



Finding Paradise

Emma Petersen & Crystal Jordan © 2006

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## **Finding Paradise**

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### **Finding Paradise**

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## Emma Petersen & Crystal Jordan

### Dedication

Crystal would like to dedicate this book to her critique partner Emma, without whom this story would never have been finished. Working with Emma made this story far better than it would have been as a solo effort. Also, without the urging of Eden Bradley, the concept behind *Finding Paradise* would never have seen the light of day. Thanks, ladies!

Emma would like to thank her critique partner, Sassy aka Crystal. The exasperating brat of a little sister she never had, for brushing her teeth on the phone and threatening to pay someone to do obscene things to her shoes. And also to Eden Bradley, who pushed me when I needed pushing. Shelli Stevens, for cheering when I needed cheering, Lacy Danes for the shoulder and ear and Feisty for being the feistiest! And last but not least...*mi familia, sobre todo mis hermanas, sobrinos y cuñados! Sin ti, no puedo respirar! Gracias para todo tu amor.*

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### Chapter One

*Tambopata, Peru*

"You are not coming, Dr. Málaga." Irritation made Ian's usually indiscernible brogue thicken. He stood glaring at her, with his muscular arms crossed over a drool-worthy chest.

Not that Elena noticed, or so she told herself.

"The hell you say!" Elena shoved her hand through her short dark hair, wishing it were Ian's. Only she wouldn't muss it, she would pull it, hard. Maybe that would get through to him and make him see she was an adult, not a child to be ordered about. She hoped he'd give up on this when they flew to Tambopata from Lima two days ago, but he had only become more insistent.

"Women do not belong in uncivilized areas." The words had become his mantra.

Elena poked a finger into his chest and winced as her digit hit hard muscle. "That's not your decision to make, Dr. Lucas. I was chosen for this team just like you. I'm just as capable and qualified as you are, and on top of that, I'm the only member of our team who speaks the language, so you need me!"

"You'll remain here at the base camp to coordinate our explorations."

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She snorted. Their base camp was a New Age hotel specializing in eco-tourism that took on scientists who needed short-term lodging. "And who'll communicate with the guides? You?"

A muscle began ticking in his jaw and she swore she could hear his teeth grind together. "I'll be ready to go with the team at dawn." Elena walked away; satisfied she got the last word. She'd make damn sure the guides knew not to start without her. She wouldn't put it past the stubborn man to depart early just so she'd miss them.

*Sleep with a man once and he thinks he owns you for life.* Elena stomped back to her lodge to check her equipment. She ran a mental checklist of everything she needed while still fuming about Dr. Neanderthal. Ian was her sometimes rival, one time-lover, yet what she really knew about him could fit on a Tic-Tac. They'd slept together while completing a short project during graduate school, but neither had pursued a relationship with each other after he'd returned to England. All their interactions focused on the scholarly matters of their careers or sex.

Elena refused to let his bad attitude ruin this trip for her. Excitement fluttered through her as she ran the primary objective of this expedition through her mind. Find the *Paradiso* flower. Local medicine men claimed the rare blossom had curative properties, and Dr. Moretti, her late mentor, had thought it might hold the key to curing certain types of cancer. Aside from finding *Paradiso*, they were to collect other unidentified plant species. In Peru there were hundreds of vascular plants indigenous only to the Tambopata region.

A grin spread over her face until Ian passed by her window on the way to his own lodge. Her good mood evaporated as quickly as it had come. She'd like to beat him senseless with his caveman club. Most of the time Ian was a rational man. Only mentioned women in fieldwork and he turned into a slaving misogynist.

This wasn't her first foray into fieldwork. She was more than qualified for the outing. Damn him for being just like every other man in her field.

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Thunderclouds gathered on the horizon, obscuring the murky light of dawn. Elena shivered, even though the usual heavy mugginess had thickened to such a degree it felt like she was breathing underwater. The Jeep sat on the edge of a clearing, surrounded by lush, verdant undergrowth. She loved Peru, it was in her blood, and her family was from here. Her father had immigrated to California from Lima before she was born, but he insisted his children know their roots. They'd spent their summers with their *abuela* in the same house her father grew up. She never had learned to like the weather here; the humidity and constant rain were a huge change of pace from southern California. Not that she'd ever say a word to Ian. He'd just use it as another reason why women should sit at home knitting. She shifted uncomfortably, trying to breathe deep in the thick air. Her clothes clung to her damp flesh as she watched Ian pack the Jeep. Watching his backside flex as he bent was not the way to begin this journey, but she couldn't make herself look away.

From the first time she had seen him there had been something there. Deny it as she may, it was still there, buzzing along the surface. Ian wasn't handsome, not in the classical sense. The bridge of his nose was a bit crooked, giving the impression that he'd been in more than his share of bar fights. But nothing was further from the truth, he was an academic through and through and despite his chauvinistic manner, a gentle man.

He had the slight ruddy tan of a naturally pale man who spent a lot of time outdoors. His hair was a dark auburn, with just the hint of curl to it. He had the lean build of a long distance runner, and she remembered fondly the kind of stamina he had. She wondered if he'd gotten even better with age, but squashed the errant thought. That kind of thinking was dangerous. They weren't graduate students slaving toward their PhDs anymore. He was her team leader and he didn't want her here.

Thunder cracked in the distance and her body jerked. Ever since she was a little girl, she'd hated storms. The lighting and the noise terrified her with its violence. She hurried to load her pack in the Jeep and tried not to think about it.

One of their guides greeted her. "*Hola, Profesora Málaga.*"

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"*Buenos Dias, Señor Vela.*" She smiled as she answered the younger of the two guides who would be joining them.

"Good morning, Elena." Angus flung an arm around her shoulder, favoring her with a grin full of practiced charm. Returning the smile, she dipped out from under his arm. Friendship was one thing, but she didn't want to encourage familiarity, or give Angus the wrong idea.

Dr. Angus Reed and Dr. Etienne Toussaint rounded out the team of scientists. Angus specialized in jungle exploration in Africa, and Etienne worked in Indonesia. This was both of their first foray into South America. Angus was loud, cheery and flirtatious whereas Etienne kept to himself and spoke little. His stellar reputation in the field spoke for him. He offered her a small smile, but remained silent.

"Right. Let's get on with it. We need to make camp before this storm hits." Ian didn't pause to glance at any of them before he climbed into one of the Jeeps, leaving everyone to clamor after him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elena knew she was in trouble the moment the first lightning bolt lit the sky, raising the hairs the back of her neck. Their mini caravan had just reached the area that would serve as their camping area when a flash of jagged light forked its way across the deepening darkness. Rivulets of sweat slipped down her temples as she helped unload the gear from the vehicles. They were quick to pitch tents and secure all the equipment so it wouldn't be damaged by the approaching storm.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elena was quiet during dinner; her appetite diminished as she toyed with her food and attempted to ignore the storm.

"Dr. Málaga and I will be pairing up for the remainder of the expedition." Ian's voice was almost muffled by a loud clap of thunder.

"Aw, Ian!" Angus whined.

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Elena glared at Ian, knowing this was some kind of trick to keep her from doing her job. Still, she translated what he said for both of the guides.

"I take it this means we'll be bunking together tonight."

It wasn't a question, but he answered anyway. "It makes sense, doesn't it?"

"You're the team leader." She turned away to talk to the guides.

Dear God, she had to deal with this storm with Ian lying a foot away from her in their tent. It was all she could do not to groan aloud. And she had to spend the next week alone with him, fighting him to be able to do her job properly and battling her constant attraction to him. Talk about doomed.

\* \* \* \* \*

They'd been in the tent for less than five minutes when the sky opened up, sending sheets of rain down on their camp. The violent wind shook the tents and the dark storm clouds overhead blocked any trace of the moon. They were in absolute darkness except for the occasional flash of lightening. The constant movement of the canvas walls made Elena nauseous.

She kicked off her boots in a hurry and shoved herself into her sleeping bag. Curling onto her side facing away from Ian, she clenched her eyes shut, blocking out the sight of the undulating fabric. She knew she wouldn't sleep through this, but Ian didn't need to know. Seconds ticked past like hours, her body strung tighter than the strings of a violin, she tried not to jerk at every booming crack of thunder. Swallowing, she fought her rising panic. Nothing bad was going to happen. She was safe in the tent. It couldn't hurt her in here. She was safe.

"Gah!" She screamed and lurched up when a hard hand closed over her shoulder. "*Mierda*. What the hell are you doing? Trying to give me a heart attack?"

Ian ignored her tone and stroked her shoulder. "Why didn't you tell me you were afraid of storms?"



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"And give you one more reason to leave me behind?" Pulling away from his touch, she tried to lie back down.

