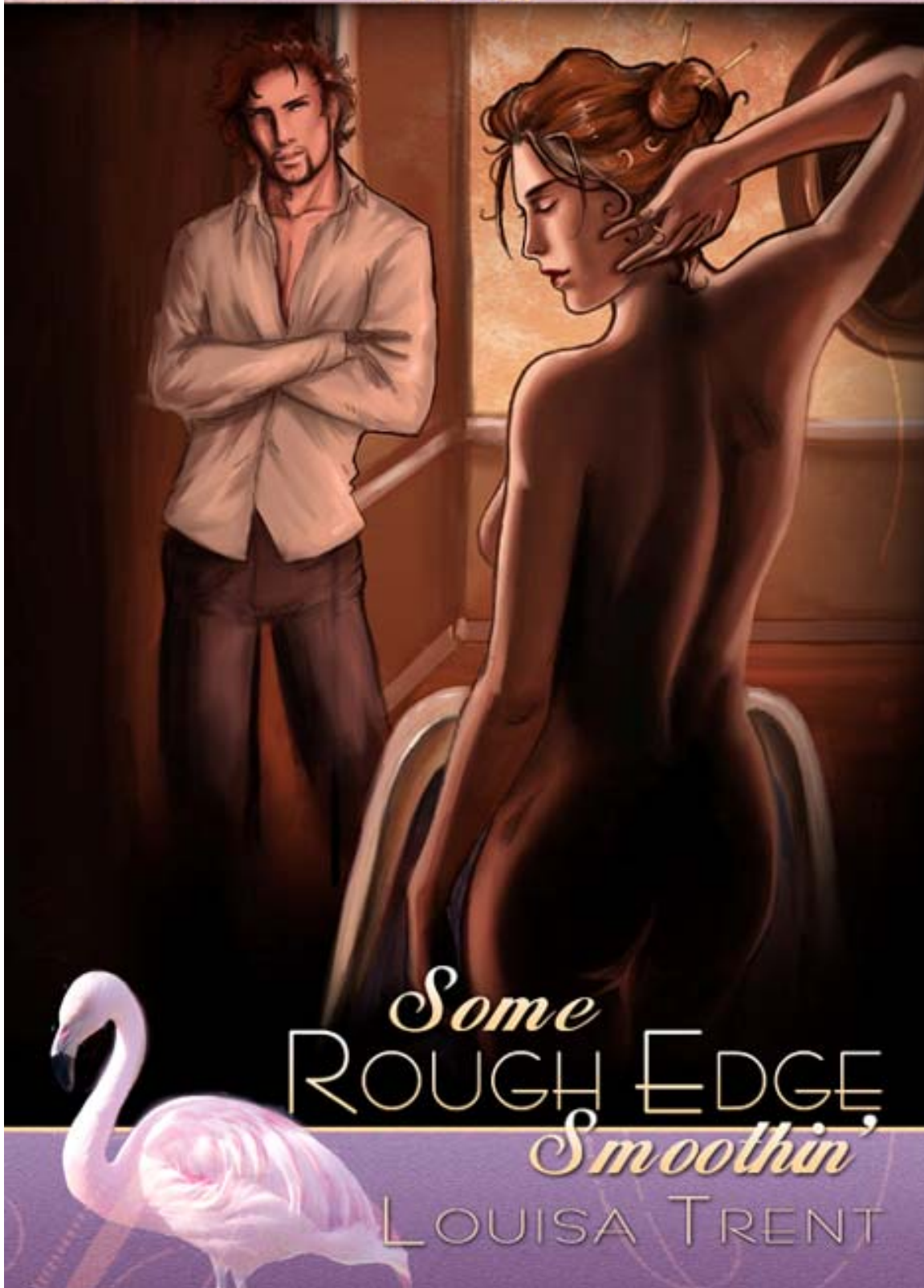


Loose Id



SOME ROUGH EDGE SMOOTHIN'

Louisa Trent

Loose Id.®

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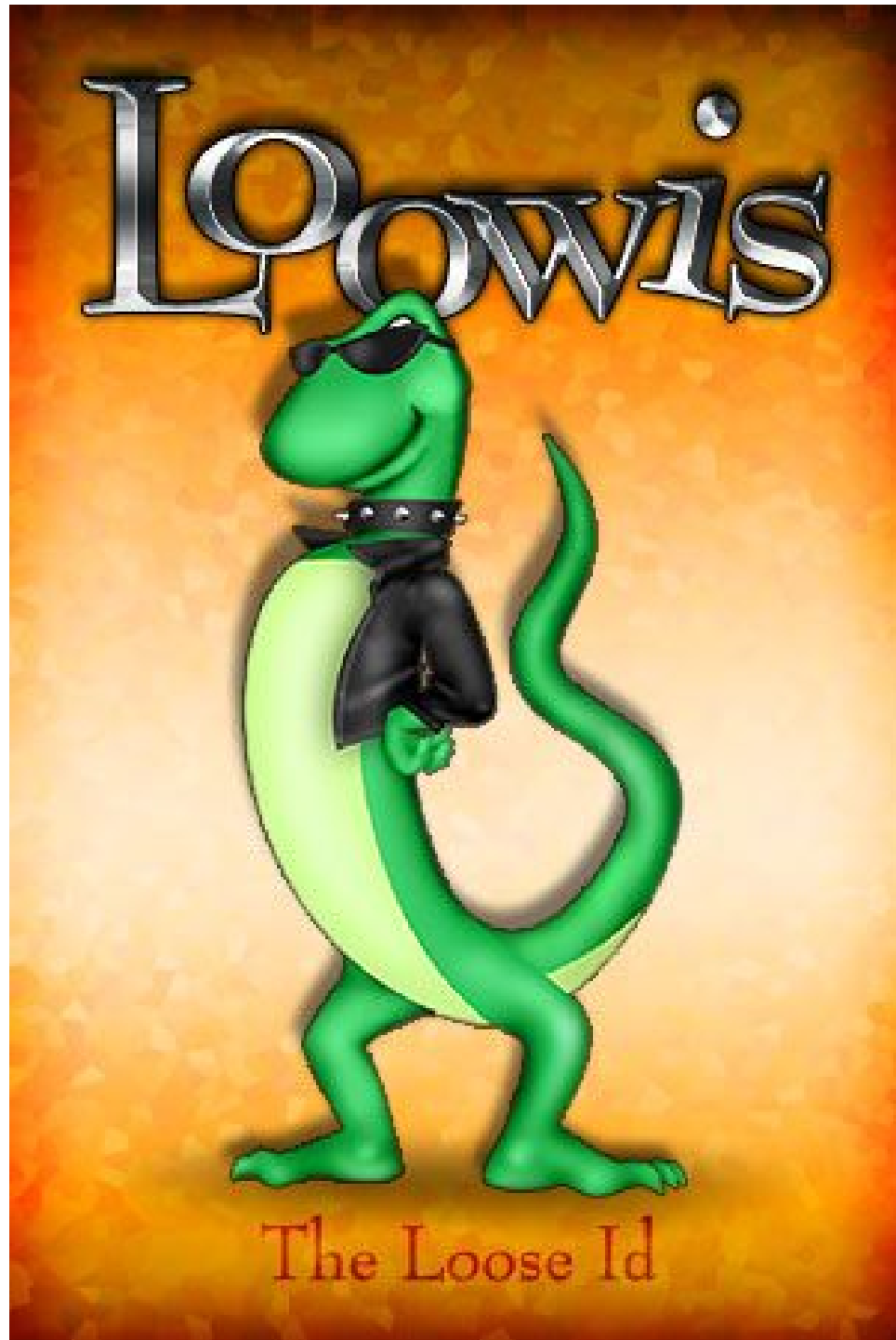
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Chapter One

Just like every morning, Tomas Ruiz stopped by at his administrative assistant's desk before heading out the trailer door to the construction site. "You're looking *mucho muy* hot today, Myra."

"Humph." Without sparing him a glance, his employee kept right on reading her newspaper.

Nothing new there. Myra always blatantly disregarded him. The same held true for her disrespecting his authority, insubordinate attitude, questionable work ethic, unorthodox approach to company regs, stubborn adherence to an organizational chart that only flowed in her direction ... He could go on and on about her work performance, but what was the point? He might sign the paychecks, but he wasn't fooling anyone. His boss title was strictly of the figurehead variety. Everyone knew who called the shots in this outfit, and it sure as hell wasn't him.

Ignoring him as usual, Myra *finally* picked up the phone, the one that had been ringing off the hook since her two-hour-late arrival that morning, and grumbled, "Ruiz Construction," into the receiver.

A good sign, this. When his right-hand woman got to feeling real stressed, she never bothered answering calls at all. But that was a whole other story --

"Yeah, he's here, Borowski," Myra chirped in her industrial-strength, sandpaper croak. "Hell, no, you can't speak to him. Why? 'Cuz, I said so, that's why. Got wax accumulation in those big ears of yours, hon? You should maybe try one of those cotton-tipped swabs and call back later. Like in a year from now. Kisses." A wet-sounding smooch, and there went the phone, unceremoniously dumped onto her desk.

Tomas winced at the AT&T bounce. The woman in the faux leopard-skin sweats was the love of his life, but man, most days Myra wasn't exactly sweetness and light. On her bad

days, she was downright unpleasant. Ornery came to mind. But land on her shitlist, as poor Borowski obviously had, and she was unapologetically surly. Whoa, yeah, Myra was gruff and abrasive when she wanted to be. Assertive as all hell, too. And those were her warm and fuzzy qualities. As to her less than endearing personality traits, he just never went there.

Above the whir of the off-the-hook phone, the one still chillin' on her desk, his recalcitrant receptionist muttered, "Ya know somethin'?"

Here was the thing: For the most part, Myra's questions tended to be rhetorical in nature, as she never gave two shites about anybody else's opinion, especially his. But, for the sake of politeness -- or maybe just to listen to the sound of his own voice for a change -- he went along for the ride. "What's that, Myra?"

His adored-one kicked back in her semi-reclining chair and propped a pair of extra-wide orthopedic shoes on an overturned rubbish receptacle. "I've been thinkin' ..."

His muscles tightened. Whenever Myra prefaced one of her pearls of wisdom with *that* particular segue, bad news always followed.

"... that Ruiz Construction could use some improvement, ya know, image-wise. High time the main offices moved out of this trailer and into one of those swanky new uptown office condos in Fenton's business district."

Tomas groaned in affectionate exasperation. He worshipped every disagreeable bone in Myra Samuel's grumpy body, but when she started spouting stuff like *image* and *moving* at him, he just had to put his foot down.

He started lowering his boot. "About the office condo --"

A high-pitched squeal cut him short. "Oh, boy! Lookee here!" Myra whipped her trusty cuticle scissors out of her top drawer. "A thirty-five cent-off coupon on kitty litter!"

No way, *ese*, was he stomping all over Myra's bubbly enthusiasm, so his foot stayed put. Instead, as the born-again collector clipped happily away, newspaper scraps flying, he gently offered, "But Myra, you don't own a cat."

Seemed like a reasonable reminder to him. Myra couldn't save every damn thing. Some stuff in life just wasn't salvageable and needed to get junked. Otherwise, she'd only end up getting stuck with a bunch of useless items, throwaways no one else wanted. Clipped kitty litter coupons. Raggedy old photos of strangers. Stray animals. Hopeless people everyone else had long since given up on --

'Cept Myra.

The woman never gave up on no one. For some reason, the word "hopeless" was nowhere to be found in her working vocabulary. And he should know. As a snot-nosed kid, on the fast track to prison, rather than trash him like everyone else, Myra had added him to her motley menagerie of discarded treasures. Luckiest day of his sorry-ass life.

Clipping done, leftover newsprint scraps brushed onto the floor, cuticle scissors tossed back in the drawer, Myra stared him down, the heat from her gaze just 'bout singeing his eyebrows.

"So what, I don't own a cat?" she asked belligerently. "I happen to like cats. Some cats even visit me regularly. Ya know somethin', Tomas? You should get yourself a cat."

"Can't. Got no room for a cat."

"A small cat," she volunteered, though he hadn't asked for her opinion. And why would he, when getting a little pussy was one subject about which he needed no advice?

Myra plunked her morning's work -- i.e., the clipped kitty litter coupon she would never use -- on top of a purely decorative file cabinet with the rest of the coupons she would also never use. When the dust settled, she continued leading him around by the nose. "Ya know -- an office condo would make a serious impression on prospective clients."

A wise woman was Myra. She was most likely right-on about him moving his address uptown. Only, when it came to women or office locations, he happened to like the downtown scene. The perspective, the smell, the taste ... the whole vibe of going downtown ... lit his fire and kept him up all night long. Besides, what the hell would relocating buy him? As the saying goes -- you can take the man out of the *barrio*, but you cannot take the *barrio* out of the man. Moving on up wouldn't change who he was inside.

On the Southside, a melting pot of ethnicities made up the neighborhoods. The pulse of different languages and peoples and cultures all beat in a blended rhythm. That rhythm was his rhythm. Hey, he also was a blend. The offspring of a papa fresh off the Raft Havana and a mama whose people had made their ocean trip a few years earlier on the Mayflower, he knew what it meant to walk both sides of the street. Which explained why Tomas Ruiz of Ruiz Construction was staying put on the Southside where his half blueblood-Anglo, half first generation-Latino ass belonged.

But, man, he loved Myra for trying to move his downtown groove up in the world. And when she turned her back, he quickly snuck her an adoring smile -- his sweetheart didn't go for outward displays of devotion -- and then changed the subject. "Er ... Myra -- did I get any messages on Friday after I left?"

"Yep."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Two calls. Both women. Figures." She smirked. "Elaborate enough? Or you want I should dress the message up some more?"

Yep. Myra was in fine fettle today.

Clamping down on an almost irresistible urge to duck -- when his best girl got irritated, she had a tendency to pitch things -- he asked, "The two calls -- what they want?"

"One was definitely business related. The other was definitely not." Myra sent a purple-sparkled wink his way.

A squint like that could mean but one thing. “Chi-chis?”

“You know it.”

Bending low to Myra’s ear and breathing hard, just to whet her curiosity, he said, “Did she sound ... you know ... *urgent*?”

“Your lady friends generally do, boss.”

“Stop,” he said, humbly. “You’re making me blush.”

“Yeah, right. You’re about a hundred set of chi-chis past blushing.”

Hiding a grin, Tomas thumbed through his mile-high correspondence. “Tell me, Myra, what would you do if you couldn’t speculate on my love life?”

“Guess I’d have to find my vicarious thrills elsewhere.” His sweetheart’s penciled brows arched above the frames of her rhinestone-studded bifocals. “Though the loss of your love life would leave a mighty big conversational hole to fill.”

“Not so big anymore. With business booming, there’s no time to sleep, never mind date.”

“I’m thinkin’ Chi-chis wants you to combine the two.”

If Tomas had learned one thing in life it was this: A gentleman never tells.

Not finding what he was looking for in the mail, Tomas wandered dejectedly to the trailer’s breakfast nook, where he poured himself a cup of black coffee. With a head tilt, he swallowed the contents.

“Myra, you said *two* calls.” He crossed his fingers around the cracked handle. “Was the second call concerning the Riverfront Project?”

“No, but it’s still early yet. You might hear somethin’ later on this week.” Pulling out her compact, Myra fluffed her eggplant-toned beehive. “That Seraphina Norris woman called again. She’s not giving up, boss.”

“Did you send her the second eviction notice like I asked you to?”

The compact snapped shut. “Who has time?”

“Myra,” he said quietly. “I told you, I wanted that follow-up notification out a week ago. The Monroe mansion is up for demolition at month’s end.”

“Stop yellin’ at me!” Myra shouted. Reaching into the greasy cardboard box on her desk, she selected a donut and bit into the soggy middle. When all but the sugary crumbs had disappeared, she daintily wiped her lips, then glared at him. “The doc says on-the-job stress directly contributes to my weight problem, and now see what you made me do! I ate the whole damn pastry.”

“Sorry.”

And he was. About a lot of things. He’d fucked up plenty in his life. But not this time. This time, he’d crossed all the i’s and dotted those t’s. That eviction notice was strictly legal. And still, Myra was pissed at him.

Pissing off Myra shook him up bad.

"About the follow-up letter ... I just don't get what you're getting at, Myra. The situation over at the Monroe place is dangerous."

"Yeah, yeah. Right, right! I admit it, the situation is dangerous."

"So, what's up with not sending the second letter?"

"You want the skinny? Here it is: I couldn't do it. The Norris woman sounded so damned nice on the phone. Like a real lady. The kind you don't see much anymore." She looked at him pointedly. "At least not in this trailer." Pausing for theatrical effect, her voice turned cagey. "Ya know -- you'd soften the blow if you explained in person about the eviction."

"Send-the-second-letter," Tomas slowly enunciated. When push came to shove, he was a businessman, not a fucking social worker.

"So, don't go over there. Give the nice lady with the sweet voice the brush off. I'll send her a cold, heartless letter with your signature stamped on the bottom after the sincerely. That oughta do it."

"Sounds good to me."

"I never shoulda mentioned she called. I only did 'cuz that's my job, and I take pride in my work. So, when you asked me who called, I told you who called. Nothing to me if you don't wanna do the right thing. *I'll* still sleep at night."

"Glad to hear it."

"No skin off my nose if you don't follow-up."

"Great."

"No blood from my veins if you're rude."

"*Firme*. Cool."

"No marrow from my bones if --"

"Stop." Tomas hung his head over his coffee cup. "Please stop." And his dentist asked how come he ground his teeth at night. "You win. I'll get back to her."

