her at www.JaniceMaynard.com.

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Alex Ramon winced as shards of pain lanced his temples. Though the splitting headache was undoubtedly a result of jet lag and too little sleep for the past couple of weeks, it could also be attributed to stress. At the moment, his particular stressor stood on the opposite side of the room...a tall, leggy blonde in a formfitting aquamarine dress and killer heels.

Maria Ferro. Aged twenty-seven. Straight, honey-colored hair that tumbled like a silky waterfall almost to her ass. He probably shouldn't be thinking about her ass. Definitely not. But tonight it was difficult not to notice.

Reluctantly, he dragged his attention from his coworker and surveyed the room. By all accounts, the party was going swimmingly. The delegation of business leaders from the European island nation of Alma mingled with the various members of the Montoro family, everyone chatting with animation and cordiality.

The ballroom was situated on the ground floor of one of Miami's premier hotels. An entire wall of glass showcased the azure ocean. Priceless chandeliers cast sparkles across the polished hardwood floor. The decor was understated, modern and sophisticated. Much like the wealthy Montoro family themselves.

Alex inserted a finger beneath the collar of his tux and tugged. He was more than accustomed to upscale social functions. But in this moment, restlessness plagued him. As Alma's deputy prime minister of commerce, he carried the lion's share of the responsibility for convincing the Montoros to return to their homeland and resume the throne.

A lot was riding on tonight and the days to come.

This evening's soiree was only the beginning...a chance for the delegation to be introduced and to establish personal contact with the family whose ancestors once ruled Alma. Unfortunately, the men and women in the youngest generation, all twenty-somethings, were more interested in hard-driving business deals and hard-partying social lives than in resurrecting any royal roots.

A throaty laugh echoed across the room. Maria was clearly enjoying her handsome companion. Gabriel Montoro, middle child of Rafael III, epitomized the classic bad boy...fun loving, hard to pin down, heedless of anyone's opinion. Alex wanted to dismiss him as a lightweight player, but in fact, Gabriel ran the South American division of Montoro Enterprises with surprising success. He was headquartered in Miami, which meant he would be involved in the upcoming negotiations.

Alex was surprised that the usually sensible Maria didn't see through Gabriel's facade. Perhaps she was blinded by the man's green eyes, tousled hair and golden skin. Alex wasn't jealous. That would be ludicrous.

He and Maria were nothing more than business associates. But he was half a dozen years older than she was, and he felt protective of her.

She had worked for his family in London. Then, when political power changed hands in Alma and the Ramons were able to return to their homeland, Maria had come, as well, along with her mother. Alex had watched with satisfaction as Maria's talent and hard work brought opportunities her way. Now, as a marketing and PR expert, she was set to play an integral role in this new venture.

Alex admired and respected Maria. She was too nice a woman to be taken in by a jaded playboy like Gabriel Montoro.

Decades had passed since the last Montoro monarch was deposed by a dictator in the aftermath of the Second World War. Four generations later the family enjoyed the fruits of a shipping and trade empire that spanned half the globe.

The Montoros were happy and successful in Miami. legendary for their wealth and lifestyle. Only time would tell if they could be persuaded by duty and honor to walk a different path.

Alex made his way around the perimeter of the room, stopping to make introductions and to chat with this person and that. In his hotel room he possessed lengthy dossiers on each of the key players in tonight's drama. Though he had glanced over his notes before coming downstairs, the information was stored in his brain.

That was how he worked. Prepare for every eventuality. Plan for any outcome. Make no mistakes.

At last he reached the small alcove where Maria and Gabriel stood. She held a glass of wine in one hand, though Alex hadn't seen her drink more than a few sips. Gabriel Montoro appeared to be offering her naughty vignettes about their fellow partygoers.

Deliberately, Alex took his place at Maria's side and gave Montoro a steady glance. "Mr. Montoro. I'm Alex Ramon."

Gabriel nodded as the two of them shook hands. "I know. My father speaks highly of you. I have to tell you, though, you may have your work cut out for you. None of us are particularly interested in playing dress up with crowns and thrones and an antiquated system that has seen its day."

Alex rubbed a hand across his chin, hoping to defuse the awkward moment with humor. "Why don't you tell me what you're *really* thinking?" The man's blunt honesty caught him off guard.

Gabriel shrugged. "I'm not sure what all of you hope to gain."

Maria shot Alex a glance as if to caution tact. But Alex was off his game. And irritated. "Alma is in the midst of important changes. Restoring the monarchy in a ceremonial role is a popular idea with the people at large. The offshore oil reserves have made the country wealthy, but we need stability. A royal marriage would ensure that."

