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Sarah Dobbs

Game, Set, Love-Match

Sometimes, mistakes are the best things in life.

When Cassie Miller jets off to the remote island of Los Tigos, she expects to get an exclusive scoop with a reclusive artist. Instead, she finds arrogant tennis ace Filippo Fernandez.

There's no doubt he's gorgeous, but Cassie is not in the mood for men. Never mind that she's wasted a fortune getting here. The worsening storm means she can't get away. The only protection she has is a leaky, old guest house. Well, that and a candlestick. Having mistaken Filippo, who has only come to check on her, for an intruder, Cassie feels incredibly guilty.

They fight their way through the storm to the safety of Filippo's villa. Maybe it is the lightning, or the electricity crackling between them, but Cassie submits to the desires she's long tried to deny.

But what happens on the morning after when the storm clears?

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Game, Set, Love-Match

By Sarah Dobbs

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Chapter One

“I’d be the bread for his cucumber sandwich any day.”

Cassie Miller looked up from her slush pile. “What’s that, Jen?”

“This Spanish tennis player. Fil—Fili...”

“Filippo Fernandez. We’ve had this conversation before when he was in the first round, and I heard he considers himself to be both Italian and Spanish, with his mother originating from Naples and...” Cassie bit her lip.

Jen took a huge bite out of her apple. “We are a Miss-Know-It-All, aren’t we? So now he’s through to the second week—first Spaniard, okay, Italian-Spaniard to ever get through to the Quarters at Wimbledon. Anyway, who’s interested in stats when he’s got a body like that? And look at those eyes! Aren’t they the lightest green you’ve ever seen? Like mints or something...”

Once again, Cassie looked up. She was *trying* to make sure everything was in order before she jetted off to Los Tigos to conduct her major interview with the reclusive but ground breaking Spanish artist Federique Fernandez. She thought what a coincidence it was that both artist and tennis player shared the same surname. She supposed Fernandez was just a popular Spanish name. No doubt about it they looked different. Cassie remembered a picture she had seen of Federique in an art book when she was at college. He looked nothing like the gorgeous Spaniard on the TV. Still, Federique had been such an influence on her. He’d achieved so much so young, and that was one of the reasons Cassie, at twenty-five, had decided to found *A&L: Art and Literature* on her laptop. The other reason was that it helped distract her from the grief caused by the

abrupt end of her all-of-six-months marriage. The highly unoriginal reason behind the break up was Mike's wandering eye, as well as the other body parts he couldn't seem to keep to himself.

A&L, on the other hand, was an innovative magazine that had carved out its own niche, passionately publishing images and words that others were afraid to take chances on. Two years later, the gamble had paid off, and *A&L* had gone from selling solely through Cassie's own website to being stocked by virtual booksellers all over the world. The next step was to get the magazine into real-life stores. Yet, although her "office" was a rather non-glamorous, two-desk affair, based as it was in the sitting room of her own Peckham terrace, Cassie would always be proud that she had created something wonderful out of such a terrible time in her life.

"No, like grass. No..."

"They're like clear emeralds, okay," Cassie said, tossing a ball of paper at her assistant, Jen, lodging it in her nest of crazy, multi-colored hair. Cassie smoothed her own straightened red locks as if to make sure Jen's kinks weren't catching.

"Hey!" Jen picked the paper out of her hair and threw it back at her.

"Very productive. Come on, Jen, I'm leaving ten minutes ago. I want to make sure you'll be able to cover me these next two weeks."

Jen saluted and crunched noisily on her apple once more. "Go already. I've managed before when you've not been around."

Cassie performed a last minute reorganization of her color-coded Post-It-Notes. "Oh, yeah, when was that 'then'?"

Jen tapped a Biro against her studded lip and swiveled in the old chair. "We-el, there was that time you went to get us some chocolate éclairs, and I was attacked by devils."

Cassie laughed, shouldered her bag and hefted her meticulously packed suitcase onto the desk. *This is it then, I really am going and leaving Jen in charge.* "They were kids in Halloween costumes, throwing eggs at *my* windows, which *I* cleaned up, by the way, because you wouldn't give them any sweets."

"Yeah, the brats." Jen wagged the pen at Cassie. "I was doing them and you a favor, actually."

"I fail to see how."

Jen guffawed. "You should hear yourself, babe—'I fail to see how'. Those windows were filthy, with a capital 'F,' and I certainly wasn't contributing to the increase of cavities in kids, thank you very much. Halloween should be banned by the dental association."

"I don't think they have that kind of power."

Jen jumped out of her chair. "Right, that's it. Get out of here, you twenty-seven-year-old pensioner. Get thee to that airport and on your way to Los wherever. You need some spice in your life."

“Like I’m going to find that observing Señor Fernandez over the next couple of weeks—and *he’s* the pensioner, by the way, although he’s completely brilliant, of course.”

Jen took Cassie’s hands. “Relax, chick. He ain’t listening. Now, let’s see. Passport, tickets, condoms, sunscreen...”

“Jennifer Thompson!”

“What? It’s going to be hot!” Jen nodded towards the television. “And if *that’s* an example of what ole *España’s* got in store, then I demand *molto* vicarious romance descriptions upon your return.”

“*Molto* is Italian.” Jen rolled her eyes as Cassie’s strayed back to the TV. A burst of applause erupted from the small set as the Spaniard flicked up a dazzling lob, demonstrating just how to make sure your opponent won’t try coming to the net again any time soon. “He is gorgeous.”

“Atta girl. Question is, would you let him pour cream all over your strawberries?”

“You’re disgusting! Now, let’s be serious for a moment.”

“You’re always serious, m’dear.”

She was right about that, Cassie thought somewhat wistfully, but there was a time when she hadn’t been. A time she’d been bursting with optimism and possibility and honeymoon-period lust she thought would never fade. She cleared her throat. “You’ve read all my notes?”

“Check.”

“So you’re familiar with all the submission processes?” Jen flicked an imaginary whip and then crossed her heart. “And regarding this interview, you’ve double, triple, quadruple checked all the bookings and spoken again to his people.”

“Oh, yeah. Loads.”

Cassie narrowed her eyes. “Jen?”

“Warning: stress levels on overload.”

“I would’ve done it myself, but I’ve just been so busy. Did you know the printers inserted the subscriber info upside down in the last issue?”

“Damn. Dreadful. How positively life threatening. Now don’t look at me like that. Let’s all just take a deep breath—and hopefully that cursed wedding ring of yours will fall off your skinny finger while you’re at it.”

“I only wear it so as not to attract any unwanted attention.”

“Who from, love? You only go from here to the cake shop and occasionally down to Sainsbury’s. I’m certainly not about to jump you, not when I’ve got my eye on Felicity here.”

“Filippo.”

“What you said. Oh, give it here!” Jen grabbed Cassie’s wedding ring and pulled

it off. She slapped it onto the immaculate desk. “There. About time, too. Not going to catch any fish if your bait’s a’warning the cod away now, are you?”

“Where do you get these metaphors?” Cassie muttered, powering down her PC and quickly snatching up the ring before Jen could see. There wasn’t much chance of that. Her assistant was absorbed in the tennis yet again. “Don’t get so distracted by your new husband that you make mistakes now.”

“*Moi*? When have *I* made mistakes?

Cassie bit her tongue.

“Except...”

“Out with it.”

“Oh, nothing. Just, you know, if he’s not quite there when you arrive...” Jen’s glance skipped back to the television.

“Why would he not be there if it’s all arranged?”

“Just, you know...” Jen’s eyes flicked again to the TV screen.

Talk about obsession, Cassie thought, although the player in question was admittedly stunning.

“...if he’s held up a bit, for some reason, try to be patient. He’ll get there. It’s all taken care of.”

“You’re sure now?”

Outside, a taxi cab honked loudly. “See? All taken care of. Bon voyage.”

“That’s French,” Cassie joked.

Jen tossed her a rude gesture. “Yeah, well *that’s* English.”

Laughing, Cassie gave her assistant a quick hug before rushing out to the cab, calling over her shoulder, “If anything goes wrong, you should know it’s your job on the line, missy!”

“Fine by me! Can’t sack a volunteer!”

Cassie settled back into the private hire’s musty smelling seats—and then leaned forward again, anxious. She had the distinct feeling that all would not go quite as smoothly as Jen projected. Then Cassie did what she always did when nerves got the better of her. She slipped her wedding ring back on.

* * * *

“Absolutely not!” Filippo Aurelio Fernandez declared, daring for once to defy his father.

Filippo’s heart had just been broken. He’d blazed his way through the championships playing his own style of tennis. Not the traditional Spanish baseliner, he’d dynamically served and volleyed his way into the second week of the tournament. Only to be beaten in straight sets by a man five years younger than himself. At twenty-eight, the cruel reality was that he probably only had another two good shots at the title. The

worst part of it was he hadn't even been beaten. He'd lost this opportunity all by himself. Nerves had set in. His first center court appearance, his first Wimbledon quarter final...hell, his first grand slam quarter final...and he'd choked. That *really* hurt.

And now, his father was insisting on some ridiculous two-week long post-interview when all Filippo wanted to do was indulgently lick his wounds on the isolated island of Los Tiqos, and somehow find a way to regroup. Maybe he would even find the time to sculpt.

"*Athletics & Leisure* is the premier international tennis magazine. It will be good for your profile, no? Maybe capitalize on your performance this year and draw in some more endorsements or ads."

"But I don't care about endorsements, papa. I just want to play, not sell razors."

Alberto Fernandez began to rant in Spanish. "*Your mother, God rest her soul, and me, we give up everything for you, son. We sell our house to pay for your coaching as a boy. We move in with my poor dead mother and my poor dead father, and this is how you repay us?*"

"Okay, papa, okay, I will do it," he said in Spanish. Filippo peeled off his white t-shirt, having eschewed all press conferences after the match, much to his father's disapproval. He had returned to the hotel to hopefully shower in private. "I just was looking forward to some time alone."

Alberto Fernandez muttered to himself. "Alone, alone, always alone. Why you need to be alone so much, Fili? Even with me, you are alone. Your head so much full of the tennis, so much you have to prove to everyone. You need life, too."

Filippo wanted to usher his papa out of the room, lock the door, sit in the bath, and drink straight scotch for ten hours straight, but he had too much respect for the diminutive man. His mother and father had indeed risked everything for him, and where would he be now if they had not given up so much? Filippo was sure what Alberto didn't realize, was that a big factor in his seemingly selfish focus on winning, was an overwhelming desire to repay those sacrifices, but Filippo underestimated his father.

"So what do I have to do?" he asked, twisting on the shower and testing the water.

"You go to Los Tiqos, and you talk about the tennis. Is simple. How you prepare, how you relax, and how you pick yourself up from defeat."

"*Gracias, papa.*"

Alberto waved a hand. "Bah. You be fine. You don't have to do nothing but talk, do what you usually do. She will be waiting for you when you get there."

"She?"

Alberto didn't respond. Back turned, he busied himself unnecessarily with his son's bags.

"Papa, *she*?"

"What's that? Ah, *si*, she very pretty. Look, see the photo in her magazine."

Filippo sighed and looked at the picture. His eyebrows flicked up and he thought

the cocktail of pale skin, red hair and blue eyes was certainly attractive. Looking like that, he doubted she could be a serious journalist. He began setting out his shower wash and shaving gel. "I haven't time for women right now, papa."

That tickled Alberto and he chuckled, the laughter escalating into a wheeze. "Priorities, my boy. I was only talking about one woman, not many. Besides, there is always being time for pretty woman."

Priorities! Filippo laughed without mirth. Papa changed his priorities depending on the size of the proposed check. Alberto wheezed again, a great shudder running throughout his small frame, and Filippo felt immediately guilty. How much longer would he have his father around to niggle him and push him and argue with? How many more times could this tiger beat the lion of cancer?

"She is going to be on the island when I get there?"

"Yes. Staying in the guest house near your villa."

"There is only one guest house on Los Tiqos."

"Providing the tide hasn't washed it away! The weather reports are saying for lots of rain. I hope your boat will be safe."

"You worry too much, papa, I'm sure everything will go smoothly. What is her name?"

"Cassandra Miller. A nice English name, no? I'm sure she's a very elegant, intelligent and professional young lady."

"Mm, I'm sure she is."

* * * *

Famous last words, Filippo thought, when he stepped off the skiff, shoes in one hand, and came face to face with the red-head from the picture Alberto had shown him. He saw a very rumpled Cassandra Miller waiting for him from the shore. She was indeed young, he would give Alberto that, but her rumpled olive green suit was hardly professional. Still, he thought, that fiery hair was admittedly very sexy. Now, Filippo was of humble origins and through a group effort had ensured that his family were now pretty comfortable, he was no snob. Still, to greet an interviewee in such a state was surely something of an insult. Particularly when that interviewee was graciously including you in his rare vacation time. Okay, so it was rather more of an arm-twisted-behind-his-back invitation than it was gracious, but still, she could have made more of an effort. It actually looked as though she'd swam to Los Tiqos herself.

"This has to be some mistake," Cassie said.

"Pleased to meet you, too."

"I'm supposed to be meeting Federique Fernandez, the artist," Cassie said. "You're sure there was nobody else onboard?"

Filippo narrowed his eyes. If she wasn't so abrasive, he thought, she'd be quite distracting. Her hair was the most striking color he'd ever seen. A shame it hadn't all escaped from its scraped back prison like the few wild strands that tickled her sharp

cheekbones. He would have to content himself with that. Filippo toughened up. What was he thinking?

He leaned close. “I think I would have noticed, no? My father, Alberto, set this up. You’re the journalist, yes? Cassie? There’s obviously been some confusion.” She smelled of salt water, he noticed. Maybe she had swam here after all.

Cassie didn’t seem placated. “But I’m supposed to be meeting the artist Señor Fernandez. It’s for a very important interview, and I’ve already been waiting a couple of days. I can’t understand what’s gone wrong.”

Filippo hauled a pair of huge bags onto each shoulder, turning briefly to wave off the small skiff that was wheeling around, ready to make its journey back to the mainland. “There’s obviously been some sort of mix up. I am Señor Fernandez, and I was supposed to be being interviewed for *Athletics & Leisure*—and I would not call myself an artist.”

“I know who you are. You’re that tennis player. My assistant and I had been watching you play on TV, which means—oh, no! Sorry. How insensitive. Your being here means you must have lost.”

Filippo’s smile felt pinched. How could he suddenly find such a beautiful woman, albeit a somewhat scruffy beautiful woman, so ugly? The good thing about the whole situation was that this mix up meant he was now off the hook. He would be free to enjoy this week off before he went back to Barcelona. Right now, he didn’t even want to look at a racket. “My papa was right. You *are* intelligent.”

“*Adios again, gringa! Adios!*” The crew members of the departing skiff drowned out what he could only imagine was a smart retaliation.

“Gringa?” she asked, when their whistles and catcalls abated.

“White girl,” he told her as he shucked off his sandals and scooped them up. She didn’t seem amused. A shame really, Filippo thought. If she smiled once in a while, her dark sapphire eyes would really sparkle. “Excuse me.”

Filippo walked past Cassie as she rummaged in a handbag that had definitely been for a swim and took out her mobile phone. He couldn’t help a chuckle when she flipped the lid and water trickled out. “Been swimming?”

She blushed, then pursed her lips. “I sort of fell asleep.”

Filippo smirked and Cassie’s narrowed eyes showed him she wasn’t at all impressed. “Well enjoy your stay,” he said. “Señor y Señora Lopez are good people. They really take care of their guests. By the way, you won’t get a signal out here. That’s kind of the point.”

“But there’s nobody here!”

He turned towards her briefly, walking backwards as he shouted, “Also kind of the point!”

“No!” she yelled. “I mean, there really is nobody around. I haven’t seen a soul!”

Filippo stopped. “You’re sure?” She put one hand on her hip. *Cute*, he thought. Then, *simmer down, Fili, don’t go losing your focus over some woman. Your career will*

be over in two years, four tops. There will be plenty of time for romance then.

She jogged up to him, and despite himself, Filippo enjoyed the sight of her jacket flap opening. Beneath it was an impractical white silk top that had molded to her creamy skin in the heat. "I might not be Einstein, Señor Fernandez, but I've been here two days now, and the only person I've seen is you. Now, does Federique Fernandez live on this island?"

They started walking, her struggling to keep pace with the easy stride that his six-foot-two frame afforded him. Filippo slowed up and they fell into a rhythm, bare feet taking them over the white-gold sand towards the handful of houses.

"Like you said, I'm the only person you've seen."

"That's a no then?" Cassie asked.

"I doubt it, could be, but I doubt it."

She sighed. "Then I need to get off this island so I can sort this out. When does the boat next stop here?"

He shook his head, long brown hair falling over his face. "It's not a train, you know."

"Funny. Look, I know this is not your problem, and I'm sure you're a little upset, but I really do need to get back to the mainland, find a phone and figure out what's happened with this interview."

"Sunday."

"What?"

"That's when the supply boat comes around."

"Sunday! But that's three days away!"

Filippo didn't respond. They stepped off the beach, and he put down his bags to brush the sand off his feet. Cassie did the same, only she wobbled over and her sunburned cheeks flushed redder to match the color of her lips. Filippo placed a hand on her shoulder to balance her. Her skin was blazing hot. He drew back as if he'd had an electric shock.

She didn't smile. Didn't even say thanks, but still Filippo looked at her with new interest, as if trying to figure out how, or why, her skin had shocked his fingers. All that could be heard was the insistent crash of the surf, more raucous than he recalled from last year. A glance over his shoulder showed the foam against the shore, when usually it was very calm. Not a good sign, he thought.

"So..." she began, seeming to feel the need to break the silence. "There will definitely be a boat here on Sunday?"

"Probably." He sensed her reel in her frustration. Filippo walked on, and she stayed behind.

"Great," he heard her mutter to herself. "Just what am I supposed to do till then?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "Till then you stay at the guest house and enjoy

Maria's famous cooking. Is not a hard time, no? I may see you around anyway. Goodnight, Señorita Miller."

"I already told you, there's nobody at the guest—"

"Ah." Filippo stopped. "There's nobody at the guest house. No 'no, told you so'," he said when Cassie's chin raised self importantly.

"I wasn't going to."

"Lie. See, no flag. They have the flag sailing high when they are home. Oh, well."

"Wait! So now that you believe me, where am I supposed to stay?"

"Where have you stayed last night?"

Cassandra flushed, the color complimenting the glow of the dying sun that warmed her dark, wine-red hair to life. "Just, you know, crashed here and there."

Filippo tried to keep his face serious. He couldn't. "Where *here and there*?"

She looked endearingly sheepish. "The guest house."

He rolled his lips inwards, to slow the spreading smile. "But I thought you said..."

She was acerbic again. "I'm aware of what I said." She paused guiltily. "But it was the only place around for miles, and it was dark, and I was getting cold, and..."

"And?" Filippo was surprised to find he was actually enjoying himself.

"And I forced the lock?"

He whooped with laughter. Frowning Cassandra tugged a strand of blazing hair out of her eye that was being blown by a worryingly brisk breeze. As she did so, Filippo noticed the low sun glint off what appeared to be a wedding band on her left ring finger. He had not noticed that before. For some reason, seeing it stopped his laughter short.

"Well, enjoy your stay," he said curtly. "And button in, if the Lopez's have left, there must have been some sort of storm warning."

Chapter Two

Trapped on a veritable desert island with the sexiest man she'd ever seen. In. Her. Life. It should have been paradise, right? Wrong. One, there was a storm coming in. Two, she had just admitted to said sexiest man to breaking and entering. Three, her scoop of the century interview with the reclusive Federique Fernandez was in tatters. Some mix up that Filippo blamed on his father, Alberto, she thought he had called him. Need she say more? Sadly, yes. The biggest bummer was that she had had to greet this Spanish Adonis in the clothes she had been wearing for the last two days.

It had all started so well. The flight took off from London Gatwick on time and even arrived at the small Spanish airport ten minutes ahead of schedule. For a woman used to dealing with constant deadlines, that was a happy occurrence indeed.

But then she found out that her suitcase was missing, presumed dead and buried in some Greek airport. The airline assured her they would track it down and reroute it to Los Tiqos ASAP. Cassie had remained upbeat; luckily she always thought to pack make up, money and a spare pair of pants into her hand luggage. She was sure she could buy some more clothes in Los Tiqos town. Except, as she was to find out, there was no Los Tiqos town. Furthermore, just as the bus had deposited Cassie at the docks to board the waiting skiff, Jen called. "...heard the guest house...closed...weather report..."

"Jen? Jen, I can't hear you. Let me call you back," she had said.

"...stay on the main land...supposed to...major storm heading your way..."

"Not missing out on this opportunity, Jen. You're the one always telling me I need a break, and this is going to be ideal. It's a holiday, yet still work. What could be better than that? Besides, I'm sure the boat wouldn't be taking people over there if it was really dangerous."

Cassie's optimism hadn't been damaged when Señor Fernandez wasn't waiting for her when she stepped off the boat. Nor did she succumb to panic when it became apparent that Los Tiqos "town" would not resolve her fashion crisis. Instead, she simply followed the directions to Fernandez' villa, exulting in the walk, the sunshine, the

charming sugar cube houses dotted here and there, the island's verdant palm trees and its pure blue skies. Even when she found no signs of life at the out-of-the-way villa, Cassie didn't despair. She hung around for a few hours, honestly expecting Fernandez to arrive at any moment. It was only when it had started to get dark and she couldn't get a signal to call Jen and find out the news, *and* she had gone through all her snacks, that Cassie realized she should make her way to the guest house and make a fresh start in the morning. She thought, quite reasonably, that the artist might have been held up if there was some bad weather on the way.

Proud of herself for reaching the quaint guesthouse that was literally bathed in a rainbow of flowers without too many wrong turns, Cassie began to worry when she found nobody at home. She would have peeked through the curtains, but the shutters were bolted down tight, as were all the doors. And then as the night came down all of a sudden, as though a thick velvet curtain was pulled across the sun, Cassie realized that she was all alone. There were no people on Los Tiquos, not even any stray cats wandered around—none that she had seen anyway. She twisted her wedding ring for comfort, but it just reminded of how many different ways she was alone.

"Nothing for it," Cassie had said to herself, lingering shiftily outside the guesthouse. "I'm going to have to break in."

It wasn't half as easy as TV cops made it look and had taken a good half an hour and some very bruised shoulders to gain entry. Like a moral Goldilocks, Cassie had slept fitfully in someone else's bed and left early in the morning to walk to the shore in case Señor Fernandez made his arrival. He didn't.

So Cassie had dithered about all afternoon, not wanting to go back to the guest house and root for food in a place she wasn't really a guest in. She eventually fell asleep under a palm tree to escape the relentless sunshine, when the tide was out. She woke up, cold and wet; the tide had come in.

"No! Oh, God, no!"

Her already soiled suit was soaked. The silk camisole was glued to her body. Sand was in her hair, her mouth...in fact, it was everywhere. However, this was not the "it-got-everywhere" scenario that Jen would want to be hearing about.

At that moment, Cassie had put a hand to her brow and squinted out at the horizon. It seemed the same skiff that had brought her here was slowly making its way in.

"Damn!" she had cursed, her stomach bringing her to the decision that she would soon have to return to the guest house and ransack it for something edible—if Señor Fernandez wasn't obliging. A major shower wouldn't go amiss either. *Ah, well*, she thought resignedly. *The guy's an old aged pensioner. I doubt I'm going to need to wow him with my personality.*

And then Filippo Fernandez stepped off the boat. Shock. All six-foot-two, one-hundred-percent muscle, and one-thousand-watt smile of him. His shoulder-length hair was a silky light brown, lighter than she would have expected from a Spaniard. What stood out most to Cassie was how his rich Mediterranean skin tone, a coloring that was definitely more genes than tan, made those clear emerald eyes pop out at her. How could a man be so stereotypically male and so breathtakingly beautiful all at the same time?

Slight correction. What actually stood out most to Cassie was the fact she was wearing the same *pants* as yesterday, pants that were now uncomfortably soggy. Furthermore, her suit was more creased than a used tissue, and her first line went thus:

“There must be some mistake.” *Oh, well done. Exceptional introduction, Cassandra.*

Filippo seemed to think so. His “pleased to meet you too” was hardly sincere. Yet, when she had teetered over, distinctly *not* the athlete, and he had instinctively balanced her, a charge had thrilled through her like lightning. The way he had stared at her after that, damn, it had made her even dizzy, but that connection was severed after she admitted to her recent criminal activities, and he had curtly bid her adieu.

So now here she was, pathetically trying to convince herself that the real lightning that was currently flashing through the shutters, was not why she had the sheets pulled tight to her chin, or why she clutched a candlestick in her other hand.

“No, the real reason is because I’m scared of these last candles flickering out,” she whispered, just to hear her own voice.

That was when the thunder cracked. Cassie screamed automatically, cringing in case the island’s only other inhabitant could actually hear how pathetic she was. Rain hammered down, making its own thunder against the roof.

Plink. Plink. Plink.

“Oh, no, don’t tell me.”

Cassie sat up in bed, watching as the leaking roof’s “Plink. Plink. Plink” turned into “plinkplinkplink” and “plopplopplop.” The leak was fast becoming a flood, and it seemed the bed would not make for a handy island in the midst of it all because the sheets were becoming steadily soaked. At her elbow, the flickering candles finally bit the bullet and hissed out.

Sheet lightning flashed again causing Cassie to jump and cringe when the powerful thunder immediately seemed to take the house by the throat and throttle it. An angry parent giving its naughty child a good telling off. The house seemed to quake, as if somebody was rattling the doors.

But the lightning had also revealed that Cassie was not the only person in the guesthouse. In that split second of light, a hulking, misshapen silhouette was illuminated in her doorway. The figure lurched forward, and a hand clamped around her mouth, but Cassie nevertheless managed to scream and scream and scream.

Cassie realized there was nobody here to come to her rescue except herself. So that was just what she did. Drawing the candlestick back, she whacked it against the intruder’s head. The subsequent thud hurt her almost more than it hurt the trespasser. She couldn’t even kill spiders. However, the way the dark figure crumpled lifelessly to the floor suggested that it did actually hurt him considerably, too.

Heart thumping in her throat, Cassie peered over the soggy bed, still brandishing the candlestick. The prone figure stirred, eyes flickering open. Lightning flashed—and Cassie saw that she had just bludgeoned Filippo Fernandez at the same time that Filippo

Fernandez saw that the woman who had just bludgeoned him was still holding the weapon. His eyes widened.

“Oops,” said Cassie and dropped the makeshift baseball bat.

“Knocked out of Wimbledon and knocked out by a woman all in the same week. I don’t know which is worse.”

“Well, what was I supposed to think? What are you even doing here? And why’d you clasp your hand over my mouth—not exactly the most non-murderer way of introducing yourself, is it?”

“That’s gratitude for you. I didn’t clasp my hand over your mouth—I put a finger against your lips. I just didn’t want you to scream.” Filippo sat up with obvious difficulty, wincing from the effort.

“Don’t move too quickly, it’ll hurt,” Cassie said, hurrying out of bed.

“You think?” He rubbed his head and leaned back against the base of the bed.

“So...what are you doing here in the middle of the night? And in the middle of this weather?”

“That’s exactly the reason,” he replied. “The weather. I felt slightly guilty, I suppose. Last summer, I remember the Señora Lopez complaining about the roof, about many things actually. I thought I should come over and invite you back to the villa. If the guest house was structurally sound, the Lopez’ would never have left the island at all. I had visions of the roof collapsing in on you.”

Cassie was moved, and amazed, that this man had shown such concern for her. It might not mean anything. Filippo Fernandez could probably take his pick of any woman in the world, but what a story she would have for Jen when she got home, and let’s not forget, *she* was the one on the deserted island with him, although admittedly attempting to knock him unconscious probably hadn’t helped her chances. Her thumb automatically touched her wedding ring, twirling it on the finger. Not that she was interested, she lied to herself.

“It was good of you to come,” she said quietly.

“Well, I didn’t want you to write a dreadful story about me, did I? Stranded by Spanish tennis player on Tiqos. The press would love that.”

“I’m not that kind of writer,” she said, feeling stupid for thinking he’d acted out of any real concern for her. Of course, it was all about image. “I don’t do tabloid. Besides, you couldn’t have knocked?”

He shrugged and winced in pain. *Serves him right*, she thought.

“Is usual our doors are always open. Besides, I did. You locked the doors, no? I was rattling them for long time.”

“Oh. That was you?”

“Who else?”

“I sort of thought it was the wind,” said Cassie.

“Banging on the door? Damn, I think I’m bleeding.”

“You’re not?”

“Ah, I definitely think I am.”

“I wasn’t disagreeing with you. I just, wait, let me get some towels.”

“No time. We should get back to the villa before—”

Just then, a small section of the roof gave way like soggy cardboard. Filippo grabbed Cassie’s wrist and pulled her out of its descent as the water roared in. Her skin jumped at his touch, as if he was statically charged.

“Oh, no! We should get everything out of this room.”

“No time,” Filippo said. “What if it all caves in? Come on, we’ll have to make a run for the villa.”

“Through this?” As if to punctuate Cassie’s point, the heavens blinked bright with blue lightning. Even brighter now there was a peephole in the roof. Thunder punched the sky straight afterwards. She put her hands to her ears, and Filippo dragged them away.

“Are you going to close your eyes when the house falls down around you, too?” Despite his beauty, Cassie hated him then because that was exactly what she had done when her marriage had fallen apart. She’d buried herself in work and pretended it didn’t even hurt, but, oh, it had hurt. God, how it had hurt. “Are you coming or not?”

Cassie looked at him through the rain. She felt that there was a deadline to his question. The offer would not be available indefinitely. If there was one thing Cassie Miller was good at, it was deadlines. “Yes,” she said.

“Well, hurry up then. You can leave that candlestick behind,” he said and hurried out ahead of her.

Outside, the rain was deafening. They had no coats to protect them from the onslaught, but luckily the air was still warm. Steamy even. Unluckily, Cassie had not brought any decent shoes with her, and her flip-flops kept getting sucked into the glutinous mud.

“Just leave them!” Filippo shouted impatiently, stopping to wait for her again as she went back to reclaim her shoe. His green polo shirt had turned see through, and though she should have enjoyed the visual delight of that hard-as-nails, surf-board body, Cassie knew her own shirt had done the same thing. Arms folded across her breasts, she traipsed adamantly back for her mud-sucked flip flop.

“I said leave them, Cassie. Come on, is it really worth it?”

“But my husband bought them for me!” It wasn’t really true. Mike had bought them for her from a market stall while they were on their honeymoon in Marrakech, although it was Cassie who had given him the money to get them while she had been haggling over some designer watches. She always thought he’d paid far too much for them, too. Perhaps that was why she was loathe to leave them behind.

Filippo’s impatience seemed to harden to anger. He stalked off into the trees, leaving Cassie to fish for her shoes alone. Her feet had started to sink into the mud, which

was fast oozing up to her ankles. “Wait! Just a—wait!” she shouted, finding one shoe, then rooting for another.

Cassie desperately tried to search for Filippo’s figure in the blackness, but he was gone. She took a deep breath and dove after him, carrying only one of the stupid flip-flops. By the time the storm had passed over, she was sure the stray flip-flop would be in a muddy grave—perhaps it was a fitting metaphor for how she ought to think of her marriage.

“Filippo?” Inside the trees, it was drier, but blacker than sleep. She actually looked forward to the flare of lightning. Upon the next illumination, she spotted him a few meters ahead and ran to catch up, painfully stubbing and scratching her feet. Breathless, she finally drew level.

“You got them then?” he said, not sounding interested at all.

“Just the one.”

He shook his head. “Ridiculous.”

Maybe it was the lightning, or the stray electricity in the air sparking her own temper, but she was suddenly mad. “You know, you’re acting like a school boy. I just didn’t want to walk bare foot.”

It seemed she was not the only one who was tense. “Me? I trekked all the way over there to get you—”

“Huh...and you did that out of the goodness of your heart, right? Not just for a good interview, which I’m not even doing?”

“Right,” he agreed, either accidentally or purposefully misunderstanding her. “And what do I get for this trouble? Only a concussion, and a, ‘Oh, please, can we wait while I find my husband’s slippers even though we’re both about to drown?’”

They trudged on through the sludge in silence. Outside the protective copse of trees, the rain still hammered down. The lightning lashed the sky with a golden rod, and the thunder made the very ground tremble, but inside nature’s little bubble, she felt safe despite the fact that she was walking next to the most dangerously attractive man alive, a man with whom she did not have to constantly deny the still present pain of Mike’s betrayal because his distracting presence simply made her forget it.

All Cassie could think about was how amazing it would feel if his lips ever touched hers, or if his eyes ever looked on her with genuine affection. What if his hands ever claimed her waist, and she got to feel his straight, hard body against her own curves? That tanned skin drawn taut over athletic muscle. How would that feel? Her mind desired to know, demanded to know, but the emotion was cruel. Powerful, but cruel. Filippo Fernandez would never kiss her or look at her or touch her the way she fantasized. The thought was heartbreaking, to know without doubt that you were just not beautiful enough to capture the love of the only man who’d woken you up in years.