Myra thumped her ear with the palm of a heavily ringed hand. "What's that you say? I forgot my hearing aid."

Funny how his receptionist could hear a fly fart next town over, but she could tune out *certain* people whenever she wanted. "I said, I'll call."

"Did you say you were going over there *in person* to tell her the bad news?"

Myra didn't believe in letting anybody off the hook too easy, especially him. Just for the joy of raking him over the coals and watching him squirm, she added a nice little old lady's, "Right, dear? That is what you told me, dear, isn't it?"

Defeated, he gave up the fight. "Yeah, Myra, that's what I said. I'll go over there today and tell Seraphina Norris about the eviction notice *in person*. Let her know I'm coming by. After work. Around six."

Smiling sweetly, Myra returned to reading her newspaper, and he went out the trailer door, ditto for smiling sweetly.

What could he say? From time to time, his badass self needed flaying --

Which would explain his long-standing Saturday night date with the big-busted, leather-wearing, switch-cracking Dom Lucille.

Not that he let Lucy anywhere near him with her S&M toys. The old-fashioned truth was, when it came to sex, he was strictly a meat and potatoes kind of guy ...

... or beans and rice, whichever side of his heritage happened to be hungry.

He didn't do games or role-playing or anything involving too much kink. A little, all right. But nothing involving more than two batteries. The whole French maid concept had passed him right by. Ditto for stanky foot fetishes. What the fuck was *that* all about, anyway? As for group sex -- two dicks in a bed was a crowd, and he didn't do crowds. Or dicks. On the flip side of the same coin, what man in his right mind would try to satisfy two women at a time? Hard enough making one woman happy.

And he was all about making the ladies happy.

No 'bout a'doubt it, he liked women. All kinds, all sizes, all shapes, all colors. But despite the gossip going 'round town about him, he was a standard "look her in the eye, kiss her on the lips, ease it gently into her love grotto" straight-shooter.

Out in the construction yard, Tomas climbed into his truck. Yep, when it came to sex, to each his own flavor. As for him, he'd stick with vanilla.

And if anybody ever asked him about his running Saturday night date with the whip-wielding Lucille, he'd tell the truth; sometimes his muscles got a little tense, a little sore, and that redheaded dominatrix gave the best massage in the business. After Lucy untied his knots, they generally sat around and watched WWE on cable. Wrestling wasn't exactly his thing, boxing being more to his taste, but since she was a huge fan, the channel stayed put on that station.

The remote control. Sex. They had a lot in common. In either one or both, if a man disrespected the wishes of the lady he was with -- even if that lady was a Dom sporting a ten-inch strap-on -- he was pretty much a prick.

He'd fucked up plenty, but a *pinga* he was not.

Revving the engine, Tomas pulled away from the trailer.

Chapter Two

Seraphina Norris did windows.

And walls and floors and anything else in need of a good scrubbing. Nothing stopped her cleaning crusade, not even dreaming about detergent-scented pails of water at night. A woman on a mission, nothing stood in her way. Certainly not something as trivial as a little ... okay ... *a lot* of dirt. It was only dirt, for goodness' sake! Only ten-plus years of grime and neglect and filth and litter and tossed refuse and the occasional empty beer can.

Seraphina squirted the next window with a fine blue mist from her plastic bottle. After wiping off the excess ammonia with crumpled newspaper -- less expensive than paper towels -- she polished the glass until the pane sparkled, and reflected sunlight splintered and bounced, and rainbow prisms danced on the wainscoted walls of her rented mansion.

Though intricately carved woodwork had gone the way of the horse and buggy, Captain Samuel Monroe had built his nineteenth-century home to last. The rough, seafaring gentleman and his socialite wife, Priscilla -- adorably, in their back-and-forth correspondence, he called her *Prissy*, and she referred to him as *Cap'n* -- had produced a brood of ten children, all of whom played a musical instrument. At times, Seraphina swore she still heard the haunting melodies of a bygone era drifting through the mansion's empty rooms --

Or, so she told everybody.

Sweet romantic tales like that sappy piece of sentimentality raised cold, hard cash, scholarship money disadvantaged kids on the Southside needed for music lessons. Truthfully, dirt-cheap rent had motivated her decision to rent the old Monroe estate, not fanciful sea-captain stories. Truthfully, she possessed not one sentimental bone in her entire body. If anything, she was a practicing pragmatist.

A good thing, too, her practical streak. One short month after moving in, real estate developer-cum-strip club owner Tomas Ruiz had purchased the property right out from under her, and she had a NOTICE TO QUIT in hand. Where would sentimentality have gotten her there? No, she had to come up with a practical solution to her problem.

Skipping the legalese, she read between the lines. Ruiz planned on tearing down the old Monroe mansion and putting up a pricey housing development.

Over her dead body.

Moving her plump derriere would take a heck of a lot more than a fancy piece of stationery with "Eviction Notice" printed at the top. The wrecking ball would need to go through her. No one was razing this house. The mansion had character. History. Personality. Bats --

Okay, the bats creeped her out, but the exterminator was coming next week to relocate her little winged friends, *and she'd still be here*. Morally, the mansion was hers. She had right on her side, first dibs, a cancelled check for one month's rent and three-months' security deposit ...

And no where else to go.

Tomas Ruiz was not getting his money-grubbing hands on her home, and she intended to tell him so!

Just as soon as he returned her phone calls.

Thus far, he hadn't bothered getting back to her. Irresponsible jerk! Too busy micromanaging his strippers at The Pink Flamingo to dial seven little numbers.

Seraphina guillotined another sheet of *The Fenton Chronicle* and then twisted the day-old news like a tourniquet. Hard. Very hard. Until the paper squeaked. Rolling the newsprint up into a crumpled ball, she attacked the next windowpane in line.

When and if Tomas Ruiz ever did call, she'd take the high road. Not stooping to his base level, she'd put him in his place. Simply and graciously, she'd explain, in a non-judgmental manner, why she was right, and he was wrong.

Wrong. Wrong. Dead wrong.

Deep in contemplation, outlining a truly excellent argument to validate her position, her nape suddenly began to prickle. That never happened unless something was wrong.

Wrong. Wrong. Dead wrong.

Even then, she didn't panic. Not until a footstep fell directly behind her did she freak.

She knew exactly two people in Fenton, neither of whom would drop by unexpectedly. And since the Monroe mansion abutted a desolate part of the riverfront, an area where breaking-and-entering was commonplace, she doubted the person sneaking up on her had borrowing a cup of sugar in mind.

Why hadn't she had a locksmith install those deadbolts on the door? And cheese and crackers, where in the Sam Hill was her cell phone when she needed to punch in nine-one-one?

With no neighbors to scream to for help and no possibility of a three-digit rescue, Seraphina frantically searched the porch for a weapon, thankfully finding one close at hand. Actually, she found the weapon *in* her hand.

The blue window-wash solution.

Not Mace, but the caustic ammonia would do.

Gripping the plastic bottle like an Uzi, she pivoted, aimed the No-Drip nozzle, and pulled the hair-sensitive trigger.

Bull's-eye! The streak-free formula tagged the thug mid-forehead.

Legs braced, she was all set to fire off another round of blue spray when the desperado held up both hands, palms forward.

"Stop, lady! Don't squirt! Everything's cool. I surrender."

Here, in the flesh, was Fenton's criminal element. This ... this ... *hoodlum* had invaded her home, prepared to do who knew what, and she was supposed to give up without a fight?

Thumb on the trigger, she squeezed off another round, sending a stream of harsh ammonia into a pair of dark eyes.

"Shit!" Choking and coughing, the desperado clawed at his red eyeballs.

"That's what you get for picking on a defenseless woman!"

"*Defenseless!*" he sputtered. "If that's defenseless, I don't want to be around when you're packing, lady."

The attack happened so fast. She never saw it coming, never saw him make his move. One second she was holding the plastic bottle, all set to fire away again. The next second, her weapon was bouncing in a blue-sudsy puddle on the floor, and he had sandwiched her between the porch wall and his very large body.

When big hands roamed her all over, she jumped for the ceiling.

"Settle down, lady," her assaulter said, his pronunciation low-life flavored.

"I -- I have forty dollars in my purse, inside the house." Next to the cell phone. How long could three digits possibly take to pound? "I can get the money now."

"Hush, lady."

At a strange sensation, she looked down and saw brown-skinned hands moving low over her belly.

"Just let me, lady."

Not wanting to, not meaning to, the order originating not in her brain, but coming from someplace lower, someplace deeper, someplace darker, a hidden core inside herself

she'd spent years suppressing, she loosened her legs. No longer fighting him, she now fought her own wanton nature, her own secret sexual impulses, her own treacherous body.

And lost.

She let him.

When he kneaded down her back, his hand splayed across the flare of her hip, briefly sweeping the fullness of her bottom, biting her lip, she sighed. Then shivered. Convulsively. He had encircled her wrist in a finger manacle, his thumb rubbing the soft underside, stroking little circles over her pulse.

Somehow, she *knew* he wouldn't hurt her.

Unless, she asked him to.

"Please?" she begged.

Chapter Three

“Easy,” he said hoarsely. “Take it easy, lady.”

Slanting his whiskered jaw, the desperado spoke low against her ear. “I think maybe I should introduce myself before we get into something here we maybe shouldn’t get into. I’m Tomas Ruiz. You know, Ruiz Construction? I understand you been calling me. Guess you never got the message, huh, ‘bout me dropping by at six --”

Tomas Ruiz? The new owner of the Monroe mansion? The money-grubbing, opportunistic womanizer she’d heard so much about? Her new landlord whom she needed to sway to her pious cause by virtue of sound logic and reasoning? The man who had the power to destroy her most cherished dream? The irresponsible jerk? *That* Tomas Ruiz? He was the hoodlum she’d just sprayed with ammonia?

Her shoulders slumped.

At her dejection, Tomas Ruiz’s big body moved back and away. “You don’t seem hurt. But can’t be too careful; I banged you pretty hard.”

He *banged* her pretty *hard*...

Her mouth gaping, she spun to face her adversary.

Unaware of the dirty thoughts playing out in her mind, the man she needed to impress with her level-headedness was busy using the torn sleeve of his black T-shirt to swipe at his wet hair.

And what did she do? Did she use the ticking seconds to plot her way out of this mess? Improvise a decent apology that would allow her to save face? For the sake of a good cause, did she say hang dignity and prostrate herself at his feet and plead for forgiveness? Or, better yet, like some outraged paperback romance heroine, did she screech, “How dare you, sir?” and slap him across the face for what she now admitted was nothing more than an unintentional double entendre on his part? Now, *there* was an excellent idea. Playing the

pious missionary card always got results. Plus, the deflection would take some of the sting off her own guilt.

Actually, she did none of the above.

In swiveling around to face him, her eye had caught Tomas Ruiz's rippling bicep. Superficial, yes, and not exactly the best self-protective strategy, either, but unable to help herself, she gawked at the flex of the gargantuan muscle, before moving her sights upwards to his glossy black hair, saturated with the window-washing solution.

Hair that thick and long would take tons of time to dry. Since she was to blame for wetting his hair, only right she comb her hands through those long strands to hasten the drying process. *Hmm*. Would all that gleaming black richness feel soft or coarse on her fingertips? Could be his hair would have a sleek texture, like a seal's pelt ...

In her imagination, she rubbed Tomas Ruiz's dark hair -- deliciously soft in texture, not coarse at all -- between her fingertips. Then she actually *yanked* his mussed hair down to her belly, her *naked* belly, letting the long strands tickle her bare skin. Liking that sensation, she pulled him down to her ...

"You are Seraphina Norris, right?"

"Um -- what?" Her mouth tightened. The nerve of Tomas Ruiz interrupting her lovely fantasy!

"Lady, you all right? You look like maybe you got a pain somewhere." Whisky-brown eyes showed their concern.

"Er -- oh. Yes, I'm all right. Absolutely all right."

But was she?

Occasionally, she did entertain *those* kinds of thoughts, usually when she was alone in bed at night. But never before had those fantasies overtaken her in the middle of the day.

She patted the front of her skirt. "And yes ... um ... I'm Seraphina Norris."

"Listen, I'm sorry if I scared you. I tried the bell, but it don't work. When I knocked on the door, you nodded your head in a kind of jerky motion. Your way of telling me to come on ahead, I thought. Elsewise, I wouldn't have barged in on you like that."

The nod! She remembered the nod.

Lost in thought, scheming up a way to fix her new landlord's wagon, she had indeed nodded her head. Tomas Ruiz might very well have mistaken that nod as a tacit agreement for him to enter her porch. Why, this really was all an unfortunate misunderstanding!

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Ruiz." She briskly extended her hand.

Then went and ruined her businesslike composure by swaying on her feet.

Her post-illness weakness again. When would she regain her strength?

Bypassing the handshake, Tomas Ruiz made a grab for her elbow. "I could maybe come back tomorrow. I can see my appearance has disturbed you."

"Oh, don't you turn this back on me, Mr. Ruiz!" Deflection was *her* strategy. Let him find his own.

She yanked her elbow from his supportive grip. "This has nothing to do with your appearance. You simply caught me unaware and startled me."

He flashed a dazzling-white smile, just oozing with hip gangsta charm. "Sure about that, *ruca*? Sure it wasn't my mestizo-brown complexion that startled you?"

Ruca. She understood enough Spanglish to know *ruca* meant "chick" in the quirky hybridization of Castilian Spanish and English, a best-of-two-worlds language full of colorful idiomatic expressions.

In nobody's language was she a chick

In any language, Tomas Ruiz did disturb her and in more ways than one.

He was talking about something insidious here, about judging a book by its cover. Had she?

This was the crime-riddled Southside, and Tomas Ruiz's book cover was very rough indeed. Dirt coated his face. His clothing -- breaking-and-entering black -- showed rips in several places. Gaudy silver hoops dangled from his earlobes. His jaw indicated no recent association with a razor. A strip of leather tied back most of his gorgeous hair, but some long strands had escaped the confinement and swept his enormous shoulders ...

Oh, she could go on and on about his disreputable appearance! But had she jumped to the wrong conclusion based not so much on his grungy look, but solely on his *brown* skin?

Seraphina adjusted the collar on her tailored white cotton blouse, smoothed her palms over the straight line of her conservative tan skirt, made sure her tasteful barrette tucked all her hair into a coil rolled at the back of her head and then, and only then, examined her conscience.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, horrified at what she saw inside herself.

"Hell, lady. You just about ruined me for ever watching cable again." He dabbed some more at his inflamed eyes. "But I understand. I came straight from work. No shower or change first, so I look more badass than usual." He sniffed. "And smelling none too good neither.."

She shook her head back and forth. "That's no excuse --"

"Don't beat yourself up." He thumbed what looked like a two-day beard stubble on his chin, then tweaked the silver hoop dangling from his ear lobe. "Let's face facts, I fit the racial profile. A common enough mistake, a common enough assumption, a common enough reaction."

"But it shouldn't be."

"Yeah, ain't life a disillusioning bitch, though? But don't fret -- you'll get over your loss of innocence in no time."

“Please don’t presume you know me.” Or that she had any innocence left to lose.

Tomas Ruiz rocked cockily back and forth on the scuffed heels of his work boots. “That’s where you’re wrong. I know all about you. You’re the naïve, do-gooder *gringa* who wants to start a music school in a condemned building.”

So much for the introductory pleasantries...

She had jumped to the wrong conclusion based solely on his appearance, but at least she had *eventually* owned up to her mistake, which was more than she could say for him. Sentimentality wasn’t what she was about, wasn’t what this school was about. And no one, but no one, called her a “do-gooder” and got away with it.

She got right in his face. Nose to nose. So close, she could make out the individual whisker stubble on Tomas Ruiz’s strong jaw. So near, she could practically taste his after-work beer. Without any space between them, she inhaled the sweat from his body. Clean sweat. Real sweat. A working man’s hard-earned sweat unmasked by fake cologne.

Shockingly, as she breathed him in, her hardening nipples pushed out against her blouse. This, after feeling nothing sexual for so long. Her physical awareness of Tomas Ruiz took her by surprise. And horror of horrors, her excitement had spread lower. Her belly actually fluttered, then clenched.

She swallowed, intentionally, hoping to compensate for her parched throat, a dryness in converse proportion to a wetness found elsewhere. “First of all, Mr. Ruiz, the mansion isn’t condemned.”

“Only because the former owner’s brother-in-law is Fenton’s building inspector. Listen, lady, there ain’t no point arguing. The building is unsound, and I want you out.”

Tomas Ruiz was so young.

After this past year, she felt as old as the hills and far too jaded to fall for Tomas Ruiz’s twenty-something shenanigans. Safety had nothing to do with his wanting her out of the mansion.

To let him know she was no pushover, she widened her legs in a militant stance, which also conveniently helped unstick her moist panties. “Secondly, Mr. Ruiz, I am far from naïve. Thirdly, I don’t *want* to start a school. I *am* starting a school. Here. Do you understand that fine distinction, or is subtlety just way over your head?”

“Hey, I’m not stupid, lady.”

Considering the Cro-Magnon quality of his grunted reply, the verdict was still out.

Charitably, she made no comment about his knuckle-dragging. He was *very* young, barely bipedal on the evolutionary ladder. What twenty-something male thought with his gray matter, not his genitalia? She could hardly blame Tomas Ruiz for his youth.

However, she could, and did, blame herself for succumbing to its appeal.

As soon as he left, she was disposing of the incriminating evidence. Her wet panties? In the washer.

