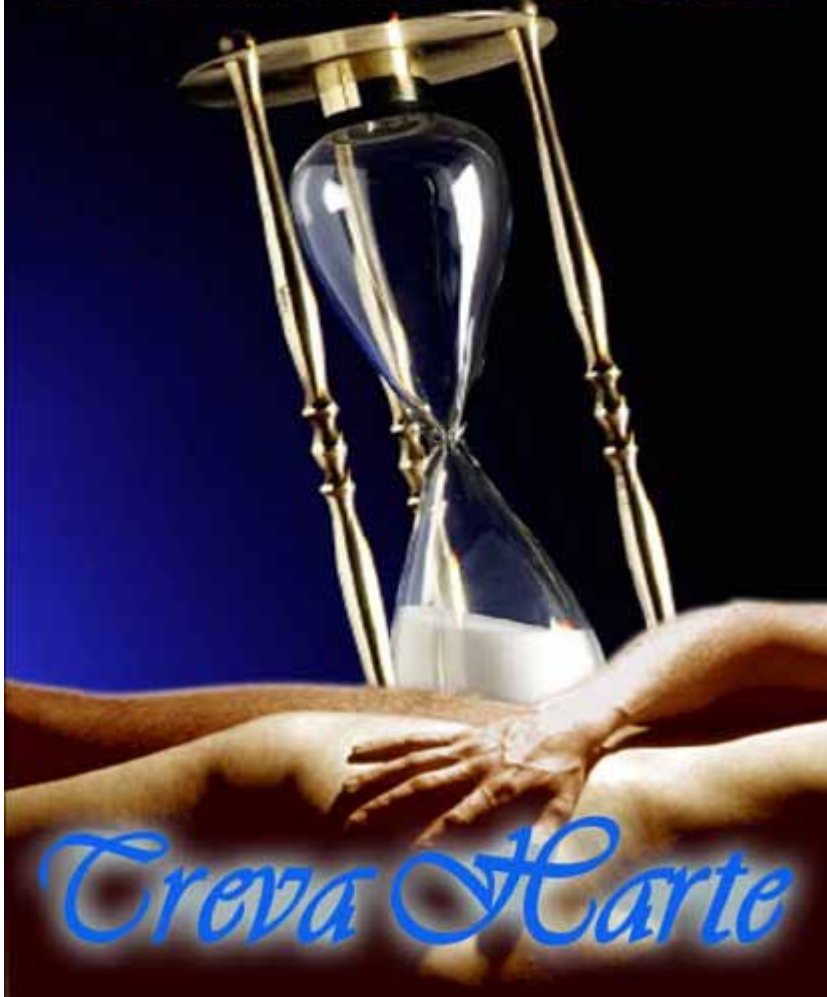


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Second Time
BOOK 2 IN THE TIME SERIES



Creva & Carte

SECOND TIME

An Ellora's Cave publication written by

TREVA HARTE

MS Reader (LIT) ISBN # 1-84360-629-1

Other available formats (no ISBNs are assigned):

Adobe (PDF), Rocketbook (RB), Mobipocket (PRC) & HTML

© Copyright TREVA HARTE, 2003.

All Rights Reserved, Ellora's Cave.

Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc. USA

Ellora's Cave Ltd, UK

This e-book may not be reproduced in whole or in part by email forwarding, copying, fax, or any other mode of communication without author/publisher permission.

Edited by *ALLIE MCKNIGHT*

Cover Art by *SCOTT CARPENTER*



PIRATING WARNING

Certain images contained within this e-book have been digitally marked by Digimarc Corp. If you purchased this e-book from a source other than Ellora's Cave or one of its known affiliates, contact legal@ellorascave.com immediately. Please note that reading this e-book without first purchasing it through legitimate means is illegal and can result in heavy fines. As always, our authors thank-you for your support and patronage.

Warning:

The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. SECOND TIME has been rated BORDERLINE NC-17, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this ebook are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

Dedication

For Allie, who likes to fix things.

Prologue

“Victor, I loved you so much. But now I love Jack more. I’m going to marry him today. We’ll work something out with Vicky, if you want. I wouldn’t keep her away from you. But we’re over.”

Jen was speaking clearly enough. He just—the words didn’t make any sense. She was beautiful, she was in her wedding dress, she was the woman he’d always dreamed she’d be on her wedding day. But she was saying she wasn’t going to marry him.

Victor turned to look at the man by Jen’s side. His best friend. The man he’d trusted since he was a kid. His best friend and...Jen.

“Why? You promised me once you would love me forever. Was it his money? Did he seduce you?” Damn it, he sounded pitiful. He hadn’t said that aloud, had he? Victor turned his back on them both and hid his face.

He wasn’t going to top this off by crying. *Dios*, leave him something. Some scrap of pride.

The woman he loved kept talking, saying these incomprehensible things. “No, Victor. I did love you. But when I fell in love with you I fell in love with danger and excitement. You were supposed to protect me while we had adventures. It wasn’t your fault you couldn’t. It wasn’t your fault I had to stay behind while you had an almost fatal adventure. But while I waited, I grew up and I realized I wanted my life with someone who will always put me first. I was willing to follow you anywhere when I was young. But Jack loves me more than his family, more than his work, more than himself. He’s willing to be there for me. I need that. I need him. I love him more.”

She was crying. She was tearing him apart and she was crying. Victor strangled the scream in his throat. “I should have stayed away then. This was for nothing.”

She looked horrified and said other things, things he couldn’t understand at all. The words simply buzzed at him. Something about sorry.

Jack stepped forward to babble at him, too. Victor tried to concentrate. He managed to catch most of Jack’s words. “I probably deserve anything you want to dish out. But Jen doesn’t deserve all this. She’s too important to us both.”

The bride and groom stared at him, as if he was supposed to say or do something. Something to make this less nightmarish. What? He’d dreamed of her for so long. But this was reality. The two of them—they looked perfect together. He saw Jen’s hand creep out to grip Jack’s.

What the hell had he really expected? He wasn’t perfect. He was trash. He’d been thrown away long ago by the people who should have cared about him. But he’d tried so hard once he met Jen. He thought he could work hard enough to deserve her. What a fool. He’d never have anything that good. Never deserve anything that good.

Words came. He said them with a calm flatness that surprised even him. “Do you expect me to say ‘get married with my blessing’? Sorry. My limp won’t let me dance at your wedding. To hell with you both.”

Of course they didn’t need his blessing. They had each other. Once he disappeared, they could forget his inconvenient existence. Victor gripped his cane, stared at it, willing himself not to look at the happy couple again. Not to ever look back at them.

Chapter One

“My God.” Cee Cee stopped short in the hallway. “It’s—”
She put her hand up to her mouth, bit it hard. She wasn’t going to cry. She wasn’t.
Not in front of all these people anyhow.

“Who?” Molly stood at her elbow. “Hey! That looks like Victor.”

“It is.” She watched him weave slightly before he got to the front door.

“But he’s dead! No, that’s stupid. I guess not.” Molly gripped her arm.

“Obviously not. But something’s wrong.”

“I’d say so. He must have just seen Jen.” Molly looked toward the closed door down the hall. “I guess the wedding is still on. With the same groom.”

“What?” Cecilia shook her head a little. “He’s sick. Or hurt. I need to see him.” Of course he was hurt. She watched him through the window, balancing himself for a moment at the stairs.

“But we’re bridesmaids! We’re supposed to be in front of the minister right now.” Molly stared at her. “Listen, since Jen looks to be marrying Jack, I don’t think Vic is going to be in a good mood right now. He won’t want to talk.”

He was alive. He was alive. Thank God, he was alive.

“No. He won’t.” Cecilia forced the words out. She didn’t want to talk, either. She wanted to find Victor. Touch him. She’d probably break down and bawl, despite everything. “I’ve got to see him.”

“Cee Cee, I never thought I’d see you running after a guy. Jen’s guy at that.”

Those words got through. Cee Cee turned her head. “He’s not Jen’s anymore, is he? And right now he needs someone. He needs me a lot more than Jen does.”

Cecilia knew. She could almost feel the anger and pain and confusion radiating out from him as he passed by. He hadn’t seen her or Molly. He hadn’t seen anyone.

And she couldn’t see anyone else but him. Screw hiding her feelings. He existed. He was breathing in the same world with her. *Thank you, God.*

Victor!

She ran for the door.

* * * * *

Victor glanced around at the porch. This was it. This house, the closest thing he had to a home, was gone, along with everything else. It was like when he was a kid. He had a “home” until he didn’t measure up. Then it was time to move on. Well, all he wanted to do now was move on as fast as he could.

He glared down at the ground. The problem was he couldn’t make a fast getaway. After all, he was a damned cripple.

Gripping the cane for support, Victor looked down at the steps. It was a long way to the ground, with a lot of steps in between. He'd made his way up without thinking too much about it. He'd been at Jen's house and almost to his goal. Now everything was different.

Hell. There was no point in trying to wait or wish there was an easier way. He headed down the stairs in an awkward rush, pausing to grip the railing for a minute at the bottom. A wave of sickness came and went. Damn. The hospital injection would have to give out on him now. He wanted to stay numb. Just keep staying numb.

The front door opened behind him and he heard a gasp. For a moment Victor hoped. He tried to focus back up the steps, to ignore the bile rising in his throat. Maybe she was—

The hope died, quickly and painfully. She wasn't Jen. That was her only flaw, though. Other, smarter men wouldn't be disappointed. The woman at the head of the stairs was worth looking at, even if she was the wrong woman for him. She was strikingly beautiful. He knew her, too, even though he couldn't quite think of the name through his haze...

Oh God, yes, of course. Cee Cee. Of course. He stared hard, concentrating on her face and the emotions inside him quieted for a moment. Aha. That was the trick to getting through the next few hours. Instead of thinking about what had just happened, he should think what was happening now. This second. Right now, this second, he was enjoying Cee Cee.

She'd always been attractive, even as a kid, but in the last few years the girl had grown up sexy as hell. He scanned the low-cut dress and the sleek brown hair.

Then he saw her eyes. Those green eyes stared straight at him and they looked—

Someone else was feeling pain, too. For a moment he wanted to hold her, like he used to when she'd skinned her knee. She'd fought back tears then. He was fighting them now.

No. He didn't have time for someone else's hurt. If he could move fast enough, he might be able to block out some of this fierce agony before it grew to something unmanageable. He had to get out, get away—

"Victor, wait!" Cee Cee ran down the porch stairs, lifting the hem of her long bridesmaid's dress in one hand, cursing the shoes that kept her from running properly. The man in front of her held himself rigid for a moment, then his shoulders relaxed slightly and he turned to her.

"Cee Cee."

He was still so gorgeous. Even leaning heavily on his cane, his mouth tight from pain, he was imposing. Tall, dark and handsome. Rugged. Dangerous. Sexy. Latin lover. He was a walking list of romance hero clichés. She'd been too young to realize that when she first tumbled into love with him. Back then, she hadn't realized any other woman would want him. She'd thought he was meant just for her.

Of course, later she'd thought he was dead. She didn't want to dwell on that time, not when he was so obviously alive. Victor might be a little damaged around the edges, but he still looked fine to her.

She looked over the changes time had made in him. Victor was thinner than ever—almost too thin. He was wearing his silky straight hair longer than she remembered, long enough to brush his shoulders. Her fingers itched to touch—his shoulders, his hair, everything.

Damn, she still had the same reaction she'd always had. Maybe even worse. Well, she'd had plenty of practice in looking but not touching. The way Victor looked right now, not touching was definitely the way to go. "Victor Ruiz, what're you planning to do?"

"What am I planning to do? Let me see. I just returned from the dead to find my loving fiancée. Shouldn't I be celebrating?" His low voice still held secrets and danger. "That's a joke, Cee Cee. Guess I might as well have stayed dead. Jen's going to marry my best friend whether I'm around or not. Good old Jack is going to get my woman and my daughter and I'm going to get—what the hell am I going to get?"

His smile made Cee Cee swallow hard and want to step back. Victor blinked, straightened his shoulders, then continued in his most formal voice. "To answer your question, I do not know what I plan to do, *querida*, but I do not think you will want to know, either. I appreciate your concern, but you need to go on back to the wedding. After all, your sister is getting married."

"Victor, don't—" Cee Cee held out a hand, then returned it back to her side. Of course he was hurting. Nothing she said could change that. "I care about you, Victor. I know you're hurt."

"Darling, I am not nearly as hurt as I am going to be." He bared his teeth in what could be another smile. "Give it a few hours to sink in and you'll be hearing about me from the police station."

"I don't think you're kidding." Cee Cee looked him over. A girl always should know her priorities. Victor was number one on her list right now. Hell, maybe he always had been. "All right. I'm coming with you. Jen will understand."

"Little girl, get out of here."

"No."

He ignored her as she walked with him to his small rental car. The only noise he made was a grunt as he swung himself carefully into the driver's seat. She stepped into the passenger's side.

"How badly does your leg hurt?"

"Bad enough." He sounded unconcerned, though sweat beaded on his forehead. "Listen, Cee Cee, I appreciate the worry but—"

"I'm staying with you until I know you're okay." She clicked on her safety belt. "I know you feel awful. Vic, if it helps, Jennifer spent over a year grieving for you. Jack helped her deal with your death—"

"I'm sure he did." Victor's voice was just a little too gentle. Then it roughened. "Listen, if you have to follow me like a puppy dog, do it. I'm not going to kick you out

because—well, for old times' sake. But don't talk to me about Jennifer or my dear buddy, Jack. In fact, the less you talk, the better." He shot her a warning glance. "Understood?"

"Understood. I just want—" Suddenly she couldn't finish her calm sentence. The words she'd been holding back since she first saw him again almost rushed out.

You can't understand. We thought you were dead. We all thought you were dead. Even I, at the end, believed it. Don't you know what that did to us? To me?

Victor wasn't ready to hear those words. So Cecilia shut her lips tight enough to sting.

"I know." He turned his head away, staring at the windshield. "I wonder if you're willing to do what I want. Since booze doesn't do it for me, there's always sex. Are you still jailbait, Cee Cee?"

"I'm—I'm twenty-one." She made her voice sound calm. He couldn't mean what she was thinking—hoping. Dying for. He was just trying to make her leave. But he needed someone with him. "Vic, you can't scare me. You've known me forever. I'm like your little sister."

"I don't have a sister," he responded. "No sister-in-law, either. Right?"

"Right." God knows she didn't want him to think of her as a sibling.

"And you're all grown up. Not a Cee Cee anymore. You must be Cecilia, at least." He started the car.

"All right. Let's go, buddy." Cecilia crossed her arms and waited.

He shifted gears and they pulled away from the curb.

She knew she had to get him to someplace quiet and private. He'd need to break down soon and things would be bad enough even if she was the only one who saw it.

He must be tired, too. He'd been leaning heavily on his cane, and he was gripping the steering wheel almost as if he needed its support to hold himself upright. What would she do with him once they were alone? What would he do with her?

On the way to God knows where, he stopped at a drugstore. She followed him in, unsure of what to do, and watched as he walked directly to the condoms. Oh, Lord. That answered her question.

Rattled, she turned and blindly grabbed the first thing in front of her—a toothbrush. She stood in front of him in line and unsnapped her tiny purse. It contained some lipstick, a credit card and the disposable camera she had planned to use at the wedding ceremony.

"The toothbrush is a dollar and two cents. It's on sale." The clerk stared at the credit card Cee Cee held out to her.

"Great. Charge it." She didn't have a dollar. Or two cents. She'd been prepared for her sister's wedding. She wasn't prepared for any of what was happening right now.

The clerk kept glancing over at Cee Cee while she rang up Victor's purchase. Cee Cee gritted her teeth. Somehow she'd managed to make a spectacle of herself while Mr.-Run-and-Buy-Condoms hadn't. Well, looking foolish wasn't her style but right now her style didn't matter. What mattered was how Victor got through this. But, oh, he owed her. Someday, somehow, she'd collect.

He smiled without humor as they walked out of the store. He put his hand on her shoulder. “Got the giant pack, baby.”

“You aren’t scaring me off, Vic.” She ignored the faint flutter in her stomach. “I figure you’ll get to the hotel and maybe pass out. You can admit you’re human, Vic. This has been a hell of a day for you.”

“But I’m not human, Cecilia. Come on.”

* * * * *

She wasn’t running. His cock, on screaming alert, pounded against his suit pants. When was the last time he’d felt so damn ready to come? She hadn’t done anything—had hardly spoken to him, in fact—but her presence, her scent was making him insane. Her hand touched his and he shivered.

Her dress was seduction—clinging to her breasts, tight and tempting around her hips. Her sleek hair begged to be mussed. Her lips were glossy—he could imagine her lipstick all over his body. It had been so long. He’d tried to warn her off, scare her off, but she hadn’t left. The whole time his stupid cock had been hard. It didn’t care who she was. It cared that she was female and soft and beautiful—

If she stayed with him, even for a while, he wouldn’t feel so damn alone.

Victor blinked down at the steering wheel. His fierce hold on the flimsy thing might damned well tear it from the mooring. He could almost feel the steering column shiver. He had to ease up. His grip was way too tight. Almost as tight as Cecilia would be if he—

Damn it! What kind of asshole had his life destroyed one minute and couldn’t think beyond sex the next? But he knew—and his cock knew—if he could just dive into her, he’d reach some kind of oblivion.

A sweet, hot oblivion. His cock wept a few slow drops at the thought.

God, if she didn’t leave soon, he’d lose any self-control he had left. This was Cecilia. He didn’t want to hurt her. But if she didn’t leave soon, he wouldn’t care about his self-control or who got hurt. He had to make her leave.

At the hotel she stayed by his side as he checked in. The hotel clerk glanced at her but Victor ignored both Cecilia and the clerk’s glances. The hotel clerk was intimidated enough by Victor’s black scowl to say nothing.

They rode the elevator in silence. It was so quiet that the clatter of the ice machines in the hallway almost made her jump. He opened the door to his hotel room, and she stepped inside. He didn’t. He folded his arms and leaned against the doorframe, with the door wide open.

“Ready to call it quits now, Cecilia?”

“Vic, you need me around. I’m not leaving.” Didn’t that sound pathetic? She didn’t do pathetic. Instead she wet her lips and added, “No matter what, big boy.”

One second. Two seconds. Cecilia turned, tossed the purse on the dresser. She kicked her stupid shoes off. Was he ever going to take the hint?

He shut the door.

Without another word, he took off his jacket and tie. Still watching her, he slipped off his shirt and pants. Without hesitation, he slipped off his briefs. Her mouth went dry when she saw him. Dear Lord, he really was perfect. Tight muscles, brown skin, and that cock. Oh, that cock. Thick and hard and long. His erection bobbed up and down, almost in welcome, as she stared down, mesmerized. It wasn't difficult to imagine what Victor was thinking.

Come on, Cecilia. Take me. Or let me take you. His penis, red and eager, issued a challenge and a welcome. His balls were already drawn up tight against his skin.

It wasn't fair. She had dreamed about him since puberty. Jen had always had him. He'd been so beyond Cecilia's reach there wasn't any use hoping for him. Now Jen had someone else and here he was. But he was hurting and confused. She probably shouldn't let Victor do what they both wanted.

She probably would anyhow.

He brushed the spaghetti straps of her gown off her shoulders. Almost caressingly, his hand swept up her neck.

"So sexy," he murmured. "You're getting me hard, baby. And I don't even have to pay you."

She looked down. Oh, yes. He definitely was hard. She couldn't imagine any cock harder. Or more enticing. She wasn't going to let his ugly words interfere with her pleasure.

"Don't, Victor," Cee Cee—no, Cecilia for this weekend—said. "Don't try to scare me or make wanting me seem cheap. I'm here for you this weekend. If this is what you really want."

"You're supposed to run screaming, now." His voice suddenly sounded uncertain. "I'm not the one who is supposed to want to scream—"

"If you're trying to scare me, you picked the wrong way, Victor." She lifted her head up for his kiss.

"You should be terrified—"

He reached out and twisted the dress down to her waist. Eagerly, she helped him remove the whole thing, not caring when she heard the sound of ripping cloth. His kiss was hot and possessive, a fierce prelude to something more. He pulled her, willingly, to the bed. He lay on top of her, his aroused body already pressing into her. She loved the weight, the heat, the push of his erection into her thigh. He was here. With her. He was real and he wanted her.

They kissed again and her head swam. His tongue was fierce, the pressure against her own tongue a prelude to whatever he planned. God, yes. She wanted him hot and hungry and masterful. His mouth was all those things. If he kept going, Victor was going to make her come with just a kiss.

He didn't stop. He teased the tip of her tongue while he used the rest of his body to drive her crazy. His hands lingered on her bare breasts and then went to cup her underneath her silken panties. He teased at her pubic hair, stretched her labia. Oh, God. After all these years of waiting he was going to make her wait for foreplay? Cecilia twisted, pressed herself against his hand, trying to make him hurry.

His fingers slid against her clitoris, more gently than she'd expected, given his initial roughness. His mouth slid away, moved to her neck. Cecilia bit her own tongue to keep from crying out with need. Of course he didn't need to hear her. He could feel how wet she was. How swollen her clit had grown. She shuddered at just his first touch against her flesh. The pressure of his thumb increased at her shiver, his nail scraping lightly against the sensitive nub. Cecilia whimpered, just a little. She couldn't help herself.

Then he stopped touching. Pulled his hands away. "*Dios*, I can't."

She opened her eyes in shock. A few seconds ago it had been more than clear that he could. He rolled away from her on the bed and rubbed his face.

"Victor?"

"Shit. One minute I'm hard as iron and the next—Cee Cee, *querida*, just let me alone for a minute."

"Did I do something?" She just barely kept the squeak out of her voice. She'd never squeaked in her life and certainly didn't plan to do it now.

"No. Don't you understand? I haven't had a woman in two years. And before that, almost all my life it's been Jen. Just Jen. Your big sister. I can't."

She wasn't going to beg. "I thought I wasn't Cee Cee anymore. I'm Cecilia, remember? Just someone you need for the evening."

"It doesn't matter right now. My body won't let me. Shit." He sat up on the bed, his shoulders slumped, refusing to look at her.

So Mr. Macho wasn't superhuman after all? A twist of lust and sympathy streaked through her.

Cecilia gently pulled him back down next to her. "Victor, it's okay. I understand. What you really need right now is sleep. Rest and it'll be fine tomorrow. I promise."

She felt his resistance for a moment and then, with a sigh, he turned and held her. "I'm still spinning from my meds and—and everything. But we aren't going to do anything. Ever. You should be like my little sister. Even if Jen isn't—"

"Sleep." She rubbed his forehead, right where the scowl marks between his eyes were deepest. How he always hated showing weakness. What a nightmare this must be for him.

"I guess sleep is all I am good for right now," he mumbled.

Almost within the next moment, he was asleep, holding her body tightly against his. She didn't drift off with him, though she was tempted. For what seemed to be hours she waited, making sure he was truly in a deep sleep, then she pulled carefully away from him.

She could leave now. She thought the worst was over. Victor would be safe enough and she would be—safe. Yes, leaving would be the smart thing to do...

Screw safe. Screw smart. She picked up the phone receiver.

"Are you okay? Is he okay?" Molly asked as soon as Cecilia said hello. Thank God it was Molly and not Jen. She could handle her baby sister.

“I think so. I mean, I’m fine. I don’t know about Vic. I need to stay a little longer to be sure,” she whispered. “He’s asleep now. I’ll call later. I hope Jen understood and that they had a wonderful wedding. I’ll be home again very soon.”

“Now. You need to be home now. Where are you? What’s your phone number? Cecilia!”

“No, I don’t know the telephone number here. Even if I did, I wouldn’t give it to you. Victor doesn’t need phone calls. Don’t worry. I can take care of myself. Besides, this is Victor. You know he wouldn’t hurt me.” Cecilia hung up.

Damn it, he wouldn’t. He’d probably tried to hurt her feelings tonight but he was still too protective to do a good job. Victor couldn’t hurt her.

Then she went back to the bed where Victor was restlessly reaching out one arm. She stared down, hesitating. He was so defenseless in his sleep. When she slid by his side, his arm curled around her tightly, as if he had been waiting for her. He sighed.

He wouldn’t do anything to hurt her...but what would she do? What was she willing to do?

“I’m pitiful,” she murmured. “He probably thinks I’m Jen, if he’s thinking of anyone at all. I don’t care.”

She let her hands drift down his chest, touch his ribs. Finally. She could touch him just the way she’d dreamed. She put her head on his shoulder and let herself sleep with Victor.

* * * * *

Cecilia woke with a start, a little stunned to find she was already wet with her dripping cream. Slowly she realized her hand was resting between Victor’s thighs and she was touching his cock. His hard, growing cock.

She blinked, sleep forgotten. God, if she’d been trying to tease, she couldn’t have done a better job.

Then again, didn’t she want to tease? To incite him? She’d all but worn a sign that read “AVAILABLE AND READY.” She’d stayed when she should have left.

Slowly and deliberately, Cecilia tightened her hold on his cock. It jumped under her touch.

“Do you want this?” His voice whispered in her ear, echoing her earlier thoughts.

For an answer, she stroked and felt him shiver.

Her panties offered little resistance as he pulled them off her hips. But even the slight hesitation was too much.

“Fuck!” He growled the word as the silk ripped in his hands.

She didn’t have any clothing left now. Good. She didn’t want any barriers.

In the next instant, Victor was on top of her, his mouth on her breast and his hand between her thighs. She could barely see his face in the dark, but she knew his expression was intent and grim.

His hand made her forget everything else. Stroking slyly, coaxing her—her hips jerked forward, the way his cock had under her hand.

“You seem ready—I hope you’re ready—because God knows I am.” His voice sounded odd.

She gasped as he slid into her. “Can’t you feel how ready I am?”

Iron was how he’d described his cock before. If iron was hot and pulsed, then he was right. He was hard and thick and stretched her wide. For a moment she tensed, uncomfortably. He was bigger than she’d thought. She couldn’t think of a more perfect time to have reality be better than imagination.

Victor paused, his cock halfway inside. He couldn’t stop—she couldn’t stop now. She couldn’t let him go.

His mouth turned to suck and lightly bite one nipple and almost instantly her sheath turned slickly welcoming. He slid in fully and they both sighed. Cecilia shut her eyes, just savoring. The real Vic was actually better than her fantasies. Beyond all of her fantasies put together. How was that possible?

She wasn’t allowed to savor long. One of his hands tangled in her hair, pulling her head back into the pillow. He snarled...and pulled himself away.

She cried out, terrified he would leave.

“Don’t move. Don’t speak.” Victor’s voice was rough.

She saw him slide one of his recently-bought condoms onto his erection. Mesmerized, she watched his hands slide down, past the vein under his cock head, down further to the base of his cock. She almost cried. It was a crime to cover such a beautiful sight.

“God, you feel good.” He shuddered as he shoved himself back inside her slick pussy again. He immediately thrust hard, as if he, too, was afraid his partner might leave. Cecilia knew he wouldn’t last long, not after tonight’s abstinence. It didn’t matter if this time was rushed. She’d expected he would be hard when he woke up.

She hadn’t expected to feel devoured.

Dimly she realized he was favoring his leg, but the slightly odd angle didn’t matter. It excited her. Everything excited her. His cock stroked her, sliding against her clitoris, making her shift her legs and push her pelvis up to catch every inch of his stroke.

His hips moved back and forth like a piston, faster and harder. Yes, that was just what they both wanted. Neither of them could bear any more preliminaries. Blindly, Cecilia moved her hips, needing to increase the friction. She stared up at him. He looked frightening, his lips lifted in a snarl and his eyes almost glazed. Frightening and more desirable than any other man she’d ever had.

Then she lost her ability to think. The hand not tangled in her hair tugged and pinched one of her nipples. The stinging pleasure shot through her breasts and centered in her pussy. Victor grunted like an animal with every thrust, and Cecilia became aware of sounds being ripped from her own throat that she had never heard before.

Abruptly he pulled her to the side of the bed and, lifting her legs up over his shoulders, he stood. When he began to thrust again, she was at his mercy, completely vulnerable to whatever he chose to do. She shivered with anticipation.

He plunged deeply, his thrusts even more powerful in this position. Cecilia screamed, as the amazingly hot, sharp sensations overwhelmed her. She ground against him in desperation, struggling to reach that mindless bliss just out of her reach.

“Damn it!” Victor groaned and shuddered, then collapsed on top of her, nearly crushing her with his weight.

Cecilia was ready to cry with frustration. Couldn’t he have waited just a minute more? She writhed for a moment. He didn’t move. She whimpered, unable to believe the most exciting moment of her sexual life had ended with her unsatisfied and wanting.

She took a deep breath. Patience. This was for him, not her. She could wait.

Victor looked up and threw the now useless condom into the trash by the bed. He licked his lips and, to her amazement, she saw him roll another condom onto his still-erect cock.

“Don’t worry. I’m not done yet.” He gave her his fierce smile again. “You had your chance, *querida*. Now I have a lot to make up for. A lot.”

Rather than enter her again, he allowed his clever fingers to seek out her swollen clit.

“Ah.” She gasped. She hurtled up into torment yet again. She wasn’t going to miss out this time. Her body was already beginning to quiver. A few gentle strokes sent her over the edge. Pleasure twanged through her, but his fingers kept on. More pleasure. More.

“Ah. Ah. Ah.”

She was going to die from the intensity, from the heat, from the ever-building delight. Cecilia bucked, ferociously, as the increasing waves of orgasm suddenly crested, drowning her in pleasure.

It took a long time for her to calm down. She finally opened her eyes, feeling her heart settle into an almost normal rate again.

“More,” he growled.

Oh yeah!

“Give me a minute.” Cecilia fought to remember his injured leg even as her desperate need went out of control one more time. Lord, her body still twitched from her release and all she could think of was that cock. How many climaxes did she want with this man?

As many as she could get.

Pushing Victor onto his back, she climbed on top him, positioning his hard shaft at the entrance of her wet cunt with shaking hands. Cecilia sank down, forcing him deep inside her body, then rode him hard and fast. He slid inside, so perfectly, so right... She let out a hoarse, moaning scream as he thrust up, again and again. She muffled the sound against the heel of her hand, dimly aware others might hear them through the hotel walls.

He took longer now, moved more slowly and deliberately. His movements almost caused her pain, so soon after the last, rough time. But it felt good, too. So good. She stared down at his body. Cecilia didn’t want slow and deliberate. Not yet. She wanted

his body again—just as hard, just as fast, just as needy. She shifted the tempo of her own movements, slapping herself hard against him. Just the sound was exciting. Exciting to Vic, too. She could tell as his fingers dug into her hips, urging her on. As his muscles corded tight beneath her. Cecilia rode him mercilessly, knowing they were both close to the edge, her breath quickening, rocking as he thrust upward.