"Elena—"

Lighting and thunder exploded directly overhead, and she clenched her fists in the sleeping bag. Moisture beaded her forehead, her stomach roiled. Oh, God. She'd never make it through this night. Never, never, never.

"Don't think about it."

"Go. Away." Teeth clenched, she glared in the direction of his voice. The tent floor rustled as he moved. Good, at least the stubborn burro could listen.

Elena started as soft lips brushed hers. She froze and sucked in a breath, smelling the fresh scent of the rain combined with Ian's familiar essence. His hand splayed on her lower belly, his mouth insistent on hers. She tingled where his skin touched hers. Without any direction from her brain, her lips moved under his, her hand covered his, their fingers linking. Heat flashed through her, beading her nipples.

Thunder boomed and she trembled again, fear and passion vying for control of her racing heartbeat. Loosing herself in the taste of him, she deepened the kiss, moaning low in her throat as his tongue stroked hers.

She'd almost forgotten how good just kissing him made her feel. For five years she'd missed this, deliberately suppressing all thoughts of how amazing the chemistry was between them.

He moved to her ear, suckling it for a moment before he worked his way down to bite the base of her neck.

"More." She demanded as she tilted her head to give him better access.

His fingers lifted the edge of her shirt, skimming over her belly. Goose bumps erupted across her flesh, making her shiver. Hot moisture flooded between her thighs, and she arched against his muscled body. Pushing his hand down her stomach, beneath the waistband of her panties, she guided his fingers between her legs. Together they slid their fingers over her slick flesh, stroking her clit.

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"Jesus, Elena." The words were reverent, almost a prayer, as Ian's hand trembled against her.

She leaned back on her elbows and spread her legs as his sensual strokes became faster, more rhythmic. Her hips rose to meet every movement of his hand.

She moaned as pleasure spiked through her, but it wasn't enough. "Ian. *Por favor. Ahorita*," she begged, remembering he once said it turned him on hearing her speak Spanish when they made love. "Please. Now. I want you. Right now."

"Then why are you still dressed?" The words washed over her, rough and teasing as he removed his hand, sat up and jerked his shirt over his head.

She laughed, racing to get undressed. She'd just finished pulling her sports bra over her head when he was on her again, rolling them onto his sleeping bag with her straddling his waist.

"Want me to ride you, Ian?"

"Perhaps later. I had something else in mind for now."

She grinned in the darkness. "I'm game for anything."

"I hoped you would be...I want your mouth on me."

She began slithering down his body, loving the friction of his furred skin against her nipples. He checked her progress with a hand on her arm. "Not like that."

She hesitated. "There's another way to put my mouth on you?"

"Turnabout is fair play, isn't that what you Americans say?"

Ah, now she understood. "Just goes to show how smart Americans are."

"Let's put that smart mouth of yours to better use."

He groaned when she licked his nipple before twisting to straddle his shoulders. Positioning her mouth over his cock, she rubbed her cheek along its hard length, reveling in the warm musk of Ian's sensitive skin. She flicked her tongue and tasted a bead of moisture that had seeped from the plum shaped tip, before sucking it into her mouth.

She felt his hot breath against her inner thighs as he groaned, and her sex clenched in anticipation of his touch. The liquid heat of her arousal

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slid down the sides of her legs, and he lapped it up before placing his lips over her clit and drawing hard.

"Ian." she screamed, clenching her thighs on the sides of his face.

He chuckled, buzzing her clit.

"Oh, God." She pressed herself harder against his face.

Her hand wrapped around the base of his cock, squeezing. His hips came up to buck against her hand. She smiled, rolling the head of his cock under her chin before she sucked him in as far as she could take him.

"Elena," he panted out her name.

"Hmm..." She hummed on his dick, working her hand and mouth up and down the length of him, faster and faster.

One finger, then two, swirled inside of her. He trailed her moisture from her vagina to her anus, teasing the sensitive opening.

Gasping in shock, her mouth came off his cock. "Ian! What are you—" He flicked his tongue across her clit, distracting her while his finger plunged into her ass. Hot waves of pleasure shot through her until she felt light-headed.

"Ian." She arched her ass to take his finger deeper. He worked her harder, faster until she sobbed with the force of the mounting tension. Her legs shook, thighs quivering with the effort to stay upright. He pushed in a second finger and she came, contractions fisting her pussy, as wetness ran down her legs.

Collapsing, totally spent, she could feel him hard and heavy against her cheek.

She didn't have long to rest before Ian pulled her around so they lay chest to chest, and began stroking her back. His touch was more comforting than sexual, but when it came to Ian's touch her body refused to acknowledge the difference. Her muscles loosened, stretched, and time slowed as she resisted the urge to grind her softness against him.

"You didn't finish," she murmured against his neck.

He rolled her over swiftly, settling between her open thighs. "You can make it up to me later."

"Definitely." She pulled him down to her and kissed him, tasting Ian and the musky flavor of herself on his mouth.

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God, but the man could kiss. She'd never get enough. He reached between them and guided himself to her opening. Lifting her hips to make it easier, she moaned at the thick, hot slide of his flesh into hers. She delighted in every inch of him as he entered her.

He withdrew almost completely, and then thrust himself in to the hilt. Keeping up that slow, hard rhythm, driving her right to the edge of orgasm, but not letting her go over. Fire raced through her veins, her muscles tightening and screaming for release.

"Faster!" she pleaded as she raised her legs to wrap around his lean flanks, trying to push him into a swifter pace.

"No."

"What do you mean no?"

"I thought that word was fairly universal."

She could feel him smile as he buried his face in the side of her neck, licking down to her collarbone, and nipping little kisses to her shoulder, before he bit down. In retaliation, she raked her nails lightly down his back, just the way she knew he liked it. His heart pounded wildly, she could feel it where their chests pressed together. Their sweat mingled, slicking their flesh and making them glide together.

Every time his hips slammed into hers, she lifted and rotated her pelvis, coaxing him. "Faster, Ian. Please."

"Keep that up and I won't last much longer."

To show him just what she thought of that, on his next thrust, she squeezed her vaginal muscles, doing some stroking of her own. He shuddered. A harsh, primitive noise burst from his throat as he frantically reached between them and pressed down hard on her clitoris. The shifting of their bodies moved his fingers just enough to send her nerve endings screaming.

Sharp, pounding thrusts drove them higher and higher. Her pussy gathered and she could feel her orgasm rushing to claim her. They came together in a rush so powerful she saw starbursts swim in front of her eyes.

"Ian! *Carino!*" Knowing he was right there with her pushed her further, harder. He collapsed on her, rolled to keep from crushing her and flopped over on his back, sucking air in great gulping breaths.

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Yawning as satisfaction thrummed through her, Elena leveraged up to crawl into her own sleeping bag.

"Where're you going?" His hand around her bicep pulled her back to his front. They lay curled together for a moment as their breathing slowed and their heart rates calmed.

Just as she felt herself drifting off, he murmured, "I think the storm passed."

She grinned and snuggled back against him. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

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### Chapter Two

Elena woke to singing birds and aching muscles. Ian had put her through her paces the night before, fucking her again and again until she was too tired to do anything but gasp as he brought her to pleasure the last time. By then all thoughts of returning to her own sleeping bag were long gone as she slept peacefully cradled against his chest. She awoke one time during the night, but the warmth of Ian's arm leaning heavy against her back, lulled her again in to a restful slumber.

Morning found a languorous Elena stretched out on her stomach, her mind basking in the sensuous images from the night before. It was black as pitch in their tent last night and not so much as a shadow was cast. Not being able to see, they relied on their other senses. The smell, taste and feel of Ian were etched into her memory and she didn't mind one bit.

As she heard the camp stirring, Elena hurried to wash using the water Ian so thoughtfully left for her. *Perizosa*, lazy girl, she called herself silently. His sleeping bag, still warm from their bodies, called to her, tempting her to return to easy slumber. At that moment, the only thing she wanted more than wrapping herself in comforting fabric was to wrap herself in the comforting fabric with Ian.

Sighing, Elena finished dressing and joined the others for breakfast.

"*Professora*." The guides greeted her as one of them handed her a plate.

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*"Gracias y buenos dias."* She took the plate thankfully, the smell of food making her stomach growl. A blush stole across her face as she met Ian's eyes across the campfire. Ducking her head, she pretended she blushed because of her stomach's noisy demand for food.

"Morning, Elena. How did you sleep?" Her head turned in the direction of Angus' voice. As she looked at him she convinced herself she was imagining things and there was no way he knew just how little sleep she'd gotten the night before.

"Well," she answered. "And yourself?"