"Fourthly, Mr. Ruiz," she said, skirmishing to remember the number she'd left off at, "I had a rental agreement with the prior owner. And that entitles me to --"

-- exactly *nada*. You didn't pay no rent to me. You wrote the check out to Mike Anderson. The dude had already negotiated the sale of this dump to me before you forked over the security deposit."

Her eyes widened. "He had? But surely that's --"

-- illegal? Guess again."

Broad shoulders bunched. A hard forearm contracted. Pumped-up biceps bulged. A thread of raven-black hair fell over an ammonia-dampened forehead. A shadowed jaw tilted to the side in a move that was so slick, so smooth, so utterly and devastatingly charming, she knew he must practice the pose in front of a mirror.

Okay, her initial assessment had been mistaken -- Tomas Ruiz was no thug. No Southside hoodlum. But he was most definitely a testosterone-polluted young male incapable of any true depth. Grade-A beefcake. Nice on the eyes, nice to fantasize about, but a cerebral lightweight in reality. He had about as much emotional substance as dandelion fluff.

"Lady," he scoffed, his thumb hooked lazily in his low-slung belt loop, "Anderson's a bandito in Armani threads. He took you for a ride to the tune of a coupla grand and never looked back."

"W-what do you mean?"

"Got a lease on this dump, lady?"

"Why ... why no. But we shook hands --"

Tomas Ruiz winced, his body actually flinching. "Never, but never, not in this litigious world, does a handshake substitute for a signature."

Litigious?

Big word for a disconnected brainstem.

Though, he made a good point. A very good point.

A freak accident. A once in a lifetime stroke of luck.

Ten seconds later, she mentally whacked her forehead. What a complete idiot! She should never have accepted good faith in lieu of a contract! "Mr. Anderson seemed like such a nice man."

"Lady, beware of nice men." Tomas Ruiz's dark eyes laughed. "Beware of not so nice men, too." Like quicksilver, those same laughing eyes instantly sobered. "You've got 'til the end of the month to vacate this dump."

"But that's not --"

"Fair?"

"Stop finishing my sentences for me, Mr. Ruiz," she snapped in irritation.

"Just keepin' it real, lady."

This time, she really *would* slap him.

Or something.

This was extreme. Perverse. Why, she was old enough to be his teacher ...

Or something.

“Mr. Ruiz, if you call me ‘lady’ just once more, I’m very much afraid I’ll feel compelled to disprove your assumption.” In an action that had over-compensation written all over it, she wagged a finger at him. “Furthermore, in the future, please refrain from referring to my home as a ‘dump.’ This mansion has more graciousness in its foundation than any of those ugly mausoleums you’re putting up all over town.”

“Well, well, well. The pretty music teacher has got herself a hot temper. Have a care, *ruca*, you might just burn me up.” He gazed at her soulfully, shining on her the kind of roguish male smile guaranteed to melt feminine hearts.

Not her heart.

Fantasy was one thing, business was something else again. She was onto his Big Seduction. This outrageous young man was only bothering to flirt *with* her because he wanted something *from* her, which was to vacate the Monroe house. Quietly. If she made a stink to the press about his callous and high-handed treatment, he’d have a public relations nightmare on his hands that no amount of spin doctoring could fix. She could see the headlines in the local paper now: “Brash Boy Builder Evicts Penniless, Practically Middle-Aged Widow From The Only Home She Ever Knew.”

What with her missionary background, her sad plight would make for a tear-jerking human-interest piece. Sympathy paid the bills. By the time she got through with Tomas Ruiz, she’d have enough donation-bulging envelopes to finance the music school here and a satellite program somewhere else. By the time she got through with him, Tomas Ruiz would be the scourge of Fenton. He might just as well change his name to “Mud” now.

Bad press was exactly what he deserved. After all, her motives were pure, and his motives were pure evil.

“Naturally,” he began, “I’ll return your full rental and security deposit, as a gesture of Ruiz Construction goodwill.”

“You know what you can do with your gesture of goodwill.” She jabbed her wagging finger into his brick-house hard chest. “You won’t get rid of me that easily, Mr. Ruiz.”

“Like this is easy. I’ve had easy, and you ain’t it.” He captured her finger, gently imprisoning the poking digit between two callused palms. “Just because you look like an angel don’t mean I’m gonna stand by and let myself get clobbered by your wings. Now, quit thumping me, girl.”

He returned her hand. “New home construction starts in three weeks. And if you’re thinking about fighting the eviction notice, give up on it. That notice will stand up in any court of law. I can have a constable remove all your stuff at the end of the month.”

He backed out her door. "I'd rather keep things friendly, but if you wanna rock 'n roll with me, we can do that, too. Just let me know. You've got my number."

Did she ever!

"I don't do rock 'n roll, Mr. Ruiz. I do classical," she said self-righteously, and slammed the door in his sexy face.

Chapter Four

Upon his arrival at the old Monroe place, Tomas had tried using the front door, but a raggedy old sign at the end of a frayed wire clued him in that the bell was out of service --

Like he couldn't have added that up all on his own.

The same message tacked to the back door explained his ammonia-sprayed face.

Shuddering at the mile-high weeds that passed as landscaping, shaking his head at the peeling paint, cringing at a roof that wouldn't make it through another snowy winter, Tomas made the return trip to his truck, head down, searching the grass for ticks ready to jump out at him

La cagada! He hated bugs. After living in one too many welfare roach motels, shelters, and cardboard boxes, now anything that crawled, flew, or had more than two feet gave him the shakes.

While closing in on the insect-free environment of his truck, a haunting melody, carried on a summer breeze, turned his back around.

At first, he disbelieved his own eyes. But surer than shooting pool with the boys on Friday night, there was Seraphina Norris, back to her damn window washing again.

The do-gooder just didn't get it. In this neighborhood, a shiny window amounted to a gold-plated invitation for a re-glazing job. Some punk would bust-up those glass panes, just for the hell of it.

He'd already done his bit. Looked like the teach would have to learn her lesson the hard way. Despite her lack of common sense, *pan dulce*, but Seraphina Norris was some kind of pretty. The lady could sing like an angel and had a face to match.

Her body had him thinking sin.

Not that she played up her charms. If anything, the lady tried to hide her charms.

Not from him. He owned a strip club, so he knew those boxy clothes hid a womanly shape that included a cute pair of *maracas*. And, though she tried to hide her woman's glory in an old maid's bun, he suspected when loose, her hair, a warm golden brown and real thick and wavy, would reach her hips.

And when he thought hips, he meant ass. The lady had one sweet *nalgas*.

Cute tits. Sweet ass. An attitude that screamed *Fuck Me*. Whoa, yeah. The woman was ripe for some good Latino loving.

What a waste! Despite his hard-on, he was steering clear of Seraphina Norris. Her rose-colored-glasses view of the world just didn't jive with his smoky-dark shades.

Climbing back into the truck, Tomas gunned the motor.

Didn't matter how often he drove down the familiar streets, the conditions always got to him. The rusted and neglected trailers, the shabby little bungalows, the littered playground where broken beer-bottle glass prevented kids from playing B-ball. The sounds and sights and smells of poverty alternately filled him with despair and rage.

Nothing ever changed on the Southside, not since he'd grown up on the mean streets. Then, as now, kids had nothing to do in the summer, except dodge trouble and play keep away from the cops. The only recreation was running ... from blue flashing lights, screeching sirens, and the sad wail of EMTs arriving on the scene to clean up after yet another mother's heartbreak.

The waterfront trapped heat and dirt. Due to all the pollution, families no longer used the river for recreation. No swimming, no boating, no fishing, not in years. When he was a boy, some big shot politician running on a "Save Our Youth" platform teamed up with some non-profit agencies and came up with the bright idea of building a community rec center. Election year was the first and last time any kid ever played Marco Polo in its swimming pool. After the sub-contractor poured the poorest grade cement, the interior walls cracked, then caved. That was just how things went on the Southside. Empty-promise social agencies. Full-of-shit bureaucracy.

Some days, he just wanted to throw in the towel. The tendency to quit came from growing up on the Southside. That, and the lingering feeling he wasn't good enough, would never be good enough, would never amount to nuthin'. He battled that mindset every single fucking day. The Southside burned up dreams. And he should know. As a kid, he'd come real close to setting his own future on fire.

Bad memories chasing down his ass, Tomas stepped on the gas, putting as many miles as he could between himself and a rundown house and from a woman who refused to take no for an answer.

Her problem, not his. Seraphina Norris was not messing with his plans.

Ruiz Construction was booming, thanks to a steady influx of newcomers moving into town on the coattails of "Fenton's resurgence of economic prosperity." The new Interstate

made commuting to big jobs in the big city a sixty-minute snap. Briefcase-toting executive types were snapping up the luxury four-bedroom, three-car-garage colonials as fast as he could build them on large tracts of land considered unsalvageable.

Like the old Monroe homestead.

With its hilltop location that overlooked the water, the fourteen acres was prime real estate.

For junkies.

When vagrants started setting fires, the town stepped in and had the house boarded up. Dealers set up shop almost immediately, druggies making their connections in the once stately rooms. Within six months, the mansion had become a regular drive-thru pharmaceutical factory.

About a year or so ago, the estate went up for bid. The house and land went for the price of back taxes -- way too rich for Tomas Ruiz's blood. The new owner, Anderson, waited for local law enforcement to get rid of the dope show.

Never happened.

The circus stayed, and Anderson fled. Pleading a real bad headache, he put the mansion back on the block again.

Lots of looking, *nada* offers.

No one wanted to hassle the dealers.

But, hey, one man's headache was another man's nirvana. Desperate to cut his losses, when Anderson decided to unload the property for cheap, Tomas Ruiz was right there, ready to do the dude a favor.

For next to nothing, all fourteen acres now belonged to him.

Since no rich CEO would want to buy an upscale house in a downscale neighborhood, Tomas's next order of business was getting down and dirty with the dealers. Henceforth, he was on the dealers' asses like *chiquile*. That also went for their posse of assorted outlaws. He was up for hassling anyone who stood in his way.

That included the do-gooder music teacher.

Tomas parked his truck under one of the few working streetlights on the river and walked alone into the dark night.

The riverfront made for some dangerous geography. Taking no chances, he stuck to the designated trail and went straight to the meeting spot. Leaning a hip against a stripped and torched car, he waited. When the group approached, about a half-dozen *vatos* wearing gang colors and head bandanas, Tomas folded his arms over his chest in a deliberately relaxed pose.

"Yo, man," Enrico Cortez began. "You hauntin' the old 'hood tonight for a reason, Ruiz?"

"You fucking well know I never left the *barrio*. Do not dick with me, 'Rico!"

"*Chale*, man! Chill. I know you got balls, no need to swing 'em at me. Just say what's on your mind."

Tomas got right to the point. "I need a favor, 'Rico. You think the RPs can help me out?"

"Name it, man. We're bloods. Me and the boys are always there for you."

* * * * *

The next day, en route to the trailer's metal door, a cloying cloud of air-freshener stopped Tomas dead in his tracks. "Myra, what I tell you about smoking in here?"

"I forget." While doing a slow Titanic sink in her orthopedic chair, his sweetheart reached into her candy dish. "Ya know how absent-minded I get at times." After popping a mint into her mouth, she started chewing real fast.

Myra's convenient memory lapses, her selective hearing, the way she ignored common office procedures -- he could live with that stuff. But smoking? Nuh-uh. The cigs had to go. "Allow me to jump start your memory. No smoking in the offices of Ruiz Construction."

Newsprint hit blotter. "Are we a little cranky today?"

"Not *me*."

"Yeah, but I'm always cranky so it doesn't count"

He sighed. "I love ya, babes. I want you around to see me grow up."

Myra rolled her eyes. "For pity's sake, you're almost twenty-six."

"An immature twenty-six."

"Don't I know it," she crabbed.

"No one can make me toe the mark like you can, cupcake. What would I do without you?"

Spiked lashes fluttered. "Stop guilting me! The post-hypnotic "no smoking" suggestion is working, I tell ya. This was only a small relapse."

Tomas eyed the tin peanut butter jar lid that subbed as Myra's ashtray. "There's enough ashes on your blotter to put a volcanic eruption to shame. Either you're smoking like a fiend again when you think I'm not looking, or you plan on scattering the remains of a long lost relative during your noon-to-three lunch hour today."

A sly look stole over Myra's plump cheeks. "Ya know, I'm gonna miss Uncle Ted. He was quite the gent."

"Myra --"

"I hear ya. I hear ya." She coughed her smoker's hack. "What's eating you all of a sudden?"

“Nothing.”

“Sure, nuthin’,” Myra scoffed. “You sound like some big bad bully just made off with your ...” She waved a greasy example of her bad eating habits at him. “... jelly cruller.”

“I really wish you’d cut back on the fried foods, Myra.”

“Yeah, well, if wishes were horses, we’d all be walkin’ around knee-deep in shit.” Two dainty nibbles, and the donut was history.

That did it! Myra’s doc was hearing from him again.

His shoulders bunched tight, Tomas said, “I can handle bullies.”

“Right. It’s nice ladies like Mrs. Norris who give you the cold sweats.”

“*Missus* Norris? I didn’t notice any wedding band.”

Myra smirked. “Checked her ring finger, eh?”

He never saw the ambush coming.

And all right, so maybe he had looked. But now that knew her marital status, whether or not Seraphina Norris liked to bite during sex, or rake her fingernails, or grab, let’s say, a man’s ass, or cup his balls and squeeze, not too rough, just enough to make an uncut dick give a heads-up -- all that was a moot point. He didn’t hit on married women, never even went there in his thoughts.

Though her marital status in no way kept him from envying Seraphina Norris’s lucky son-of-a-bitch husband, that fortunate so-and-so who came home to her at the end of the day, the no-good fuck who had the right to --

Tomas halted right there. Envy never got a man anywhere. Seraphina Norris was taken. End of story.

Except he couldn’t get her out of his head, hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her since she’d squirted him with window cleaner. And wasn’t that real quick thinking on her part? Though, if he really had been a punk robber high on crack, she could’ve been hurt. Where the hell had her husband been, anyway? Why wasn’t the negligent ass-wipe protecting his woman?

“Do you believe that Seraphina Norris, anyway?” he asked in exasperation. “The kids on the Southside eat cereal three times a day, and she wants to bring culture into their lives. You know what happens to cereal when you add milk? Gets all mushy. Just like her brand of sentimentality.”

“Gotta start somewhere, boss. I’m thinkin’ the Norris woman is nuts, too, but her heart seems to be in the right place. She’s got good intentions.”

“Good intentions are worthless. First sign of trouble, she’ll pack up her cello and move back to wherever she came from.”

“Piano.”

“Huh?”

"Seraphina Norris plays the piano, not the cello. I heard her sing the other night over at the Chamber of Commerce welcome reception. The caterers served those fancy cocktail wieners floating in grape jelly. You shoulda been there. The food was terrific. Let's see, what else did they serve --"

When Myra started talking buffet food, the descriptions could go on for longer than he had time to listen. He cut in quick. "Cello. Piano. Same difference."

"No, they're not. Installin' a piano is a major commitment. My money's on her stayin'."

"Not at the Monroe place, she's not!"

Myra drew a moistened fingertip over her arched brow. "As a kid, didn't you wanna learn how to play the piano?"

"Could've been me --"

"I remember you tellin' me one foster home had a piano, and you wanted to learn the keys. Sure it was you, Tommie."

Myra always called him "Tommie" while forcing unwanted memories down his throat.

Slouching, hands crammed in his pockets, he reverted to Tommie Ruiz, that unlovable kid whose ass Myra had cared enough about to kick, and kick, and never stop kicking until he had made something out of himself. "Me wanting to play the piano, that was years ago. What did I know? I was too young to understand poor kids don't take music lessons."

"I'm thinkin' Seraphina Norris wants to reach kids before ignorant adults preach bogus crap like that at them."

That said, his best girl pinned him with the same look that had inspired terror in his heart all those years before.

Myra Samuels had been crossing the street, a bag of groceries under each arm, when, on the run from the cops, he'd accidentally knocked into her, and her produce hit the asphalt. Though a tough, wise-mouthed delinquent, he'd been no match for her fury. He didn't know what grief was until Myra let him have some of hers. After reading him the riot act, she stood over him while he wiped her smashed carton of eggs up off the street. Upon learning he was a throwaway kid, she took him in, fed him, and gradually added him to her collection of strays. For two years, he'd lived with her and Bill, Myra's long-suffering husband. They never had any kids of their own, but no chair at their kitchen table ever went empty come supptime. They were always feeding somebody or other, always taking some lost soul into their lives, into their home, into their huge hearts.

Myra was the one who'd encouraged him to get his G.E.D., who got him doing small carpentry jobs for her neighbors. When she found out he was good working with his hands, she was the one who urged him to get some decent skills. After a stint in the military, he'd started up his own construction outfit. Myra had been with him every step of the way. A man didn't forget stuff like that.

Tommie Ruiz dragged his whupped ass to the trailer door. “If anyone wants me, tell them I’m on the Southside visiting a crazy music teacher.”

“Will do, boss,” Myra said and went back to her newspaper reading.

Chapter Five

Seraphina surveyed her new school. The crumbling plaster walls. The destroyed section of oak flooring homeless people had ripped up for firewood. The buckled ceiling compliments of a leaky roof. The crop of weeds where a front lawn had once grown. Letting her imagination soar, the blight disappeared, and in its place, she saw possibilities. During her recent telephone campaign of prospective teachers from out-of-state music colleges, those possibilities are what she'd reinforced. She'd presented the Southside Conservatory of Music as a school housed in a lovely old shipbuilder's mansion, set high atop a rolling hill overlooking a scenic river park area of Fenton.