Her vision hazed as she hurtled into a second orgasm before the first had completely subsided. With a shout, he followed her.

Silence fell. Cecilia tried to breathe regularly again, sliding off his sweat-slick body. She hesitated. Did he want her to touch him now that sex was over?

“Cecilia, I should—what should I say or do?” Victor sounded as nervous as she suddenly felt.

Cecilia yawned. The answer was simple.

“Sleep. Go to sleep.”

There was a long silence and Cecilia let her eyes shut. Then she heard a sound and jolted awake.

Victor hadn't fallen into the sated doze she had. He was curled up, his back turned to her.

Victor made another hoarse sound.

Cecilia put her hand on his arm. “What is it?”

He shuddered. “Oh hell—” The words ripped out of him. “Jen, why?”

Victor's fists clenched as he began to shake. He wouldn't cry because in Victor's world real men didn't cry. They just suffered, soundlessly. Cecilia knew he hated for anyone to see this. He'd probably hoped she was asleep. She wondered if she should try to ignore him. She was sure he'd prefer she did.

But she couldn't ignore this grief. She held him until, gradually, his tremors ended.

Victor lay with a hand over his face for a long time. Then he turned and stroked her hair. “I didn't hurt you, did I? You seemed to enjoy it as much as I did.”

“No, you didn't hurt me.” She kissed the hand at her hair.

“You're very beautiful,” he rasped. “I'm glad you're here. God forgive me.”

“You'll change your mind about that later.” Cecilia knew him. “But I'll always be glad I was here. Don't be ashamed. I know accepting what happened hurts.”

“I imagine I'll be ashamed of a lot of things that I did and intend to do with you. But not just yet. Cecilia, I just don't understand why you—” He stopped. “I won't question why. Let's just enjoy ourselves.”

A change of pace was definitely needed. He was looking far too serious. Maybe even a little guilty. One thing he didn't look like was someone who was enjoying himself. Well, she could think of a couple of good ways to make him much happier. A little teasing wouldn't hurt for a start.

“I intend to.” Cecilia stroked his tight butt. “This is my lucky day. I didn't bring my vibrator or dildo along but I finally may have met a male who can keep up with me for the weekend.”

Guilt and sadness was wiped from Victor's face in an instant. He looked fascinated. Cecilia hid her amusement. She'd thought that would intrigue him.

“You need them when you’re with a man?”

“Not all men. But sometimes I could use a back up. Just in case. Not every man has my...stamina.” She watched, almost as fascinated as Victor had been with her conversation, while Victor’s cock stirred. What had she started?

“Your stamina. Hmm. We’ll see who quits first this weekend, shall we?” Victor murmured the words against her ear, his voice rough with renewed promise. Cecilia turned her head, bit his earlobe. His cock stirred a little more.

She was going to make sure neither of them would have the energy for regrets.

* * * * *

“Hold that pose and smile.”

“Oh, no! You sneak!” Cecilia wiped the sweat from her eyes. She was still sprawled, legs apart, after their last bout. “I should never have given you that camera.”

At least they hadn’t opened the hotel drapes.

“It’s a toy, not a camera.” The flash momentarily blinded her yet again. “But damn, you’re pretty all naked and wet.”

“My turn—” Cecilia lunged, grabbed the camera, and snapped the photo before he could react. He looked damn pretty himself, with his fly half down and his pants riding low on his hips. Turn about was fair play.

“Give me that!” He snatched at her hands.

“I don’t think so.” Cecilia slid away from him, dancing just out of reach.

“Give it back and I’ll develop the prints myself.” Victor used his most guileless smile. “I don’t think some of these photos should be seen by others.”

“But you’ll let me have them afterward?”

He looked at her questioningly, but didn’t ask why. “I’ll send them to you.”

She caught the inference and handed him the camera without speaking. He wouldn’t be around to give them to her himself.

What they both needed was more sex.

“Come here,” she invited instead. “Let me help you work on that fly. I love seeing you half-naked, but all naked is even better.”

“No problem.” Victor lifted his hands up to his shoulders in what could be seen as surrender—and an invitation. “Undress me anytime, baby.”

“Any way I want to?”

“What way is that, Cecilia?”

She knelt and grinned up at him. “No hands. Just mouth.”

Her mouth pushed at his fly, testing for an entrance. Her tongue circled the button at the top, slipped behind his jeans.

“*Dios*, babe. Fun is fun but—” He almost ripped open his pants, freeing his cock for her eager lips. He moaned as her tongue touched him. “Undress me whenever you want. Just this time—faster.”

* * * * *

He left the room to buy a skirt from the hotel gift shop while she slept the sleep of the sexually sated. She had already taken over one of his shirts, using it as a cover for when room service delivered food. She'd need something to go with it when she left, since her bridesmaid's dress had been shredded. He hesitated when he saw some flowers for sale by the register. He ought to get her...something more.

He shook his head. Flowers meant too much and not enough. She was starting to mean too much. He had to be careful. When they were in bed, everything between them worked too well. After getting slapped in the face, somehow he'd gotten lucky. He didn't deserve someone like Cecilia being so generous...so fucking sexy.

He fumbled with his cane as he reached the elevator. They'd be so wrong together. He knew that when they started this weekend. Cecilia kept making him forget.

Outside of bed, he wasn't right for her. Not remotely. He was too old for her, too battered, had too much history. *Dios*, if he wasn't good enough for Jen, he sure as hell wasn't right for her little sister. He shouldn't even have to tell himself that.

How could she be interested in him? Hell, he had probably qualified as a pity fuck. Victor winced as he left the elevator, not entirely because his leg throbbed from the exercise he'd had this weekend.

Shit, he had some pride left. He damn well had better become a little more to her by now. He wouldn't ask for undying love—he didn't want any more so-called undying love—but he did want Cecilia to...

To what? Nothing. He just wanted her. That's all. Wanting wasn't having, though.

* * * * *

She was still asleep after he made his phone call. Victor stared down at the woman on the bed. What the hell had he done?

This wasn't just anybody.

This was Cee Cee. No. Cecilia. She was grown up enough to skip the kid's nickname.

Cecilia looked exhausted. She should be exhausted. He'd used her—no, they'd used each other—until the worst of his rage and pain and need had burned away. He wasn't crazy any more. Well, at least he was sane enough to know what he had to do next.

He could handle things on his own now.

She opened her eyes to see Victor looming over her.

"You're so young, Cecilia."

She knew exactly what was coming. Screaming would do no good. Nothing she could think of would change the inevitable. Victor had his impassive face on, the one that meant things were going to happen his way or he'd die trying.

"Just don't tell me I remind you of Jennifer at that age, please." She couldn't stand being dismissed that way.

"Not at all." His certainty almost made her feel better. "But you are young. And I was very wrong. I called you a taxi, *querida*. We have to end things here and now." He handed her a skirt.

“I expected you to tell me good-bye today.” She managed a half-shrug, rather proud of her calm. She could act like an adult, even if Victor didn’t believe she was one. She tossed her new toothbrush into the garbage. “Let me get dressed.”

What did she expect? His undying love? That he’d stay with her forever? Vic had made what was going to happen clear enough. No use whining. This was the real world. Parents died, men you loved left. What good did whining do?

It didn’t take long for her to pull on the skirt and button up his shirt. But she bent down, taking a long time with her shoes, to hide the tears.

She hesitated when she was done, wondering if she should say good-bye right then, but he took his cane. He held her arm as he escorted her to the hotel lobby.

“Thank you, Cecilia,” he said as the taxi driver entered, searching for his fare. “I owe you a debt that is greater than I can repay. If you need me, call.”

He won’t call me.

Cecilia gripped his arm tightly for a moment. “I enjoyed myself, even though I knew you were hurting. Take care. Please. If you ever need to know—anything—even though you said you didn’t want to, call me.”

Cecilia hesitated, kissed him on the cheek. She pulled back quickly. If she did anything more, she’d break down and beg to stay. She already knew how useless begging would be.

“Will you be all right?” she asked instead.

“You can’t baby-sit me forever, *pequeña*.” For an instant she saw a real smile in his eyes. “I’ll live, Cecilia.”

Seeing that smile, Cecilia relaxed. Victor nodded at her. She nodded back. Then she left the lobby with quick steps and didn’t look back.

Chapter Two

Spring, Three Years Later

Maybe she was getting old. Was twenty-four supposed to feel ancient? She was actually a little shaky as she paid the taxi and walked through the door.

Cecilia paused, took some deep breaths. The dizziness receded. The medicine sometimes made her body behave unpredictably and she had no desire to faint. She especially didn't want to faint in her old home where, amazingly enough, not one adult would be at home to check on her for weeks.

You could never get away from a member of the family when she was growing up. Someone was always around, like it or not. Now it was rare that anyone was here.

Ever since Jen had gotten married this wasn't really home. Cecilia used the house as a home base, but between touring and recording, she wasn't there more than a month or two a year. Molly was out in the wilds of Colorado, doing an internship to become a vet. Kevin was always away, working on one construction job or another. Jen and Jack were only next door, but they were living their own busy lives. Mrs. Beale, Jack's housekeeper, was the only one who came to the house regularly to tidy up. She probably had seen more of the place in the last year or so than the family did.

"Things do change," Cecilia muttered aloud. Well, in this case, yippee for change. She'd have plenty of time alone to think. She needed that time to make her final decision.

The question itself was clear. Could she be a single mother? Probably. She might be single, but she wouldn't be alone. When Vicky had been born, before Jen married, the family had rallied to her aid. Cecilia remembered taking care of Vicky as a baby. Did she really want to go through that again for herself this time? Diapers, feedings, colic...

Her breath caught. Vicky had looked so much like Victor, even as an infant. Cecilia remembered how she had played with Vicky, waiting for the infant to smile at her. Those little baby smiles had been so—so enthralling. Cecilia had pushed those memories aside for a long time, concentrating on her own life. But they were there now, enticing and bewitching. Babies were demanding but, much as Cecilia had never admitted it aloud, so sweet. So very sweet. And, yes, she wanted one. She wanted to have her own baby. She needed something to love.

Cecilia firmly brought herself back to her present problem. Her family had changed, but not that much. All of them would help her whenever they could. She had more money than Jen had ever had as a single parent and she didn't have to support anyone but herself and a child. She had a wandering lifestyle, but she could make accommodations. She knew she could manage. Maybe no one else would believe it, but she could put a baby first, before her singing.

That left the one last big question. Who would father her child? There were sperm banks—would they take on someone with her disease? There were some ex-boyfriends.

She made a face. The last relationship, with a now ex-backup member of her band, had been like most of them. He was fun but unreliable and, eventually, envious of her success.

Of course, there was Victor.

Of course? How “of course” was Victor?

She went to the kitchen sink to get water. It was time for yet another pill. She didn’t want to think about her illness. She wanted to think about Victor.

Victor saw Vicky, but he wasn’t up for much more of the family. Jen and he handled those visits without the rest of the family knowing much about them. Cecilia hadn’t seen him in three years.

“I don’t care. There’s still a bond there.” Cecilia frowned a moment. “I know there is.”

She didn’t lie to herself about men, not the good or the bad. Men might run after an affair with her broke up, but they remembered her. How could Victor, of all people, forget? They had known each other too long and, finally, too intimately. He might not be interested anymore or he might not want to be interested. But he remembered her.

Victor had mailed the photographs to her without a note a few weeks after their weekend. Just as she had suspected, even with a cheap camera Victor was incapable of composing a bad shot. She had looked in turn mysterious and sexy. In one, she looked as sexually satisfied as any woman could be. Even the quick photo she had snapped of him had its charm—he had looked almost as sexy and dangerous in the photo as he had in real life.

She looked at them more than she ever wanted to admit. They went with her from hotel to hotel, some of the few things she refused to discard during her travels. In fact, she’d called him once because of those photos. Just once. She’d been careful. She wasn’t going to make him think she was pursuing him. She wasn’t. Not ever again. She had tracked him down in—Italy, if she remembered correctly—and asked his permission to use one for an album cover.

“They’re yours, of course.” He’d sounded emotionless. “Do what you want with them.”

“I know you could get a huge commission on something like that,” she’d persisted.

“If they help you, that’s enough,” he’d said. “It’s little enough given what you provided for me that weekend.”

She wasn’t sure if she was touched or hurt. If she was such a good provider, why had he avoided her all this time? What had she meant to him?

“You mean that’s my payment for a weekend’s sex?” Cecilia’s voice purred at its most dangerous. Smart men knew to back down when they heard that tone.

“I think you gave me some sanity, Cecilia. I haven’t forgotten. You tell me if some of my negatives are worth that.”

The conversation ended as it had to, with her thanking him and saying good-bye.

He remembered. Of course he did. Stupid man. She’d thought she’d outgrow him; she thought she had more pride. But she hadn’t and she didn’t. He was the only man

who had ever made her shiver with just a look. He was the only one she trusted. She was miserable and scared and Victor was who she wanted to help her.

So, yes. Of course Victor. No matter how she'd tried to let him go, it had to be Victor.

Jen might know where Victor was right now, but Cecilia didn't want to interrupt her trip. In fact she didn't want Jen to know anything. Not yet. Besides, right now Cecilia was being Aunt Cee Cee the babysitter for her four-year-old niece while Jen and Jack were away on their second honeymoon. At least that was Cecilia's excuse. She'd actually canceled her few remaining stops on her tour because she was feeling too ill to go on.

"Aunt Cee Cee, you're here!" Vicky burst through the back door and squealed when she saw her aunt.

"Hello, sweetie." Vicky was adorable, and she was growing up. The child wasn't a baby any more, but a tiny person. Cecilia knelt down to hug her.

Would Cecilia get a chance to watch her own baby grow up? She stood up, carrying Vicky.

"Hello, Cecilia."

Cecilia froze at the sound of that male voice. *Be careful of what you wish for.* Cecilia looked up and saw the man she had been thinking of two seconds before. She set Vicky down again, before she dropped her.

Victor looked a little older. She saw just a few gray strands in his dark hair. He was still thin, he still had those dark eyes, and he still radiated intensity. He looked even sexier than she remembered, and she remembered plenty. "Hi, Vic. How are you?"

"I'm well. I wish I could say you look the same." He frowned at her. "Sit down. You look like you should."

She surprised herself by agreeing. "I guess I will. It's just jet lag."

"Mom tried to call you before she left but you were gone, Aunt Cee Cee," Vicky informed her. "Father is watching me. He thought he couldn't and then he could."

"But I'm staying—" Cecilia stopped short.

"I'd planned to stay here, but I'll take my things to a hotel." Victor was almost out the door.

"No, don't be silly." Cecilia jumped up, held out a hand. If she fell over, she fell over. She wasn't going to let him leave. "How could you watch Vicky at a hotel? There's plenty of room."

"I'm gonna stay in Mommy's old room, next to Father's," Vicky continued, eagerly. "I stayed there when I was a little baby, before my Daddy was my Daddy. Where will you be?"

Cecilia winced. Once Jen got married, Cecilia had moved to what had been Jen's old room. She couldn't displace Vicky, though.

"I guess I'm going to be in my old room." Cecilia used her most cheerful voice. There was no point in whining to a child. But that was definitely a less desirable room. Sibling age had its privileges. "I used to have to share with Molly."

"Aunt Molly and you?" Vicky frowned. "I 'member. Did you like to share?"

“Sometimes.” *Never.*

“You could share wi’ me,” Vicky offered. She held her aunt’s hand. “Sometimes it’s scary by yourself, right? I could protect you and you could protect me.”

“We’ll see.”

“That means yes.” Vicky spoke from long experience. “Good! My stuff is up there. You take yours up now, Aunt Cee Cee.”

“I’ll take them up for you later.” Victor was still studying her. “Vicky, why don’t you go and watch TV for a while? I need to talk to your aunt.”

Vicky hesitated, but the lure of TV was too strong. She ran to the living room and the sounds of the television set were soon blaring.

Cecilia sat, taking deep breaths. She’d asked for him and here he was. Should she wait or should she just go ahead? Either was a risk. He could be deeply offended by her bluntness. On the other hand, Victor was more likely to leave for another few years than he was to stay and let her gradually lead the conversation—no, there was no way to casually work this into a conversation, whether she took minutes or hours.

“Is there something you need, Cecilia?” he asked. “Is something wrong? I can tell something is going on.”

“I was just thinking how fortuitous it was that you’re here. I have something to ask of you.”

“Yes?”

Her stomach lurched—and this time it wasn’t because she felt sick. Spotlight. Showtime. “Victor, do you know what endometriosis is?”

“It’s a disease which causes a woman to lose her fertility.” He looked more concerned now. “Cecilia, do you have...?”

“Pregnancy, if endometriosis hasn’t gone on too long, can help,” Cecilia went on steadily. “Even more important, I want a child very much.”

He looked concerned, but uncomprehending. Damn, she was going to have to spell everything out. “Victor, I don’t know any other way to ask this. Would you be willing to give me a child?”

He looked at her, his face an absolute blank. Then he gave a short laugh that wasn’t quite real laughter and turned his back on her. “You’re joking.”

“You know I’m not.”

He swung back toward her with his eyes shooting angry sparks. “I am sure you have had many boyfriends since me. What is wrong with them?”

“Everything.” This part really wasn’t complicated after all. At least not as complicated as she had first thought. “And I don’t have any now. Besides, I don’t need a boyfriend. I need a man. Aren’t you man enough, Victor?”

“I do not understand. Why the hell do you and your sister regard me as some sort of stud? A stud you can share at that?” Victor looked baffled and angry. “You need some Hispanic stallion to provide you Anglo women with babies, is that it?”

“Maybe you have some right to say that of me.” Cecilia tried not to sound hurt and then decided maybe she should be hurt and show it, too. “But it’s really unfair of you to say that of Jen! She loved you! She didn’t plan to get pregnant when she did.”

“That’s more than you can say.” His fist clenched, unclenched. “So. Let me understand. I’d give you some acceptable sperm and you’d leave, hmm? That’s all I’m worthy of in your family, apparently.”

“No, Victor—”

“Cecilia, I promised long ago I was going to be a father to my children, if I had any, more of a father than I ever had. I haven’t lived up to my promise. So far all I get is a few weeks here and there with my daughter. Vicky calls someone else her daddy. Would I get the same from you? Or would you give me any role at all beyond providing sperm?”

“Stop!” Cecilia was ready to stamp her foot and she hadn’t done that in years. Being direct hadn’t worked. But getting angry at Vic rarely worked either. She gripped her temper and decided seduction might work better than ire. She’d always been able to flirt her way into winning her point. “You want to know what you’d get? Don’t you think I could make it worth your while, Victor?”

She moved closer to him and smiled her most practiced seductive smile. They were so close they almost touched. “Didn’t I make it worth your while that weekend?”

He made a brief, violent gesture with his hand before his fingers bit into her shoulders. “I wondered when you would remind me. I wasn’t myself that weekend. But your generosity was important to me then. Don’t make that seem less than important to you.”

Oh, hell. Why was she doing this? She knew men. She’d made a study of Victor all through her teenage years. This wasn’t going to get her anywhere. His pride and masculinity were something no one could challenge. Instead she should use his sense of honor and, much as she hated it, his sense of obligation.

“I owe you a debt that is greater than I can repay,” she quoted back to him, bitterly. “You told me that. Did you mean it? Because now I need repayment. Afterwards we’re even. You never need feel indebted to me again.”

He took a short, sharp breath and stepped away from her. The moment stretched out, making an uncomfortable moment into an agonized eternity. Cecilia kept herself on her feet, looking steadily at him, by sheer will. The adrenaline that had given her the courage to say that was gone. She felt simply dizzy and ill.

“Very well. You’re right to remind me of my words, of course. Cecilia, if you want my child, I’ll do my best to give you one.” His voice was cool. “I have conditions, though. You must take me as well. I will never abandon any child of mine again. I was forced to, with Vicky. I will die before I allow it with anyone else.”

“What do you mean?” Cecilia braced herself.

She’s scared. Scared to death and trying to hide it. I know that look of hers. It’s just like the one she got before she confessed to her mother that she broke the antique vase in the living room.

Why would she be scared of me?

Fuck. Because I was such an asshole the last time. Of course. Because she wants this baby. She wants it so badly she’s going about everything all wrong.

Ahh, CeeCee, I know how that feels. You don't have to fight and pretend with everyone to get what you want. At least you don't have to fight me.

But damn. Why did you have to ask me this? I love kids. Jen and I used to talk about how much we wanted them. Oh damn, damn. You can't want what I would if I had a child. Hell, or what I would want from you if you were my kid's mother. Think again about what you're asking me. Because I'm crazy enough to agree with what you ask. Stupid enough to think maybe I can make a family work. Somehow.

Be smart enough for us both, Cecilia. Tell us no.

"I would be honored to repay my debt to you, Miss Turner." He took her hand and brought it to his lips in what could have been a courtly gesture but seemed more mocking than courteous. Then he dropped her hand, making the meaning even plainer. "However, if you want my child, you must either promise me custody or, better yet, you must marry me. I might share my child with my wife. I'll share my child with no one else ever again."

Cecilia said nothing, keeping her face an unruffled mask outside. Inside she was trying to think. She couldn't. This bargain could leave them hating each other. She could think of a million reasons why this would be all wrong, but she wanted his "condition" desperately. She wanted the whole thing—the baby, the marriage, the man.

Maybe it would work out. Maybe she couldn't make such a big decision when she was so tired and so ill.

Maybe she would have to.

Suddenly, wearily, Cecilia rubbed her eyes and forehead with her hands. "All right."

He waited, too, his face as unreadable as hers, for her to continue.

"All right," she repeated. "I agree. We can get married when you wish. I suppose we should work out some agreement beforehand. I don't expect anything of you, Victor, other than children if I can have them. I won't give up what I have, either. Not to someone who is just the father of my child and no more."

"That would be fair," he said, evenly. "Do you want your clever brother-in-law to work out the agreement? Since he is gone for a few days we need not rush."

"Perhaps I'll have Jen do it," Cecilia flashed. "She's getting her law degree now, too, and has an interest in family law."

"As you wish."

Victor sounded as if he had lost interest in the discussion. But he was speaking more and more formally, as if he was translating the words from Spanish to English in his head. That usually meant he was upset. "You look ill. Do you wish to also consult your doctor? I would be happy to fulfill my obligation to you whenever your doctor and you find it agreeable."

"I suppose I must." Cecilia drew herself up. "My medication needs to be out of my system before I try to get pregnant. Listen, Victor. I know how you travel. You may not be here when the doctor tells me it'll be all right. Should I call you when it will be a—a mutually satisfactory time?"

“I had planned to stay here with Vicky for the next week or two. I don’t mind marrying you while I’m here.” He sounded as if it was an errand on a list. “Perhaps marriage should come before pregnancy. It is an old-fashioned notion, of course.”

Cecilia bit back the angry words. Sometimes they were too much alike—his anger made her angry and the anger fed on each other. When she had been kind and honest during the weekend they were together, he was able to be as well. She might not be able to manage kind after this “discussion,” but she could try honesty. God, but honesty could be scary.

“Victor, I need your help. I’ve accepted your conditions. Can’t you be satisfied?” she asked, at last.

This is selfish. I know it is. But maybe I can make it work. I can make Victor happy if he lets me. I can. If it does work—oh God, if it does—then I’ll have a family again. A real family. Plus Victor to make that family with. Hot damn.

“My satisfaction is something I will look forward to, perhaps even before the wedding.” He gave her one of those old, not quite smiles just like he did their memorable weekend. “But perhaps not. I’m not sure you feel well enough. Talk to your doctor. I will talk to your doctor as well. You worry me. I don’t like to see you so pale and so—so...”

“Ill? Hysterical?”

“Desperately unhappy.” His lips brushed her cheek. His sincerity made her ashamed of her snapped out words. “Call. You’re not yourself. I don’t like what these drugs are doing to you.”

* * * * *

Cecilia put a kettle of water on the stove for tea and wondered what to do next. Dr. Stone had been encouraging—perhaps too encouraging. She could be medically ready within a few weeks. Was she ready emotionally for such a big change?

Cecilia snorted. What a stupid question. She hadn’t gone through all these months of taking medication, of nausea and dizziness for nothing. She had to be ready.

What about Victor?

Victor had gone outside with Vicky. She heard the thump of the backboard against the garage wall and shook her head. Old habits died hard.

He was shooting hoops.

She remembered those long summers watching from the porch while her privileged older brother and sister played with Jack and Victor. Jack and Victor’s shirtless male chests had made her pubescent heart flutter. Even then, even knowing Jen had a lock on Victor that Cecilia couldn’t dream of removing, she’d been most fascinated by him. No one moved or looked like Vic.

Back then Jennifer had obviously thought so. Jen had changed her mind. Cecilia never had.

Wanting Victor hadn’t made her adolescence much fun. Things only got worse as she got older, when everyone thought Victor was dead from a helicopter crash in Colombia. Jen falling in love with Jack hadn’t helped. Even though Jack was a good

man, Cecilia had the worst twists of emotions she had felt in her life—a nasty mix of betrayal over Jen’s decision, joy for her sister’s happiness, and despair as she tried to accept Victor’s death. Above all, she’d had to keep quiet. She had had no right to Victor before. She was sure no one in the family knew how she had felt. What she’d had to accept.

Thank God I’m not Cee Cee any more. Victor changed me into Cecilia. I am an adult. I have adult choices.

She decided her adult choice right now was to go out onto the porch and watch Victor sweat, just as she had when she was twelve or thirteen.

She watched him, his shirt off, as he aimed and shot. He didn’t obviously favor his injured leg, though she saw the scars on it still. Vicky was laughing and trying to catch the ball as it swished through the hoop.

Cecilia hesitated. Should she join in? Was she in good enough shape? Once she had been. Watching the older kids had made her work to be on the girls’ basketball team at school. She hadn’t been too bad, especially when she grew to just shy of five-feet-eleven. Maybe professional women basketball players were taller. There weren’t any professionals at her high school and she had fit in just fine.

With that thought, she darted in front of Victor and snatched the ball. He loomed over her—he was well over six feet. But she didn’t intend to be intimidated. Surely his leg would slow him down.

A little hustle, a little none-too-careful jabbing with her elbow and she was free to make her shot. She heard Victor’s laugh behind her.

“When did you learn to play dirty, Cecilia?”

“About the time you got too rusty and old to play any more, Victor.” She grinned. “I was just as much a star of my high school team as you were.”

“Ah, but I went on and played in college, *querida*.” He neatly took the ball from her. “I don’t recall hearing about your college basketball scholarship...” She snatched at the ball, with no finesse, trying not to laugh. This was the old Victor, the one she’d always enjoyed—

“Hey, this is almost like old times!” A familiar voice called from down the driveway.

Vicky took off after her favorite uncle. She banged her head into his stomach and Kevin winced.

“Well,” Cecilia said, coolly, as her big brother gasped for air. “If I had known the whole family was going to be here after all, I needn’t have cut my touring short to mind Vicky.”

She held onto her brother anyhow when he hugged her. The two of them had been close six years ago. When Kevin had run for cover and joined the military after her parents died, the closeness had suffered. Even though Kevin had come back and done his best to keep everyone going after Jen got married, it had been too late for Cecilia—she was on her way out of the nest to try her hand at singing and adulthood. But she appreciated the try. Mostly.

Maybe today was a day to remember how things had been, not dwell on how they were now.

“Vic.” Kevin gave Victor a hearty, manly handshake.

Victor remained relaxed, the basketball held to his side. Of the whole family, Kevin had the least to do with what Victor must still regard as Jen’s betrayal. Kevin had been on the other side of the world when everything happened.

Besides, no one could stay mad at Kevin for long. Kevin, with his wide smile and innocent eyes, seemed perpetually boyish.

Victor tossed the ball at Kevin, who automatically went for a lay-up shot. Cecilia suddenly felt a pang in her stomach and paused. Her adrenaline rush was running out. Maybe playtime was over. “Time for me to quit.”

“Me, too, I’m afraid,” Victor said immediately and held his arm out to support her. “My leg—” But he held her with no trace of weakness.

“Have either of you fixed any dinner?” Kevin asked hopefully, oblivious to the sight of Cecilia fighting nausea. “I remember you could whip up some gourmet chow, Cee Cee.”

“No. I’m not up to doing anything much right now.” Cecilia tried to breathe through her nose and not sink to the grass with waves of sickness. “Sorry.”

“Me, I only can scramble an egg. But I think that may be what we have for dinner.” Victor kept his arm around Cecilia, steadying her. “You’ve played too hard, girl. Sit down and watch a master in the kitchen. You can clean up afterward, of course, Kevin. You were never very good at the cleaning up part, Cecilia.”

Male laughter rang out. Cecilia gave them both “the look,” followed by the finger.

“Vicky, you didn’t see that,” she said before she laughed herself.

They walked into the house, all four of them, Vicky jumping and bouncing ahead, Kevin carrying his old military duffel bag and Victor holding Cecilia by his side, holding her up.

Chapter Three

“So, it looks like the drug therapy is over. I should start ovulating again soon. Can—can you wait here that long?” This wasn’t how she’d thought her wedding would be planned back when she was a kid. “I guess there’s no point getting married until I can get pregnant.”

Victor didn’t seem worried about a certain lack of romance. He paused, absently rubbing his thumbs against the pulse points on her wrists. Cecilia almost forgot to form words. She wanted to purr like a cat as he stroked her skin.

“I can wait for as long as necessary. I essentially pick and choose assignments nowadays. I’ll take as long a holiday as I need to. After all, I haven’t had a vacation in a very long while. Shall we get a marriage license quickly then?” he asked. “We can keep things very small. I don’t mind if Kevin is a witness and I insist Vicky be there.”

And he didn’t want anyone else in her family. They both knew that no one else was scheduled to be back immediately. She nodded. Perhaps it would be better that way. No publicity for either of them, no second thoughts allowed.

“Sure. I’ll tell Kevin. You tell Vicky.” Cecilia wasn’t sure which of them would have the harder job. “Um, Victor. About tonight. Vicky is sleeping in my room but—”

“That’s fine.”

“Fine?”

“I’m saving myself for our wedding night.” He gave her his most expressionless face.

“Why?”

“Because you’re still sick. Because your family is here. Because this will be—traditional.”

Damn, I don’t know why. Because it seems right. Pretty Cecilia. If we just hold off, maybe I can figure out how to not make you look so afraid. You deserve better.

“You’re just trying to tease me. Aren’t you?” Cecilia hated when she couldn’t figure out if someone was playing with her.

“I don’t object to teasing. Do you?” He slid his hands from her wrists to just under her stomach. His fingers splayed down, almost but not quite touching her mons.