“We’re here,” he said and motioned to the villa she had already been to a day earlier.

“But this is Señor Fernandez’ house—the artist.”

Filippo laughed at her softly. He did that a lot, something which made her feel even more see-through than the welded-to-the-chest blouse she was wearing. “If you say so.”

They came to the end of the umbrella of trees and immediately got soaked once again. The gale tore at Cassie’s hair and seemed to scrape her arms. It was so strong. They hastened to the low villa’s side entrance. Filippo opened an oval door that was surrounded with storm-brutalized flowers that still managed to look perfect. Somehow, Cassie doubted she managed to pull off the same feat. Filippo waited impatiently for her to follow him inside before bolting the entrance against the storm. Cassie breathed a sigh of relief, and upon inhaling, found that he smelled of rain. The natural scent was far headier than the most expensive aftershave.

The villa was darker than the night. Cassie let her arms fall from her chest, seeing as there was no way Filippo could see her in this darkness. There was a question in the air, but neither appeared to want to voice it as it seemed childish. *What do we do now?* Cassie’s mind began to run away with her, but she caught tight hold of it.

“Blankets,” Filippo said.

Cassie heard him flicking a switch next to the door, then cursing in Spanish. It seemed the lights were out over here, too. “Don’t move while I find some candles,” he said. “You’ll trip over everything if you’re not careful. We can only cope with one concussion.”

She cringed in the dark. *Oh, yeah, that. Another reason why I don’t stand a chance. Not that I care, of course.*

Cassie heard Filippo fumble about before there was the sound of matches being struck. The flaring light actually hurt her eyes. She hugged her arms around her chest once again, not because she remembered the blouse was see through, but because she realized how cold it had suddenly become. Filippo came over with a few candles flickering on a chipped saucer, some unlit ones under one arm. Not only that, but the warmest, fuzzy brown blanket she’d ever seen was laid over one arm. She suddenly desired that even more than Filippo.

“Here.” He set the candle down on a long mahogany table cluttered with photographs.

The light was not good enough for her to see who was in the pictures, and she didn’t want to appear nosy by ogling them. Above the photo frames, on the cool stone walls, hung prints that she recognized. Matisse, Monet, Cézanne...that is surprising, Cassie thought. Remembering herself, Cassie took the blanket from him and drew it around her shoulders. His fingers were long, she noticed, the nails wide and round. The blanket’s cozy fur tickled her neck. When it slipped off her right shoulder, and Filippo righted it for her.

When he staggered slightly, his whole weight made her knees buckle. The unlit candles clattered to the floor, rolling noisily about the wood. He squeezed her shoulder painfully.

“What is it?”

“Sorry. My head, I...” Filippo withdrew his hand and massaged the bridge of his nose.

“Oh, my God!” Cassie saw blood glitter in the candle light. “You really are bleeding!”

He gave her a heavy-lidded look. “I really am bleeding.”

“Well, you didn’t believe me about the guest house.”

His sigh sounded weary. “A truce then.”

Now, Cassie felt more motherly than anything. She had an overwhelming wish to look after him. It was only natural, she supposed, being that she was the one who’d done the damage in the first place. Yet there was something about him, regardless of the defensive I-don’t-need-anybody front. More than that, although Filippo’s physical strength was unquestionable, and his body screamed that he was a man, there was something almost boyish in his handsome features—a gentle look beneath the giant exterior that was crying out to be cared for.

“Now, you wait there,” Cassie ordered and fumbled about for the stray candles. The blanket completely fell from her shoulders, but Cassie didn’t have time to think about whether he could see through her blouse. She snatched up a couple of candles and lit the tall blue stalks off the ones that were already aflame. “Where’s the bathroom?”

Filippo waved one arm roughly in front of her. “To your left. Yes, that’s it.”

Cassie groped about for a towel, ran the tepid water onto it, and wrung it out. “You should lie down,” she said, returning to the hallway. “Where’s the couch?”

“The bed.” He allowed her to help him upright from where he’d leaned against the hall table. “I’m fine, really.”

“Clearly,” she said when he lost his footing again.

Cassie grabbed his forearm to steady him, her fingers barely curling around half of his powerful arms. She let go, stung, when she thought Filippo pushed her away from him, but his arm only snuck under hers and around her back, gripping the sodden waist of her trousers. He led the way to the bedroom as Cassie struggled under his weight. His solid, male body was heavy, but it was a comfortable sort of heavy against her side. A heaviness that she could imagine atop of her, making breathing difficult. Even through their damp clothes, she could feel that his skin was hot. Cassie tried to force herself to concentrate on the task at hand—that and not allowing the candles she was clutching precariously to set her blouse on fire.

“This is it.” Filippo shoved back a door with one palm. “Watch your step.”

His thoughtfulness was surprising, especially since he was the one with the injury. He sat down on the bed.

“You should lie down,” she suggested. He seemed to agree and dragged his long legs up onto the bed. He heaved a great sigh—she must have hit him harder than she’d thought—and lay his arms crisscrossed onto his stomach. She wondered if he’d fallen asleep straight away. Was that a bad thing? Did that mean he had a concussion? Would

he need to go to the hospital? Would she go to jail for beating up a celebrity?

“Steady, Cass,” she whispered.

“Hm?”

“Nothing.” She laughed self consciously and made to leave the room.

“Where are you going?”

His accent was attractive like the rest of him. He lay on the bed, with wet clothes...Cassie swallowed. “Just going to get the towel. Got to wipe away some of that blood.”

She crept away and returned quickly with the towel and the blanket he had given her. Again, his breathing seemed slow, as if he had gone to sleep. Cassie was worried about that and wondered if she should do something to keep him awake. Setting the candle down on the bedside table, another one cluttered with a nest of picture frames, Cassie tentatively leaned over to wipe his forehead, where little rivulets of blood had dried. Thank heaven, she’d only cracked him on the head. Cassie reckoned women the world over would be in mourning had she mucked up this angelic face.

Filippo winced as she worked but otherwise didn’t stir. Cassie tried to decide whether it was a good idea to let him sleep in his wet clothes. She knew she herself was shivering, and she didn’t have a head injury. Pervert! Jen would be screaming right now while urging her on. Telling herself it was with purely Florence-Nightingale intentions, Cassie sat on the edge of the bed and slowly began to undo Filippo’s shirt.

Heart beating in her ears, her fingers fumbled with the buttons. She peeled the fabric away from his chest, which was a sight to set her heart racing. Clear, broad, lithe and brown, there was not an ounce of fat. Just pure perfection. His nipples were small and taut, fringed with a slight fuzz of dark hair that also nestled in the center of his chest. The same hair traced a line down the center of his stomach, disappearing beneath his trouser line.

Great idea, Cass. Now, how do I get it off? Cursing softly, Cassie tried to sneak her arms under his back to gather him up. *Another great idea—not.* Next, she leaned over him to pull the soaked fabric to his far shoulder before trying to ease it off without disturbing him.

Filippo’s long fingers fastened around her wrist, holding her in place. She inhaled sharply.

“I was just...”

Filippo’s shocking green gaze rendered her speechless. His eyes glittered almost gold in the dancing candlelight. To Cassie, there seemed to be incredible pain behind those pretty, pretty eyes. It was just a heartbeat before that intense stare traveled over her own body. It wandered over the planes of her face, the tied-back hair that was starting to come loose and frizz in the damp air, raking over her breasts probably revealed by her still-wet blouse.

Cassie held her breath. He *was* looking at her, looking at her the way she had never dreamed a man like that could. Or was it just lust? And hadn’t Mike looked at her

that way too before...before it had become clear that she was no longer enough for him? Though she desperately wanted to stop resisting, to succumb to the gentle way he was pulling her towards him, to crumble into his arms, Cassie reminded herself that a man's love was ephemeral. Fleeting. With Mike, it was gone as soon as his secretary started wearing shorter skirts. With Filippo, it would say hasta la vista by sunrise.

Filippo's fingers then moved from her wrist to trace the curve of her cheeks. He touched her as though she was a watercolor and he was the sable brush and she the canvas; delicately. Cassie almost heard her resolve break. The only way she could do this was roughly.

"No," she said stiffly and turned away. Breathing in once and out once, she got up and left the room. Filippo didn't come after her. *Fool, what had you expected? That the way he touched you then was not the same way he has touched a thousand other women before you and would touch a thousand other women after?*

"Cassie?"

She froze at the doorway. She hadn't expected him to call after her. Maybe he was different. "Close the door on your way out."

Thunder bullied the skies—and Cassie slammed the door. Hard.

Chapter Three

Filippo rolled onto his side and pulled off his damp shirt. He threw it to the floor with a wet *thwack*. Count them, three knock backs in one week. The blow of the match, the blow from the candlestick in the leaking guesthouse by Ms. Auburn, and then the final blow from Cassie herself.

“Bless me father, I have been weak tonight. Give me the strength to resist my base desires and not to covet another man’s wife.” Filippo kissed his fist and then performed the sign of the cross. For good measure, he also kissed the gold necklace he had been given for confirmation. It was a routine for him, and tennis players were creatures of habit.

Cassie was a better person than he, Filippo thought sadly. His mind strayed yet again to the woman in his house with the wine-dark hair and sapphire eyes. He had always prided himself on being a moral, Catholic boy, and there he was trying to corrupt such a good, beautiful woman. No wonder she had said no to him. How could she even bear to look at a man with such weak ethics? But it wasn’t just that which was bothering him. It was the fact that he felt he was losing control, that the solid, focused wall he had built, which had kept him in the top thirty for the last consecutive four years, was slowly crumbling.

How could one woman do that in one day? The thought scared him, and the last time he had been scared was on his mother’s death bed. The room had smelled of cancer. The very next year, papa had gotten sick, and the doctors seemed to have tested for everything else first before they got around to testing for cancer. It did seem unlikely, Filippo had to admit. After all, how could two people have the exact same illness? It seemed like impossibly bad luck. They might have missed the signs of cancer in Alberto, but what Filippo could not ignore was the promise his mother had exacted of him before she had descended into deliriousness.

“Make your papa proud,” she had croaked. “Make him proud.”

“I will, mama.” Filippo’s mouth moved as he repeated the words he had said on

that day as a boy. Papa would certainly not be proud if he knew he had just tried to seduce a married woman, but he would be less proud if he knew he had just spoken to her so disrespectfully, particularly given that she was a journalist for *A&L* and apparently had a great deal of influence.

Groaning, Filippo got off the bed, but as he reached for the handle of the door Cassie had slammed moments before, he heard the front door slam like an ominous echo. His stomach turned over. *She hadn't seriously gone out in this storm? Had she?*

Grabbing up the candle, he hurried out into the living area and scanned the hallway. He called out for Cassie.

When the front door slammed again Filippo felt a growing sense of unease curdling in his stomach. It was slamming because it hadn't been closed properly. Again—*slam!* God knew how long she had been out there! He grabbed a coat from the rack above the hall table and pushed out into the storm.

“Cassie! You pig-headed, crazy...Cassie!”

Lightning flared. Filippo blinked through the downpour, drenched yet again. His head was pounding, helped none by the shaking thunder that rolled through the night. She was nowhere in sight. Cursing, Filippo ignored his throbbing headache and ploughed his way back towards the copse of trees, thinking she must have headed back towards the guesthouse.

* * * *

Cassie was, in fact, still in Filippo's villa. When she heard him calling, she simply chose not to answer. Another reason why Cassie remained silent was because she had just stumbled across his larder. It seemed she had started down the slippery slope to True Criminal with her earlier breaking and entering, which was quickly followed with Athlete Assault, and as if that wasn't enough, she was now pilfering any decent food from him. The commotion with the storm had meant she hadn't noticed the hunger pangs quite as much, but now she was ravenous. It wasn't just that though. It was Filippo's rejection. She should have known. Never trust a man with eyes like clear emeralds, she told herself, as if it was something that happened so often she had a motto for it. The reality was, like his stunning eyes, Filippo was a rarity.

Wait a minute, didn't you reject him first? That was true, Cassie realized, thinking the knowledge should have made her feel slightly better. It didn't. Plus, he didn't have to be so un-sportsmanlike about it.

“Gold!” Cassie reached into a tin and hesitantly sampled a stale biscuit. “Ugh.”

“Cassie!”

She frowned, holding her breath in the kitchen as Filippo walked past, quickly hiding the candle behind the door so he didn't notice the glow. She exhaled when his footsteps retreated the other way, going back to bed.

Jen would say, “Are you completely Mariah Carey? There's a half nekked, sexy Spaniard calling your name, and you're hiding in his kitchen stuffing your face with his moldy old biccies?”

Cassie wanted to respond, but she also wanted to see him when she looked a bit more presentable. Also, food was required to give her the energy to put on an act that his sharp dismissal hadn't stung her as much as it really had. Her hand went to her unruly hair, planning on combing it out with her fingers before she went to check on him.

Going to a lot of effort for a man you're supposedly not interested in, aren't you?

"Go away, Jen," Cassie muttered to her best friend and imaginary devil-on-her-shoulder.

Brushing the crumbs from her still-moist blouse, Cassie doubted that the silk would recover from this onslaught—it was far too delicate, but was she? Should she sulk about this, or just be an adult and brush it aside?

Cassie finally decided on the latter. She'd survived worse things than this—Non-Monogamous Mike for example. By the poor light, she managed to find mugs and tea bags, although upon giving them a tentative sniff, she found they smelled like musty strawberries. Then she remembered there was no power, so she wouldn't have been able to make tea anyway. She went to the sink and poured water into a couple of mugs instead. That would have to do, Cassie thought, although she would have preferred tea. It would have been good to get something hot inside them.

"Now, now," Cassie said, thinking she was warning off Jen's imaginary reaction when in reality the naughty thoughts were hers and hers alone.

Proud that even the thunder didn't rattle her into adding china breaking—it would be family heirloom china, knowing her luck—to her recent misdemeanors, Cassie found a tray that was in need of a good washing. She set the two mugs and the candles onto it and carefully made her way back to the bedroom and saw the door was ajar.

She set the tray down on the floor and gave the door a tap. It breathed forward eerily. Cassie frowned, then, "Filippo? It's me...are you awake?"

Cassie bit her lip, undecided as to whether she should go in. She didn't want to come over as presumptuous by poking around in someone's bedroom without permission.

"Sod it," she murmured and pushed the door open wide. Filippo wasn't there. Maybe he'd gone to the bathroom? Cassie scratched her bare arm. Should she check? What if he'd fallen down?

Thunder clapped once again, and she started, pressing one hand to her racing heart, but it wasn't thunder making that noise. She picked up the candle and cupped her hand around the flame. *Thud*. Cassie was no longer afraid, just concerned. She found that the front door had blown open. Or had Filippo opened it and stormed out, annoyed at the fact that she had rejected his advances? The idea was certainly pleasing that she—cheated—on Cassie Miller—could have any kind of impact on a man such as him.

Then commonsense kicked in. Damn. He'd been calling her name before for whatever reason—maybe to apologize? *Don't start*. When she hadn't answered, he'd come to his own conclusions.

"Okay," Cassie said to nobody, eyeing up the slanting rain outside with more than a little distaste. "What do you do when you shout for somebody you think you might

have offended, and they don't answer?"

Well, I would just go to bed.

"All right then. What do you do when you shout for somebody you think you might have offended, and they don't answer, and you're a headstrong Spaniard with a little too much neighborly concern—sweet though it is—for his own health, who thinks he's invincible?"

Why, you dash out into a flaming tornado, of course.

She could see the headlines now:

Tennis Tragedy—Filippo Fernandez Felled by Falling Fir Tree—*Do they have fir trees on Los Tigros? Probably not—all your fault, Cassandra Miller from London, Number 86a Tottenham Road.*

There would be hordes of traumatized women looking for somebody to take it out on.

Cassie quickly scanned about for boots, something she could walk in rather than squishing about bare foot again, but everything was about ten sizes too big. It would have to do. She thrust her mud-crusting feet into a pair of hiking boots and grabbed a giant-size tracksuit jacket from the coat peg.

"Filippo! *Filippo!*" She hollered hopefully from the doorstep. The ravaging wind and worryingly icy rain literally sucked her breath from her very lungs. "*Filippo!*"

It was no use. She was going to have to get wet—again. The weather attacked her even more forcibly when she stepped out from the villa. Like gravity crushing down, her legs bowed slightly under the pressure. She pushed on regardless and headed for the trees, thinking he would surmise that she would walk this way back to the guest house, seeing as it was somewhat protected.

Clawing her way through the wind, it became obvious that the big clumping boots were more of a hindrance than anything. She kicked them off impatiently, thinking how it was becoming a habit to abandon footwear out here. Finally and thankfully, Cassie emerged into the copse of trees, breathing hard. Although the sky seemed to be brightening, or maybe she was just getting used to the pitch black, in there it was deepest, darkest night.

She growled, eyes bulging as she tried to force them to adjust. "This is ridiculous. Are you in here, Filippo? It's Cassie! Are you—? Oh, my God, no."

As lightning flared and the semi-shelter fuzzed with weak light, Cassie spotted Filippo's figure sprawled out on the ground. *Score 1 for feminism, she thought. All five foot five of me rescuing this real-life Goliath. Except it's all your fault,* retorted the part of Cassie that wouldn't let her take any real credit for anything.

She reached Filippo in seconds, nearly stood on him in fact, lungs burning from the effort. She scrambled to the ground and felt for a pulse in his neck. There wasn't one! "Oh," she said when she adjusted her fingers and then found it, strong and steady.

Nevertheless, it couldn't be good for him to not be moving like that. The pulse

checking being the limit of her medical knowledge, Cassie worried she was going to have to resort to her feminine wiles, such as they were with tramp-hair and woman of the night, see-through, blouse.

Be serious!

Fumbling around in the dark, she picked the wet strands of hair from his face and brushed it back from a rather high forehead.

"This is clearly not working," Cassie said, speaking to drown out the awful feeling of being alone in the night, not to mention the epicenter of a guesthouse-wrecking storm. Panic tickled her gut, threatening to fizz up. She fended it off, not quite as successful with the tears burning in her eyes.

Needing to do something, she bent lower and stroked his forehead again, the side of his face, the square jaw, a definite, angular cheekbone, an eyebrow. "Wake up Filippo," she whispered into his ear, so close to him that her own breath bounced back warm against her skin. "It's really rude of you to leave me all on my own like this...not very hospitable at all really. Now come on, you really are going to have to wake up."

Nothing. Now Cassie panicked and sat up, making sure that her fingers found his so that she was still connected to another person, even if they were dead to the world.

Don't say "dead."

What was she going to do now? Cassie fretted. He probably needed a brain scan or something, and where was the nearest hospital? The mainland, but where was the phone to call the hospital? Why, on the mainland, of course. She turned away slightly and rested her cheek on one wet knee and tried to tell herself that she was not afraid of the dark.

And then his fingers tightened upon her own. She spun around. Her eyes had adjusted by now, and she could just make out the vague lines of his face. "Oh, God, what happened? Are you all right?"

"No thanks to you," he said, moaning. She felt rather than saw him rub his head with his other hand.

"Oh, charming." Cassie tried to pull her hand away.

But Filippo held tight. "Where the hell did you go?"

"Where did you go?" she countered.

"I went after you!"

"No, I think you'll find I went after you, seeing as I did actually get here *after* you."

"Didn't you hear me shouting for you?"

"No." It sounded like a lie, even to Cassie.

Filippo was quiet. His hands were warm, she thought, his fingers thick and long and safe. She broke the moment again. "So, what did happen?"

"Sort of walked into a tree."

She burst out laughing, despite the dangerous storm whirling around the creaking trees. “A tree?”

“Well, it was dark.”

“But a tree?”

Maybe he did it to stop her from laughing at him—that seemed about the best bet actually—it couldn’t have been because he had an overwhelming need to cup her chin and kiss the very breath out of her body, but that was what he did. Their mouths missed on the first try, but even through the darkness, they found each other. His fingers slipped down underneath her tangled hair, thumbs stroking her cheeks, lips tasting her own as if she could bring him back to life. Cassie felt as though she was swimming and swirling, chaotic as the storm that raged on beyond the trees.

Then, with one hand behind her head, Filippo lowered Cassie to the dirt as though it was a four poster bed and she was a princess. His hard body covered her own, chest pressing against her breasts and his legs...his legs found a space between her own—which was at once both a shocking and secure fit. At that moment, Cassie was oblivious to the freezing mud. All that existed was Filippo’s mouth.

When he his lips abruptly left hers, Cassie gasped automatically, her mouth yearning to be completed by his own yet again, but Filippo had paused for a reason. “Do you want me to stop?” he asked.

Cassie could sense it in his voice and his body and his very breath that caressed her parted mouth that he was yearning for her to accept him, to want him as much as he wanted her. This time, Cassie didn’t say no.

Chapter Four

It sounded like the sky was tearing. Cassie froze in Filippo's embrace. "What was that?"

"We'd better get back inside," he said tensely. "The storm's getting worse."

"That's possible?"

His long fingers grasped her own in the dark and dragged her to her feet. As if in answer, there was a huge rustling sound. Then, as if time had sped up, she felt something tall and heavy crashing towards her.

"Quick!" Filippo yanked her forwards, and the ground shook when the falling tree hit the dirt—it seemed like less than a meter away from her bare feet.

I shouldn't be thinking about how dramatically romantic this is, Cassie thought as they clawed their way back through the wild elements to the villa. Despite the destruction she had just witnessed, one which could have been quite destructive to both of them, she still felt invincible next to him. *Except he just knocked himself out by walking into a tree.*

"You think this is funny?" Filippo asked. The effort of wedging the door shut behind them for the second time causing his breath to come in short pants.

Cassie tensed and didn't answer. Was he being deliberately abrasive, or was the communication barrier just making him seem so rude? Her hair had come loose, the clip lost somewhere in the mud with her spare flip-flop. She wrung out her long locks, squeezing it to the very tip as Filippo fumbled about relighting the candles, wondering whether they should talk about what just happened.

Cassie tugged at her blouse uncomfortably. "Do you have anything I can put on? I think these clothes are going to become my second skin if I wear them any longer." *Oh, nice imagery, Cassie. Now he thinks you're a tramp.*

"*Momento*," Filippo said, walking away with the candle and returning with a long white shirt. It was one that would probably fit him snugly, but it would swamp her. Still,

anything was better than the sticky blouse and leaden trousers she was currently wearing. He lit an extra candle and handed it to her. “Here, you can change in the bathroom.”

Once again they were awkward with each other, even though moments ago his mouth had pressed urgently against her own, mimicking the urgency of his lower body. Cassie now placed the flickering candle on the ledge behind the sink. She peered out just in case Filippo was around before she stripped off, but all seemed quiet, except for the raging storm outside. She pushed the bathroom door to just in case, gratefully unzipped her trousers and let them thump to the floor before trying to struggle out of her blouse.

“Cassandra?”

Her body stiffened, not out of fear, but out of anticipation. There she was half naked, wearing only a pair of white undies—the comfy kind too, more was the pity, with her top pulled half way up, just shy of her breasts. She swallowed. “Yes?”

The door creaked open, the air nearly gusting out the candle’s precarious light, and Cassie was exposed to Filippo’s bright, pale green eyes, still breathtakingly intense in the soft glow. Without words, he aligned his body with her own. They stood there, him looking down upon her, her looking up at him, lust churning in his eyes. Then his hands reached out for her hips, pausing just millimeters away from the skin. Her body felt as though it had been waiting for his touch forever. “Why did he stop?” her mind cried out.

But Filippo had only reached out for her half removed blouse. In his large hands, the fabric seemed like doll’s clothes. Slowly, slowly, he peeled off the wet silk. Cassie raised her arms, helping in her own way. It was two years since a man had touched her like this. Two years since Mike had betrayed her. She shoved the thought away. Filippo was not Mike. This was just a moment of lust, and there was nothing wrong with that. Filippo would not betray her because this was not a relationship. More to the point, she wouldn’t let herself get in the position to be so cruelly destroyed again.

Stop thinking.

Filippo pulled harder, and the wet silk finally became unstuck from her breasts. Bra-less, her nipples tightened now that they were exposed to the cool, damp air. There was a slapping sound as he tossed the blouse in the sink and then...then he just looked at her.

Cassie stood there in her pants, skin tacky and dotted with rain drops. His eyes touched her almost physically as they took her in completely. She found the extended gaze painful—was he weighing her up and realizing that she was not what he wanted? That her form, though slender, was fond of a few too many éclairs than was perhaps good for it and would never be the tennis-toned physique of the other women on the tour that he must so admire?

“Don’t,” she said. It was almost a plea.

He shook his head gently, apparently not understanding her concerns. Cassie lowered her head and crossed her arms over her breasts. She felt Filippo frown at her, but still he did not move. She made to push past him and reach for a towel—now Filippo moved. It was as if he had finally made a decision, and if he didn’t act on it now, he never would. His hands grasped her waist from behind, the fingers sending off

shockwaves through her abdomen and traveling down, much further down within her whole body. He scooped her up effortlessly, her legs over one arm. She clasped her arms around his neck, thinking how high it felt up there in his strong arms.

“What are you doing?” she asked, almost giggling, though she knew full well.

The bed awaited them. Filippo lay Cassie down. She longed to feel his mouth on hers again, for him to fit himself between her thighs, to run her hands up that muscled back.

Fully clothed, Filippo sat beside her on the bed. His eyes burned into her own momentarily, his fingers on the hem of her pants before he pulled them down, all the way off and past her toes, letting them fall with a whisper to the ground.

Cassie sat up, glad there was only a candle to faintly light the room. Her drying hair tickled her bare back, gently caressing her tender breasts. She actually felt beautiful and wanted by this man who had woken up those dormant feelings that made her a woman, but it was slightly unfair, her stark naked while he was hidden away under all those wet clothes.

Smiling tentatively, Cassie pushed off the tracksuit jacket Filippo was wearing, revealing a glorious bare chest. Her fingers lingered over the elegant knots of his broad shoulders, aching to feel her own body underneath them. She wanted to go straight to the button of his trousers, pull down the zipper and rid him of his underwear and feel his hot, clammy skin against her own, but she wasn't brave enough. Instead she took his large jaw in her own small hands and kissed his full pale lips. Again, she wondered how a man who was so thoroughly male could still be so beautiful. Her kisses wandered off target and explored his chin, the bristles prickling her delicate mouth. She tasted the spot where his earlobe met his jaw.

Filippo seemed to sense her hesitation, her lack of courage, but he knew without a doubt what she wanted. “Be brave, Cassandra,” he murmured, taking hold of her wrists and placing her hands over his chest. He directed her, bringing her hands over his washboard stomach.

This was how a man was supposed to be, she realized. Hard, yet sensitive. It was the perfect combination. Her fingertips reached the hair around his belly button, and his stomach cinched in at her touch. Keeping her courage, she popped open the button. Filippo stood up. He did the work for her then and stepped out of his jeans.

It was too much. Usually people had a best feature. Cassie thought hers was her hair, when it was brushed and straight and gleaming, but Filippo also had beautiful silky hair, beautiful eyes and a beautiful chest, but it didn't stop there either. His legs were like lithe tree trunks, strong and long and athletic. There was only one item that remained in the way of Cassie's deciding whether he was complete perfection.

As he towered over her smaller frame, she reached her hands up to the elastic of his gray boxer shorts. Cassie actually wet her lips as her index fingers slipped inside the top of his underwear. She saw with anticipation the straining of his cock against the fabric, which was slightly damp from his own excitement. He was obviously as desirous to be free of them as she was.

“You are perfect,” Cassie whispered, almost disappointed. How could she compete with this? How could she ever be enough for him?

“Huh?”

“Nothing, nothing at all.” *Stop thinking out loud!* She smiled, heart clamoring in her chest as she inhaled his musky scent.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, one hand stroking her throat and shoulder, the thumb grazing her hardened nipple. He shook his head as if he really meant it. Right then, Cassie dared to believe that he did.

Then Filippo took charge. His mounted the bed, his body forcing hers back against the covers. His skin was fiery and wet, his chest sticking to hers as if trying to glue them together. Their mouths found each other’s again in the orange flame of the candlelight, a different kind of flame blazing inside Cassie. She felt his cock, hard and insistent against her. So close to being inside her. So close.

His tongue told her that it knew her mouth, as if they were made for each other. His probing wasn’t delicate or explorative but knowing, deep and sensuous. He licked her own tongue as if they were beginning to merge into one. Cassie arched, hungering for more, feeling him press and press. Her hands wrapped around his wide, broad back, wanting to make him her own. She moved them down to Filippo’s narrow hips and then the pert mound of his buttocks.

And then—Cassie dared to push as Filippo pushed. She cried out, her mouth sealed inside his own, as he entered her. Sweat sprang out on her upper lip as his cock filled her completely, then his hands took hers and pinned her arms above her head.

Filippo’s next kiss was strong as if to make up for the next brief seconds apart. “Okay?” he asked, those dazzling eyes expressing more than fleeting concern.

Dare she hope that there was something more long term in this? Could it really be something more than simple lust between two people in an electric storm? “Better than okay,” she whispered back, feeling prone and somehow powerful. Her tender nipples tightened as his chest grazed them when his mouth bent to her throat. One kiss. A nip of the teeth. A lick to the tip of her earlobe.

Filippo’s grin was wolfish when he sought her eyes again, imprisoning them as his cock pushed deeper and deeper inside her. His hands trickled down the underside of her arms from her wrists to her armpits. She giggled and was rewarded by a smile, before Filippo got serious again. One hand found her left hip, the hand curving around it, tracing down to her leg and bringing it up over him. She wrapped her other leg around his back and gasped as the angle brought a flush to her cheeks, as he touched and rubbed her clit in exactly the right way to create a pleasure equal to his own.

Filippo was murmuring in Spanish, his breath hot against her throat as he alternated between her mouth and her collarbone. Next he discovered the valley of her breasts and their strawberry nipples. The bridge of her nose, the tender flesh of her eyelid. The underside of her chin as her head arched back into the pillows with pure pleasure. Cassie knew with all certainty that when they were satiated and breathless, panting in each other’s arms, feeling their hearts race in each other’s chests, that Filippo would not

only have had her body, but her heart.

Stop now, Cassie told herself, *before he breaks it, before he does to you what Mike did*, but she was feeling reckless. As the rain thundered down and the thunder pounded the skies above, she met his rhythm. Each thrust was equal to his, her passion matching his own. If she was with anyone else, anywhere else she might have been embarrassed to reveal the depth of her ardor, but Filippo demanded it of her, and she could not deny him. Her fingernails dug hungrily into the flesh of his buttocks, pulling him into her more and more.

Cassie felt the rhythm increase, as though this melody of theirs was an opera rushing towards its crescendo. His sweat-drenched chest stuck to her own, mingling with her own perspiration that was trickling down her breasts. Up and up and up; the song was getting louder, more frenetic, but still in harmony. Her hips embraced his own, creating a safe haven for him within her own body. Together they climaxed, their individual melodies coming together in a song that hummed from the tips of their fingers to their toes.

Filippo's heart did indeed race against Cassie's own, and his breath panted against her neck. He left her all too soon, but the absence was remedied with strong arms around her small back that tucked her against his chest, his chin resting in her hair. She felt, with a strange contentment, his semen drying against her inner thighs. One hand wandered away to trace the curve from her waist to hip and back again.

There were so many things Cassie wanted to ask, but she couldn't for the life of her figure out what they really were at that precise moment. Even if she could have, she doubted she could put her questions into words at that point. She forced herself to be content in Filippo's ephemeral embrace. If this was just for one night, Cassie told herself that she would just enjoy it for what it was. They were both adults and they could be reasonable about this.

Chapter Five

Filippo woke to the morning sunlight peaking through the tightly fastened shutters, the storm now a distant memory. He rolled onto his side and gazed at the woman beside him. How differently he thought about her now. How differently he felt about her.

Upon their first meeting, all he had seen was a scruffy, yet admittedly striking, English journalist, just somebody else who wanted something from him. His mama wanted him to make his papa proud. His papa wanted him to be the first Spaniard in history to win all four grand slams, but what did Filippo Fernandez want?

He cast a melting gaze over Cassie, observing the contrast between her dark red hair, now loose and wild, lying crumpled white sheets. They half covered her creamy breasts—a raspberry nipple poking out just begging to be tasted. The sheets lay tangled around and between her thighs, where he had been just hours earlier. Cassie’s white cheeks were flushed, her lips half parted. Her closed pale eyelids revealed an entrancing network of pink and purple veins. Unable to resist, Filippo’s thumb touched her mouth, as if trying to absorb its contours into his memory.

“This,” Filippo murmured, “this is what I want.”

But he realized this epiphany was a double edged sword as his words caused Cassie to stretch in her peaceful sleep. In so doing, the hand that rested on his hip rubbed his skin, and the touch sent the passion spiraling off within him again. It was also the hand that bore her wedding ring. How could just that one plain, gold innocuous band have so much power? But it did, and Filippo knew with unwavering certainty that this woman belonged to another man. He wondered what could be so wrong with their marriage that she would forget her vows and be with him. Maybe there was something more to this. Maybe she felt something special, too?