Angus guffawed and slapped Dr. Toussaint on the back. "Great! Despite old Etienne's snoring and the unfamiliar noises of this jungle."

"Yes, I'm sure Africa does sound a bit...different."

Elena looked at Ian and blushed again, praying that the "unfamiliar" jungle noises Angus spoke of weren't really her cries of passion.

It took a moment before she realized one of the guides was speaking to her. Translating for the group, she told Angus and Dr. Toussaint that the younger guide would be accompanying them because he spoke some broken English, while the one she translated for would guide her and Ian.

"All right then. Let's get to it," Ian ordered as he got up and started clearing the supplies used to prepare breakfast.

Swallowing her last bite of breakfast, she rose to help him. She was hoping for a few moments of privacy before the guide took them out into the wilderness. "Ian—"

"This can't interfere with our work." Ian stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

A bit stunned, Elena blinked. "I never thought that it would."

"Good, then we're agreed."

So much for her vague hope that they might explore the chemistry between them. She sighed. "Agreed, Dr. Lucas."

"You'll have to try and be quieter tonight so the guide doesn't hear."

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What? She started and glanced at him in surprise. "But, I thought—"

"Here's the last of it," Angus's booming voice interrupted as he tossed his plate into the washbasin.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Why do you think women can't do fieldwork? I've gone on several expeditions over the years. Some of my female colleagues go frequently. It's essential to our career development."

Elena had been trying without success for some time to engage Ian in conversation as they made their way through the jungle. Their guide scouted ahead for a likely place to camp for the night.

"Maybe I didn't want to be out here with a token."

Oh, that was just it. She propped her hands in her hips and blasted him. "Hey! I organized this expedition, Ian. I got the backing of the university and the funding from the pharmaceutical companies. I used my family contacts to secure the right to explore here. I was always going to be coming on the trip. We only recruited you for name recognition. If anyone here is a token, it's you!"

He bent over at the waist and literally howled with laughter. After a long moment, he wiped the mirth from his eyes. "Touché."

She grinned at his reaction. God, he was dangerous to her peace of mind. She adored a man with a sense of humor. Pulling off the cap, she saluted him with her canteen.

Ian sobered. "Do you know what the number one export of South American countries is? Drugs. A drug cartel doesn't care who you are, who your family is, or how qualified you are."

"Just like you, it's my choice to take that risk."

"The risks are higher for you. Stop being obstinate for a moment and—"

"Coming from the King of Burros, that doesn't hurt much."

Ian was momentarily distracted. "Did you just call me a burrito?"

Elena laughed. "No. I called you a burro. A donkey, because of your stubbornness."



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Taking advantage of the perplexed look on his face, Elena asked, "Why is it more dangerous for me, Ian?"

"Because you're a bloody woman!" His brows snapped together, irritation replacing his good humor.

Heat flushed her face, and she fought the need to yell back at him. "And you're a misogynistic bastard. I swear to God, I don't know what I ever saw in you." She had the brief satisfaction of watching him wince and pale at her words before his face went completely blank and he turned away.

She trailed after him, swatting vines out of her path. "You know, I get so sick of men telling me what I can and can't do. If I listened to all of you, I'd never have gone to college, never have gotten my doctorate, and certainly wouldn't be here now. And this is exactly where I want to be! So, you know what, Ian? You and everyone else who thinks that because I don't have a penis I'm not smart enough, or good enough, or determined enough can just go to hell."

Scrunching his face in response to her barrage of words, he shook his head. "Now wait just one damn minute, I never said those things about you or any other woman. My mum would have kicked my arse."

"She can get in line behind me," Elena snapped as she stomped away.

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### Chapter Three

She didn't understand him. He seemed to respect women. He listened when she spoke, expected her to carry her weight and contribute her ideas to their findings. Yet he remained adamant that she shouldn't be here...just because she was a woman. It didn't make sense. She sighed, knowing it would bother her until she solved the puzzle.

While he took his turn on the machete, cutting a swath through the foliage, she kept an eye open for the unique coloring of the *Paradiso* flower and any other interesting plants. But a part of her mind wandered over the mystery of Ian Lucas. In the end, there was little she could do about his attitude towards women in fieldwork. As much as she liked him, she knew better than to think she could change him.

"Stay where you can see us," Ian called to her.

"Fine," she replied as she scouted the area around their campsite in concentric half-circles, spying interesting species and collecting samples. She glanced back now and then to make sure she could see the others. The ground dropped away in a sharp cliff and stopped her outward movement. A small silvery-green plant clinging to the cliff edge caught her eye. She dropped her pack and fished out her camera to get a better look at the plant through the lens. Squatting down, she snapped several pictures. Remarkable. An undocumented species. Too far down for her to reach, but perhaps Ian could manage. She swiveled on her knees to call to him when big hands yanked her upright and shook her hard.

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"Eep," she squeaked in alarm before she caught sight of Ian attached to the crushing grip. Of course, when she got a good look at his furious face some of her relief faded. "What's wrong?"

"Didn't I tell you to stay where I could see you?"

Jerking away from him she replied, "I did!"

He glanced back to see that she was telling the truth. There was a clear view back to the Jeep.

"What is wrong with you?"

Ian took a deep breath and looked as if he was trying to resist strangling her. Frustrated, she slapped her palm flat against his chest and pushed him.

"*Ya! No puedo mas.* I've had enough, do you hear me? I put up with this kind of behavior from my brothers and my father because they're family and you can't choose family. But I'll be damned if I'll put up with it from you."

Smacking his chest again, she stomped away from him but was bought up short when he grabbed her arm and slung her around to face him. Giving her a little shake he ground out, "You have no idea what can happen to a woman in a place like this."

Snatching her arm from his grasp, she massaged it, knowing she'd be bruised tomorrow. "Well, why don't you stop acting like a jackass and tell me?"

"You can't—you have to stay where I can see you."

"Only if you tell me why," she insisted.

After a moment, he spoke. "Be...before I met you, I was engaged."

"I didn't know that. But what does this have to do with anything?"

"We were on a six-month field study in Africa. Dr. Moretti was directing a group project. It was such an honor to be selected, and Kate and I were both chosen. She was so excited to go." He smiled a little at the memory, lost in thought for a moment.

"He was my mentor, too," Elena commented, not knowing what else to say.

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His voice was monotone as he continued, like a school boy reciting a lesson by rote. The more he spoke, the paler his face became until Elena was afraid he'd pass out.

"One day Kate went out early with a few others to help identify some new bird species. She was separated from the others for only a few minutes when some members of a local militant group found her. Their attack on her was...brutal. The others found her by following her screams. They managed to get to her in time to keep her from being...from being...and even then she had shattered ribs and a broken nose. When I first saw her afterward, she was so bloodied and bruised, I didn't...I couldn't tell who she was. Worse yet, she just lay there, not laughing and teasing like Kate, just blank...and the look in her eyes."

He leaned against the nearest tree and scrubbed a hand over his eyes.

Her heart squeezed at his pain, so she stepped forward needing to comfort him.

When he continued speaking, it was in that same dead voice. "Even after she was safe back in the UK, whenever I even mentioned going back out into the field, she went into hysterics, crying, begging me not to go." He looked Elena in the eyes, his pupils so large they nearly eclipsed the bright blue irises. "We broke up. It seemed as if Kate couldn't look at me anymore. She couldn't let me touch her, and I didn't know how to make it better."

He finished, out of breath, as if he had just run miles. He dashed at a tear that ran down his cheek and walked away from her before saying, "Women don't belong in uncivilized areas."

Tears slipped from her eyes as she cried for him and Kate. God, what a nightmare for both of them. No wonder he was so overprotective of women.

Swiping her tears away, she scooped up her own bag, stowed the camera, and hurried after him. Pausing for a moment at the Jeep, she told Angus to collect the plant on the cliff before jogging down the path Ian had made. Just as she lost sight of the guide, she nearly ran into Ian's back.

He'd waited for her. She didn't know why she felt so relieved by that, but she did.

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She pushed her feelings away and focused on him. Taking his hand, she started to lead him deeper into the underbrush. He didn't ask any questions but followed her into the dark brush. Earlier they had found a waterfall, and that's where Elena led Ian now.

"Let's swim." She didn't say anything else as she started peeling off her clothes, steadfastly ignoring him as he stood a couple feet away from the shore watching her.

For the first time in her life she was totally at ease with her body. Nothing mattered but this moment with him. Right here, right now. Shimmying out of her khaki shorts and panties, she put a little more shake into the movement, knowing Ian watched her.

"Elena!"

She ignored Ian's shout call as she ran splashing into the crisp, cool water. Diving beneath the surface, she didn't bother to look back to see if he planned on joining her.