“I can take anything you want to dish out, Vic.” Cecilia hoped she was right. Her legs were ready to buckle, but this time it wasn’t because she was sick. She knew how good Victor’s hands were. “I hope you can, too.”

“We’ll have to see, my bride.” His fingers inched down a millimeter more.

Did he expect her to back down? She didn’t ever back down. She just changed the rules. Right now, she didn’t like Victor’s rules anyhow. Cecilia tilted her pelvis up, he

slid his fingers down, until the tips rested lightly on her clit. They stared at each other, challenge issued.

"I thought you weren't going to touch." Cecilia reached out, let her fingers rest on the top button of his fly. She didn't unbutton, she didn't touch further. Under her fingers, his stomach muscles tightened in anticipation. She didn't look down, but she bet that wasn't the only thing tightening.

"I said I was saving myself." Victor kept his hands where they were. Close, but not quite close enough to where she wanted. "I didn't say I would save you."

"Really?"

"Really. Let's see what we can do for you. You're looking...hungry."

"Bastard." She said it without any particular anger, though, because his grin promised all sorts of illicit delights. "I can control myself."

"Can you? On our weekend I seem to remember stories when you couldn't wait. Stories involving a vibrator and a dildo—" He didn't budge.

"You would remember those stories even though you didn't remember to call me. What if I told you they were just...stories?" Cecilia decided to turn the tables. She didn't touch his cock. He said he was saving himself. The same rules didn't apply to her. She most definitely did not want to be saved. Instead she unbuttoned the top of her shirt, watched his eyes follow her. She unbuttoned another. "Just a little sex talk to get you off?"

"You did. But they sounded real to me." Victor tilted his head. "If I checked your room, would I find a suitcase full of toys?"

"You're welcome to come to my bedroom if you want. I don't have to share with Vicky. But I thought you were above that sort of thing until we got married." Cecilia unsnapped the front clasp of her bra. "Toys are fine, but I've moved forward. Now I do piercings, too."

She enjoyed hearing his sucked-in breath when he first caught sight of her new ornaments. Lazily she rolled the tiny nipple rings in both breasts, taking care with each circular stroke, letting them both enjoy the sight of her nipples beginning to pucker.

"Now your hands could be on me, if you wanted." Cecilia fought to sound steady. "But since this staying untouched before marriage is so important to you, I'll just manage on my own. I wouldn't want you to compromise yourself."

"You fight dirty, Cecilia." He stepped back away from her but she knew she had his attention. She pinched one nipple. His eyes dilated. Now. He'd give in now.

Instead he stepped back further.

She knew how to get him crazy. Too crazy. He wasn't going to give in. Not within ten minutes of telling her they were going to do things the traditional way. He wasn't her toy. He was going to be her man.

If they waited...if he waited...he could make her forget she was afraid, that their marriage wasn't a love match, that she was going to marry someone for convenience. He needed to keep her wanting, just a little, so that all she remembered was that she wanted him. Even if he didn't love her, he wanted a wife-to-be who was eager.

Hell, all either of them would remember was how good sex was going to be when they stopped waiting. Sex, not stud service. She'd be dying to marry him before he was done with her.

But he couldn't touch her now. Almost wildly he looked around, trying to figure out what the hell he would do. Then he saw it, lying on the floor.

She bit back a protest as he turned his back to her. But Victor wasn't ignoring her. He turned around again, almost immediately, holding one of his canes. His hand slid down its slim length and he smacked the cane against his palm.

"I haven't had to use these too often lately, but I can see you might need its assistance, fiancée." Now his grin looked a little too challenging. Cecilia knew she ought to stop. She would. Well, she would have, except she felt a sudden new gush of interest in her cunt.

No one had ever offered to cane her before. That was okay. She wasn't interested. Any man who tried would quickly lose his balls. Right? Cecilia opened her mouth to tell Victor how wrong he was.

But warmth was turning into a shooting fire through her body.

"Spread your legs, Cecilia." His voice was soft, softer than it should be, given his stance—his own legs spread, his hand fingering the small brass knob at the top of his cane.

"Victor, you wouldn't—"

"Spread your legs and see."

She did. Victor had to be able to see the tremors in her legs. Without his prompting, she raised her skirt.

The cane inched between her legs, pushed her thighs wider. Cecilia put one hand to her mouth, trying not to cry out. The other kept that skirt up, exposing her to whatever Victor chose to do next.

God, she was weak. Weaker than she'd ever dreamed—needier—excited as hell.

Victor inserted the brass knob between her panties and clit and then stroked, the rough etchings of the metal rubbing against her swollen nub. Cecilia bit her finger and closed her eyes, fighting to stay on her feet.

"How does that feel, *querida*?" Victor's voice was tender now, but the movement of the cane was wicked.

"Good. Jesus, Vic, how did you think of—" She stopped, unable to talk for a moment. "Let me sit down. I can't stand up." He inched the cane away.

She collapsed into the big stuffed chair, hooked her legs around its arms. She didn't care if Victor knew what he was doing her. She pinched her nipples hard as he returned the cane to rest against her pussy, this time inserting it just a little deeper into her wet channel. The roughness of the knob, the slickness of the wood felt alien. Different. Sexy. Oh, yes. The rush of sensation was too much—she had to come. She would go crazy if she didn't—

"Come, Cecilia. Do it." His voice was as ragged as her emotions.

Victor shoved the cane just a little more deeply, a little more roughly. Too much. No. Just right. Cecilia let go, felt the intensity of her climax shake through her. Her orgasm was powerful, intense—almost as intense and powerful as her husband-to-be.

When she opened her eyes, damned if the man didn't look unmoved. Except for the bulge in his pants. Oh, God. She still wanted to crawl on top of him.

"You won't...suffer...for my old-fashioned notions, Cecilia. All you have to do is ask."

Ask? He meant beg. God knows what he'd do in response. Probably whatever he wanted to. All right, she'd been stupid, but she wasn't a total idiot. She could learn to back down from a challenge. At least once or twice. At least until she figured out what to do next.

"I—I'll talk to Kevin right now." It didn't matter if it was getting late. She inched herself off the chair, hoping her knees could hold her up. If Cecilia had to, she'd go wake her brother up. She had to leave before she gave in and begged Victor to change his mind.

* * * * *

Kevin just stared when she broke the news. "You never do things the easy way, do you, Cee Cee? And you always make it sound like the most reasonable thing in the world to do. So, let me see. You want to get pregnant quickly. Obviously Victor is the only man for the job and of course he insists on marriage. What about after the wedding and pregnancy?"

"What about it?"

"Jen and Jack are still your family. Vicky will be your niece and your stepdaughter. How is Victor going to handle that? How is Jen?"

"In a civilized fashion," Cecilia snapped.

"Old Vic isn't the most civilized person in the world, Sis. And Jen is a protective big sister. You don't even want to think about what Jack is like if he thinks Jen is being upset by someone." Kevin shook his head.

Cecilia knew he was right. She might not like it, but she knew it. She didn't want to concede anything to her irresponsible brother but she forced the words out. "I suppose you have some advice on how to handle things?"

"Call Jen and Molly tonight and let them know, at least. That will give all the rest of us a chance to prepare ourselves."

I should talk to Victor about it. On the other hand, when have I ever asked anyone about what I should do with my life?

Less than an hour later Cecilia tracked her future husband and father of her children to the couch in the tiny, cluttered study. He was staring outside, looking as tired as she felt. She hesitated at the study door. Did she really need to tell him tonight?

Without looking away from the window, he held a hand out toward her. She went forward and put her hand in his. He clasped it and she subtly relaxed. It was almost a lover's gesture.

"Victor, I think I've done something foolish," she began. "I need to confess to you."

“Think of me as your priest, my dear.” He easily pulled her onto his lap.

“This doesn’t hurt your leg?” she asked, curling up against him anyhow.

“My leg will survive. Now tell me what you have done.”

“I called Jen and Molly. I thought they should know. Somehow everything got out of hand...” She deliberately let her voice drift helplessly for a moment, but he didn’t jump in to help the way he had during the basketball game. Damn. “They both want to fly here for the wedding. Jen wants us to get married here, with the magistrate that married her. I just don’t know what to do! She’s already talking about Mrs. Beale and caterers having food for a reception—”

“Cecilia.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve never seen you forced to do anything you don’t wish to do. *Pequeña*, you want to have some kind of elaborate ceremony, don’t you? To dress up and show off before everyone. Of course.”

She looked at him through her lashes, gauging his mood. Then she let her tongue wet her lips just a little. She wasn’t a vain little performing peacock. But she did want a huge wedding. She really did. She even knew why. She wanted to finally be able to show Victor was hers. She’d waited to do that a long, long time. Much too long.

“Well—” She made it a little breathy.

“No, Cecilia. You don’t have to try to seduce me into it. It isn’t necessary. I should’ve known a wedding with you couldn’t be simple. It’s all right. I suppose there are a few people I could invite.” Victor sounded unconcerned.

Cecilia hesitated, torn between dismay that he saw through her when other people didn’t, and delighted that he was willing to play along anyhow.

“It’s really all right?”

“Yes, my dear. Really. I see it’s wise that I bought this today. It’s for you, Cecilia.”

He tossed a small jeweler’s box in her lap. Her breath caught when she opened it. Inside were a simple wedding band and a not so simple emerald ring.

“Oh!” She put the emerald ring on her finger.

“Perhaps I should have asked your opinion first, but the emerald matches your pretty green eyes.” He sounded almost uncertain. “Is it right?”

“Victor, I didn’t expect—”

“Me to give you a token of my affection? Do you think I would let others wonder why I refused to give you what a beautiful woman like yourself should expect from her husband?” His voice grew stiffer and more formal.

Others might wonder. He meant Jen. The set was beautiful and expensive. He hadn’t even been able to give Jen a diamond chip years ago. But now he wouldn’t allow Jennifer to think he couldn’t afford to give such a “token of affection”—either monetarily or emotionally. That didn’t mean that he was giving this to his fiancée with affection. After all you didn’t have to give a love token because you loved someone. You could give it for show. Was all his affection to his bride-to-be for show? After all, he couldn’t even be bothered to sleep with her.

“Well, then, I guess I must accept this in the spirit it was meant.” Cecilia used her most practiced seductive voice. That was the voice that made her money. “And I should thank you in kind—”

She put her arms around him and kissed him for the first time in years. It wasn't a nice kiss—there was mockery in it and hunger and challenge. She felt no response at first. Her lips forced open his mouth.

Then his mouth and lips moved on hers and his hands moved to grip her hair tightly, as they had once long ago, in bed. The mockery and challenge gradually edged away, leaving just the hunger to carry their kiss on and on. Finally his hands and mouth eased away from her.

“You are welcome. I'm sorry my present didn't please you.”

His voice was calm, as if nothing had happened at all. Cecilia looked down and saw his fingers tremble, just a bit. She let some air out of her lungs. Then the hunger hadn't been completely one-sided after all.

“Once we get married...” Cecilia said, tentatively. “Where shall we go?”

“For a honeymoon?”

For our lifetime. Or are we going to continue to see each other at rare intervals?

“Right.” She tried for his unconcerned tone. “I don't really have time for anyplace far away or exotic. I have a recording date next month in New York.”

“Would a cabin in the Blue Ridge be enough? It isn't luxurious, but it has all the basics. It's my vacation place. I don't get there often enough, but it's the closest thing to a house I can offer you.” His voice softened as if he was imagining his cabin with pleasure.

“I'd like that, I think,” Cecilia said, cautiously. Somehow that offering seemed more real than the rings did. More like something he genuinely cared about.

“Then that's settled. Tomorrow you can begin making all those preparations I know you're desperate to make. But first come with me to see my daughter. She's anxious to tell her new stepmother all about the dress she wants to buy for the wedding. I am a mere male. I don't understand.”

“Victor—”

“Yes?”

“You seem so detached about all this. I know seeing all my family, getting married in this house where Jen and Jack were married, must bother you. Please tell me if you can't bear it.”

“Cecilia, I will let you know what disturbs me when it does. I have promised to marry you and give you children. Where and how we marry is of very little importance to me compared to all the rest.”

Damn, he was being formal again. “I see.”

“Do you? Cecilia, when we marry and we have children, I want you to remember why we did this and why we will stay together. I am not sure you are going to be satisfied, my dear.”

“I was the one who started this, remember? Of course I'll be satisfied.”

“You have never been satisfied with anything for long in your life, my sweet. That is what makes you successful in your career. Marriage and motherhood are different.”

“I’ve heard. Victor, I stick with what I promise.”

“Good, because I called a lawyer today that I know. You may want your sister or Jack to look at what I propose for our prenuptial agreement. It is simple enough. You keep what you have, I keep what I have. Anything we accrue together can be held in trust for our children. But should there be a divorce, I will have custody.”

“I don’t plan to divorce you.” Cecilia was indignant. “Any divorce would be your doing, not mine.”

“Then there will be no divorce,” Victor answered.

Then, maddeningly, he leaned close enough to just brush his lips against hers. Her teeth clenched with the effort not to deepen that kiss. His lips smiled against her mouth.

“Oh, no, Cecilia. You cannot force me to respond to your kiss and then think you don’t have to respond to mine.”

His kiss was blazingly, achingly hot. His tongue was fierce and pressed into her mouth, just the way she knew his cock would press inside her pussy. Oh God. Heat blazed even higher. Sudden, greedy lust tore through her. Victor always could turn on the need.

She heard her little moan just before she forced herself to pull back. No. They weren’t going to see her weaknesses anymore tonight.

“Mmmm.” She managed a hum without a tremble. “I enjoyed that.”

She hoped she put the necessary appreciative detachment in her tone. She thought she was the mistress of the art, but it seemed that Victor was even better.

“You will enjoy even more soon, I promise you.” He had no visible emotion other than amusement in his voice. “Cecilia—just a little advice.”

“I rarely take advice, Victor.”

“It would be wise to take this. I’ve known you ever since you were a small girl. All that acting of yours might work with others, but I know when you are pretending for effect, particularly when you play with sex. I like you better when you don’t play those games.” He touched her outthrust chin gently and continued. “You may baffle your family. You may put on poses for the public. But I know you.”

“Haven’t you been playing games with me? You pretend to be so emotionless. I know better, too. I watched you grow up, remember?”

“I don’t play games, Cecilia. Nowadays my emotions are fairly contained. In my case, knowing me when I was younger is not the same as knowing me now.”

We’ll see about that. You may think you have all that temper and passion locked inside, but I don’t believe it. You never did talk much about your emotions, but anyone could tell they were there. Maybe you think that by saying as little as possible, no one will notice them. But I know better.

“Then I look forward to getting to know you better.” Cecilia allowed her smile to be genuine. It could be very interesting to learn about the Victor she saw before her now.

Chapter Four

“My God, Cecilia!” Fran squealed. “Look at you!”

“Is that good or bad?” Cecilia knew, but she wouldn’t mind hearing the words. Besides, Fran was a pro at publicity. She knew when an event clicked perfectly and when it didn’t. That was why she made the perfect agent.

“Incredibly good. Oh. My. God. Only you would come up with this outfit for your wedding. Where did you get that hat?”

It was small and had a tiny veil over her face. Cecilia grinned as she pushed the veil up with gloved hands. “Very ‘40’s retro, isn’t it?”

“I suppose,” Fran told her. “I feel like I’m going to some old-fashioned high school prom.”

Cecilia stared at her and then gave a quick laugh. “Maybe you are, Fran. I hadn’t realized it before. I always wanted to go to one with Victor.”

* * * * *

When Vic appeared in the small dark corner of the porch where she had hunched up to hide, her thirteen-year-old pride was shattered. He had found her because she was crying—harsh little sobs that forced their way past her mouth. She tried to stop and couldn’t.

“How do I look?” His hand went to his tie.

“As if you need to ask. “ Cee Cee stared up at him, tears momentarily forgotten.

Victor looked magnificent in his formal wear. Cee Cee already knew that Jen was dressed in a prom gown, ready to go out with him. They were going to make a beautiful couple. Cee Cee, in her T-shirt and jeans, knew she had no place in that picture. None at all. She didn’t expect to. It was just—

“What ‘s wrong, Cee Cee?” Victor crouched down to eye level.

“Nothing. Isn’t Jen waiting for you?” Cee Cee wiped at her eyes, willing herself to stop. Another sob hit, betraying her again.

“Nope. I’m waiting for her. Besides, it doesn’t matter. You always have time to tell me what’s wrong.”

“No, I don’t.” Cee Cee turned her head away.

You couldn’t tell someone dressed to go to a prom with your sister that you’re dying to be able to go to a prom with him. Especially if you’re thirteen and he’s in college. He’d laugh. Worse yet, he’d be sorry for you.

“Did Molly hurt your feelings? She wouldn’t want to make you cry. You know that.” Victor’s voice was very gentle.

“Vic? Hey, Vic!” Jennifer’s voice called from the house. “C’mon! Dad is ready to take our picture now.”

“In a minute!” Victor called back. He waited, looking at her with concerned eyes. “How are you now, Cee Cee?”

“I’m fine. Really. Go on.” Cee Cee stopped crying and even managed a smile. “You look really great, Victor.”

“So do you. Even with those tearstains.” Victor stood up. He hesitated. “Hey, Cee Cee, you aren’t jealous that Jen is going out tonight? You’ll be going to stuff like this when you’re older, too. You know, I could take it or leave it, but Jen would never understand if I didn’t bring her to the prom. She really wants to go. I’m always afraid I’ll mess up when I have to do things like this, but I can’t have Jen mad at me, right?”

“No. You can’t have that.”

Cee Cee watched him walk into the house where her parents were fussing over Jen. I want to have someone I really want take me to a prom. But it isn’t going to happen. Ever. Because Victor is the only one I want.

* * * * *

“The prom look suits you,” Fran eyed her critically. “In fact, I’d say you got a wedding and reception that fits you perfectly. Especially the groom. There have to be some great photos coming because the two of you look like movie stars. There’s only one problem.”

Only one? If only Fran knew.

“What’s that, Fran?”

“Here you get this tall, dark and handsome dream to marry you and you don’t let anyone in on your secret,” Fran complained. “I had no time to get word out to the right people.”

“Hey, Victor got one of his photojournalist friends to take photos. That will do for you to splash in the right magazines.” As if she cared about the publicity.

She got a grip. Of course she cared about the publicity. She was a singer. Publicity was important.

Victor was more important. She just didn’t want him to know how very important he was.

Jen caught her right after that, just before Cecilia took one more peek outside to stare at the yardful of well-wishers. She tried not to think of them as an audience.

“Trust you to pick the perfect day for an outdoor wedding. Not a cloud in the sky,” Jen said. “I’ve never seen the backyard look so good.”

“That’s because you’ve never seen me landscape a backyard with my own two hands.”

“When did you turn gardener, Sis?”

“When I decided to have the wedding in the backyard.” Cecilia made a face. Making that decision cost her. The garden had been neglected for years and she had spent many sweaty hours out there, making it attractive.

It was worth every torn fingernail. The ceremony wasn’t going to be in the house. It wouldn’t have mattered if it poured rain, she wasn’t going to have any reminders of the last Turner sister wedding.

“No one wanted to help?” Jennifer asked.

“Did you?”

“Uh, no thanks.”

“Thought not.”

“I actually wanted to ask you something. Cee Cee—”

“Yes?” Here it came. Something else she didn’t want to think about. She could tell from the hesitation in her older sister’s voice.

“Did you put in the clause Jack suggested in the prenuptial agreement?”

“Yes.” Cecilia fiddled with the angle of her hat. “I added something about me getting custody if Victor proved to be an unfit parent or if he gave me specific grounds like unfaithfulness or physical cruelty to divorce him. I thought he was going to spit fire, he was so angry.”

“Jack thought he would be.” Jen looked a little amused. “He laughed like a maniac when he thought of it. But, while I wouldn’t think Victor would ever do it, there’s no reason to leave a loophole where he could drive you into a divorce.”

“Well, Victor said almost the same thing after he got done choking. He said those contingencies are never going to happen, so he had no problem with agreeing.”

“Cecilia, you are happy, aren’t you?” Jen wasn’t quite as amused now. “You seem to be, but the circumstances are so odd—”

“I’m happy. Very.”

“I hope you both are. I love you two.” Jen hesitated. “Cecilia.”

“Yes?”

“When I first told you I was going to marry Jack you were so upset that, for a minute, I thought you wanted him. Do you remember? I think I just figured something out. It wasn’t Jack. It was Victor even then. How long have you cared?”

Cecilia gave her a long stare. “I’m very happy. That’s all I’m going to say about it.”

But this was her big sister. Jen wasn’t intimidated by the infamous Cecilia stare. Jen hugged her instead. “We’ll see,” Jen said. “Later.”

Cecilia asked in turn, “Are you happy, Jen? You look tense. I don’t mean just about being at the wedding, either.”

“It’s nothing. At least—we can talk about that as well some time later if you want. It certainly can wait. You enjoy yourself. That would make *me* very, very happy.”

“All right.”

“And Cecilia—”

“Yes?”

“There is one other thing that would make me happy.” Jen looked hard at her. “I know we’ll always be sisters and nothing could ever come between us. I know that. I know you wouldn’t let Vic stand between us. But...maybe... Do you think... Jack would never say this in a million years, but he misses Victor. They were such good friends. It would be so great to have us be close. I would be fine with that. But I can’t make it happen. Maybe you—”

“I can’t promise you anything.” Cecilia tried to imagine convincing Victor to forget everything that happened. As if he really cared about her opinion. “But you’re right. We are sisters. Vic knows that. We’ll just have to see how this one works itself out.”

* * * * *

Cecilia watched, almost in wonder, as Victor placed the ring on her finger. The sun glinted off the shiny new surface of her wedding band. His first married kiss started out as a chaste peck on her lips. Vicky tugged impatiently on her dress as the kiss suddenly turned warmer, lingering.

Married. It hadn’t taken long. A ten-minute speech and she was married.

No, not long. Just all her life.

The reception took longer than the ceremony but wasn’t much clearer to her. She didn’t want to admit it but Cecilia, the unflappable, was damn near hyperventilating from nerves.

The next thing she remembered was talking to the wedding photographer. Trevor was a brilliant photojournalist—almost as brilliant as Victor.

“I’m sorry I stuck you with a wedding. I imagine a job like this is sort of like asking a race car driver to take on a bus route.”

Trevor laughed.

“I owe Vic for when he has pulled me out of a bloody tight spot or two,” he told her. “Taking some shots of a beautiful woman and watching the Ice Man melt is hardly worth an apology. It’s my pleasure.”

“The Ice Man?”

“That’s one of Vic’s nicknames. One of the respectable ones, anyhow,” Trevor amended. “He’s known for staying cool in all situations. You stick around for the reception when the lot of us start getting drunk and you’ll hear plenty.”

“You mean he stays calm in dangerous situations?” Molly asked, behind her.

“Particularly in dangerous situations with women.” Trevor winked. “I’ve never seen him lose control. Not ‘til now, anyhow. It’s a pleasure to watch him. It must be love. He looks like he’s enjoying himself and like he intends to enjoy the honeymoon, too.”

“I intend for him to.” Cecilia showed all her teeth as she smiled.

Ice Man indeed.

Trevor winked and resumed prowling around the small crowd, looking for just the right photo opportunity.

Cecilia looked for her husband.

Was he losing control? She thought about it. Yes, Victor had looked like he was enjoying himself. He had even danced at the wedding reception—the first song was one Cecilia had recorded. It was a standard, but lots of people had told Cecilia she made “I Get A Kick Out of You” sound fresh, as if no one else had ever sung it before.

Just like when Victor held her during their obligatory first dance and she felt like she had never been held by anyone else before. She was breathless and excited, eager and nervous. Overwhelmed.

But as she walked close to him, this time he grabbed her and began to move. My God. This was voluntary. Vic was dancing with her again!

"I can't dance. Not even before this leg," Victor confided to Cecilia as the music flowed around them and she laid her head against his chest. She listened to his heartbeat, steady and sure against her ear and almost forgot to listen to his words. "I'm not Jack. I never went to cotillion. Thank God."

"You're doing okay," Cecilia whispered back.

"But I'm not dancing." He nuzzled her neck. "I'm making love to you. This is the only chance I seem to have to get my hands on you."

"You're doing okay," Cecilia repeated. "Hey, are you drunk?"

"Just a little. I think." He swung her around, effortlessly. "The champagne has been flowing pretty freely. Yeah, I must be, or I'd never do this. I like your singing, Cecilia. Did I ever tell you that? I have all your recordings."

"Thanks, Vic." No, you never did.

"Your voice—it's a great one to make love to."

"I'm going to hope you mean now and not with some other ladies." Cecilia smiled. Her fake smile was starting to hurt. "That's not a good thought."

"Most definitely I mean now." He gave her a mock hurt look. "As for other times—I'm not sure I could. I could get 'em in the mood, maybe. But I don't think I could do any more with your voice in the same room. You're too much competition."

I intend to stay that way. Too much for anyone else to measure up.

"Thank you, Victor." Cecilia tried for demure. "You must be very drunk to tell me something like that. Ice Man."

"Which of my buddies have you been talking to?" Victor asked, suspiciously.

"My lips are sealed."

"Not for long, *querida*. I very much want them opened for me."

Oh, he had been outrageous, amusing and very, very sexy all during the reception. Nothing seemed to faze him.

* * * * *

The next thing she focused on was the going away part. Jen was there to see her off, her big sister fussing over her going away dress like her mother would have. When Victor came to the bedroom door with the rest of the family, Jen had hesitated, then hugged Victor as Molly and Kevin kissed Cecilia.

"You be good to my little sister." Jen's voice shook a little. "I know she'll be good to you."

Victor swung a squirming Vicky over to Jen, without a word.

"Jen, I'm never good to anyone," Cecilia protested, cutting through the silence. "I might be good with or for a man, but that's something very different."

"Victor." Jack's voice cut in.

For a minute the two of them measured each other the way fighters might. Then Victor very deliberately relaxed and held out his hand. Jack grasped it readily.

“Congratulations, old man,” Jack said. “You’re in luck. You’ve married into an amazing family. Turner women are the best women in the world. That doesn’t mean they won’t kick you in the...er, head...when you need it, of course.”

“I am aware of their head-kicking tendencies.” Victor had a half smile on his face. “But I am sure that Cecilia will make up for any injuries she may give.”

“Victor!” Cecilia said.

“Jack!” Jen protested at the same time.

Both men laughed and separated. It was almost as if both of them had promised themselves to not cross paths for the rest of the afternoon as Cecilia and Vic made their good-byes.

“Good-bye, everyone. I need to talk to my wife for a few minutes.” Victor’s eyes promised something that made her heart kick into a higher speed.

Kevin wolf-whistled.

“Remember to come out to say good-bye, you two!” Molly laughed and shut the bedroom door behind them.

* * * * *

“What?” Cecilia looked at him, her hair a little mussed from her hat. Her eyes were half-smiling, half-wary. “Are you really ready to start our honeymoon right here?”

Damn it, he wasn’t. He’d spent too many weeks doing the right thing to mess up at the last minute. But his breath quickened at the idea of pushing her down, pushing himself inside. Whoa, boy. She was watching him too carefully. Cecilia was trying to yank his chain again.

She knew he was planning something. Victor kept straight-faced with an effort. He waited, watching a little uncertainty cross her face. No matter how she prepared herself, she’d never guess just what he had in mind.

Cecilia might have planned the wedding and reception. He was going to be in charge of what happened afterward. Starting now.

“I wanted to give you a wedding day present, *mi esposa*.”

“I love presents.” Cecilia wiggled her fingers. “Gimme.”

“This is something that takes a little time. Sit down, Cecilia, and spread your legs.”

Cecilia’s eyebrows rose. He knew she was remembering the last time he’s asked her to do that. She stretched each leg out slowly, letting him get a good look. “I have a feeling you don’t want to play with my garter.”

“Oh, I might do that, too. But the present first.”

He held open a small box, a bit larger than the one that had held her ring. When he opened it and cupped the contents in his hands, he watched her eyes widen just a little.

“Are those...?”

“Not ben wa balls. Something better. Or so I’ve been told. I thought this might be a nice addition to your toys. May I?”

She nodded, her eyes wide, her lips squeezed tight, a fascinating mix of shy and excited. He hadn’t expected the shyness. He hadn’t expected his response. He wanted to tear into her. He wanted to protect her. He wanted... Vic shut his eyes, took a short

breath. He didn't want his hands to shake like an adolescent when he touched her. He ran his finger up her thigh, enjoying the feel of her skin. He could turn his head, just a little, and taste her if he wanted.

Oh God. She hadn't worn any panties.

"What are they?" Her voice reminded him that he'd wanted to show who was in charge. If he got his mouth on her sweet pussy, he'd never be able to stay in control.

His fingers spread open her labia instead, feeling the moisture already forming. Sexy. Excited. His. He slowly eased the round spheres inside her. He took his time moving them up into her passage. If he waited, this would be even better. Better. He had to remember that. Though it felt damned good right now.

"Duotone balls. The ball bearings inside them will move when you do. Every time you walk, you'll feel them." She clenched her vaginal muscles at his words, tightening around his finger. He sucked in a breath, then continued to slowly push the two balls up further inside. "When you shake hands with your friends as we go outside, they'll click and remind you of me. All the while you're being polite and saying good-bye, you'll feel their weight move with you. I want to drive you crazy, Cecilia."

You're my wife. You're going to be the mother of my child. You're my family from this day forward. I'm going to make sure you never regret any of this.

He heard the little noise she made in her throat.

Oh, yeah. She was hot. Hot for him. Everything was working fine.

Including his cock. The cock that wanted her as badly as she seemed to want him. He shifted uncomfortably.

"You will." Her eyes half-shut as he placed them firmly inside. "I'm already getting crazy."

"Good." He stroked the bindings between the spheres slightly, just enough to make them vibrate. She trembled. "You can wear them while we drive to my cabin. Up until we make love."

"I'll enjoy that." She gave a lazy smile.

He drew his finger out again, slowly, pausing to massage the spot he remembered. The one that made her cry out, catch herself and then clutch his wrist so he'd stay, pressing just so.

"Not now, Cecilia. We have just a little more of your reception to attend." He slid his hand away.

Just tease her. Even if it was teasing him unbearably, too. He had to make her want everything he wanted. Make her not regret this decision. Make her stay with him. He already knew that even if he didn't love her, he needed her to stay. He was so damn tired of being alone.

"Is this punishment? Because I made you suffer through a reception?" Cecilia wiggled her hips from side to side. He heard her hiss with pleasure.

"Does it feel like a punishment?" Victor found himself licking his own fingers, enjoying her tangy salt-wet essence, wanting to linger.

"Nooo. Not exactly."