“Doesn’t matter,” Filippo said bitterly. He carefully removed her hand so as not to disturb her, feeling a sickness in his stomach that nothing could remedy.

This was what was missing from his life. This beautiful, passionate, hesitant, adventurous, clumsy woman was what was missing. Last night the passion she gave to

him fuelled his desire to play well, reviving a love of the game he had previously been missing. He had always wanted to win, but now he wanted to win for her, to prove that he was good enough, that he was a better man than the invisible but oh-so-present husband. Now, all desire left him. He didn't even want to think about the next tournament, let alone the next grand slam. Fate was unfair.

Filippo walked naked out of the bedroom and went to his studio. Unused these past ten or so months, it was incredibly dusty. The cool floorboards felt gritty against his toes. Coughing quietly, Filippo pulled on the filthy shirt he kept over the back of a clay-marked chair, set out and washed his materials, having to scratch the bladders clean with his nail. Running some tepid water into a bowl from the small studio's sink, he started to put himself into the clay, and as he molded his emotions in front of him, for all to bear witness to, there was only one thing—one woman—he was thinking about.

* * * *

Cassie woke up warm and hot and cold. Warm, when the memory of the night before suffused over her. Hot, as she realized she wanted more of the same, and cold for two reasons. Firstly, because the sheet barely covered her naked body, but mostly because Filippo was not there. Of course there could have been a number of reasons why, but a sense of foreboding settled in Cassie's stomach and would not leave it.

Cassie nipped to the bathroom and quickly dressed in the oversized shirt Filippo had given her last night. She freshened up hastily, combing the worst of the knots out of her hair, and didn't dare look in the mirror. It wouldn't be good news, she was sure. Still feeling like a guest, Cassie padded from room to room, knocking hesitantly before entering. She eventually found him, of all things, sculpting.

"Hi," she ventured.

Filippo turned, and his eyes were like deadly guns. "Hi."

She wondered if she'd ever get used to that beautiful, shocking green. Cassie glanced away, dithering, feeling unwanted and not finding any strength or reassurance in his cool greeting. There were more pictures in here, too, Cassie noticed. Large black and white exposures, intimate and sensitive, all of the same woman. Laughing, eating, drinking with family. She was captivating. It was his mother, Cassie realized, seeing that same stunning gaze Filippo had firing out of the pictures, despite the fact they were only black and white.

"These are great," she said. "I feel like I know her, too."

"She's dead."

So much suddenly made sense. Despite his capable persona, the starry career that was about to go stellar, the money he undoubtedly enjoyed, though none of it was particularly evident in here. There was something wounded about him. She had felt it earlier on, that overwhelming desire to care for him and nurture away a pain she hadn't been able to put a name to, but which she had known was there. Cassie surmised that Filippo's mother had probably passed away when he was just a young boy.

"I'm sorry." It sounded so inadequate.

“Of course.” He turned back around, combing the clay with a plastic oval instrument.

Cassie cleared the emotion out of her throat. “Can I make you something to eat?”

He nodded, and Cassie waited for him to say something else, but he didn’t. He just worked on the piece before him that she couldn’t make out. She wanted to go and take the tension out of those shoulders, turn his face towards her with her palm to his cheek, feel his smooth mouth with her fingertips, the mouth that had been so insistent last night. Instead, Cassie left the room, emotional now for different reasons. The night of intense passion they had shared had obviously meant nothing to him. She’d known that, of course she had, but it didn’t make it any easier to swallow.

Cassie found herself in the kitchen looking for various scraps to cobble together a breakfast with. She rinsed the dust off a couple of forks and used one to scoop some beans onto a couple of plates. She found a loaf of bread in a box near the sink and lay two pieces on each plate. About to take the food back to the bedroom, Cassie stopped, suddenly emotional. *Why am I so upset?*

Because the man I could easily fall in love with is waiting for me to leave.

Cassie put down the plate, forks clattering against the dish. She rushed to the bathroom, scooped on her disgustingly soggy trousers, and tucked the yards of extra shirt into them. Then she pulled back the front door, trying to be quiet, to check the weather. She winced when it squeaked, not that Filippo would care that she was leaving anyway. As she looked up, she saw a steady drizzle. The off-white sky was like one big cloud stretched out to the maximum, but there was no growling of thunder or signs of lightning. The air felt slightly fresher and less muggy, even some birds had ventured out. They weren’t quite singing, but they did give out the occasional peep.

She lingered. Should she say goodbye, or would that just prolong what was already a difficult situation? Cassie decided on the easy option, knowing that it was probably better just to leave it be. She’d go back to the guest house and try to dry it out. No doubt it would be in a state by now, and just wait until the boat came on Sunday to take her back to the mainland. She’d go back to A&L, bury herself in subscriptions and submissions and commissions, give Jen a thorough chewing out, before probably relenting and apologizing profusely for being too harsh, and she would remember Filippo and Los Tiqos as nothing more than a wonderful dream, with a slightly nightmare ending, but one that time would make her glad she had experienced. Plus, it would provide Jen with good gossip fodder for some time to come.

And maybe...maybe Filippo would come after her like he did before when he realized she was missing.

“Don’t be absurd,” she chided herself, traipsing through the still damp earth. In the daylight, she saw the horrors she must have stepped on last night that the storm and darkness had disguised. Desiccated frogs, large black blobs of spiders with their legs curled into their centers, all manners of green and white droppings from various birds and creatures.

“Ugh,” she said, wrinkling her nose. Things always were so much clearer in the morning, she thought, but why, oh, why, couldn’t the day have revealed to Cassie that

Filippo was as ugly as the dead spiders or as lifeless as the desiccated frogs? But the more light had only shown how impossibly handsome he truly was, and how there was so much more to him than that face; his sculpting, the pain of losing his mother, so young, or so she presumed. All of that made him so much harder to walk away from, but she was doing it.

When Cassie reached the guesthouse, she saw that its sugar cube white walls had been washed bright so that it almost looked the better for the storm, but upon inspecting the inside, she found the water was calf deep. With a resigned sigh, Cassie stooped down to roll up her trouser legs and went in search of a mop and bucket.

When the figure approached the guest house some time around noon, Cassie had already opened all the doors to let the water escape, sloshed it out for hours with a rusty bucket she had discovered in the back yard. A yellow toad had sprung out of it onto her shoulder, and she'd shrieked so loud at its "attack" that she wasn't sure who was more afraid, her or it. It certainly made off in something of a hurry. Back breaking at this point, Cassie was proud to find that she had finally made some headway. She was shoving the last slops of water towards the back door, when she noticed the figure's grinning presence.

At first, her heart leaped. "Fili—"

But it wasn't him. One of the men from the skiff who had brought her to this hellish paradise was watching her work, smirking, one hand on his hip and one raised high on the door frame that led to the backyard. He looked as though he'd been watching her, and enjoying it, for hours.

"God, you scared me!"

"Si." His smiled stretched wider.

She put her hand on her heart to calm it and set the mop against the kitchen wall. "You're the guy from the boat, right?"

"Si, chica."

"Right. Well, we weren't...I wasn't expecting you until Sunday."

"Si. Come to check, because of wet," he said, gesturing above him to the sky. He made explosive noises and flared out his fingers to suggest the storm.

"That's so good of you, really," Cassie said, half ecstatic that she would be getting back to civilization, but also crushed that it meant leaving things with Filippo so unresolved, but he didn't care about that, so why should she? *Accept it for what it was Cass. Don't pine for what wasn't even there in the first place.*

The boat guy took his hand off the gate frame and swaggered forward. He had a strange way of walking, with his hips carrying him forward, his bare feet swishing against the drying dust of the backyard. "A lot trouble," he said. "Just to check you out."

"You mean, just to check on me?" She moved a step back inside the house instinctually. It was the wrong direction.

"No, no, to check you out. Lot of time," he said, rubbing his fingers together,

suggesting the old, time is money motto. He moved inexorably forward, still with that unstoppable grin and oil-black eyes that scoured her figure, invading her body with just his look.

Cassie wet her lips. So did he. She clenched her teeth. "I...I can pay you."

"Good. Pay, good." Still moving forward. So close she could smell the *cerveza* on his breath and the tang of foreign cigarettes. His nails were filthy, rimmed with black.

"When we get back to the mainland? I could..."

"No. No when back mainland. Here. Now."

His hands took her by her shoulders, pinning her to the uneven wall. Those filthy nails dug painfully into her flesh. Cassie kneed him in the groin, wrenched free of his grimy grip and screamed with all she worth.

That and Filippo was what saved her.

* * * *

Filippo felt sick with guilt.

When he came upon the guest house, he had felt like an idiot for trekking after a woman—again—who was obviously trouble. That she was married was the least of his problems, he thought as he massaged the candlestick-induced bump to his head. The good things he had tried to imagine about her vanished when he saw the definitely more than friendly position she was in with Carlos. How many more times would she succeed in embarrassing him? Both his heart and his pride was stung.

Filippo had turned to go back to the villa, tail between his legs, knowing that he'd made the wrong decision, taken the wrong chance, when he heard a bloodcurdling scream. The term was overused in films and crime books alike, but this sound got into his veins, slowing up the blood flow, turning it cold and thick.

As he took off towards Cassie, he felt like he was running through water. He just couldn't get there fast enough. Couldn't throw his damned legs into gear to cover the distance in time. Story of his life, but this time, spurred on by emotions he had not known he was capable of, his body surged with adrenalin and extra effort.

"Filippo! Oh, my God. Oh, thank God. He—"

Cassie was running towards Filippo. He saw Carlos rolling around on the ground and it was obvious what he had tried. Filippo ran straight past Cassie to deal with Carlos.

"Don't Filippo! It's not worth it!"

Filippo didn't listen to her, he had seen red. It was break point, and Carlos was the ball, and Carlos wasn't just the ball, he was the ball when Filippo was seeing it well, as though time had slowed down dramatically, and the small yellow sphere had swelled to the size of a basketball. All he needed to do was keep his eyes on the prize, let his shoulders open up...and hit it.

But Cassie got in his way, positioning herself in between him and Carlos. "Don't, Fili. Please."

He wanted to drag her out the way. This time, he was determined not to let anything come between him and his own personal goal, but the use of his nickname caused him to hesitate. It was an endearment only really used by those family and friends he was close to, and it reminded him who he was; a man who did not use violence for victory. So Filippo refrained, panting like a cheetah as he stared down at Carlos, the humiliated, mortally wounded prey. Cassie was right, he realized. Carlos hadn't needed to be beaten to a pulp to realize what he'd tried to do. Eye to eye, man to man with Filippo, the knowledge there between all three of them was punishment enough.

"Fili, I..."

Feeling nothing but contempt, Filippo turned his back on Carlos and put a hand on Cassie's shoulder. "Do you want to go and get your things from the guesthouse while I watch him?" he asked, nodding to a groaning Carlos.

She nodded and headed inside, reappearing moments later with her luggage. Filippo carried her bag and they moved in complete silence towards the shore.

Stranding Carlos temporarily, Filippo took Cassie back to the mainland and said nothing more to her than goodbye. Though, God knew, he had wanted to say so much more. "This is the way it must be, Cassie." He squeezed her hand, pressing enough money into her hand so she could afford to get back home. He didn't trust himself to be able to let her go if he did or said anything else.

She looked at the money as though he had slapped her in the face. He supposed he had, in a way. "You know where the bus stop is to get back to the airport, or do you want me to show you?" he asked gruffly.

Head bowed, she shook her head. "I remember." Her voice was a whisper.

"Cassie?" Having climbed out of the boat and onto the deck she stopped, weight on one hip and her shoulders low. She looked back, those dark sapphire eyes doleful, heart breaking. "Goodbye," he said.

Cassie didn't say anything, just turned back around and kept on walking. She kept her back straight and proud as she walked away, dead center over the deck and onto the tarmac towards the bus stop that would take her straight out of his life.

Chapter Six

Cassie flushed the toilet in *India Idyll*, the new restaurant Jen had dragged her to for their special dish-the-dirt-dinner. It made a change from éclairs, Cassie supposed as she rinsed her mouth. She realized that she couldn't stomach the thought of any kind of food at the moment. She blotted her lips with tissue paper. Jen had suggested tapas, in honor of her recent Spanish experience "to keep the memory alive," but Cassie wasn't taken with the idea.

Shaking her hands dry, Cassie gripped the sink and stared at her drawn reflection in the water-spotted mirror. *Your system's just upset, that's all. The excitement of the supposed interview, the storm, strange food, all the traveling. That's all. Nothing to do with Filippo.* She squeezed her eyes shut, as if trying not to see him, but his image was locked inside her mind. Ashamed, she flushed at the memory of his mouth on hers, his hands hurtling her towards pleasure and how she had so utterly abandoned herself to the rhythm of his deep thrusts. Her stomach writhed again.

"And now what does he think of you?" she whispered when the nausea had passed. "Just another easy conquest?" *Not that you'd needed much convincing.*

An old lady shuffled in followed by a pair of granddaughters, both wearing their hair in identical plaits. Cassie held the door for them on her way out and returned to Jen.

"Thought you'd gone home to use the loo. You were that long! I could've ordered and eaten by this time." Then Jen's slight irritation changed to concern. "What's up with you? You look dreadful."

"Cheers." Cassie settled herself at the table, feeling drained but a little more herself. She thought she might just be able to manage some plain rice.

"I only mean compared to your usual supermodel self."

Cassie smiled and played with her fork. "Naturally. I've just been feeling a little off since I got back, that's all. Sorry we haven't had chance to catch up before now. I really needed a little break." Translated—a good mope.

“Don’t worry about it. Truth is, I’ve been avoiding you over the interview mix up. I don’t understand what happened to Señor Fernandez, and I haven’t been able to get hold of him to sort it all out, though I’ve left him tons of messages.”

Cassie wrestled with her guilt. Though she was curious about how anyone could get a tennis player and an artist mixed up—and how the other party could be so easily duped into such an extensive interview—Cassie didn’t really want to go into it. All she had told Jen over the phone was that the artist had not been there. She’d lingered about for a few days, but still nothing. What was done was done, and they should just move past it. She shrugged. “Never mind.”

Jen clicked her fingers before Cassie’s nose. “Where are you, Cass? Was there really that little talent on Los Wotsit? I’d have thought there would at least have been some young locals to ogle.”

Cassie regarded Jen suspiciously. The woman sounded like she knew more than she was telling, but Cassie was too tired to go all private eye on her. “There was one guy...”

“I *knew* it! Who?” Jen pounded the table, the cutlery shuddered, and the restaurant’s patrons jumped likewise. Jen was oblivious. She leaned in close.

“You’ll never believe it,” Cassie said, grinning in spite of herself.

“Oh, my God! Somebody famous? *Who?*”

“Guess.”

“Prince Charles.”

“Jen!” Cassie leaned in, too, so that they were both conspirators. “Filippo Fernandez.”

“Really? No!”

Cassie frowned. She had expected something like: *And how could you not have told me this?* She had not expected a breezy, *Really?* “You could look a bit more surprised.”

“I am surprised—jealous as a bitch in heat—but I’m surprised. Honestly. So go on, don’t leave a girl hanging. What happened?”

Cassie let it go. “We just, sort of bumped into each other on the island, that’s all,” she said, not sure why she wanted to keep what really happened to herself. Was it because she was ashamed at her behavior, or because it had been such an intimate moment that she wanted to cherish the memory and selfishly keep it all to herself?

“You just sort of bumped into each other?” Jen looked as if she’d eaten something rotten, but the waiter hadn’t even been over to get their drinks.

“It’s a small island.”

“It’s a small island.”

“Will you stop repeating what I say?”

Jen sat back in her chair and wagged a finger at Cassie as the waiter finally came

over to see what they'd like to drink. "There's something you're not telling me."

"Well then, that makes two of us, doesn't it? Just water for me, please. Jen?"

Jen was rubbing the table top nervously with one finger. "Oh, double Bacardi and coke. No ice."

"Well, out with it," Cassie said good naturedly, tired of beating around the bush.

"Okay, but let's remember, I'm your friend, and I have your best interests in mind. Look, I'm sorry if I crossed the line, but I thought you really wouldn't want to know about it."

Cassie realized they were probably talking about different things, but decided to play along. She wanted to know what else she wasn't privy to. "It's okay. I know you wouldn't have done...it to deliberately hurt me," she said, although she had no idea what "it" was.

"He's been calling for a while now."

Cassie sat up straight. "He has?"

"Luckily, he's too much of a coward to call you directly. I've had him bugging me on my mobile all week."

"He's called you, you've actually spoke to him?"

"If you can call his mangled winging speaking. I tell you, Cass, I could barely understand him half the time. You know why he's ringing you now though, don't you?"

Cassie's heart was racing. *Because he wants to see me again? Because he doesn't want to go through life without having me in his arms and his heart...and his bed.*

"Only cos he's gone and split up with that home-wrecker, Rachel. She's moved up the food chain, apparently—shacking up with the CEO of the company now, or so he said."

A different kind of storm was raging in Cassie's mind. Then it all came together, and her optimism was dismantled. Cold drenched her body. Jen was not talking about Filippo. She was talking about Mike. Hating herself for it, Cassie still couldn't help but ask, "What...what does he want?"

Jen accepted her Bacardi and coke gratefully, knocking half of it back with one gulp. Cassie fingered the condensation on her glass. She was feeling nauseous again, for rather different reasons. After everything that had happened—the life she had rebuilt, the career she had started from scratch, the friends she had made along the way—was she still that same weak person inside? The same stupid girl who would ignore the warning signs and the hushed, late night phone calls because she was too scared to go it alone? Would she always and inevitably come a-running like a dog to a whistle whenever Mike blew?

"Why, he wants to get back together, of course. Something other than Rachel going AWOL has made him realize he made a big mistake—*supposedly*. Wants to talk to you about it. That, plus the usual 'didn't know what he had until it was gone' blah, blah, blah," said Jen, rolling her eyes and toying with one oversized hoop earring. She stopped

immediately when she saw Cassie's stricken face. "Oh, no. Don't give me that look. You see, this is why I didn't tell you. I'm sorry to have kept it from you and everything, but somebody has to look out for you. I knew you'd react like this. I knew it! He clicks his fingers and you...ugh." Jen leaned her head on her fist. "Tell me you're not considering calling him back."

"I'm not considering calling him back."

"And once more, with conviction."

The tears slipped down her face out of nowhere. Standing on wobbly legs she told Jen, "I'm sorry, Jen. I have to get back."

"No, don't go, Cassie. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You haven't. I'm not. I just..."

"I know. You need some time alone. Just be smart."

"I will," Cassie promised and gripped Jen's hand briefly. All she wanted to do was get home and think—about what that 'something' could be which had caused Mike to have this epiphany.

"That's okay," Jen hollered as Cassie rushed towards the doors, characteristically upbeat. "I'll pay."

"I'll take it out your wages!" Cassie quipped.

"I'm a vol-un-teer!"

Cassie flicked Jen an easygoing smile, but the tears were tugging down the corners of her mouth. She tried to tell herself that whatever Mike was going through, it was no longer her concern, but she knew she had to get away and sort the mess out in her head, make sure she was strong enough to say no to him, before he could catch her unawares.

She wasn't quick enough. Hovering anxiously outside Cassie's mid terrace was Mike, the first man she'd ever given her body or her heart to, and the first man who'd broken it and used it so carelessly. He had convinced her she would never be brave enough to give it to anyone again—let alone to a man who was bona fide heartbreak material like Filippo Fernandez.

Mike looked as exhausted as Cassie felt, and she felt more than a twinge of sympathy. She'd told herself they hadn't lasted because they had got together too young. That Mike was a good man. That he had loved her and provided for her, but he was also weak, and he found it hard to say no when a woman made advances. To Cassie, that was unfathomable. For one, she had adored Mike, and it had never occurred to her to cheat on him. There wasn't even the temptation to hold in check, but for another, she couldn't comprehend a woman who would go after another woman's husband. She'd reconciled it in her head by deciding this Rachel was not the type of woman who could find true happiness. She couldn't have loved Mike, and so it would never last. Again, she'd ended up feeling sorry for him and not herself.

"I miss you, CC."

She missed him, too. God, did she miss him. The way they used to trawl second hand bookshops on a Sunday, agree about everything and nothing, eat chips while looking at estate agents, wishing for more money and a better house. At least Mike had. Cassie, she was sorry to admit, had been happy with her life. She had not striven for more or dreamed that there were other men who could make contentment seem like a dirty word. Filippo. Even his name was beautiful and exotic, yet familiar at the same time.

“CC? Baby...” He drew in a deep breath. “I know I’ve know right to ask you this, but I need you. I—I need to talk to you...I need you to give me just one more chance.”

Cassie hardened. He was trying to drag her back to the girl she was, remind them of lost youth and innocence and a time when after she laughed, the faint laughter lines around her eyes disappeared. Now, they didn’t. Likewise, there had been too much pain for them to go back now. “I gave you one more chance, Mike, and then another, and another. Every time you told me you had to work late, and I did the whole good wife thing, timing your tea around your crazy hours. What an idiot I was—and there you were, taking your fill at the office and then coming home to me, kissing me, touching me. After *her*. Do you know what that does to somebody, Mike? Do you know what you did to me?” *Stop it, stop it now*, she counseled herself as her voice reached hysterical proportions. Next door’s doily-style curtains twitched. *You can’t afford to let him see how much he still affects you.*

“Believe me, CC, I know. Do you think I haven’t been hurting, too?” Mike ventured to take her hand. She shoved him away. “See, if you didn’t still feel something for me, you wouldn’t react like this. What’s more, you wouldn’t have taken so long to sign the papers if you felt nothing—not to mention the fact you’re still wearing my grandmother’s ring.”

Damn it. “I only didn’t sign the papers at first to teach you a lesson. You needed to know what it’s like not to get *everything* you want.”

Mike looked at her pleadingly as if to beg her to reconsider. His next words almost made that happen. “I’m not doing so good, Cass. Something’s...happened.”

“Save it. I already heard about Rachel.”

“That’s not it!” Mike said, but by now, Cassie had found her keys and her resolve. It was hard, but she closed the door firmly in Mike’s stricken face.

Just when one thought there were too many bad things in the world, something went right. Cassie dumped the keys onto the coffee table and tried not to let her eyes stray to the window where she could still see Mike pacing about outside. As usual, he gave up quick enough, and Cassie was relieved, in more ways than one, to watch him move away. She slumped onto the couch and hit the playback button on her answer machine. For the past couple of weeks, she had entertained the girlish fantasy that Filippo would call her out of the blue. The way as a schoolgirl she day dreamed on her bed that the best-looking boy in class would choose her at the disco, cutting a path through the smoke and her green-eyed peers. Even then, young as she was, she had recognized such things as fantasies, but the best-looking boy in class had certainly never made a beeline for her at the school disco.

But when she heard the Spanish accent on the answering machine message, she

almost dared to hope. "...Is a message for Ms. Miller? I have been in touch with your assistant Jen about an interview for your magazine. Now, I don't do interview usually—is well known!—but the lovely young lady insist, and I have much affection for *A&L*. Who am I, an old man, to say no to such a lady? I have annual workshop in Stuttgart this week and would be good opportunity for you to see how I work. I be delighted if you call me back and discuss details..."

Not quite Filippo, but nevertheless. Federique Fernandez read *A&L*? *The* Federique Fernandez read *her* magazine? It was the strength she needed not to call Mike and find out what had upset him so much. It would have been so easy to invite him back into her home, heart and bed. Particularly when she was in sore need of comfort, but she had picked herself up and moved forwards after Mike's betrayal. Filippo had not betrayed her. He'd made her a woman again, so in theory it ought to be much easier to forget him. In theory, at least.

Chapter Seven

“*Vamos!*” Filippo cried, furious with himself. He pumped his fist, trying to inspire the passion he was sorely lacking to win this all important point. He was thirty-forty down on his own serve and had just put in a double fault to boot.

“Deuce,” intoned the umpire.

Cameras followed Filippo as he unnecessarily requested his towel from the back of the court, taking an extra moment to try and regain his composure. The Mercedes Cup might not have been Wimbledon, but he was still the defending champion. Losing here would not only mean dropping some major ranking points, but it was also a blow to his already dented confidence. Despite the fact that his game adapted pretty well to the clay, he just couldn’t seem to find his rhythm today. If he lost the next point, it would be a shock first round exit, never mind that his opponent was ranked some eighty-six places below him. He should have walked this match.

Filippo threw the towel back to the ball girl, accepted three balls, and sent one bouncing back. Then he approached the service line, wiped the sweat off his nose and performed his other little rituals. Bounce. Bounce. He drew the racquet up, bent his knees, whipped his arm over his head.

“Let. First service.”

Filippo had never felt so self conscious in all his life. Never mind the fact that he’d turned pro when he was sixteen, or that he’d fallen on his arse trying to do a Boris Becker in *front* of Boris Becker, or that he’d choked in his first final and dropped every game except two. Not good for a man’s confidence that., but these things he learned to take in stride. These things happened; they were predictable almost, minor or major problems that occurred either because one was not good enough, or had not put in the preparation, or just hadn’t played well on the day.

But he blamed this one on Cassandra Miller. Why else would he care about the cameras, the thousands of eyes upon him? He was, of course, worried about one particular pair eyes that might be watching him. A pair that might see him fail.

More rituals. Bounce. Bounce. A quick glance at his coach and trainer. His papa, who as ever looked too fragile to absorb so much tension on a yearly basis. *Appearances can be deceptive*, Filippo thought, as he'd discovered with Cassie. Who'd have thought someone with so much reserve could be so passionate? Seeing her savagely kick Carlos where it hurt was perhaps the sexiest thing he'd ever bore witness to.

Shouldn't be thinking about this. Concentrate. Point-by-point. Don't think about the fact that, if you don't place this one perfectly, he's going to take a crack at your second serve which, as you know, needs work, and then he thought about it.

Damn. Bounce. Bounce. He aligned the racquet with the ball. Bent his knees. Tossed the ball. Whipped the racquet over his head.

And his opponent, a towering Russian even taller than Filippo's six foot, three inch frame pushed a total miss-hit return. It caught the back edge of the line.

"Game, set, match Ivankov. 6-2, 6-4."

Shoulders low, Filippo walked to the net to shake hands with Ivankov. He gave him a congratulatory pat on the back, glancing into the nearest camera. *See that Cassie*, Filippo thought as he threw his racquet towards his bag—and missed—as he returned to his chair. *Can't keep my own serve, can't defend my title, can't tell the first person who's made me realize that there's more to life than tennis. So much for making papa proud.*

"I don't want to talk about it," Filippo said when his father came into the locker room. "I don't want to analyze it, and I especially don't want to think about it."

"Would be wise to do so, Fili. You have the RCA Championships next week. The U.S. Open is not far away. We must try to figure out what you're doing wrong."

Filippo knew what he was doing wrong. Letting a vibrant, difficult, wine-dark haired beauty with sapphire eyes into his heart, and this a woman he had only known for twenty-four hours. He had to do something about this lapse of concentration. Foregoing his usual massage, playing the stumbling-over-his-words Spaniard to get out of the post-match press interviews quickly, he showered, dressed and went out to discover what kind of nightlife Stuttgart had to offer. That night, he vowed to get Cassandra Miller out of his head once and for all.

* * * *

"Germany," Cassie repeated to Jen, the phone tucked against her neck and shoulder as she packed some last-minute necessities. Like the passport. Her head still wasn't back to its efficient best, but what better way to put some distance between her and what had happened on Los Tigos? Stuttgart was a completely different environment. No room for fantasy there.

"Why Germany? That's a funny..."

Cassie shrugged, and the phone dropped to the living room carpet with a *thunk*. She scrambled for it. Jen was still speaking, oblivious, "...for a Spanish artist to live."

"Well, artists have to see the world if they want to comment on it. Besides, I don't think he lives there all the time, but he holds a workshop there every year. People come from all over the place to attend."

“Spoken like a true frustrated know-it-all artist. When are you going to start painting again?”

“It’s the writing I miss the most, but I’m just being realistic—plus I know where my strengths lie.” What she meant to say was the magazine was something she could control whereas her work, particularly after “The Breakup”, was too dark. She didn’t want to get involved in all that again. “Anyway, I should go. My flight’s at 9.30, and it better not be delayed either. I’ve arranged to meet Federique around five. He’s going to tell me what he’s been working on, but that should give me plenty of time, right?”

Jen laughed. “You’re starting to stress again.”

Cassie breathed out, forcing herself to be calm. “You’re right, I am. It’s the whole Mike thing, I suppose it’s been on my mind a bit. Is he still calling you?”

She heard Jen sigh. “I wish you didn’t sound so hopeful when you say that, but yeah, he’s still stalking my work mobile. I’ve told him to bugger off a couple of times, and that was just yesterday. I don’t think he’s going to go away easily, Cass.”

“I’ve never seen him like this—”

“Tough. It’s not like he didn’t have it coming. Now get thee to Germany and talk art with Fernando.”

“Fernandez.”

“What you said.”

They said their goodbyes, and Cassie grabbed up her hold all and her new shiny suitcase on wheels. The other one still hadn’t made an appearance, having been sent on to Spain and then going on to Los Tiqos with the Lopez’s apparently directing it back to the airport. Her repeated phone calls conducted in bad Spanish suggested that it was now on its way back to London. She bet she’d have to pay for the case’s unexpected detour.

Outside Cassie heard the clunky purring of a taxi cab. Flicking off her living room lights, she hastened outside, flicking them on again so she could find her purse. Attempting to scoop this exclusive interview the reclusive Federique Fernandez was indeed becoming costly. The Arts Council Funding A&L received had just about covered the last trip, except that whole trip was a mistake—

Don’t think about Filippo. Don’t think about Filippo—

His lips on my lips, tasting me, treasuring me, opening me up to him—

—but this one was coming out of her own personal account. The money in there was getting quite lonely, she thought wryly as she instructed the cabbie to take her to the airport. Of course, if Mike would hurry up and repay the rest of her share of the house, things might not be such a struggle. *Don’t think about Mike. Don’t think—Dammit, what could have happened to put that haunted look in his eyes?* It reminded her of the eyes that greeted her in the mirror every morning when her dad was sick. It would be nice to be safe again, to have somebody’s arms around her when she went to sleep, but did she want those arms to belong to Mike?

Snap out of it, she told herself. There was no way in the world that she was going

to let money or memories get in the way of a once-in-a-lifetime meeting with Federique Fernandez. He had been the one artist who had changed her own perspective as a girl. She remembered the day vividly. She'd just turned eleven and was on a rare school trip to the Royal Academy in London. While everyone else had guffawed, Cassie had been drawn into Federique's literally twisted self-portrait sculptures.

"What is it?"

"Looks nothing like a giraffe"

"Where's the toilets, sir?" they had asked, but Cassie had been captivated. What made somebody feel so twisted, she had wondered, so unlike the straight, normal body they walked around in? The questions had gone unanswered until she'd got interested in boys, and even then she only understood the sculptures and the premise behind them. It had taken Mike's betrayal for Cassie to truly engage with what was behind the pieces. Now, that betrayal had faded, and it was Filippo who gave Fernandez's work new meaning.

Cassie half watched the taxi's meter clock up as they slowed for traffic. Still, she thought, it didn't matter how pricey this trip was. It would be worth it for the readers, and on a personal level, for herself. Maybe she'd even be inspired to write again.

It was with an unflagging sense of optimism that Cassie enjoyed the ride to the airport. Her nausea was history too, just like Mike was, and Filippo, or so she told herself. *Time to concentrate on my own future.*

* * * *

"*Sind sie* Filippo Fernandez? *Wirklich?*"

Filippo looked up from his beer. He'd only drank a couple of sips, his strict work ethic not truly allowing him to indulge, but the woman was not a restricted pleasure; she would actually be a work out. Papa might even approve. Filippo glanced at her with more interest from his place at the darkened anonymous bar near the airport; she had a nice slender figure, shiny brown hair, brown eyes, curly lashes and a playful mouth, but she was boring. He thought the low top was a little blatant. This hadn't been the way he'd expected the whole getting-Cassie-out-of-his-head plan to go. Bland music pulsed dully from an old jukebox.

"I see you at Wimbledon, *ja*? Quarter finals. You here for des Mercedes Cup? Not to be drinking?" She wagged a finger. It was meant to be seductive.

She said Wimbledon with a "V" instead of a "W." Well, that was an interesting quirk. "Si, sure. Sit down."

Filippo ordered her a drink, unable to even remember what she had asked for, so he'd just gestured to the one she was holding instead. The barman nodded with heavy eyes and set another glass before the woman whose short skirt was riding up a little too high on the seat next to him. Still, she was happy enough with her drink, though something in her eyes told him that she knew he wasn't really interested. She fingered the stem of the glass seductively. It excited very little from Filippo, and he went back to being absorbed by his own half drunk beer, thumbnail scraping at the foil label.

But she was extremely persistent. She wasn't about to give up.