Pushing through the water with clean strokes, she swam across the pool before coming up for air.

She bit back a scream as she felt something brush her leg. Spinning with a quick kick she opened her eyes and she looked into Ian's smiling face. The wicked look in his eyes kicked her pulse in to high gear. She shoved her sopping hair out of her eyes and grinned back.

"Have you ever made love under a waterfall?" He pulled her close against the full length of his body. The contrast of his hot skin and the cold water made her gasp. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he leaned back and began making his way to the rock formation at the far end of the lake, propelling them with strong kicks of his legs.

"You know I haven't." She laughed as he dunked her head under the water before settling her on a rock close to the water pouring from above them.

"There's a first time for everything," he said. Bending his head, he took her nipple into his mouth.

"Mmm..." she responded. "I like first times with you."

Ian sucked her nipple further into his mouth, nipping hard at the crest, causing hot pleasure to spike between her legs. She shuttered, the

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sensual spill of water down her body intensified the feelings racing through her. She arched herself into him, pushing her breast closer to him. Running her fingers over his skin, she slid them up to his hair. The wet strands clung to her hands, the auburn a sharp contrast to her tanned skin. His pale flesh so different from hers. He spread her knees and made a place for himself between them, stepping closer, his height allowing him to stand in the pool.

"I like firsts with you, too," he answered. Turning his attention back to her naked flesh, he continued to bite and lick at her nipples.

Seeking to assuage the burning ministrations caused in her lower body, Elena ground herself against him. "*Ian, por favor.*" She moaned as the tension riding her became too much.

Lifting her off the rock, he sat her down on his length. The sensation of him filling her and the water surrounding them caused her to gasp.

They held still for a moment as nature's shower pelted them. She held tight to him with her arms and legs as her body clenched around him.

Ian's groan was muffled as he buried his face in her neck. He backed her against the smooth rocks and pounded into her, fucking her so completely and fully she couldn't stop her scream of satisfaction as she came again and again.

He pulled from her pussy, the hot drag of his cock in her still clenching flesh made her moan. He turned her back to his front, snuggling against her. Holding her in the deep water, he reached around to stroke between her legs, tugging on her tight curls before gliding over her pussy lips and dipping in to stroke her clit. She jerked and shuddered, heat resurging in her core.

"*Dios mio, Ian. Please!*" Closing her eyes, she arched her neck over his shoulder, water pooling over her skin, misting their bodies. Every sensation built on top of the other, more than she could handle. Inhaling the damp air, she could smell Ian and the fresh water of the falls.

"Shh...shh..." Wrapping an arm around her hips, he bent her forward, leaning her against the water-smoothed boulder. Her thighs and

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nipples rubbed on the rock. The rough, almost painful feeling made her burn hotter. She pushed her ass back, opening herself to his penetration.

"Please, please, please," she chanted, not caring that she begged him to fuck her. Needing him deep within her, filling her to the limit.

He brushed the tip of his cock between the cleft of her ass, pushing against the top of her vagina. Settling his hand on the small of her back, he arched her and drove deep inside of her. She cried out with pleasure as wet skin slapped against wet skin. He moved his calloused fingers down her back to stroke over her buttocks and thighs. Each thrust of his cock into her hot pussy pinned her against the smooth cool rock, pushing her closer to orgasm. The sensation was indescribable. He seemed determined to draw it out, linger in the heat they created.

She squeezed her muscles around his dick, wanting to hurry his movements, needing to bring him with her this time. Squirming her hips, she rode against his cock. He groaned, his hands gripping her hips tight, each hard push going deeper, longer.

"*Te amo*," she whispered as he ground his pelvis against her. "*Te amo*." Her declaration came over and over as he thrust into her harder and faster. She sobbed out the words as he tensed, pounding in short swift strokes, shuddering into her, taking her with him into orgasm.

Elena couldn't look at Ian as they waded to shore and began to dress. I love you. The words echoed in her brain. Even though she said them in Spanish it still didn't make her feel better that she was almost positive that Ian hadn't understood them.

She loved him. How did this happen? He was so wrong for her, but he fit her perfectly in every way. Except one. Maybe he could change. Maybe he wouldn't cling to the past the way her father always had, insisting she stay home, make babies, be a good woman. A different woman. *Idiota*. How could she expect a man as stubborn as Ian to change? She shoved away that wishful thinking.

Feeling sadness and depression creep over her, she swallowed hard. Why did it have to be so difficult? Realizing she was in love should have been a happy moment, but instead she found herself fighting back tears.

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They dressed and walked back to camp in silence.

She understood now why he believed what he did, but that didn't change her or what she needed. And she needed her career. It defined her, made her who she was.

Heartsick, Elena skipped dinner and went straight to her tent. She curled into a ball and willed herself to sleep before Ian came in. Half asleep, she heard the rustle of fabric. As he lay down beside her, she called herself a fool, but went to him willingly when he pulled her into his arms. Their loving was hot and almost desperate as they clung to the few moments they had together.

The next morning, they started out later than usual. Ian had let her sleep in again and Elena tried not to feel annoyed with him. She knew he was trying to do what he thought was best for her, but she just wanted to be treated like the rest of the expedition team.

"Burro." She ground her teeth together. Anger was all she had to protect herself now, and she pulled every bit of it around her like a shield, ignoring Ian when she walked past him to breakfast. Kicking herself for wanting what she could never have, she gathered her things and broke camp, refusing all the while to look at him.

All day she tried to ignore the constant throb of arousal humming in her veins. She was a fool for wanting Ian; she knew they could never be together. But she did want him and her body ached from it. At least they had the guide as a buffer between them, a sort of chaperone to keep her from begging Ian to touch her, to satisfy the cravings that tore at her depths.

She tried to keep her mind on the task at hand, but it was difficult with every breath pushing her already sensitive nipples against the fabric of her bra. And it didn't help that every time she dare to look at Ian, his gaze smoldered as hot as she felt.

They had been exploring an area a couple hundred yards from their camp when the guide explained he would be leaving to return to camp to see if the other team had any luck. If she strained she could hear the rumble of the Jeep's engine as Angus, Etienne and the other guide returned.



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Ian didn't waste any time, they were alone for less than five minutes when he spoke. "Come here." His gaze held a familiar gleam as they raked down her body.

Her nipples hardened and lifted under her shirt. She knew he saw it, and she didn't care. She stepped forward, then hesitating, trying to convince herself not to do what she wanted so badly.

"Here? There are bugs." She didn't see any bugs, but it was as good of an excuse as any.

He arched an eyebrow. "Now you decide to be girly?"

"When a centipede might be crawling on my naked skin, yes!" she countered, not wanting to give in so easily.

Laughing, he motioned her forward with a wave of his hand. "Just come here. There'll be no bugs. Besides in a few moments, I can guarantee, bugs will be the last thing you'll be thinking about."

Even as she cautioned herself against it, she was walking towards him, unbuttoning her shirt. Whatever he had in mind, she knew he'd make it good for her.

He grabbed for the gaping sides of her shirt and hauled her forward. His fingers fluttered over her breasts, plumping them up, teasing her nipples through the soft cotton of her sports bra. She arched into his palms as his white teeth flashed in his tan face. "Like that?"

"Yes." Her breath panted in the sultry air. They both knew she did.

At any time their guide could return. The thought should have scared her but it didn't, it only aroused her more. She'd never thought of herself as an exhibitionist, but with Ian she'd probably try anything and find it sexy.

"Want more?"

"Yes."

As his hand pressed to her lower back, his erection road against her lower belly. She rubbed herself against him just to hear him moan. His hand slipped down to cup her ass through her khakis. He dipped between the cheeks to rub against her slit. Her clit swelled and moistened, her hips bucking back to increase the friction.

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"Move for me, Elena." Ian's hand moved faster, more insistent in its movement over her pussy. The whole world faded as she focused on the wildfire pooling between her thighs. She gripped his shoulders for traction as she rose up on her tiptoes to push closer.

"Ooh. Ooh. Ooh."

Using his other hand, he ripped open the zipper of her pants, pushing past the elastic of her panties to work a skilled finger between her pussy lips. She gasped as he flicked over her swollen clit. Her thighs clenched over his hand. He chuckled and shoved a finger, then two, into her hot, wet channel.

"Ian!"

"I love it when you say my name. Say it again."

"Ian, Ian, Ian," she chanted in time with his plunging fingers. She was so close, one more push and she'd go over the edge.

His hand withdrew, leaving her empty, aching, and confused.

"Ian?"

He shoved her panties and slacks down, lifted her out of them to wrap her legs around his hips, her booted feet hooked under his ass. He cupped her hips in his broad hands.