“Excellent. It’s not meant to be. Exactly.” He stood up, a little gingerly, then pulled her up. He imagined his present rolling inside her, pressing and stretching. Getting her ready. Perfect. This was going to be perfect. “Come on, wife. I’ll enjoy taking these out...later.”

* * * * *

Cecilia walked with her big sister over to the members of her back-up band, who were surrounding a laughing Molly. The alien feel of Victor’s toy stayed with her, a secret promise that lay hidden underneath all her smiles and chatter.

She wanted to leave. She wanted Victor to remove the globes inside her as slowly, as sensuously as he had put them in. Probably that was one reason Victor had done such a devilish thing.

She wanted them to stay in, teasing and seducing her. That was the other reason he’d done it.

“Watch out for them, Molly,” Cecilia warned, as they got closer to the group. “They’re all flirts and they all lie. All of them.”

“And here we were saying how much we love you, Cecilia,” Beau, her pianist, protested.

Cecilia arched one eyebrow and then threw up her hands dramatically.

She heard Molly laughing and then Jen chiming in behind her. Cecilia gave in and laughed as well.

Victor watched as the three sisters roared, holding their sides. Cecilia was usually so careful not to show her real emotions. He liked how she giggled and guffawed. The three women looked very much alike then and very young. Almost as young as when he first knew them.

“Makes you wonder if you’re going to be arrested for consorting with a minor, doesn’t it?” Jack was at his elbow. Just like when they were younger, Jack seemed to know what he was thinking.

Maybe he had had enough to drink to take some of the edge off his usual feelings about his old ex-buddy. At any rate, Vic found himself nodding, his eyes still on the trio, feeling a wave of understanding at Jack’s words. “Cecilia looks about thirteen. She’s damn young for me anyhow.”

Jack gave a short laugh. “Cecilia was born a woman. Don’t let the little girl looks fool you. You’re a lucky man.”

Vic grunted and then said, reluctantly, “So are you.”

“I know how lucky I am.” Jack began to drift away again. “I hope you truly know how lucky you are.”

Vic mouth damn near watered as he looked at his bride. Oh, he knew all right. Her lush mouth, her high breasts, the lure of sex she both promised and threatened with every swing of her hips, every turn of her head.

Up until now he’d wondered if all this waiting until the wedding had been such a good idea. It had started because he’d been worried about Cecilia’s physical health.

Soon he'd wondered about his own mental health. Now he was sure he'd been right—though he'd never known he had quite such self-control. It had given him plenty of time to think up some wonderful ideas to while away the honeymoon.

He'd already acted on his first idea. He figured very soon Cecilia was going to run for him and the car. She had to be going as crazy as he was. *Dios*, this was going to be a honeymoon for the books.

Wait a minute! He watched while the group of overgrown buffoons his wife called her back-up band dragged her away. Damn it, she was supposed to be scurrying through the last of her wedding duties, not prolonging the reception.

Then Cecilia looked fully at him and began to sing. Her lips pouted, her eyes measured him, her voice thrilled and beckoned. Heat flashed through him, centering on his cock. Whatever else she sang, she sang sex to him. Long, slow, hot, drugging sex.

Oh, yes. She might not be doing exactly what he'd planned, but they were on the same wavelength.

Chapter Five

It had been a wonderful reception. Cecilia remembered at one point where she'd actually sung with the band after a few glasses of champagne. The camera lights had flashed. She supposed Fran would have a field day with those pictures. She'd sung directly to Victor, wondering if she was doing the right thing while she did it. She hadn't wanted to look easy, as if she was so crazy for sex with him that she'd run off the second he—

She remembered his eyes narrowing, turning hot, as she finished her music. Oh, hell. Hard to get was one thing. Stupid was another. Cecilia had run across the yard to his arms.

They hadn't bothered with any more good-byes as he carried her off to the Jeep.

And here they were. Alone again at last.

"My Lord, it feels wonderful just to feel so—so good!" Cecilia burst out spontaneously. "I can't remember feeling so healthy."

"You look better." Her husband surveyed her. "I like the color you have in your face. But you've lost weight."

"Darling, I was bloated before," Cecilia drawled. "This is what I usually weigh."

"You're too skinny," he answered.

"Too skinny for what? I'm at my best fighting weight right now." She flexed her arm muscle.

He laughed and she laughed. It was a beautiful early spring morning, they were in Victor's battered Jeep driving down the highway and, best of all, they were on their honeymoon.

Everything had been almost frighteningly perfect.

* * * * *

"What I really just can't believe is that we haven't made love yet," Cecilia said, conversationally. "You really are sexy, Victor. So sexy you're lethal. I've always thought so. I must have felt a lot sicker than I thought since I couldn't make you give out for me before. But you know I don't feel sick any more."

She put her hand on his thigh. His leg bunched tighter before he relaxed again.

Was he tense? She was. All this abstinence was killing her. The duotone balls shifted again, the way they had for what seemed hours now. *What next*, they seemed to click. *What next?*

He hadn't waited for Jennifer. Wasn't she just as seductive, just as desirable? Hell, wasn't she better? If he didn't before, he damn well would think so before tonight was over.

"I'm driving as fast as I can, Cecilia. Give it about another hour or so."

“I don’t know if I can wait that long.” A very wicked thought made her pause. Hell, he couldn’t object. They were married, after all.

She glanced out the window. The highway was deserted and had been for almost an hour now. Without preliminaries, she reached over and unzipped Victor’s pants, pulling them down as far as she could. The car swerved.

“Cecilia—” he growled through his teeth.

“You sound angry, but I can tell you aren’t,” Cecilia answered sweetly, as she touched what was rapidly hardening beneath her hands. “Or at least a part of you isn’t.”

His sharply indrawn breath excited her. “Not the smartest part of me, darling,” Victor answered. “This is damn dangerous. I could drive us off the road. This isn’t the time for games. I could—”

“Silly man. You’re panting. Do you think I’m going to listen to what you say when I see how you respond?”

“Jesus, Cecilia—don’t. I mean it.”

Cecilia bent over. His cock wanted her. He couldn’t lie about that. She ran her tongue down its length. It was potent and demanding and hard. She sucked his cock into her mouth greedily, like a child with a special treat. The car shot forward and, breathing hard through his nose, Victor slowed it down again.

“Shall I stop?” She licked the tip of that satiny smooth head. She let her tongue rest against Victor’s pulse, beating hard in that stiff shaft. “Are you sure?”

“Maybe. In a minute. Or two.”

She tasted his pre-ejaculate in her mouth. Hot and delightful, it trickled down her throat. She tickled his balls with her fingers as she ran her tongue over his cock, always centering back on the sensitive cock head. Oh, she had missed his cock.

The car jerked and almost knocked her off his lap. Almost. His hand steadied her, held her against him. His fingers twined in her hair, silently commanding her to stay.

She chuckled against his skin and felt him shiver.

Cursing in Spanish, Victor pulled the Jeep to a stop by the side of the road. She looked up and grinned.

“You did good, husband.” She smoothed the inside of his upper thigh with her finger. “I’m amazed you kept on the road that long. And see? You can play games with me after all, no matter how you complain.”

He was lying. He loved her games. She could tell.

“Game time over. Damn it woman, you almost spoiled everything.”

“What?”

“Do you realize I haven’t jacked off since forever?” Victor pulled her up hard against him.

“Well, I’m sorry, but what does that have to do with—”

“I’m going to try to get you pregnant. Remember? I’ve been going out of my fucking mind, figuring I’ll have enough sperm to impregnate about fifteen women when I finally get to come, and then you go and try to waste it.”

“Oh.” She wasn’t sure if she should be annoyed or excited. Cecilia rubbed against his erection. Wet drops slid from his cock. She was excited. Definitely. “Well, how much longer do you plan to wait?”

“I guess we’ll have to see how well we can manage to start our honeymoon in a damned Jeep.” He had her dress up over her hips before he finished the sentence and his hand reached inside, stroking. Despite his urgency, he was gentle, exploring. She bit her lip, keeping her eyes on him. He was so intent, sweat beading on his forehead, his eyes and hands focused totally on her. The idea of him waiting, waiting to come with her, was making her even hotter than before. God knows she’d been ready to combust without the knowledge.

His fingers pinched her clit. She twisted on top of him. For just a minute she thought she was going to come apart. This had started out as almost a joke, but it didn’t feel like a joke right now. She had never felt more desperately serious in all her life. He reached inside, pulled on the tiny string that held her toys and she wailed. “Oh, God, Vic. Do that again.”

A police siren let out a blast behind them.

Victor looked in the rearview mirror and let out another curse in Spanish. He hastily set Cecilia on the seat next to him. She yanked down her dress, he yanked up his zipper just before the police officer strolled to the side of the car.

“I’ve been watching y’all go down the road for the past few miles.” The officer spoke without a trace of amusement or sexual innuendo in his tone. Cecilia hoped he hadn’t been watching too closely. She certainly hadn’t been in any condition to notice anyone nearby but they would have been quite a show. “Any trouble here?”

“No, sir.” Victor’s voice was absolutely level and emotionless. “You want to see my license?”

“I reckon I would.” The man flipped open the wallet and then peered at Cecilia. “Everything all right, ma’am?”

“Yes, sir,” Cecilia said.

The policeman strolled back to his cruiser. Cecilia didn’t look at Victor. It seemed to take forever before the man returned.

He handed the wallet back to Victor and the officer kept looking at Cecilia. “You mind explaining why you are out here with Mr. Ruiz?”

“We just got married...” Cecilia gripped her two hands together tightly. “Sir.”

The man made a noncommittal sound and then turned to Victor.

“Mind your step, Mr. Ruiz. You checked out okay, but I could arrest you for reckless driving. I could test your alcohol level to see if you’re DUI. I will if I catch you doing anything like this again.”

There was a silence for several more minutes after the cruiser left before Cecilia hissed, “Why was he acting like such a jerk at the end? And why was he asking me anything? I wasn’t driving.”

“I’m Hispanic and you’re a pretty Anglo woman. He figured there must be something wrong.”

Cecilia opened her mouth to protest, then shut it. Opened it again.

“Which one of us was wrong?” she asked. “Was I the hooker or were you kidnapping me?”

“You should have asked him,” Victor said. “I haven’t been hassled by the police in a few years, but it isn’t unusual to have it happen for any reason or no reason at all. Not, my darling, that making me drive like a—a crazy man down the road is no reason. He would have been well within his rights to arrest me. Fortunately my press card was in my wallet. He probably didn’t want the chance of any bad publicity.”

“Have you ever been arrested?” Cecilia asked and smiled at a memory. “I was. Once. With my sisters. Jack had to bail us out. I was the one who resisted arrest. Jack wasn’t pleased with any of us.”

“Thank God we didn’t have to call him for this.” Victor suddenly did have emotion in his voice. Intense relief. “Yes, I have been. Several times. Most recently it’s been part of the job—someone didn’t want me taking photos in Bolivia and I had to get the embassy to get me out. I was arrested once or twice when I was a young punk, too. I didn’t have anyone to bail me out then. Jail isn’t much fun.”

“Well, this was almost as bad. After all, he delayed our arrival by several minutes,” she pouted. “I am, as I think I showed you before, very, very anxious to start our honeymoon.”

“Your wish is my command.” Victor started the Jeep. “I just hope you don’t kill me before the honeymoon is over.”

“I don’t plan to. I need you to live for a long time before we’ve finished everything I want to do,” Cecilia assured him. “On the other hand, if I do kill you, I’ll make sure you die thanking me.”

With one hand, Victor grabbed hers and put her palm to his lips. This time, instead of kissing it as he had once, he lightly bit it. Then he sucked one of her fingers for one, too brief, moment.

The tiny searing pain, followed by the sweet delight, made her clench her own thighs in anticipation. She wanted him. That wasn’t a joke.

“That is exactly what I’m afraid of,” he told her. “Now be a good girl and let me drive.”

She obeyed and settled into the passenger’s seat, watching him drive. It was enjoyable to watch, since he did it the way he did most things—with a kind of effortless competence that almost hid his intensity.

Then again, did she have to be a good girl? Still without speaking, Cecilia spread her legs. She thought she caught Victor’s eyes flicker her way at the movement. She bit back her grin.

“I never did thank you for my special present, did I?” She put one finger against the small string and twitched it. The quick flash of heat at her movement reminded her again how very horny Victor and his toys had made her.

She wanted him, she wanted him.

But teasing them both would do for now.

“I have other presents when we get to the cabin.” Vic’s voice was thick.

She squirmed, feeling the tightening in her cunt, in her chest, as she let the movements inside her rock her into wetness. Not satisfied, she lay one finger, two fingers against her clitoris and pushed.

At her tiny gasp, Victor's hands clenched on the steering wheel. He wasn't looking, but he could listen. Besides, as she rubbed herself, slowly, carefully, never stopping, always staring at Vic, she couldn't help but gasp. Moan.

This was good. Anticipation tickled her, then whipped her into desire. So good. Almost as good as being with Vic would be. Soon. She envisioned his mouth on her, tugging where her fingers were now, making her writhe.

"Oh, oh, oh." She was close. Wet and needy.

"Finish it, damn it!" Vic's voice was ragged. She opened her eyes, looked at the need that tightened his features.

"Oh, God!" She fell beyond teasing, beyond torment, into delight.

* * * * *

She must have slept a little in the Jeep because she jolted awake when it stopped. In the moment it took her to come to complete awareness, Victor had unbuckled her seatbelt and swept her up in his arms. "Come along, bride. I think it's time to be traditional. There may not be much of a threshold to carry you over, but it's ours."

She'd thought he'd fuck her right then. Instead he picked her up, cradling her as if she was three and needed to go in for a nap. That wasn't quite what she'd wanted. She decided not to ask if he was straining his leg and completely spoil the potentially romantic gesture.

She had a quick, jumbled impression of a log cabin before he gallantly carried her inside and then, with much less ceremony, tossed her on a bed that could use some better springs. He turned on one dim light.

The cabin was obviously meant for getting away, not for fancy vacations. Cecilia wrinkled her nose. She wondered if Victor had bought the furniture and, if so, what thrift sale he had gone to.

"I'm glad the place has electricity," Cecilia said cautiously. "How about running water?"

"Yes and no."

"And that means?"

"Running water, yes. Electricity, no. That lamp is battery-operated."

"That was something you really should have mentioned before you suggested we come up here." Cecilia moaned. "Please, please tell me there is at least a tub."

"Tub, yes. Shower, no."

She dramatically threw her hands over her eyes and moaned louder.

"Please don't say *mi casa es su casa*," she said. "I would never live like this. This is no house of mine." She paused. Did he actually look a little hurt? "Idiot. I'm teasing you." Cecilia kissed his ear. "There's a bed. I'm happy."

"City girl," Victor growled in her ear and proceeded to unbutton her shirt. "I told you the place was a bit primitive. But then, so am I."

“I can live with that, I guess.” Cecilia winked at him.

She was a little stunned at how the half-teasing start they made at undressing each other changed so quickly into something else. She couldn't even pinpoint when the teasing shifted—after he took her shirt off with a growl? When she finished nuzzling his ear and bit his shoulder?

He stopped briefly and licked the sweat from his lip. She tightened at the sight. She wanted to lick that sweat. She wanted his tongue on her. She wanted him to be everywhere, sucking, fucking, satisfying.

“Time for my second present, Cecilia,” he whispered.

“Yes.” She was ready. More than ready. Above all, she wanted his cock, hard and potent and wanting her. She needed him to come inside her. Now was the time. He'd been teasing her for weeks now. Frustrating, exciting, endless weeks. She couldn't bear any more.

He reached down to the floor, fumbled inside his discarded jacket for a moment— and then snapped handcuffs on each of her wrists.

“What?” Cecilia gasped. That hadn't been the “present” she expected.

He fastened one to each bedpost. His grin was a combination of sly and triumphant.

“Hello, Mrs. Ruiz. How do you like this toy?”

“Hello, Mr. Ruiz.” She lifted one free leg and stroked the sole of her foot down his chest. She wasn't scared, if that had been his intention. She was intrigued and, impossibly, even more turned on. The man had put a lot of thought into his presents. “What now?”

“You like to tease so much, I thought you might like to be teased a little more.”

Teased? She'd go out of her mind. She had to tell him that. Her sanity was slipping. What the hell was wrong with him? Was he trying to prove he was Superman?

He bent, circled her clit with his tongue. He pulled on the duotone string with his teeth. The spheres shifted, slyly taunting her again.

“You bastard,” Cecilia managed.

“Mmmhmmmm.” He hummed it sweetly against her clitoris. “You're right.”

She tilted her pelvis against his mouth, making sure she was as close as possible. She was an idiot, crazed with lust. “Keep on being one.”

He was going to brand her. Going to make her know who he was, crave him, want no one but him. Not just as a stud, but as a man. His pride was at stake but—but Cecilia deserved more, too. She'd always been so sexy, so hot...

She wailed, the sound ringing through him, making his heart race a little faster, making his want a little deeper. Not yet. Not yet.

He lifted her up, nipped the fleshy part of her ass. She tasted good, already wet and salty, inside and out. He let his tongue slide down deep. She felt good, smooth and trembling against his hands and mouth.

Pretty Cecilia. His wife. Now and forever, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, quarrels and separations, when she quaked in lust or screamed in anger. His. His. His.

It didn't matter if he didn't love her. This was going to be right for both of them. She wasn't going to leave him. She wasn't ever going to even want to.

God, he was going to come like a teenager, all over her instead of inside her if he kept torturing and pleasuring them both like this. These past few weeks had been almost too much. His balls were drawn up tightly, gone somewhere beyond aching into a special hurtful pleasure. His cock felt hard enough to use as a hammer. He wanted to hammer that cock into her.

"Fuck me, Vic." She begged him just as he knew he couldn't wait any more. "Fuck me now."

He sucked in a breath, looking at those tight pierced nipples below him, puckered and pouting. Pierced. He'd damn near swallowed his tongue when he first saw them, watching her hands on her breasts, watching her work herself into sensual torment. Now he wanted to run his tongue against those ornaments, shifting them and making her cry with need. He wanted—

"I want to fuck you. But is that all you want? A fuck? Something to make a baby, Cecilia?" He hadn't spoken those words out loud, had he?

"I want your cock. I want you." She seemed to not even realize what he'd said, her face contorting with desire. "Vic! Please."

He'd done it right. She wanted him just the way he'd planned. Just the way he wanted her. Crazy, all out, to hell with the consequences.

"Then I guess I should take one of my toys back," he told her, barely able to speak. "Before I fuck your brains out."

Please, please, please. She was going to die if he didn't fuck her. He couldn't keep going much longer, could he?

But he still waited, playing with the string that controlled the duotone balls. Each shift of the toy tore her between pleasure and frustration. If her hands were free, she'd kill him. No, better yet, she'd dig her nails into his ass and make him use his cock on her. Then she'd kill him.

"My brains are already gone," she whispered. "Please, Vic. Finish me off."

What difference did it make if she begged out loud? She'd gone beyond pride at this point.

Finally, finally he began the slow recovery of his present. He gave a gentle tug that shot fire through her. She rocked her hips, crying, no longer able to do anything else but crave and show her craving.

The fullness that had enticed her for hours slowly slid away, bumping and nudging her vaginal walls, brushing against her clitoris. It came out with a soft little plop of a sound, wet from her juices. He tossed it on the floor. The two of them stared at each other, his hands still resting on her thighs.

"I—I'm empty, Vic. No more toys or games. I don't want to come without you this time," she whispered, her voice husky, not even trying for effect. "Fill me."

His cock teased at her entrance. He put his forehead against hers. They breathed in unison for a moment, not moving.

“Have mercy, *querida*,” he said. “I haven’t done this in—well, in about five years.”

“Had sex?” She tried to laugh at her joke, but panted instead. It seemed like five years for her, too.

“Had sex without any protection.” He entered her. Slid home. Home. He fitted so well. So perfectly. “Sweet heaven, it feels good.”

Then he slid back, almost completely out of her. She whimpered. He slid back in.

“Yeah. It does...feel good,” Cecilia breathed out.

“I don’t think I can make this one last much longer, baby. Next time.”

But he hung on like a hero until she writhed beneath him and then they moved roughly together, her heels hooked over his shoulders, his hands tilting her rear up for better penetration.

For just a moment, while she could think, with his fingers digging into her ass and her thighs locked around him, it seemed as if they hadn’t been apart at all. Nothing else was like this. No one else was like this. Their connection made her feel closer to him than any other human on earth. How had she kept away for so long? How had he?

Everything was the same, but better.

“Now, Cecilia, damn it. With me!”

She gushed, slippery and almost ready. Close, so close. Her legs slipped against his skin, she was so wet.

“I caaan’t!” She would die if she couldn’t come. Her nails scratched at the bedposts, her wrists restrained. She needed more—something—

His hand slipped further, pressed her anus, a small, sharp, additional penetration. She lurched upwards, feeling the snap of orgasm hit her viciously just as he moaned, filling her with a seemingly endless stream of come.

* * * * *

The next few days were almost like the isolated time they’d had in the hotel room years ago. They saw no one else. Victor had a cell phone with him but said it didn’t always work so far out in the woods. At any rate, it didn’t ring. They didn’t turn on the radio. There was no TV.

The neighbor he paid to look after the place had stocked the cabin with a few staples. Apparently that had been his idea of “getting the house ready.” Cecilia kept planning to drive to the nearest town to try to buy something for a fancier dinner than canned beans and steak, but then, what would the local store carry that was fancier? Victor seemed to like what she cooked anyhow. And they would have to leave the cabin. It wasn’t worth it when they could make love instead. Before breakfast, on the table. After they shared lunch together. At night, instead of washing the dishes.

It wasn’t a bad routine at all. But time was passing and they weren’t talking to each other much more than they had that weekend long ago. They joked with each other, but she knew they were both working to keep things light. She couldn’t allow them to stay that way.

She hadn't gotten married just to keep wondering about how Victor felt about her. Even if she didn't like what she heard, she had to know. Until she did, she wouldn't know how to fix it.

* * * * *

"I bet one article of clothing."

"Which one?"

"Nope. That wasn't in the rules, Victor. My choice."

"Your rules are—very well, then. I also bet one article of clothing. I'll even tell you what it is. My shirt."

Victor had a very nice chest. She hadn't meant to be distracted. This whole strip poker idea might be a little more difficult than she'd thought when she'd first proposed it. She licked her lips as he toyed with the buttons of his shirt.

She'd better think. Umm—she was supposed to—she discarded one card, tentatively. Victor gave her another. Cecilia let out a deep breath. A six. She now had two threes, two sixes. She silently counted, trying to remember the damn rules Vic had just explained.

"I call."

Victor laughed. He turned up his cards. A ten, two fives, a Queen and a seven. The first hand was hers.

Victor slowly, unhurriedly unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged it off. Yes, he really did have a nice chest. Broad. Strong. She watched the flexing of his pecs.

No. Ogling and fantasizing wasn't why she was doing this. This was her chance. She was going to get answers. Cecilia tried for nonchalance, but couldn't achieve it. *Here goes nothing.*

Here goes everything.

She'd get the first big question over with. "Do you still love Jennifer?"

When he stared at her, she shut her eyes in mortification. Did she sound as jealous and insecure as she had been when she was a teenager? Probably. Damn. She clutched her cards tight as she waited. Did she want to know his answer?

"Jennifer is a wonderful woman." Victor began, slowly at first, as if putting into words what he had never consciously thought before. "Loving her helped get me through high school and into college. It kept me anxious to prove myself, to achieve something to make her proud. Loving her got me out of Colombia and helped me fight to regain use in my leg. When she stopped loving me, I thought I could never survive without her. But I did. I know you saw me when I was crazy from her leaving me. Things are different now. I don't know when it happened, but by the time I saw her at our wedding I knew I would always love her but she wasn't mine. I'm not in love with her any more. That love has been gone for a long time."

"I see." Cecilia's heart beat hard. If Jennifer finally wasn't competition, did that mean she was the winner? Probably not. She didn't feel like she'd won.

Cecilia tried to not look at Victor as they played the next hand. She wasn't supposed to be the one who was affected by nakedness. She was going to be the strong

one. It was almost a shame he had such nice muscles to show off with all that skin. She watched them ripple as he tapped his fingers against the cards.

This time Victor raised by two articles of clothing. All she had to show was a King and a few low cards. She slipped one shoe slowly off and Victor almost absently stroked the sole of her foot.

She hadn't said they couldn't touch. Victor took full advantage, teasing sensitive nerves. She remembered she'd been planning to fondle him but—she quivered instead as he let his fingers rested on the arch of her foot.

He kissed that curve, letting his tongue tickle the sensitive nerves there.

“Why did you follow me the day Jennifer and Jack married?” he asked.

Damn. His tongue was resting lightly on her skin, but his questions were tough.

“I was worried over what you might do—”

“It wasn't just that.”

“No.” They'd both promised to tell the truth. “I loved you, Victor. Ever since I was a small kid. It was hopeless, of course. When we all thought you were dead, I wanted to die, too. You came back and you realized you couldn't have Jen—I knew how you felt. I couldn't not go with you and see you were all right. I had to make love with you.” There. Her big secret since childhood was out.

He said something, inaudibly, in Spanish. Cecilia slipped off her other shoe. He turned to that foot, laved it with his tongue.

“And now, Cecilia? How do you feel about me now?”

She should have expected the question. She had expected it. It still made her want to hide her face in her hands. She had spent so many years carefully building a façade of light-heartedness, of unconcern. But she had promised honesty.

All she had off was her shoes and she felt naked.

“I guess I've never stopped loving you. Why else did I know I had to have your baby and no one else's? I got along fine for years being without you, but when I needed someone, you were the one I wanted. The one I really, absolutely, had to have.”

She heard him breathe in heavily. She turned, almost blindly, back to the cards. He lost the hand when she silently laid down three deuces to his pair of fours. She didn't look up at him as the silence lengthened.

“I could use some help, Cecilia.” He gestured to his clothing.

She stubbornly refused to look up, but his movements kept her eyes waist-high—right at his crotch. That was a mouth-drying sight all on its own. She swallowed and slowly unzipped his pants. His cock hardened against her hand as she pulled the zipper slowly, carefully down. He slid his hips up, letting her slide the pants down to the floor. She stared at his cock. God, she wanted to touch. She wanted to pull that cock inside her and forget about everything else.

But he didn't touch her. He didn't say anything. When she was done freeing him completely from his pants, after allowing herself one long, lingering stroke of her hand over one leg, Victor sat, quietly, patiently, one leg bent and his injured leg stretched out.

She looked up, into his stare.

He was her husband. No matter how he answered, they were going to stay married. No matter how he answered. Suddenly she didn't want to ask the question she had desperately wanted to know. She'd thought knowing about Jennifer was difficult. But asking her next question was almost impossible.

She asked anyhow.

"How do you feel about me?"

She could almost feel him searching for the right words yet again. There would be no need to search if what he had to say was what she wanted.

"Cecilia, if I could love anyone, it would be you. I've had many other women since I had you. No one and nothing was as passionate or as tempting. But I won't lie. When I stopped loving Jennifer, I also stopped being able to love anyone. I'm sorry. Does it help if I tell you I care for you and want you desperately? There's nothing wrong with you. It's me."

"I expected that." Cecilia looked at the scars on his knee. He had so many scars, so many injuries from before. And she had come very late into this game. "I understand."

They continued their play. The fun of the game had gone, for both of them, but perhaps because neither wanted to admit defeat, they kept on. When she drew her new card and realized the best she had was two eights, she hesitated. What did she have to raise? Should she call?

Suddenly she realized she very much wanted to win. Maybe it was because her pride was hurting. Damn. Did it matter why?

"Call."

Victor had a full house. Her turn to strip again. For a moment she wondered just how friendly the game was. Did it matter if Victor was cheating? After all, that meant he wanted to see her naked.

She looked thoughtfully at her wedding and engagement rings. But she didn't want to take them off. Ever. Victor may have given them to her for the wrong reasons, but they meant something important. She was going to prove that to him somehow.

Impatient, she pulled off her long T-shirt. Why not give him a show?

She watched his eyes flicker over her. Of course she was wearing nothing but a thong. She'd worn it planning for distraction. But, once again, things weren't going as planned. Victor had a way of throwing her plans off. Right now she was the one squirming against the slick material touching her clitoris. She was the one desperate for his touch.

Underneath the hunger was dread. She didn't want to answer these questions. She didn't mind stripping off clothing in front of her husband. But somehow she'd thought she could keep her emotions hidden. Instead Victor was elusive and she was exposed. He wasn't responding the way she had hoped—not with his answers or with a little more physical action.

He said he didn't play games but, once again, he proved a better game player than she was. That galled her more almost more than anything else. She'd planned to distract him just enough so he would answer honestly—not that he would concentrate on distracting her and start asking questions she didn't want to answer.

As if he heard her thoughts, Victor bent, slid his tongue against the small golden ring piercing her nipple. Cecilia bit the inside of her lip hard. She wasn't going to give in. Not unless he did. He tugged.

He knew the sharp pain-pleasure he was giving her.

"If you're pregnant—or even if you're not—what do you expect of me? Of us together?"

She looked down at his body. His strong, sexy body. The one she wanted. Even though it came along with a brain that asked inconvenient, troubling things. Damn it, she even liked his brain. She just wished he would concentrate that brain on something else. Preferably loving all these ideas out of both their heads.

"I...don't know. I guess I haven't thought far enough ahead." Cecilia tried to talk sensibly. His tongue was driving her crazy. "I want you to be happy. I want to be happy. I travel. I like it. If we have a child, I can take him with me for a while anyhow." Victor paused and she rushed out the rest of the words. "But, no matter what, I would like to have some sort of home to come to. For both of us to come to. Sometimes. I like being with you."

Just when she least expected it, Victor scattered the cards and pounced. Oh, God. He was better at hiding what he wanted than she ever could be. Cecilia was flat on her back before she could gasp out her surprise and he was pulling her thong down.

Part of her was relieved as his fingers slipped under the material and jerked the cloth apart. She knew he could feel how wet she was, how much she needed him. She'd been expecting him to do this even earlier, dying for him to do this. Victor had never been a man to talk about how he felt before. He just felt and reacted to his needs.

He'd learned a little patience with time, but no one could change that much. She knew the core of him. This guy was still passionate and sexy. He still needed his cock inside her pussy. Almost as much as she needed it in her.

But he needed more. He needed to belong, to succeed, to know he was important to someone. He could belong to her, succeed with her, be important to her. But she wasn't sure Victor understood that. Yet.

He didn't need to figure it out now. They didn't need to talk anymore. The words had begun to hurt and she wanted to do what they always did very well together. Their sex never hurt. Not the way her feelings and his seemed to.