"Better just to let her have what she wants? Filippo asked himself as the woman placed a hand on his knee and whispered something German in his ear. She told him something that his pre-Cassie self would have been very happy to hear. He tried to feel the same way he would have done in the past, but it was almost as if Cassie had taken something from him. The thought irked him immensely, having never felt it before, but also, because he had never felt that way before, Filippo wondered if it was the precise opposite; Cassie had given him so much that he didn't need to look for anything else in any other women. Still, his natural fighting instinct kicked in, and Filippo decided to win back what he thought she had taken.

He did it by not moving the German woman's hand from the very top of his leg, and by pulling her towards him for a flat kiss via the gold chain she wore loosely about her slender neck. It was the only thing on her that sparkled, as far as Filippo was concerned.

It was at that moment that the door of the small German bar tinkled open. Nobody looked up. Many people came and went in places like this, especially one so close to the airport. Filippo had gone there because it was the only area he knew, but he was not yet part of the general apathy that pervaded the other patrons. He *did* look around, maybe sensing another foreigner in the mix.

Not just another foreigner, Filippo realized, as he continued to look. Filippo frowned. *Could it really be...? Surely it wasn't...* He smiled to himself, recognizing Federique Fernandez, the artist Cassie was *supposed* to have interviewed on Los Tiqos. *Wouldn't it be weird if Cassie was here too?*

The woman beside Filippo was unhappy at having to share his attention, especially with a man. Her perfectly manicured nails touched his chin, turning his attention forcibly back to himself.

"*Entschuldigen*," he apologized. *Always know the word for sorry, wherever you go.* Another one of his father's gems.

She seemed somewhat placated, and to show him there was no hard feelings, she now pulled *him* forward for another kiss, one that had all the right mechanics, yet still managed to be lifeless.

And just then Cassandra Miller made her entrance, noisily dragging in her wheeled suitcase, knocking over a morose-looking German's lager and making him seem even more unhappy.

"*Entschuldigen, entschuldigen*," Filippo heard Cassie cry. He shook his head at the wonder of the coincidence and laughed out loud. Had old Alberto been giving her tips, too?

As an adorably flustered Cassie took a seat next to Federique Fernandez, whom she had recognized immediately, and who was also taken with her, the woman next to Filippo decided to make her intentions crystal clear. She stood, pushing herself close to him, inserting herself between his legs and toying with his long hair. While Filippo tried to find a polite way to prevent her from completing her mission, without having to

wrestle her to the ground, Cassie's eyes met his. The woman lay a proprietary arm around Filippo, and he saw that she met Cassie's eyes directly.

The sparkle in those dark English eyes that Filippo had found so mesmerizing went out.

Chapter Eight

When Mike betrayed her, Cassie did her best to ignore it, putting all her efforts into establishing *A&L*. Though seeing Filippo again was an amazing coincidence, Cassie thought fate could have been kinder to her. Like maybe presenting him to her without the slinky blonde writhing in his lap? But Cassie did what she did best; she gritted her teeth and denied that it caused her any pain at all. However, a storm to match the one on Los Tiqos was raging inside her.

“*Señor Fernandez*,” she began instead. “I can’t tell you how nice it is to finally meet you.”

“Finally?” he said, one eyebrow raised. He stirred his tiny teacup with a tiny spoon, a thin peccadillo causing blue circles of serpent smoke to writhe in the low light. The pungent coffee would have had her sweating with nausea a few days ago, but this evening she was fine.

“Only that I’ve followed your work since I was a young girl.”

The Spaniard wheezed and dotted his ash onto a saucer that had not yet been cleared. For a man who had waved goodbye to sixty a considerable while ago, there was still something enigmatic and attractive about him. Now he clutched his heart dramatically. “Ah, you do my poor heart bad, Miss Miller!” He leaned in conspiratorially. “Making me feel like old man.”

Cassie laughed, but it was obviously forced. Despite herself, her eyes strayed back to Filippo. The blonde woman looked distressed, and Cassie was surprised to see Filippo graciously, yet blatantly, trying to extricate himself from her company. Now, the woman was angry. Cassie shook her head faintly. *Typical*, she thought. *He would have been quite happy to carry on with whatever they were doing before I came in, and if he thinks denying that now is going to win any points with me, well, he can think again. Shows how much he thought of me, not that I expected any different.*

“Miss Miller?”

“Hm?” Cassie shot upright, realizing she had been watching Filippo with her chin on her hand. “Oh, Señor Fernandez, please forgive my rudeness. It’s been a long flight.”

Señor Fernandez raised his wild and wiry eyebrows. “I am knowing many women, Miss Miller. I know when is tired, and I know when is lying. You is lying.”

He suddenly had her full attention. Was he angry with her. Had this ridiculous coincidence with Filippo jeopardized her best scoop ever? “I apologize. I don’t mean to offend you—”

“Not offended, Miss Miller. Amused. Now, *he* —” Señor Fernandez pointed to Filippo, “—looks offended. Imagine. Maybe he is upset his girlfriend is with such a handsome old man. I still got it, no?”

Cassie eyes whipped to Federique. Such astuteness for human drama, she thought. It was no wonder his sculptures spoke to so many. She tucked a fallen strand of straightened hair behind her ear. “I’m not his girlfriend. Perhaps she is.”

Señor Fernandez folded his arms on the table. It seemed to Cassie that his smile held the secrets of the universe. “Ah, but I am right. You do know him. A brief encounter maybe? A steamy...forgive me, an old man must take his pleasures where he can dig them!”

“No offense taken, *Señor* Fernandez.”

“Federique, please. So tell me, you feel is fate you meet again? An affair gone sour, a note off key? But why with the paper lady, you ask? A woman lives with her misery, Miss Miller, whether she ignores it as you do, but a man seeks to cloud it with other feelings, though these feelings are usually not emotional, if you understand?” He shrugged expressively. “But it means nothing.”

Cassie slumped back in her chair, thoughtful. Then she realized this attitude would betray to Filippo how much she had felt for him in such a brief time, so she straightened up. Her head was starting to throb. So much in such a short time. Filippo, Mike, now this oracle artist Federique Fernandez. Even stranger was that she felt bizarrely comfortable with this grandparent-figure she had only just met, especially given that he was also her icon. It was too surreal. “If you’ll excuse me, *Sen*—Federique. I must get some air.”

The chair scraped against the hard floor as Cassie stood up. Federique put a small hand upon hers. “A man looks at a fling with fire in his body, just as this man,” his head tipped to Filippo, “looks at you, but he does not look at her with such fire also in his heart, and his eyes.”

Cassie swallowed with difficulty. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She held up one finger to indicate that she would be just a moment and left the smoke-filled bar. As soon as the door closed, it whooshed open again.

Filippo.

Cassie took a deep breath. It was clear they both had so much to say, but Cassie knew that her own words were tangled up in swirling emotions. If she opened her mouth, nothing would come out right. It would certainly not come out with any dignity. She

folded her arms against her chest and the wind's brisk edge, as if trying to physically keep her turmoil inside. Perhaps Filippo was having the same problem. She saw his lips, those perfectly shaped lips, part and inhale a breath in which to speak, but nothing came out.

Then he touched her fingers. It wasn't an invasive, territorial grab, just an inquisitive contact, which somehow conveyed to Cassie how much more he desired. *Then why had he been with that woman, if he truly felt so much for me?* When she didn't respond, Filippo moved away and raked his hands through his long hair.

"I lost tournament today because of you."

She looked at him in amazement. "Are you serious?"

"Oh, yes. Completely—"

"Well that's just charming. That's the first thing you can say to me?"

Filippo looked puzzled. Then something dawned on him, and his handsome face underwent a brilliant metamorphosis. In short, he burst out laughing. There were even tears at the corners of his stunning light green eyes.

Cassie felt an undeniable urge to laugh with him, but not when he was laughing at her. That couldn't be right. The only thing she wanted to do right then was get out of his gaze that seemed to illuminate her like a spotlight. Abandoning the suitcase inside the bar, what was one more piece of lost luggage after all, Cassie stalked away.

She didn't make it two steps.

This time, Filippo did grab her, proprietarily, as though he was hers to claim.

"Let go of me!" She wrenched out of his grasp and turned away, but his hands found her waist from behind.

She whirled in his grasp, and their eyes struck like hammer and nail. They were locked in a battle of wills. Cassie made to leave once again, but the attempt was far more half hearted. It was a melting feeling, a painful but wonderful submission, and the acknowledgement of what he did to her, that she did not resist when he walked her softly back against the bar's rugged stone front, oblivious to the faint trickle of passersby.

"Careful," she warned. "You know what I'm capable of."

He gave her a sad smile. The memory that was conjured up was not pleasant for either of them. In full view, Filippo stroked one side of her face as if he hadn't seen her in decades. His totally toned, athletic form was coiled with tension, like a panther ready to spring into the chase. His maleness was heady and overwhelming. Cassie struggled to keep her breathing steady. It was not easy.

"Is not wonderful that we meet like this?" Filippo asked sincerely. "Ask yourself, Cassie, does it not mean we are meant to be together?"

She gritted her teeth. "You didn't seem to be thinking that, inside."

He looked as if she had wounded him, and Cassie felt his pain as if it was her own. "*Si*, but..."

“I know, I know, she meant nothing. Like every woman hasn’t heard that one before.”

He gripped her chin quite roughly and forced her to look into his eyes. “Life is bringing us together. This you cannot deny, despite the things trying to keep us apart. I believe this now, sin or no.”

Cassie was suddenly horrified. “And being with me is a *sin*? Why? Because I’m not Catholic? Because I’m not Spanish?”

He shook his head. Cassie noticed a smartly dressed lady was also shaking her head as she walked past the two of them. The woman’s petty distaste somewhat diffused Cassie’s anger. She had a sudden rebellious desire to kiss Filippo, long and deep, just to see how fast the woman’s head could shake. Of course, that wasn’t the only thing encouraging that desire. Miraculously, she refrained.

“No...you know why.”

“Oh, I do, do I? Well, why don’t you enlighten me?”

Filippo withdrew ever so slightly, as if judging her in a different light, shaking his head slightly. “Because you belong to another man,” he said thickly.

It was as if Cassie’s brain was struggling through the sludgy Los Tigos mud. Then Mike’s words echoed in her ears, “...you’re still wearing my grandmother’s ring.” Wearing the ring was such second nature to her, she’d forgotten what it signaled to others, and yet, Filippo had still slept with her, even though he had mistakenly thought she was still married. Her heart half sang with the realization, but then stopped mid-flight. Perhaps unfairly, she felt he had somehow let her down. Wasn’t Filippo just like Rachel then? When was it ever right to intrude upon a marriage?

“A *peseta* for your thoughts.”

“It’s the Euro now. You know that, right? Spain converted in—”

Filippo shook his head, some of the tension draining out of his body. “You are happy to lecture me on my own country and currency, but will not speak of the things in your heart. Why do you keep so much back, inside yourself?”

Cassie cleared her throat. “If you think that’s a lecture, you obviously never went to university.”

“Oh, I am stupid now?”

She smiled at his attempt to lighten the mood, but the smile was sad. “Maybe.”

Filippo looked away, muttering in Spanish. It didn’t sound particularly flattering—well, what could she expect. Inhaling, Cassie stepped into Filippo’s gaze. It was time to put things right. “You’re not stupid. *Non stupido!*” she shouted, mimicking the way people universally spoke to the deaf and the foreign. It brought the desired effect—that twinkle back to those green eyes. She said softly, “..and I’m not married either.”

Selfishly, Cassie watched the emotions morph across Filippo’s features: disbelief, acceptance, joy...desire. He obviously believed they were now free to be together. After

all, it did seem strangely meant to be, and it *was* amazing that their individual lives had brought them together. Not just to the same city, but to the same exact bar. How much more of a hint could fate give her? *Oh, I don't know, how about the smell of another woman's perfume on your husband's shirt, his hair, his body? You chose to ignore that though, didn't you? And look where that got you.*

That her mind once again went to Mike made Cassie realize that she did have to tell Filippo what was in her heart. She took a deep breath. "But you're half right, in a way. Part of me...and it's not a good part, not really."

"What are you saying?"

"If you'd let me finish—"

"And again, this lecturing."

"Again, this interrupting. Filippo, I do belong to another man. I hate him. God knows, if it was legal, I'd...okay, never mind that. All I'm saying is, to truly hate somebody so much, I think...I think I must still love him, at least a little, at least who I thought he was." She bit her lip and waited for his judgment.

Filippo shook his head. "No."

"No?"

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "No." Filippo rested one hand on the wall above her shoulder. His great frame cast a shadow over her, seeming to create a secret place in the middle of the city.

Cassie nodded, physically affected by the heat of his body, the pull of his lips. "Okay, no. No." And her fingers found the belt loops of his trousers and pulled. His hips touched her stomach, his ribs pressed against her breasts. Even as she thought—*God, what am I doing? What am I getting myself into now?*—she reached up, far up, standing-on-tiptoes-up and reveled in the rough and smooth of stubble and skin. His mouth was a remembered paradise, made sweeter by the thought that she might never experience it again, and so in the center of Stuttgart's inner city, Cassie and Filippo were transported back to Los Tiqos, the crashing storm, the sapping heat of the island...and their bodies. *He really does like me*, she thought dizzily. *Despite what I've just told him. How that was possible?* She wasn't quite certain, but she did know that she wasn't about to ask why. *Don't break the spell, Cass. Don't bring reality in on this fantasy.*

He pulled away, and a moan escaped her, making her cringe when she saw the humor that sound brought to Filippo's face. "Told you, nobody kiss with this passion if you do not in some way belong to me, but we will discuss this later, no?"

"Ah, no?"

"Yes, we will. Now, I must leave. I have a meeting with my papa and one of my sponsors, something about renewing some contract. I would ask that you join us, but you may not wish to see me again if you meet him! He tells long stories of me."

"It's fine." Cassie self-consciously wiped her bottom lip.

"You will promise I can see you again?"

She looked at him, worrying that the fantasy was already shattered. “If you say so.”

“Promise it then. I will come to your hotel, tonight. We need to talk, not just kiss.”

Cassie tried not to visibly flinch. Mike had said the exact same thing, “I need to talk to you.”

“If we are going to do this, we should do it all,” Filippo was saying. “And do everything backwards—we will actually have a date? You see, I am old-fashioned.”

That made her smile. Her eyes searched him, trying to figure out. Finally, she nodded.

“Out loud! Promise. Say you will.”

“Okay, okay, I will. Now go away. I’ve an interview to do.”

“So do I. Wear something nice.”

He left her reluctantly after she had given him the address.

* * * *

When Cassie got back to her hotel, she was physically and emotionally exhausted. The flight, the wonderful interview with the enigmatic Federique—he promised to let her sit in on one of his prestigious workshops tomorrow—and of course the shock encounter with Filippo had tired her out, but even through her tiredness, as she dumped her coat onto the anonymous bed and kicked off her heels, the thought still managed to make Cassie smile. It really *was* amazing they should meet again. The thought still nagged. How could Filippo want her after what she had said? Was she deliberately building obstacles to her own happiness because she was scared of getting hurt again? Or was it all something of a sham? Was Filippo only after more of what they’d had on Los Tigos? *But*, Cassie thought, *if it is just that, I’d be a fool to say no. Could anyone say no to Filippo Fernandez?*

Before going to the bathroom, Cassie switched her mobile phone back on and tossed it back into her handbag. She’d turned it off for the flight and, with everything that had happened in the meantime, had forgotten to switch it back on. She took a long hot shower, after letting her grubby travel clothes stay where they fell, glad to be out of them. She got out a few minutes later and wrapped a fluffy white towel against her skin. It was habit that made her slip her wedding ring on again. Then she took time over straightening her hair using the dryer provided, wanting to feel groomed and beautiful for Filippo. She had a lot to live up to, but a date. Her stomach flip-flopped. It was so high school. She bit her lip to try and stop herself from smiling. She wondered where they would go. Would it be a fancy meal or a night on the town? She thought she would prefer a quiet local restaurant, a place that tourists hadn’t heard of, with a small open fire and traditional German music. They could sit close together and talk about Los Tigos, find out about his family and his sculpting. Her defense mechanisms kicked in on queue, and Cassie told herself not to get carried away. After all, if this was just going to be a physical thing then—

Cassie broke off from doing her eyeliner when she heard her mobile ring.

“Hello?” Cassie said, after fishing the cursed thing out of her handbag. It was a new one. The Los Tiqos tide had butchered the other.

“Finally! Where on earth have you been?”

It was Jen, her voice catching over the bad, delayed connection. Whatever Jen was, she was not a woman who often got stressed. An icy feeling settled over Cassie’s high spirits. “Tell me,” she said simply.

“It’s Mike.”

Oh, God. “Please say he hasn’t done anything stupid.” *Is he okay?* she added to herself, secretly.

“No, not like that anyway. More’s the pity—”

“Jen.”

“Sorry, but this is what I’ve been trying to get in touch with you about.”

“I’ve had my phone off.”

“I noticed...*and* I’ve been calling the hotel, but they said they couldn’t get an answer at the room. I was starting to get worried.”

“I’ve been in the shower. Jen, please, what’s going on?”

“Look, there’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll just say it then. He broke in.”

“Who? Mike? No way, Jen, come off it. He’s no burglar!” Even the word, used in relation to sensible Mike, sounded absurd.

“Not to point out the obvious, but you didn’t think he was a cheater either. You were wrong about that one.”

“Yeah, thanks, but breaking and entering? What else could he even want from me? It’s not like he left me with anything worth enough to steal, for God’s sake!” Cassie swallowed her old bitterness.

“Saw it with my own eyes, love. I was just nipping in to check the post for new submissions and, well, the door was already open and bust. Now I might be short sighted, but I know what I saw.”

Cassie slumped down on the bed in her towel. “What did he take?”

“Nothing. He’d just rifled through everything. Now this might sound far fetched...”

Cassie rubbed her eyes with a weary hand. “Nothing sounds impossible to me anymore. I think the world’s gone mad, or maybe it’s just me.”

“Or maybe it’s Mike. Look, I wasn’t going to mention this because I didn’t really want to worry you—and I’m sure nothing will come of it, but, well, he’d been nagging me to tell him where you were, but I just told him to get lost. Long story short, he was holding the pad where I’d written your flight number and the details for the hotel.”

Cassie's head reeled, possibilities and denials and maybes whirled. "Shit," she said, but her mind was already working. He must really want her back to go to all that trouble. *Right, cos stalking's just so romantic.*

"Yeah. Maybe you should come home, love. I know this interview's important, but if you've got nobody there you can really count on, I think it'd be much safer."

She wanted to tell her best friend that Filippo was here, but she held back. Why? It was partly because it would mean having to explain so much more about what had happened with him on Los Tiqos, but it was also because she was afraid their "relationship" was too fragile for reality. If she started to gush about it, it was sure to fall apart. Plus, what did she expect, that Filippo would protect her from her own husband? And did she really need protecting from Mike, or from herself? Should she hear him out? She had to admit, she wanted to know what this 'something' that had happened was—maybe he needed her help? *And I should care about that, why?*

"Cass?"

"I'm here—"

There was a pounding on the door, and Cassie cursed. Her heart *thumped* in her chest.

"What was that?"

"Just room service. I—I'm eating in tonight. Look, I should get it, and don't worry. You did the right thing letting me know. I'll be home soon, I promise."

"You better. Call me when you're on your way home. Be safe."

Cassie said a rushed goodbye to Jen and then, to the door, "Just a minute!" Filippo was early—and she couldn't exactly greet him in a towel. Bang went her extensive beautifying preparations for their 'first date.' She threw on a simple black shift dress, no time to pick shoes, and went to let him in.

It wasn't Filippo...

"Now, CC, don't be scared."

Chapter Nine

Flowers, or not? Expensive restaurant, or not? Suit or casual? Filippo felt a tremor of excitement fizzing throughout his whole body as he knocked on the door to room 1501. Eventually, he had decided to opt for the latter in each question, not wanting to seem over the top. All they really needed was each other's company after all. If they could generate such heat on Los Tigos where there was not even a restaurant, although many islanders dropped by to the Lopez's for their lime sausages, then fancy wining and dining was surely unnecessary. Not to say that he didn't want to lavish Cassie with all the perks his hard work had afforded him, but he also didn't want her to feel overwhelmed.

The door opened, and Cassie popped her head out, peering up and down the corridor. It was the first indication that their date might not go as well as Filippo had hoped.

"You look beautiful," he said, and the words seemed wholly inadequate. It was the truth, although admittedly he had whispered similar sweet-nothings in the past to make sure countless other dates with countless other women had gone better than well, but Cassandra Miller was not just any woman.

Her eyes found him briefly before she invited him inside after doing one last scan. She closed the door with relief.

"Something is wrong, no? You seem...flustered. No, sad?"

At that point Cassie actually seemed to remember his presence and revived somewhat. She flashed him a flat smile that would have been stunning to a man who had not seen her real one. "It's nothing really. I just...didn't know what to wear."

"Well, you look beautiful." *You said that. You know it, and she knows it.* They each smiled tensely. "Shall we go?"

"Ah...yeah, okay."

"Do you have everything you need?" He'd asked this because she was about to walk out into the night without a purse, a coat, or indeed any shoes.

“Yes.” She looked down. “Oh, hold on.” Cassie disappeared into the bathroom and returned a second later with an inch extra height, a beautiful white wool coat, and a small purse. He was pleased to note that the purse was so tiny she probably didn’t carry much make-up. Some of the women he’d dated lugged suitcases of the stuff about. “Ready.”

Filippo held the door for her, and they waited for the lift in silence. “So. How is my namesake, Federique Fernandez? I recognized him myself at the bar. He looks to be an interesting character, no?”

Just then a noise came from the end of the corridor. Cassie started but breathed easier when she saw it was just a maid, wheeling a trolley full of clean white towels and guest soaps. He put a hand on her shoulder as the lift doors opened, noticing the tension in her shoulders. They walked in.

“Don’t be nervous, Cassie,” he said, when the silver doors had closed, and they were left in private. Those deep, intelligent blue eyes scanned his own. There was something she was about to divulge, some secret she thought he needed to know, and one he desperately wanted to hear. “I know it’s stupid after what we...well, I am nervous also if that helps.”

“It’s not you,” she said finally.

“Then what? Maybe I can help with something—did that old artist try it on with you? You shouldn’t hold it against him, Cassie. You’ve only your self to blame.”

“Excuse me?”

Filippo advanced upon her small frame, covering it with his own and pressing her against the back panel. “Any man would be a fool not to.” He took her chin like he owned it, controlled her mouth with his own sensuous kiss. It was with greater pleasure that he felt her body respond, sensed the tension seep out of her bones. She arched towards him, wanting more, to relive the memory of Los Tiqos. He was right, he told himself. There was passion enough between them that there would still be plenty of heat. He wanted to know her again right there, to taste and be tasted, to claim her and be claimed by her.

Somewhere above that anonymous lift in a plain hotel in Germany, Filippo was sure he heard thunder roll above. Could almost feel the rain on his body, softer than it had been when they had dashed through it and hidden in the copse of trees on the way to his villa, and then, when they had been safe and snug inside with the door bolted against the elements, the candlelight had revealed that her clothes to be soaked through, the swell of her perfect-sized breasts completely visible through the sheer fabric. Nipples taut and pink and ready to tease. Now, he felt those very same breasts strain against her dress and his own body, demanding his own hardness against her softness.

The lift “binged” and the doors slid open. Flushed, they parted as an elderly gentleman stepped inside. Bright eyes noted their position, and Filippo saw Cassie roll her lips inwardly to try and stop from smiling. It didn’t work. Neither could the waist-coated gentlemen resist a smile, but he stood before them mercifully saying nothing, arms held casually behind his back.

The lift eased to a stop once more, and the gentleman addressed them in German before leaving, nodding as he went.

Filippo returned the polite nod then turned to Cassie when the lift continued its descent. She looked pleasantly stunned. "Do you know what he said?" he asked.

"He said," she paused, seeming shy a moment. "He said something about him and his own wife...enjoying each other for a long time."

Filippo's grin, feeling mischievous. "Actually he said, 'My wife and I still behave indecently in public, and we've been together now for fifty five years.'"

"But you said you didn't know German!"

"No, what I said was, did *you* understand what he said? Obviously not!"

She nudged him playfully. As the lift doors opened for the final time, and they left the hotel, their hands slipped naturally into each other's, and Filippo's sense of foreboding was forgotten, more or less.

* * * *

The restaurant was difficult to find, even for Filippo's hired silver Mercedes with its in-car navigation, namely because it was a local treasure that not even all the locals were aware of. Filippo had been there only once with his father, who always seemed to have some kind of insider information on everything. Ask him anything, and he'd have a ready answer, always one step ahead. It was impressive but exhausting at times.

But as Filippo now looked at Cassie over the intimate corner tabletop that was carved out of wood from a nearby forest, according to Alberto, the last thing he wanted to think about was his papa. The woman who had ignited a fire in him that he hadn't even known needed kindling, or could burn so well, was by his side.

The silence between them now as they waited for their starter was comfortable, edged with a certain giddy happiness, like a warm stitched blanket fringed with sequins. It was at once unbelievably easy yet also very special, but Filippo knew he had to tread carefully tonight. As much as he'd like to, he hadn't forgotten what Cassie had said earlier. Maybe that was what was on her mind?

Other couples and families dined in the candlelight, the cozy setting also lit by the small natural log fire which Filippo inhaled with almost as much pleasure as Cassie's scent. This was how he wanted to spend the rest of his life; with good food and a good woman.

"You're quiet," she whispered, although he knew she was not concerned about it.

"I practice my foreign brooding. I hear English women find it incredibly sexy."

"I wouldn't know. I'm Scottish."

"You are?"

"Well, half of me...my dad's side."

"That's where you get this spirit from then," Filippo said, touching her chin with thumb and forefinger. Her face blushed a wonderful pink, much lighter than the blazing

red of her lustrous hair. He hoped it was his presence that caused such a stir in her and not just the addictive Apfelbier they were drinking.

The waitress interrupted them, setting down a fan of various German sausages for Filippo and a steaming bowl of home-made potato broth for Cassie.

“Danke schön,” said Filippo. It smelled absolutely delicious.

“Bitte sehr,” the young girl said and coyly fluttered her eyelashes at him.

Cassie shifted uncomfortably, but she was smiling. “Is only because she probably thinks she knows my face from somewhere,” he explained.

“Or because she thinks it is such a handsome face,” she said.

Filippo was already looking at Cassie, but now he moved around to face her completely, giving her the full attention of mind and body. Some of the girls he had dated back home had found the attention from other women difficult to cope with, but Filippo suspected that as long as he made certain Cassie always knew the extent of his feelings, she would know she was woman enough for him and not be fazed by it.

Filippo sampled one of the strong, salty, white meats on his plate as Cassie burned her lips on the soup and pulled back sharply. He kissed her gently, tasting the spiced broth. “Better?”

She rolled her eyes then seemed to change tack and kissed him back, deeply and seductively. “Almost.”

Filippo raised an eyebrow, wondering if she meant what he thought she meant, but then again, it wouldn’t be the first time he had gotten things completely wrong where Cassie was concerned. Although, he reasoned, it wasn’t entirely his fault. A wedding ring on the wedding finger usually did only mean one thing, but this woman was full of surprises; it was something that both intrigued and frustrated him about her.

Cassie sensed his hesitation. “What is it? I thought we both...” She licked her lips and nervously tucked her hair behind one ear. “I thought we both felt the same. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have presumed—”

“Si, we do. Completely. Totally.” His fingers lost themselves in that hair. He thought it smelled of strawberries and spring rain. “I just...” She rubbed her arms now. “There are things we should talk about first, no? This other man?”

She bit her lip, nodding slowly. “Okay. Ask away.”

Filippo considered, then, “I have not feel this emotion for anyone or anything other than the game—the tennis, you know?—stupid as it sounds...”

“It doesn’t sound stupid at all.”

He smiled. “And also my family, though in a very different way, of course.” Her smile, that smile that excited his heart, was slow in coming. “Don’t look so sad. I am telling my heart to you, and it is full of love.”

Now their eyes snapped together. Should he have used that particular word so early on? Did he even feel that yet?

Cassie looked down, and Filippo watched her think, mesmerized by the long curve of her black lashes. “Then I don’t understand the...” she shrugged, “reluctance?”

“Is not reluctance, is selfishness. Believe me, I am glad—so glad to know you are not married—I have...beaten myself lots for that first night. I thought tonight we could start things properly, but this other man?”

“Mm. I can’t talk about him, not right now.”

Filippo half smiled. There were so many yes men—not to mention yes women—around him that he enjoyed Cassie’s refusal to obey his every request, but in this case, he wanted answers. Anger wriggled into his mind. Here he was putting his emotions on the line, and the woman wouldn’t even let him know how she truly felt. “I deserve the truth. Answers, Cassie.”

Perhaps it came out too strong, because the next thing she said was through gritted teeth. “I said I can’t right now.”

A few people shifted uncomfortably in their seats. One of the waitresses did a 180, possibly deciding it was not wise to ask if they were enjoying their meal at that precise moment. Filippo’s blood was boiling in all different kinds of ways. “And you are selfish also. Crazy.”

Cassie stood up and put a very final feel to this first date. “I’m crazy? How crazy is it to sleep with a married woman?”

“I’m glad you agree with me. Crazy people aren’t usually so reasonable—and you aren’t married! Or is this ‘truth’ just another lie?” He threw down some euros and got their coats.

“Well, of course, I’m crazy,” she snapped as she begrudgingly allowed him to help her with her coat. “Nobody in their right mind could fall for such a manipulative, egotistical pretty boy such as you—and I didn’t lie to you. You never asked.”

“Well, at least you’re observant enough to see that I’m pretty.”

Exasperated, Cassie shook her head and yanked back the door with more force than she meant. She indicated for him to go through. He insisted she go first, which only got her even more worked up. In the end, she sighed, “Oh, will you just go on!” and lightly shoved him in front of her, only to stalk past him over the gravel towards the car.

“And maybe,” she went on, “maybe people have reasons for not talking about other people. Maybe it’s just too painful. *Maybe* they’re scared of admitting how much they feel for other people in case these people hurt them as much as the other people did.”

In the brooding darkness of the thick Germanic countryside, Filippo caught her arm and pulled her to him. “So let me see if I have this. Are ‘people’ you, ‘these people’ me, and ‘other people’ him we don’t wish to talk of?”

Maybe.” Cassie dropped her barriers a little and looked at him directly.

“Maybe you should kiss me now.”

“I think I definitely should.”

She slipped her hands under his hair and found the back of his neck. Their mouths

crushed together...but it wasn't enough. Would never be enough. He had to have all of her, again and again and again.

"Back to the hotel?" he asked, pulling away.

Breathless, she nodded, and they hurried the final couple of meters to the car. Behind them there was a curious noise like...clapping? Both Cassie and Filippo turned; the whole restaurant was applauding.

Cassie groaned and covered her face with one hand then ducked into the car. Filippo got into the driver's seat. They grinned at each other before he put the car in gear and set off back along the quiet roads towards the city. The situation wasn't resolved, but it was no longer volatile; they would be able to talk this out, he was sure.

On the way, his phone rang. "*Si. Que? Si, si. Uno momento.*" He turned to Cassie. "Some emergency with the sponsors. I have not been paying enough attention to them, apparently."

"I'd have thought it should be the other way around."

"And me. I will tell my father you said that, he will be amused."

"You'd better not. Your father, his name is Alberto, isn't it?"

He smiled, strangely happy she had remembered. It meant she cared, or just had a very good memory. "That's right, he is my manager. Meddler, more like. Anyway, I must see to this, there are some little details to be worked through before papa will agree to the renewal."

"And what about what you agree to? Sorry, it's none of my business."

Filippo sighed heavily. "It is a good point, but I will drop you at your hotel and see you later, *si*? To talk only. I do not presume anything."

"Course, you don't," she said and smiled to herself.

* * * *

Filippo knew that Alberto was regarding him thoughtfully, with his fluffy white haired head resting on one stubby hand. Filippo, for his part, was concentrating intently on the soup spoon. He still felt full from the meal he'd had with Cassie earlier that evening, but that wasn't the reason he wasn't eating. He couldn't stop thinking about her. Every so often, the corner of his mouth would tug up into a half smile. He would catch Alberto smiling at him for smiling, which made him stop smiling, but only for a moment.

The men seated around the elaborately dressed table were themselves elaborately dressed. They had been discussing contracts for the past hour, as though they were friends. These men were part of Filippo's team, each partly responsible for his continued success, garnering him the finance to keep working with coaches and nutritionists and fitness trainers.

I know what kind of exercise I'd rather be enjoying. He almost laughed. The excitement he felt at the prospect of seeing Cassie again was similar to the first time he had entered a local tournament in Toledo and won it. Okay, so there had only been sixteen kids in the whole thing, but he had been the youngest there, and it had made him

feel special. In a house full of children with no mother, that had been important.