Gabriel's smile was mocking. "How very feudal of you, Mr. Ramon."

"This is not something to joke about. The lives and well-being of thousands of people are at stake here. Your

family's history is part and parcel of Alma's identity."

Gabriel shook his head. "They threw us out with nothing but the clothes on our backs."

Alex shoved his hands in his pockets. He had the most insane urge to throttle the guy. Wouldn't that be a royal mess... "They didn't throw *you* out," he said, the words even. "You weren't even born. And the people had no say in it. You know what Tantaberra was like. He'd shoot first and ask questions later."

Gabriel shrugged. "Whatever. The point is, if you're trying to make my family and me face up to some kind of obligation, you're way off course. We have a good life here in Miami. Why would we want to return to a tiny backwater collection of islands that time forgot?"

Maria spoke up, her blue-green eyes sparkling with passion. "Alma has changed, Mr. Montoro. We have highspeed broadband internet access, satellite television and radio and a thriving business community. Along with the natural beauty of the land, we have much to offer."

Gabriel wasn't convinced. "I can find all that and more here in the US."

Alex played his trump card. "But think of your aunt...you know what she wants."

A flicker in the other man's eyes told Alex he'd finally scored a point. Isabella, at seventy-three, was the oldest living Montoro. It was her dearest wish that her grandchildren, grandnieces and grandnephews return to their homeland for the sake of family honor. She was dying...caught up in the advanced stages of Parkinson's disease. Alex had a notion she was hanging on only long enough to see the transfer of power take place.

Gabriel downed the last of his champagne and plucked another crystal flute from the tray offered by a passing waiter. "Aunt Isabella lives in the past. We do not always get what we want."

"I think that's a song," Maria said, smiling. Clearly she was trying to lighten the mood. But Alex was in no frame of mind to be appeased. Gabriel Montoro rubbed him the wrong way. The man had wealth, power, good looks and sex appeal. It was rumored that women besieged him all hours of the night and day. Surely Maria wouldn't be so naive as to be taken in by him.

Gabriel sipped his drink, his gaze stormy. "Lucky for you, my father retains some vestige of the old ways. Perhaps he can be persuaded. Who knows?"

Alex winced, as did Maria. Maria laid a hand on Mon-toro's arm briefly, as if to placate him. "I think no one has told you," she said softly. "But your father cannot reign."

"Why the hell not?"

It was oddly amusing that even though Gabriel insisted his family had no interest in the monarchy, he was incensed at the notion his father was ineligible.

Alex took a deep breath and exhaled. "Your father is divorced. His marriage was not annulled. Under the tenets of Alma law, that legally disqualifies him."

"Hell of a way to operate a country. You should be damn glad I'm not in the running. If a man of my father's

caliber is not on the short list, I'd never make the cut." The sarcasm was laced with disdain.

"This isn't personal, Mr. Montoro. We're merely trying to follow the traditions and expectations of our people."

Maria nodded. "Alex is right, of course. The situation is unprecedented. We are trying our best to make it work."

"But neither of you even lived in Alma until Tantaberra was ousted. Why do you care?"

Alex remained silent, unable to give voice to the emotions roiling inside him. Fortunately, Maria was more vocal. "Alex's family met the same fate as yours long ago, Gabriel. They, however, settled in London and rebuilt their fortunes in oil and gas. When Tantaberra was finally overthrown, Alex's father determined that returning to Alma was the right thing to do."

Gabriel shook his head, draining the second glass of champagne. "I seem to be surrounded by proponents of duty above desire. Thank God, my brother is the one in the hot seat. You'll never find a more honorable man. But whether or not he's interested in a crown remains to be seen."

Alex took Maria's elbow in a loose grip. "If you'll excuse us, Mr. Montoro, Maria and I need to mingle. I'm sure we'll meet again."

Gabriel eyed both of them, his rueful smile half apology, half derision. "I'm sure we will. How long do you anticipate staying in Miami to stir the pot?"

"A month, give or take. We have a great deal of work to do. The official request from Alma to the Montoro family is in the process of being drafted."

Maria spoke up. "And I'll be working on press releases and rollouts to the public. We want everything to be positive and upbeat."

"And if my family refuses?" Gabriel's steely-eyed gaze held not a whit of humor.

It was Alex's turn to shrug. "If your brother agrees, the rest of you will be free to make your own choices. Although, for the sake of a smooth transition, your support will mean a lot to him, I would think."

Maria grimaced. "This is a huge undertaking, Mr. Montoro."

"I asked you to call me Gabriel," he said. "And you, too, Alex. I'm not one to stand on ceremony." If he was making a point, it was subtle.