"Wrong answer," he whispered in her ear, his fingers still pressing against her pussy, exerting just not quite enough pressure. "We're going to have a home. We may be apart sometimes, but we are not going to drift in and out of each other's lives like—like gypsies. We will make time to be together. Not sometimes. Not just sometimes."

"Yes." Cecilia frantically tried to pull his briefs off and gasped with relief when they slid down far enough so that he could, in turn, slide his cock into her. They lay together, unmoving, for a moment longer. Cecilia thought she might die from the wanting.

If great sex was what he'd give her for now, it was a gift worth having. She'd take it gladly. But she couldn't help being greedy. She wanted more, even though she'd be damned if she let him know that again. She was going to show him instead. She was

going to make him love her. She'd give him love. She'd give him a family, a home. He needed all that. He needed *her*.

"You make me feel very—fortunate," Victor said, gruffly, at last.

He knew. He knew she wanted more. He was trying to make things better, damn him.

"For God's sake, show me how fortunate." Cecilia forced out the words, gripping his tight ass and pulling it harder against her.

She wanted to forget their problems. Victor could do that for her with his cock. Or at least he could for a while. She could work for more later.

Chapter Six

This felt a little bit like the last time they'd gone to a drugstore, though the general store was a far cry from the bland suburban store they'd been to during Jennifer's wedding. This time she took a pregnancy test kit off the shelf, carrying it along with some of those more gourmet groceries she had once coveted. She had a feeling the food would taste like dirt in her mouth if Victor announced they were going to leave soon and go—where?

Everything was wrong now. They couldn't joke the way they had. Idle conversation became charged with unhappy undertones.

"You know, Vic, where are you from?" Cecilia tried once more to make conversation as they drove back to the cabin. "I mean, are your ancestors Mexican? I don't think you ever told us."

He looked at her. She realized she'd said something wrong. Again.

"Cecilia, you know I grew up everywhere. My mother, when she bothered to remember I was around and supposed to be with her, dragged me all over. I spent some time in Texas and California when I was small. So maybe I am Mexican. On the other hand, we spent a few months in Miami, too. So am I Cuban? Hell, I moved to D.C. when I was ten. Would that make me Salvadoran or Guatemalan? Mom didn't really discuss our roots. I don't think she was exactly sure who my father was. We didn't have much time to chat about family since she left me when I was ten. I've spent so much time in so many different places, picked up so many words and phrases and intonations, I can't even tell much from my accent."

"I'm sorry I asked." Cecilia held up her hands, trying not to show either sympathy or sadness. He'd hate either. "I can tell you've thought about it before."

"Our baby isn't going to be hearing any family history from me," Victor continued, as if she hadn't interrupted.

"I said I'm sorry. Never mind. Stop!"

Victor sighed. "I'm sorry, Cecilia. I'm edgy. I want to leave—I mean it would be best if I left in another day or two. There is something brewing in Russia. But we need to decide what happens next."

"Once I find out the answer in this little kit I'll tell you." Cecilia's voice was very tight. It was just the way she thought. If she was pregnant, he'd leave. If she wasn't pregnant, he'd leave. At least if she was pregnant she'd have something.

"*Mi esposa*, it won't matter so much. If it doesn't happen this month, we'll try again. I'll make sure not to be gone too long. I swear it."

"But I want to be pregnant now!" Cecilia swallowed. "Okay, I can't control what happens. I know that. But I'm so scared, Victor. I'm scared that it will never happen and I'm scared that if I'm not, you and I will never—we won't ever really be married."

"We have the marriage license." But they both knew she meant more.

“We’re playing at marriage right now. If we don’t have a child—well, you said you don’t like to play games.” Cecilia pulled at a strand of her hair.

“Darling, don’t look for trouble,” Victor said, gently. “No one can predict the future. But we both made promises to each other. Trust me, I know we’re married.”

Maybe. Maybe he’ll stay with me. Well, maybe we’ll stay married. But he’ll go back to his traveling and I’ll go on with mine. Eventually we’d just forget to see each other.

They pulled up to the cabin. Cecilia stared at it. She didn’t want to leave.

She was supposed to be the sophisticate of the family. But she understood why Victor loved this place. They could make it perfect together. This could be a start to a real home. She could persuade Victor to put in a lovely, modern bathroom. They could come stocking good coffee and fresh bread and—

In the meantime, there were plenty of crazy things she did love about the place. She loved the lumpy mattress and creaky bed frame. After all, they had a wonderful time on them. Victor had said they shouldn’t buy a new bedroom set. They’d just wear that one out, too. She didn’t care about the lack of electricity any more—she loved the firelight at night, especially watching it flicker over Victor’s skin. Most importantly, she loved the place because this might be the closest thing she and Victor would ever have to their own home, their own marriage.

Clutching the small bag from the drugstore, Cecilia slid out of the Jeep. Victor pulled out the sacks of groceries. She wouldn’t have bought so much if she had known he planned for them to leave soon. Maybe they could take them back to D.C. with them. Maybe—maybe it was time to stop avoiding the answer.

She ran into the house. She couldn’t wait any longer to see.

* * * * *

She listened to Victor putting the groceries into the battered little refrigerator, heard the kettle being heated on the stove in preparation for his endless cups of strong, bitter coffee. Five minutes. Ten minutes.

Finally she looked down at the little strip.

She walked out of the bedroom. Victor turned around so quickly it was as if he expected her to hold a leveled gun at him.

Cecilia burst into tears. He wrapped his arms around her, letting her rest against his body.

“Shhh,” he soothed, rocking her just a little. “It’s all right, baby. I know you’re hurting but we have plenty of time to keep on trying—”

“No. I’m crying because I’m so damned happy, Victor.” She gulped and snuffled. “I’m pregnant!”

He stood absolutely still and then, slowly, slid down to the floor with her sliding along with him, right onto his lap. He put his head against her neck.

“Cecilia,” he whispered. “Cecilia.”

She gulped again and laughed. Then she hit him on the shoulder. They’d done it. They were making a baby—a family—together.

“Well, damn, stud muffin.” She knew he could be teased this way right now. “You did it right first thing. You are good.”

“Time to celebrate, baby.” He smiled, his voice a little rougher than usual. “Let’s see. You can’t have any champagne. We’ll have to work with something else. I hear some women get mighty insatiable when they’re pregnant. Shall we celebrate with a little sex? Just to please you, of course.”

Still straddling his lap, she smiled. For a moment she thought she saw just a faint gleam of moisture in his eyes. Without saying more, she unzipped his jeans. “I don’t think it would please just me. There appears to be some evidence to the contrary.”

“Let’s see if we can get rid of that evidence,” he suggested. “Maybe if we use it—use it really, really hard—it will disappear.”

“It hasn’t worked yet, but I’m certainly willing to try.” She pulled his lower lip out with her teeth and nipped at it. His hips moved forward sharply.

“Cecilia—”

“Mmmm?” His hand clasped her wrist hard, almost like a handcuff.

“Before I go crazy here, let me tell you something. You won’t be sorry. I’m going to be the best damn father to your baby— “

She blinked to keep her own tears away. He meant it. She knew that.

“One thing more.” His voice was hoarse.

“Yes, Victor?”

“You’ve made me very happy.”

One tear splashed down, despite her best efforts. It was silly to cry. She’d already begun to show him how happy they both could be together. Her mouth turned hot enough to make them both forget tears.

* * * * *

She placed her small suitcase next to his, one part of her mind seething with things she needed to plan to do for the baby, the other part already longing for him. They had been close, closer than she had dared hope, during their two weeks together. Just not close enough.

“Cecilia, I have some things stored in a storage locker in D.C.” Victor swirled the car keys, tossed them in the air and caught them. “I don’t carry a lot with me and I don’t have a place of my own. I’ll give you the key. I want you to start looking for some place for us while I’m gone. I’m flexible. Whatever you want, wherever you want.”

What she wanted was Victor. But he needed a home to return to. Damn it, right now she had so much to do! How was she going to give him a place right now?

“I’m going to be up in New York for a few days. Would it be okay if, just for now, we left our things at the old house?”

“If it would make it easier for you.”

Damn. She could tell he wasn’t thrilled. “Not forever,” Cecilia promised. She’d get moving on their own home as soon as she could. “I’ll start a search when I get back. Shall we rent a place until we have time to look together?”

“Yes. No. Oh damn, I don’t know,” Victor said, helplessly. “I suppose we should buy a place as soon as possible. Very well. You win. We can stay at your old place until I’m back and we can look for something permanent together.” He shook his head. “I don’t see me a homeowner. This should be interesting.”

“Do you want to stay in Virginia?”

“I don’t care. You grew up here. Do you?”

“I don’t know. My family is in Virginia. I—yes. I suppose. Unless you want to go somewhere else.”

“Virginia it is.” He kissed her once, hard, and then turned to finish packing. “Give me your itinerary for the next few weeks, Cecilia. I’ll call you as soon as I get to a hotel and let you know what’s up.”

“Okay. I’ll go to the doctor when I get back, by the way. Just to be sure and to get all—well, all the whatever a woman needs when she’s pregnant.”

“I’ll be back, Cecilia. In just a week or two.”

Was that what he had told Jen when they left at the airport? When he disappeared for two years?

“I know.”

He looked at her and his mouth twisted. He gave her another kiss.

“I promise.”

* * * * *

That evening, in front of the fire, he stayed awake, watching Cecilia as she slept on the rug. The firelight played off her skin while his finger very gently traced the outline of where his flannel shirt, the shirt she had put on, had slipped down her shoulder. A few shirt buttons were missing now. He smiled, remembering how he had ripped them off and why.

She was in a deep sleep. He’d heard pregnancy could make a woman tired. It was a little early for any signs, but he looked anyhow. She was going to be the mother of his child. He wondered what sort of mother she would make. Hell, he didn’t even know what sort of wife she would make and now she was going to be doing both. She made a hell of a lover, but he’d discovered that three years ago.

What else was she capable of being? He wasn’t sure what he wanted from her.

She looked so soft, so alluring while she was asleep, her hair just mussed a little and the shirt slipping a little more with each breath she took. He looked at the gleam of her wedding ring and the engagement ring on her finger. She hadn’t taken them off during their insane card game. She hadn’t taken them off since he put them on her.

She’d said she loved him. He couldn’t help the satisfaction that swept through him each time he remembered the words.

The sight of her asleep against him, the sight of her wedding ring, made a man feel like she belonged to him. She could make a man forget a lot of practical things, looking the way she did. Things like how they were going to live together for the next few decades, what she expected from their marriage and how she intended to get it. He didn’t possess her. It was a pleasant dream, but that wasn’t real. He was being

permitted into her life. He wasn't sure how long he'd be allowed to stay. The short wisps of her hair made her look so sweet and so young. More innocent than she'd ever been. Jen's hair was long. He frowned at a sudden, unwanted thought. There was a certain family resemblance but Jen wasn't as tall and Cecilia was curvier. Jen was direct and you never knew what Cecilia thought half the time...

Hell, where had those thoughts come from? He had promised himself he wouldn't make comparisons, but suddenly they flooded his mind. Jen's sexiness had been warm and approachable. It had been easy to fall for her. How could a man not want someone smart and kind and beautiful and sweet? Cecilia's sexiness was hot, blazing. Sometimes she was sweet but she gave no guarantees. She was a challenge—a challenge a man thought about before taking on. He couldn't imagine refusing her, though.

Would you be man enough to match me? She'd flung the challenge at him and he'd accepted it, even though he didn't understand why she wanted him. Or why he wanted her. They'd made a baby together.

What next? He'd known her forever, but she still surprised him. For example, today she hadn't spoke to him all afternoon—not until suddenly she came and wanted to make love.

What a complicated creature she was. It wasn't easy to be with her, though it had been easier than he thought, so far. He would have to work to keep her satisfied.

He'd have to work to remember he didn't love her. *Oh no, Ruiz. Don't think about that. Remember how well that worked out last time. Imagine all the expectations you'd both have.* He knew she wanted things from him already, though she wouldn't tell him what. If he loved her, she'd expect even more. Then he'd fail to meet her expectations, just the way he always did.

His hand paused, dropped away from her body.

* * * * *

"I'm here, Cee Cee!" It was Jen's voice in the kitchen. "I brought you breakfast."

"Why don't you just kill me instead?" Cecilia mumbled, rinsing her mouth out with water. "It would be a lot kinder. I just emptied out my stomach, thanks."

"Okay, forget breakfast." Jen rubbed her back the way her mother had when Cecilia was six. "I'll fix you some dry toast. No butter. We'll see how that goes down."

Cecilia sat, her head in her hands, on the kitchen table. If she had thought being sick while she was on medication had been difficult, pregnancy had shown that was a piece of cake in comparison.

Jen popped some toast in and straddled the chair opposite her. Cecilia looked up and narrowed her eyes.

"Something is up." She stared at her sister. "You look different."

"I am," Jen replied. "Hey, Sis, are you a betting woman?"

"Maybe," Cecilia said, thinking about poker.

"What do you want to name your baby if it is a girl?"

"Nora, of course."

“Okay. I just knew it. I was going to name a daughter after mom and I’m the oldest. But I’m such a great person that you can have dibs on Nora if you have your baby first.” Jen smiled a big smile.

Cecilia looked at her and tried to figure that one out. It didn’t take long.

“You, too?”

“Yes!” Jen pumped her arm up in the air. “Oh, I’ve been so scared this wouldn’t happen again. Jack has been such a great dad to Vicky and such—such a great guy all around but, after we decided it was time to have another child, we just couldn’t. You can’t imagine how I felt.”

“Actually I can.”

“Stupid me. Of course you can. I just meant—well, I had had such a time persuading Jack that he should have kids at all—he had some stupid idea that he would pass on bad genes or something. Then Jack began thinking something was wrong with him because, of course, I’d already had Vicky. It’s been almost a year of wondering. Then I finally got checked out.”

“Let me guess. Endometriosis?” Of course. Jen had lived through the whole thing too.

“It can run in families, you know. I wonder about Mom—”

“Well, she didn’t wait for pregnancy the way we did. Probably never had to worry about it. We can’t ask her now.”

“Well, we worried plenty. When Jack and I went away, it wasn’t just for a second honeymoon. I had a laparoscopy. After they scraped all the gunk out of me then Jack and I—umm. Well, I knew we might only have a short period of time before the disease started again. I figured we had better get me pregnant as fast as possib— Oh, Cee Cee, we had sex like a pair of rabbits. For weeks. Jack swears I was trying to kill him.”

They must have been having sex like rabbits after her wedding. During her honeymoon. Cecilia wondered how she felt about that and then grinned. Why not? She certainly had been. “You look like you both survived really well.” Cecilia snickered. “C’mon, you aren’t fooling anyone. I’ve seen you two together even when you aren’t trying to get pregnant. Most of the time it still looks like Jack is ready to drag you off to the nearest bedroom. And you just encourage him.”

“Don’t make me blush,” Jen said, and did anyway. “The point is, I’m pregnant. Now, let’s compare due dates. Oh, great! The toast is ready. I’m starving.”

Jen was going to go through all the pregnancy things she did. Except Jen knew how pregnancy went already. Jen had already had Vic’s child. Ask or not?

She had to ask.

“I’m glad I have a big sister.” Cecilia tried not to look as Jen popped a piece of toast in her mouth. “You can make me feel stupid, if you want, but you have to help me. Just explain to me about all this—this information the doctor had me bring home. I’m feeling sort of overwhelmed. Vitamins and checkups and birthing classes and everything.”

“This is just the start,” Jennifer informed her. “You get more blood taken out of you by the end than you think you could possibly have in your whole body. And those pills! They smell disgusting, they’re huge and you take them every day. Every single day.”

Cecilia nibbled carefully while Jen gulped her food down. She tried not to be envious, but her sister was gobbling food, glowing with pride, staying at home to rest and she had her husband around the house. Cecilia knew she looked sick as a dog. She was about to work out her travel for the next few months. She didn’t even really have a house of her own. That was something she and Victor hadn’t had time to even think about looking for.

None of that mattered. She could handle all the crazy details of marriage—except for Victor.

Victor was—well, somewhere in Russia. He called faithfully and kept swearing he would be home as soon as possible, but he didn’t tell her when. She had a feeling he didn’t actually know. She was already starting to wonder if she had just dreamed their time together. Of course morning sickness seemed pretty real to her. He’d been around long enough to get her feeling sick as a dog.

Then, just like last time, when she had longed for him the most, she saw a shadow and looked up.

She leaped to her feet and stumbled into his arms.

“Jesus, Cecilia, you look bad!” Victor exclaimed.

“And here I was thinking how wonderful you look.” Cecilia tightened her arms around him.

“You’ve lost more weight,” he said, looking her over carefully.

“She doesn’t eat and when she does, she throws it up,” Jen snitched immediately.

“What does the doctor say?” Victor patted her back as if she were three with hiccups.

“She said to try to find something to keep down for now and worry about it if I lose much more weight.” She’d wanted to look sexy, not like a scarecrow when Vic arrived. “I’m taking all my vitamins. I usually feel a little better in the afternoon.”

“Well, I’m here now.” Victor smoothed her hair. “We’ll see what happens.”

“I better stop feeling sick.” She stiffened. “I hate being this way around you all the time.”

“Well, I’ll leave you two newlyweds alone.” Jen got up. “I warn you I’ll give you about an hour before I tell Vicky. She’ll want to be over to see her father as soon as she finds out he’s here.”

After she strolled out, Cecilia turned to Victor. “Sometimes I really hate my sister.”

“Because?”

“Because she’s pregnant, too, and healthy as a horse.” Cecilia scowled. “She’s starting bets on which one of us will give birth first.”

She searched for signs of distress in Victor’s face and saw nothing. He’d told her he was over Jennifer and perhaps he’d been completely honest. Well, she knew how to make sure he didn’t think about Jen right now.

Cecilia looped her arms around her husband. “By the way, you were right. Pregnant women can be insatiable. When I’m not throwing up, I’m thinking about sex. I bet if we got naked and had some, I’d forget that my stomach is churning right now. I could hardly stand waiting for you these past few weeks.”

“Well, if we must have sex to stop your illness, I’m willing to make the sacrifice.” Victor picked her up. “We have an hour, after all.”

He stumbled slightly. “Your leg. Is it acting up?”

“It’s not too bad.” He gave his usual answer.

“Vic—tor.”

“Airplane rides make it cramp up a bit. I’ll live.” He continued to walk up the hall.

“You shouldn’t be carrying me.”

“Cecilia, right now you don’t weigh a whole lot more than Vicky. I told you that I will live. Don’t fuss over me.”

“Aren’t you fussing over me?” He was forgetting to use his contractions again. Just five minutes together and he was getting upset.

“That is different. You need fussing over. I do not. There. We are in bed. End of discussion.”

He stripped off her shirt, unsnapped her bra. He stared at her breasts a moment, then smiled. He traced one and she shivered. His smile broadened.

“They look different.” He cupped them both in his hands, as if he was weighing them, comparing the way they had been. “You’re too thin but here—here, you are starting to look pregnant. They’re heavier. They have more veins. And no more nipple rings.”

When he pinched her nipple, she made a small, mewling noise, unable to help herself.

“Like that?” Victor asked.

“Y—yes.”

His tongue tentatively followed his finger and she stiffened. Then her greedy hands clutched his head closer.

“Let’s see what we can do with this new look of yours.” His tongue touched her nipple and she screamed. Then his tongue became merciless, licking her nipple into a harder and harder peak, despite her noisy, if wordless, pleas for—for something. For anything that could end the knotting, screaming sensation. He sucked her nipple up hard, into his mouth.

The release of tormenting pleasure left her flat on the bed, her hands knotted in the sheets. Very slowly Victor’s mouth eased away and she let out a shuddering sigh.

“Thank you,” she said, faintly, her eyes beginning to close.

“My God, Cecilia,” Victor said. “This pregnancy thing may be more fun than I expected.”

“Victor, I want to make love to you but—oh, I’m so sleepy now and so hungry.” Cecilia touched his dark hair. “I couldn’t sleep well until now. I couldn’t eat. Not ‘til now.”

“Poor Cecilia.”

“I’m sorry. I’m falling asleep right now. I wouldn’t blame you if you just—you know—came inside me. I wouldn’t mind.”

“I would prefer you conscious when I come,” Victor whispered into her ear. “It’s much more fun that way.”

“That’s good, too,” she agreed, yawning, not completely aware of what she was saying as she fuzzed over.

And, to her horror, she could feel herself sliding into sleep. Victor was still aroused, next to her thigh, but she couldn’t stop. She also heard the faintest beginning of a chuckle from him as her eyes closed. She relaxed completely at the sound. It would be all right. Victor would be waiting when she woke up.

If she knew him at all, he would be ready and waiting. He’d see she paid for falling asleep. They would both see to it that payback was fun.

* * * * *

When she woke up, she reached out for Victor. He wasn’t there. He should have been there. However, she could hear voices in the kitchen. Oh. Jen must have brought Vicky. She blinked sleep away, checked herself in the mirror out of automatic habit and smoothed her brown hair down. She didn’t look too bad.

When she got to the kitchen, she saw Jen was straddling a kitchen chair, talking to Victor and laughing. For one horrible moment all the jealousy Cecilia had ever had welled up in her. People thought she was joking when she said she hated Jen—but sometimes she did, for all the reasons she loved her.

Jen was so overwhelmingly perfect in ways that Cecilia wasn’t.

Cecilia looked at her sister’s amused face. Jen looked a little mussed and crumpled. Jen never checked herself in the mirror to see she looked her best. She never needed to. Her self-confidence carried her through.

Damn. Cecilia really didn’t like seeing Jen with Victor right then. When Jen was with her own husband, she fit so neatly with him, it was hard to imagine her with anyone else. Jen and Jack. But when Jack wasn’t around, Cecilia could easily remember when Jen had been with someone else.

It had been Jen and Vic a few years ago, and she had seemed as much an inseparable part of that couple as she was now with her husband. Cecilia, on the other hand, felt suddenly too tall, too selfish, too young, and now too ill with pregnancy, to compare to her older sister.

Just then Jen looked up and her face lit up when she saw her, just as it had lit up while she spoke to Victor. Cecilia saw the love in her big sister’s face reflected at her. Love and old, remembered guilt rushed through her.

How could she feel this way about Jen?

“Cecilia!” Jen exclaimed and smiled at her. “I was just warning Victor about how to deal with pregnant women.”

“I expect to be treated beautifully,” Cecilia drawled a little, pulling on the old prima donna mask she was used to. She waved her hand, airily.

Victor’s face smiled at her, too.

“If I don’t, *querida*, I expect you will remind me.” He gave her hand a kiss.

What did that mean? Was he trying to make her feel better? Then that meant he knew she felt uncomfortable. He didn’t know she was jealous, did he? Or was he doing it for the sake of their company?

Cecilia gritted her teeth. She wasn’t going to make him think she needed to be waited on and pampered. She was going to make him happy to see her. Happy she was pregnant.

“Well, you don’t have to do it full time,” Cecilia reminded herself as well as him. “I suppose we’ll both be traveling quite a bit while we wait for the baby.”

“I’ve been telling Victor about Jack’s new ambitions,” Jen told her. “Can you believe it? After all these years of adamantly saying no politics he’s considering running for the state legislature.”

“Truly?” Cecilia was startled but not stunned. Jack had been born to politics.

“I guess he can run from being his daddy’s boy, but he can’t run forever. Do you see me as a politician’s wife?”

Cecilia looked at her sister, still mussed from not looking in the mirror but glowing with her own pregnancy and happiness.

“I can see you being whatever you put your mind to,” Cecilia replied. “You’d make a great change from the usual political spouse.”

Still laughing, Jen got up and gave her a hug.

“I’ll leave with that,” she said. “If you start flattering me, I know you must want something.”

“Send the reporters to me if you don’t want to be in politics, Jen.” Victor nodded his good-bye. “I’ll tell ‘em the real truth about some of Jack’s adolescent escapades. The voters will abandon him in droves.”

Cecilia swallowed as the door shut behind her. She had put aside what she wanted to tell Victor when she saw they had company, but she knew she still needed say the words.

She wished she had Jen’s easy directness.

“Vic, I missed you.” Her voice was soft.

He looked at her then, a little surprised.

“I told you I’d be back.” He sounded like there had never been any doubt.

“I wouldn’t really have blamed you if you didn’t show up. I’m sorry I acted so strangely when you left. You see, I—I would rather be angry about missing you than be afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“You go to dangerous places, Vic. I know that’s what you do and that you love doing it. It’s my problem. I’m not mad at you for leaving, but—but I’m terrified you aren’t going to be able to make it back.”

“Cecilia.” Victor was clearly even more surprised. “I had no idea you were worried. I had my accident when I was just starting out. I was stupid and green then. I’m much more cautious now. I know more. Hell, with this leg I can’t do some of the stunts other folks get up to. I use my head instead. I swear.”

Second Time

“Yeah, I can see you hanging back from some perfect shot.” Cecilia tried to smile as he slid her arms around her. “Listen, don’t try to fool me. I worry.”

“I worry about you, too,” he said. “You’re carrying a baby and there will be times when you are on your own. I can’t be there.”

“But—”

“Besides, I missed you, too.” He kissed her cheek and then nuzzled her ear, touching it with the tip of his tongue.

Not the way I do. Not if you don’t love me. It can’t be the same.

He sat on the kitchen chair time and slid her on his lap.

“Can I show you how much?” He continued to lick her ear. “No one makes sex feel as good as you, *querida*. I missed that, too.”

Even when it seems like everything else is wrong, we have that together. I’m being an idiot, rushing things. I have to ease him into loving me.

“I want to try that breast thing again.”

“You aren’t going to sleep on me, are you?”

“Not this time.”

Chapter Seven

"I don't see why you have to sulk."

"I am not sulking. I am being sensible." Victor set the coffee mug down—hard—on the kitchen counter.

You aren't using contractions. You're sulking. "The doctor says I'm healthy. I'm back to my normal weight and I've stopped that incessant throwing up. There's no reason for me not to do a few performances. Fran is already grumbling about how few I'll promise to do."

"You were sick as a dog until a few days ago," Victor scowled. "There is no reason for you to go traipsing around, risking your health, for the next few months."

"I'm not sick any more!" Cecilia's voice rose for a moment, then settled back to its usual husky evenness. "I'll be just fine, Victor. It isn't as if you'll be here with me anyhow."

"I had promised to take on the San Francisco job before we were even considering marriage," Victor said. "I plan to be back a lot more after that. We could start looking for a house to live in when I get back if you were around."

"I'll be taking off several months very soon." Cecilia picked up the mug from the counter and began rinsing it with swift, furious motions. "Everyone says my voice is better than they've ever heard right now. I don't see why I should waste that."

The doctor had told her she was fine. She'd probably been more nervous than anything else when her dreadful bouts of morning sickness occurred. It had stopped when Victor came back but she knew before that she had been fretting herself into a ridiculous state, doing nothing but waiting and worrying whether he would return. She wasn't going to do that to herself again. Victor could come and go as he wished. She would, too.

She certainly wasn't going to sit around, making them both miserable. Soon Vic would wonder why he'd married this unhappy, broody creature in the first place.

"Taking care of yourself and our baby is not a waste of anything." His lips shut tight and he walked out of the house, the slight limp a little more noticeable than usual with the way he exaggerated the firmness in his strides. He didn't slam the door but it was obvious from his movements how angry he was.

Cecilia heard the Jeep start up. He was gone.

She sighed.

"Cee Cee?" Jen's voice at the door was exactly the one she had expected next.

"Yes?" Cecilia sighed again.

There were definite disadvantages to living next door to a big sister. It was really tough when a big sister stayed home most of the day either studying law or working on her newspaper column. She could see everything that went on—like when someone's husband stormed into his car and drove away.

“Do you want to talk?” Jennifer asked, tentatively. “I can go right back and stick my pesky nose back in my own house, if you want.”

“Never mind. It is pretty obvious Vic and I were fighting.” Cecilia shoved the coffee mug into the dishwasher. “He never gives up a point and I will not just do what he says all the time.”

“Good.” Jennifer nodded. “I don’t want to make comparisons or anything, but it occurs to me that I always let Victor pretty much have his own way. It wasn’t good for him.”

“I don’t remember that. Are you just trying to make me feel better?” Cecilia was surprised. “You’ve always pretty much done what you wanted.”

“Usually I wanted what he wanted when we were younger.” Jennifer nodded again. “But when I think back to when I agreed to follow him around the world, giving up graduate school and having no idea what I would be doing besides being with him—I do wonder about myself. It hadn’t occurred to me until after I married Jack and we worked out our compromises, but I think I might not have lasted with Victor if we’d gone away as we planned before Mom and Dad were in the accident.”

“I never thought of that,” Cecilia said, shaken. She’d always thought if Jack hadn’t intervened and married her sister, Jen would have slipped right back into her fairy tale life with Vic.

“Well, when Victor and I did fight, we fought. It wasn’t often, but what we ultimately wanted with our lives was very different.” Jen looked past Cecilia, not seeing her at all. “I would have loved to see the world. For a while. But then what would I do with myself? You love travel just for travel’s sake, Sis. I adore being home. Even when we had to struggle on our own, I loved being home. Jack’s life and mine have fit together so well that I wonder why I didn’t fall for him right from the start. It is almost too easy loving the boy next door.”

“Oh, c’mon. You and Jack fight.” Cecilia felt like an idiot. She wanted Jen to be happy with Jack. She wanted to believe Vic hadn’t been right for her. But she had this sudden need to defend Vic to her sister.

“Oh yes.” Jen agreed again without really agreeing. “But not about how we want to live. Now you and Victor are arguing because you both want the same things but both of you want to be in control. That’s pretty normal for newly-marrieds. You’ll work it out.”

“I’m starting to realize how annoying I must have sounded when I gave you advice about Jack.” Cecilia shook her head. “It’s really irritating to hear someone give you all the answers and, even worse, to realize they’re probably right.”

Jen laughed. “I spent a lot of time wanting to ignore what you were telling me when I was all in knots over Jack. I spent the rest of the time wanting to ask you what to do next. I’m so happy I could return the favor.”

“I suppose I’ll have to tell Vic that I’m really only going to be gone another month or two and the only other things I’ve booked are some recording dates.” Cecilia made her decision. “I don’t want to risk the baby any more than he does.”

* * * * *

Victor awoke with an uneasy feeling prickling down his back. He checked his clock and frowned. Although all his nerves were screaming to call her, Cecilia should be asleep in—he cast his mind over her itinerary—Toronto right now. Telling himself he was a fool, he moved his hand to the phone anyhow.

They'd been married almost three months. She was almost three months pregnant. He hadn't seen her in weeks. Damn it, of course he should feel a little...unsettled. But Cecilia was probably just fine. He was worrying for no reason.