"Lean back," he ordered. She braced her hands on his shoulders and obeyed. Somehow he'd managed to free his erection, and she felt the tip pressing against her opening. She tightened her legs to help push him inside of her. "Take all of me, love. That's it." He filled her to the absolute limit. She mewled at the intense pleasure-pain, her fingers digging into his shoulders in erotic distress.

She would have thought it impossible in their current precarious freefall position, but his hips rolled, and he nudged against her cervix with each movement. She hissed softly. "*Dios mio*."

He bounced her, and she lifted off of him to slam back against his pelvis. She flexed her thighs and helped with the motion. Up, down. In, out.

"Elena, I'm close. Come for me." He pulled her tightly against the base of his cock and ground her hips down.

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This was paradise, she decided, right here in Ian's arms. She threw her head back and screamed out her orgasm as his hot fluid splashed inside of her. "I'm coming, Ian! I'm coming...I found it, Ian!"

Both of them froze as he followed her gaze to the bright scarlet and orange flowers bunched in the lower canopy of a Kapok tree. She laughed and hugged him close while he spun her in a celebratory circle. She tightened her knees on his hips as they moved, the green surrounding them blurred until nothing was clear but Ian's face before her. "We found it, Ian! The *Paradiso* flower. We found it!"

He buried his face in her hair, still panting from their exertions. Unhooking her legs from his waist, he set her aside. It hit her just like that, the sudden clear realization that it was over. Paradise lost. Done and gone. For doing her job, what she loved, she lost her only other true love. Ian. She swallowed; afraid she was going to be sick.

"I need my pants," she whispered. This was really it; they found what they came for. The expedition was over, and so were they.

He walked over to the pile of clothing and helped her work her panties and khakis back up over her boots, legs, and hips. They'd zipped up just before Angus, Etienne, and the guides came crashing through the trees.

For once, Etienne looked upset. The stoic man was pale and rattled; his gray eyes wide with near panic. He ran forward and grasped each of their arms, glancing around almost frantic, his heavy French accent making his words almost indiscernible. "What eez wrong? We heard screaming."

Elena patted Etienne's shoulder to calm him while Ian cleared his throat. "Dr. Málaga found the *Paradiso* flower. Up there." He pointed.

His use of her title kicked her in the gut as nothing else could have. Ian was all business again, as if he hadn't just come inside of her minutes before. The small glow of remaining triumph over their discovery drained away even as Angus began celebrating in a babble of praise, backslapping and handshakes. Even Etienne smiled, a bit tightly, but a real smile and kissed each of her cheeks. She returned the smile because she knew she should, but she felt blank and distant even when Etienne brought the

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*Paradiso* specimen down for her. She bagged and tagged it, picked up her backpack and turned toward camp, never once looking at Ian.

## Chapter Four

As Elena lay pretending to be asleep, she tried to ignore the pain in her chest. This was it, her last night with Ian, and she was spending it listening to his even breathing as he slept peacefully. Striking her bedding with her hands curled in fists, she resisted the urge to howl like a toddler in the midst of a temper tantrum. This was her last night with him, and probably the last night she'd see him in a very long time, and she refused to spend it in her solitary sleeping bag.

Elena rose and crawled on all fours to where Ian lay. She heard his breath hitch and knew he was awake, as aware of her as she was of him. She sat back on her knees and watched him play possum. She grinned wickedly, but not for long.

His chest was bare and she knew he only wore boxers beneath the covering. She watched, fascinated as his erection began to tent the fabric. She chuckled and leaned down to touch his mouth with hers. She continued kissing him as she straddled him, loving the feel of him pressed to the juncture of her thighs. Her nipples tightened and she found herself aroused and ready to take him as she resisted the urge to grind herself against him.

She looked into Ian's bright blue eyes. Neither of them spoke as he helped her remove her shirt. Leaning up, he took her pouting nipple into his mouth. As his hot mouth closed over her crest, she moaned with pleasure and arched into him.

"Ian."

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He bit down before he grabbed her waist with both hands and rolled her beneath him. They made short work of the rest of their clothing and before she knew it, he was deep inside of her. As he stroked into her with hard, deep thrusts his eyes never left hers. When it became too much for her, she closed her eyes and his movements stilled.

Her eyes opened and this time, she left them opened, obeying the silent demand in his. They both knew what this was, and he was daring her to face it head on, the way he was determined to face it.

His movements came faster as he pounded against her, and their harsh breathing mingled with the wild sounds of the jungle. Elena bit her lip in an attempt to hold back her cries of passion, convinced if she let one slip free, she'd wake up from this dream.

He groaned as her body clenched on his, he gave in first and buried his face in the curve of her neck. Tears crept from the sides of her eyes as she held him and he trembled against her, spilling himself in a hot rush inside of her. Her orgasm began to build becoming almost painful before it exploded, flooding her pussy with wetness as she cried out in ecstasy. He lay on top of her for a moment, and she clutched at him, not ready to let him go just yet. As he rolled them onto his side, she flinched, suddenly cold from losing the feel of his body against hers.

Weeping, she crawled to her own pallet. This time, he let her go. She curled herself into a fetal position and hugged her arms tight around herself in an attempt to stop the grief from shattering her into a million pieces.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elena rose early so she could bathe in the waterfall once more before they headed back to their base camp. The rush of memories when she entered the clearing almost made her turn back, but she forced herself to strip and step into the water. The thick air-cooled near the lake's edge and she breathed deep. Submerging herself, she paddled toward the waterfall, bobbing upright under the roaring splash. She turned away from the rock where she and Ian had made love. That was done. Her heart squeezed in pain and she let herself feel it. Denying her loss wouldn't

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make it go away. Now all that lay ahead was watching him walk out of her life the way he had last time. Pushing away from the waterfall, she rolled to her back, floating in the pool, drifting until she was ready to get out.

Slogging her way up the bank, she picked up her towel to dry herself. Since she was alone at the lake she didn't bother to button her shirt as she began to squeeze the moisture from her hair. When she turned she found Ian standing in front of her. Preparing herself for another lecture about being away from camp by herself, she continued to towel her hair.

"Marry me."

Elena knew the command was about as close to asking as Ian would get in his gruff manner. Her fingers shook as she dropped the towel and attempted to button her blouse. The material abraded her nipples, which were still tender from their fierce lovemaking the night before. She didn't want to have this conversation with him half-naked, she already felt as though her heart was stripped bare before him.

This couldn't be real. It couldn't be happening. Her heart hammered in her chest, galloping until she thought it would explode. Shock roared through her, made her lightheaded.

He came to her, pushed aside her ineffective fingers, and finished buttoning her blouse. Taking her chin in his hand, he brushed his mouth against her soft, slightly swollen lips. His rough fingers were tender as they slid over her jaw, stroking down her neck to tilt her head up, so she had to meet his gaze.

He cleared his throat once, twice before he continued. "I know this isn't the place or the time, but I love you. I've always loved you, though I was too stubborn to admit it. And I know it would be the biggest mistake of my life if I walked away from you again."

Tears welled in her eyes and slid unheeded down her cheeks. Joy bloomed in her chest. Oh, God. Please don't let me be dreaming. Please don't ever let me wake up.

"Please." He wiped away her tears with the back of his hand as his own eyes became suspiciously bright. "Don't cry, Elena. Please."

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She sniffled back a small sob. "You have to know I love you, too, and I'd love nothing more than to spend my life loving you and exploring the world with you."

"Exploring the world with me?"

Elena flinched at his tone. *If he'd asked her to marry him, he must have gotten over his aversion to her being in the field, hadn't he?*

"Elena," he hesitated before he continued speaking and her stomach dipped. "When we're married, that would be the end of your fieldwork."

"What?" He couldn't have shocked her more if he'd slapped her.

"I thought you understood how I feel and why I feel this way."

Elena chose her words carefully, hoping, praying she could make him understand. "I do understand, but you can't let one incident dictate your life, my life."

As his eyes shuttered she knew she wasted her breath, there was nothing she could say or do to make him see things the way she did. See her the way she was.

"The fact that you'd even ask me to make a choice between my feelings for you and my life's work tells me all I need to know, Ian." Elena attempted to walk away but stiffened when Ian grabbed her arm. Her eyes burned with unshed tears, but she refused to let them fall again. She wanted, needed, to give him everything but he had demanded the one thing she just couldn't give. Her chest ached. She looked down at his other hand, half expecting him to see him holding her heart.

"*De veras, me mata,*" she whispered, as she pried his hand away. It was the first time she spoke to him in Spanish outside of their lovemaking, and even though he couldn't understand the words, she knew he understood the tone. Knew he'd ripped her heart out with the promise of paradise; he'd snatched it away.