Seraphina squeezed her eyes shut, better to see the big picture.

If the dream was in your heart, it wasn't a lie ...

The image was so clear in her thoughts, she could easily have named the flowers in the perennial gardens, so clear she could inhale the fresh breezes wafting in from the river, so clear she saw boats sailing by as she stood on the mansion's landscaped hilltop.

No lie, what she had told all those college administrators. Someday, the school *would* be wonderful.

Sighing rapturously at the picturesque beauty of her vision, Seraphina opened her eyes again.

And found, of all people, Tomas Ruiz staring at her through the rusted screen door.

"You look kinda ..." Her landlord shook his head so hard, his ponytail could easily shoo away flies. "You all right?"

"Of course, I'm all right," she snapped.

"Well, anyway, I was in the neighborhood --" He fingered his silver earring. "Listen, I know it's late, but can I come in?" He paused, added, "Please?"

"That *please* changes everything. For a moment, I almost took you for a petty and spiteful lunatic against whom I should file a restraining order for harassment." Smiling tightly, she stepped back and away, giving the man in the black T-shirt and jeans plenty of room to enter her leased home.

Regardless that she had backed up to a wall, the porch seemed to shrink to half its former size with her visitor's entrance, and not only due to her landlord's height and muscles and all around brawn. Tomas Ruiz possessed an elusive, indefinable something called presence. He practically exuded raw strength and vitality ... and sense of purpose.

Why didn't he go exude all over some other woman?

Too bad, she'd always been a sucker for a man with a mission. Too bad, Tomas Ruiz's inner calling was all about making a fast buck and darn the consequences. Too bad, he had a powerful impact on her, anyway.

The way he looked at her! As though she were the only thought in his limited mind repertoire.

My bad ...

She knew Tomas Ruiz wasn't stupid. But thinking him so made her feel more in charge. And, no matter how trite the expression sounded, he also made her feel special. Holding a young and handsome man's undivided interest was awfully seductive, as was being the object of his virile attention.

Fortunately, she was onto him. Her internal radar warned of Tomas Ruiz's ulterior motivation. He was only turning on the charm to get her out of the house so he could crank up those bulldozers and swing that demolition ball.

Unfortunately, intellectually understanding his purpose and emotionally withstanding his attraction were two different animals. Despite her raised defenses, his spell wrapped around her.

Sex. It was all about sex. All about hot loins and wet places and her shameful need for a man. She'd been married to a good man, a Godly man, for five years, widowed for one, and yet she stood helpless before Tomas Ruiz's irresistibly naughty pull.

His hair -- wet from a recent shower? -- was swept back from his forehead, the black, glossy wealth once again tied at his muscled neck with a piece of old rawhide that she could see poking out when he turned his head briefly to the side. She had this overpowering urge to yank at the thin leather string until the thick mane fanned like black Spanish silk over her work-worn knuckles, every last strand slipping through her eager fingers. She had this horrible urge to then strip off her cotton blouse, her knee-length straight skirt, all her underwear, and order him to ...

What on Earth was happening to her? Why did she keep having these sexual thoughts about this rough-looking, tough-talking, young man?

To contradict her illicit fantasizing, she drew back her shoulders and offered him a cool, self-possessed, very mature, teacherly, smile. "Mr. Ruiz, let's cut through the fat and get to the bare bone, shall we? Why are you here?" She raised a brow. "Again."

"As a courtesy, I wanted to inform you my trailer moves onto the site at the end of the month."

"I see. A courtesy. How very thoughtful."

He cranked his good-looking jaw to the interior door to the house. "Is your husband here? I could also talk to him --"

"I live alone. I'm a widow."

Even when not twitching with laughter, even when turned down at the corners, even when a little pinched and blue, Tomas Ruiz had a sexy mouth.

He muttered a coarse word under his breath. "My language. I'm sorry." He blew out a gusty breath. "I didn't know you'd lost your husband, Mrs. Norris."

A pulse beat beside a chiseled jaw. Dark eyes dropped to the floor. "I apologize for my thoughtless remark. But your living alone here is all the more reason for you to leave this house and this neighborhood. You must know about the crime rate on the Southside. That's why you were so jumpy yesterday --"

Rather than call him on his ulterior motive, which would have served no purpose other than to further antagonize him, Seraphina tried diplomacy. "Thank you for your concern, but I overreacted yesterday. I assure you, I will not overreact again, Mr. Ruiz --"

"Tomas," he corrected. "Call me Tomas."

Continuing to address a younger male as Mr. Ruiz was the height of absurdity. She would take him up on his sensible offer and call him by his first name --

However, she would not return the favor.

Her first name falling from those charming lips? Even at the suggestion, her belly fluttered. She did NOT want *that* happening all the time. Plus, the constant reminder of their age difference, as represented in his continued use of *Mrs. Norris*, might prevent foolish behavior on her part.

She cleared her throat, began again. "Tomas --"

"Yes, Mrs. Norris --?"

There was that same flutter again, low in her belly, and he hadn't even used her first name. How ridiculous! She was an adult woman who had lost her husband, a man she had respected in life and whose goodness she missed in death. How could her body betray her this way?

Fiercely disregarding the butterfly sensation, she restarted yet again. "Tomas, it's no secret that I want to stay at the mansion. No secret, either, that you want me gone. Couldn't we reach a compromise in this situation?"

“What sort of compromise?”

She made a wide circular motion with her index finger. “Couldn’t you build your new houses *around* the mansion? I mean, the mansion is located on the very top of the hill. You could still build your houses at the bottom and up along the slope of the drive. Just leave me enough land for student and faculty parking. And for the summer amphitheater.”

“What the hell -- excuse my language -- is an amphitheater?”

“An amphitheatre is an oval or round structure -- in this case, a temporary tent -- having tiers of seats rising gradually outward from an open arena at the center.”

“Oh, you mean like an outdoor boxing arena?”

“Well – er -- yes, in a manner of speaking.”

“Why didn’t you just say so?”

Because, Oscar de la Hoya aside, she wasn’t a huge fan, that was why. “The amphitheatre wouldn’t be as large as a boxing arena.”

His dark eyes crinkled once more. “Or nearly as entertaining.”

Tomas Ruiz was so obviously not a music fan. What a relief! They had nothing in common.

“Well – ahem -- let’s get back to our negotiations, shall we?” she said briskly. “If the amount of rent I agreed upon with Mr. Anderson is problematic, I can pay you a little more each month.” She needed to lose weight anyway. Who needed three meals a day?

Tomas Ruiz’s eyes stopped crinkling. “This ain’t about the money. Apart from you living alone in an abandoned building in a high crime zone, this mansion is structurally unsound. It’ll never meet code.”

“Code?”

“Building specs.”

“I guarantee the mansion will meet ... uh ... code before school opens in September.”

“For the sake of argument -- where’s a widowed music teacher gonna come up with the investment capital needed to fix up this dump?”

Money.

She sniffed. With some people, like Tomas Ruiz, money was always the bottom line.

Seraphina smoothed her fingers over her straight skirt. “I don’t see where my financial situation is any of your concern.”

“I’m not getting all in your business. All’s I’m interested in is getting you off my property. You’re not safe here.” He scratched his temple. “Ain’t nowhere in this whole neighborhood that’s safe for a woman like you.”

She kept her temper. Barely. He thought he had her pegged, did he? Since he seemed familiar with her kind of woman, she wished he’d let her in on the classification. Frankly, she had no idea. What kind of woman was she? And more importantly, how did *he* see her?

"Believe me," she began, "I have lived in far worse neighborhoods. And, I like it here."

"Yeah, well, the funky ambience will wear thin pretty quick on a woman like you."

There was that *woman like you* again.

Haggling was getting her nowhere fast. She would try a different approach.

"My goodness," she said sweetly, "all I'm trying to do is level the playing field a bit. The school will offer low-income children equal access to music lessons through an extensive and privately funded scholarship program. Any and all donations would be greatly appreciated." She paused, smiled, heaped on the saccharine. "I wish you'd try to understand the needs of these disadvantaged children."

"Oh, I understand, all right! I understand that Southside kids need more than the pipe dreams of a do-gooder. Hell, I've seen my share of philanthropists like you. You think you can blow into a neighborhood, make a whole lot of pretty promises about establishing social programs, and then split when you get bored or your white gloves get soiled. What you don't realize is that when you get tired of slumming, and hurry back to your neat little life, in your neat little neighborhood, in your clean-window suburb, you leave behind a bunch of disappointed little kids. The Southside is damn messy, lady, and a bottle of window cleaner ain't gonna fix it!"

Seraphina felt her face grow flushed. "That is flagrantly unfair! I am not that person you describe. I've never even owned a pair of white gloves!"

But Tomas Ruiz didn't seem to hear. He continued on with his rant. "These kids need something solid in their lives, something they can build a future on. They need job opportunities, apprenticeship programs, a way to make an honest living. What they don't need is a do-gooder lady with empty, reckless promises. So, I won't be changing my mind about the school. These kids don't need music lessons. And I want your tail out of here by the end of the month."

"Why don't these kids need music in their lives?" She stuck out her chin, a habit of hers when she felt cornered. "Huh? Why? Because they're poor?"

"Exactly," he said, scorn registering in every syllable. "Because they're poor. Ain't that what I just said?"

"I don't care for your attitude."

"Ditto here, Mrs. Norris! You think you can solve complex problems with one tap of your magic musical baton. If that ain't attitude, what is?"

"It's not attitude when someone tries to make a difference through hard work --"

She stopped. Frowned. "I wonder," she said, genuinely seeking his candor, "if other people in town feel as you do about the school. I assumed everyone felt positively, owing to the welcome I received at the Chamber of Commerce Happy Hour."

"Sorry. I don't go in for all that operatic screeching, so I missed you singing *Carmen* that night."

“A shame you weren’t in attendance. My vocal performance had never been better. And, as a result of my public relations schmoozing, the school received some wonderful scholarship funding. The hors d’oeuvres were really quite good, too.”

“Yeah, well, I make it a habit never to eat things I can’t spell.”

“My goodness! How extraordinarily limiting for you.”

She smiled.

He smirked.

Sex. This was all about sex. Their one-upmanship wasn’t about the school. Their bickering was verbal foreplay. Despite herself, she was physically attracted to Tomas Ruiz, and if his difficulty in staying focused on her face, not on her breasts, was any indication, he seemed physically attracted to her as well.

She didn’t take his interest personally. According to local legend, Tomas Ruiz was attracted to anything with a GYN and a heartbeat. And she was ... well ... she was the cliché of the lonely and sexually frustrated widow.

Whatever the reasons, they needed to drop the tedious, quasi-flirtatious bantering and deal honestly with what lay beneath their sparring. An undeniable electrical current buzzed back and forth between them, a magnetic pull they could either act upon or disregard. As consenting adults, the choice was theirs to make.

The first step was to apologize for her sarcasm, which was sexual displacement at its very worst.

Chapter Six

"Listen, Mrs. Norris, about that operatic screeching crack -- I'm sorry," Tomas Ruiz said, beating her to the apology punch.

"Apology accepted and counter-offered -- I can't spell that darn word, either. For years, I mispronounced it as 'horse doovers.'"

He thumbed his jaw. "Ain't that how it's supposed to be pronounced?"

"Why no, it's --" She stopped, looked over at his crinkled bad-boy eyes. "Got me."

"You got me, too."

"Pardon? When?"

"When I heard you sing the other day. You sounded just like an angel."

"Thank you!"

They laughed. The joint humor felt good, almost like the beginning of a friendship. An impossibility, of course, since they were on different sides in the school debate. Apart from that, friends don't generally throw friends out onto the street, leaving them homeless and virtually unemployed. And there was that pesky sexual awareness thing happening between them as well. Something like that could squash a developing friendship between a man and a woman, *any* man and woman.

Reality check. Her mind wasn't on doing lunch with Tomas Ruiz. Her mind was on sweaty sheets and lusty sighs and musky smells. A pity they were involved in an adversarial tug-of-war. From a purely practical point of view, a little meaningless sex with Tomas Ruiz would probably do her lingering depression a world of good. Mindless sex would probably be just what the doctor ordered.

Taking a deep breath, Seraphina tried to bring her wayward thoughts back on track. "Tomas, I really would like to know what people think about the school. You must hear things. People talk --"

"I'm not exactly anybody's sounding board in town. Frankly, I'm usually on the receiving end of gossip."

"How difficult for you," she said softly, sympathetically, her pity entirely hypocritical when considering to whom she spoke. After all, she'd just envisioned a media blitz that would make Tomas Ruiz the scourge of Fenton. Now, the idea left a bitter aftertaste in her mouth. How petty and vindictive to think two wrongs ever made a right ...

"Yes, I have heard of your reputation, Tomas."

His reply was a pair of wide shoulders lifted in a shrug, telling her nothing.

She wanted him to deny the gossip! For, if the stories circulating about him were true, then the situation was utterly hopeless.

In Fenton, Tomas Ruiz was known as the town's most notorious womanizer, a man who cared about nothing but the almighty dollar, an opportunist who let nothing and no one stand in the way of his ambition.

Yet, he had also spoken with such passion, such conviction, about job opportunities, apprenticeship programs, a way for the young people of the Southside to make an honest living. His approach had sounded so practical.

She too was a practical person. Pragmatism had become her religion, realism her faith. So, one would think they could make some sort of deal, reach some sort of compromise, arrive at an arrangement that would benefit both of them --

Unless Tomas Ruiz's speech about the needs of Southside children was just a charmer's lie.

Her pride was a short nylon thread with a small, slippery knot attached at the end. She held onto that knot in a death grip, lest she break down in tears in front of this man, who was, despite the sexual attraction, no more than a complete stranger, whose thoughts she didn't know, whose motives she suspected.

She had but one certainty: Tomas Ruiz must not weaken her resolve to stay in the mansion. This house symbolized her last stand against despair, a line she had drawn in the sand against the depression that seemed to smother her more with each passing day. Leave here and she had no place else to go but deeper into sadness.

She'd lost the ability to pray months before. Out of sheer habit, she clasped her hands together at her waist, digging the fingernails of her right hand into her fleshy left palm, a test repeated often these last months to make sure she had not gone totally numb. "You've accomplished what you came here to do, and now you may leave. You have houses to build. Don't let me detain a busy man like yourself." She started for the kitchen door.

Halfway there, her no-nonsense straight skirt caught on one of the many exposed nails along the wall of the porch. None of the usual methods worked to free herself: tugging, pulling, saying a few select bad words under her breath. She was about to rip the foolish nail head through the hem when Tomas dropped to a graceful kneel at her feet and reached up her leg. "Here, allow me."

She might have told him not to bother. Swatted his hands away. She could have done any number of things to keep him from touching her. Instead, as Tomas Ruiz tore her world apart, one finger at a time, she dropped her gaze to the dark crown of his head, and imagined what else he might do for her there on his knees at the center of her body.

"Steady," he said, low and sexy. "Just hold still. Let me do all the work."

How many times and in how many different bedrooms had the man kneeling at her feet uttered those very same words to a woman? How many bare female legs had he walked his hand up?

Hundreds, more than likely. Thousands, according to the gossip.

To prove her hormones didn't totally rule her, she forced herself to change her mental musing from lust think to something more cerebral. "I get so bored with the same old marigolds. This summer, I'm planting unusual plants around the mansion." She paused, groping for sanity as he groped her knee. "Do you know anything about the care of erotic -- I mean -- *exotic* plants?"

"Look around you. No flowers will grow here, Mrs. Norris. Any seeds that come up will wither and die. Only weeds survive on the Southside. Maybe in a few years things will improve, not right now."

She couldn't wait a few years! For the sake of her shaky mental health, she needed to involve herself in the school. Right now. Today. Her husband's death and the concurrent loss of a meaningful occupation had left her floundering. Too much free time on her hands contributed to her prurient thoughts of Tomas Ruiz.

"This is taking forever," she said breathlessly. "Are you freeing me from the wall or nailing me to it?"

Dark eyes twinkling, he gazed up at her. "If I was nailing you, trust me, you'd know it."

After seconds of memory backtracking, she understood the gaffe she'd made.

What a complete idiot! She was making a fool of herself. Misspeaking left and right. "I didn't mean that the way it came out." Her sluggish brain rephrased the question. "That is, what I meant to say: Is there a problem? You've been working on me a long time."

"If I was working on you, *ruca*, you'd never complain about how long I was taking. I'd keep you so busy, you wouldn't ask me all these questions neither."

Her hands went to her hips. "I meant -- working on my *hem*!"

"I know what you meant. I'm just teasing you."

"I'd wish you'd stop!"

“Your wish is my command.” He gave her skirt one last tug.

And her skirt dropped back down to its former place.

But his large, capable hand loitered. On her leg. Her *bare* leg.

On a tight budget, she’d removed her pantyhose as soon as she’d walked in the door, done to prevent possible runs. Now she was paying the price for her economy.

The brown fingers touching her leg contained such strength! Such male confidence. The man exuded masculine power from every sinew and muscle. Why did some men have everything, while other men had nothing, not even the promise of a tomorrow? Why did good men die too young?

Her husband had been only fifty, just middle-aged, when he’d died of the cholera epidemic that had swept through their small missionary school in India. The greedy disease that had claimed his life also took more than half the village population. Left with nothing but despair, dragging herself out of bed each morning proved difficult. Why get up? Why bother facing the new day? What did she have to live for anymore?