Hell, maybe he was just horny and making an excuse to call her.

While he waited for her hotel to connect them, he looked at the photo with the rather battered frame on the hotel nightstand. It was Cecilia in one of the photographs he had taken so long ago.

He smiled. It was one he had to hide when others came into the hotel room. He would have had to kill anyone else who saw her so smugly sated from lovemaking. But it was also his favorite photograph when he was alone.

"She's not answering, sir," the hotel receptionist said. "Shall I try again?"

"Yes."

Where was she? She wasn't that sound a sleeper, although her pregnancy did make her more tired.

On the tenth ring a small voice answered, "H-hello?"

"Cecilia! What's going on?"

"I was in the bathroom. Vic, I'm scared. I'm bleeding. Oh, God, Vic, I'm bleeding."

He cursed. He was several thousand miles and too many time zones away.

"Call a doctor," he ordered. "The hotel will give you a name. I'm coming. I don't know how quickly I can do it, so stay in Toronto. Do you hear me? I'll check with your hotel to see if you are—are in a hospital. Don't worry, darling. It will be all right. Lie down now. Call from the bed and lie down."

"Yes. Yes, I will. I—I just didn't know what to do for a minute." Cecilia's voice began to gain some of its usual husky strength. "Thank you for calling, Vic. I don't know how you caught those thought waves I sent out to you, but thank you. I'll be here."

"Take care. I'm going to be there soon."

He hung up and then threw his clothes in the suitcase. Trouble. This was trouble. At least he was on the same continent with his woman this time. He called an airline and hastily booked a flight to Toronto. And all the while he did it, his hands shook.

Christ, he didn't like any of this. Cecilia's fear and possible loss gnawed at him. Underneath that was shock. He'd sensed when she was in trouble. The last and only time he'd done something like that was back in Colombia when dreaming of Jen had kept him sane. Of course he had been the one in trouble then.

He'd never asked Jen about whether she had dreamed the same dreams. What was the point? He knew he'd dreamed them because he had been so in love that he had to be with Jen some way. The only way he could.

He didn't want to go through that again. Not with his wife.

Then he cursed himself. Cecilia was alone, afraid and perhaps miscarrying and he was thinking about his own ridiculous hurts.

He tried to call her again before he left and got no answer this time. He left a message saying when he would be in and ran for the taxi.

Everything else could wait until he saw how Cecilia was.

* * * * *

By the time Victor got to her hotel room he was furious, with himself, with the situation, with Cecilia for being there instead of safely at home. He hung onto that icy fury until he got outside the door.

He stopped short at the wooden barrier between him and Cecilia and took a deep breath. Then, with maddening force, the fear he'd hidden under that anger let loose. He grunted with pain, the feeling was so sudden and intense.

He took another two or three deep breaths and grabbed onto his usual composure. It wouldn't do to terrify Cecilia even more than she was already.

He used the extra keycard that the reception desk had provided. The hotel staff had looked relieved to see him.

The twist in his guts hit him again when he saw her, huddled under the covers of the huge hotel bed. It made her look tiny and alone. Her legs were propped up on pillows and—somehow this made his insides twist with tenderness—she'd managed to put on some lipstick and blush for his arrival. She looked white as a sheet under the false color.

God. Cecilia had never looked wrong to him before, never made a false move with her looks. He had never seen her look anything but good, not even when she was an adolescent. This wasn't one of her teasing games. She was scared and hurting for real.

"Hey, *querida*," he managed to say evenly. He walked to her bedside and found himself dropping on his knees next to her, holding her tightly against him, trying to keep the terrors for them both at bay.

"V—Victor."

"How are you?"

"Listen, I don't think we're needed any more," a male voice said. There was a sudden scraping of chairs.

Victor looked up, startled. He didn't know how he had missed the three males who sat in the room. They were big enough. He bit his tongue before he said something stupid. He had been so focused on his wife he hadn't thought to wonder about what her band was doing. Apparently they had been sitting with her.

Cecilia knew how to take care of herself—and get others to care, too.

"Thank you Beau—Tim—Kyle." Cecilia's voice steadied. "I really appreciate you staying here with me until Victor came."

"What else are friends for?" Beau brushed his lips against her cheek and looked at Victor. "Take care of her, man. Listen, Cecilia, we're out of here. Looks like we're free for a while. Call us when you know more about—about anything."

The other men murmured their good-byes.

“They were so sweet,” Cecilia said. “They drove me to the doctor and stayed here, even though they were terribly uncomfortable about it all. It’s especially sweet, seeing as I am messing up their bookings, too.”

Victor’s grip tightened on her hand. He wasn’t going to be annoyed about friends stepping in when he could not. If he couldn’t keep from feeling a jealous knot in his gut, to match all the other things twisting in there, it was his problem.

“Let me try again, *querida*. How are you?”

“Okay. I think. The doctor says the bleeding is stopping and it might mean nothing. Just to be safe, he told me to stay here in bed. I’m to have bed-rest for the weekend. After that he’ll check me and see what is going on.”

“You must be bored.”

“Some. I hate being here. All I can do is think about what might happen. Victor, I’m so glad you came!”

The last words came out in a little rush before her lips shut tight. She swallowed her tears back.

Thank God he hadn’t shown himself to be a jealous idiot. “You don’t have to be brave right now. I’m here. Do what you want. Cry, yell, whatever. I’ll handle it.”

“I don’t want to get upset. It might not be good for the baby,” she answered. “Besides, I’m not upset. You’re here. I could have handled it, Victor, but now you’re here.”

She sighed and gripped his hands. “This may be a long weekend for both of us though.”

“Yes.” *Dios*, maybe he was going to cry.

“It’s not that I’m scared for me, you know. I just don’t know what it will mean for the baby and I can’t do anything except lie here. It’s hard. That’s all.”

He was about to reply somehow—how did you answer that?—when he saw a photo resting, face down, on her hotel nightstand. He picked it up and then he let out a short laugh. It was the photo she’d taken of him that weekend long ago.

“I can’t believe you kept that.” He put the photo back, face down. “I look like I’m posing for—well, a magazine I wouldn’t pose for.”

“I like to think you were posing for me.” Cecilia smiled a little. “I love that photo, even though I had to hide it from the boys. You look almost as sexy there as you really are.”

“I suppose the doctor has said absolutely no sex,” Victor said, not asking it as a question. She nodded sadly and he stroked her hand. Maybe he could make her feel better if they teased each other. He’d feel better if they did what they usually did together. “Too bad. The weekend would be much more entertaining that way. Not even any foreplay?”

“I don’t know.” Cecilia’s blush brought some real color back. Then her devil smile appeared. “Would you like to call and ask?”

“It can wait. I don’t want to risk the baby any more than you do, sweetheart. Maybe I should go to another room, call you instead and we could try phone sex again.”

She had really begun to blush now and look for something to throw at him.

“Pervert.”

“Pervert? I wasn’t the one who called from—where the hell were you?—while I was in Mexico City. That must have made up a nice chunk of change when you got that particular hotel bill.”

“I was in Boston. And I managed to scrape up the money.”

“Long distance phone sex,” Victor mused. “You made some pretty impressive promises about what we were going to do together next time, as I recall. I’m not absolutely certain some of them were physically possible, mind you, but—”

She let loose a pillow at his head.

“You didn’t complain,” she said. “Or was all that grunting and noise I heard on the receiver a complaint?”

He bent over her on the bed and brushed her lips.

“I guess we’ll have to find out later, Cecilia.”

The lost look was gone from her eyes. That had been his original intention, but as he stared at her, he realized he would have to take it a lot easier. He knew she wasn’t really able to handle much more than a little spicy conversation this weekend. That was a damn shame, all around.

On the other hand, he much preferred the familiar tightening he had in his crotch to the tight feeling he had had in his guts right before he had seen Cecilia. Lust could be taken care of eventually. He didn’t know quite what to do with the other feelings except to ignore them.

“Do you have any pain now?”

“No. Maybe it’s all over with.” Cecilia was starting to look more and more her usual self. “Let’s call room service and order an enormous quantity of food. If we can’t have sex, food is the next best thing.”

* * * * *

“I don’t know how you managed it, but I’m very glad you did.” Jen sat next to Cecilia, patting her as if to see where she was broken.

“I’ve had worse problems in tougher countries than Canada.” Victor shrugged, his eyes on Cecilia’s face.

Worse problems, maybe, but none that made him quite so nervous. He’d rented a minivan, piled up some pillows and blankets in the back and drove Cecilia back down to the Virginia house for the doctor’s exam on Monday. The Canadian doctor had been maddeningly noncommittal about what the problem might be and whether it was over. Cecilia’s own doctor hadn’t been too much better.

“You feel okay? The doctor says you’ll be okay?” Jen patted Cecilia’s hand.

Cecilia’s chin went up.

“I should be. The baby’s heart is beating and everything. The doctor just wants me to stay in bed a little longer to be sure,” she said. “Rather safe than sorry, right?”

Obviously Cecilia didn’t want to tell her sister everything. That wasn’t all the doctor had said. Victor hadn’t wanted to admit his disappointment at the failure to

completely reassure them that the baby was fine—or the additional pang when the doctor had advised no sexual intercourse for a while.

“It won’t be so bad,” Cecilia had tried to smile, after the doctor left them alone in the office for her to dress again. “The doctor didn’t say we had to stop everything. We’ll just have to pretend we’re in high school—”

Her words had stopped as they both remembered just who Victor had been with in high school. He’d wanted to say something to ease the tension, but he had never been as good at words as other people. He just didn’t know what to say. Why did their past have to be so complicated?

At least she was home now, where she belonged, with people who cared about her. He would juggle work as best he could, but he knew both of them were going to have to be here for a while. No matter how bad it got, he couldn’t leave her alone to face whatever might happen.

Had he won the argument with Cecilia about her staying home? Or had they both lost? Maybe she should have stayed at the house rather than toured. But he should have stayed as well.

“So, now that you are going to stay in one place for a while like normal people, what do you plan to do?” Jen asked, echoing his thoughts.

“As soon as I am out of bed Fran has an idea for me.” Cecilia looked at Victor. “Well, for both of us, really.”

Victor looked back at her and put his hands in his pockets.

“Yes, *querida*?”

“She wants me to give a few interviews, to keep people remembering who I am,” Cecilia said. “She thinks she already has a pretty impressive magazine lined up. She thought—well, she thought it would be quite a coup if maybe you took the photos, Vic.”

He kept looking at her. She grinned suddenly and batted her eyes deliberately at him. “Aww, pretty please, Vic? I kind of think it would be fun.”

“I don’t do that kind of photography,” Victor reminded her. “If I did, I also might well be breaking several contracts I made with my employers. You remember them. They are the employers who are probably none too happy with me right now.”

“Think about it? It would be great publicity. You know you take great photos of me, Vic.”

“No,” Victor said, gently. “I can’t promise.”

“You never like to promise anything.” Cecilia scowled and then brightened. “But I have faith that you will deliver anyhow. Uh—Victor. There’s something else.”

He eyed her, warily. “Yes?”

“The first interview she has for me. It isn’t exactly on me. Exactly.”

“What is it on—exactly?”

“Well, on both of us. But—on you, mostly.”

“Me?”

“Well, it is a Latino magazine and they are looking for interviews with, you know, Latino subjects.”

“Cecilia—”

Cecilia rushed the next sentence over his. “I mean, I would be in it, too, a little, but mostly as your wife.”

“What would they find interesting about me?” Victor looked honestly amazed.

“Are you kidding? You’ve been everywhere, covered all sorts of dangerous situations, and—well, you’re an attractive guy.”

“Cecilia, what kind of article is this?”

“Just a little fluff piece, really. But you would be doing me a big favor if you agreed to be their subject. But we need to decide quickly. This has a deadline.”

He opened his mouth, shut it. His wife looked at him with all the wide-eyed innocence of any practiced actress. He thought about her anxious dread for the past few weeks. He liked her attempt to maneuver him into something he hated better than her listless acquiescence. Since he was almost dead certain he couldn’t grant her request to do photographs, what could it hurt to go along with this?

“You can do the talking,” he said. “As long as it is understood that even if I am there I am not giving the interview, it is fine with me.”

“Don’t get all formal with me, Vic. You don’t have to worry about a thing. You can just prop yourself up in a corner and look handsome while I talk for you. That’s the way I like my men anyhow. They just need to look good, not say anything.”

Victor grunted. The Cecilia he knew was back. Then he grinned. He didn’t say anything.

Chapter Eight

“You know, I didn’t expect your home to be like this,” Rachel Hernandez said.

“Like what?” Cecilia asked.

“Well, it was your parents’. It looks like it must have when they were alive.” The reporter smiled and waited.

“Pretty much, yes. But this house isn’t just mine. All my sisters and brother have a share in it, too. We never got together about changing anything.” Cecilia looked at the living room with new eyes. Rachel’s eyes. “Actually Victor and I are planning to get ourselves our own home soon.”

It was her parents’ house. It wasn’t hers. She would never have that wallpaper or the antique furniture in the living room if she had picked things out for herself. Should it matter how it was decorated? She wasn’t sure she could imagine herself being at home in any other place. Was that why she was so reluctant to look for someplace else? That didn’t mean she couldn’t change it. Turn it into something she and Victor both liked.

Their home. It had been here all along and she’d been too stupid to clue in.

Rachel toyed with the photos placed on the mantel. Cecilia smiled. Everyone did that. She’d have to keep the photos just where they were, no matter what else changed.

“What are you looking for in your house?” the reporter said. “What would you like?”

“Ummm.”

Cecilia looked a little desperately at Victor, who stood silently in the background. Why had they never discussed this? What did Victor like? She had no idea. He had never had his own home—unless you counted his vacation home. She hoped his furniture there didn’t reflect his taste. They should have talked about this before. Why did they let things just drift? “I guess it would be more—contemporary? I like modern.”

Victor grunted.

“I like antiques, too, though.” Cecilia spoke a little faster. “Vic, help me out here.”

“Not my interview, babe.” He shot her a grin.

“Well, I like contemporary.” Cecilia tried again. “With a few really treasured mementos of the past. You know, enough to remind you of important things that happened previously.”

Why did I jump into this interview without thinking? I sound like an idiot. Thank God I haven’t said anything about reminding myself about my ancestors. Victor’s lack of knowledge in that area is a very sore point. Lord. What made me think I could give an interview to someone, especially with Victor standing right there?

“I guess it won’t matter how I want to decorate a place anyhow,” Cecilia rallied. “Pretty soon the place will be decorated in Early Baby. I remember all the clutter there was with Vicky.”

“That is your niece? That must be her photograph there,” Rachel said. “I’d heard a little bit about all that. Your parents dying, your sister taking charge of the family.”

Danger. Danger, danger. What should I say about Vicky? When the reporter asks about Vicky’s dad what am I supposed to do? What the hell was I thinking of by granting this interview?

“Yes, and we’re all very grateful to her,” Cecilia said. “But that was a long time ago. I’d hate to see me portrayed as Little Orphan Annie. It doesn’t fit my image.”

“This is your husband at—at his high school prom?” Rachel asked. “You must be a very understanding woman to keep that. He’s with someone else.”

Jen, of course. Jen looked so beautiful that night and I was so jealous of her. It was even worse when he went to her prom. That time he caught me crying. Poor Vic. How he hated doing that sort of thing.

Poor me. What if Rachel sees the one with all of us as a family? How do I explain that Victor has known all of us forever and had serious relationships with two-thirds of the Turner daughters? You can’t explain that very easily.

“I am understanding.” Cecilia walked away from the fireplace to the sofa. “I’m also practical. I was—hmm, eleven when Victor went to his prom? I don’t think it would’ve been a good move on his part to escort me. I’m not sure I was allowed to wear high heels then.” *All I need is for her to see him with Jen in two sets of prom pictures.* “Anyhow, take a look at some of the great shots Vic’s friend has of our wedding.”

He didn’t seem to mind getting dressed up for our wedding. Maybe he even liked it. I made it easy for him, didn’t I? It was easy for me. Everything seemed so right.

“Well, let’s talk about your work and your latest recording.” Rachel sat next to Cecilia. Victor didn’t sit. He kept moving, restlessly, in the background. This wasn’t easy for him. He was doing it for her.

“Sure.” Yeah. Talk about my career. That’s what I want to talk about.

“How did you get started?”

“I fell into it, really. It’s sort of embarrassing, since I really haven’t had to struggle with this at all. Some friends of mine in college started a group and we got some work, mostly because everyone in the group knew far too many people who owned bars and clubs. From there a friend of a friend contacted me and—I haven’t really been out of work until now,” Cecilia said. “And that is only because of the baby.”

“You plan to take up where you left off after the baby?”

“Well, I know babies can change things unexpectedly but for now—yeah, sure. Of course.” Victor paused for a moment before he continued his prowling.

What now? Did he expect her to stay home while he took off for wherever? Had she ever given him the impression she wanted that?

“So, despite ‘falling into this,’ as you put it, you feel pretty dedicated to your work.” Rachel nudged her back to the interview.

“I—well, it’s my work. I can’t think of a better way to make a living and enjoy myself at the same time. I’m very lucky.”

“You wouldn’t give it up for anything?”

Did Rachel see something wrong? She looked too interested. Too—too something.

“Uh—well, for some things, I suppose. Jen gave up a lot for us when she took us on. But it would have to be something pretty extraordinary—a life or death situation, I guess. A lot of me is defined by my work.”

“Work, not kids or husband?”

Am I that dedicated? Really? I had been making plans to create a home with Victor. But am I making those plans all alone?

Cecilia looked over at Victor. Her breath caught at his remote expression.

“Both the husband and the kids are pretty new to me. I’m sure I’m going to be including them more and more as time goes on. That’s how the whole marriage and children thing works, I suppose. But I can’t imagine doing something just because it’s expected. I’ll do it because it’s right for me.”

I have to agree with Jen there. I don’t see me trotting after Victor with a baby in my arms. Not that Victor wants me trotting after him. But we can both work and still be married. I know we can. We’d manage it all if he would just see us as a real couple and trust us to handle things together.

“And your husband is okay with that, too?”

“You ask him.”

“Victor?” Rachel turned to him.

“I’m a typical Hispanic male, right?” Victor said. “You want me to say the wife should stay home where she belongs, with the kids, right?”

“I just asked.”

“Well, it so happens I’m a typical Hispanic male married to an extraordinary non-Hispanic woman,” Victor answered. “We negotiate what we both want. Having her stay home with the kids appeals to me, but I want her to be happy. We’ll compromise.”

Cecilia let out a soft sigh of relief. Was this finally happening? Vic was thinking of them and the future. He was even thinking of what would make her happy.

“That’s something my readership would love to hear more about. I know a lot of Hispanic women who want some give and take with their relationships.” Rachel raised one eyebrow. “How are you going to compromise?”

“Well, we have a few more months to work that out.” Victor sounded calm. “All I know is that we made promises to each other that we have to keep. Everything else is open for debate with us.”

Nice talking, Victor, for a guy who doesn’t like to talk. How traditional a wife and mommy does he want? And how did he know we were in the middle of negotiating anything? I thought I was just getting him so used to the family thing with me that he wouldn’t think about the hows or whys.

Cecilia tried to be casual. “Compromise is important. My career was on hold for bit just recently. I had to stay here for a while because of some problems with the pregnancy. Just before you arrived, Rachel, I got a call from the doctor. I’ve been told that I am absolutely okay, the baby is okay, and life can go on as normal.”

Victor’s head shot up. She had been trying to figure out some way to tell him, but he had literally been answering the door for Rachel while she answered the phone.

Cecilia looked at him and smiled and, when Rachel's head turned, gave him a wink and then licked her lips.

After three very long weeks, she was certainly ready to have sex with her husband. Victor gave one crooked half-smile and his face went back to being as impassive as ever. Damn, he was good at hiding his feelings. He better be ready to fuck her hard enough to make her scream. She tried nonchalantly to check out his jeans and see if she was going to get lucky or not. Damn, his long, loose shirt hid everything.

"So you are going to begin touring again?"

"No, I'm going to take it easy until the baby is born. Then I should be ready to roll," Cecilia said. "Junior here ought to be portable for a good long while."

"I take it that Victor isn't planning to give up his work to take care of the baby, then?" Rachel asked, easily.

"I'm not quite ready for that compromise." Victor gave a short laugh. "Besides, I don't breastfeed too well. Plus my job doesn't usually allow for a baby."

The interview went smoothly enough from there. Victor finally even said a few things without prodding for his own interview.

Except that every now and then Cecilia felt a prickle of awareness and excitement as she caught Victor looking at her. He had to be ready for her. She almost lost track of the conversation once or twice but then came back to it hastily.

"So, to sum it all up, you're happy, right?" Rachel stood up. "You've beaten your disease, you just got married to the guy you love and you're having his baby?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that sums it up perfectly." Cecilia tried not to sound too grateful that the interview was ending.

"Hmmm," The reporter turned off her recorder. "Well, thanks. I may need to call you back to verify a few things, but that should wrap it up for now. I'm not sure when this is scheduled to be in print, but I'll let you know. It looks to me like I have enough to do a story on you alone, Cecilia. I'd like to try that later, if you don't mind."

"Of course not. Run it by my agent first, though. She handles that sort of thing."

Victor's hand rested on her shoulder as they waved and said good-bye graciously. He shut the door.

He propped himself against the door and looked at her, challenging her the way he had in his hotel room, back on their first weekend. "Jesus, what a lot of bull you can dish out when you need to. So we're just two crazy kids in love? When the baby comes what am I going to do? Follow after you with the suitcases and the diapers?"

The whole thing had been a lie, then? He hadn't thought out anything about their future life together. He probably hadn't thought about them really being together at all.

"I don't know," Cecilia snapped. "I certainly don't intend to follow you with the baby and the bottle."

"No breastfeeding, I take it?"

"What? Listen, we've never discussed what we plan to do with our so-called marriage after the baby is born. I for one didn't think that was what we planned to discuss the second we got some time to ourselves and were able to actually make love."

He's angry again. Damn it, I'm angry, too.

“Yeah.” His mouth came very close to hers. “You can make all these crazy statements about touring, taking off with my kid, and you figure I’m so sex-starved that I’ll accept it or anything else just so I can go ahead and do this—”

His hands pulled her skirt up and her panties down and he rocked himself against her.

“Babe, I promised myself after Jen I was never going to go without because I was never going to want only one particular woman again. I figured if I got an itch any woman would do,” he said, very softly. “Now I made some vows to you and I plan to keep them, which means I had to break that stupid promise.”

“I would hope so but—this isn’t some sweet nothing you want to tell me, is it.” Which is too bad. If you felt like declaring your love right now, I wouldn’t be angry any more.

“You know I’ve gone without you and sex for a while now. But, believe me, no matter how hard I get for you, I’m not giving you total control over the rest of my life just so I can get some.”

“You are so crude, Vic.” Cecilia tried to keep her voice from breaking when his finger flicked ever so lightly over her nipple. He’d take advantage of her weaknesses while talking about refusing to give in to his. “Do you want me to give in because I want some? I don’t plan to.”

“Too bad.” Vic braced her against him very tightly so his cock was hard against her thigh, but not quite close enough. “We need to get something straight. I thought I was clear on what I wanted from our marriage before but I don’t ever remember you agreeing with me. Now that I’ve heard your future plans, I figure you don’t intend to agree.”

What had she said? She wouldn’t have said—well, let him hear what he wanted.

“I see. You want me to stay home with the baby and be ready to have sex whenever you show up? What else could you want from me? You don’t love me. You married me because I wanted your baby. I don’t think that makes much of a traditional love match.” Cecilia tilted her chin up, ready for battle.

“I want us to be partners and, even if we sometimes—and I mean sometimes—have to be apart from each other, we have some idea when we are going to be back together.” Victor unbuttoned her shirt.

Her nipples were too sensitive already. She was desperate for him to unhook the bra that he was stubbornly leaving on while his tongue flickered briefly around her breasts. Just a light flicker, then he would stop. She didn’t want to beg, but she could see it happening in a few more seconds.

Where did he get the idea of sex while arguing? Or was this negotiation?

“You’re the one with the job that takes you all over with no notice, hot shot.” Cecilia tried to keep her mind on the conversation. “For your information, I was planning to tour less. Work a schedule out with you.”

Not that you deserve to know that, you—you tease. You’d keep doing this all night until I give in.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Victor’s smile came out broad and confident.

He placed his mouth directly on one nipple as he pushed his still-clothed cock against her, all at the same time. He bit down. She thought she was going to combust right then from the painful pleasure. She screamed, but she wasn't sure if it was from lust or fury. He wouldn't talk about what he wanted but he was making her give in, making her—

Victor lifted her against the wall and she squirmed to get even closer. She was still mad at him. She was. But just then he moved his fingers against her clit, then up further inside. His fingers were gentle but his mouth wasn't.

"Damn, you've got the touch," she managed to pant out. Could he always do this to her, no matter how angry she was? It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair, it—

"Only because I feel you, *querida*." He shoved up, harder, higher.

Too right. Too wrong. Too late.

She went under almost immediately.

* * * * *

"So." Cecilia gasped, still holding onto him with her whole body pounding. "Did you win or did I?"

"If we both feel good, we both won." Victor kissed her shoulder. "Now me, I feel very, very, very good." As he gave her a kiss for each "very," Cecilia smiled, her teeth bared.

"You know, you are one hell of a negotiator. I get all the fun and you say you're satisfied. I do think I have a few—additional negotiations—about ready to go, though."

"I'm always willing to work out a compromise."

"Are you?" She pulled herself away. "I don't think so."

"What do you mean?" Victor's grin faded.

"You used me. You used sex on me."

"That's a crime? I didn't see you resisting." Victor ran a finger down her cheek. "You're kidding, right? You use sex on me all time."

"That's not the same." Cecilia clenched her fingers tight into her palms. It wasn't the same for him. All he cared about was the sex. She cared about him. She cared about their future. "I have news. Neither of us will be using sex on each other."

"Huh?"

"Until you feel like talking to me instead of teasing me or ignoring me or ordering me around, we aren't having sex."

"*What?* You love having sex with me!"

Being nice didn't work. Being pregnant didn't work. Working her butt off to make him happy wasn't working either. Victor didn't think of her as a partner any more than he had when he first dragged her to a hotel room.

"So what? I like sex. But I'd rather use a vibrator than you right now."

"What did I do wrong? You were screaming and panting for me just a few minutes go." Victor's scowl was almost scary. "You can't deny I make you damn happy I'm around."

“I can turn a vibrator off when I’m done with it. It doesn’t think it owns me because it can make me come.” Cecilia scowled back.

“What the hell do you mean by that?” He grabbed her wrist, then dropped it. “I’m your husband, not your toy.”

“Then act like one! Talk to me sometimes! Tell me what you’re thinking, what you want. I’m tired of using sex as a substitute for all the other emotions we have inside us.” Cecilia paused.

Come on, Vic. Talk to me. Here’s your chance.

“What the hell else do I have to give you except sex?” Victor looked at her. “And a baby. That’s what you want from me, isn’t it?”

All this time. She’d worked so hard all this time for *this?*

“If that’s what you think—then—then—try doing without me and sex for a while. Until you figure out what I do want from you.”

Chapter Nine

The phone call woke Cecilia out of a deep sleep. She sat up, dazed. She heard Victor murmuring softly on the telephone.

He was home again. She wasn't sure if she was glad or sorry. He'd taken off for a job in Spain right after her ultimatum. When he came back she'd hoped—

Well, whatever she'd hoped for hadn't happened. He certainly wasn't talking to her. He was sleeping with her. Just sleeping.

She heard him give a peculiar yelp. Cecilia sat up in bed.

"What is it?" she hissed.

Victor looked at her with a peculiar expression on his face—a strange mix of pride, amusement and embarrassment.

"Umm. It's Fran." Victor cleared his throat. "I—umm—think maybe you should hear this from her."

Cecilia stared at her husband. She could almost swear a dull red was fading from his cheeks. She picked up the telephone.

"Hello, Fran?"

She listened, then gave a yelp somewhat similar to her husband's. She turned back to Victor and saw the red sweep quickly over his face again.

Cecilia began to laugh.

"Well, I've always thought so," she got out through the laughter. "I'm glad my taste has been confirmed by the rest of the country."

"Cecilia—" Victor warned.

"We'll have to run out and get a copy. Several copies," she said. "Thanks for telling me, Fran. Free publicity is a good thing."

She hung up the telephone to look at her husband, still chuckling.

"One of the 'Top Fifty Sexiest Hispanic Males,' huh?" She looked him up and down. "You didn't tell me you were in the running. I should have known, though."

"For God's sake, you don't think I would have agreed if I had known what the article was really about!" Victor protested. "Thank God it is just some regional magazine, not something like—like *People*."

"Or a tabloid. I'll bet you get in there next," Cecilia replied. "Maybe I should send them my favorite photo of you. If I did, I bet you would easily make it to the list of 'Top Ten Sexiest Males in the World.' 'In the World Ever.'"

"Please." Victor held up his hand as if asking her to stop.

"This is stupid of me," Cecilia said. "I thought I had kept track of your career, but I missed hearing about you being a possibility for a Pulitzer Prize. Why didn't you say something? Hey, and Fran said one of the photos they ran in the magazine was the one they ran when you were shot down in Colombia years ago. That was a really great photo. Even though you looked battered, you were really, really gorgeous."

“Cecilia! The joke is over. I hope.”

“At least they mentioned me.” Cecilia patted him on the cheek. “I’d hate to have all these women thinking you are unattached. You know, Victor, here I have to go out and hustle to get a magazine article written about me and you just have it fall in your lap.”

“Some folks have all the luck.” He shook his head.

“Well, I certainly don’t. While articles are being written about you, I have to stay home and do nothing. I suppose the Pulitzer—or is it because you are so sexy?—was what got you the leeway to be able to stay here and still work locally for these past few months.”

“Ce—cil—ia.” Victor ground out. “Enough.”

The telephone rang steadily for the next few hours. There were endless calls from reporters. Some were friends of Victor’s who wanted to laugh and others were trying to find out more for their newspapers. Victor refused to answer the telephone. He did, however, deign to read the article once she ran out to get it. She wasn’t sure she was grateful or annoyed that they hadn’t quoted her at all. Considering how foolish some of her responses were, she decided in favor of being grateful. Victor read the article and growled.

By that evening, Cecilia was becoming adept at half-answering the questions she’d received all day about her husband. Victor had become even better at avoiding the telephone.

“Hello? Cecilia Turner Ruiz.”

“Instone here.”

“Yes?”

“You don’t know me but I’ve worked with your brother-in-law. I’m head of Instone Investigations. May I speak to your husband, Mrs. Ruiz?”