"Elena—"

She touched two trembling fingers to his lips; there was nothing more they needed to say. Nothing would make this right for either of them. They knew where they stood with each other and knew they couldn't fix it.

She didn't let herself look back as she walked away from Ian and left her heart with him.



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### Chapter Five

*Lima, Peru*

Elena rarely saw Ian during the last few days they'd spent at base camp. Now, she waited for her flight to Los Angeles from Lima. She needed the familiarity of the city she grew up in with a fierceness she didn't bother to examine. To convince herself that she wasn't avoiding him in particular, she stayed in her room and didn't speak with anyone. She kept herself occupied during the day with phone calls, e-mail, and paper work. But during the nights she hugged her pillow tight and gave herself permission to sob out her misery. Three nights of crying until her eyes almost swelled shut didn't help to ease her heartache, so she immersed herself in finding another expedition. Since they'd managed to find the *Paradiso* plant, she'd had plenty of offers. She decided to take two weeks off and then she'd be gone again. Somewhere she didn't associate with Ian. Somewhere she could forget about this whole trip, she could lose herself a new project. Yes, that was just the thing.

She didn't leave her room until the day of her flight back home. Of course she hoped she'd run into Ian while checking out but that never happened. As the jeep drove away from the hotel, she swore she saw him watching her but couldn't be certain with the tears blurring her eyes.

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Elena stepped out from *Las Brisas* into the warm sunshine and made her way down the path leading to the park situated in front of her apartment complex. The restaurant had always been a favorite of hers, reminding her of *abuela's* cooking. But these days, even her usual favorites didn't seem to spark her appetite.

It had been a week since she last seen Ian and instead of the pain easing over time, it only seemed to intensify. She still found it hard to sleep and when she did, she had restless dreams of the times they spent together. She awoke many times in tears, aroused, and frustrated to the point of pain.

Elena walked faster, dashing away a tear from her cheek. It was a beautiful day in the little California beach city where she grew up, but nothing seemed the same since Ian broke her heart. As she passed by people on bikes and skates, she wondered if she'd ever feel normal again. She needed to focus, in a couple of weeks she'd leave for the Falkland Islands. After finding out Ian would also be part of the Suriname project she'd been offered, she'd begged off, knowing she wouldn't be able to take being so close to him.

She stopped in front of her apartment complex, startled. Her mind was playing tricks on her. She closed her eyes, her heart thumping, and she prayed that when she opened them, the man standing before her would still be there.

"Ian." His name was a soft exclamation of breath. He looked different, tired and haggard but it was him. She couldn't keep from staring as she resisted the urge to throw herself at him, promising to give up everything to stay by his side.

No. It would solve nothing. She would wither without her career. As would he. They were alike in so many ways. She hated that it came down to this. After only a week without him, she didn't even want to consider how bad it could get, would get, for her. How the chasm of loneliness inside her might make her regret staying true to herself.

"I got an offer to join an expedition in Suriname," he stated, without saying hello or bothering with any other niceties. So like him.

"So I heard. They speak Spanish there, too, you know." She didn't know what else to say.

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"I know."

"Well...have fun." She turned to walk up the steps of her apartment building before he could see the tears in her eyes. *It doesn't have to be this way.* She wanted to scream it at him for causing such pain, but she remained silent. Yelling wouldn't help either of them.

His rusty voice, the accent thicker than usual, stopped her. "You're going to keep up the fieldwork, aren't you?"

Elena sighed she wanted so much to comfort him and take comfort in him. Her heart turned for his pain and fears, and now for her own pain. "Yes. This is who I am, Ian. It's what I do. I can't change that for you. I promise not to be so hard on you about it if we ever work together again because I do understand. Really." Tears pushed hard again at her eyelids. "Goodbye, Ian."

She brushed past him to hurry up the steps of her apartment. She'd just hit the top step, stumbling against the scrolling wrought iron railing, as her sweater tightened and jerked her to a stop. Damn. She twisted around to see on what she'd caught her sweater on and came face to chest with Ian, who had a grip on the fabric. "What's wrong?"

He cleared his throat, opened his mouth, but nothing came out. She took a step towards him. "Ian?"

"Come with me."

"Where?" She felt like she was imagining the words coming from his mouth.

"To Suriname."

"You want me to do more fieldwork." It wasn't a question. With his history, she couldn't even hope he'd change his mind about women on expeditions.

He moved his hands to her shoulders, and she couldn't tell whether the trembling came from her or him. His hands gripped her shoulders, digging in almost painfully. "Yes. Marry me. If it means you'll be doing fieldwork, at least I'll know if you're in danger, if you're safe. I need you."

Tears welled in her eyes again and she didn't bother to fight them. "I need you, too," she whispered as she placed her hand against his heart.

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Searching his eyes, she forced herself to ask, "Are you sure? Because if you're not—"

He answered before she could finish; his eyes clear and determined. He'd made his choice. "I'm positive. I'd rather be with you, even if you were in danger. As long as we are together, that's all that matters."

Tears ran down her cheeks as he whispered, "*Te amo*, Elena."

She flung herself in his arms, and they held each other tight. This was where she belonged. For better or worse, and even when he was a stubborn burro. For as long as they both lived. Fierce joy bubbled inside of her, more than she could contain, and she laughed and cried at the same time.

"I love you, too, Ian."

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### Author Bio

Emma Petersen wrote her first Romance in high school after falling in love with Historicals and has been writing ever since. She lives in sunny California with a cool cat with named Toussaint and is working through an addiction to shoes.

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Crystal Jordan only began writing about a year ago, after she finished graduate school and needed something to fill the hours that used to be eaten away by homework. What started as a hobby has quickly become a new career. She now writes paranormal, futuristic, contemporary, and erotic romance. Additionally, she is a member of Romance Writers of America (RWA) and its erotic romance chapter, Passionate Ink. She also serves as a moderator and Paranormal co-liaison to the award winning author's resource Web site and forum, Romance Divas.

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### **Prologue**

The house was finally empty. Big Ty's city relations had beat a hasty retreat back to their gated communities and mini mansions. The will had been read, and his only son had stayed silent throughout the entire ordeal, not really caring who got what or why.

Tyson Parsons, Jr. loved his father and, over the years, they'd become close. The first couple days after he arrived at the ranch following his mother's death, he'd hated his father and what he'd done to his mother. His mother had never said a bad word against Big Ty, but he knew the story behind his birth. How his incredibly wealthy father had chosen to abandon his pregnant mother rather than risk being disinherited.

If his mother had had her way, he never would've learned the truth behind the circumstances of his birth. He found out accidentally when he overheard her brothers talking about how his mother had come home to Standing Ridge heartbroken, pregnant, and alone—how she refused to name the father of her child. The only thing her brothers knew about the man was she'd met him in Parsons' Pass, where she'd been working as a substitute teacher.

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Ty's heart broke at the news. From the time he was old enough to remember, his mother had told him stories about his handsome father who'd died before he was born. The day after overhearing his uncles and, despite the feeling in the pit in his stomach, Ty asked his mother for the truth. And she gave it to him, holding him while he cried.

Ty had sworn he'd never forgive the man who fathered him. But here he was, more than twenty years later, mourning the man he'd sworn to hate.

He had spent more than half his life in the huge house that set at the foot of Parsons' Pass. He'd laughed and cried in the house, and it had never been so silent. Memories filled him as he went room-to-room closing doors and shutting off lights. He remembered the lamp he'd knocked over racing to watch a ranch hand break in a new horse. It had been his second day at the ranch, and he thought the huge blond man with the cold blue eyes would punish him for his carelessness. Instead, his father had picked up the lamp's mate and tossed it to the floor, saying he had always hated the lamps anyway.

Now, as he opened the door to his father's study, he thought about his wedding, which was scheduled for less than a month away. When he spoke with Shanna earlier, he asked if they could postpone it, since a wedding should be a celebration, and he didn't feel much like celebrating. He backed down when she'd thrown one of her increasingly familiar temper tantrums, and he remained unsettled as he recalled how her tone changed when she found out Big Ty left him everything. The house, the ranch, the land, and some property in a few cities he hadn't been aware his father owned. The uneasy feeling grew when she promised to cut the shopping trip with her mother short and fly back to be with him. The night he called to tell her his father had died, she hadn't volunteered to return early; she'd said instead that she couldn't miss the last fitting, or her wedding dress wouldn't be ready on time. So he'd had to face his father's relatives and the reading of the will alone.