If only they’d had a child ...

She’d desperately wanted a baby. But no little boy or little girl filled the aching void inside her. And maybe her childlessness was just as well. Hard enough to bear her husband’s death. What if she’d had to deal with the loss of a child as well? So many little ones had lost their struggle for life against the epidemic. Why hadn’t she died, too?

She’d wanted to die. When illness had finally struck her, she’d prayed to die. She’d even bargained with a God in whom she no longer believed to substitute her death for a sick child, her life for theirs. And, why not? What did she have left? No husband, no school, no faith.

The last had meant surrendering her work. What kind of missionary had no faith? What kind of missionary practiced closet atheism?

When the all-too-familiar self-pity began swamping her again, stoicism didn’t prevent her from breaking down in front of Tomas Ruiz, courage didn’t keep the tears from forming behind her lids. She wished she could say crying jags had wrung her dry. That spent emotion had left her as rubbery as spaghetti cooked way past *al dente*. But it hadn’t been like that for her. She’d experienced something much worse than the purging sadness of normal grief.

This past year, she’d felt nothing. Absolutely nothing.

And feeling nothing, she’d had no choice but to go on. Without her husband. Without the mission school in India. Without her faith. Without her God. All by herself.

Through a hole in the porch roof, above the thickly swarming cloud of mosquitoes, she noted dully that a star streaked across the night sky.

“Make a wish,” Tomas Ruiz said.

She blinked at his romanticism. Then thought, why not? One person's wish was another person's prayer. One person's superstition was another person's religion. "I will, if you will."

"Sure."

As Seraphina closed her eyes, she wondered what a virile man like Tomas Ruiz, a man in his prime, a man who had women falling all over him, a man who had everything, could possibly have to wish for.

Chapter Seven

“Wish I had me one of them jazzy Hawaiian shirts.” Tomas removed his tool belt in front of the trailer’s miniscule closet. “A real splashy one, with loud yellow and red exotic flowers.”

Myra finished filing her nails. “What the hell are you rambling on about now?”

“Ever notice how male birds have more colorful plumage than female birds?”

“Nope. Can’t say I have. But I have noticed you’ve been more *flighty* than usual since your visit to the new music teacher yesterday. Like you’re walkin’ on air or somethin’.”

A gentleman never tells ...

So Tomas kept right on talking birds. “There’s a reason for all those bright feathers. A guy’s gotta get a lady’s attention somehow. I think a Hawaiian shirt might do that for me, especially if the lady has a thing for exotic flowers.”

“Rare birds? Exotic flowers? You’ve been hanging out too much over at The Pink Flamingo.”

“That’s right, Myra. Make fun of the simple wishes of a simple man.”

“You’re simple, for sure, if you think you need a hula-hula shirt to attract female attention.”

But he only wanted one woman’s attention. Seraphina’s attention. Even thinking her name had him seeing angels.

Myra tossed her nail file back in the desk drawer. Out-of-the-blue, she hit him with her penetrating gaze. “How bad do you really want the Riverfront Project, Tomas?”

“There’s nothing I want more.”

“What are you willing to do to get it?”

“Anything,” he promptly replied, no deep concentration needed.

Myra started tapping her newly manicured tips on her desk blotter. "Your public relations stink."

"Tell me something I don't already know."

Tap. Tap. Tap. "How's this? Seraphina Norris is picking up a lot of goodwill in this town, and you might catch some too if you hang onto her feel-good coattails."

"The lady thinks I'm a dud."

"You are a stud. All the ladies say so. Work it to your advantage."

"*Dud!* Not stud."

"Mine's better. Here on out, *shat*-up and let me do the talking. I'm not listening to you anyway."

"What else is new?" he muttered under his breath.

"I heard that, you fresh thing!"

"Sorry," he said automatically.

"Scuttlebutt says Fred Connor is urging the planning board to go against your bid for the downtown Riverfront Project."

Suspecting as much, he still couldn't help but slump. "Why?"

"He doesn't like your image. You gotta clean up your act pronto if you want in on the Riverfront Project deal. Connor holds a lot of weight with the City Council." Myra hefted her feet onto the waste paper receptacle.

One of these days, he was sneaking in that orthopedic hassock he'd bought to match her chair. "What do you suggest I do?"

"Reconsider evicting Seraphina Norris."

"What does Mrs. Norris have to do with any of this?"

"Connor happens to be the music teacher's biggest supporter. He wants her to have that school, and he wants her to have it at the old Monroe place." Myra took a wheezing breath. "You might want to think about teamin' up with that woman, boss. I like her. She's got guts. Determination. I knew it the minute I set eyes on her over at the Chamber of Commerce. Probably comes from her bein' a former missionary and all."

"Seraphina Norris, a missionary? As in the position?"

Myra rolled her eyes. "As in church missionary! She worked with her minister folks. When they passed on, she married her minister husband and continued her work in some of the worst slums in India. I just found out today over at the diner that her husband died of cholera. She nursed him along with the sick kids in her school. Then, she also contracted cholera. But still she wouldn't leave, not until her church sent out a replacement. She's only now gettin' back on her feet."

"She told me she was a widow. But India?"

"Calcutta," Myra supplied. "And stop making me repeat every damn thing I say."

"I took her for one of these do-gooder types."

"She's a do-gooder for sure," said Myra. "But she happens to be the real deal. You need to hitch your star to hers if you want this Riverfront Project. Today, you go back over to the Monroe place and see how you can do that."

* * * * *

The university administrator stood when Seraphina entered his office. "I'm Dean Slater." He motioned to the chair in front of his desk.

Smiling cordially, Seraphina took the seat indicated, placing her briefcase containing an inch-thick folder of employment applications on her lap. "How many teaching candidates do you have for me to interview today, Dean Slater?"

"One."

Seraphina blinked. "One. Only one?"

"Very few of our graduating seniors are willing to work in a high-crime area for the salary you quoted over the phone."

She bit her lip. "I suppose I could come up with a bit extra --"

Dean Slater rustled some papers in his In/Out box. "Even if you doubled the salary, you'd interest very few applicants. The Southside doesn't have the best reputation, my dear."

"I see." Seraphina studied her hands while recovering from the blow just dealt her. When her disappointment was under control, she looked straight into Dean Slater's eyes. "Can you tell me something about the applicant?"

The dean of students pushed a neatly typed résumé across the shiny mahogany desk. "Calia Vasquez is one of our brightest, most talented students. I have to be honest with you, for that reason I tried to discourage this young lady from applying. But as soon as Miss Vasquez heard about the school, she insisted upon the interview, despite my objections."

"What instrument does she play?"

"Miss Vasquez is a promising concert violinist. Her talents will be wasted in the classroom."

"Why don't we let her decide where her talents are best suited?"

Dean Slater looked offended. "Teaching is an admirable profession. I am an educator, myself! But why should this young lady sacrifice her career on a poverty-ridden student body when she could command a high salary in an affluent area, at a prestigious school?"

"Calia comes from a wonderful, professional family. Her father is a doctor, her mother a lawyer. All her brothers and sisters are well-educated and successful. A high-achiever like her could go places."

"I suppose," he went on thoughtfully, "because of her Hispanic heritage, she feels some sense of responsibility --"

Seraphina's heart pounded. "Miss Vasquez is bilingual?"

"Well, yes. English and Spanish. But fluency doesn't mean she needs to teach in that particular neighborhood, with those particular children."

"Don't you see? There's every need. The Southside has a large Latin population. Please send her in at once!"

Dean Slater rose from behind his desk and ushered a pretty, dark-haired, trim-figured young woman into his office. Then, closing the door behind him, the educator left them alone.

Seraphina jumped out of the chair. Her briefcase containing an inch-thick worth of unnecessary job applications fell to the floor. Rather than a business handshake, she held onto the applicant with both hands, lest the accomplished musician change her mind and tried to get away. "No interview. Just tell me why you want to teach at my school."

Calia Vasquez smiled serenely. "That's easy. I'm from the Southside. I'm going home where I belong."

"You're hired!" The Director of the Southside's Conservatory of Music hugged her new teacher.

* * * * *

Later on that day, a grating knock on the rusted screen interrupted Seraphina's cleaning. Broom in hand, she answered the door.

Tomas Ruiz threw his arms up in the air. "First you squirt me with window wash, now this! What's next? Sucking me up in a vacuum?"

She snickered. "I'll have you know, I've given up using cleaning agents as weapons."

He dimpled, his laughing dark eyes widened, his gaze fixed on the broom. "You still sweep me away, Miz Norris."

Oh, he was such a flirt!

"Talking about sucking up," she said, stepping aside for him to enter her home. "I know why you're here. Your lawyer just called."

"Oh?" he asked innocently.

She sent him a withering stare.

"Honest, I don't know why the legal dude called."

"Your attorney suggested I leave the mansion sooner rather than later. He informed me, I have no legal foundation on which to fight the eviction. So -- if you're here to gloat, please spare me. As you can see, I'm busy."

The comic clutched at his heart. "You wound me. I'm not here to gloat."

"Then, why *are* you here?"

Removing the broom from her grip, he began a rhythmic sweeping. Tomas Ruiz did everything with a musical flare.

Looking up from the dirty floor, he stared into her eyes. "I'm here to help."

Not fooled for a minute by his soulful glance, she bracketed her hips with her work-worn hands. "So, you're here to help. Why? Afraid I'll sue if I stub my toe on one of these loose floorboards?"

"Could be." His dark eyes twinkled, his dimples deepened.

With his bad-boy looks and naughty charm, no wonder Tomas Ruiz had a womanizing reputation. He had to know his effect upon women, Seraphina thought resentfully, scooping dirt into her dustpan. All charismatic men did.

Feeling utterly un-charming, she said dourly, "You're hardly forcing me to live here, Tomas. We both know you want me out. So why sweep my porch?"

"I already told you -- to help out."

She'd soon see about *that*. "As it so happens, I could use your help."

"Just name it."

"I need to find another job. Currently, I give private piano lessons --"

"To rich kids."

"Yes, to advantaged children," she bristled. "Plus, I substitute teach at the high school. But I'll need a job nights and weekends as well, to help defray costs. I understand you own a strip club. The Pink Flamingo. Are you hiring any new employees?"

Dark eyes lowered to her chest. "Mrs. Norris, my employees wear very scanty costumes."

Feathers. *Only* feathers. Bright pink feathers. That was what the dancers wore.

Luckily, she was no prude. As far as she was concerned, a body was only a body, and she felt very little embarrassment about hers. With the exception of her rear end, which was ... well ... abundant. Disappointing her breasts weren't equally as abundant. Would a few strategically placed feathers mask her pear-shaped figure?

If his shocked expression counted for anything, Tomas Ruiz had his doubts.

"You know," he said, rubbing his chronic two-day beard growth. "I don't think The Flamingo would be a good fit for you. And about the eviction notice, I've been thinking ... I could maybe extend your occupancy."

Her lids shuttered down against the pain in her head. Who was this man anyway? What was he all about? Had she been too quick to judge?

She did tend to make snap decisions at times. Maybe, Tomas Ruiz was more than a money-grubbing ogre. Maybe, he had some scruples. Maybe, concern for her well-being, not the quest for the almighty buck or fear of a lawsuit, had brought him to her door again. And

maybe, just maybe, behind that laughing face and bad-boy charisma lurked some hidden depth.

Naw.

"I don't need an extension," she said, tightly. "I need to stay here. Permanently. I teach music. That's what I do. That's how I pay the bills. You don't seem to approve of that method, nor do you approve of my seeking part-time employment at your bar --"

Practicality made her inquire, "How much does stripping at The Pink Flamingo pay per night, anyway?"

When he threw out a figure, her eyes bugged. The amount far exceeded her weekly substitute teaching earnings. For one night in feathers!

"Headache?" he said to her squinting eyes.

"Like the pounding of a percussion section. After interviewing prospective candidates for teaching positions, I then substituted half a day for an ill band teacher at the high school. Let's just say, what the drum section lacked in musicianship, the players made up for in decibels."

"Listen, we started off all wrong. Can we maybe start over again?" Transferring the broom, Tomas stuck out his right palm.

Dumbfounded, Seraphina waited for the fingers to rattle like a deadly snake.

"Aw, go on," he prodded. "I dare you. It's only a handshake, right?"

Right. Only a handshake. Silly, if not downright rude, to ignore his palm. More importantly, she never backed down from a challenge. Also, a handshake fell under her PMS theory. Theorizing a small nibble of chocolate would avert a full-fledged orgy on a family-sized candy bar when *that* time of the month rolled around, she would open a small bag of semi-sweet chocolate chips and eat them, one at a time, thus indulging her craving without a huge caloric intake. Using that same logic, a socially acceptable handshake might just satisfy her socially unacceptable craving to touch Tomas Ruiz. And, to be charitable, everyone deserved a second chance, everyone deserved the opportunity to start over again. Isn't that what she was doing?

She determinedly slipped her hand into his hand, palm to palm. As was expected in such situations, she raised her face to his, a polite social smile pasted dutifully in place, and took a step forward. Now within his personal space, her cheek muscles faltered. Twitched. Finally, the social smile gave out altogether. Mouth-open, she simply gawked at the splendid maleness of Tomas Ruiz.

Amazingly thick hair helped soften his tough face. But nothing could soften that square jaw or jutting nose. And his dark eyes! What could she say about those eyes that wouldn't sound trite and hackneyed and clichéd?

Perhaps she could say those dark eyes, those twinkling, sparkling, devil-may-care eyes, were definitely not the windows to his soul, but most definitely were his calling card to any

woman's bedroom on the planet. Hands clasped, fingers entwined -- no shake, no pump, no motion at all -- Seraphina admitted her PMS theory didn't hold here. A small nibble of Tomas Ruiz wouldn't do the trick. Only an all-out binge would satisfy her craving.

And there stood Tomas Ruiz, looking at her as if he had wire-tapped into her dull, fatigued, hurting brain, and knew exactly, precisely, what she was thinking.

And why wouldn't he?

He must get this exact same bowled-over reaction from every female.

Healthy and young and virile and sexy, Tomas Ruiz had it all. Everything. She would've wept at the unfairness of life had she'd been able to. But of course, she couldn't cry. She hadn't been able to shed one tear, not in a year, not for her dead husband, not for all those dead children, and certainly not for herself, forced to go on without them.

Some tragedies cut too deep for tears.

Chapter Eight

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Norris," Tomas Ruiz said formally, his large brown hand clasped around her much smaller, much paler hand.

"Seraphina." Mouth dry, lips barely parted, breaths coming and going in shallow pants, her rising arousal shocked her out of her perpetual sadness. "Please call me Seraphina."

"Thank you. I'd like that. Tomorrow, Seraphina," he said her name softly, as though caressing each syllable, "I'll start asking around town about work for you. With the building surge in town, there's bound to be an opening somewhere."

She hung onto his palm, reluctant to let go. "Thank you. That's very sexy of you."

He grinned. "You're welcome. And thank you for the compliment."

What compliment?

She thought backwards, flushing when she recalled yet another slip in her speech. "I misspoke. Again. I meant to say that's very -- er -- solicitous of you."

"Gee, I'm crushed. And here I work so hard at sexy, too. Ain't I at least *muy suave*?"

She rolled her eyes.

He dimpled. "Aw, c'mon! Give me smooth, anyway!"

Sighing, Seraphina withdrew her hand.

She doubted Tomas Ruiz had to work all *that* hard at anything, certainly not at sexy or smooth or *muy suave*. Sure, he cultivated his natural attributes with various poses and posturing, and enhanced his bad-boy image with a black T-shirt and jeans wardrobe, but the man naturally exuded charisma. Some men had animal magnetism. Other men had integrity. Few men possessed both, as the first quality invariably corrupted the second.

Tomas broke into her thoughts. "How's this? Not only will I find you another full-time job other than teaching, I'll also find you another place to live."

"That is not the kind of help I need!" Before she said more, something she'd later regret, she walked away.

"Hold up!"

Turning, she saw a pink *something* wave at her from between two brown fingers. "What's that?"

"My business card. In this instance, the card will also act as an employment referral to the manager at The Flamingo. I'll tell Lou Franco to expect your arrival at two o'clock, and that's sharp, to discuss part-time work." His smile dazzled, a tease lurked in his voice. "If that appointment is convenient for you, naturally."

Retracing her steps, she lifted the card from between his fingers and read the fine print beneath the practically pornographic logo. "I'll get my legs waxed. Those feathers don't hide much."

His sexy lips trembled at the corners. "Know how to lap dance?"

"No. Should I signup for an accelerated class?"

Tomas washed both hands over his face. "We've both had our fun. Give the card here." He wiggled his fingers.

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" She slipped the delicate pink rectangle into the pocket of her navy-blue skirt. "I'm going."

"Wait a minute! You can't strip! You're a nice woman --"

"Oh, please! Spare me the moral outrage. You are not the keeper of my values. Believe it or not, I don't happen to have *nice woman* tattooed on my rear end," she said defiantly. "Now about those pink feathers -- would a wealthy man like you push a hundred-dollar bill down my cleavage for a few extra grunts and grinds?"

Based on past experience, she already knew the answer.

No!

She did not inspire lust in men. Even if she took it all off, including the feathers, even if she strutted her stuff on that stage as naked as the day she was born, Tomas Ruiz wouldn't notice or care.

Though -- he *really* did seem to like her breasts. She'd caught him eyeing them more than once when he thought she wasn't looking. Real breasts must be novelty items in his circles, she thought, chuckling to herself.