“You’re a private investigator?”

“Yes, ma’am. Is Mr. Ruiz there?”

“Yes, he is,” Cecilia said, sobered.

Victor’s face become impassive as he listened to the one-sided telephone conversation. When Victor’s breath sucked in, she moved closer. Absently, his hand went to her shoulder and gripped.

“I see,” Victor spoke at last. “What is it that he wants me to do?”

As the conversation continued, Victor’s face looked more and more stony.

“I will speak to my wife.” He spaced his words out slowly. “I have your telephone number. I will return the call soon.”

He hung up, very carefully, and she could almost hear the cursing Victor was refusing to utter aloud.

“Yes, Vic?” she asked. “What ‘s the trouble? It is trouble, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps,” he replied, in his most formal tones. “My—there is someone—” He stopped and began again. “A man who claims to be my father wishes to speak to me. I suppose I should have expected people to come and make such claims. They must think I have too much money or no brains.”

“Did he discover you because of the magazine article?”

“That damned article has a lot to answer for. The investigator said he knew who I was but—the story apparently led this investigator to where I was immediately. He had never made the connection before.”

“The investigator mentioned that Jack has used him,” Cecilia told him, carefully. “He probably is a reputable businessman. You know that Jack doesn’t make mistakes about business.”

“I’ll talk to Jack about it, never fear.” Victor ran his hands through his hair. “I’m not going to just blindly accept all of this without checking.”

“Vic, you talk about this man as if he isn’t your father. But, darling—what if it is true?”

He looked at her, his face still unreadable but his dark eyes glittering.

“What if it is?” he shrugged. “After thirty-one years, would it make any difference?”

“It might. You have to find out.”

“I have to do nothing. I am not leaving here while you are having so many problems.” Victor looked stubborn. “It can wait.”

“Maybe I could travel. We could both go. I could check with the doctor—”

“It can wait.”

“Could he come out to visit us instead?” Cecilia pondered.

“It can wait. I said I would call back. I suppose—maybe he could come out. If you don’t mind having someone you don’t know here.”

“He looked for you.” Cecilia touched his shoulder, tentatively. Victor didn’t respond. “It must’ve been difficult, since your mother moved you so many times. He must have really been persistent. He certainly spent some money if he used an investigator that Jack uses. Victor, don’t you understand? He must have wanted to find you.”

Victor dropped his eyes and stared at his hands.

Those early years had damn near killed him. He remembered the stinking hallways and the disgusting rooms, the nights his mother had come home with booze and later with drugs and not much later than that, with men. Some of those men had terrified him.

He remembered his mother screaming at him, screaming at some of the men who had come and gone in the night. He remembered her hitting him, others hitting him. He remembered things that weren’t blows, but hurt just as much. Things that had made him cower like a scared little animal in corners and closets, trying to get away.

He thought about the offers that had been made to him when he was too little to even understand them. Some had just been illegal. Some still turned his stomach. He wasn’t going to tell his wife or anybody how many of those offers he had been tempted to take—or had actually taken. Or what happened and how bad it was no matter what you chose.

Things were better after his mother ran away. The people in the foster homes hadn’t cared about him, but he had never expected them to care the way he had wanted,

dimly, for his mother to care. For his father to care. He had given up any expectations of that once he accepted what his mother had done. By then foster care suited him well enough.

He had spent most of his life trying to both outrun and make up for those years. Sometimes he came close, but he knew that he never would be able to. He could gloss over it and forget some of it and make himself smarter or stronger, but it was always there in the background.

“Do you know what it would have meant to me to just once, just once, have a father who could have been there for me?” he said, at last. “How it would have changed things for me?”

“No, I don’t,” Cecilia answered, softly. “Not really.”

“Me, either.”

She was silent, struggling for something to say. What could she say?

“Vic, it wasn’t his fault. Whatever happened. However bad it was.”

“My mother left me. Before she did, I wanted her to leave. That’s how bad it was.”

There was another long silence.

“Daniel. His name is Daniel.” He spoke the words softly and reluctantly. “Like your father. I always liked that name.”

* * * * *

“So?” Cecilia asked as Victor stared at the investigative report.

“So?”

He had checked the investigator’s credentials with Jack, who gave the man glowing references. Victor called the investigator. Daniel Aguilar owned a ranch in New Mexico. He wasn’t wealthy, but he didn’t need money, either.

She had done her best to not nag, to just wait him out and Victor had gradually allowed himself to do what they had both wanted him to do. He just did it excruciatingly slowly.

“Now? Will you call him now? Can we invite him here?”

Victor looked down at the papers again. “You can call if you want.”

Cecilia began to push the buttons before he’d finished the sentence. She had to say everything. But at least Victor was listening as she made plans with someone neither of them knew.

“Don’t worry about looking for me at the airport,” he told them over the speaker phone. “I’ve seen both your pictures now. I’ll know you.”

“The fact that I’m five months pregnant might also give you a clue.”

Victor merely grunted.

When they hung up, Cecilia said, tentatively, “He has a nice voice. It sounds almost like yours—his accent is just a little heavier and he speaks very carefully because of it. He sounds like you when you’re angry and searching for just the right word.”

Victor opened his mouth, shut it again. She knew he didn’t want to prove her right when he spoke. Oh, he was angry all right.

* * * * *

Daniel Aguilar had said he would find them, but Cecilia knew him the moment he stepped into view. She knew Victor knew him, too, because she heard his breath hiss out.

Daniel was just a little shorter than his tall son, just a little stockier, but in almost everything else, he looked just like Victor. Cecilia walked toward him, his eyes making her smile. They had the color and shape of his son's, but they were less intense and more patient. They were very kind eyes.

"I'm Cecilia," she said, simply, as his arm reached out to swing her into an embrace.

They were strong arms, too. Cecilia wondered what he did on his ranch in New Mexico. Whatever he worked at, he did something physical regularly.

"I'm very glad to meet you," Daniel smiled at her. Then he looked at Victor over her shoulder. His stillness matched his son's. "*Dios.*"

"How do you do?" Victor's hand came out and the handshake was quick, ending a half second later.

Victor's eyes weren't kind and they measured the man before him carefully. Daniel seemed stunned for a moment, then he reached to pick up the small duffel bag he had dropped to greet Cecilia.

"Thank you for having me." Daniel's words were polite, his eyes still faintly amazed as he looked over at Victor. "I know this was a surprise for you both."

"A...surprise." Victor seemed to think over the term. "Yes, it was quite a surprise to me. I had given up on hearing from you about twenty-five years ago. It would have made a big difference to me then."

"I know," Daniel said, as they walked toward the airport parking lot. "Had I known then, I would have been there."

"It seems like something a man should know." Victor's voice was absolutely neutral.

Cecilia looked at him. He was being unjust. How much had he known about Victoria for the first year of her life? But she held her tongue. This was a time for Victor's feelings, not for arguing.

"Do we need to go get more luggage?" Cecilia asked, hastily.

"That is true. It is something a man should know," Daniel responded. "No, I have no other luggage, Cecilia, thank you for asking."

They were all silent a moment.

"Victor, how well did you know your mother?" Daniel Aguilar asked.

Victor laughed once, harshly.

"Too well and not at all," he answered.

"Then you know enough to realize that she told no more than she wanted to anyone," Daniel said. "If she had told me or told your grandfather—her father—that she was carrying my child, she would have been tracked down right away from wherever she ran to. But she left after a fight with Alejandro—your grandfather, Alejandro Ruiz—when she was sixteen. He told her not to come back. She did not. He refused to ask for her. He never asked, even though he knew I was looking for you."

“How did you find out about Victor?” Cecilia asked as they got into the Jeep. Come on Victor. Talk to the man. I can tell you want to know.

“I got a letter from Susanna about three years ago. She wanted money and she mentioned her son.” Daniel climbed in. “I don’t think she expected me to show up at her doorstep or at least not to show up so quickly. You weren’t there.”

“I had been booted out of her life years before that,” Victor said.

“Yes. She was desperate then and needed money.”

“Did she get any from you?” Victor asked.

“I got her to the hospital and paid the bills there,” Daniel replied. “I took her body back the ranch when she died.”

Victor gunned the engine viciously as he started it.

“Am I to be sorry she is dead?”

Cecilia was sorry. Sorry for Victor. He didn’t want to mourn his mother’s death? Cecilia knew how much she’d cried over hers.

“*Dios*, you sound like your grandfather there. He left the ranch to me when he died, said he had no daughter.” Daniel shook his head. “You needn’t try to feel anything you cannot feel, Victor. Susanna led a hard life and one that was not for a child. When she told me about you she said she had first thought you were another man’s. She had named you for him. I knew Victor Ramirez, of course. We had fought over your mother a time or two. I had a bad temper when I was a teenager and worse judgment. But she swore that as you grew up, she knew she had been wrong. She realized I was your father.”

“There are blood tests we could take if you wish.” Victor’s tone was indifferent.

Cecilia gripped the car seat hard to keep from jumping in.

No Victor. Don’t try to distance yourself from him. You need to know how much you care for others. How much they can care for you, if you let them.

“I don’t need them. I can look at you and I know,” Daniel said. “I knew before that, when she told me you existed. I could feel it in my own blood. That is proof enough for me.”

No one said anything.

“You two look almost identical.” Cecilia broke the silence. “And you know it, Victor.”

The two faces looked at each other, their profiles eerily alike.

“You are my son,” Daniel Aguilar told him. “I never married, never had any other children. I needed to find you, Victor Ruiz.”

“Why?”

“At first, for myself.” Daniel’s tone was thoughtful as he answered. “I had wanted a child. As I grew older I gradually gave up that wish. Susanna reappeared and gave that hope back to me. When Susanna died, I wanted to find you for her sake. She had lived so—so sad a life and I wanted to find something that would redeem it. But then I imagined what you must have lived through with Susanna and I wanted to find you for your sake. The search seemed hopeless when I tried on my own. When I finally decided to spend the money on a high-powered investigator, it all became much simpler.”

“You never married?” Cecilia questioned.

“No. How could I? Susanna was as selfish as she was desirable. She seduced me when I was younger even than she was. She spoiled me for anyone else.” Daniel’s half smile looked just like his son’s when Victor was masking his feelings. “Before she made her choices she was—was the most wild, most exciting female in the world to me. I loved her. I could never really stop. Not even when I most wanted to.”

The Jeep stopped at the old house. Cecilia was helped down by her father-in-law. She looked at him. He was still a young man. If Susanna Ruiz had been sixteen when she had Victor and Daniel was even younger... Cecilia calculated and whistled to herself. She had a very young father-in-law. He was a grandfather—would be one twice over soon—when many men she knew were just starting to become fathers.

“Father!” Vicky appeared at the front door of the house next door to call out. “Is he here?”

“Yes, child. Come meet your grandfather.” Victor’s voice still held that distressing note of neutral indifference.

Vicky barreled over the grass and Daniel Aguilar dropped to one knee to grab her. Instead she skidded to a halt next to him. She evaded his grasp and ran to hide behind Cecilia, and then peeked out shyly.

Daniel’s breath hissed through his teeth just the way Victor’s had at the airport.

“You have the look of Susanna, a little, granddaughter.” He smiled at her. “That was your grandmother.”

“She has none of her looks.” Victor’s voice lost its indifference and became hostile. “She has nothing of Susanna in her.”

Dear Lord, what had his mother done to him?

Daniel looked at his son and spoke, just as evenly and carefully as his son might. “You may not have loved her. That is understandable. But there is no shame in looking like a lovely young woman. Your little girl will be a beauty if she has half her grandmother’s looks. And, *niña*, you are a very lovely young lady.”

“My daddy and my father both say so,” Victoria told Daniel, solemnly.

Daniel’s eyebrows drew together as he looked at Cecilia. The explanation she had avoided with a reporter came more easily to Cecilia now. Daniel wouldn’t be judgmental.

“Vicky is my niece and my stepdaughter,” Cecilia explained. “That’s why I love her doubly. If you want to know more—well, we have time to tell you when you get in the house.”

“I think this is something I would like to hear,” Daniel said, as Victor opened the door.

The house was in upheaval, even though Cecilia had done her best to tidy it before Daniel’s arrival. After her interview where she had chattered about what type of home she wanted to live in, she had taken a good look at where she did live. Cecilia had informed her siblings it was time for new paint and some redecorating in the old house. For now the living room remained as it always did, relatively unchanged and in order, and she took him in there. By now, well over her shyness, Vicky was chattering away.

“Daddy ‘dopted me a long time ago when he married Mommy,” Vicky confided. “But then Father came and later on he married Aunt Cee Cee. I like it now ‘cause I can see all of them whenever I want. Father was gone a lot before. So was Aunt Cee Cee. I missed them. And Mommy is going to have a baby and Aunt Cee Cee is going to have a baby and I get to be the big sister.”

Daniel looked at Cecilia again.

“That pretty much sums it up,” Cecilia agreed. “My older sister, Jen, was engaged to Victor several years ago. If you had any reports from the detective you hired, you already know that. And you know that Victor was shot down in Colombia and left for dead. It was a very difficult time.”

“I knew some of this but—I did not realize how much of it Vicky knew and accepted and I did not know that all of you are still so close,” Daniel said. “It is remarkable.”

“I don’t know about that.” Cecilia dismissed the remarkableness of it as she briskly went on. “Perhaps. We were always a close family and both Jack and Vic were always a part of that family. Personally, I think I am the luckiest of the group, since I got to keep Victor.”

She touched her husband lightly and felt his body jerk, almost as if she had hit him. She made a decision. She couldn’t help, no matter how much she wanted to, no matter how much she hurt for both of them. This was up to Victor. Victor and Daniel.

“I think it’s time for you and Victor to come to terms.” She brushed her lips against her husband’s mouth and then against her father-in-law’s cheek. “Let me know when I can come back. I believe I’ll be in the kitchen, cooking up something. Come on, Vicky, sweetie. I bet I have a cookie for you out in the kitchen.”

“With choc’lit?”

“Most definitely.”

As his wife led Vicky out of the room, Victor swung his body to stare blindly out the window. His father stood.

“What can I tell you, Victor? What will ease you?”

“I don’t think words would help.”

“Perhaps not.”

Victor moved to the mantel and played with the photographs, as everyone seemed to at some time. He stared at the one where he and Jack had been included with the rest of the Turner family long ago. He looked at his body in the photo, half turned away from the others. But half was turned toward them.

“Cecilia said I was part of her family.” He stared intently at the photographs and away from the other man. “Perhaps. I loved her parents. I wished they were my parents—or I would have if I hadn’t realized Jen would then be my sister. They saved my sanity and probably my life. I had no one to trust until them.”

“I would give my life to have been there for you then.” His father spoke very quietly. “But I am here now. It could be enough, if you wish it.”

“I may not have grown up with you, but my children could. I want them to know family.”

“What do you wish for yourself?”

“I’m thirty-one years old. It is a little late to have a father.” *A little late to think I could belong.*

“But you wish for one?”

Victor turned to look at his father and swallowed hard. His father had a kind face. He said words someone would want to believe. But Vic couldn’t. Not yet. Not entirely.

But Daniel Aguilar was waiting. Waiting for him to say something.

“Yes. Yes, I do wish it.” The words forced themselves out.

“Hijo.”

“I can’t call you ‘father’. Not now.”

“We have time.”

* * * * *

Cecilia ran up and down the scales and her father-in-law accompanied her on the guitar. When he broke into an improvisation, she did, too. They grinned at each other.

“It ‘s a pity I’m married to your son and am pregnant as well.” She smiled. “I’d run away with you in a minute.”

“If I were just a little younger, I’d agree to go with you, Cecilia,” he said, easily.

“More flirtations?” Victor strode in the kitchen and stopped to nip at Cecilia’s neck. “I can’t ever leave you alone.”

“Why else d’you think I flirt?” Cecilia gave him a teasing glance. “I don’t want you to leave me alone. Vic, your father is a brilliant musician. I think I may hire him to accompany me.”

“I confess I had never heard your recordings until I realized who you were,” Daniel said. “Once I bought some, I realized you were an amazing singer. It was just another little bonus to finding my son.”

“I’ll get you some free copies,” Cecilia answered. “Not that I don’t appreciate you helping to support me. Even better, I adore practicing while you accompany me. I think these voice lessons are really helping. Thank heaven I found something useful to do with my spare time.”

“Along with the supervision of the painters and floor polishers and making sure you force everyone in the house to move furniture.” Victor laughed and swung her onto his lap. “You have too much energy.”

“Since not so long ago I was dragging around, unable to do a thing, you ought to be happy.” Cecilia settled herself against his thighs.

“I am.” He sounded almost afraid to say the words.

Cecilia turned her face at his stare. She had been surprisingly pleased with the way the last few weeks had gone. Victor had his work, but he came back almost every evening and when he couldn’t, he called while he was gone. He was never gone for more than a day or two.

She’d kept busy at home. She had played with redoing the house as cheaply as she could, experimented with new dishes she had always meant to try cooking and had no

time to do before. She'd taken up voice lessons again. It had been quiet and domestic and—and married.

If she'd ever thought too much about it, it all seemed pretty close to what she would have pictured her ideal marriage to be. Victor and she could have lives which flowed together, diverted away from each other for a time, then returned to merge again, almost like two streams that finally grew into a river.

Except for the sex. Or no sex. It was fortunate Daniel was around, or she wasn't sure if the two of them alone could keep their hands off each other. If Victor would just give in and admit this was important, that he loved her and everything that came with her—

“I will be leaving tomorrow,” Daniel said. “I have work to do at home.”

Cecilia smiled, trying to hide her slight dismay. Daniel had been a part of keeping her happy in her new life.

“What work do you do?” Cecilia asked. “You know a lot about us, but we know very little about you.”

“I work on what used to be Victor's grandfather's ranch.” Daniel hesitated and then admitted, “I also sell my sculptures.”

“You're an artist, too?” she was entranced.

“I am not famous,” Daniel said. “I could never support myself with that work. But, yes, I like to think of myself as an artist.”

“Can I see something of yours?” she asked.

“I did not bring anything, child.” Daniel was regretful. “You will come out to visit when the baby is born and I will have something for you then.”

“Yes, of course.” Cecilia had no hesitation at all. They'd all be out to see Daniel, even if she had to hold Vic at gunpoint. But she had a feeling that wouldn't be necessary. Victor might not want to admit it, but he was starting to get used to having a father. “I'm getting big enough for us all to know that won't be much longer. Just three more months left.”

Daniel smiled and said softly, “*Con su permiso*, Cecilia—”

She followed where his gaze traveled. “Of course you may.”

She sat quietly as Daniel touched her stomach. As if in response, the baby moved beneath his hands. Victor's hands gripped her tightly. He'd made that same gesture often enough. She'd never imagined men to be so interested—to touch so tenderly.

Daniel smiled.

“I look forward to seeing everyone.”

* * * * *

“I'm going crazy.” Cecilia glared at Victor.

He got that wary, patient look on his face that drove her crazier. He'd been giving her that look far too often in the past weeks.

“I know, *querida*. Just a little longer.”

“Why are you being so nice?” She wanted sex, damn it. A good head-banging bout of sex would help relieve the antsy, anxious, half-elated, half-fearful emotions she had

boiling up in her lately. She was sure it would help. Of course that's what she always thought. He did, too. They had to learn to do more than just fuck each other mindless as a solution to everything.

Even if it was a good solution. You couldn't worry about the future if you were stupefied from sex. You couldn't wonder if your husband wanted you if he was buried inside you, moaning with need.

Things had been unbalanced since Daniel left. It was as if neither of them knew what to do with the sudden intimacy they had created now that Daniel was no longer there to buffer them. What to do without sex.

"This sucks." She glared over at him. "Don't take that as an invitation. I'm not touching you."

Victor crossed over to her, slid his hand down her shoulders. "Too bad. I like you touching me. You know that."

He was being so gentle. So considerate. Even though they weren't having sex. He must really want the baby too. Even if he was saddled with a shrew wife. A sexless shrew wife.

When his hand slid down her swollen stomach, then cupped her pussy, she almost cried with relief and need.

"D-don't, Vic."

"It's all right, Cecilia." He kissed her neck. "You said no sex. You didn't say I couldn't touch."

It felt better than all right. But she'd told him...what had she told him?

"I talked to Daniel—my father—today," he whispered, his hand beginning to move against her. "I think he's as excited about the baby as we are."

"I know." She began to move against him, her thighs clenching against his hand, trapping it.

Did Victor think that by talking to her, she'd forget what he was doing? As if she could. As if she couldn't notice his fingers opening her up, stroking her clitoris.

"As soon as we can, I want to take us to his ranch. He said it was our home." Victor's breath was coming a little faster. So was hers. "Do you know what that means to me?"

"I think so." Oh this sex was such a good—such a bad—idea. Victor was actually talking to her and she was starting to lose consciousness. "Oh, Vic, a little more. There."

He was talking. He had been close and affectionate all this time. Like a lover. He knew her body like a lover, too. He knew just how much pressure, just where to apply it.

"Things were so bad with my mother. I told you a little. To have a father like Daniel is—is amazing. Ah, Cecilia, you're amazing. So wet."

He had told her. He had talked to her. She ought to say something, she ought to—How could she talk right now?

"Ahh." It had been too long. Vic was too good.

He bent and sucked her nipple and it was over. Cecilia moaned in defeat and ecstasy.

When she finished shivering, she blinked against a rush of tears. “I know you think I’m being unreasonable.”

“Just a little.”

“Don’t agree with me!”

“Absolutely not.” Victor’s voice had the slightest tremor of a laugh, but otherwise he was doing pretty well with his soothing tone. “I wouldn’t think of agreeing with you.”

He was doing his best. He was there for her, he’d talked to her. He’d even given her the perfect hand job after she’d bitched at him. Oh, damn. He probably still hadn’t figured out why she had said no sex but he was still being incredibly sweet. He was hard and aching because he hadn’t done anything more than get her off, but he was smiling at her, as if he just enjoyed watching her. As if he wasn’t horny. As if her satisfaction was all he needed to make him happy.

Ultimatum or not, Vic deserved something.

“That does it.” Cecilia tapped her foot. “Take off your clothes. Now.”

“Cecilia, your brother is due in from work in a half hour!” Victor put his hand to his belt anyhow. She watched him shove the buckle back.

She’d been right. He was as desperate as she had been.

“This can be quick.” Cecilia pushed him and he fell back easily against the bed.

“Be gentle.” Victor’s voice trembled, definitely trembled, with laughter this time. “If you must take out your aggression, remember to leave me with a cock and balls at the end.”

“I wouldn’t dream of taking away either,” Cecilia purred. “Just like I’m not going to touch you.”

“Eh?” Victor looked definitely intrigued.

“My vibrator.” Cecilia pulled it from her toy drawer in the nightstand and switched it on.

“Um—I’ve never—” Victor let her pull his pants off anyhow. He might not have ever, but his cock looked very interested.

Damn. She wanted that cock. She’d take the vibrator, but his cock was absolutely delicious.

“Well, soon you will.” Cecilia narrowed her eyes. “What should I try first?”

He bucked at her first, experimental touch of the vibrator against his hip. Cecilia bit her lip.

That shaft was so seductive, standing hard and straight—that cock head so tempting, swelling and reddening as she lightly ran her vibrator against his penis... His balls were already tightening, drawing up.

“Quickly.” Victor sounded strangled. “I don’t think—I can stand too much more.”

“You’re standing just fine, Vic.” Cecilia hummed as sweetly as the toy in her hand. “Let’s try...this.”

She hadn't touched him. She'd said she wouldn't. She probably meant it as payback for when he'd refused to do anything but torment her. Or for whatever mysterious reason she'd picked on to torment him all these weeks. But not touching was working. Watching her stare at him, looking as if she was going to come just from watching him, was getting him insane.

Cecilia almost didn't need that toy of hers, though the feel of it was...amazing. Watching her use it was even more of a turn-on.

He was going to come at her next touch if she kept teasing him. He didn't care. Whatever she wanted. However she wanted him. As long as she kept on wanting him.

If she just missed him for sex, he could stand that. If she depended on him because he was her baby's father...that was good, too. Just as long as she was around. She'd been far away lately, more comfortable with his father than with him. As if she didn't know what to do with her husband when they were alone. She hadn't said she loved him in a long time. Maybe she'd already changed her mind.

But she was paying attention to him now. Up close and personal. He wanted to keep it that way.

He caught his lower lip between his teeth, fighting to keep from crying out. Fighting to keep her attention on him.

She smiled sweetly at him. He knew that meant trouble, tried to brace himself.

Then she placed the vibrator just lightly against his perineum, let it hum right at the root of his penis.

Victor stiffened. He was already starting to shatter. Desperately he fought back. He wanted this to last a little longer.

"*Dios!*" he howled. "Cecilia, I'm going to come!"

"That's the idea—" Her words teased but her voice was husky, aroused.

Cecilia. He stared at her, all mussed and round and beautiful. Cecilia. It wasn't just sex he wanted. He wanted his wife again. *Dios*, how he loved her.

"Touch me. Touch me instead of using that—" He raised his hips. "I need you."

He *loved* her?

Her fingers wrapped around his cock head, holding him, squeezing his cock. Love. Her. Yes.

Cecilia.

He spurted hard. She couldn't help herself, she touched his come. His eyes shut and he groaned again, as if he were injured. But he kept coming, long, intense waves of his seed. Cecilia licked her lips.

Vic had been right. She needed to touch him. As much as he'd needed her.

When he stopped trembling, she slid against him, holding him, rocking him a little.

"F-fifteen minutes. Maybe. That's all it took." He muttered.

"Maybe. You like my vibrator?"

"Some." He rubbed his face against her. "I like you better."

"Mmmm." Cecilia rubbed her face against his skin, just the way he had against her. He smelled like sweaty male. Sweaty, sated male.

He kissed her, long and hot, until she squirmed. “You’re tempting me. Trying to make me do what you want.”

“But you aren’t going to do what I want.” Cecilia tried to scoff.

“Hell, I didn’t start this! I don’t know what you want. I’m trying to help. We’re in this together, Cecilia.”

“Not quite. You aren’t giving birth.” You aren’t terrified that your husband will see you as nothing more than the mother of a child. What would happen in the next few weeks? What if her plan didn’t work after all? What if Victor just had nothing to say to her?

God, she wished she could give in and have some more sex. No. She wished she could have sex with her husband. Victor. She wanted him more and more all the time and she’d wanted him plenty before they got married.

“I’m going to be with you, though. Every minute.” He stroked her hair.

Cecilia sighed. The reassurance was almost better than sex. She couldn’t give in, let everything be the way it had been where they used sex to substitute for everything. She didn’t want him to leave. Not in any way. Not physically, not emotionally. She wanted him right there while she jumped into the unknown.

Please. Please, let that be so.

“Cecilia? Maybe you won’t care about what I have to say.” Victor’s voice suddenly got very serious, with that slightly uncertain note that tore at her heart. “But you need to know something.”

What? The pain she braced herself against was almost physical.

She gulped hard for air. The pain was physical. She wrapped her arms around her stomach.

“Cecilia?”

Chapter Ten

At that moment the telephone rang. Victor grabbed for the receiver and almost dropped it.

“Hello? Jen? Yes. Yes. We’ll be there.”

“What...is it?” Cecilia gulped.

“It looks like we need to run next door,” Victor said. “Jack isn’t home. He had some important deposition or something to take and was due back early this evening. The plane is delayed and now Jen is in labor. Just remember that when you’re mad at me for not being home because of my work. Who is here right now, huh?”

Cecilia began to laugh and pant at the same time. “Good. The hospital sounds really good right now.”

“*What?* Are you having contractions?”

“I think so. This really is turning into a race.” She got out the words before the pain hit again.

“But it’s too soon!” Victor went white. “I hurt him.”

“It’s not that soon—” she managed to say. She even managed not to add *I hope*.

Victor shoved his shoes on and then his shirt, leaving it unbuttoned as he helped his wife out of the door and down the stairs.

Jen stood at their front door, bent over almost double.

“Mrs. Beale came over,” Jen grunted. “She’ll watch Vicky.”

“I don’t believe this.” Victor grabbed two suitcases and shoved them into the back of the Jeep. With one quick swing he had Jen into the back and with another, he had Cecilia in the front. Both of them were panting in regulation birthing class style. “I suppose the hospital will figure I’m into polygamy.”

“I don’t think that most wives give birth at the same time even with polygamous marriages,” Cecilia panted.

“Hey, Victor, you missed the first go round with me and Jack stood in,” Jen said, with a half laugh that hissed out in pain. “Think of this as your turn.”

“Try his cell phone number again.” Victor started the motor.

Cecilia’s hand reached out for his leg and clenched it hard. He almost shot through the roof. He knew how careful Cecilia was of that leg and he knew how out of it she must feel to handle it so roughly. He decided not to mention any pain he was feeling just right now. He suspected her sympathy might be a little low. Very carefully, he inched his leg away.

He had never been quite so grateful to get to his destination as when he pulled into the entrance of the hospital. Victor got to the hospital lobby and flagged down some folks at the desk to help. As the two women were wheeled away, he ran to park the car as quickly as he could. As he got back to the doors of the lobby he saw the figure of a red-haired man running full tilt from the other direction. Victor threw up his hand.

“Yo! Logan!”

“How is she? Where is she—?” Jack panted. “Of all the damn times to have a flight delay—”

“She’s filling out forms and stuff next to Cecilia, I think. They’re puffing like racehorses and holding each other up.” Victor felt like panting himself from his trip. “That’s how I left ‘em anyhow. Jesus, Jack, they’re both in labor. How is a man supposed to cope with two women in labor?”

Jack grinned and began walking quickly to the door.

“Very, very carefully,” he responded. “I’ll wish you luck if you wish me the same. Women get really mean in this condition. I remember Jen from last time—”

He stopped and looked at Victor.

“Sorry.”

“Hell, I’m the one who is sorry I wasn’t there then,” Victor said. “And I’m really sorry you’re the one who got all the brownie points for that.”

“I deserved them,” Jack told him. “Like I said, women get mean.”

“Just be grateful you got here in time.” Victor followed him. “I couldn’t see me trying to be labor coach for both of them at the same time. There are things no man should have to do.”

* * * * *

Nothing had gone the way she thought. Cecilia remembered cursing and crying at Victor. That was the civilized part. There had been pain and sweat and strange hands grabbing intimate parts of her body.

There had been terror, waiting to hear if the baby had come too soon. Thank God he was all right.

But now she was sweaty and exhausted and terrified, clutching a tiny little human who had no idea what to do for himself. A little stranger who was supposed to be hers.

Victor had watched while the nurse coached her in how to breastfeed. Who would have thought it took coaching?