Alone. For the first time since his mother's death, he felt alone. The thought weighed heavily on him. Ty couldn't bring himself to go into his father's study. Instead he stood in the doorway and tried to ignore the

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pressure behind his eyes. Some of the best times in his childhood had occurred here. Like the talking to he'd gotten after his father caught him and Jenny Gardner playing doctor in the hayloft. Or when Big Ty had given him the keys to his first car. God, it had been an ugly, beat up hunk of junk, but the time he and his father had spent restoring it had made it more valuable than any high-end automobile Big Ty could have bought him.

Closing his eyes, Ty thought back to the video-recorded will his father's lawyer played for the gathered family members earlier. His father had concluded the tape in typical Big Ty fashion, by telling his family to kiss his ass and get the hell out of his son's house. Ty had sat stunned, unmoving long after the video ended and the house cleared. The questions he longed to ask his father would now go unanswered. He wanted to believe his father left him everything because he loved him but, after years of thinking he was merely an obligation, it was hard to believe otherwise.

Especially since his father had come into his life only after his mother's death. Ty's mother had been killed instantly when a car driven by a drunken teenage boy had slammed into hers on the way back from the airport in Rapid City. He'd never forget how he felt the day before the funeral when his father arrived. It had been eerie looking into the same blue eyes that so often looked back at him from the mirror. He had cried and begged his grandmother to let him stay with her, but she told him that his mother had left instructions to call his father if anything ever happened to her. She had held him tight and told him it was important they respect his mother's wishes.

Ty sighed and tried to shake off the old memories that still left fresh pain.

He hadn't locked the kitchen door, so when he heard it open he feared it was Shanna making good on her threat to come home early. He felt guilty and tried to relax the sudden tension in his muscles. Shanna coming home early was a good thing; he should be glad that she wanted to be here for him when he needed her. *So why do I dread the thought of seeing her right now?*



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Soft footsteps made him turn, and he looked straight into the eyes of Jenny Gardner.

Ty swallowed, guilt and lust warring for control. His heart pounded as she walked toward him.

She wore the same hip hugging, black, ankle-length skirt she'd worn to his father's funeral. The matching black sweater didn't show any skin, but the way it clung to her breasts made it more arousing and provocative than if she'd been wearing something low cut.

He took a deep breath and stepped back.

"Ty, I'm so sorry about your daddy." Her sympathetic words washed over him, dampening some of the fire that burned in his gut. He knew she was only there to offer him comfort, the same way she often had when they were children, but the thoughts he entertained now were far from childlike.

"Thank you."

"I bought you some beef stew and fry bread. Momma sent them over along with an apple pie. She was worried you might starve to death in the time since she left."

Ty chuckled as he thought of how Mrs. Gardner had fussed over him and practically force-fed him at the wake.

Jenny smiled. "You don't look like you're starving, Ty."

*If you only knew*, he thought, but instead took her arm and said, "You shouldn't be out so late, Jenny. Let me walk you to your car."

She pulled away from him. "I'm not leaving. You need me."

He closed his eyes. Her words were innocent, but they affected his body in ways that were far from innocent. His mind and body interpreted them as something all together carnal. He wasn't in the right state of mind; his emotions were too fragile, too close to the surface. Being alone with her now would be tantamount to throwing gasoline on a fire.

"Jenny, please. I really need to be alone."

She looked hurt, but nodded her head. "Okay, Ty. Goodnight."

He waited until he heard the door close behind her, before going to his room to grab a couple of blankets. He'd never be able to sleep in the house tonight.

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Walking to the barn, he looked up at the star-filled sky and said a silent prayer for his parents. He turned the light on in the first stable stall and made his way back to the place he'd spent plenty of nights as a child, camping out and pretending he was a desperado on the run from the law.

It was the same place he'd met Jenny that first day he'd come to the ranch when he was twelve. She'd found him crying for his mother.

He shed no tears tonight, however, as he lay for about thirty minutes, the blanket beneath him not enough to stop the hay from poking and scratching his back. The smell of hay and horses comforted him as the memories of the day continued to torment his mind. Throughout the entire day, he stayed dry-eyed, even as he watched his father's casket being lowered into the ground. He'd been numb; only looking into the sorrow-filled eyes of Jenny Gardener had elicited any type of feeling. The sight of her upset wrenched at his heart, but his own tears still failed to come.

Until now.

One moment he was thinking about her, and the next he was sobbing so hard he couldn't catch his breath. As if his thoughts brought her back to him, she stepped into the barn, the creak of the door signaling her presence. When her hand touched his shoulder, he went into her arms gratefully. She held him while he cried, neither one of them speaking.

His tears turned into the occasional hiccup, and she snuggled against him, the same way she had when they were children. But there was nothing innocent in the feelings her breasts provoked as they pressed against his chest.

"I'm so sorry, Ty."

He looked into her pretty round face and tried to remember a time he hadn't wanted her. Their eyes met, held, and the next thing he knew he was kissing her as if his life depended on it.

She didn't protest, but engaged in the kiss eagerly. Everything they had avoided for almost two years flared up between them, hot and wild. His hands were rough as they pushed up her shirt and shoved aside her bra, but Jenny didn't seem to mind. She arched into his touch and moaned as he buried his face in her breasts, inhaling the intoxicating scent of her skin.

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Over the years he'd lain awake more than one night trying to figure out what perfume she wore. Alone and aching, he'd get so hard thinking of her. The only way he'd be able to sleep was to take the situation into his own hands.

Now, he was aching and hard, but he wasn't alone. It seemed like a dream, the feel of her restless hands running against his back, clutching him, and pulling him close, but this was better than any dream. Jenny was warm flesh and soft sighs beneath him. She bit back another moan as he ran his hand over her nipple before he bent over and latched onto it, suckling hungrily.

Her surprised gasp spurred him on. He sucked and gently bit at her nipples until she arched against him, crying out his name. Her clothes were gone and his soon followed. Sweat slick, he lay against her, flesh against flesh, the tip of his cock poised at her entrance, brushing the damp heat between her thighs.

"Ty! Please. I ache, Ty."

He drowned in the passion and promise he saw in his eyes, but what he also saw there was enough to bring him back from the brink. Trust. She trusted him with her body and unwittingly with her future. Had his mother looked at his father with such unquestioning faith?

"Jenny, I don't have any protection."

She looked at him, uncomprehending at first, but he knew the moment she understood the meaning of his words. The blush started in her cheeks and worked its way downward until it bloomed scarlet on her bare breasts.

She took a deep breath, as if she was steadying herself. "It's okay, Ty. I want you."

Ty groaned and rested his forehead against hers. He wanted her, too, more than his next breath. He wanted her so bad that he considered making love to her despite the risk. He nuzzled her neck before kissing her trembling lips. He shook his head. He couldn't do it. What if he got her pregnant? The last thing he wanted to do was repeat his father's mistakes.

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He knew another way, however, to soothe her ache, a way that wouldn't get her pregnant. He deepened the kiss and reached between them to touch her moist flesh. The first touch was hesitant, unsure and merely skimmed against her skin.

His touch became firmer, and Jenny moaned low in her throat before opening wider for him. He peppered kisses down her throat, stopping to lave the taut crests of her breasts, before dipping his tongue into her belly button.

She was moving with him, writhing and whimpering beneath him until he arrived eye-level at her the apex of her thighs. She protested as he spread her legs, and she tried to cover herself with her hands, but he nudged them aside and buried his face in her drenched flesh. At the first pass of his tongue she gave a strangled gasp and tried to push his face away, but he persisted. Stroke after stroke he devoured her, driven by the way she pulled him closer and sobbed his name. Her thighs clamped on his head as her breathing became harsher. She fisted her hands in his hair, arching up, and pushed his face harder against her pussy.

Her cries took on an urgency. Trembling, she cried out with every insistent pass of his tongue. She begged for him to stop, begged for him to continue, and then she was screaming, exploding, and shuddering sweetly against his mouth.

Ty crawled up her body, loving the way his body glided against her sweat-sheened skin. His lips brushed hers once, twice before she pulled him down and kissed him sleepily. His flesh throbbed, but he ignored it as he covered them with the extra blanket. He held her tight, her flushed face buried in his neck. Long after she fell asleep he replayed the scene in his mind, reliving every movement. The taste of her, the feel of her, and the sound of her cries. He'd never forget them; they were imprinted on his soul.

He didn't remember falling asleep, but as he drifted off with Jenny lying beside him, warm and secure, he knew without a doubt there would be no wedding. From the moment he'd met Jenny he tried to run from the truth. He was tired of running. As he lay holding her, feeling her soft breath against the crease of his neck, he knew without a doubt what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. He wanted to spend every night

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falling asleep next to her and waking up holding her, ready to quench the insatiable need for another taste of her. He dreamed of his future with Jenny.