Tomas frowned. "What's so funny?"

"Breasts."

Could she believe, he blushed?

"Breasts ain't funny, ma'am. Breasts are serious business."

"My goodness! I do believe we've finally stumbled onto a subject upon which we can both agree." She slanted him an arched look. "Though, for different reasons, I'm sure. In my

opinion, the purpose of a woman's breasts is for the nurturing of babies. But more and more, society views breasts as ... well ... decorative. Hardly functional at all. Their sole value relegated to bra cup size. That trivializes their importance."

"See that? Just like I said, breasts are serious business."

"And you seriously enjoy looking at mine."

Tomas, the sexy man of the bad reputation, looked bashfully away. "Ease up, woman! A Latino male never discusses such things with a lady."

"Oh, go on! Admit it! You ogle my breasts when you think I won't notice."

"Admitted," he said, looking anywhere but at them, now that they were out in the open, so to speak.

"So, answer my question -- would you push a hundred-dollar bill down my cleavage for a few extra grunts and grinds?"

Tomas Ruiz raced for the door. "Ask for Lou. Two o'clock sharp."

* * * * *

Wedged like a thong between an open-all-night adult movie house and an open-all-night adult bookstore, The Pink Flamingo fit right into Fenton's "X-rated" entertainment zone. Every city in every country in the world provided a similar district with similar entertainment. Goodness knows, she'd spent enough time on city blocks just like this one to know exactly what went on inside the buildings. And on the streets. And in the alleyways.

Her parents' ecclesiastical calling had dictated a mission of the homeless. Since the time she was old enough to use a ladle, she'd been put to God's work in soup kitchens, in flop houses -- any place where poverty thrived. She'd witnessed her share of misery. And things that gave her reason to hope, things that made her spirits soar, things that uplifted her. Nothing on the Southside's X-rated zone either surprised or shocked her ...

... *except* the freshly painted teen drop-in center.

The building was incongruous, a quiet beacon of hope shining across the dark street from the garish flamboyancy of The Pink Flamingo.

Curious, and with plenty of time on her hands before her audition, she took a quick peek inside the drop-in center's large storefront windows.

The bright and cheerful interior boasted pool tables, a large screen TV, PCs, a boxing ring and assorted weights, and exercise equipment. *Gasp!* Bookshelves lined the far wall, filled, not with dog-eared paperbacks, but hardcover editions, best sellers as well as the classics. A sign on the locked door advised: "Fully staffed facility open after school and on weekends." A long list of community service courses and a short list of rules followed. Impressive.

Costly, too, she thought, re-crossing the two lanes of traffic and entering The Pink Flamingo.

As her eyes adjusted to the strip club's smoky ambiance, a thin man in a dapper pin-striped suit -- vaguely reminiscent of Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* -- called out from behind the bar, "You Seraphina Norris?"

"Guilty as charged."

The man walked toward her. "Lou Franco, the manager. And bartender. And bouncer. And a few other titles I wouldn't want to tell a lady."

"How do you do, Mr. Franco?"

"I do fine. And here's Roxanne True, now. She'll show you the ropes."

A statuesque redhead in a pink silk robe undulated over. "I heard you sing at the Chamber of Commerce Happy Hour. Got a great set of lungs on you, hon."

"Why thank you, Miss --"

"Just Roxanne The Stripper, hon."

"Exotic dancer," Lou corrected, wearing an unhappy expression. "I don't employ strippers at The Flamingo. All my girls have genuine talent. They're entertainers, each and every one. If you get the job, Mrs. Norris, you'll keep your feathers on. I operate a high-class establishment here."

"Lou's a former police detective, hon. No worries about the customers stepping out of line with him on duty. And he's always on duty," Roxanne confided, winking one beautifully expressive blue eye. "The guy has absolutely no life."

"No lie," Lou quickly agreed. "Rox -- can you show Seraphina the dressing room while I finish setting up?"

"Sure, Lou. Walk this way, hon."

Not without major surgery, Seraphina thought with a sigh. Her hips couldn't swivel like Roxie's.

Inside the small dressing room, pink-feathered flamingo costumes decorated chairs, closets, tables, and the floor. Pictures of flamingos adorned the walls. Without meaning to, Seraphina's thoughts returned to India, where real live flamingos had nested in a muddy stream near her mission school. She'd spent hours of quiet reflection alone at the water's edge, watching the beautiful birds fish. Stick legs wobbling against the current, long flexible necks dipped low, the wading birds would scoop out their next meal.

A sharp stab pierced heart. Seraphina welcomed the pain. Feeling something was far better than feeling nothing. "Very generous of you, giving me the tour, Roxie."

"I remember my first day here like it happened yesterday. I thought I'd throw up on stage. Dancing in front of a crowd takes some getting used to. You quickly learn to tune out

everything, but the music. And this place ain't so bad. Lou keeps the order, and I love working for Tommie."

"You know Tomas Ruiz?"

"We go way back, Tommie and me. He's one of the good guys. I understand he's the one who sent you over for the job. Though, if you don't mind my saying so, you don't seem like his type."

Seraphina laughed. "I'm not! Tomas Ruiz neither likes nor approves of me."

"That doesn't sound like the Tommie I know. He's never been one to make rash calls about people."

"Maybe not. Ordinarily. But I'm a thorn in his side. I've rented the old Monroe mansion, the one he plans on ripping down. I planned to rehab the house and grounds, turn the place into a music school. That is, before Tomas Ruiz decided to evict me. He doesn't think I belong on the Southside."

"A word of advice -- stay put. Don't budge. Tommie will come 'round."

"I don't think so --"

"Let me tell you a little something about Tommie -- stick him in an aluminum suit and he'd be one of those old knights of yore. He's the protective type, most especially of women. He's only looking out for you, hon. The guy's a real doll."

"You're on in five," a voice yelled at the dressing room door.

"That's Ed, the stagehand. He works lights." Roxanne shook her head. "He can make a gal shine up on stage, but is a pain in the ass about punctuality." She gave Seraphina a reassuring smile. "Change into your costume now, hon. Use the screen over there in the corner. And when you come out, I'll give you a few pointers on how to keep your audience interested."

* * * * *

Tomas was on his way out when Myra actually picked up the ringing phone. He hung tight when his sweetheart's newspaper hit the desk. "Don't go getting your silk boxers all in a twist, Lou," Myra squawked. "*Cheesh!* I'll tell him, already."

Cradling the receiver on her shoulder, she told him already. "Lou says Seraphina Norris just walked into The Flamingo for her two o'clock audition. The lady's got her own costume and music and everything. Lou wants to know what gives." Myra folded her arms over her barrel chest. "So do I. Spill, mister."

Tomas mouth gaped. "I never figured her for a show."

"She's a show, for sure. And as it so happens, Lou's lookin' to hire a new stripper. Says he's one gal short since Chi-chis left to finish hairdressing school."

“Aw, man! Mrs. Norris can’t fill that vacancy. What does a former missionary know about exotic dancing?”

“Not much. She asked Lou if the swingin’ tassels came with clip-ons.”

Tomas twirled his fingers in front of his pecs. “These kinds of swinging tassels?”

“You’ve got it.”

Ignoring his groan, Myra spoke into the phone again. “Sit tight, Lou.” She glared over at him. “Tommie’s coming right over to make everything right.”

Chapter Nine

Ten minutes later, Tomas raced through The Flamingo's hot-pink doors. "Where is she?"

Lou looked up from polishing the taps at bar. "Changing into her costume."

"This is a mistake, Lou. I never should've set this thing up." Tomas rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't want Seraphina Norris working here. The lady is a former missionary."

"I knew there was something different about her when she walked in the door. That's why I called."

"I'm glad you did. She knows nothing, Lou."

"Well, she wants to learn. Not like her dancing here is the end of the world. She'll do fine. I'll keep my eye on her. Look out for her. Take care of her. How's that?"

"She's-not-working-in-this-dive."

Lou slapped his buffing cloth on the bar. "Back in the day, the place was a dive, but The Flamingo's respectable now, and so's the salary."

"She's got this half-assed idea about turning the Monroe mansion into a music school and using the cash from this moonlighting gig to help fix up the place. But she ain't gonna need the extra cash, 'cuz I'm tossing her out of there."

"Nice move. She got a puppy dog you can kick?"

"Don't look at me like that, *ese*. I got my reasons for wanting her to put a change of address card in with the post office."

"Everybody's got reasons."

Tomas played with a bar menu. "The Monroe place ain't safe. I'm trying to correct the problem, but --"

Tomas stopped his self-incrimination. He trusted Lou, but his barkeep was an ex-cop, strictly straight, everything on the up and up, everything done by the book. Not the best way of handling dope dealers and not exactly Tomas's personal style. "Just don't hire Seraphina Norris on as a stripper. She's not right for the job."

Lou's eyes narrowed to slits. "I don't know where you get off, Ruiz, telling me how to manage The Flamingo. I run a decent establishment here. You want me to resign, say the word."

"No, I don't want you resigning! This bar would close without you." Tomas rolled his tight shoulders. "Look, I apologize for interfering, but so help me, if Seraphina Norris gets up on that stage and some drooling fuck customer leers at her in my presence, I won't be held responsible for my actions."

Lou eyed the laminated menu Tomas had been playing with, the one that had somehow ended up crushed into a ball. "So, that's the way it is, eh?"

"Yeah, that's the way it is, Lou."

The Flamingo's manager fingered his gray silk tie. "We're not the only game in town. If she's tapped out, who's to say she won't try some other club? And you and I both know, some of those other places are raw even by our somewhat tarnished standards. You want her working in a place that's nothing but a cover for prostitution?"

"I got an idea -- give her a waitress job."

"Sure. A singing waitress job. How's that?" Lou laughed.

"Why the fuck not? She could do burlesque numbers. Show tunes. I've heard her sing. She's got the voice."

The manager of The Pink Flamingo beat his fingertips on the bar's shiny chrome surface. "Show tunes would add class to the place, I suppose --"

"I'm ready, Mr. Franco!"

Wearing a sari, the shimmering material several shades darker than her golden-brown hair, Seraphina took up center stage.

Tomas couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, couldn't think beyond, *Fuck!* She looked beautiful.

And man, would she be pissed if she caught him here.

Tomas dove for the shadows. "Psst," he hissed from the exit. "Lou!"

Engrossed in his job applicant, Lou didn't look over. "Huh?"

"Do not tell Seraphina Norris I was here."

"Sure." Lou's gaze stayed riveted on the stage. "Um ... fine. Anything you say ..."

"You listening, *ese?*"

"I'm all ears."

"Then hear this: That woman unwraps not a single inch of that shimmering stuff she's got on."

The manager played with his cufflinks. "What do you want me to say to her?"

"I don't care. Tell her anything. Make something up. Just make sure she takes the singing waitress gig."

Tomas tiptoed out the bright pink door.

* * * * *

The next day, Tomas parked his truck at the bottom of Monroe hill and walked the mansion's overgrown grounds, checking things out. He couldn't blame Seraphina for wanting to hang onto the house. The hilltop location would make an ideal spot for a school. On hot summer nights, student musicians would serenade everyone up and down the riverfront. The melodies would sound fucking beautiful ...

He hadn't planned on visiting the lady. Somehow, though, Tomas found himself once again at the bottom of a rickety set of stairs. Unable to help himself, he knocked at a rusted screen door.

One rap. Two. The third time worked like a charm.

"Come in!"

He did, finding Sera -- funny how, all of a sudden, he'd started thinking of Seraphina as *Sera* -- on all fours on the kitchen floor. He had never seen a more dick-hardening sight. Which explained his shouted, "Why isn't that back door locked?"

She smiled serenely. "It's the middle of the day."

"Maybe where you come from it's safe in the middle of the day, but this here's the Southside, and it ain't safe here any time of day. You keep your doors locked all the time and don't let anyone inside unless you know them."

She slid back onto her haunches. Raising an arm, she pushed a strand of golden-brown hair back from her forehead. "Not a day goes by without one of your friendly visits, so I assumed you were the one knocking on my door."

Wanting nothing more than to knock on her door, he dropped his eyes.

The fucking kitchen floor needed ripping up. The whole fucking house needed gutting. What the fuck was she doing washing the fucking floor on her hands and knees?

His balls tightened some more. "Get up."

Her green eyes went huge. "Pardon?"

She had to get up! That position brought only one thing to mind, and that one thing had nothing to do with her cleaning beat-up linoleum.

"Up off the floor!" He took a step toward her.

Not a muscle did she move. Did the woman have no freakin' sense?

He reached and yanked, bringing her to her feet. "I don't want you scrubbing floors on your hands and knees ever again. Got that?"

"A floor this dirty will ruin my mop"

He scowled at her. "So, instead you ruin your hands?"

"The mop is brand-new."

He scowled at her and at her half-assed logic. Yeah, she was nice, but she'd been married! Hadn't she seen the bulge in his jeans? Couldn't she read the signs?

He strained out the words through clenched teeth. "Get the damn mop. I'll finish the damn floor."

Her lush hips swayed to the utility closet; she sashayed her way back. "I never turn down an offer of help." She handed over the mop.

Keeping his eyes averted, he started pushing the sponge around.

Her nipples. Man, her nipples! They jutted through the worn cotton of her dress. Former missionary or not, a woman with a sensual body like that had no business looking all innocent.

Seraphina Norris had him baffled. Her body was saying *Come Fuck Me*, and her lips were saying, "Oh, that feels good," but he knew she wasn't no cock tease.

To confirm this, he looked up.

Big mistake. Her chapped hands had gone to the small of her back, and she was stretching like a cat, her spine arched, her tits clearly outlined under her thin dress.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, he stepped back, getting his dick the hell away from her.

"Thank you for helping me land a part-time job at The Flamingo, Tomas. You're looking at your newest employee."

"Oh, yeah?" Trying to appear nonchalant, he leaned an arm on top of the mop stick and thumbed his jaw. "How'd that go, anyway?"

"Well, I wore my sari -- the village women in Calcutta sold a goat in order to purchase this wonderful length of silk for me as a farewell gift. And as the music played, I began to slowly unwind the yardage, as Rox advised me to do, and --"

Too edgy to let her finish her story, he interrupted. "But you didn't, right?" How to phrase the question, so as not to offend her delicate missionary sensibilities? "I mean, you didn't actually get --"

"Naked?"

"Yeah. That."

"Well, under the sari I wore those tasseled pasties," she said gleefully. "And a feathered G-string." She shook her head. "How one keeps that string from riding up into one's --"

He held up a hand. "I get the picture. What happened?"

"As I started unwrapping the goods, so to speak, Mr. Franco was struck with this fabulous cabaret idea --"

Now he was smiling. "Cabaret, huh?"

"Yes, drink-dispensing singing waitresses. I'll be the first. Do you believe that? No dirty shimmy-shake for me, after all! I'll go table to table with my tray, belting out show tunes."

Relief poured over Tomas. He owned an adult club -- no apologies. The strip bar was a sound investment, a way to get the most return for his investment capital. But a lot of bad stuff went on behind the bright smiles of women who shed their clothes for a living, and he didn't want that bad stuff for Seraphina Norris.

"The pay is great," she continued. "I'll only work weekend nights, and I get to wear a conservative white blouse and black skirt." Her smile was angelic. "I'll tell you a little secret - I really didn't want to strip."

"No fooling?"

"I'm quite serious. Stripping just isn't me. Not that I'm a prude, you understand, because I'm certainly not a prude."

Tomas took in Seraphina's high-necked collar. "Oh, I can see that."

"It's just that, well, the feathers were a little more exposure than I'm used to."

Showing her kneecaps was a little more exposure than Seraphina Norris was used to. "Right, right," he cheerfully agreed.

"Anyway, Tomas, thanks to you, now I'll have extra funds for the school."

The lady needed to get her head out of the clouds. Someone had to give her a dose of reality before she got hurt. "Listen, about this school idea --"

She looked at him intently. "Have you ever wanted something so much, you feared saying the words would make the dream disappear?"

Tomas knew all about that kind of dreaming. He wanted the Riverfront Project so much he could taste it, so much he thought about it first thing in the morning and the last thing at night. He wanted the project like a junkie wanted his next fix, and he'd do anything to make it happen. "Yeah, I've wanted something that bad."

But Seraphina didn't appear to hear. She'd gone someplace else, someplace far away, somewhere in her mind he couldn't reach. He'd been there, too. He'd been to that dark, unholy place where panic clawed at your guts, where fear was a foe that lived inside your own head.

Tomas picked up Seraphina's hand, felt for her pulse, counted the beats, decided she needed a jumpstart, a kick of fresh air, or she'd pass out on him.

"Let's take a walk around the property. All right, Sera?" He paused. "May I call you Sera?"

"Cap'n Monroe called his wife, Prissy. Wasn't that sweet?" she asked vaguely.

“Yeah, sweet. Real sweet.” He led her toward the back door.

At the rusted screen, a noise coming from outside had him narrowing his eyes at the woods at the rear of the house.

The trees were moving. Suspiciously moving.

Something was out there. Not a lost deer or a raccoon, but an animal of the human variety. Someone up to no good. Otherwise, why hide?

Tomas whipped his attention back to Sera, who had stopped before the damned shiny window. Oblivious to her danger, she smiled. At him.

Reflected in the clean, sunlit glass, she made the perfect target.

A sharp *swish* knifed the air, and that clean, shining glass window came smashing down.

Chapter Ten

After the dust cloud cleared and the porch stopped shaking, Seraphina determined that, yes, she was still alive.