Now, Filippo shook his head, thinking of Cassie. She made him feel special, that such an independent and individual woman saw something worthy in him, and it wasn't the tennis either. She'd known who he was, but so did most English people, considering he'd put out the British number one en route to his second week at Wimbledon. However, unlike the blonde German woman at the bar earlier, it didn't seem to be his career that enticed Cassie—in fact, she didn't seem to know *that* much about it at all. Maybe it was his looks that caught her attention, but he could live with that, perhaps because he doubted that was the only reason. Filippo believed in fate. If the world conspired to place them together in two different parts of the world at two different times, then it was telling them something they couldn't ignore. *We all have ghosts*, he thought. *We all have old loves—well except from me, but we'll work through it. We?* Filippo smiled again. *You're letting this woman get under your skin, letting her affect your focus, but who am I to argue with what fate desires?*

“Isn't that right, son?”

“*Si*, papa.”

The table of people he called friends erupted with deep laughter, and suddenly they seemed like strangers. Filippo dabbed his mouth and threw the napkin unceremoniously onto his plate of *foie gras*. “If you all will excuse me, I have some place I must be.”

“Fili?”

“Sorry, papa, but I made other plans tonight.”

“But—”

“No, papa. I will see you back at the hotel. Yevgeny, Andres, Karlo, we'll catch up in Indianapolis, no?” With that Filippo thrust back his chair, left Alberto with an affectionate squeeze of the shoulder, and half walked, half jogged to Cassie's hotel. The night air was uncharacteristically sharp, and his breath fogged in white clouds; he wondered with interest whether he and Cassie really could maintain such heat in such a radically different environment to Los Tiqos, but as he rode the shiny elevator up to the fifteenth floor, humming an Enrique Iglesias song to himself—*I really am smitten*—Filippo did not doubt it.

Despite the fact it was almost midnight, Cassie was quick in answering the door, but it was obvious that there wouldn't be any talking for quite some time.

“It's late,” she said, rubbing her eyes and shyly hiding one foot behind the other. *I've seen more than your toes before*, Filippo thought, although the action made him smile. Cassie was still wearing the simple black dress from earlier on, but it was clear she'd been to sleep. Her rich, gorgeous locks were mussed up, and her voice was a little thick.

“Do you want me to go then.” He didn't even phrase it as a question, because they both knew the answer.

In response Cassie reached up to him, standing on tip toes. Filippo responded

instantly and took a possessive hold of her waist. There was no innocence in her expression when she slowly raised her lashes. Some of the cobwebs of sleep were now swept away, but she was still deliciously heavy-lidded and warm and pliant to his touch.

The pure lust and undeniable physical attraction that had swept through them in Los Tiqos, propelled by the drama of the storm, was enhanced by something deeper. It was with true affection that Filippo scooped her up, with tenderness that he laid her on the rumpled sheets, still cozy from her body heat. Prone, she looked up at him with complete trust as he stood over her, not afraid of the lights being on or of what he might think about her body. That was sexy.

Plying off his shoes, Filippo descended to the sheets. Her body welcomed his, embracing him with arms and legs and hips. His mouth took control of her own, molding her reactions, stirring her kiss to greater, more passionate proportions. His tongue tasted her, remembering. Such was the intensity of their reunion it felt as though they had been separated for years, not weeks. He wanted to be inside her, questing ever deeper, knowing her again and again, over and over, but not yet.

With a mischievous smile, Filippo rolled onto his back so that Cassie was atop him. She straddled him, but now that he had put her in charge, her confidence seemed to ebb. She looked suddenly vulnerable and inexperienced—and he wanted her all the more.

Filippo took her softly pale face between both palms and smoothed her gorgeous hair. “Not with me, Cassie, not with me,” he whispered, telling her with his eyes not to be afraid.

His own heart jolted when she seemed to look at him with love. The lust was still there, burning like a slow fire, but it was as if she had given way to her true feelings and allowed them to shine through. Filippo let his right hand trickle over head, down her neck, the shape and sweet arch of her back and bottom. His fingers pushed under the hem of the ridden up dress, the tips finding the silk of her underwear and then the top edge. He watched her reaction with a thrill when he looped his fingers under that hem and nudged them down off her buttocks. She bit her bottom lip, eyes fluttering closed, cheeks burning. His hard cock pressed urgently against her silky panty that had quickly become damp.

With more confidence, Cassie opened her eyes and yet still hesitantly, leaned forward. The brush of silk against him as she did so created a rush of pleasure. He moaned, forcing back the longing to take her right then and there. This should be a slow love-making he knew, to prove the depths of his emotions.

Not realizing he had closed his eyes, Filippo opened them in surprise when her lips touched his. She brushed delicate little kisses against his mouth, his upper lip, his nose. Then she looked at him, breathing heavy. The look said that she had run out of skin and needed more. It was with bashful, almost shaking fingers that he watched her undo each of the buttons on his casual white shirt. Her cheeks were now on fire, but she carried on despite the intensity of his gaze. As he watched, his heart aching, Filippo realized he loved this shy, brave woman.

“Cassie...” His hands took hold of her own, stilling their work. She had one button left to go.

She looked mortified, as if his restraint was a rejection when Filippo knew that it was the exact opposite. He wanted all of her, forever, and wanted somehow to put that into words, but not before he knew how she felt. Love was a new thing to Filippo Fernandez. On the one hand, he wanted to be sure the feeling was reciprocated before he totally gave in to it. Then again, when had he ever waited to see how the other player would react before he delivered the winning shot? But this wasn't a match. Cassie wasn't an opponent he had to beat. For the first time in his life, Filippo didn't quite know how to go after the prize he so dearly wanted.

"But why?" Cassie asked. Filippo saw her dark eyes glitter brightly in the glow of the bedside lamp. "Don't you want me? Aren't I..." She couldn't say the words.

He sat up with her still on top of him and held her about her waist. "Aren't you what? Tell me."

She checked his eyes as if investigating their integrity. "Aren't I...enough for you? Pretty enough, I mean." She rolled her eyes. "Yuck. I've become one of *those* women."

Filippo felt winded. It meant that she had no idea of her magnetic spirit and enthralling beauty. The fragility of her pale features that made a man want to be a man. The fight of her inner spirit that made the same man proud. How could she not know what she was worth? He wanted more than anything to show her how wonderful he thought she was.

"Stand up, come on." Puzzled, Cassie stayed where she was. Filippo grinned and stood on his knees on the bed, raising Cassie with him. Despite herself, she giggled and clambered off, waiting for him to join her as she tugged down her dress. "No need for that," Filippo said and playfully smacked her bottom. Then he took up her hand, leading her to the tiny bathroom and closing the door.

"What are you up to?"

"Just look, and I mean look. Really look," Filippo said and positioned her before the full-length mirror on the closed door. In the reflection, he stood over a head taller than her and was far broader.

Through the mirror, Filippo saw Cassie turn around and look up to him. "I don't understand," she said.

"I'll show you then." From behind her, Filippo took the tiny zipper of her dress in his fingers and slowly pulled it to the base of her spine. As it went down, his index finger drew a line from the graceful length of her neck, over each vertebrae, the shiny interruption of her black bra, until he reached the small indent before her buttocks. When he slipped both hands into the dress, smoothing the slightly raised slope of her belly and grazing a wisp of pubic hair that had escaped her pants, he surprised himself by a fleeting thought; *How would it feel to run my hands over this stomach, knowing that she was pregnant with my own child?* He hadn't thought it possible, but the thought made him harder, and he wanted to claim her all the more. It took all his control to hold back and raise his hands over her belly and up to her bra.

Filippo watched them both watching his progress in the mirror. Cassie's breathing

was shallow, and through the lacy fabric of her bra, he felt not only the pleasant bullets of her nipples, but the flickering pulse of a racing heart. She sighed loudly and leaned back against his body, so his cock pressed against her back through his trousers. Gently he moved her slightly forward and withdrew his hands, now pushing the short sleeves of her dress down over her shoulders.

Absorbed, he saw Cassie watch him reveal the swell of her milky breasts, showing the small raised freckle that nestled dead center in their valley. On and on he pushed, the fabric caressing stomach, waist, hips, before it finally whispered to the floor.

He saw her swallow, watched her chest rise and fall. Their eyes met in the mirror, and then his hands went to her bra. He unhooked it easily, pausing before stripping her of that also. Her eyes passed over her reflected beauty, curious and nervous at the same time.

Filippo leaned his formidable form over her, drew the curtain of her hair to one side and kissed the niche between shoulder and neck. Her nipples deepened in color, craving the same attention, but Filippo would leave them wanting for the time being. Now his fingers found the silk of her pants, pulled them down a touch to reveal a beautiful mess of wine-dark pubic hair, perfectly matching the long locks that were now stark against the snowy swell of her left breast, the color an echo of the aureole surrounding her rosy nipples.

“Wait,” she said. He shook his head. “Fili...”

“I want you to see what I see.”

“Please,” she said, “just turn out the light.”

Filippo continued, bending down to completely denude her of the very last garment. He stood back up to his full height, and Cassie made to turn away from the mirror. He kept her in place firmly. “Do you see now? Do you really see?” he murmured. “Do you understand how beautiful you are?”

Cassie licked her lips, but the anxiety whirling in her dark, mysterious eyes softened to some form of acceptance. She lowered her head, and her hair slipped over her eyes and caressed her ivory skin. The contrast was breathtaking. Filippo’s own ruddy coloring was revealed through his unbuttoned shirt, dark against her whiteness. It was fire against ice, and the ice was melting in his hands, especially when his hand crept again over her stomach and down to her glossy pubic hair. She gasped when his finger expertly probed the moistness between her legs, glancing in the mirror as if to check that it was all real. In the glass, Filippo saw the lust explode behind her blue eyes.

She twirled towards him and completed her earlier work—opening the last button. Filippo watched the muscles work in her back as she did so, saw his own fingers caress the creamy globes of her bottom. Cassie pulled off his shirt, throwing the light fabric next to the sink. Then her eyes went down, and she bit her lip in anticipation. His simple black dress pants bulged at the crotch, ready for her attention. Oh, so delicately, she released another button, then a zip, then his trousers. He stepped out of them, knowing he looked strong and male, proud of the fact that he would bring them both so much pleasure. He felt her trembling as she lifted the elastic lip of his boxer shorts up and over his upright cock, before taking them off, too. Her fingers brushed the hairs on his legs as she stood

back up.

This was it. She blinked, beautiful and ready...for him. Filippo lay down on the white bathroom tiles, the cold shocking back, ass and legs. He drew her down with him so that her knees were on either side of his hips and he saw the whole length of his cock disappear inside her, inch by inch. In the mirror, he also saw the unaccustomed pleasure on his face as she accepted his full hilt. Slowly at first, they began to move together, her breasts bouncing gently against his hands, her hair making her face a secret that he kept having to discover. The greater control of the position allowed her to ride him far quicker towards orgasm. When Filippo saw that she was getting close, he scooped her up effortlessly. She moaned as he left her and then again as he backed her against the mirror, her eyes widening from the metallic cold. Her legs found his back, and he entered her in a rush. Skin to chin, chest crushing her breasts, their speed was fast and furious, frenetically coming together in a turmoil of lust.

“Oh, my God,” she cried.

“*Mio dios*,” he breathed.

Filippo’s felt his semen pulse into Cassie’s core, filling her with himself, leaving room for nobody but him. Her legs dropped weakly with him still inside her. One foot touched the floor, and he let her down, slowly drawing out of her as she struggled to catch her breath against the pressure of his chest. He held her close, drained himself, feeling his own wetness, and hers, on his legs. Exhausted, he buried his face in her hair, kissing the salt of her burning skin.

Looking up, Filippo found Cassie’s own kind face, soft with unspoken emotion. She stroked his sweat-soaked hair, those majestic eyes telling him she loved him, too. Somehow they found their way back to the bed, flopping down onto its messy sheets, a tangle of arms and legs.

Their silence said so much. More than that, it was like an invisible cradle around them, protecting their love, even if just for that moment.

“Tell me about Spain,” she murmured after a while, eyelashes tickling his chest. “About your family, your sculpting, your tennis.” She sat up now, looking eager and excited. It was irresistible. “Tell me everything.”

Filippo stroked one naked breast with the privilege of a lover, a man invited to know this beautiful body. “I was born in small town—Toledo. My mama passed away when I was a boy. I think I play the tennis because is something I was good at and something to take my mind from the pain of this. You think of nothing but the ball and the point when on court—at least that is the idea, but I also do it for papa and for my mama, to repay the sacrifices they make to give me such chances, no?”

“But you love it, too, right?”

He considered this, and sadly shook his head. “Not as I should. I never feel as though I play just for myself, for my passion, but always for somebody else’s. Is not anyone’s fault though—I do not blame—is only my own. Sometimes, when I go back home, my oldest friend Jorge and I, we knock about on the old clay courts. The kids, they gather and watch us till the dark. This is when I feel good about my game, when I see

they see that with hard work, you can do anything with your life. So many players now, they live in Florida or Miami, or Monte Carlo—for the taxes—” Cassie laughed. “But I could never leave Spain. Is my home, though I am never there.”

“And the sculpting?” she asked, resting her chin on his breast bone.

He frowned, trying to remember how he had started with that. “You know, I don’t know. Is something I teach myself—I think is why I love it, no? No coach, no sponsors, no cameras. I can do whatever I want with the clay and is never wrong, is never, ‘Too much emotion, Fili, too little concentration, Fili, not enough top spin, Fili’.” He stopped, embarrassed. “But am not ungrateful, and I don’t imagine my life without tennis. Sometimes, we just forget why I play it, no?”

Cassie now laid her cheek on his chest. He lost his fingers in her hair, wishing they could stay like this forever. That tomorrow he would not have to return to the tennis life. “What about you? Is your dream to make this magazine? I subscribe, by the way, these last eight months. Is very good, always exciting.”

She raised her head again. “You do? I had no idea!”

“Is under my sister’s name and goes to her address. She post them to me when she can—or when I’m in any one place for long time enough.”

“So many coincidences,” Cassie said thoughtfully.

“But aside from the magazine, you have other passion? Not including me, of course.”

She nudged him with her elbow and rolled onto her back, his arm behind her head. She covered herself slightly with the sheet. “Well, aside from you, I paint a little—just people, things I find some beauty within, but I like to write, too, except I haven’t done anything for ages, not for a long time.”

“Why?”

Her smile was apologetic. “That’s a difficult question, and a difficult answer.”

Filippo moved onto his side and draped an arm over her belly, circling the belly button, idly thinking again of how amazing it would be to see it swollen, how beautiful, how fertile she would look flushed and exhilarated with another life growing inside her. He shook his head, shocked by the intensity of his feelings. “Why?” he asked again.

“Not now,” she said sadly. “Let’s allow ourselves be happy for the moment instead of making ourselves miserable, no?”

Her teasing his mannerisms brought a smile to his face, but he also realized that this was the right time for this conversation. If she was going to be in his life as he wanted her to be, it was something they had to discuss. Okay, so she was not married, but if she did still love this other man—at least in part—he wanted to know before—*Oh, who am I kidding? Filippo, you know she already has your heart.*

Swallowing, Filippo forced himself to touch her wedding ring and twist it around on her finger. For some reason, he wanted to see if it was loose, but it wasn’t. If anything, it was too tight. “Is this why you stopped writing?”

Cassie looked confused, but then some things seemed to make sense in her own mind. “I suppose it did, yes, in a way. When—when Mike and I first met...” Her eyes swiveled to Filippo. “Are you really sure you want to hear this?”

“*Si*, I think I have to.”

She covered her eyes briefly, then let her arm fall to the sheet covering her chest. Filippo also felt suddenly cold and dragged the tail of the sheet over his hips. Cassie tried again, “Well, when we first met, it was as though I didn’t need to create a fantasy anymore, because...because he was already there.” Again she looked at Filippo, but he kept himself emotionless, not betraying how her words cut him to the core. “But then it became clear that fantasies weren’t real or, at the very least didn’t last, and then it became too painful to even attempt to create them. When he...so he cheated on me, okay? There, but I sort of felt, maybe it was half my fault. My dad was sick, and I suppose I pushed him away. One way or another, I haven’t written since I met him.”

“And this is the man you still love?”

Her eyes were direct when she looked at him next. “I still love the man he was, at the beginning at least.”

Filippo felt numb. It certainly wasn’t as bad as loving a married woman, but loving a woman who still loved the memory of somebody else was not a feeling he relished. “I’m thirsty. I’m going to go and get some ice,” Filippo said, not trusting himself to say anything more.

Cassie watched him dress rapidly, and he felt her distress, but he needed to get out of the room for a moment to think things through. “But there’s ice in the little freezer,” she said, just as he swept out of the door.

The hotel’s beige corridors were monotonous and empty. The perfect landscape for trying to figure out what he ought to do. Filippo pressed the button for the one and only lift, whose red light warned it was on its way, but he grew tired of waiting and headed off for the stairs. Outside, Filippo filled his lungs with the sharp, clean night air. The empty roads, buzzing infrequently with a solo vehicle, tail lights disappearing into the distance reminded him that real life carried on beyond the bubble he had created with Cassie. He also wondered whether he was overreacting. He paced the block just the once, the fresh air restoring his clarity. He had faith, didn’t he? Catholicism and family were the frameworks of his life. Couldn’t he bear to have faith in Cassie, too, in his feelings for her, and the fact that if it was meant to be it would be? Yes, he decided, he could. Time to pop the cherry on this twenty-eight-year-old love virgin. Filippo felt much better as his long legs strolled through the deserted checkered lobby. Pressing the lift button, he noted briefly that it was descending from the 15th floor. Cassie’s floor. He didn’t think about it again as he stepped in and rode it back up. As the floors added up on the red digital panel, and Filippo neared the 15th floor, he felt incredibly optimistic.

But that was before he heard the shouting behind the door of room 1501.

His instinct was to ram the door open and rescue Cassie like the damsel she definitely was not, as she had succinctly demonstrated with Carlos, but a man had to prove his worth from time to time, but then—

“But look at the ring on your finger, CC! Look at it and tell me you don’t still love me. I need you now. You *said* we could talk about us.”

“I *said* we could talk.”

Filippo felt cold. He suddenly felt like such an incredible fool. Should he get right back into that lift and a life without the only woman who had ever shown him that there were passions other than tennis?

Sighing deeply, his guts writhing, his ears wanting to shut off, Filippo turned to leave, and stopped right there. Did he ever give up in a match? When he was two sets and two match points down in the semi finals of Roland Garros last year, did he just quit? Or did he play on, never giving up, only allowing defeat at the very last point, when he was beaten by a better player?

Filippo knocked on the door. The room immediately went silent.

Cassie came to the door, clutching the sheets about her skin. Her wine-dark hair fell gloriously about those pale shoulders, and her sapphire eyes flashed with unshed tears. Filippo’s primitive, protective desires took over; she looked so small and fragile like that. His Cassie. His to cherish and make sure she remained safe, but somewhere in that room, there was another man who thought the exact same thing. Her wedding ring flashed just at that moment, brighter than her eyes. Although that band of gold did not mean what he had thought it meant, it was still a barrier, and it still tied her to this other man. Was Filippo already beaten, should he just bow out now?

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed. “I know I should have told you he was here, but I...Look, maybe you should go, at least until we sort this out.”

Filippo put a hand to the door she was trying to close. She resisted, but he was the victor. “I want to see him.”

His voice created chaos. A man stormed to the door and wrenched it back. Cassie tumbled over in the rush, the sheets exposing her ever so slightly top-heavy upper thighs. Despite the fact that they had both obviously seen this and much more before, Filippo felt it was indecent of the other man.

The man. Filippo observed him critically. He was tall and fairly good looking in an ordinary sort of way, at least that was what he attempted to tell himself. He was also quintessentially English with fair, freckled skin and a sensible hair cut. His blue-gray eyes were intelligent, but smug and self absorbed. Perhaps it was this particular character trait that had lost him such a woman, Filippo mused. *Does he recognize me?* Filippo wondered. *Does he realize that if Cassie was a shallow woman, then he wouldn’t stand a chance against me?* Though her integrity was a good part of what Filippo found attractive about her. He also knew it could be his downfall. They obviously had a history together, whereas he and Cassie only had a few nights. Filippo had a bad feeling that history would win.

And yet...

He *still* could not bring himself to leave. Instead, he stepped into the room, easily throwing off the other man’s arm when he attempted to bar his entry, and helped Cassie up off the ground. Her cheeks were as red as her hair, and she would not meet his eyes.

“This...this is Mike,” she said, as though every word cut her to admit it.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” This Mike demanded. “Coming here with your pony tail and—”

Filippo reacted when the slighter man invasively tugged his hair.

“Mike, stop it!” Cassie shouted, looking at the other man as though she suddenly didn’t know him and couldn’t believe how he was behaving. “You shouldn’t even be here. I said we’d discuss this when we got back home. You know I’ll be there for you with Lillian, just like you were there for me, but you have to respect that I have my own life now, and you’ve no right to barge in on it like this.”

“I’ve every right...you’re my *wife*.”

“Mike, I understand you’re going through a very difficult time right now, but you’re not thinking straight. I’m not your wife. I haven’t been for a long time.”

“And even if she was, that does not give you freedom to speak to her in this way, no?” Filippo said, stepping in front of Cassie who was still clutching the sheets about her.

“It’s okay, Fili,” Cassie said and gently urged him to the side.

“Who asked you anyway?” Mike spat at Filippo, then focused again on Cassie. “You still wear my ring. Maybe you’re not my wife in the eyes of the law, but you are in your heart, I know you are. Come home to me, CC. Let’s start again—I can’t do this on my own. I helped you, remember?”

Cassie covered her face briefly. “Of course, I do, but you left me, I remember that too.”

“I think it’s time you leave,” Filippo said, wanting to get rid of the man who was causing Cassie and, he admitted, himself, such torture.

Mike’s face twisted. “Oh, you do, do you, girly boy with your big blue eyes and your long brown hair? You do know that she still loves me, don’t you? She’s only with you for a cheap thrill. What we have is solid. *We* have history. So I suggest you get out of here, you Spanish—”

Mike had hit on the one thing Filippo was worried about—whether Cassie’s attraction to him was purely physical, and that she saw nothing underneath. The thought flared his temper, but he knew he could not let it get out of control. “I suggest you stop right there before I show you what a ‘girly boy’ can really do, and I promise you, *that* will not be pretty.”

“Is this what you really want over me, CC? Hm? This foreigner and his accent? What can he offer you—long disjointed romantic chats into the night?”

“His eyes are green.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Look, Mike, you need to go. We’ll talk when I get home, okay?”

Filippo almost turned around to stare at Cassie then. They would, would they? Again, he felt betrayed, by what or who he wasn’t sure. All he knew was Cassie was the

only woman he'd ever looked at and fantasized about her being the mother of his child, and she wanted to talk with her ex-husband? That couldn't be good. Maybe Cassie was right when she said that fantasies could not be real.

Mike's jaw clenched with emotion. "What kind of man would I be if I didn't try, CC?"

Exactly the question Filippo had asked of himself. With uncertainty, Cassie took her once-husband's hand and squeezed it with her an emotion so powerful that jealousy raged in Filippo. Closer, closer she moved towards the man whose head had begun to droop and whose shoulders now sagged. Beaten. Inadvertently, Filippo felt exactly the same. He saw her lips move and her throat work as she spoke, but he did not grasp the words.

Mike, his nostrils flaring, shot Filippo another evil look before disappearing. He slammed the door behind him. Hard. Cassie's shoulders jumped, and Filippo wanted to reach out to her and caress that creamy skin, feel her slippery hair against his chest as they woke together in the morning—but he reigned it in. It was this ability that had seen him keep his nerve in the Australian Open against Sampras, winning a tight game on his own serve, even though the writing was on the wall. It had still been a mini victory to make the great player *win* the match himself, rather than gift it to him.

Cassie took her time in facing Filippo, and when she did, she looked so scared that he wanted to relent. "I'm so sorry you had to see that."

Filippo smiled without a single trace of humor. "I'm leaving, too."

She shook her head. "What do you mean?"

"I think there are things you and this Mike still need to work out, and I think I should give you the space to do that," he said, telling himself he was being honorable, when in reality he was protecting himself. "I want you, Cassie, but I'm a selfish man, and I want you all for myself. Is all I can say."

Cassie took his hand but he moved it away, feeling sorrow that must be reflected in the way he looked at her. Her slim fingers lost their grip. That was just as well—it irked him to be touched by the same hands that had just touched Mike with such emotion. Knowing she had feelings for another man was one thing; seeing it was another.

"So, just to be totally cliché...will I see you again?"

Filippo narrowed his eyes. "Don't make joke, Cassie. This is not funny."

"I know that!"

With a sigh, Filippo grabbed Cassie's left hand. He held it in her line of sight so she would be able to see the ring that still meant so much to her. "When this is gone, I'll come back," he said, and then he really was gone.

Chapter Ten

Cassie was not a Catholic, and Jen's arty studio flat was certainly not a confessional, but nevertheless, after a long and interesting week with Federique in Stuttgart, and countless delays at the airport, Cassie had come to tell all about Filippo, the lust in Los Tiqos, the shock reunion in Stuttgart, Mike's exceptional timing in the hotel room; everything. Radio London was playing in the background, the television was on, but the volume was down.

Jen had sat up after she was through, but Cassie lay back on the duvet and jeweled pillows they'd spread out. Her hands clasped over her stomach, she stared at the blank ceiling, almost feeling the same way herself. In silence Jen poured another mug of red wine, the liquid chugged into the bright cup. She offered Cassie the bottle, who shook her head.

"Well now," said Jen, stunned. "You lucky, stupid cow."

Cassie raised an eyebrow. "Stupid?"

"How could you let a man like that man walk away from you?"

"Wasn't exactly like I had a choice in the matter, was it? He's his own man, Jen. Plus, I understand where he was coming from. Who wants to get involved with someone with a mental ex?"

"Hold on, start again." Jen slightly slurred the 'S'. "Number one, you have to stop 'understanding' other people and be selfish for once in your life. Go after what you want...and three," Jen said, hooking one finger over her middle finger, "I hold with my earlier conviction—you, missy, are very, very ssstupid."

"You're the one who can't count."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. So what makes you say I'm stupid?" Cassie asked

"*That*," she said, stabbing a finger in the direction of Cassie's wedding ring.

Cassie raised her hand to look at the simple gold band. “What about it?” she asked, even though she knew perfectly well what Jen was going to say.

“Er, only that ‘when that’s gone I’ll be back’, he said, but let him go you did, without even the slightest sniff of a girly strop.”

“Fair enough, Yoda, but what was I supposed to do? He was right. Mike is still in my head, and now his mum’s ill. Look, at that point, I couldn’t convince him to change his mind. Maybe in time, when I figure all this out myself—”

“But did you even try?” Jen interrupted. “In all these years since that cheap husband of yours left you for that cheap tart from the office, did you even try to let another man in? Or did you build twenty-four carat barriers—ssscuse me, twelve and a half—with that infernal wedding ring?”

“Okay, you’re right. I get it.”

Jen cupped one hand to her hear. “Again, louder.”

Cassie nudged Jen’s knee with one toe. “Stupid, stupid, stupid. How could I let a man like that just walk out of my life without a fight?”

Jen raised her glass, pointing at the same time. “You should’ve whipped the ring off then and there.”

“I should. I should’ve whipped the ring off.”

“And his boxer shorts.”

“And his—Jen.”

But Cassie’s best friend was on a roll. “But Cass, this thing with *el tenniso* is just so *romantic*. Too romantic to leave it where you two idiots have. Nope, there’s nothing for it but to get straight on that phone and tell him how you want him.”

“Straight on that phone. Got it. First thing tomorrow.”

Jen shot Cassie a sideways glance. “Well, make it snappy. Where else am I going to get my vicarious romance installment from?”

“You could ask your quote ‘sex on stilts’ landlord out, like you’ve been harping on about doing since last Christmas.”

Jen toyed with the chain around her neck, obviously lost in a mischievous train of thought that Cassie was not sure she wanted to be privy to. “I do like a man with an interesting hobby now—and if he has enough stamina to go potter about Peckham all day on three foot sticks, well, imagine what he could do with me!”

Cassie rolled onto her side, took the tiniest sip of wine from her own mug, then lay down on her back again. The alcohol was bitter and stung her throat and chest all the way down, but the heat was comforting. “Well, if you don’t do it soon, I’ll do it for you. You’re such a wonderful person, Jen. You deserve to have a good man in your life.”

Jen reached over and squeezed Cassie’s fingers. “Touché, you interfering minx. I suppose I’d better get my skates on and sort it out then. Don’t want my boss embarrassing me in front of my future boyfriend!”

They both giggled, longer than they would have done had there been no alcohol in the mix. When the laughter finally calmed, Cassie absently felt her stomach with the flat of her hands. “Although,” Cassie said, quiet now. “I don’t have his number.”

“Barriers,” Jen sang, chiding. “but I do.”

“You do? How would you—?”

“O181 Serve up a Stud.”

“Oh, very clever. Good one.”

Jen rolled onto her stomach and waggled her legs in the air. She lay her chin on two fists. “But seriously, what if you could get hold of his number. There’s bound to be some way of contacting him, I’m sure? Would you tell him you’re over Mike then, that you want to be his racquet caddy for the rest of his life?”

Cassie ran her tongue over her teeth. Red wine always made her want to floss. “How would I get in touch with him though? Through his fan club? It all sounds a bit desperate.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Cassie sighed. “All right, no, I wouldn’t tell him I wanted to be his racquet caddy—I don’t think they have them.”

“Not that one! The one about being over Mr. Minger.”

Cassie winced. “But what if I’m not over him?”

Jen rubbed her nose with the back of her hand and looked at her friend with sympathetic, but red and bleary eyes. “That’s a question only you can answer.”

* * * *

The next morning, back at her own flat, Cassie googled Filippo on her laptop. Eventually, she came up with his agent’s number. That would do for starters. She rehearsed what she might say, praying the agent would speak English, and her left hand was actually on the phone to dial the number, when the ring Filippo had forced her to really look at, caught her attention again. Her hand withdrew, and she experimented with twisting the band around on her finger. She drew it down towards her knuckle, over that bump and then paused, nervous. Taking it off would be irreconcilably saying goodbye to Mike, her old life and the dreams she had had. Just as she decided that maybe it was time to invest in new dreams, the phone rang. Cassie jumped. Her hand shot out automatically, answering it on the first ring.

“It’s me.”

“Oh, Mike...how are you? How’s Lillian?”

“Not good. They’ve taken her in. Cass, would you...Please...”

Cassie bit her lip, torn. She sighed loudly. “Is it The Royal?”

“Yes.”

Cassie felt cold. The sound of pure anguish in her once husband’s voice still

managed to make her heart ache. Her dad had died from bowel cancer just after she and Mike were first married. He'd been so patient, so loving, caring for her when she staggered home after helping her mother nurse her father. One night Mike had scooped her up from a bath she had been too tired to get out of. He'd bundled her in a radiator-warmed towel, dried her hair with awkward hands and put her to bed with a kiss.

"I'll be there in 15 minutes."

Over the next few months, the memory of Filippo did not fade, but it did have competition. Lillian had been a good mother-in-law, always ready for a chat, always happy to listen to any rubbish she wanted to babble on about, and now here she was, delirious, babbling on about 1929 and childhood summers and ice cream and wasting away before their eyes. Cancer, again. The memories of Cassie's own father and how good Mike had been were suddenly very present, and there was the magazine to deal with—the write up of Federique Fernandez's feature interview. Things hadn't changed much since she started the magazine two years prior; being something of a perfectionist, she still formatted and proofed the entire layout herself rather than passing it off to the printers to arrange. Plus it saved her a good fee, but it was also painstaking, time consuming work, especially since the magazine had gone bi-monthly as opposed to quarterly, and she'd just managed to persuade a local stationers to carry it.

If Cassie had had a moment to breathe, it would have occurred to her that she was following a similar pattern—burying herself in work just as she had done when Mike left. Unfortunately, Mike did not give her space for air, let alone the space to think. She still had Filippo's agent's number, still had the intention to call, but with the hospital visits and the demands of the magazine, she somehow never quite got round to it. When someone you care about is sick, you barely have the time or energy brush your teeth, let alone figure out how you're going to convince the man of your dreams you want to spend the rest of your life with him. Still, one day she snatched the scribbled number off her desk and stuffed it into her purse. During the morning visit, Cassie left Mike talking in low voices with the doctor. She ducked out of the ward to the shop near reception and rummaged for the number. She got as far as keying it in, heart racing, palms sticky, when a shadow fell over the display.

"Who're you calling?"

She thought about telling Mike the truth, but instead she smiled and shrugged. "It can wait. What did the doctor say?"

Mike's face dissolved in tears and Cassie put her arms around him. "I know. It'll be okay."

"I can't do this without you, CC."

Cassie sighed and rubbed his shoulder, unable to speak. Her hand still clutching the phone, she saw the display light switch off. The number vanished. Before she knew it, months had gone by. Much against her better instincts and Jen's less than subtle warnings, Cassie let Mike back into her life on the strict understanding that it was on a purely platonic basis. Lillian meant a lot to Cassie, too, so perhaps she back in because she knew they were both in pain. Plus, she still felt she owed Mike; he'd been there for her after all, and he was getting to be too much of a Jack Daniels fan. Somebody had to

make sure he didn't completely overdo it, but the stress was taking its toll on Cassie, too, and Mike was the one who bore the brunt of it when she finally blurted out what she suspected. They were taking a break from the hospital visit routine, which was much-needed considering the doctors had announced they were sending Lillian home. There was only one reason why sick people who had not gotten well went home.