The sun shining through the barn window woke Ty. Reaching for Jenny, he found the space beside him empty. He opened his eyes. He was alone.

## **Finding Paradise**

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Full Swing by Crystal Jordan © 2006

### **Chapter One**

She loved hot, sweaty sex. Which is probably why her husband's big body moving against hers felt so amazing. Tyler's long fingers gripped her hips, working her on his cock. Head thrown back, she clasped his biceps for balance as she straddled his lean hips, riding fast and wild. Each penetration filled her, stretching her pussy to the limit. Only her slick moisture made it a comfortable fit. She shifted her knees to the right to change the angle of his thrust.

Tyler's breath erupted in a painful hiss. "Jill."

Right. His damaged knee, the long surgical scars bisected his muscular leg from calf to mid thigh. She recoiled left so she wasn't leaning on it. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Don't be." He settled back against the headboard and let his hands slip up her back to cup her shoulders, pushed her long hair out of his way, and pulled her tight against him as his pelvis rocked in a new rhythm. Jill trailed her tongue from the base of his throat up to his ear where she bit down lightly, his salty tang bursting over her taste buds. His breathing hitched and he groaned low, shoving deep inside of her.

The Army Ranger tattoo on his shoulder rippled as the muscles in his arm flexed. She bent to nip at the corded flesh of his bicep. Inhaling the

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musky scent of his skin, she let the smell and feel and taste of him seep into her senses. Everything about him turned her on, made her want more and more. She arched in his arms, pressed flush against him, loving the sensation of his lightly furred chest rubbing her skin.

Not even the high-powered air-conditioning could keep the Florida heat from making sweat bead across her forehead, pool at her collarbone, and slide between her breasts. The cool air blowing against her heated skin made her shiver and her nipples harden. His head dipped to pull the tip into his mouth, grazed it with his teeth and nipped at the taut crest.

The sweet sting made her breath catch. Heat flashed through her breast. Her core tightened spasmodically in response, pulling a low moan from her throat. She splayed her fingers against his scalp to press him closer. The prickle of his close-cropped brown hair tickled her palms as his dark stubble abraded the sensitive skin beneath her breasts.

The bedsprings squeaked in time with their movements. Nothing else but the sound of their panting breath and the slap of skin filled the air. His rich brown eyes met hers briefly before he reached down to manipulate her clit, flicking her swollen flesh with nimble fingers.

“Tyler!”

Her breath choked out and her mind went blank as she moved with his hand. She reached up and dug her fingers into the headboard behind his shoulders, using it for leverage to pump herself harder and faster on his cock, pressing his erection as deep as she could take it. Blood roared in her ears as her heart pounded in a frantic rhythm, her entire body flushing as she pushed toward orgasm.

She clenched her sex tight around his penis and ground her pelvis down, just the way she knew he liked it. The action was more than enough to thrust them both into orgasm, and they shuddered together.

A tear leaked from the corner of her eye as she came in a rush so intense it ripped open-mouthed sobs from her throat. Her thighs jumped and quivered as she fought to stay upright and not collapse her weight on his bad leg.

She tried to pretend everything was the same as it used to be. That she and her husband didn’t fight constantly, and then have sex the rest of

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the time to avoid actually talking. They certainly didn't laugh anymore, in or out of bed. Sex had taken on a desperate edge as they tried to forget how bad things were between them. Don't think about the problems with their marriage—just fuck until it all goes away. They'd had a lot of sex in the two weeks since Tyler came home from the hospital.

Twin trails of tears snaked down her cheeks, and she hurried to swipe them away. Not that Tyler noticed; he'd rolled away as soon as they finished, leaving her to stare at his tanned back. He was leaner than he had been, but still a big, strong man. She'd always loved that he made her feel petite and feminine.

"Ty..."

"What?" He didn't even glance at her. Despair and anger squeezed her throat shut. The emotions warred for dominance as her mouth opened and then closed again. She couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't start an argument. Another tear leaked from the corner of her eye.

She reached out to touch him, but hesitated before making contact. The contrast of his skin against hers always amazed her. His skin was dark from a lifetime spent outdoors. Not even a year in the hospital had managed to rid him of his tan. For a moment her hand hung a hairsbreadth from his shoulder before she let it fall back to the mattress. Curling on her side, she faced away from him and didn't even bother to check the slide of tears. How could five years of marriage have fallen apart so fast?

\* \* \* \* \*

"This isn't working, Jill." He kept his head bent as he sat on the edge of the bed. When he got no response, he lifted his eyes to see that she'd frozen while climbing out of bed, her tall, softly curved body bare. He stared because this was perhaps the last time he'd see it. Decades spent on a golf course had made freckles smatter over her pale skin. Her coppery mane of hip-length hair was the first thing he'd noticed about her when they met in college. He's always loved the silken feel of it running through his fingers.

Taking a deep breath, he braced himself for what would come next.



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The room still smelled of sex, the sheets warm from their bodies. Knowing he was doing the right thing for her didn't make this any easier.

She clung to the fancy knobs on the footboard. "Wha—What do you mean?"

"This isn't working. We both know it." He fought hard to stay calm, to not open his mouth and let the first stupid, sarcastic thing come out.

"It doesn't have to be this way."

"It shouldn't be this hard, Jill. It never was before. You never used to cry when we slept together." Her ocean blue eyes widened at that. Yeah, she thought he hadn't noticed. "You shouldn't have stayed with me. You shouldn't have given up your golfing career. You should be with a guy who can take care of you, not some broken down has-been."

He watched her face grow paler at his bitter words. Her grip on the bedpost tightened as she swayed. Pain darkened her eyes and he wanted to call the words back. Hurting her like this killed him, but she needed to be as far away from him as possible. He was poison.

"I *have* given up a lot. I'd give up more if it meant you're here and you're whole and safe."

"I *don't want to be here*. I don't want to be safe. And you call this whole?" When he pounded on his thigh, just above his fake knee, she twitched as though to protest, so he hit it again. Pain slammed into him in waves, but he welcomed it. He deserved it for hurting her.

Anger flashed in her eyes. "How long are you going to be mad, Tyler? It's been a year. When are you going to see that you survived, even if your knee didn't? You have the opportunity to start again. You're an expert in security, demolitions, and God knows what else. You could work as a consultant or even start your own company. We have the money. So, you can't be a Ranger. Be something else!"

"A desk job," he sneered.

She speared her fingers through her hair. "Jesus! Why do I even bother? It never goes in. It's like talking to a brick wall!"

"Dammit, Jill! You have no idea what this is like."

She spread her fingers in obvious frustration. "You're right. I have

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no idea what it's like to suffer from major head trauma, to have doctors dig four bullets out of my chest, to have another bullet shatter my knee, to undergo twelve different surgeries, including a knee replacement almost a year after the fact. I don't know about any of that, but mostly I don't know what's going on in your head because you never tell me anything. We don't talk. We just yell like this. *Talk* to me, Ty. We can work this out."

"No, we can't. This is never getting better. Talking about it won't fix anything. It won't help me run a four-minute mile. Won't make me a Ranger again." He grabbed for his cane and missed, knocking it into the side table and scattering his pill bottles. Jill rushed over to pick up the mess, but he fended her off. "I can do it myself. I don't need your help. I don't need *you*. Just...just go away."

Still kneeling before him, a bottle clutched in her hand, she flinched as though he's slapped her. "Is that what you want? For me to leave? You push and push, Ty. I have to tell you, I'm not sure how much more I can take."

"Then leave."

"That's what you really want?"

"That's what I just said, isn't it?"

No, it wasn't, but he couldn't bring himself to say the actual words. He laughed at himself, angry at his own hypocrisy. Not that she'd know he wasn't laughing at her, but that would only help his cause. If he *ever* heard anyone speak to her this way, he'd beat them to within an inch of their life.

"I'll be gone by morning," she whispered. She rose on shaky legs and he reached out to steady her, but she flinched away from his touch. Her reaction hit him like a solid punch to the gut.

"Where will you go?" He had no right to ask, but he had to know she'd be all right.

She stared at him for a moment, her expression blank. Then she blinked and seemed to collect herself. "St. Augustine. Brooke has a house in the World Golf Village. She said I could stay there anytime."

The corner of her mouth quivered while she fought for calm. *Please don't let her cry. Please.* He wouldn't be able to stand it. He'd apologize for everything and promise to make it better. It would never be better. *He*

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would never be better. She turned and bolted from the room, the door slamming shut behind her.

He'd done it. She'd leave and go back to the Ladies PGA tour, get on with her life, just like she should have done a year ago when they dragged his broken body back on a stretcher. Why didn't he feel better? Shouldn't doing the right thing make him feel less like a bastard? It would get easier. It had to.