Thanks to the quick reflexes of Tomas Ruiz.

In a dull and distant way, she recalled stopping to admire her shiny glass window. And then that same window had shattered, the glass blown inward, the sharp shrapnel ricocheting in every possible direction.

If Tomas hadn't been there, if she had been alone in the house, if he hadn't shielded her from the breaking glass and flying debris, who knew what sort of injuries she might have sustained.

Though the fallout had subsided, Tomas still shielded her.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his breath warming the top of her ear.

His was a straightforward question. And, she should have been able to give him a straightforward, yes or no, answer. Only she couldn't. Everything that had happened this past year, everything that had tested her in ways she never thought possible, had caught up with her. Within the shelter of Tomas's arms she stood mute.

Ten seconds? Twenty? How long had her dream taken to shatter?

Her floor-to-ceiling window must have imploded in under a minute. Within thirty seconds a burst of jagged glass fragments had covered the porch. The breaking glass had been deafening, the sound blocking out her own high-pitched screams.

Not so her dream. Her dream had shattered silently.

"I've got you," Tomas Ruiz had said, swooping her up in his arms and carrying her across the floor, away from danger.

As her life fell apart for the second time in a year, like a madwoman, she'd started to laugh.

Next, came the tears. Ugly tears. Tears that streamed hotly down her cheeks, burning her skin. She'd sobbed, "My beautiful window!"

"Can be replaced." Tomas's voice rumbled against her ear. His strong arms tightened around her. "Only glass, Sera. The damn window was only made of glass."

Only glass?

What did he know?

Shaking, shuddering, she shattered. Not noisily. Not like the window. But silently. Like her dream.

A heart, still whole and strong, hammered against the side of her face. A warm breath, scented faintly of some hot and pleasant spice, caressed her cheek. A lover's stroke. He held her like a lover as well. Then again, what did she know of lovers?

But she did know -- at least, anecdotally -- that danger aroused some men. The need to reaffirm the continuation of the species, or some such biological component, caused certain males to react sexually.

Tomas Ruiz proved out this theory.

After literally placing himself as a barrier between her and a shattering wall of glass, his penis pressed hard and unmistakably against her bottom.

Danger must work the same on certain women, too.

After narrowly escaping injury, she felt like throwing her arms up in the air, her morals out the shattered window, and for the first time in her life, give into her secret nature. As it was, her generous bottom accepted Tomas Ruiz's hard masculinity.

No! That wasn't right. Nothing as tepid as *accepted*. She enthusiastically *welcomed* his hard masculinity, the thickness of which had rapidly imprinted itself into the deep gorge between her buttocks. Eagerly, earnestly, she pushed back against that hard thickness.

"Are you all right?" he asked again.

In answer, a soft sound of pleasure vibrated deep in her throat.

Had she known how, she would have purred. She *wanted* to purr.

Covered in plaster, filthy with it, a fine dust that coated her hair, her loose cotton dress, infiltrating her very skin pores, and she parted her legs for him.

Wide. Wider still.

Teach me how to purr, Tomas ...

Her white cotton panties were of the Mother Hubbard variety -- High-waistband, low-leg elastics, hopelessly modest, hideously ugly. As was her bra. Also white cotton, also utilitarian, the rigid style engineered for maximum support not for Victoria's Secret appetites. Before marriage, afraid to let go, to free the physical side of her nature, she'd never

indulged her yen for sexy underwear. After marriage, she'd had to keep that part of herself hidden so as not to shock or repulse ... or send her saintly husband running for the safety of the opposite direction.

Those same concerns didn't apply to Tomas Ruiz. Gossip said her new landlord never turned down the opportunity to sleep with a woman, any woman.

She was any woman. On the porch, she was conveniently the *only* woman.

Unfastening her bra would take only a slight twist of his large hands, less time than that to slip her panties down and off. Her breasts ached, the nipples hardened to points. The void between her open thighs throbbed. The panel on her underpants, already damp, grew more so. If Tomas Ruiz touched her there, he would learn her true nature. He would understand then, she was no angel.

Would he touch her *there*? Did men routinely touch women *there* before, during, after lovemaking ... any time?

She sensed Tomas Ruiz would touch a woman everywhere. She sensed he would do whatever he wanted to a woman, and the woman would enjoy it.

A window had just shattered, the glass sent flying in every direction. Those sharp missiles could have struck her, maimed her, killed her. Life was so short! Right now, right this very minute, she wanted to know what pleasure for pleasure's sake felt like.

She didn't expect romance, or impassioned kisses, or pretty whispers in her ear. Her urgency called for sex. Hard, driving, pounding sex. The kind of animalistic sex at which Tomas Ruiz purportedly excelled. According to rumor, he could give her what she needed, and the interlude would mean nothing.

Meaningless sex. Oh, please, yes!

"If you weren't here," she began, stopped, began again. "If you hadn't gotten me out of the way --"

"But I was here. I did get you out of the way," he said softly. "So don't go there. Don't go looking for the 'ifs' in life. If you do, they might find you someday."

Fingers lightly swept her twisted-tight hair.

To remove plaster?

Most probably. But how to explain a thumb stroking the full curve of her buttock?

A breathy word escaped her slackened mouth: "Please?"

"All right. It's all right."

Would he draw up her skirts in back? Would he undo his zipper and free that tremendous bulge? Would he take her from behind, like an animal?

Yes! Now! Please now!

Where was the harm in giving into her true nature? Her parents and husband were both gone. Resigned from her missionary post, she need no longer hold herself to exemplary

standards of behavior. For once, she could do something with only herself in mind. Do something *for* herself, not for anyone else. Was that so selfish?

The use would be mutual. Tomas Ruiz wanted her. His erection told her so. He could free the coiled knot inside her belly. She'd do anything he asked, if only to feel something again -- even if that something were shame. Maybe afterwards, she'd finally get some sleep. Restful, sex-satiated sleep.

As excitement quickened her breathing, Tomas's large hand, the one that had only just cupped her bottom, loosened, fell away.

A cry that had nothing to do with the shattered window or with the destruction of her dream rose up inside her. Her folded knuckles blocked its vocalization.

Why had he stopped?

Unless --

In the aftermath of danger, had he only just then realized what he was doing, whom he caressed?

He must have, for he was backing off from her. Not a lot. His body still offered protection, but that hard bulge had retracted.

"You're a nice woman."

With that pronouncement, he denied her what he'd given more than half the women in town.

"The shock," he soothed. "That's what this is about."

No, it wasn't the shock. Or, at least, not *just* the shock. Her need had been building inside her long before the shattered window.

But he couldn't know that. So, he put off her reaction to hysteria. He probably thought the broken window had unhinged her. Then again, he also thought her a do-gooder society lady.

Seraphina looked over her shoulder at the virile young man who knew nothing about her. "A rock, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Did you see who threw it?"

"All I could make out was movement in the trees."

A chill ran through her. "Some kid up to mischief?"

He took a deep breath. "Could be."

"But you don't believe so, do you?"

"Flying glass can do serious damage."

"I see."

And she did. More than he thought she did.

Someone wanted her out of the Southside. Someone wanted her out of this mansion. Someone wanted her gone so badly he had hurled a rock through the window, intending to hurt her in the process. Who? Why?

The slippery nylon thread of her pride wasn't enough to hold onto anymore. She was about to let go. She was about to fall. And there was no safety net. No one to catch her.

Tomas Ruiz wanted her out of the mansion. He could have paid someone to scare her. He could have paid someone to toss a rock through her window. In a diabolical scheme to gain her trust, he might even have staged the whole "rescue" episode. She wouldn't put anything past him. After all, she stood in the way of all those luxury houses he meant to build. Time was money. Every day she spent in the Monroe mansion delayed construction, which ate into his profits.

"What I can't understand, Tomas, is why you aren't saying *I told you so* about the mansion? You were right, and I was wrong about Southside being dangerous. Why aren't you saying those things, huh, Tomas? Why aren't you rubbing my nose in it? Why aren't you saying I deserve everything I get for ever thinking I could start a music school here?"

"Deserve!" He scoffed. "What does deserve have to do with anything that happens in life? Listen, if I heard 'I told you so' as many times as I *deserved* to hear those words, most days I'd hear nothing else."

He waved a big hand. "Look around you! The window broke, but the house is still standing."

"W-what are you saying?"

He raked that waving hand through his dusty hair. "I'm saying ... I don't know what the hell I'm saying. Except that, yeah, the porch shook a hell of a lot, but the main house didn't so much as twitch when the window caved, and that tells me that structurally, the mansion is sound. This old house is stronger than I gave it credit for."

The dark eyes holding hers were openly complimentary. "You're a lot stronger than I gave you credit for, too."

"Oh, you're very much mistaken about that. I'm not strong at all."

Pulling away from the protection of his arms, she ran back inside the house before she begged Tomas Ruiz to make love to her.

He made no attempt to follow.

And why would he?

Tomas Ruiz didn't want her, not even after she'd made it easy for him. Though he'd slept with most of the women in town, he'd made no moves on her. And that didn't surprise her.

Even her own husband hadn't wanted to sleep with her.

Chapter Eleven

His ponytail walloping the back of his neck, Tomas stalked the back trails of River Park, heading down the path no one in his right mind would take.

Tonight, Tomas was every bit as dangerous as any gang member who hung in the park, as desperate as any druggie waiting on his connection. And violent? Hell, yeah, he was violent. Damned violent. He'd been raised on these mean streets, and no punk was messing with him. Let them try. Bring 'em on. He was in a skull-busting mood.

Tomas yelled into the cover of trees, "Enrico Cortez! Show yourself!"

The young gang leader strolled out of the bushes. Eventually. "What's up, man? Why you trippin'?" He stopped, looked him over. "Fuck, man! What happened? You look wrecked. You got blood and grit all over you."

"The woman staying over at the Monroe mansion -- Mrs. Norris -- just had a rock fired through her window. Know anything about it?"

Enrico's expression showed confusion. "I told you, Tomas, the RPs were gonna leave the lady alone. And we are."

"Rico, if you're fucking with me, so help me, *ese*, there ain't enough desperados in your posse to watch your back."

"Hey, *amigo*, haven't I always dealt straight with you?"

"You patrolling the grounds at night over there, like I asked?"

"Yeah, man! What d'ya think? Don't freak on me. You asked for a favor, and the RPs are comin' through for you. So far, it's been quiet at the Monroe place."

"What about cross-town gangs?"

"Ain't no street rap anywhere about hassling her. The colors are *firme* with her staying there."

Tomas twisted his mouth. "Ain't cool for no one, not while the dope show's still in town."

"True dat! The dealers were some aggravated when the *gringa* lady moved in. She stopped their action cold --"

Tomas rubbed the tight cords in his neck. "Fuck!"

Today's rock throwing incident might only be the start of things to come. Who knew how far the dealers would go to scare Seraphina Norris out of the house?

She could've been hurt today. Her pretty face could've been busted up, cut, scarred ...

Tomas cringed. He'd seen the ugly results of what dealers did to anyone who stood in the way of them making their dirty money. For Sera's sake, he was scared shitless. *He* was the one moving in on the dealers' action. *He* was the one putting up houses in their territory. Not Seraphina Norris. But like always, the weak ones got picked on, the ones unable to defend themselves got intimidated. Mattered squat that the music teacher was a woman -- women made the easiest targets.

Not this time. No way was he letting Sera pay the postage on the message the dopers were sending him.

Tomas pulled it together. On the Southside, fear was not something a man ever showed. "I'm glad to hear the gangs are cool with the music teacher. But the dealers just had someone chuck a rock through her window."

"What do you want the RPs to do?"

"Keep your noses clean, first of all. Secondly, run the grounds at the Monroe mansion at night, like you've been doing. Maybe I can find an excuse to stay close to the music teacher ..."

"Excuse? Turn on the Latino charm, man, and she'll be asking *you* to move your boots under her bed."

"It's not like that, Enrico."

"So?" He shrugged his lean shoulders. "Maybe you haven't fucked her yet -- get it goin' tonight."

"I've got no designs on the pretty teacher. But until I can shake her loose from that house, she's my responsibility." Tomas changed the subject. "How's your old man liking his new job over at the site?"

"He likes it fine. My mama, though, now she thinks you walk on water."

Tomas laughed. "And I could, too. The river is that polluted." Refusing to give into discouragement, he said, "That will all change soon enough." He paused. "How'd you like to get with your father? Have a real job. Make some real money."

"Someday, maybe. Right now, I wanna stay tight with the boys. They depend on me to keep them together. And outta trouble."

"You're doing a fine job on that score. The RPs haven't had a single gang-related bust in six months."

Enrico blushed. "What can I say? I do what I can."

Tomas grabbed the RP's leader around the shoulders in a blood hug, then clapped his back. "You're a good man, Enrico."

"Te veo mas tarde, guey."

"Ay te watcho. See you at the center. Si?"

At 'Rico's nod, Tomas slipped back into the twilight shadows.

Earlier, some piece of shit had lain in wait in the woods outside the Monroe mansion, and that piece of shit had watched the house, waiting for just the right opportunity to strike. On account of parking his company truck at the bottom of the hill, instead of in the mansion's rutted drive, that piece of shit had counted on catching the music teacher alone.

Well, she hadn't been alone. Not then, anyway. But she was alone now. He'd left her alone. A man worth his dick doesn't leave a woman alone in a dicey situation.

After just telling 'Rico he had no intention of getting it goin' with the pretty *gringa* teacher, Tomas couldn't stay away.

Before, her mixed signals had puzzled him. But tonight, there had been nothing mixed about her raw and naked need. How could he refuse that need?

He couldn't refuse, not and still call himself a man.

Her need drew him back to her. Didn't matter that he was a substitute, a fill-in for a dead man. The lady was hurting, and he had to be there for her.

Tomas didn't bother to knock on the rusted screen door. Stepping over shards of glass, he entered the kitchen. When he didn't find her there, he headed for the back of the house.

Loose wires hung out of crumbling plaster walls. Holes the size of craters marred the floors. Forget about the ceilings. In most rooms, he could see straight up through the joists to the attic. The kitchen had power, but no other room. She still had running water. Cold water, to be sure. No way, *ese*, did the old hot water boiler still work.

What had he gotten himself into here? He should have himself committed for thinking he could turn this old hulk of a house around --

Hell, bring on the white coats! He was not only thinking about turning the house around, he would turn the house around. For her. For Sera. Because he understood all about dreams, understood that keeping the faith meant the difference between going on and giving up. To make all the bad stuff bothering her go away, he'd make the school work out for her. He'd do whatever it took to keep her dream alive.

He'd see to the wiring first, as in tomorrow. Just eight o'clock, and the house was already pitch black -- except for a small flicker at the end of the hall.

Following the play of light and shadow, Tomas came to an open door.

The bathroom. Sera, wearing only a white bra and white panties, stood before the sink, a candle -- the source of the flickering light -- perched on the closed toilet seat.

Sera bathing by candlelight. Sera bathed in candlelight.

Slouched against the doorjamb, his eyelids gone heavy, Tomas watched her move a wrung-out washcloth down the long column of her pale throat.

She shivered.

After the lights, he'd fix the busted hot water heater. No more shivering for Sera!

He could tell she'd already shampooed. Her hair looked darker. To get the strands out of the way while she bathed, she'd piled the golden-brown mass atop her head and pinned the wet ringlets there with decorated sticks. Geisha sticks, he guessed. A few tendrils had escaped, though, and the ends tickled her fine ass. Lucky hair.

Tomas liked that Sera's hair had a mind of its own, liked that her hair was wild and unruly, liked the weighty look, the length. Not many women these days had long, natural-looking hair. What he wouldn't give to undo those exotic painted sticks and set her hair free, watch the curly strands ripple down the naked length of her pale back --

Covered in plaster, reeking of sweat, his skin bloodied, his hands filthy, he had no plans to touch Sera.

Looking, now that was something else again.

Trailing his sights down Sera's spine to the flare of her hips, Tomas checked out the full-cheeked sexiness of her ass. Under the panties, the demarcation between her buttocks made for a deep and narrow passage he hungered to explore.

Sera had just lost her husband, a man she had loved, and she was hurtin'. Loneliness explained why she had come onto him after the window had shattered. For her own safety, he had to make sure she didn't go around issuing the same needy invitation to other guys. Picking up strange men was damn dangerous anywhere, but messing with the wrong *chingon* on the Southside could mean assault.

He could take care of Sera sexually. He *wanted* to take care of her sexually. He knew he could satisfy her. At least with him, she'd stay safe. So, yeah, he would take some of her hurtin' away --

So long as she understood what she was getting into before they started anything.

Purposefully keeping things crude -- because, hey, he was crude, and best she learn the truth upfront to avoid unpleasant surprises down the road -- he said, "Unhook the bra. Gotta see those tits."

She gasped, "Tomas! What are you doing here?" Over her shoulder, she slanted him a startled look.

Even in the dim light, he saw the fear register in her green eyes.

Smart woman. Obviously, he'd been spying on her, partaking in a little voyeurism at her expense, stealing her privacy away. The question was: Would she continue the game? Would she voluntarily satisfy what she had to consider his prurient appetites? Or was she too nice for that sort of thing?

"Did I read you all wrong, Sera? Didn't you issue me an invitation on the porch an hour or so ago? You gotta let me know, because, baby, regardless of what you might have heard, I don't do rape. If that was your nice woman's sex fantasy, you'll have to find yourself another *hombre* to act out your mind game. If this ain't consensual, the fuck stops here."