* * * *

"Sweet or salted," the squeaky voiced cinema usher asked from behind the popcorn machines.

"Sweet," Mike said, used to Cassie's sweet tooth.

"Salted," Cassie said, at the exact same time. The young man looked from one to the other nervously, as if this contradiction was too much to deal with in his already chaotic life. *I know where you're coming from*, Cassie thought to herself.

Mike looked at her quizzically, his hand in that intimate niche between her hip and her ribcage. She moved away. It was stupid she knew, considering he'd only laid claim to it just the once, but Cassie still considered that part of her body as partly Filippo's. Especially since that particular part of her body was...changing. What was more, Mike's touch didn't feel the same, and it certainly didn't mean the same to her as it used to. It was then Cassie realized she'd let this go too far, maybe even given Mike the wrong impression. Unfortunately, Mike didn't lower his hand. *Maybe I'm just being over emotional because...*

"But you always have sweet."

"Well, now I want salted."

Mike exchanged a "women" glance with the boy behind the counter. She narrowed her eyes at him, before picking up a box of salted popcorn for herself and taking it to the till.

"Time of the month?" Mike asked, in full hearing of the cashier.

"You know what, just shut up," she hissed, feeling even more emotional and glad when they escaped into the darkness of the screening room. She wished she *was* feeling so prickly because of her period, but she was late. Stress often made her periods erratic, and Lillian's illness hadn't helped that, but Cassie knew she'd missed a couple. Maybe even three. She hadn't had one since just before going to Los Tiqos. *Oh, Filippo*. Her body still ached when she actually had the chance to think of him. His shocking green eyes haunted her. Would their baby have the same eyes?

Feel-good girl-gets-boy rom-coms were not supposed to make you cry, so Mike was understandably concerned. Something which made Cassie even more irritated.

"What is wrong with you Cassie?" he whispered in the packed auditorium.

"Sorry, it's just an emotional time, you know? Can we just enjoy the film?"

"I would if you weren't radiating absolute hatred. Have I done something? Besides, it's my mother, not yours."

"Jesus, Mike!" Her outburst evoked shushes from various patrons. Mike

apologized for her, something else that made her grit her teeth. The way he just settled into his old routine with her, the way he presumed he could have her again after what he had done, but her anger was misplaced. She knew she had let this happen. Her hand strayed to her burgeoning stomach. Cassie didn't need confirmation from a doctor. It was undeniable, and now she had finally accepted it, she realized with a jolt how much time had passed since she had resolved to call Filippo.

"Come on, CC, don't be a grump. You're right, let's just enjoy the film, hey?" Mike rubbed the wrist that was holding the small box of popcorn. She stood up sharply as if possessed. She flung off his hand and the popcorn with it. That was unintentional, not to mention a waste of good junk food, but now she had started, Cassie thought she might as well finish.

"I'm sorry I let things go this far Mike, but it was only because I do care about you and Lillian, but you gave up your right to tell me what to do when you couldn't even obey your vows. I don't think I should spend the rest of my life trying to fix something you broke." She turned on her heel and threaded her way out of the row, all the spectators now watching her instead of the film. Most were also sensible enough to stand and let her pass.

It was a shame the same thing couldn't be said for Mike. *If he was sensible, he would never have cheated on me*, Cassie thought bitterly, hauling back the double doors...*but if you were sensible, you never would have let him. Especially not if you'd known there were men out there like Filippo who might love you even more.*

Jogging, Mike caught up with Cassie as she neared the automatic doors. They whooshed open as he tugged at her fingers. "Now, CC, will you just calm down and tell me what this is about?"

A streak of unusual vindictiveness ran through Cassie, and when next she spoke it was through clenched teeth. "You really want to know 'what this is about?' This," she spat, not waiting for his response, "is about the fact that you seem to think you can still tell me what to do. *This* is about the fact that you come crawling back to me when the 'love of your life' moved on up the food chain, or when you realized you couldn't cope with difficult things on your own. I've managed by myself these two years, not just managed, but flourished, but mostly though, this is about the fact that you are not a part of my life now. I don't have a responsibility to you anymore, but I do have a responsibility to this baby—and to this baby's father."

Mike blinked. Rapidly. So did Cassie. *Oops, hadn't meant to tell him that*, but saying it out loud made it real. It was suddenly so clear. No more putting off calling Filippo. She was ready to tell him, ready to be with him, ready to take off this ring. She resolved to call him first thing tomorrow morning.

As Mike drove her back home, the streetlights and terraces were nothing but a blur in Cassie's busy mind. She was too absorbed in thought to notice Mike's tension, or even the slightly jerky movements of his usually smooth driving. The Mazda pulled up in front of Cassie's home, the porch light a beacon in the darkness, illuminating the sadly neglected pansies and petunias drooping in her one and only hanging basket. Exotic they were not, but still the small buds echoed the bright profusions that had embraced the

outside walls of Filippo's whole villa in Los Tigos.

Cassie unbuckled her seatbelt and turned towards Mike. "Thanks for driving me home," she said, clearing her throat. Mike stared dead ahead, fingers gripping the wheel. "Sorry I told you like that, I really didn't say it to hurt you. You'll get over Rachel, you know. You'll be okay with everything because you have to be. You're stronger than you think, Mike."

He shot her a look, his blue eyes pained. She sensed he knew what she was really talking about, that they couldn't carry on the way they had been. He would have to deal with his mother's illness as best he could alone. The tip of a whiskey bottle caught her eye beneath the passenger seat, and Cassie's heart felt heavy, but that was Mike's problem to face now, she told herself. She had finally let him and his problems go. What she did next was not out of spite, it was just the right moment. Quietly, she slipped the gold ring off her wedding finger, noticing that it had grown oddly loose. *Get pregnant, lose weight*, she laughed inwardly. *Perfect*. Taking one last look she set the ring on the dashboard and got out of the car, not looking back.

Waiting for Cassie on the mat inside her door was a Next Day Air envelope. Feeling a gathering sense of excitement, she decided to savor the moment. First she went to the kitchen and prepared her latest indulgence; celery and chocolate spread. Then she changed into a looser pair of jogging pants, put some "Jewel" on the CD player, dimmed the light, and curled up on the couch with her letter, which was now shaking in her fingers.

Having thought she could savor the moment, hoping against hope about it might be from, Cassie ripped the envelope apart. Inside was a single piece of tri-folded letter paper. Cream, watermarked, but most importantly from Filippo. As she unfolded the letter, another piece of shiny paper fell to the ground. Though curious, Cassie could not withhold from reading the slanted script in front of her for any longer.

Dear Cassie

I've started this letter many time, and always thrown away. I don't seem to be able to express correct what I want to say or let you know what is in my heart. I know I am acting hastily in Stuttgart, but I wanted you to come to me of your own will, for me to be the only one in your heart as you are in mine...

But I am impatient, hot-headed Spanish! I can no longer wait. A man fights for things important to his life, and you changed all these things I thought meant so much. So I am sending you a ticket to see me in America, where I train for the U.S. Open. Much else I have wanting to ask and say with you, I think we must try giving fate a hand of help, no? Sometimes, we make our own destiny, and if there is a chance for us and I do not take them, then I lose everything. I don't enjoy this losing.

My number is at top of this letter if you decide to travel. If not...I do not want to think of this...but if not, I wish you love in your life, and writing.

Fili

It was a simple letter, but it made her planned phone call all that easier. She was already imagining how it would go, how he would sound when she told him she felt the same, that she had finally taken that ring *off*. Cassie leaned towards the coffee table to dip a celery stick in the teacup of chocolate. She felt hopeful, although she had no idea how Filippo would react to the news that she was pregnant. Would he be pleased? Might he even be angry? She pushed that thought away.

Now Cassie ran her fingers over the words of the letter, noting where the blue ball point had leaked a little more ink than it should. She had never seen his handwriting before, and somehow it made her feel even closer to him. It abruptly occurred to her to dial the number on top of the letter right then and there, but she knew she would stumble over the words. Wanting to gush out the truth all at once, she would just get completely tongue tied.

No. Tomorrow would be soon enough, when she'd got what she wanted to say completely sorted. Cassie took a chomp at the celery, rolling her eyes in pleasure at the sour-sweet taste. She dipped it in the chocolate once again, munching the whole stick down to nothing and licking her fingers before taking another look at the letter. Now that she had hard hold-it-in-her-hands evidence of Filippo's feelings, Cassie finally relaxed. She picked the other piece of paper off her living room floor. Sure enough, it was a return ticket to America. It was an open one too, meaning she could decide when she wanted to travel, within reason and with reasonable notification.

As she drifted off to sleep on the couch, the letter still in her hands, Cassie felt content. She wondered whether it would be better to tell him in person, rather than over the phone, but then she would have to wait for the doctor's go ahead, so she knew it was safe to travel. She made a mental note to make an appointment in the morning. Such a gesture would certainly show Filippo how she really felt. "When this is gone, I'll come back," he had said. Well he wouldn't be able to doubt what was in her heart when she showed him, under an American sky, the bare finger of her left hand. What was a little more time after all, when they might have forever together?

Chapter Eleven

“Phone call for you, Señor Fernandez,” Filippo recognized the voice as belonging to one of the women on the hotel reception desk.

He put down his water bottle and sat on the bed. “I did ask not to be disturbed,” he pointed out.

“Yes, sir, except by your father or a Ms. C. Miller. The man holding states he has an urgent message from the lady. I thought you would at least wish to be made aware of this.”

“Of course, yes, thank you. Put him through.” The brief buzz of excitement he’d experienced upon answering the phone had slackened dramatically, turning instead to a cold brick of concern.

“Hello?” said the English voice, one he recognized.

“Yes. What do you want?”

“I want you to stop contacting CC. I mean, don’t you even know when you’re beat? I told you, pretty boy, me and Cassie have history. We’ve decided to make a go of things, and we’ve a very good reason for doing it.”

Filippo paused and clenched his jaw, adrenalin raging through his veins. *How to proceed?* “I would prefer to hear this from Cassie.” He could almost hear Mike sneering at him from the other end of the phone.

“You won’t like what she has to say, pal.”

“Don’t worry about my *feelings*, Mike. Just have her speak to me.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to you, okay? We’re a family, get it? You were just a bit of light relief, a bit of comfort for her lonely nights, but she’s not lonely anymore, she has us. She’s very sorry if she upset you.”

“You better not have hurt her—”

“I would never hurt her.” There was a deliberate silence. “Especially not in her condition.”

The room seemed to swirl. “You mean, she’s pregnant? How...how far gone?”

“Four months,” Mike pronounced glibly. “We might have been split up, but the physical tie between us was always undeniable. Don’t you see, it was just the hormones that made her go with you? I’m sure I’m partly to blame, too. I was foolish, I didn’t know the better woman was the one I’d been with all along. I should have paid her more attention. She said she felt unwanted, looked over, but neither of us knew about the baby at that point. How does it make you feel, *hombre*, knowing you slept with a woman who was pregnant with another man’s child?”

Sick, actually, Filippo thought, and now he was paying penance. He put the phone down softly, the little “click” thunderous in his ears.

* * * *

“‘Fili fails in Indianapolis,’” Jen read out from the official ATP website.

Cassie glanced at her watch and put down her glass of milk. Half past twelve. Jen usually nipped out to the bakery about this time, and Cassie had made a mental deadline to ring Filippo’s agent at that point. They were in the sitting-room/office again, wading through the hundreds of hopeful submissions for this cycle, and that was just the hard copy submissions. Emailed subs bumped up the tally considerably. Admittedly, Cassie’s attention was not on the subs—she was checking hotel availability close to Flushing Meadow. That and day dreaming about the overwhelming urge to churn out pages and pages of her own stories. They were more words than anything at the moment, no real narrative revealing itself, just a collection of thoughts given new and original expression. A smile crept onto her face as Jen continued her own narrative.

“Eleventh seed and Spanish number two Filippo Fernandez has today crashed out of the Indianapolis open. His shock first round exit was a scalp for French teenager Guillaume Nicoleau. Speaking after the match, Fili was notably upset, saying, ‘sometimes your heart’s just not in it, no?’ When asked how he rated his chances in next week’s U.S. Open, the Spaniard was noncommittal, ‘Is coming to the end of my career, realistically,’ he said, ‘so is really a feeling of is now or never, but I don’t know. I just have to play my own game, no? and pray for some inspiration to hit me.’ What is certain is that Fili Fever will be returning to Flushing Meadow again this year, however far the Spaniard progresses in the tournament.’ Well?”

“Well what?” Cassie fidgeted, rolling the now empty glass of milk between her palms. She self consciously tugged down her green sweater, which had ridden up over her slightly swollen stomach.

“Oh, come on, I can’t believe I have to do everything for you. It’s clearly your fault he’s losing. His heart is broken, he said it himself.”

“No, he said his heart wasn’t in it,” Cassie corrected, and her own heart secretly fluttered when she thought her imminent phone call might have the power to mend his.

“Ah, same thing. I can’t believe you still haven’t called him.”

It's now or never, Cassie realized, feeling awful that she still hadn't told her best friend about her pregnancy, but this morning, Dr Russell had officially pronounced that she was pregnant. He also said it was okay to travel, but Cassie was worried. Her own mother had two miscarriages and Cassie didn't want to do anything to jeopardize her own pregnancy. Cassie brushed the cookie crumbs from her desk thoughtfully, trying to decide how to phrase it to Jen.

"Porking out a bit aren't we?" Jen pointed out. You want to be careful, or you might be getting a telly-tubby," she said patting her own belly.

Cassie laughed. "Charming. Listen Jen, there's something I have to tell you."

"Brad Pitt wants you to have his babies."

"No!"

Jen cracked up. "Nothing would surprise me anymore. Come on then, out with it."

"Well," Cassie picked at her nails unnecessarily. "I've been waiting to call Filippo because..."

"Because you're a full-grown wuss?"

"No, because of this mess with Mike mostly, but also because I'm pregnant. I wanted to make sure. The doctor says once you pass your first trimester, then it's pretty much okay to let people know."

"You are pregnant?"

Cassie took a deep breath, and the joy suddenly came flooding up within her. At least the weight of one person not knowing was gone, and she was free to celebrate. "Yes!"

Jen screamed and pulled her into a tight hug. "I thought you were getting a bit fat!" she said, looking down and shaking her head at Cassie's stomach. "Congratulations, oh, my God, congratulations! Hang on, so I take it you-know-who is the daddy?"

Cassie rested her hands on her hips. "Oh, so first I'm fat and then I'm a floozy? Yes, it's his. It's Filippo's baby. Now bugger off. I've got a phone call to make."

Jen had tears in her eyes. "Congratulations." She squeezed Cassie even tighter, and all Cassie could think was, she hoped Filippo would be half as happy as Jen was when he found out she was carrying his child.

* * * *

Jen decided to take a half day off, and as soon as she was out the door, Cassie hovered over the telephone. She was bursting to tell him, but nevertheless, her stomach was upset as she held the blue air mail envelope in her hands. She took a deep breath.

"Filippo, it's me."

He would know exactly who she was, just from her voice even though it was coming from so far away. He would also, of course, be ecstatic to hear from her.

When Cassie finally worked up the courage to dial the hotel number, the man on the desk insisted—oh, so politely—that Señor Fernandez had specifically requested not to

receive any calls from her. Confused and confounded, she'd nearly hung up right then and there, but a certain stubbornness made her plough on. Irritated, the desk clerk nevertheless put her on hold while he double checked with the Señor, providing he was available, that was.

There had been a long wait, her heart thundering all the while and her hand resting protectively on her stomach. Then came a click as the phone was connected.

"Putting you through now, Ms. Miller," the receptionist informed her. Cassie let out the breath she had taken in to say, "Hi."

"Yes?"

Cassie licked her lips; he didn't sound right. Her seemingly invincible bubble of excitement burst. "Filippo?"

"Yes?"

"It's me. Cassie."

A long, long silence. "I know who this is. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I got your letter, you know, the one you wrote." *Stupid, stupid. Just stop talking, there's a good girl.*

"Oh."

"What's the matter? I thought you'd be happy to hear from me. I've something to tell you."

"Don't bother, I already know about it. Look, Cassie, I am finished with never knowing what is really going on with you. It's like, who is this woman? All the time. What I thought we had..." He sighed. "Was not even real. Lies and half truths, whatever they are. What I say is, I don't think you should call here again, no? I understand you are having much emotion at this time, but this doesn't really help either of us, does it?"

Cassie's mind whirled. It was a dismissal—a cruel, cold dismissal. She suddenly felt sick, and it had nothing to do with her condition. "But I'm pregnant," she croaked.

He sighed. He actually *sighed*, as though it was the worst news he could ever hear. As if her carrying his child was a burden and not a miracle. "Which is why you shouldn't call me. It will only make things worse. Goodbye, Cassie. Good luck."

"Wait, just let me—"

The dial tone sounded like a heart monitor registering death. It was final.

* * * *

Cassie impatiently pressed the flat's outside buzzer. "This better be good," Jen's sleepy voice didn't sound too impressed.

"He hung up."

There was a droning buzz as Jen immediately let her in. Cassie stabbed at the lift call button, but of course, it decided to be ignorant. Impatiently, she mounted the prison-gray staircase, trying to keep to the middle and not touch any of the handrails. Dark stains

colored the edges, and Cassie tried not to breath in the acrid stench, not wanting her unborn child to have to inhale the same smell. *As if it could anyway, and besides, what's the point now? Don't think that way!* she immediately reprimanded herself.

Finally, as her legs were about to give way, Cassie unsteadily reached the third floor and hammered on Jen's door. It was only when she looked down she realized she was wearing odd slippers, day-glo pink socks, her must-never-see-the-light-of-day comfy cardigan and sweatpants. Thank heaven nobody had seen her.

A man stood in Jen's doorway.

Cassie screwed up her face and peered around him. "You must be Cassandra," said the skinny man with dusty blonde hair. "I'm Carl, the landlord."

"You need to do something about these stairs, and the lifts. They just don't listen."

"Nice to meet you, too." He turned around. "Jen! Calamity Cassandra's here."

Cassie looked at him sideways as Jen hurried to the doorway. She was busily tying a madly patterned but silky dressing gown together. "He hung up!" she said.

"Let's just breathe, Cass. Now tell me all about it, and don't go getting yourself so upset—think about the baby."

"Oh, congratulations," Carl said.

Cassie noticed him as if for the first time. She looked at Jen. "Can he not leave?"

"I own this building!"

"Leave, Carl," Jen said sternly.

"Leaving. Left." Carl grabbed his coat, remembered to give Jen a peck on the cheek, for which she slapped him off before ushering him out.

"Sex-on-stilts landlord?" Cassie asked, pointing a thumb behind her once he was gone.

Jen flickered her eyebrows. "The very same."

"When did that happen? And why didn't I know about it?"

"I asked him whether his lovely, *long* stilts were an indication of what one could expect from the rest of him."

"Nice one."

"Thanks. I thought you had enough on your mind without me bothering you with my own dating dilemmas—like, stilts, so *not* an indication of other appendages."

"Commiserations."

"Thanks, but he's sweet—makes me laugh." Jen finally hauled Cassie indoors and got her to the settee. Like a mother setting the table, she put out a box of tissues and a box of chocolates. "Good outfit."

"I try. Oh, Jen, he hung up. I'm screwed." Cassie said, reaching blindly into the

chocolate box.

“I’m going to need a little more information than that. Let’s go over this properly and dissect it piece by piece. I might see something you’ve missed.”

* * * *

“Nope, you’re screwed,” Jen surmised a little while—and a third of a box of chocolates—later when Cassie had repeated the phone conversation.

“Yep.”

Jen scratched her wrist thoughtfully. “Unless...”

“Don’t,” Cassie reached for the tissues, tugged five out by accident and used them all to wipe her red nose. “I don’t want any more excuses to get my hopes up.”

“Just hear me out. What if Mike had something to do with this?”

“I don’t understand. How could he? No, we’re just clutching at straws, I think. I told Filippo I was pregnant and—nothing. No emotion, nothing.”

“As much as it pains me to say it, I reckon we underestimate Mike. I mean, think about it. The guy turns up at your hotel room. Here’s someone who’s so obsessed, whose head is so messed up about his floozy fiancée shacking up with the CEO—I mean, shocker—and, okay this is sad, his sick mum, that he gets on a *plane* to try and make sure he doesn’t lose you too. As long as you kept wearing that damned ring, clever Mike here thought he still had dibs on you, no matter what.”

Cassie wagged her ring finger. “I took it off, left it in Mike’s car.”

“I bet he took that well!”

“You know, I don’t even know. I wasn’t really paying attention to be honest. I was thinking about the future and moving on.” She felt sadness as she touched her stomach.

Jen’s eyes followed Cassie’s hands. “Don’t tell me you told him about the sprog?”

“It just sort of came out.”

There was a melodramatic groan from Cassie’s best friend. “That’s it then—Mike the Obsessed got to Filippo first.”

“You make it sound like the mafia or something.”

“Mike’s an estate agent, Cass. Plus this Mr. Megalomaniac big-shot-property-developer is used to gambling and winning—the guy probably feels invincible, like he can control the world. Imagine how it feels to be rejected by two women all around the same time? To finally grasp that people aren’t property and actually have minds of their own?”

Cassie sighed heavily and rubbed her face. Though her pride and her heart were still severely wounded from the “conversation” with Filippo, things didn’t feel quite as hopeless as they had earlier on that evening. Now that she had talked things through with Jen, she had gotten a little more perspective on things.

Besides, she thought resolutely, this was her child whether its father decided to be around for the ride or not. That in itself was something to be excited about. She would manage. Jen would be only too glad to help out, she was sure, and Cassie could sell the house and move closer to her mother, maybe even move in with her to save money. She shuddered. Okay, so it *would* be difficult, but it'd be worth it. She smiled, feeling slightly giddy when she thought about her growing child. Would it be a girl or a boy?

"Maybe, Jen, but then again maybe not. Filippo told me never to call, and he sounded pretty definite about it."

"So you make a pest of yourself? So what? He's your baby's daddy. You have to make sure he knows about that—he has a right."

"I know. Well, looks like I'm going to have to become a phone pest."

"And if you don't, I will," Jen murmured.

Cassie was rummaging for the last strawberry surprise in the chocolate box. Jen had gotten her mitts on all the soft ones before her, as usual. "What's that?" she asked, settling for a Turkish delight instead.

"Nothing. I'll get some blankets. You should stay here and get some rest."

It sounded like a good idea. It had taken her these two years to get used to and appreciate living all on her own, but right now, she didn't fancy it. Jen hefted some blankets on top of her and chucked her a pillow. "Night, chick. We'll talk some more in the morning."

"Night." But that night, in the strange flat with its own strange night noises, Cassie didn't get much rest at all. Plus Jen snored. Even worse than that, Cassie's dreams, and even the moments she lay awake blinking at the ceiling in between those dreams, were haunted by stunning Spanish eyes the color of clear emeralds.

Chapter Twelve

Five months later

Filippo tried to smile properly at his fiancée at what he presumed must be a very nervous time for her. Gloria was a good girl, young and loyal. He'd met her almost straight after he'd found out about Cassie. He had a feeling that part of Gloria's attraction to him was the lifestyle he could offer her, particularly as he watched her preen and tug at her revealing outfit before they stepped out onto the catwalk together, but she loved him, he knew, and she was eager to settle down and have a family. Best of all, a native Spaniard like himself, she told him she had no aspirations to leave the birthplace and was more than happy to take part in charity events like this Barcelona fashion show, which was being put on in aid of Tennis for Tots. In fact, she had fairly insisted they do it.

"Feeling okay?" he asked her.

"Terrified!" she responded, peering around the hordes of scarily skinny models to see him. She looked anything but terrified.

The show co-coordinator was busy fixing and aligning and adding last minute touches. Just then, the small, compact man accosted the two of them. Chattering into his ear piece, he flung Filippo's white shirt wider open and adjusted the shorts so his hip bone could be seen. Filippo tried to take it all in his stride, but it was a most disconcerting feeling. Next the man turned his attentions to Gloria, twisting the floaty sarong to reveal more leg.

"More glow!" he ordered, and the make up artist snapped into action.

Filippo's smile slightly weakened as Gloria's eyes seemed to shine, basking in the extra attention. The tabloids heralded their relationship as something of a fairy tale. "Spanish Cinderella," said one. "Señorita Cinderella," proclaimed another, never incredibly original, but, he supposed, it was true. Gloria still wasn't used to the life and the travel. Her mother was a nurse, and her father owned a small tobacco shop back

home, but they had always struggled. It was part of his attraction to her, Filippo had thought when he met her at a barbecue on one of his sporadic trips back to Toledo. That and her dancing brown eyes, her good heart, and the energy and excitement she expressed at everything he introduced her to, but Filippo couldn't help but wonder sometimes, as he did now, whether he had specifically chosen somebody who didn't challenge him. Who didn't aspire too much more. Who didn't remind him of the English woman with the wine-dark hair and flashing sapphire eyes who had so enchanted him last year.

For all the good that had done him.

Six consecutive first round exits, a disappointing showing at the U.S. Open, a dramatically dropped ranking. Filippo had never felt so relieved at the season's close in December when he had gone back home in desperate need of recharging his batteries. He thought of going to the villa at Los Tiqos, but that would have been a mistake, and then he had met Gloria. She had introduced a simple, constant happiness in his life, and the following season had begun with resultantly few hiccups. There were no moments of glory either, but Filippo was just happy to be playing uncomplicated tennis again. He told himself, for the first time in a long time, his mind was clear. His heart though, was neither broken nor full.

"Go!" The co-coordinator shoved Gloria forward, and she set off.

"Go!" Filipino's turn. He strode down the runway behind her, blinded by the flashbulbs and surprised at the amount of cameras and press and applause. He told himself not to worry about the oiled chest and hair-sprayed hair. *You're doing it for a good reason*, he told himself, like a mantra, posing awkwardly for the international suite of TV crews.

After the event was the obligatory party. Filippo would have preferred to meet a few guys for a beer or just go to dinner, but Gloria was so excited about it. He felt it would be mean to deny her the experience, plus it might seem a little ungracious to disappear so quickly after the event.

"I can wear that new dress the designer gave me!" she said, tugging on his hand and bouncing.

It struck him again how young she was. Ten years his junior, she was certainly a rather naïve eighteen, but papa loved her. Everybody loved her, and Filippo knew that she would make a good mother. It irked him slightly that that was such a requirement in what he looked for in a woman now. He worried he was only trying to recreate the family he *wished* he could have had with Cassie. He closed his eyes briefly as the memories assaulted him. Treacherous thunder. Flashing lightning. Tumultuous rain. Sheer clothes. Wet bodies. Questing kisses, challenging blue eyes, a woman that welcomed all of him, took his heart, his body, that breathed him into her soul. He gritted his teeth. Ridiculous that she could still affect him this way, even now...*but she betrayed you*, he reminded himself. *She was sleeping with that ape the whole time. Pregnant with his child, not yours.*

"...and besides, everybody's going to be there. We have to go! Please, Fili, please!"

The puppy dog eyes under heavily curled Spanish lashes were endearing.

Nevertheless, the action reminded him of a woman who would never have to resort to coercion to get her way. The familiar pain struck his gut once again, but it was less severe than before...or maybe he'd just got used to the feeling.

"Okay," Filippo agreed, and so, through his own fault, Filippo accompanied Gloria to the party that evening. As usual, there was the obligatory paparazzi armed with their unoriginal questions to fend off as they arrived.

"Fili! Fili!" yelled the photographers and interviewers, people he really didn't deem as close enough to use his nickname.

But he was ever polite.

"Have you set a date yet?"

"When are you and Gloria going to tie the knot?"

Etcetera.

Filippo always answered vaguely. He hadn't a clue to be honest. It made him incredibly guilty, but he did wonder if they would only really make it down the aisle if Gloria got pregnant. Was he using her to forget Cassie, just as Gloria might be using him for the life of her dreams? It was a terrible thought, and he tried to banish it. She deserved so much more than that. His respect, at least.

"Filippo, good to see you back on form. How do you rate your prospects at the French this year?"

A serious question at last. Filippo attempted to take Gloria with him as he went to give Miguel Santoro his proper attention, but Gloria resisted, happily twisting for the cameras. Filippo gave her his fake, indulgent smile, pretending to find affection in her vanity. He let her enjoy her moment.

"I'm feeling as good as I did last year, better in fact. I'm hitting the ball pretty well at the moment, so I think I stand a good chance."

"And, of course, Wimbledon is upon us soon after."

"Yes, my favorite tournament. I'm definitely looking forward to going back there this year." It occurred to Filippo then that by the time Wimbledon did come around, it would be a year since he and Cassie had met. Somehow, it didn't seem half that long ago. Her baby would be born by now, he realized, totaling up the months—Mike had told him she had been four months gone when he had called to warn Filippo away from Cassie. The child itself must be about two months old. He crushed the thought, not wanting to think of her playing happy families with the husband he had unhappily met in Stuttgart. The fact that his own lust for her had meant he'd come between. That wasn't the most pleasant thought either.

"Do you think you can build on your achievements last year?"

"Sorry?"

"You made it to the quarters last year. Do you think you can do better?"

Filippo had been distracted by a half overheard question put to Gloria. "Excuse me Miguel," he said and moved back down the line. He put his arm around Gloria,

hoping to shuffle her along and save her from having to answer.

The press guy repeated himself. “So, when’s he going to make an honest woman of you, Gloria?”

She flicked her black hair. “Any time now,” she said, again surprising Filippo by being such a dab hand at speaking to reporters, but there was more. “We’re keen to start a family so I shouldn’t think it’d be too long—Fili here is not getting any younger, are you?” She nudged him playfully.

“Where’s the honeymoon going to be Gloria?”

“Los Tigos,” she pronounced, batting her eyelids, much to Filippo’s mortification. “It’s his own little hideaway—keeps it quite the mystery, but he’s been promising to take me for some months now.”

“Okay, that’s enough guys. There’s drinking to be done. Thanks,” Filippo said and moved Gloria on.

There was a surge of noise as people shouted at them to wait and to answer a few more questions. “Oh, I think there’s been quite enough already,” said Filippo, walking Gloria inside the hall before she had him married off by next week.

* * * *

“Nothing on these flaming channels,” Jen said, pressing the channel change button over and over. She had gotten herself entirely exasperated, knee jogging up and down on the hospital chair like a pneumatic drill.

“Would you give it a rest? You’re making me nervous,” Cassie said from the bed. She blew out with a whistle as another contraction shocked her.

“It’s the waiting!” Jen protested. “It’s killing me.”

“Mnngh!” Cassie squeezed her eyes tightly.

“Tell me about it,” she panted. “Everyone’s always late in our family—like where is that flaming mother of mine? You think she could manage to be on time for her first grandchild.”

“Another twinge?” Jen asked, side-stepping the question.

“Not exactly the word I would use.”

“Is there no way they can make it come sooner, I’m exhausted just listening to you?”

“Spicy food and sex was the advice, apparently. I’ve already tried the former.”

“Hm, well, can’t help you with the latter I’m afraid, hon. Oh, no.” Jen hurriedly arched the remote at the corner mounted television. “Blasted thing!”

“What is it?” Cassie shoved back her greasy hair. “Oh, no.”

“Precisely.” Jen tried again to make the remote control obey.

“No, leave it. Turn it up.”

Sighing, Jen did as Cassie asked. *This* the remote would do. Both Cassie and Jen watched in silence as Filippo Fernandez, complete with child-would-be-bride were interviewed. Cassie had seen it in the newspapers, not even a month after that fateful phone call. She'd still tried to get in touch with him, half hoping Jen might be right about Mike's meddling, but he moved around so much, and as soon as she tracked him down to his next hotel, he had left. At least, that was always the desk clerk's line. Then, after being constantly deluged by paparazzi pics of the 'happy couple,' Cassie decided it might be time to focus solely on her child. It was hard to take. Then Mike's mother died, which was a nightmare in more ways than one. Mike's emotional spirits got even lower, although his alcoholic spirits got greater. At one point, he was taken into the same hospital his mother had just been in. Although Cassie made only one brief visit, she worried, but when Dr. Russell began to worry about Cassie's own blood pressure, even Jen stopped nagging her to try and get through to Filippo.

Now, Cassie looked up at the television with a look of distaste. Seeing fuzzy tabloid shots of this girl who had captured Fili's heart were almost possible to deal with, but seeing her in the flesh so to speak was unadulterated agony.

"So when's he going to make an honest woman of you, Gloria?" a journalist asked at the Tennis for Tots charity event. A female translator with a British accent translated.

The young woman tossed luxurious black hair, and Cassie thought glumly of her own stringy locks. "Any time now," the beauty said. As if her looks weren't painful enough, she went on, "We're keen to start a family so I shouldn't think it'd be too long—Fili here is not getting any younger, are you?"

"Where's the honeymoon going to be, Gloria?"

"Los Tigos."

"Los Tigos," Cassie and Jen said together.

"That little..."