"Gabriel, then," she said. "We take our charge very seriously. I hope you'll give us a chance to win you over."

He chuckled. "Fair enough."

His relaxed response sent a wave of relief crashing through Alex. It would be bad form to alienate one of the royal family right out of the gate. Gabriel had been pissed a moment ago, but his tone and demeanor were mellower now.

"I appreciate your plain speaking," Alex said, his customary diplomacy back in working order. "I'll look forward to continuing our conversation."

Maria allowed Alex to steer her away from the Montoro bad boy, but for once, she couldn't read her boss. He led her toward the buffet. "Have you eaten anything?" he asked gruffly.

Her stomach rumbled on cue. "No. I was too nervous."

He handed her a plate. "We've both been working nonstop for weeks. I think we deserve a break."

Maria surveyed the bounty with anticipation. Fresh seafood, everything from shrimp cocktail to crab legs to raw oysters, filled silver trays to overflowing. The various salads and breads were no less appealing.

She made her choices and followed Alex to a small table for two. The glass doors were designed to be open for access to the patio, but it was much too hot at the moment for anyone to go outside.

She sat down, tugging the hem of her dress to a decorous level. Alex was in an odd mood. In a tiny pocket she carried a tube of lipstick and a small vial of tablets. Shaking two ibuprofen into her palm, she handed them across the table. "Your head is killing you, I can tell. Take these."

He scowled but didn't argue. She knew that men in general and this one in particular hated showing weakness of any kind. It was a sign of his discomfort that he didn't refuse.

They ate in silence for long minutes. The quiet didn't bother Maria. She'd grown up without brothers or sisters and had often spent time alone at home when her mother was at work.

Tonight, however, she was more aware than usual of her boss. It was no surprise that she'd had a bit of a crush on him over the years. Alex was virile, lean and muscular. Even in the expensive suits he wore, his physical power was evident. Thick black hair, cut conservatively, and deep brown eyes added up to an extremely masculine and sexy man.

In London, she had worked as his secretary. Once they all returned to Alma, however, she had been promoted to her current assignment in media and PR. Her position fell under the auspices of the Ministry of Commerce, but she did not ordinarily answer directly to Alex. For this assignment, however, he was definitely in charge. And that was a problem. Because the longer she knew him, the more she was afraid he would pick up on her reluctant attraction.

She had no illusions on that score. Alex was the eldest son of an aristocratic Alma family. He would marry one day and marry well. But not someone like Maria. Not a woman whose mother had been a laundress in a seedy neighborhood in London to make ends meet.

Maria was practical and ambitious. She would get ahead by virtue of hard work and innate talent. But, once in a while, she let herself fantasize about sharing Alex's bed. All that hard muscle and warm skin at her disposal. A shiver snaked its way from the nape of her neck to a spot low in her belly. Thankfully, Alex was oblivious to her imagination.

He was discreet about his relationships. A very private man with a fine-tuned sense of propriety. She'd seen the hint of disapproval in his gaze tonight as he assessed her party dress. Why, she couldn't say. By Miami standards, her outfit was tame.

Nevertheless, she knew she had blotted her copybook with Alex. Perhaps he thought her décolletage was too low or her skirt too high. Though the man was incredibly appealing, even she could admit he had a stuffy side. Perhaps she would have teased him had he not looked so grim faced. It occurred to her that he took this venture very personally. As if it was solely up to him to convince the Montoros to accept the mantle of the monarchy once again.

By the time they'd finished eating, the lines at the corners of Alex's mouth had disappeared. Between the food and the painkillers, he seemed finally to have relaxed. Still, she couldn't put a finger on what bothered her about his interaction with Gabriel Montoro. Instead of being conciliatory and cajoling, he'd been borderline antagonistic.

It made no sense.

She sipped a glass of Chablis and gazed out over the diverse group of people. The Alma delegation actually outnumbered the Montoros, but the Montoros had invited numerous friends and associates.

Rafael Montoro III was the life of the party. His rugged features belied his age. Though he had already turned fifty, he could pass for a man a decade younger. Did he harbor resentment over being bypassed for the throne?

His oldest son, Rafael IV—known as Rafe—was charming and affable and extremely self-possessed, though he had yet to hit thirty. Except for his age, it was not a stretch to see him as king of Alma. Rafe's sister, Bella, was much like her dad, the center of attention and a vivacious extrovert. But she was very young, only twenty-three if Maria remembered correctly.

Then there was Gabriel, who was another story. And also a close cousin, Juan Carlos, who had been raised with the Montoro siblings after his parents' deaths. Neither Gabriel nor Juan Carlos would be likely to play much of a role in the upcoming transition, except for supporting Rafael IV.

Users Review

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