Cecilia wiped tears and sweat from her eyes. The plan had been that right now she’d lie back, Madonna-like in the crisp nightgown she’d brought for herself, holding her baby while Victor worshipped at her feet.

Instead she hurt all over. She needed a bath, she needed sleep. But the baby was crying and confused, whimpering a little as he rooted at her nipple. Damn it! She had a baby, but she wasn’t even able to feed him properly. She didn’t know how to do the most basic thing a mother did.

And Victor was watching the whole thing, with her all the way, just the way he’d promised.

Victor was watching her fuck up motherhood.

Cecilia fought tears. She was trying, damn it!

Suddenly a baby mouth turned, fastened on her nipple and began sucking with greedy determination. Her son had figured things out for himself. His face pressed hard up against her, his legs jerking as he fed himself.

She could feel the tugging—not just at her breast, but at her heart.

Her son. Vic's son.

He was so perfect. So precious.

This time she did cry.

Oh, Vic. Sometimes you don't have to work at love. Sometimes the other person does all for you.

It was a number of hours later—too many hours, to Victor's way of thinking—when he finally saw his wife and son in the hospital bed after being wheeled from the delivery room. The baby was still squalling when Cecilia held him to her breast, cuddling him.

Victor looked at the tiny, scrunched-up face. That face was relaxing now as he figured out what breasts were for. His son was all right. The doctors had said he was healthy, with lungs and heart and everything working just fine. Not even that small for a new baby.

Victor looked at his wife, with her hair and face gleaming with sweat and totally absorbed in her new baby.

His stomach knotted as he watched them. Cecilia looked up, a huge smile on her face. He'd always known how beautiful she was but it was as if he'd never known before. He fought tears. He fought a sudden throat-tightening emotion that threatened to sweep over him, consume him...

"Oh Vic, he's so beautiful." She couldn't stop smiling. "I think he's going to look just like you."

"Poor kid."

She hesitated. "Vic, I'm scared."

"Scared?"

"This parenthood thing. I thought I could handle it. But I need help." She hesitated again. "I need you. I don't think I can do this alone."

She reached out her free arm and he held her.

He almost fell on his knees then, the feeling was so overwhelming.

His son, his woman. He had known he would love his child—well, he thought he had known. He hadn't known how much.

But his son wasn't why he wanted to cry.

Cecilia.

Why had he been so stupid for so long? The sex was spectacular but that wasn't all. He loved her. Of course he had been in love with his wife for far, far too long. How could he help it? She was the most loving, most complete woman in the whole world. Right now, hair tangled, lips swollen, tear-streaked, she was more beautiful than she'd ever been.

She said she needed him. She said he was a part of all this...

Dios. He'd forgotten to tell her he loved her.

"Cecilia, I—"

“Time for the new mother to get some rest.” The nurse chirped at his ear, shattering the moment.

* * * * *

They stood, looking at the tiny bodies in their tiny bassinets. The hospital had plenty of other babies resting there but Victor knew which was his. He didn’t even need to see the nametag.

“Daniel,” he said, softly. “Daniel Aguilar Ruiz. I’m glad his Uncle Daniel didn’t put up a fuss about us calling him Danny. I keep forgetting that Daniel is his name, too. But I wanted my son to have his grandfathers’ name.”

He thought about his exhausted, triumphant wife. She was asleep at last. It had been some very long, tough hours for her. But her tears at the end weren’t from the pain but the sight of her son. Their son.

“Cigar, Daddy?” Jack’s voice was behind him.

“Hell, yes. I guess we have to go outside to do that, though.” Victor kept looking at the tiny, sleeping baby. “They’re small, aren’t they? Of course mine popped out a little early. But I didn’t realize they’d be so small.”

“I think Jen might argue with that,” Jack’s eyes went to the bassinet next to Daniel Ruiz. “She still hasn’t gotten over the fact Cecilia had her baby first because Jen had to have a Cesarean. God, that kid will grow up to play football—he is almost ten pounds! I can’t believe it. Little Jack. John Edmund Logan, Jr. Jesus, I have a junior. Wonder how he is going to feel about that? I feel like a smug S.O.B. about it. And I’m babbling. I don’t believe any of it.”

Both men stood, side by side, staring at their sons.

“I want to tell you something,” Victor said, finally, his eyes still on his baby. “Since I couldn’t be there for my first—I’m grateful you were there.”

“Vic.”

“Yeah?”

“If you had been, you know I would have never tried anything with Jen. Ever. That would’ve been an easy promise to keep since I doubt she would have ever thought about me at all. She was incredibly faithful to you for as long as she thought you were alive. Things changed afterward. I’m the one who should be grateful to you for not being there.”

“But if I had, I wouldn’t have Cecilia or Daniel.” Victor tried to think it out and gave up. There were just too many emotions swirling around in him. “It’s a complicated world, isn’t it? You know, I could have skipped the bad leg and the amnesia but—for the first time I can truly say I know, absolutely, I wouldn’t wish for things to be different. You know how great Jen is. But—hell, how am I supposed to say this to you without you taking a swing at me? Just, I’m glad things are the way they are now.”

“So am I,” Jack said. “So I guess we live in the best of all possible worlds, eh?”

The two of them looked at each other, his own dark eyes probably matching the skepticism in Jack’s blue ones. For a moment it was almost the way it used to be, when they worked as a team.

“Absolutely.”

“Maybe it’s time for a cigar. One more thing. Vic—I never told you this. I didn’t know how to explain it when we never spoke more than a word or two to each other. Anyhow, I have a seven-thousand-dollar leather bomber jacket of yours in my closet at home.”

“What?”

“I paid that for your old high school jacket. You went down in Colombia and when I started paying for information for your whereabouts, I ended up with that as an expensive souvenir.”

“You had a search put out for me?”

“Why do you think I knew about that private investigator you asked me about? Jen needed to find you. I needed it, too.”

“I sent money to the family that took care of me back in Colombia,” Victor said. “I thought I had paid off all my debts for that adventure when I paid them and my hospital bills. I didn’t know I owed you, too.”

“You owe me nothing, man. I told you I did it for myself and for my wife.” Jack was curt as he dismissed the idea.

“I—thank you, Jack. But, man, the jacket wasn’t worth that much. You always spent too much for clothes.”

The two of them laughed and then, turning walked easily together to smoke their celebratory cigars.

“Betcha my kid can beat up your kid,” Jack said as they hit the lobby.

“I bet they will both beat up each other regularly. Hell, we did,” Victor said. “But as I recall, I beat you up far more than you did me. I imagine my son will take after me.”

“Hope he doesn’t have your poor memory—or is it delusions?” Jack hooted. He paused, a moment, then said, “I missed you, man. Welcome back.”

* * * * *

“Are you ready for us now?” Victor stuck his head in.

“Ready? I’ve been bored out of my mind. Jen is always asleep when I’m awake and no one but you visits.” Cecilia tried not to whine. “Vicky, come see your little brother.”

“Another little brother?” Vicky was almost charmed by the baby hands and feet but still disturbed. “I wanted a sister and I got two brothers.”

She crept closer, willing to be mollified when the baby waved a hand in her direction.

“He is cute,” Vicky said. “So is little Jack. But next time—a sister.”

“We’ll put in the order.” Her father pulled Vicky’s hair. “You remind us.”

“Vicky, honey, we can’t order a baby like—like a toy.” Cecilia made a face at Victor. “Babies come as they want. We’re lucky to get such a nice one.”

“If the order isn’t right this time, we can put another one in,” Victor murmured, getting another look from his wife.

He laughed and kissed Cecilia hard. Then he handed her the flowers he’d been hiding behind his back. There they were. Proud, bright and held in Victor’s own hand.

“You got me flowers?” Cecilia stared. “Wow. You never bring flowers.”

“Jack got some roses for Jen and it made me think you should have some too.” He looked faintly embarrassed. “These seemed more like you, somehow. I asked the florist for some ideas.”

“Heaven forbid that you come up with the idea yourself. I’ll ask one of the nurses to put them in water.” Cecilia stared at the lilies.

“You know, the nurses in this hospital think we’re crazy,” he murmured. “Vicky has had the privilege of coming to see two little brothers in two different hospital rooms with her two different mommies. The nurses don’t know what to say about it. At least they don’t know what to say in front of us.”

“I can just imagine what they say!”

“I know what I want to say to you, *querida*. I—“

“If I’m Jack’s sister and Daniel’s sister, does that make them brothers?” Vicky asked suddenly, unknowingly echoing her father. “Are they twins? They were born on the very same day, right?”

“Not exactly, sweetheart,” Cecilia said. “They are cousins. Very special cousins.”

“Why can’t they be brothers?” Vicky’s lip threatened another pout. “Then I could take them both home with me. I want them both to come home with me. Please, Father? You make them do it.”

“They are just cousins.” Victor squatted next to her to hold her with one hand and touch his son’s face with the other. “But you are the big sister. You are the link to them both. They both will have you as a big sister so they will be very, very close cousins because of you.”

The pout stopped and Vicky smiled.

“I am the special big sister,” she said, proudly.

“Very special to everyone, honey.” Cecilia looked at her husband. “I forgive your previous remarks about ordering more children while I feel like someone ripped me open like a Thanksgiving turkey.”

He winced. “So why are you forgiving me?”

“Because you are an exceptionally brilliant father.”

Now his smile flashed.

“Thank you,” Victor said, too modestly.

“Kevin and Molly have both promised to be home for us by today,” Cecilia said. “I want to get back. This hospital is no fun.”

“Strange. I enjoyed every minute of my stay. You haven’t been here long. The hospital is kicking you out today anyhow.” Victor was cheerful. “You finally did something right with this pregnancy, wife. Quick labor—”

“You try seeing how quick a labor is if you do it yourself,” Cecilia muttered.

“You had a healthy baby with no complications. The pregnancy may have been tough but the delivery was fine.” Victor’s hand clenched on hers for just a minute. “I was a little afraid for you at first. But you were fine.”

“Naw. I wasn’t fine. I was great!” Cecilia’s smile broadened. “I’ll have plenty to be snotty about to Jen. She’s still stuck here for a while. It serves her right, after all her healthiness and good humor all through her pregnancy.”

“I would wait a few days on that,” Victor warned. “Jack tells me she is in none too good a mood right now.”

Cecilia looked down at the small baby she was holding. “Vic, he looks so much like you—the shape of the head, his mouth. His eyes are already turning dark. I know they’ll look like yours.”

“I wouldn’t mind if he had your green eyes,” Vic told her. “But no matter what, he’s going to be a handsome rascal, isn’t he?”

“He is a pretty nice looking baby,” Vicky cut in. “But he and little Jack make a lot of noise and poop their diapers. Yuck!”

Her father gave her a hug.

“I’m just so glad this part is over.” Cecilia leaned back in the bed. “I’m ready to move on with things.”

His eyes narrowed but he said nothing, just looked at her and little Daniel. Uncomfortable, she cuddled her baby. How could she tell him she was lying? Would he understand how scary it was now that the rules were going to change? She had been pregnant and needed to take care of herself for nine months. Victor had stayed with her to help because they were married. What were they going to do now that they had someone else to take care of? What did she know about being a mother and wife anyhow? She could already feel little Daniel grabbing at her heart and making her want to be with him. She needed new rules and no one was helping her find them.

I always said rules were meant to be broken. I was stupid.

“Then I think we best move on, wife.” He stroked her hair and then their son’s face.

What would they move on to?

“Hello, Mom!” a voice called from outside.

“It’s Molly!” Cecilia turned her head toward the voice and Victor’s hand dropped away from her. “You’re finally here, slowpoke.”

“It takes a little time to get out of Colorado and an internship.” Molly hugged her niece. “But I couldn’t miss this.”

“She brought presents, too,” Kevin said, lagging a little behind her. “Guess I should have thought of that, too.”

“That’s typical, Brother.” Cecilia rolled her eyes at him.

“Something for Vicky, and then little Danny and the new mom.” Molly kissed Cecilia as she held out the gifts.

Vicky was absorbed in her doll. Danny was oblivious to his new silver rattle. Cecilia’s mouth watered when she saw the chocolate.

“Don’t eat it all, Cecilia.” Molly held it away from her. “It has caffeine.”

“A little caffeine while breastfeeding never hurt anything.” Cecilia snatched for it and popped a piece of candy in her mouth. “Oh, yum.”

“And congrats, Daddy.” Molly handed him another cigar.

“I did bring a little something.” Kevin let the baby grip his finger and smiled foolishly. “As soon as the tiger here lets me go, I’ll get it out of the hall.”

Cecilia’s eyes filled with tears when Kevin brought in the wooden cradle. She knew he’d made it by hand.

“Now you’re going to make me feel bad for giving you a hard time, you creep,” Cecilia sniffled to her brother. “It’s so beautiful.”

“I made young Daniel’s here just a smidgen prettier than little Jack’s,” Kevin said. “Seeing as he is my namesake and all.”

Cecilia was so used to Kevin being Kevin that she had almost forgotten he was really Daniel Kevin Turner, Jr. until Victor had reminded her. But that made the name for their baby even better.

“I love you both,” Cecilia said. “But it seems like the only way I get to see you two anymore is to make a baby.”

“It tends to get my attention,” Kevin acknowledged before he kissed his sister on the cheek.

Cecilia knew she’d harbored reservations about her brother for a long time—ever since he had taken off without them after her parents died. Her reserve was gone now. Maybe it was all the childbirth hormones but she reached out to hug him tightly.

“I really, really love you,” she muttered. “Just don’t make me repeat that.”

“I heard what you said, Daniel Kevin Turner.” Jen’s voice came from the doorway as she shuffled carefully in, holding Jack’s arm. Jack held their baby with the other. “I can’t believe you would give your own nephew an inferior cradle.”

“Young Daniel’s may be prettier but John, Jr. has a bigger one,” Kevin answered promptly. “Seeing as how he is the bigger guy.”

“And they say he has no brains.” Jen shook her head and then shuffled carefully to ease herself down into the chair near Vicky. Vicky crowded up to her on the arm of the chair and held her around the neck, carefully avoiding the tubes and bags Jen brought with her. “Okay, Cee Cee, let’s see how good a baby you can produce. I warn you I’ve had practice now. I’m getting better and better with this baby thing. I’ve got a super baby this go round and you’ve just started to try.”

“Baby Jack is gorgeous,” Molly said.

“You haven’t really looked at mine yet,” Cecilia interjected.

“And I love your little guy.” Molly took a peek. “Vic, you have got another kid who looks like you. It’s lucky you’re reasonably attractive since you seem to have all these dominant genes.”

“I’m still hoping the kid may get Cecilia’s green eyes,” Victor protested.

The others laughed. He was home again. Back with the family he’d grown up with. Cecilia’s family made a swarm of loving relatives for his wife and kid—and him. Still, it was comforting to be able to make a phone call to his own family. His father. His father, who had cried when he heard the news that he had a namesake.

Cecilia had started all this. He didn’t know how he was ever going to be able to repay her for the connected feeling he had with this family and his own. The connection

that had strengthened when he had a child with his last name and with his father's and Cecilia's father's first.

Just then a nurse came into the crowded, noisy room.

"I'm sorry, but it's time for the babies to be taken back," she said. "We're bringing in the meals right now."

"Meals!" Jen snorted. "You should see what they feed you after a C-section."

"No, what I want to see is that other cradle," Cecilia demanded. "I'm not going to take my fast-talking brother's word for which is prettier."

For a brief moment Jen and Victor were left in the hospital room together, a noisy throng of family just outside, calling to each other. Jen looked at him, held out her hand.

"So, Vic, is all finally forgiven?" she said.

He touched her palm, then kissed it, European-style.

"Of course, Jen."

"No, Vic, I mean is it really? I know I hurt you before and I can't do a thing about it. It's a horrible thing to know when you really care about someone the way I do you. Has Cecilia made up for it?"

He thought about his baby. He thought about Vicky and what could have been.

"Yeah. Yeah, Jen, I think she has. She isn't you but—she is herself. That's more than enough."

"You're crazy about her." Jen's smile broadened, even while for a moment, her eyes looked sad. "I wanted that for you both. And you are."

Crazy about her? Yes. Crazy to tell her too. Ever since Cecilia went into labor it seemed they hadn't had a moment alone. Jennifer and he might have been together long enough to know each other's moods, but he couldn't tell Jennifer before Cecilia.

"Jen, you're a beautiful lady. I'm glad you finally got everything right when you had your baby."

"I think I got things pretty right with Vicky. I wish—oh, I don't know. I guess we both have been lucky, Vic." Jen carefully walked to the door. "I'm really glad you can be back in our lives again. I guess I can thank Cecilia and Danny for that."

That was when it hit Victor. For a moment he didn't want to say anything and then he knew he had to. He'd held onto grudges and then, today, he thought he had been generous and forgiving to let them go. What he hadn't done was realize who should have held the grudge.

"Jen, I'm sorry, too. I should have been here before. If I had been a real man, instead of pretending to be one, I wouldn't have left you in the first place. I would have let you know I was alive as soon as I could. Of the two of us, I have the greater apology to make."

Jen stared at him. "Is this Victor Ruiz? Admitting to a mistake?"

Vic smiled and pulled at her braid of long hair. She'd heard him. He was willing to admit to a mistake. Once. That would be the last time she heard him talk about it.

"Maybe Cecilia and I can be your kid's godparents this time," he said. "I'd like that."

"I'd love that." Jen's smile trembled. "Count on it."

They walked out of the room together in time to see Cecilia returning.

“Hello, wife.” Victor reached out his arm to hold her.

“Hello yourself.” Cecilia ducked her head down.

And Cecilia, who had been in the hall in time to hear it all, blinked tears away again. It had to be the hormones.

Victor swept her back into the hospital room, picked her up and put her back in bed. She tried to smile before she realized the tears were still there, clear and bright and liquid and in plain view.

“I’m just tired.” Cecilia wiped her eyes, willing herself to stop.

She couldn’t stop. Damn it, she couldn’t.

Why was she crying? Victor had made his peace with Jennifer. He’d made a choice—the choice she’d always wanted him to make. He was going to stay with her.

She looked over at the photos on her hospital bed-tray. The ones she and Vic had taken long ago.

Hold that pose and smile.

She had. But she couldn’t hold a pose forever.

Cecilia stared at the photo, where she’d been so happy and so hopeful and so in love, even though she hadn’t wanted to admit it. Something snapped inside her.

“What’s wrong?” Victor asked. “Tired is one thing but—this—stop it, Cecilia!”

“I can’t.” She wiped the tears with both hands. “Believe me I want to.”

“Can I fix the problem?” For a moment he sounded like he had when she was a kid, sobbing her heart out at the prom. “Let me help, Cecilia.”

“I wish you could. I know you want to. I—I was eavesdropping, Vic. I’m so glad you’re staying with me—” She sniffed.

“But?”

“I can’t do this, Vic. I want to. I want you. But—but I love you. I can’t help it. If you don’t love me back, I can’t do this any more. Make my love enough for us both.” She gulped. “Oh, God. What am I doing—?”

She was giving up. Doing what she’d sworn she wouldn’t do.

“Stop, Cecilia. Now. Ever since we’ve been married you seem to have one foot out the door.”

“I don’t want to leave, it’s just—”

“I wondered why you kept wanting to leave. I thought—no, damn it, I know we’ve been happy together. Good together. I wondered if you couldn’t get over having to chase after me at your sister’s wedding and then ask me to give you a baby—”

“After I wanted you all through adolescence. Don’t forget that. I remember you telling me to stop following you like a puppy. I don’t think I ever did stop. What could be more pathetic? I promised myself not to ask for more than you wanted but—but—I realize I haven’t made peace with myself about it.”

“Damn it, Cecilia, let me finish before I screw it up again. Look at it from my point of view. Maybe it’s my fault. I kept waiting for you to leave. I had one woman dump me, pretty damn publicly, for my best friend. Then her sister says she needs me because

she needs someone to make her a baby. That is the only reason I could see why she agreed to marry me. But I was aching to be with her again.”

“Aching?”

“Dying to be with her. I didn’t want to show it—I mean, it had been years since we’d had been together. She never gave any indication she wanted to be with me after we had our fling—not that I blamed her. I wasn’t a considerate guy then. In fact, I was amazed she was even willing to talk to me after the way I acted. Up until then she seemed just fine without me. Then she made me this incredible offer.”

“It was an amazing weekend for both of us and you know it. That’s one reason I thought we could make a baby together.”

“Anyhow, what sort of idiot jumps at the chance to go make love under those conditions?” Victor kept on. “I figured I needed to hang on to a little dignity of my own, *querida*. I wasn’t going to admit to anyone, including myself, I had any feelings for this woman besides wanting to have sex with her.” He grinned, suddenly. “Intense, great sex with her.”

“So you are saying we are both pathetic losers?” Cecilia’s mouth curved upward. “And here most of America thinks you’re one of the fifty sexiest—”

“Maybe it’s time to flip the views we have of ourselves around. Maybe I should be flattered that this younger, sexy woman told me she wants me this much. Maybe you could feel good that you have this man who constantly lusts after you, who constantly loves you. Maybe it took me a few years longer than you to realize I love you—”

“A few! Listen, buddy—” He loves me? I’m arguing with him and he loves me?

“I’ll just have to spend more time convincing you that I can make it up to you. I’m sorry we first had sex the way we did. I guess I mean the way I felt about it then, not the way we had sex. The sex was great, but I think we’ve both been paying for it ever since. Still, if you can forgive me for it, I know I can make up for—for taking advantage of you. I swear it. Can we start over a second time?”

“Are you saying I need to let go of the self-pity?” Cecilia’s smile broadened just a little bit more. She slid, a bit gingerly, over the bed to sit on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her very tightly. She grabbed him back. “To forget that I wanted you more than you did me at first?”

“I will, if you will. How about it?”

“It sounds good.” Cecilia’s grip tightened. “You know, ever since my parents died and you left I was sure nothing would go right. That I had to fight for everything I wanted but I’d always lose.”

“I’ve felt that way most of my life.”

“We need to change that attitude. I need to believe sometimes what I want will come easy. With you.”

“Babe, you always can come easy with me. Um. Sorry. You know I always say the wrong thing.”

“Jerk.” Cecilia gulped and then managed to get the rest out. “I am starting to believe it. As long as you do love me.”

“That’s the reason you kept trying to get out? You didn’t believe I loved you?”

“Yes, you idiot.”

“Damn. That was why the no sex and the—the moods? You know I don’t always say things I should. But I’m going to try to right now. I finally realize I’ve loved you for a long time now, Cecilia. Probably much longer than I’d admit to myself and certainly longer than I would admit to you. I’ll make it up to you. I promise. Give me a chance to show you.”

“Could you wait just about two minutes to show me and let me say something before I know you knock it completely out of my head?”

“Yes?”

“Can you teach me Spanish?”

“Huh?” Victor stared.

“I don’t know if I’m any good at languages. I mean my high school and college foreign language classes didn’t do much to teach me anything. I know I can’t understand a quarter of what goes on when you and your dad chatter away. But I have this idea in my head and I figure if opera singers can sing in another language than their own, I probably can—”

“Whoa.” His visions of seduction were pushed away for just a minute. “Explain a little more coherently, please.”

“I’ve been thinking about some of the folk songs your father sings. I think I could record them. They were meant to be in my repertoire—all that steamy love lost and passionate emotion is perfect. It may take a while but if what I’m doing is going to be mostly recording nowadays, why should I care if it takes a while? I’m going to need a project to really work on. And if I do, I think Daniel would be pleased and it—it would be sort of a gift to him. And you. And Vicky and Danny, when they grow up enough to realize some of their heritage...”

He let her voice slide by and through him. It was going to be all right. She was planning their future and working out one for them together. Whatever she wanted was all right, as long as he was in those plans with her.

“Fine.” He cleared his throat first. “Let me begin the lesson by telling you Spanish is a Romance language. You do know that, right?”

He whispered a phrase in Spanish.

“What does it mean?”

“When you’re feeling better, I’ll translate,” he said. “Graphically.”

He kissed her.

Epilogue

Six weeks later

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Vic asked.

“Please. We haven’t had intercourse for a few months, but it’s not something you forget how to do.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean, the doctor hasn’t cleared anything yet.”

“Victor! I’m tired of having to ask permission to have sex with you. I feel fine. If anything hurts, we’ll stop. Do you think I got reservations at this particular hotel and got Jen to baby-sit just so we could argue?”

“No. I don’t want to argue.” Vic looked around. “Is this the exact same room we had three years ago?”

“Probably. Are you going to argue about that, too?”

“No. It just...brings back memories.”

“Good ones.”

“Oh, hell yeah. You were quite the sex kitten, babe.”

“Was? I still am.” Cecilia climbed on top of him. “Vic?”

“Yes, *querida*?”

“Am I still a sex kitten?”

“Is this a trick question?”

“I mean, am I too heavy? Too ugly? The baby stretched...things. You know. I’ve gained weight.”

“What?” He blinked at her. His astonishment would have made her laugh if she hadn’t wanted reassurance so badly.

“Well, you aren’t making love to me. You promised, but you didn’t.”

“All that moaning you gave last time was to make me happy? You weren’t satisfied?”

“You used your hands to make me come.” Cecilia punched him, lightly, on the shoulder.

“Hands? *Querida*, I only had to use a few fingers.”

She punched his shoulder again. “Jerk. I can’t help it if my after-pregnancy hormones have given me a hair-trigger where sex is concerned.”

“Naw, it’s me doing that to you, not the baby.”

“There may be something to that, Mr. Arrogant. I love to feel you any way I can get but—I love your cock, too. I want that.”

“You were tired, Cecilia. You’re still tired.”

“Tired of not having you.”

Vic hesitated. “I don’t want to hurt you. Last time we did anything—”

She knew the baby’s early arrival had scared him. Fortunately she had a plan to take care of that. Cecilia smiled, a feral cat-like smile. She reached over to the nightstand

and pulled something out. The restraints he'd given her dangled between her thighs and his.

When the soft cuffs hit his cock, his shaft tightened. They both watched it harden to fully erect. Cecilia traced her fingers lightly up and down his erection. Very nice. If nice was the right word.

"You won't hurt me if you just lie back and let me do the work," she promised.

"I shouldn't." But he gripped the posts of the bed tightly, clearly inviting her.

Her breasts brushed his chest as she leaned forward to fasten his outstretched arms to those bedposts. Just because she liked it, she swept against him again. The light fur on his chest tickled against her sensitized nipples.

She cupped the tip of his cock with just the slightest pressure of her vaginal walls, not moving any further. He sighed.

"It's nice...slow, baby. Really slow."

She slid her clit against the head of his cock. Slowly. They both sighed.

"Very slow," she agreed.

She wasn't too big after the pregnancy. Vic was still fascinated. He still wanted her. His eyes narrowed into slits as he watched her body move in a lazy rhythm. Circling her hips in a figure eight, dipping and swaying, she enjoyed Vic's cock head.

"Kiss me, Cecilia."

She blinked. His voice was soft, tender. A lover's voice with a lover's request. A lover's desire. She put her lips against his.

Tender. He was so tender this way. Like a boy with his first girl, his breath catching when she first flicked his lips open and found the tip of his tongue. He let her take control of his mouth for an instant before his tongue rubbed against hers, mimicking the way his body arched and moved against hers, reminding her that he wasn't an innocent. The sinews of his arms tightened as he gripped the bedposts, fighting himself.

He wasn't an innocent, no. But there was something new and fresh and delightful as she rocked over him and he braced himself for her assault, refusing to thrust harder, letting her take the lead. Cecilia licked the side of his throat, where his neck was arched, her tongue resting where his pulse beat fiercely.

She slid her face down, her cheek against his heart, her hand against his breastbone, moving her body down against his thighs. Her lips came to rest against the veins under his cock head. She didn't move them, just savored, for a moment.

It was like having her first man. Like she'd never had him before. She opened her lips, touched his shaft.

He moaned. Powerful and weak when they had sex, gentle and strong.

Victor. He was Victor. Hers.

"Come back up here," he whispered. "I want to touch and taste."

Cecilia slid back up. She'd removed her nipple rings as soon as she knew she was pregnant, but his tongue could trace the holes. His lips tugged at her nipples, hard enough to make her gasp with need. She squirmed, grinding her pussy against his shaft, not letting him inside her. Flickers of lust moved through her as she clenched and unclenched her vaginal muscles.

God, she could come just this way.

“Mmmm. Cecilia.” His voice was hushed. “I can taste your milk. It’s...different. Sweet.”

It spurted, uncontrollably. *Oh, my God.*

Vaguely embarrassed, Cecilia tried to pull herself away. His legs reached up, his knees digging into her back. He wasn’t gentle now. Even bound, he was strong enough to make her stop.

“No. I want to,” he murmured against one breast, then moving to suckle her other. “Give it to me.”

She watched his face, absorbed, intent, even with his eyes shut. Her breath caught. Why was she ashamed? What he was doing felt good. He liked it, too. A lot. She could tell from the rapt expression on his face, from the way he moved his erection against her.

She shifted, despite his wordless protest, and moved to the nightstand drawer. She took out the lubricant and squirted between her breasts, letting it drip down over her swollen nipples. Victor’s chest rose and fell on a long sigh as he stared.

She moved closer, so her already swollen breasts cradled his cock on either side.

“Let me go. I need my hands to fuck you this way,” he muttered.

Her hand trembled as she freed him from the cuffs. As he rested against the pillows, Vic held her breasts hard, keeping them tightly closed, kneading them as he thrust into the vale they formed.

“This way,” she whispered. She pushed one breast forward. “Suck my nipple. Hard.”

His cock moved violently, almost in protest, between her breasts. He slid out and stretched forward, kissing one areola, straining to suck it deep into his mouth. Then he slid back between her breasts. Cock and mouth moved in harmony, creating pulsing, stinging sensations that made Cecilia breathe hard, fighting not to cry out. She ground her pussy against his leg, knowing she was dripping there, too.

Ah yes, things were different this time. Hot, sweet, fierce, needy, tender, hard. Need that made her shiver as she came, her clit stroking wildly against his thigh. Wanting that made him groan, deep in his throat, as he followed her, come splashing hot and plentiful on her breasts and chest. Love that made her cry a few tears as she fell down beside him and his arms held her.

She loved him so much. More all the time even when they didn’t make love. More every time they did.

“I do love you, Cecilia.” Vic kissed her hair. “Thanks for giving me a second chance to do things right.”

“I’d have given you a third and fourth time, too, if I had to. I love you too much.”

“I wouldn’t mind a third and fourth time. Give me a minute.”

“Jerk.” Cecilia yawned, let her hand rest on his chest. She relaxed, his body sheltering her. Within seconds, she was drifting into sleep. Next to Victor.

Also by Treva Harte



The Wildling

Perfect

Why Me?

Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.

www.ellorascave.com