Cassie grew quiet. For the first time, she really felt sad. While she had Filippo's child growing inside her, he had been schmoozing with this slip of a girl. She watched, feeling as though she was in darkness, as Filippo did the proud future husband thing, strong brown arm around the girl's tiny waist. He showed her off the way he clearly hadn't wanted to with Cassie, but in a way, she mused, she supposed it was actually a good thing. She would never have fitted into that world of glitz and glamour. Strangely, she hadn't thought it was the life that Filippo would have wanted either.

"It's his own little hideaway—keeps it quite the mystery," the translator told Cassie emotionlessly. "But he's been promising to take me for months."

"*Months?*" Cassie gasped.

"Keep strong, honey. You've got this little man to think about now," Jen said tenderly.

The nurse came in to do yet another check. "Phew. We were starting to get a little worried over you there, mummy."

Cassie frowned as much from the irritation that anyone could be so irksomely chipper as from the fact that this was really real. She was honestly truly going to become a mother.

“You’re fully dilated,” the nurse explained. “It’s time.”

Chapter Thirteen

“You’re not thinking about the English Miss, are you?” Alberto asked over breakfast in the Wimbledon player’s village.

Gloria was safely out of ear shot. She was doing the London tourist thing with a couple of the other players’ wives who had not been here before, but Filippo still felt it was rude to talk about Cassie even when Gloria was not there to know about it. Thinking about Gloria, he was amazed at how easily she had adapted to this life—a little too easily perhaps? To outsiders, the constant travel to far and distant cities; Australia, America, Sweden, Italy, Dubai to name a few, *seemingly* glamorous locations, the reality was that the flights and the matches took their toll. They were even tiring for the athlete, who hopefully ensured he was conditioned enough to withstand it and still play decent tennis.

Imagine then a girl whose most strenuous exercise, or so he hoped, was sweeping up in her papa’s store, but Gloria was still not fatigued from the traveling. Since the Tennis for Tots charity fashion extravaganza, she’d wanted him to go to this event and that award ceremony or this new restaurant. He’d initially tried to keep up, to make sure his young fiancée was happy and content. After all, it was asking a lot for her to travel around with him on a yearly basis, living out of a suitcase and various hotels or player’s accommodations, but this year, having almost gotten back to the form he’d been in at the last event, Filippo told Gloria that if she wanted the tourist experience, he’d arrange for her to go with somebody else. She’d happily and hastily agreed. It should have given his pause for thought, but the only thing Filippo did worry about was how unworried he was.

“Papa, I didn’t tell you about that so you could remind me of it constantly.”

Alberto raised his hands, decrying his innocence. His thick white moustache twitched. “What? I mention it once—and only because we are here at the Wimbledon.”

“I still don’t know how that interview on Los Tiqos managed to get so mixed up. Maybe I should fire you, no?”

“You would put your own papa out of job. *Ai.*” Alberto hung his shoulders and morosely pushed about a cube of melon.

Filippo gulped down some ice cold fresh orange juice and wiped his mouth. It was exciting to be back here, where he had made his first break-through last year by getting deep into the second week of the championships. It was one of only a handful of times when the women's WTA tour and the men's actually came together, and that brought with it a good atmosphere, but Filippo was happily engaged, or so he reassured himself, and the female players didn't interest him, though some of the up and coming Russians were certainly flashy.

Not only that, but the buzz he usually felt when at Wimbledon was tempered by the fact that he *had* been thinking about that "English Miss," as his father put it. How could he not? This was her country, after all. From what he knew, she lived close by. She might even be watching. The thought wasn't particularly helpful, given he didn't want to have anything else to concentrate on except his first round match that afternoon.

All he wanted to do was get in a little time on the practice courts with his hitting partner, a fellow Spaniard. Stay focused, stay... "Why do you bring her up anyway?"

"Who?"

"Who? Papa, you know who."

Ever evasive, Alberto leaned his head on one side, scratching the base of his neck with short fingers. "How are you feeling about the game today?"

Filippo gave his father a long look. "Why must you always change the subject?"

"I don't! There is a thread, you see, go with it..."

"A thread? Okay, well, I feel confident. We've played eight times before, and I've beaten him all but once. That was our first meeting, although he is playing well this year. I'll keep on my toes."

"And how are things with the lovely Gloria?"

Filippo sat back in his chair to study Alberto in greater detail. "I don't see—"

"Always you are never trusting your papa. Is so difficult to be a parent sometimes, especially doing this all by myself after your poor dead mother...*Ai*, when I think of what we went through to make sure you—"

"Fine. Things with Gloria are fine."

Alberto immediately dropped the drama. "And you love her and cherish her?"

"I feel a lot for her."

Alberto fidgeted, and Filippo knew his father was uncomfortable, as he himself was. They never usually discussed such things together. "But that is not love, feeling a lot. That is not passion. Why, your mother and me, God bless her and save her—"

"Okay, papa, I don't need the details."

"But maybe you do, no? A woman should set your soul on fire, Fili. She should make you want to be a better man. Get into your pores and your soul until she is the very breath you breathe."

Filippo pushed away his breakfast and folded his arms on the tabletop. Around

him was the chatter of other players and coaches and managers and trainers, but he barely heard it. It suddenly felt as though he and Alberto were the only two people in the room. “That’s how it was with you and mama?” he asked, with difficulty.

Alberto was looking ceiling-ward, into memories Filippo did not especially want to imagine, though it warmed him and surprised him to see the love still shining in his father’s bleary eyes. “We thought we were so special, so unique. One of a kind! Oh, and we were, Fili, we were. Nobody had ever experienced a love like ours! We were indestructible, invincible. Our love would go on until infinity, and then, the cancer...” Alberto shook his head and Filippo looked down, crossing himself. “But that is ridiculous. Everybody who has ever been in love feels exactly the same, that their experience is different.” He pointed a finger at Filippo. “But nevertheless, this is how a man in love *should* feel, as though no man has ever loved this way before him, or ever loved again. That his woman is a goddess to be worshipped, an altar to make sacrifice to. If he does not feel this, he hurts not just himself, but the woman he is with. Neither is free then to find the person that will make them alive, and they live on, slowly, contentedly maybe. It is a life, I suppose, but it is one where they are dying everyday, knowing they did not find their match. Like Mario and Maria!”

Filippo struggled with a smile as Alberto exploded into laughter and thumped the table. He wiped a few tears from his eyes with his knuckles, but Filippo was sure they were not really born of laughter.

The canteen looked around, but Alberto was unaware. Instead, he leaned intently towards his son. “This feeling is what I want for you my son, my Fili. More than tennis, more than money, more than any of this. To know you follow in my tradition and see you love a woman how I did your mother, well, that is what would make me proud.”

“But you always put so much importance on my tennis.”

“Of course! And it is important! We encouraged you in this because it seemed to make you so happy, especially after your mama passed away. You were only happy on the court, not thinking, not feeling your grief for a few hours a day—we each find our ways to cope, you know? Then you became so good, what kind of father could I call myself not to give you every opportunity to play and train, the way those with money could so easily?”

Filippo laid a hand on Alberto’s shoulder. It was but a brief touch, but it said so much, and then, “I don’t love Gloria, papa, not the way I should. I love Cassie, still, even though I should not. Even though...” He could barely look at his father, the guilt was overwhelming. “Even though our time together was sinful. I still *smell* her when I breathe, papa. I still see her eyes and her smile and feel her *heart* beating against mine, beating with love, but she did not feel the same. She was a married woman, pregnant, not mine to take, but I did. Sometimes I hope that Gloria will feel the same for me as Cassie, or even just look at me the way she did.”

“She doesn’t?”

“No, but it’s my fault, because I don’t look at Gloria that way either. I hoped that I would. She’s a good girl, papa.”

“*Si*. But you make difficult, intuitive decisions every time you are at that net or

responding to a serve, or playing a defensive volley. It's all about heart, Fili. Your heart tells you instinctively what to do, and if yours is not with Gloria, I think you know what to do."

Filippo nodded slowly, taking a deep breath in and out. "I do."

"Good. Because I have heard news that you really do need to know. It's not something I wanted to say if you were smitten with Gloria, but—"

The sense that Alberto was about to tell him something important, something life changing, crawled over Filippo. "Tell me."

* * * *

Cassie swept through the house in a long, sheer feminine skirt, making her way to the sunny garden. Her hair had grown even longer, and though time consuming for a new mother, she couldn't bear to get it cut short. It rippled gently as she walked, her figure almost back to the slender form she had had before getting pregnant. In truth, she liked what the extra few pounds had done for her shape. It made her feel curvy and womanly. Plus it was another excuse to keep up with the cookies and milk.

Right now, she was carrying two bowls of vivid red strawberries out to the garden for her and Jen. It was the first day at Wimbledon, and they had taken the small portable television outside, hooked onto the extension cord, to watch the first Monday. Cassie still wasn't certain what she would tell Lee about his father in the future, but for now, she thought it might be nice for him to visit his daddy, so to speak. Filippo's match was due to start on court number one at two o'clock. Five minutes to go. It occurred to Cassie, as she set the bowls down next to Jen who was cradling the sleeping child under the patio umbrella, that Lee would be oblivious to the match, but *she* wanted to watch it, even if she had to see "Señorita Cinderella" in the player's box herself. She supposed it was the closest they were going to get to being a family.

"All right?" Jen asked, smiling and squinting in the sun as Cassie took a seat next to her.

Cassie knew what she was asking, wasn't it too painful for her to watch Filippo play, being that she was mother of the child he had rejected? And it did still hurt, and God, if it hadn't been for the help of Jen, her mother, and even "sex on stilts" Carl, then Cassie didn't know how she would have coped. She'd been lucky enough to avoid a detrimental dose of the baby blues, although she had sniffled her way through a couple of boxes of Kleenex and repeats of *Sleepless in Seattle*, but still, the house had seemed empty when she'd actually had the time to notice it, usually in the evenings when Lee had gone to bed. How she had ached for Filippo then, to share in her happy-exhausted glow, to cradle her at night when she had spent all day cradling their newborn, or simply for them all to go for a drive, with no real destination in mind. The aching had alternated to anger and back for quite some time, but now what she felt was fairly static. It was acceptance and a thankfulness that her child was healthy and strong. Besides, with his career, even if Filippo hadn't rejected them both, he would rarely be here anyway.

Placing a hand on Jen's briefly, Cassie smiled. "I know it might seem slightly pathetic, but I actually like to see him."

“Pathetic yes, but understandable. So, not to put a dampener on things or anything, but has you-know-who been about lately?”

“Who Mike?”

“I was trying to avoid giving it a name.”

Cassie chuckled half-heartedly. “He made himself unwelcome last week, after his latest girlfriend decided to leave him and go back to school.”

“Ew.”

“Well, okay, it was college but still, not the best idea he’s ever had.”

“Not having much luck with the ladies lately, is he?”

“Can’t say I care all that much. He was harping on about how, since we’re both alone again, it must be fate telling us something.”

“He never?”

Cassie dipped the tip of a strawberry into the sugar bowl and sucked on it before biting off the juicy flesh. “He did. He even said he could forgive me for going with ‘that Spaniard.’ We could raise Lee together, he said.”

“He *never!*”

“He *did!*” Cassie picked out another fruit.

“So what did you say?”

She shrugged. “Just that I didn’t feel as though I particularly needed forgiving for being with Filippo. Those couple of snatched days were the happiest I’ve ever been in my life. I’m thankful for that, not repentant. Then I picked up Lee and said ‘do you think he looks like something I need to ask forgiveness for?’”

“And what did he say?” Jen’s eyes were wide.

“He left—oh, wait, it’s starting. I’ll turn it up.” She leaned forward in the patio chair to adjust the knob on the tiny television, happy that Jen was playing mum this afternoon. It felt nice to have her arms free for a change and remember that they were capable of things other than carrying and cuddling and burping.

She ran her fingers through her hair as the players walked on court. Well, one of them did. Cassie squinted at the screen. Even under the shade of the parasol, it wasn’t completely clear, but there was definitely only one player on the court.

“Eh?” Jen screwed up her nose and tried to make out what was going on. “Which one’s that then?”

“Ivankov, I think. It’s definitely not Filippo.” Distracted, Cassie turned the sound up louder to try and make out what the commentators were saying about this over the buzz of next door’s lawnmower.

“Well, this is most unusual and not like the Spaniard at all. As we understand it,” explained one commentator, “Ivankov, who was in a different locker room to the one Fernandez uses, came on court at the appointed time, only to find he’s the only one here!”

I must say this is unprecedented in the history of Wimbledon.”

“Where could Fernandez be? Could he have *forgot* that he had a match?” the other asked.

“Impossible, surely. No, I’m just hearing that Fernandez *was* in the canteen this morning. Apparently, he had his practice session as usual, although some spectators said that he seemed a little distracted, but your guess is as good as mine, Pete. Ah, there’s the referee having a word with the umpire now, and Ivankov is going back inside!”

Cassie turned to Jen, shaking her head in amazement. “How...*strange*.” Was it Cassie’s imagination, or was Jen avoiding looking her directly in the eye? Her best friend shifted uncomfortably in her chair, and Lee’s closed eyes flickered. His tiny nostrils flared.

The commentator’s chatter attracted Cassie’s attention yet again. “One can only hope it’s nothing family related, Joe...”

“Indeed, Pete, and just listen to the crowd. They’ve never seen anything like this before, and I have to say, in all my years commentating, neither have I. Not once, as far as I can remember, has a player just decided not to turn up to his own match. Well, apparently, we’re going to go to court number two for the time being, but we’ll keep you updated on this extraordinary turn of events. One thing’s for sure, Fernandez better have a very good reason, or it’s quite likely he’ll be disqualified from the whole event.”

“I should think so, Joe. I should think so.”

Cassie turned to Jen, and Jen turned to Cassie. Just then somebody hammered on the gate to the back door. Her heart in her throat, not really daring to think *anything*, Cassie rose from her chair, smoothed her skirt, and unlocked the gate.

It swung back suddenly, so much so that Cassie had to dodge smartly out of the way. “Hey!”

It was Mike.

Chapter Fourteen

“Traffic. Everywhere,” Filippo said yet again. Next to him, Alberto was quiet and tense. “I’m doing the right thing, aren’t I, papa? Am I doing the right thing?”

Alberto looked up sharply, surprised Filippo supposed that he was actually speaking to his father again. Filippo couldn’t blame him. He had completely avoided the man since breakfast this morning. Since his father had told him that he’d had a phone call from Cassie’s assistant Jen. It had all sounded very complicated, and there was a lot of guess work being made, but it seemed that Jen surmised that Mike had spoken to Filippo all those months ago without Cassie’s permission, and not on her behalf as Filippo had been led to believe. What was more, Jen had been trying to get in touch with them for the longest time, except they were never in the same place twice. By the time she caught up with them in a particular city, the receptionists were like brick walls. According to Alberto, they owed this message to the fact that Jen had delivered it herself. She had hovered outside the grounds this morning and met Alberto on his unearthly early morning walk, a practice he’d had since Filippo was a boy.

“I don’t understand,” Filippo had said, though it made his heart speed up to even hear that his father had had contact with somebody close to Cassie. “Why now?”

But there Alberto had induced his parental privileges, as he thought of them. It was like an amendment in the U.S. Constitution, only it was for dads, even though his son was a twenty-nine-year-old man. No amount of prodding or prying or even bullying from Filippo would make him reveal what he and Jen had spoken about. He would only say that “it is important” and “it is not for me to say.” but apparently, it was for him to decide only to tell Filippo the message if he wasn’t in love with Gloria. Although Filippo did wonder whether he might have done the same thing as he in Alberto’s place. Still, if he heard “it is important” one more time, he thought he would go crazy. Maybe he was crazy, he thought, as the car began to move forward once again—albeit painstakingly slowly. Who else would leave Wimbledon for a woman with an important message?

Leaning against the tinted glass, Filippo wracked his brains trying to figure out what it might be. Had she not been pregnant after all, had Mike said that just to ward

Filippo off? Of course, it seemed obvious now. It was probably exactly that. A husband might resort to anything to keep his wife, and Filippo knew that if the roles were reversed, he would have fought tooth and nail for a woman like Cassie. So no, he told himself, it was not crazy to be leaving Wimbledon for this woman—even though he had probably been disqualified for the maneuver by now and ruined his best shot at the title, or getting into the finals at least. His ranking would slump too, as though it had suffered a heart attack...

“No. I have to hear what she has to say,” he said. Alberto looked at him sharply. It was the first time he’d ever seen his father nervous, and that made Filippo nervous. He took a deep breath as the car indicated off the motorway and onto quieter, more suburban roads.

“You’re sure this is the right address?” Filippo asked Alberto some time later. It was the third time he’d done so. The flashy car, far from a limousine but definitely expensive, was starting to attract some attention. It was parked half on the curb outside a row of miniscule—but the brighter side of shabby—terraces facing a main road.

According to Alberto, it was the one with the cheery sun-yellow door, whose front was strewn with half a dozen hanging baskets, that they were interested in. The basket’s only flowers were scarlet pansies. Filippo wondered if he stroked their velvet smooth petals would it come anything close to how soft he remembered Cassie’s hair had been.

“Am old, but not senile. Number 37,” Alberto said, tapping the side of his head.

Filippo took a deep breath, pulled on a shaky smile and felt as if he were walking out onto the centre court. It was what he imagined final’s day would be like, the royal box would be occupied, the arena would be at maximum capacity...and then an unexpected player would walk onto the court.

Alberto wrinkled his nose. “Who is that?” he demanded.

Filippo swallowed. “Cassie’s husband,” he whispered, watching as Mike strode around the back.

Alberto made to make another comment, but then he thought better of it and closed his mouth. Filippo popped the door handle. He’d come this far now, abandoned his match, although he now felt monumentally stupid for doing so. How on earth was he going to tell the organizers what he’d done? Then, of course, there was his fiancée. No matter what happened now with Cassie, he knew his and Gloria’s relationship was over before it had really started. Filippo was too much of a gentleman to leave her in the dark for any longer than was necessary, but telling her, hurting her, would be another matter, and it was a prospect he did not relish. He pushed those concerns from his mind, resigned to what he’d come to do. He might as well see what it was Cassie had to say. Though why she would want to do it with her husband still on the scene, Filippo hadn’t a clue.

He stepped out, half wondering whether he should come back when Mike was not here, but no, it was now or never. According to Alberto, Cassie had asked to see him, so she’d also asked for whatever consequences might arise from this meeting as far as Filippo was concerned. What was he supposed to do? Time it just right in between family breakfasts and putting the kid to bed? Filippo sighed as he walked, noticing the

neighbor's curtains twitching, but he managed to keep his eyes on the front door.

"Shall I come?" Alberto called out.

Filippo laughed softly. "No, Papa, thank you. I have to do this alone." He walked slowly to the front door, feeling it would be intrusive to approach from the back as Mike had done, with the ease of a man who owned the property. He tried to swallow the pain that brought—like heartburn—but a raw flare seemed to spread inside his chest. Why was he thinking about this again?

Just like when he was "in the zone" in a match, everything seemed to be going in slow motion, from when he reached out to rap the shiny yellow door with his knuckles to when he heard Cassie scream, and then everything sped up. Filippo did not stop to think twice about it, or to consider whether it was the wrong option. It was just an instinctive reaction, like his papa had said earlier at breakfast. His heart told him what to do. It told him that Cassie needed him right now, and no matter what heartache had passed between them, he would always be there for her.

Seeing her again took the breath out of his body. As if he had just stepped into a vacuum, or if he'd been winded. The sun suffused her deep red hair and made it bright. A rich, striking mahogany, like a crown of long fire falling almost to her waist, but her beautiful eyes did not see him. Her beautiful arms did not reach out to embrace him. They were too busy trying to fend off Mike, shove him away—it didn't seem to matter where—just *away*.

Her gentle frame once again belied the spirit within her, and Filippo was reminded of how she had kneed her way out of Carlos' arms on Los Tiqos. It was distressing to him that so many men seemed incapable of understanding that women should be cared for and protected, not subjected to temper and violence and frustration. Not that Mike seemed to have the same motive as Carlos. In a blur of milliseconds, Filippo surmised that his intention was just to stay in Cassie's garden. He now believed Cassie's strenuous attempt to hurl Mike out was almost metaphorical.

But Mike was not Carlos. He was taller, broader, stronger, and no amount of Cassie's spirit could match his sheer brute strength.

In the haze of what happened next, Filippo only barely registered the frantically screaming woman at the patio table near the conservatory's open double doors. She was carrying a bundle of something.

At the end of it all, Filippo's knuckles were bloodied, but Mike's face was worse. He was not a fan of violence and found his obvious strength was ordinarily so intimidating that it dissolved fights before they even got started, but Filippo realized with a stab of regret that he was not dealing with any ordinary, rational human being here. If only he'd picked up on that earlier, he thought, cursing himself. So much of this could have been avoided.

Filippo hadn't even touched Cassie, hadn't really even said anything intelligible to her as the police led Mike away. Apparently, one of the neighbors had called the police when she'd heard the disturbance—thank heaven for twitching curtains. Now he looked at Cassie, unsure what to say or do. She was visibly shaken, sitting folded over in the chair next to the woman and her child at the patio table, but it was Alberto, who had

hurried in having seen the police arrive, that broke the stunned silence.

“Filippo, Jen, everything okay?” he asked.

The woman with the child looked up. “Alberto.”

Now Cassie looked up, as if returning to the present. She saw Filippo as if for the first time, and it was in confusion. “What...what’s going on here? Why are you here?”

They were both useless. It took English and Spanish interpreters to sort the situation out. It wasn’t even one of those romantic, whirlwind moments that people describe in books, where “they communicated without words.”

“Filippo,” Jen said, as if he was deaf and not foreign. “Cassie,” she pointed to her, and Filippo hid a smile, “is not married to Mike. No married.”

“Now?” he asked, looking from one woman to the other. “Or when we first meet?”

“Not even when you first met. She just stupid.” Cassie shot her friend a mock-annoyed look as Jen twisted a finger against her temple.

They just stared. Not in disbelief. Not in elation, but as if they were just...happy to look. Their eyes gently grazed over the other, slowly moving, slowly taking in as much detail as possible. Filippo felt like he was painting her in his mind, sculpting her form into something more tangible, the nuances embellished by the emotion he felt for her. For Cassie’s part, he thought she seemed to be making notes, preparing to write him into some internal story, metaphors and all. He hoped it was a fairytale, not a horror.

For the moment, Cassie took her eyes from Filippo, and he felt as though a warmth had been removed from him, in spite of the English summer sunshine. “Did you do this?”

“I’ve been trying—and failing—to get in touch with him for months, ever since you told me...”

“Since she told you what?” Filippo said, his attention being pulled once again by the child in this woman’s lap. To start with, he’d thought it was this Jen’s baby. Cassie’s child, if indeed she had had one—he doubted everything now—would surely have been slightly larger, although he had to admit he wasn’t the best authority on kid sizes. They came in “baby,” “school kid” and “teenager” as far as he was concerned. Yet he kept looking at it as though he had forgotten something, when he noticed again the child’s striking coloring; russet curls and copper skin.

“Jen, I—” Cassie shook her head. “Maybe now isn’t...”

Jen silenced Cassie’s half-hearted objections with a soft look. “It’s okay, Cass,” she said and spoke now to Filippo. “Since she told me she was pregnant.”

“Wait a minute. Mike told me it was his child, that you felt neglected by him and, well, basically, what we had meant nothing.”

“Oh, my God!” Jen guffawed, and the baby, having amazingly slept through the earlier trauma, gurgled. “That idiot, I *knew* it! What’d I tell you Cass? Neglected by him, my backside. Neglected for two and a half years more like.”

Filippo looked to Cassie. She was very still, but her head lifted slightly. “We divorced two years ago—he cheated on me. It’s not exactly something I like to brag about.” She shrugged. It was clear it didn’t hurt so much now, but it must have done back then.

Filippo wished he hadn’t held back and had punched the bastard even harder. Then he rubbed his face with his hands and laced them together behind his head. Thinking. “Can we just—you know, stop. Just for a minute. A second even. That would be good.”

Like an earthly goddess, Cassie rose from her chair, the afternoon sunshine slipping over her like butter. Filippo would remember the scene with red admirals dancing by her right ear, like nature’s accessories accenting her beauty. Her hair was vermillion petals spun together, her eyes an ocean at night, the moon picking out its cresting waves. Her lips were like cheeks gently sun-warmed, her cheeks like kisses in the centre of lily-white snow. She took up the copper child, held it against breasts that spilled over chiffon and lace—and then gave it to him. To him.

Filippo looked at his father; there were tears in his eyes. He looked at Jen; there were tears in her eyes, too, but Cassie was the epitome of serenity, her eyes clear and calm.

“This is Aurelio,” she said. “I call him Lee.” It wasn’t a whisper, but an almost ecclesiastical tone. The voice of a wise woman, the voice of a mother.

“Aurelio?” Filippo’s own voice was croaky. Aurelio was his middle name.

“Your son, Fili.”

* * * *

Being presented with a child he did not know even existed. Holding the baby in his arms. Being told this child was his son.

Cassie watched so many nameless emotions travel through his mind, his face and his eyes as he stood there in her back garden, their baby boy in his strong brown arms. Nothing much made sense at that stage—Mike, Filippo’s not turning up to his own match, the small Spaniard Cassie assumed to be his father, Jen’s involvement in the whole scenario, but what made perfect sense was this golden father holding his copper child. That was real. Cassie didn’t know what it meant for them at that moment, but right then that didn’t even seem important. Nothing seemed important then, not even her and Filippo or the debt she clearly owed Jen. Nothing except that this baby should have a daddy, and it seemed he’d found one.

“Alberto?” Jen said, but Cassie barely noticed the sound. “Why don’t I give you a tour of the neighborhood?”

“And leave these three time for themselves,” Alberto agreed. “Is good to finally meet you, Jen,” he said as they left the garden, the gate shutting with a soft bump. “You have boyfriend?”

Filippo wandered over to the patio table and, oh, so carefully sat down on a chair.

“He won’t break,” Cassie laughed and took the seat next to him.

“I might. If anything happened to him,” he said, not looking at her, mesmerized by the child’s sleeping beauty.

Cassie watched Filippo’s chest rise and fall. It was working fast. So much bigger than the tiny baby, they should not be breathing in sync, but they were. She brushed one silken curl of the child’s hair, not from necessity, just from wanting to touch it. Her fingers trickled from Lee to his father’s elbow, not even a breath in between them, the bright golden hairs of his forearms glowing in the sun. His skin was warm and good to touch. She left them to each other and went to make coffee, ending up drinking it herself in the sitting room, watching her old lover watching Aurelio. He sat there until the sun began to die, a gladiator made tender and bolder thanks to the gift in his arms.

She went out every now and then to take a hot drink or a sandwich. Filippo took a sip or a bite every now and then, forgetting to thank her even though she wanted none anyway. A little later, Cassie brought Lee in to feed him, then returned him to Filippo. He smiled, then sat back down with the baby.

Around six, she had washed the dishes at her leisure, still keeping an eye on them through the kitchen window, feeling as though she could look at them both forever. She shook most of the suds from her arms and went to get the last few mugs and plates, flip-flops clapping as she walked. Picking them up from in front of Filippo, she was leaving as quietly as she had arrived, when he shifted Lee’s weight. One hand moved to the tips of her fingers and drew her back to his side.

Then his hand moved, to the waist that he had owned, to the heart that she had offered, the lips she would gladly share forever, and then he dropped his hand, as Cassie thought she would drop the dishes given that her heart was hammering so hard.

“I’m sorry, Cassie.”

She shook her head quickly. Strangely, it was the first time she had felt like crying. “It’s okay, I understand.”

“No, you don’t.” His words stopped her progress back to the kitchen. She stopped, one foot on the step, her back to his back. He twisted slightly in the seat. “I want you, Cassie.”

That made her turn. Looking into his arresting, light green, bright green eyes, there was nothing more that needed to be said, but Filippo sighed and dropped his head, focusing once again upon the child. “But there are things I must do first.”

Cassie went inside. The tears that came now, as she set both hands down against the rim of the sink, were pure pleasure. She sobbed out an entire year of her heart, quietly. If Filippo heard, he did not come, and she knew instinctually that it wasn’t out of ignorance. It was because he knew, as she did, that he didn’t trust his body not to want her the way hers gravitated towards his, feeling connected even though they were separated. There would be time enough for that, they knew. Soon.

Chapter Fifteen

Filippo felt exhausted but elated as he returned to the rented-out house. Gloria was waiting for him in the bedroom, dark thunder on her usually sunny face. A rainbow of shopping bags and boxes were splayed around her, all unopened. A very bad sign.

“Where have you been?”

“I didn’t think you’d be back so soon,” he said.

“Evidently.” She shrugged. “Lynne didn’t come at all today, actually. She and Aleksey have been arguing. I hear she’s left him.”

Filippo nodded. “Well, Ivankov is known for his hot temper.”

“At least he has passion,” Gloria said.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Filippo slid the keys onto the side table and sat next to her on the bed. What he hadn’t noticed was her little palm pilot. Its digital screen was on, and it boldly displayed one website in particular.

“God, that was quick work,” he muttered, further incensing Gloria.

His intimate reunion and first meeting with Cassie and their child had been captured for all the world to see. Apparently, NaughtyNews.net found a dad meeting his baby boy newsworthy enough to create a slideshow out of it. “Fili’s Fairytale Failure!” one headline screamed.

As Gloria angrily clicked through the pictures one by one, Filippo felt his temper surge. He pulled the machine from her. How dare they? He was fair game. He was a public figure, but Cassie, she was not of Gloria’s ilk. Posing for pictures was not on her agenda, and Aurelio—despite the anger, his heart warmed at Cassie’s choice of name—wasn’t even old enough to make the decision whether he wanted to be in the public eye

or not. Seething, Filippo breathed out loudly, trying not to think how Cassie would respond to knowing her privacy had been invaded like this because of him.

But first, he owed Gloria an explanation. “You weren’t supposed to find out like this,” he began. Not the best beginning, he found out as her eyes flared. “But nothing happened.”

“How stupid do you think I am?” First one box was aimed at his head. Luckily, she wasn’t a great shot. “Nothing happened?” Another box. “Nothing happened?” A bag this time. He dodged it. “There is a baby in that picture, Fili. That pretty much tells me *something* happened.”

“Not today, it didn’t. Not anytime that I was with you, I promise. I knew Cassie before I ever met you.”

“So what? I see your face in these pictures. I’m not blind.” She folded her arms, kneeling restlessly on the bed. “You’re going to leave me, aren’t you?”

His expression told her everything, he knew. He just wished he had been able to put it a little more delicately. “I’m sorry, Gloria. I didn’t think I’d ever see her again...and I didn’t know about the baby.”

Gloria looked disgusted. “There are lots of babies you’re not knowing about,” she muttered.

A pause. “What?”

Gloria’s direct expression was something to fear indeed. She held up a white stick that had been tucked in her crossed arms. “See for yourself.”

Filippo crossed the distance between them, picking his way over the explosions of spilled boxes and bags. He took the pregnancy test from her, a feat she made him work for, and then raised it to his eyes. “It’s pink,” he said thickly.

“Nothing gets past you, does it? Aren’t you even happy about it? I’m carrying your *child*, Filippo. I’m everything that you need. You don’t need to go to *her* anymore!”

Was he happy? Filippo thought, knowing even as he did so that it was a sinful thing to think. Life was a gift, and he would have been happy about the news if he hadn’t met Cassie again. Hadn’t tasted what it might be like to have the woman who had been in his restless dreams for so long in his life for real, and now, it was being taken away from him. Worse, he’d taken it away from himself.

“Well, you’d better get happy,” Gloria was saying, “because there’s a reporter and a camera crew on their way up here to get your reaction to the happy news.”

“You *leaked* this?” Filippo wasn’t just worried about Cassie seeing the report. Now everyone would know he and Gloria had been sleeping together. Even though it was generally accepted that the younger generation slept together before marriage, that didn’t mean he wanted Alberto watching it on television. How Gloria could knowingly leak the news of her pregnancy, knowing her family would find out about it was beyond him. She clearly wasn’t the sweet, traditional girl that Albert, and Filippo included, had thought.

“People are interested in us, Fili. Besides, you should be thanking me. This is

what's going to save your competition. I told them when you found out I was pregnant, you went to see a close friend who'd just had a baby. You were so excited about *our* news, you weren't thinking straight. You wanted to see what it felt like to hold a child and feel like a father. You *forgot* about the match because of it, and you're very, very sorry. Aren't you?"

Filippo folded his own arms now, realizing just how young Gloria really was. It had been unfair of him to bring such a young woman into this life and expect her to have the maturity to handle it. "I won't do that, Gloria. I'm not sorry about missing the match." He approached her, his voice soft. "Some things are more important than tennis or pictures or what anybody else thinks of you. It's what's in your heart that counts. What's in your heart, Gloria? Can you say honestly that it's me, or is it this life that you love?"

"It's you!" she sobbed, but Filippo thought that even she flinched at how insincere she sounded. He went to comfort her, but she wrenched away. "You will do this for me, Fili, you will!"

"I will take care of you and the baby, Gloria. I'll do everything I can, I give you my word."

"You gave me your word that you'd marry me, too, when you gave me this ring."

It was awful, and she was right, but how—*how* could he walk away from Cassie? Not now, after holding their child in his arms, after being without her for so long. It was Cassie he ached to take into his bed and know again. He wanted to spend the rest of his life exploring her body and mind, watching her change, watching their little boy grow into a man and be as irritated with Filippo as he was with Alberto. He smiled.

"This isn't funny, Fili!"

"No," he said and walked to the bathroom to wash his face in cold water.

"So you will do the interview, you'll tell them everything's all right with us, and that the English woman meant nothing—that she's just an old friend?"

Filippo didn't like the way she said "old." It was spiteful. Now, she had taken on a pouting expression that was meant to endear but just reminded him yet again that he'd made the wrong decision in Gloria. The knowledge didn't particularly make him proud of himself. He felt like a heel, almost worse than Mike.

Coming to a decision, Filippo patted his face dry, feeling as though he'd just played a tight five setter, and lost. He stuffed the towel on the handrail and ran his hands through his hair in an attempt to get his mind in order. "It's not the truth, Glory. So no, I won't do it."

"Funny how you're suddenly such an encourager of truth." Gloria flicked back her hair. "Well, it doesn't matter anyway, because I already gave my interview."

Goddamn. He refused to be angry at her. The only person deserving his anger was himself, but he was frustrated. "Glory, Glory, don't you understand? Don't you see? It doesn't matter what the public thinks if *we* know this isn't going to work."

Gloria's beautiful face looked suddenly ugly with victory. "Oh, but it does matter," she said, hefting up a large packed bag onto her tiny shoulder. So it was not

about keeping him after all, Filippo realized. It was about winning. “Because *she* will see it. It’s going out on the nine o’clock news slot and the Wimbledon highlights.”

Cruel, he wanted to say to her, but he was certain that was the whole intention.

“Oh,” she said, stopping by the bedroom door and tossing a smug look over her shoulder. “You can have the rest of my things sent to Aleksey Ivankov’s place. He’s very kindly offered to let me stay with him.”

“And Lynne doesn’t mind?” he asked.

“You don’t listen, do you? Lynne won’t be there, Fili. She left him.”

A few moments later, he heard the front door slam and one of the cars tear away. In truth, it was a relief, but he knew it wasn’t over. There was still Gloria’s pregnancy to consider, although it was now clear that the issue of whether it was his or not was complicated.

Still, he was determined not to be even more irresponsible than he had already been. He checked his watch: 9:15 p.m. Cassie might have already seen the news, and by the time he drove back down there, she would definitely have seen the highlights show. She would have seen Gloria falsely explaining why he hadn’t made the match today and listened to her brag about how over the moon he was over a baby that might not even be his.

He drove on automatic, too tired to really worry about it anymore. He finally arrived back at Cassie’s house, after several wrong and a few missed turns, recognizing the little terrace in the centre of all the others. Its yellow door and bright red flowers made it stand out, even in the darkness, and the porch light was still on as if welcoming him, but the flickering emanating through the front room’s net curtains was definitely coming from a TV screen. The day’s earlier warmth was absent from the night. He felt a chill as he stepped along the short path to Cassie’s front door and knocked.

The door opened after sounds of life from inside, after rather a long stretch of nothing. She’d obviously been crying, but she met him with no reproach, and he offered no apology as she silently pulled the door back to allow him in.

Aurelio was sleeping soundly in a crib next to the couch, and she watched him carefully graze the boy’s cheek with one finger. They sat down on the sofa then and watched an old, anonymous 80’s film on TV. They were next to each other, but not touching.

As the credits rolled up, Cassie switched off the sound, placed the remote carefully on arm of the couch and turned to him. “Are you happy?”

“And sad.” She thought about that. “I’m not sure if the baby’s mine. She left and...” He sighed. “I can’t say I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’ll be a father to Lee, I can see it, and you’ll be a father to...Gloria’s—” Filippo nodded uncomfortably, “—to Gloria’s baby, if it’s yours. You’ll be in his life, Fili, and you’ll be in my heart, but that’s all it can be. I could never be the other woman, you know that.”

Filippo understood that feeling, even if he’d only experienced it falsely in relation

to Cassie. His throat was strangely tight. "Yes."

He left around one in the morning, making arrangements to come by the following evening. He had a lot to think about, a lot to explain, and a lot to talk to his father about. She didn't kiss him goodbye—he hadn't expected she would.

* * * *

Cassie spent the next couple of weeks with Filippo, and yet she was also not with him, all at the same time. It was safe to say that it was pretty much torture, and that was *without* listening to the shocked and constant ramblings provided by Jen, but at the end of their discussions about it, she always ended with an, "I'm sure it'll all work out for the best." Jen never sounded too sure though, and neither was Cassie. To be honest, she was fed up of not being sure. Filippo would be a father to Aurelio, and that was that. From now on, she wasn't going to let her feelings come into it at all.

They were on the patio again, the same as they had been two weeks ago, minus one person in particular who had been cautioned by the police for his behavior. Cassie hoped she had seen the last of him. It was strange, she thought, that she could write somebody out of her life who had once meant the world to her, but her world with Mike had been small.

Cassie looked across at Filippo whose strong tall figure was having trouble trying to turn over the sausages on the barbecue. Alberto was laughing his see-sawing laugh, standing idly by with a small bottle of *San Miguel*, not helping at all. Jen and Carl were half hidden behind the conifers Cassie had planted to shade the pond at the bottom of the garden. They apparently had something important to discuss. Cassie reckoned they just wanted an excuse to grope each other out of sight.

Aurelio murmured against her dress. More baby spit. She'd given up bothering to sponge or change clothes after the first few weeks. She was destined to be a mess for the foreseeable future—a mess that smelled of baby spit at that.

Alberto was shouting at Filippo in Spanish. Cassie had begun to pick up a few words here and there, when listening to him sing Aurelio to sleep before he crept out the house, or moments such as these between a different father and son.

As far as she could discern, Alberto was being a back-seat-barbecuer.

"Papa! You do it then!" Filippo shouted, half a sausage disappearing down the grill. He attempted to pluck it out with his bare fingers. The subsequent "Yow!" was not expected.

Alberto bent over laughing and then came over to Cassie. "You want more *cerveza*?" he asked her.

Cassie smiled, getting up from her seat and bringing her empty glass of water, the mostly melted ice cubes still knocking about against its sides. "In the kitchen, under the sink." He kissed her hand dramatically and stumbled inside.

"Is because cooking is woman's work," Filippo said when she came up to him.

She kicked his sandal with her foot. "You say that about everything you're useless at, I suppose?"

“Pretty much.”

Cassie picked up the tongues and plucked out the charred sausage, resting it back on the grill, so aware of his large frame towering above hers. It was as if their bodies were opposite magnets, pulling together, repelled only by circumstance. “You insisted you wanted to be the cook.”

He shrugged. “A modern man not afraid of his feminine side.”

It was an automatic reaction, born out of the familiarity they had started to feel around each other. Whatever the cause behind it, Cassie reached out and tugged the ends of his long, golden-brown hair. “Obviously,” she said, suggesting that his long hair proved he wasn’t afraid of his “feminine side.” She had started out smiling, but that soon faded and she moved her hand away.

Cassie felt Filippo want to touch her, but she also felt his indecision, and his respect for the space she had asked for. Holding Aurelio against her shoulder with one hand, she gave his father the glass of ice cubes. “It’ll cool the burning.”

“It won’t,” he said pointedly.

Cassie had turned away. Now she turned back, but he shook his head and resumed his vigil over their burning food. She noticed he now picked up the tongs that she had used for the first time.

“Is starting,” Alberto said, appearing from inside the house clutching three beers in his fingers. “You certain you are wanting to watch?”

“Of course, papa,” Filippo said, “I just finish my woman’s work. Three burgers for you, Cassie?”

“Don’t be cheeky.”

“You need feeding up, no?” Alberto said, nudging her and opening one bottle with his teeth. He gave it to Cassie.

“Thanks.”

Filippo went back and forwards with different combinations of burned food for different people. He called Jen and Carl for theirs, too, who slunk back like a couple of teenagers, holding hands. Cassie thought how good it was to see them together. Her friend deserved this happiness after such a “dry spell” as she put it, but it did reinforce the fact that she herself was alone. Still she knew she should be grateful Filippo was in their lives at all, for Aurelio’s sake if nothing else.

They all crowded around the small table and the smaller portable positioned under the umbrella. Aleksey Ivankov, the man Filippo should have played in the first round, was making his first shock entrance on the final Sunday at Wimbledon.

“Should have been you, no?” Alberto said, tapping one thick finger against the table top.

“No, papa,” Filippo said and Cassie found herself breathless as his green eyes focused in on her. She busied herself with Lee, kissing his head, checking to make sure he wasn’t too flushed, but everybody had seen the look.

Three amazingly simple sets later, Ivankov claimed his first victory at the tender age of twenty one. Gloria who had been sat in the player's box the whole time looked suitably proud.

"And what a sensational championships this has been, Pete," the commentator was saying.

"Yes, Joe, in more than one sense of the word. Let's not forget Ivankov was supposed to meet Fernandez in the very first round—with Fernandez going into it as very much the favorite. One can't help but wonder if the Spaniard had to withdraw 'for personal reasons'—"

"And the less said about that the better."

"Indeed, but it's likely it might have been a very different story here on this fine day at Wimbledon's Centre Court."

"Quite possible, and judging from Fernandez's form going into the tournament, it could have been a Spaniard lifting this cup here today."

"But such is life."

Eyes went immediately to Filippo, who was quietly gulping down the last dregs of his beer. He winked at Cassie, and she smiled. "It just wasn't the right time this year, that's all."

"Next year," Alberto said gruffly.

Filippo nodded deeply. "That's right."

The commentators' voices came into focus yet again. "...and Ivankov must feel like he's the luckiest man in the world. Whatever our thoughts on it, you can't deny the pair are well suited, and with Aleksey and Gloria announcing their engagement, and that they are going to try for a baby soon after the wedding. One wishes them the best of luck, although one's heart goes out to Ivankov's wife Lynne, who left him when she found out he was in love with Gloria, who was previously engaged to Filippo Fernandez. Phew! Who says tennis is boring?"

There was profound silence on an English patio at that moment, just the barbecue destroying the remnants of abandoned meat and one lone bird shrilling lazily in the heat.

"More beer," Alberto said and scraped back his chair, disappearing inside the house.

"If you'll excuse me, Cassie—Jen, Carl. I think there's something I need to clear up."

Cassie was breathing heavily, not wanting to hope, not wanting to fully admit that her hopes and her life were so entangled with Filippo's. For Lee's sake, she had to be strong. Standing, Filippo looked at Cassie, looked down, and back up again. He left without a word because there were no right words.

Carl took a deep breath once Filippo disappeared out of the back gate. "Well, Jen and I are getting married, too, if that's any consolation."

Jen looked as if she wanted to whack him over the back of the head. He flinched

as if he suspected she was about to, but instead she closed her eyes. “What’d I tell you? When the time’s right, I said. Does this seem like the right time to you? Seriously?”

“Any time is the perfect time when I’m with you,” Carl murmured, saving himself. Jen visibly softened.

Cassie’s face erupted with smiles. “Jen! Would you leave him alone? Of course, it’s the right time. What’s the point in waiting if you’ve decided you want to be together?”

“We have, more’s the pity,” Jen muttered. Carl chuckled her chin, teasing out a smile.

“Oh, congratulations!” Cassie embraced them both in turn with one arm, the other still holding Lee. Jen was subjected to two squeezes. It just went to show something good always did come out of something bad. Maybe she would have her own good news that day, too. “Alberto! More beer!” she cried. Maybe.

Chapter Sixteen

The bride looked beautiful, multi-colored curls and all. Beneath her vintage off-white wedding dress, which she'd picked up in the charity shop in town, Jen wore her usual Doc Martins. She'd had the boots buffed especially and the dress cropped so her efforts would be visible. Her shocking bouquet of tight red roses completed the eclectic look. It was Jen all over. Carl wanted their vows to be unique—he tried to convince her that she should wait for him to come down the aisle in his stilts. A girl has to draw the line somewhere.

Cassie's maid of honor outfit was much more traditional. It was a long, lilac silk dress that complimented her hair and added to the rich, striking tones of Jen's august wedding.

"Do you, Jennifer Henrietta Thompson, take Carl Benford to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Cassie glanced back to look at Filippo. He was in the second row with Aurelio, who was sleeping again. Cassie was glad that he had made it back from his latest tournament just in time, via going out in the semi finals. Otherwise, she would have had to leave the child with her mother. That was something of a last option, considering her mother was loathe to ever give him back. He was such a good baby, though that it wasn't surprising. However, the other reason she was glad to have him back was simply because she'd missed him. It turned out Gloria had lied about the baby and quite a few other things besides—like her long term affair with Aleksey. She'd stolen the pregnancy results from Lynne, who was understandably devastated. The tennis world was buzzing with the sensation, becoming rather like a soap opera since Gloria's introduction. Most didn't like the change, but the sensation would die down and the increased interest in tennis couldn't be denied.

"I do," said Jen.

Carl was the one who was about to cry. Jen cast Cassie a quick roll-of-the-eyes, but she could tell the woman was equally emotional, as was she.

“You may now kiss the bride.”

The guests applauded as Jen smooched Carl energetically and tugged him down the aisle. “She’s in a hurry!” a few of the old-timers quipped, only to be jabbed in the ribs by their wives. The bells of the local church began to toll, and the air started to swirl with confetti. It was a beautiful day. Filippo appeared at Cassie’s side, looking gorgeous in an olive green suit and a crisp white shirt that showed off his coloring. Many of the guests were looking more at him than the bride and groom, who were now being forced to pose awkwardly for photographs. Rather than making her jealous, it made Cassie proud that Filippo stood next to her, carrying her child. She tried to remind herself she had no right to feel that way, since after the discovery about Gloria, things were still unresolved between the two of them. Filippo had pretty much had to leave straight away, being registered in consecutive tournaments for the next month or so. Even now, he was only here for the day before he would have to jet off to Stuttgart, a place which held bitter-sweet memories for Cassie. They’d had no time to show each other how they felt, if indeed Filippo really did think of her as anything more than the mother of his son.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” he whispered into her ear, the gesture making her feel special in front of so many admiring female eyes. The best part was that Filippo did not seem to notice the attention, not like Mike who had always pretended to give her his full interest, but who was always preening for his audience.

“What?” It sounded like something fun, a secret.

“You look beautiful.”

Cassie gave him her how-original look, but was nevertheless pleased. “Thank you.”

“Other than that though, there is something I have to talk to you about.”

This did not sound fun. It seemed serious. “Why, what’s wrong?”

He shook his head mysteriously. “I’ll tell you after the reception.”

“Oh, come on, you can’t do that!”

“I can,” Filippo said, looking absurdly smug. “And I will.” He stole a quick kiss on the cheek before heading off to introduce himself and Aurelio to all and sundry.

Cassie shook her head, but she was smiling. Yet all through the reception, the meal, the toasts, the speeches—even the fabulous desserts—she felt like an excited school girl. What could he want to tell her? What might the kiss have meant? Was it a prelude to something? She tried, without much success, to refrain from thinking about it too much.

After the meal there was a two-hour wait where Filippo drove.

“I know.”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

“Him, I suppose. Me? The right time...I don’t know!”

“Cass, hon, sometimes you have to give fate a little helping hand. What? Why’re you smiling like that?”

Cassie blinked thoughtfully, her smile becoming infectious. She knew what she had to do. "It's just, well, funnily enough, that's what Filippo said, too."

* * * *

Cassie found Filippo chatting with a group of women at one side of the dance floor near the buffet table. The fan club spanned all generations, without prejudice. Young girls twisted their ringlets, women looked at him out of the corner of their eyes, and grandmothers brazenly felt his biceps and asked for autographs on their paper plates. He took it all in his stride. Cassie was grinning as she made her way over. Instead of the roll-in-the-gut stomach churning she felt when Mike had been caught in similar situations, she felt nothing but pride. The difference was she'd *known* Mike was too weak to say no. Filippo, on the other hand, was strong and moral, and he loved her, which was why she was about to take her life into her own hands. She'd given birth. How hard could this be?

"Excuse me, ladies, but do you mind if I borrow him for just a moment? It's very important," Cassie interjected, taking Filippo's hand and leading him away.

"As long as you bring him straight back, dear," one of the older ladies quipped.

"My heroine," Filippo said, putting a hand to his breast.

"I try."

"So what is so important you must tear me away from my harem?"

"Watch it!" She pushed against the hand she was still holding. God, how good it felt to fit her hands into his long, strong fingers and feel her skin against his smooth, dry palms.

There was love in his sparkling eyes when he winked at her to show he was teasing, wasn't there? Cassie's heart was drumming all out of sync as she led the way out of the disco area.

"Wait now. Where are we going?"

Filippo stopped her, and his doing so almost arrested her bravery, too. She ploughed on. "I told you, it's important, and I want to say it somewhere I don't have to shout."

"But we just get here. You don't want to miss The First Dance, do you?"

"No, but I've made my mind up, so stop trying to talk me out of it."

"Out of what? Have you decided to trade me in for a newer model?"

Cassie did not share in his amusement. She pulled him out of the hotel's open double doors and into the night. Some guests had already had the same idea, enjoying the cool and having a drink and a cigarette outside.

"Cassie, seriously, I think we should go back inside."

She let go of his hand. "Why're you so bothered?"

He shrugged and avoided her eyes. "Oh, you know, don't want to miss anything."

She frowned. “But I told you, I’ve got something I need to say.”

Filippo’s eyes flickered back to the doors again, but then his face visibly relaxed. He nodded, giving her his attention. “Go on.”

“Not here.” Cassie hooked a finger through one of the belt loops on his trousers and drew Filippo around the side of the building. There was nobody there, although they could still hear the general chatter, the deep-throated and occasionally raucous laughter of men, and the thud of the bass from the disco indoors.

His initial tension, whatever its cause, was gone. Filippo’s interest was peaked, particularly when Cassie backed him against the wall, stretched up on her tiptoes and put one hand over his eyes. “Ready?” she asked, voice high with nerves.

“I wouldn’t be allowed to call myself a hot-blooded male if I wasn’t.”

“This is serious. Now, what do you see?” she asked.

A pause. “Nothing—your hand’s over my eyes.”

“But what do you see?”

“You.”

It was the answer she had been hoping for and, if she was truly honest, had half expected. What she hadn’t expected was for Filippo to turn the tables on her, literally. In one swift movement he pinned her against the brick. His eyes had the look of a man who knew exactly what his body did to a woman, but below that and through it was deep affection and respect. One hand went over her eyes then, and Filippo did not have to stretch.

“And what do you see, Cassie?”

Her body ached for his, and she felt his own stir. It was overwhelming. “You.”

Filippo drew his hand away. She blinked. “Now, what do you see?” Cassie frowned and began to shake her head. When Filippo smiled, every single part of him seemed to echo the sentiment. It was like being bathed in sunshine. “What do you see?”

“Still you—I don’t—” She laughed nervously. “I don’t understand.”

At the same time, both Cassie and Filippo heard the ear-screaming whistle of a microphone that was too close to speakers. The music seemed to have stopped. Filippo raised his eyebrows and tugged her back inside. “Then let me explain.”

Inside Cassie found she was right. The music had stopped. Not only that, but most of the guests had assembled in the disco area, around the stage. The lights were half-up, and only the stage area was spotlighted. Those that weren’t there were now being ushered in by girls in burgundy blazers and ties. Poor things, Cassie thought absently.

There was no more time for idle thoughts when Cassie spotted her mother and Aurelio in his pram near the small stage. She was crying. Slipping out of Filippo’s grasp, Cassie dashed over, her only concern that of her child. “Mum, what’s wrong? Is he okay? What’s happened?”

Her mother, for once, was at a loss for words. She simply offered a watery smile,

biting her bottom lip. Cassie peeked under the blankets; Lee was sleeping soundly. The kid could sleep through the end of the world, she was convinced, but the main thing was he seemed fine. He wasn't even flushed.

A hand on her shoulder. Cassie whirled. "I wanted everybody to be here. I wanted you to remember."

"Fili?" She shook her head. Why was everybody looking at her? Why was everybody on the verge of tears? She found Jen and Carl at the opposite side of the stage, glued together, their heads resting against each others', and on the stage, she now saw, was the owner of the microphone.

"Cassie Miller?" the man asked into the microphone. In the now church-quiet hall, his voice sounded deafening.

Don't say yes, she told herself. Whatever you do, don't say yes—he'll want you to play some ridiculous party game—probably involving balloons and your teeth—and make a fool of yourself, and it's all Filippo's fault. Mental note: hate him for this. Forever. "Yes?"

"Sure?"

A ripple of laughter went through the some two hundred-strong crowd. *Oh, God, the humiliation's started already.* "Er, yes."

"Then I'm going to need you up here, I'm afraid."

Me, too. Throwing Filippo daggers, Cassie took the deejay's hand and stepped up onto the stage, hoping her dress wouldn't be see-through in the bright lights. "Do you know why you're here?" the deejay asked.

Stunned, Cassie shook her head. She was about to say no when she spotted another familiar face she hadn't expected to see here tonight. "Alberto?" The small but statuesque Spaniard raised his glass in recognition.

"Is my fault," another voice said into the microphone.

In the bright lights, Cassie hadn't noticed Filippo slip up onto the stage behind her. She glanced around and jumped.

"All yours," the deejay said and handed over the microphone.

"Don't worry. I asked Jen's permission. She assures me we're not 'stealing her thunder'."

"What are you doing?"

"She wants to know what I'm doing," Filippo addressed the crowd, then looked at Cassie. "I told you I would explain—look over there."

Frowning Cassie followed Filippo's finger, as did another spotlight. *What on earth is going on here?* Her gaze landed on a huge poster on the far side of the dance floor. It read:

GAME, SET, LOVE-MATCH?

Now Cassie was frustrated—she hated being in the dark. She turned to look at

Filippo, or where Filippo should have been, determined to get some answers once and for all.

But Filippo was on the floor. On one knee, to be exact.

Her hands went to her mouth, and the tears came to her eyes.

“I wanted everyone to see you the way I do,” he said. “You’re the centre of this room, and you’re the centre of my life. I wanted everyone to know how I feel about you. I wanted everybody to know that when I close my eyes, I see you. When I look into the future, I see you, and when I look at you now, your beauty, your goodness, is so blinding that I can barely see at all.”

Cassie’s face crumpled up. *Bet he wished he wasn’t seeing this*, she thought, as the tears leaked out of her eyes and down the hands that still covered her face. “Oh, my God,” she murmured through her fingers.

“Cassie,” he began.

“Here?” she asked, disbelieving, smiling through her tears. “Now?”

“What better time to start the rest of your life than right now?”

Cassie held her breath, catching it again when he took a ring out of his pocket. The diamond glittered like sun on ice, but it could have been out of a cracker for all she cared. “Cassie Miller,” he said his own eyes brighter, impossibly, than the diamond, “will you marry me?”

Chapter Seventeen

“Welcome back,” Filippo said, as he steered the skiff onto the shore of Los Tigos. Christmas was an even quieter time than storm season, and Filippo said they would have the island to themselves.

“Where we first met,” Cassie said, knowing full well.

Filippo helped her off the boat. “You drove me crazy. Still do.”

Cassie looked hurt, but Filippo took his fiancée in his arms right then and there, laying her onto the fine, golden sand.

“What are you doing?”

The heat was not in the air this time, but it was in the electricity between their bodies. This was the first real break they’d had. The tennis season was now over, submissions were on hiatus at *A&L*, and even devoted parents needed a break once in a while. It was not that Aurelio was a difficult baby, but it was good to rediscover themselves and not think in terms of “mummy” and “daddy” anymore. Jen and Carl were watching the baby on the mainland, until the guests came over tomorrow afternoon for the big occasion. Cassie suspected they saw it as practice for their own child.

Right now Cassie revelled in Filippo’s body atop of her own. This was her husband to be, the father of her child. This beautiful, sensuous, passionate man. Their lust had blossomed into love and had become all the stronger for it. Filippo propped himself up, hands in the sand, so that he could gaze at her. Just that look was enough. To see those brilliant emerald green eyes burn as they discovered all over again her eyes, her cheeks, her lips, was mesmerizing.

“We shouldn’t be doing this, spending the night together before the wedding. It’s scandalous—my mother’s having a fit.”

“All the more reason we should be doing this then, and no offence, but I don’t really want to be talking of your mother.”

And then his lips met hers, tasting of salt. His tongue went no way to quenching her thirst for him whatsoever, but rather served as an appetizer for another sort of welcome intrusion. One she felt pressing against her stomach, full of promise. Familiarity had not bred boredom but craving. They made love intimately, with a freedom and an honesty only true lasting emotion could bring. It was a love as vast as the ocean over Filippo's broad shoulders and as infinite as the sand beneath their bodies.

As the sun changed and the sky grew red and the ocean sparkled in the dying light, they turned inwards to each other. Naked, they traced the lines of each other's bodies, taking the odd kiss, the odd nuzzle. They took pleasure in the silence, in stroking a belly and making it flinch or smiling and laughing when nothing was funny. When it was dark, they went back onto the boat and made love again, their movements rocking the back of the skiff so it undulated as they did.

In the morning, Filippo stirred Cassie with a kiss to the throat before his mouth went elsewhere and stirred her awake. A while later, they walked lazily hand in hand towards the villa, their stomachs empty but neither feeling hungry.

"I should be getting ready," Cassie said dreamily, letting her arms brush against his as they walked. "I should be stressing out, trying on my dress and complaining it's too tight."

"I'd marry you if you were not wearing a thing." He left a kiss on her shoulder.

She bumped him playfully with her hip. "I bet you would."

"In fact, maybe we should change the dress code."

Cassie giggled, enjoying the warm sunshine and the freedom of loose, floaty holiday clothes. It was not scorching, but it was definitely not Peckham. "No, thanks, I'm a big fan of Alberto's, but there's only so close you want to get to a person, other than your husband, that is."

Filippo's next look was long and reverent. He leaned close and whispered, "That sounds nice," as if it was a secret, even though they were as yet the only ones on the island. Cassie blinked, thinking about how it would feel to be this man's wife, but there was time for her emotion later that evening, when the dress was on and her mum was not even struggling to retain the tears, and Filippo told all the people he loved and all the people she loved, Cassie especially, that he would cherish her for the rest of his life, and meant it. "So what is of so much importance that you drag me here—?"

"Against your will."

"Against my will, to come and see only hours before our wedding."

"When I brought you to the bus station that day, after the first time we were together, I came back here to stay for a while. I still had some time off, and I was determined to make the best of it, seeing as you'd ruined most of my holiday anyway."

Cassie pushed Filippo off balance, and he scooped her up, twisting her easily upside down. "You, miss, should be reported for cruelty to grooms! Do you promise to give up your dastardly husband-bashing ways for ever and ever as long as we both shall live?"

Cassie roared with laughter, stupidly trying to keep her skirt down over her bikini. “I do not!” Filippo pretended to drop her. She screamed, although she knew she was safe. “Okay, okay, I do! I promise!”

Filippo righted her and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “So anyway, you are having to come and see this, *against your will*, because is my wedding present to you.”

“It is? Oh, no, but I didn’t get you anything.”

He laughed. “I disagree, but is my wedding present that I get the day I met you a year and a half ago. See, when you left, I stayed here on the island. Firstly, I wanted to deal with Carlos, and I promised I would tell his little girl just what his father was if I ever found out he so much as sneezed on another woman without apologizing, but...” Filippo went ahead to the villa, his feet slapping lightly against the tiled floor. As he walked, he threw open curtains here and there, light creaming into the cozy shadows.

“What?” she asked, catching up and slipping her arm round his waist.

“This.” Filippo pushed open the door to his studio.

The light was good enough that she could see the curtains blocking out the morning sun, but in the centre of the room, was a woman. Polished to a high shine, the figure was all flowing lines and rhythm, a waterfall of curves, a goddess in clay. Her clothes dripped off her shoulders, molding as though wet to a strong but feminine form. Her hair streamed behind her, as if in the face of some fierce gale, and her eyes were majestic, mysterious and direct. They did not peek out shyly. They were arresting. Bold...beautiful.

Cassie had taken a few steps forward. Now Filippo came up behind her, his breath tickling the tiny hairs on the nape of her neck and making her shiver exquisitely. It was the same way she had felt when she first saw him.

“This was the woman who made me trek through torrential rains to find her.”

She looked at him, words not coming easily. Finally, “This is how you saw me?”

He smiled, and she would bet her heart stopped—just briefly. His fingers caressed her cheek as if she was a precious, beautiful gold. “It’s how I’ll *always* see you.”

Filippo’s focus on the word “always” let Cassie know that this magic was real, this love would last, her dream man would be by her side even when she was awake. Cassie was aware how special Filippo was—nations had taken to the tennis courts after his meteoric rise to fame at Wimbledon a year and a half ago had made them sit up and take notice. Filippo was a recognized success, a star.

Trembling, Cassie’s fingers touched her own cheek of clay, and she bit her lip, eyes watering. This was proof that Cassie was her own star, of how special Filippo thought she was. “I can’t believe you did this, after just one meeting.”

“You made an impression,” he said and drew her close. “An everlasting one.”

“You know,” said Cassie, taking his fingers in her hand and smiling at the promise, “this would make such a good story.”

“But how does it end?” he asked.

“It doesn’t, it just begins.” She kissed his nose. “Again.” This time she kissed his gorgeous lips, fingers sneaking once again under his shirt. “And again.”

Epilogue

Game, Set, Love-Match
By Cassie Miller-Fernandez

“And what a journey it’s been for the young Spaniard, Joe.”

“What a year indeed, Pete. Last year he made history at Wimbledon, but for all the wrong reasons, by being the only person to forget about his match.”

“Although that wasn’t strictly true, was it? He’d gone off to see the beautiful young woman, who we can now see from our commentary box and their child, who he apparently didn’t even know about. Whoever said tennis and the people in it were boring is obviously watching a different game.”

“And since then everything has gone so right for Fernandez, his lovely wife Cassie, his one year old...Aurelio, I think you pronounce it—and now, here he is at match point, two sets all, five-three *and* with a point on his opponents serve.”

“Who is, not to mention, the defending champion and the man who the Spaniard’s previous fiancée is now with. I think it’s safe to say though that the crowd are behind Fernandez. There’s just something about this stylish Spaniard, the passion he puts into every shot, that the British people are appreciating. Who’ve you got your money on, Joe?”

“At this point you’d have to say the Spaniard, but Fernandez has never been in a Wimbledon final before, and Ivankov, as you say, has already won it. All it takes is a slight tightening up for Fernandez to miss this chance and choke on his own serve. Who knows, Pete, but to get off the fence, I’m going to have to say Fernandez. That’s who I *want* to win—and I think the whole crowd feels the same.”

“Now, Ivankov steps up to the service line. He knows he needs to get his first serve in to stop Fernandez taking his title from him...”

Filippo sprang up and down, trying to stay alert and not get flat. Many people were championing this match as a personal vendetta. They thought he would want to make Ivankov pay for what had happened between him and Gloria, but that couldn't be further from the truth. The pair of them seemed happy together, and Filippo hadn't given it another thought.

He glanced up into the player's box, eyes not finding Gloria but Cassie, Aurelio and Alberto. Aurelio was fairly oblivious, and Cassie had worried whether his first time going to see daddy play should not have been on the final Sunday at Wimbledon—she didn't want the baby's crying to distract him, but Filippo had wanted him there. Nevertheless, Cassie's mother had watched the baby in the wings until the final set. Cassie, on the other hand, was the opposite of oblivious. He could see she was trying not to look tense, but her tight smile betrayed it. For that he loved her all the more. The passion she had sparked in him had extended to so many different parts of his life, and he wanted this match with a ferociousness he didn't think he possessed.

Cassie waved a little sign that she had written in her steadily improving Spanish. It said *por me, por Lee, ma por tu*. Literally translated, it meant “for me, for Lee, but for you”. Filippo knew what she meant; “win this for me, for Lee, but above all for yourself”. His heart swelled at that moment. He felt calm and centered and in control, and from that point everything seemed to go into slow motion.

Filippo hunkered down to better read Ivankov's serve. The Russian tossed the ball, the racquet head thundering down atop it. Filippo guessed right. He darted out to the centre line, got in position and whipped the ball back with as much pace as Ivankov had given it. The ball sailed for the base line. Ivankov had left it, thinking it was out.

And now the world and Filippo watched. This was the moment he had been striving for his entire life. This was the day, the occasion that he had been dreaming about. This was what all that hard work and all those heart breaks had been preparing him for. Except, as the linesman made his signal, pronouncing his decision on whether the ball was good or not, Filippo looked at Cassie just as Cassie looked at him. Though he wanted this win with his every breath, Filippo knew that, in or out, his heart would not be broken. It would never be broken again, ever.

GAME, SET, LOVE-MATCH

THE END

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Game, Set, Love-Match is Sarah's first contemporary romance.

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