"The ... the sex ... is consensual, Tomas," she said softly. "I'm merely surprised. I -- I didn't think you'd bother with me. I -- I didn't think I was your usual type of woman."

"Hell, no, you're not my usual type of woman!"

Her grammar was good, for one thing. No woman he'd ever been with spoke like her, looked like her, acted like her. Sera was a lady. He knew nothing about that breed of woman.

"I don't want you to talk, Sera." Why remind himself of the differences between them? They'd only get in trouble deciphering where the other was coming from. "I'll tell you what I want, and I'll expect you to do it, no questions asked, no arguments. That's the kind of fuck I want. Got it?"

All big-eyed and solemn, she nodded. Her slender arms went behind her back, her work-chapped fingers undoing the bra fastener.

She'd had one bitch of a day. He could make it better for her, wipe all the bad stuff away. He could do it, as long as they didn't talk, explain their motives, make some sense out of something that made no sense at all. He already knew they didn't belong together, that there was no way to make this right. Words weren't gonna change that. She was too good for him. End of story.

Taking a step toward the candle, Tomas blew out the flame, one puff casting the room into total darkness.

No touching Sera tonight. No more looking, either. Those rights belonged to a husband, not to a badass like him. He'd use his imagination, instead.

In his imagination, he saw her wiggle her shoulders. Pictured those ugly white bra straps falling down her slender arms. Envisioned her breasts. Man, her nipples. Works of art!

"Christ," he prayed, when he heard the metal clasp of her bra hit the floor, "You're beautiful."

"Beautiful?" She chuckled. "But you can't see me."

Always so logical! Always so argumentative. Which explained why he'd ordered her to silence, an order she'd naturally ignored.

"You are beautiful, Sera. Very beautiful. Your breasts are round and high, the color of cream. And the tips --" He swallowed. "What shade are your nipples, beautiful Sera? Tell me." He listened, smiling at the lift and fall of her shrug, whispery movements in the dark.

"Why, I guess they're pink. And there's no reason to charm me. I've already agreed to this. I agree to everything."

Charm her? He spoke the truth. Sera was beautiful! Her husband had to have told her so --

Tomas filed his confusion away. "So -- your nipples are pink. Are they rose pink or carnation pink? You're good with words, describe them to me."

"Tomas!"

"They're a rose at dusk, aren't they?"

He wished he could see them, touch them, kiss them ... suck them off. But this wasn't about his wishes, but about her need.

"Now don't go all shy and cover 'em up," he said, anticipating her next move.

The heavy air stirred, signifying Sera was shaking her head in exasperation, a habit of hers.

"How did you know I was about to cover up?"

Her tone contained irritation. He liked the way Sera looked when she was pissed. He liked that flash of temper that fired-up her eyes every once in a while. Anger made her seem human, more approachable. Tough, having a hard-on for an angel.

"A man knows such things," he said simply. "Now, take down your hair."

When the scent of flowers perfumed the air, he said, "Pick up the washcloth again." He fantasized how her dainty tits would shift as she reached for the sink.

His balls had turned blue when they met and had never recovered. Aching since the window broke, in pain since her soft ass cradled his cock, he had reached the point of desperation. How much more could he take?

Agony. He was in fucking agony.

This hurt. Not touching her hurt. He wanted to fill his hands with her, wanted to get inside her. But he couldn't. Just couldn't. Sera wasn't any ordinary good-times woman and this wasn't about them having an ordinary good-times fuck. This was about showing her he was not the kind of man she should ever have encouraged. This was about teaching her a hard lesson about a hard man. This was about keeping her safe from men just like him.

"Do what you were doing before I interrupted." The command came out a hoarse croak, his vocal cords mimicking the tightness in his balls.

She shook her head again -- the slight agitation of the sex-thickened air told him so. His demands had excited Sera. Her shallow breaths confirmed his suspicions.

Splash. Terrycloth hitting a water-filled sink. Droplets falling, *plop, plop*, as Sera squeezed out the excess moisture.

Leaning his skull back against the doorjamb, he pictured the nubby texture of the wrung-out cloth sliding over the firm slope of Sera's breast. "Do they ache?"

“Do what ache?”

How could she be so fucking innocent? “Your nipples! Do they hurt?”

“Yes,” she answered, uncompromising in her honesty.

No compromise from him, either. “Do it again, only this time rub ‘em harder.”

Sera had been married to a good man, a missionary man. She didn’t know nuthin’ about a hard man’s hard fucking. For her own good, she was about to get a taste.

“I said harder, Sera. Drag the cloth back and forth over the points until they burn.”

When a surprised “Oh” crossed the space that separated them, his throat arched and worked. “Again,” he ordered. “Do it again. Keep doing it ‘til I tell you to stop.”

She gasped. “Oh dear -- oh dear.”

“Now drop the wash rag and pinch your nipples.” His voice sounded thick, as thick as the sex-charged air.

Splash! The cloth fell back into the water-filled sink. *Un-un-un.* Sera panting as she did what he told her to do.

His knees went weak. “Harder! Use your nails.”

When she started to moan, too far gone in her need to refuse him, he let her have it. “Lose the panties.”

Flutter. Underwear gliding to the tile floor.

His voice, terse, low ... tortured ... gave the command. “Facing me, get your knee up on the tub. Do it now.”

The bathtub was an antique. Cast iron, claw foot. He gave her a few seconds to prop up her knee on the high side, until he knew her pussy would be wide open. Dark room or no, a nice woman like Sera would feel exposed.

His hands fisted at his sides. His gut twisted. His shoulders tightened. Forget his neck and jaw -- he’d need to see Lucille later to work out the knots. Nobility pretty much sucked. “You know what I want.”

“I -- I’m sorry. I d-d-don’t know.”

He frowned. Did she take him for a fool?

“Please tell me what you want me to do,” she pleaded.

“I want you to --”

Shit! He’d never been in this kind of situation before. Never had to explain, never had to say anything. Always before, the woman understood.

Sera didn’t understand.

He searched for the right words, then started all over again. “I want you to pleasure yourself. Take it nice and slow. One finger to start, two to finish up.”

“Inside my vagina?”

Tomas felt himself go hot. "Yeah. That."

Her using the correct terminology made sense. Still, the V-word fell on him like a ton of bricks. Pussy sounded a lot more user friendly. Cunt would have done him one better.

His dick twitched in response to the wet sounds her *vagina* made as her fingers moved in and out. "Work your clit."

"Mmm," she murmured after a l-o-n-g while, the delay informing him Sera didn't go solo any too often.

She was doing it now, doing it for him.

Her breath caught, released, caught again. About two strokes away from the final curtain, Sera held back, resisting the standing "O."

He liked pussy. Liked watching a woman's face when she came. Right as it happened, an incredible radiance glowed from a woman's features, body meeting mind in a metaphysical union.

Metaphysical. He'd had to look the meaning up in Webster's. He did that all the time while reading. He bet Sera also read a lot.

Read a lot, but didn't come a lot. At least not alone.

Sera was so beautiful! She'd look even more beautiful when she came. A real sacrifice not seeing her face. But this was for her, not for him, he reminded himself, as he said those fateful words, "Come, Sera."

"I ... I ... don't ... think I can."

Sometimes, orgasm was metaphysical. Other times, it all came down to mechanics.

Some women could get off easy. Others needed that little extra something, like help from a battery-operated device. Sera probably fell into the latter category. Where was a vibrator when a guy needed one?

Tomas left his position by the door, walked to the closed toilet lid and grabbed the white candle from its holder, tested the wax.

Cool to the touch, burned down to about ten or so inches, nice and firm and thick. Not as thick as his cock, but hey, life wasn't perfect.

He handed her the candle, making sure their fingers didn't collide during the transfer. "Use it like a dildo. And Sera, don't hold back. I better damn well know when it happens."

A sharp cry in the darkness.

He tensed. "What's wrong?"

"N-nothing. I just never -- uh -- used a candle in quite this way before."

Chuckling to himself, he relaxed again.

Only to go screw tight when he heard Sera slide the candle up inside.

Her pussy. Warm honey. Wet sex.

His agony.

"Oh, Tomas," she gasped, as she got down to it. "Oh, Tomas -- Oh, Tomas."

He thumbed his eye sockets. "That's right, baby. Let it roll over you, let it sweep you away. Coming is what you need."

He felt her spasm, felt her writhe and shake and finally go taut. Sweat drained down his tensed face, between his tense shoulder blades. "I'm here, baby. I'm here. Don't fight it."

When she convulsed, he lost it, too, coming right along with her. He hadn't done that since he'd just turned sixteen.

Humiliated by his loss of control, disturbed by what it meant, his gut roiling like he'd been sucker punched, he stared wildly into the darkness, seeking a hint of her, a sign of her, any fucking indication of her, in the pitch-black room. She was too quiet!

"You all right?" he asked.

"Yes." She spoke low, hesitantly, second thoughts straining her voice.

Those second thoughts were a good thing. Those second thoughts would protect her from men like him.

"Go to bed," he told her.

"What about you?"

"Don't fret over me. If you need me for anything, I'll be out on the porch, cleaning up the glass." *After* he'd unzipped and cleaned his lack of control up at the sink. Reality could be a bitch.

"But Tomas -- *what about you?*"

No use pretending he didn't understand what she meant, no use going soft on her now, either. So damn naïve -- she thought he hadn't gotten his, and that was the way he intended to keep it. A man had his pride. Especially a Latino man. "Don't question me, Sera, remember? Just do as you're told. Now get out of here."

There were women he went to for sex. Not strictly 'hos, but gracious about accepting cash when the rent came due. With these women, he had what was called an amicable understanding. That these women had this same amicable understanding with several other men was just the way things went. As long as he didn't have to wait in a long line in the hall outside their apartments, he didn't mind sharing it, and he didn't mind paying for it. Better to leave his rental contribution on the nightstand next to the last guy's rental contribution than pretend the fucking meant something.

He hadn't gotten any since meeting Sera. Hadn't even thought about getting any. Since Sera, he hadn't taken care of his manly needs in the shower, either, like he shoulda oughta have done, which explained his present humiliation. For Sera's sake, he had to start playing this smarter. He couldn't put off jerking off like he had done. Funny how the alternative -- paying for a hand job or oral -- just didn't seem right. Almost like he was cheating. On Sera.

“My nightgown is hanging on the door,” she said, padding across the floor to where he stood, red of face and sticky of boxers.

As she reached, her bare breast came within an inch of his biceps, her nipple within a stroke of his hot skin.

He went statue-still.

After unhooking the nightgown, she moved past him down the hall, leaving him trembling against the doorjamb, breathing in the lingering scent of flowers.

And beautiful Sera’s beautiful cunt.

Chapter Twelve

“Any news yet on the Riverfront Project?” Tomas asked Myra the next day.

“Nothin’ official.” His administrative assistant looked up from her newspaper.

Terror struck his heart. Myra had spared him a glance. Not a good sign. “And unofficially?”

“You don’t stand a chance, not with your reputation. You gotta live it down,” she said quietly -- too quietly.

With Myra’s soft pronouncement, his dream flushed down the toilet. Everything he’d worked for slipped away, not because he couldn’t do the job, but because he didn’t own a suit, didn’t practice the right party manners. “Thanks for letting me down easy, Myra. That’s kinda what I thought anyway.”

“Advertisin’ what you do to improve conditions on the Southside might sway stuffed shirts like Connor to your side. Are you willin’ to let me leak your philanthropic activities to the press?”

“I told you -- what I do for charity, I do anonymously.”

“Right. Right. But you also said you’d do anything to get this project. Apart from your charity work, still stickin’ to that anything?”

“Yeah.”

Myra stared solemnly into his eyes. “Seraphina Norris is your anything.”

“What!” he exploded, something he never did with Myra.

“You need to improve your image, Tommie. The missionary lady could do that for you. I realize this is a drastic measure, but you’ve got no choice. You need in on her do-good glitter. Connor is a straight-laced kind of guy. Been married fifty years, and he highly recommends the institution.”

"Glad to hear it. Good for him --"

"And bad for you. He's made it known to various City Council members that he doesn't approve of your 'swingin' life style.' Connor doesn't think you project the right middle-America image for this redevelopment project. He wants a married guy with roots and a stake in the community."

"I've got all that, except for the marriage license. And unless a wedding comes with a guaranteed life-time warranty, I ain't interested."

"Better get interested, Tommie. Marriage means stability. Responsibility. Family values ... the Riverfront contract. A whole lot of people are dependin' on you for the jobs this project will generate."

"Tell me you're not suggesting I get married to win this contract."

"People marry for all kinds of weird reasons."

"Not me."

"You know somethin'? You seem kinda tense. You need to unwind. Take a nice, long, soak in a hot tub --"

"In case you never noticed, Myra, this trailer doesn't come equipped with a tub."

"See that? That's exactly what I mean! People with roots have tubs!" Myra scrutinized him over the tops of her bifocals. "And married men have the deepest roots. As soon as romance enters a man's life on a permanent basis, he gets all content and starts investin' in the future."

"Haven't you heard, Myra? Romance goes right out the door as soon as marriage enters the picture."

"My marriage is still romantic. Why, when the hubby and I are snugglin' in bed..."

Tomas covered his ears. "Stop right there. I'm not discussing this with you."

"Shush now! It's not what you think. I was only gonna say, my hubby still rubs my cold feet with his warm ones in bed. And he still makes me a cup of tea while we're relaxin' in front of the tube so I don't have to get up. And in the winter, he warms up my car every mornin' before I leave for a grueling day at work. If that's not romantic, I don't know what is!"

"I do," he grumbled. "And we're not talking about that, either."

An AARP magazine flew across the trailer at him. From years of fine-honed practice, he ducked in time and was already hotfooting out the door when Myra yelled after him. "Connor wants you to call him. ASAP. When you do, I strongly suggest you start droppin' Mrs. Norris's name into the conversation. Get my drift?"

"I'm buried under it, Myra. Subtle, you're not."

Closing the trailer door tight behind him, so the grit and noise of the site wouldn't disturb his sweetheart's mid-morning snooze, he climbed in his truck and sped away.

* * * * *

The very last person Seraphina expected to see at her door that day was Tomas Ruiz. But there he stood, in all his gorgeous splendor on the porch's top stair, smiling and saying "Hi" as if nothing had happened between them, as if she hadn't "pleasured herself" to his tersely worded commands.

A little shy after being naked with him, she said a boring "Hello" in return.

As if they shared a naughty secret, which in a way they did, he countered with a sexy smile.

After softening her up, Tomas Ruiz got immediately down to business. "I need to board up all the windows."

Her guards went right back up. A woman can only be rejected so many times in her life before developing incredibly long, porcupine-like, self-protective spikes.

How silly to believe a genuine desire to see her had prompted Tomas Ruiz's visit! She should have realized dollar signs always came first, last, and always with him.

She swallowed her hurt. "You want to work on the windows *now*?"

At his nod, gloom descended. Boarding up the windows would cast the house into darkness, even during the day. Just what her depression needed.

But better to bring the enemy into her camp than stick her head in the sand like an ostrich and pretend he didn't exist, she held open the screen door.

Her adversary entered her rented home, setting his toolbox on the floor with an ominous thud.

Last night, without touching her, Tomas Ruiz had given her an orgasm. Her very first one. Touching herself in his presence had been sexually edgy. Remorselessly thrilling. Wildly exciting. Wickedly abandoned --

Lonely, too.

She'd longed for his hands on her body, all over her body. No parts off-limits. She longed to do the same to him. Mouths hungrily joined, loins frantically pumping, she longed for mindless mutuality. Ferocious, politically incorrect lovemaking.

The night before, Tomas had forced her to come apart, to break like her glass window, while he had remained whole, aloof from the devastation. That he'd kept his control while she'd lost hers was a bitter pill to swallow, but she forced that bitter pill down. Inexperienced, but not a fool, she knew Tomas didn't want her. The toolbox, heavy with nails to board up her windows, proved he just wanted her out of his hair.

Well, he could board up every single window, all the doors as well, and she wouldn't change her mind. A lonely climax wouldn't change her mind. A rock thrown through her window wouldn't change her mind. No charming smile would change her mind. She would miss the light, but she was staying at the mansion.

Tomas looked around the porch. "Living in a boarded-up building just ain't healthy."

What an actor! He sounded *soooo* sympathetic. Her health, her rosy rear! If he really cared, why the nails and hammer?

Tired of the games, she came right out and voiced her suspicion. "Were you behind the rock throwing incident, Tomas?"

"No," he said coolly.

Tomas had remained cool the night before, too, uninvolved, while she'd came apart. Could she believe a man who so easily manipulated others while remaining aloof himself?

"I'm staying here, Tomas, until I'm legally forced to leave."

"Sera, be reasonable! You need air circulation. And sunlight."

"I need the school more."

He puffed up his cheeks and blew out a breath. "I'll install the new glass windows and screens, one room at a time. The original wood casings are in good condition, so they stay."

She did a double take. "Pardon?"

"You're already too pale, Sera. By the end of the summer, I want you looking as brown and healthy as me. That calls for air and sunshine. And windows." He turned his woman-killer smile on her.

The brilliance almost, but not quite, blinded her.

She narrowed her eyes against the glare. What was he up to? What tricks did he hide in those dimples? And where were her sunglasses when she needed them? His dazzling smile would burn out her retinas if she wasn't careful.

"The new windows should arrive within the hour," he continued. "I've got a crew coming over to help with the installation, so we should have them up on the porch today."

She gasped. "You've decided not to rip down the house, haven't you?"

"Didn't say that."

"You think you can salvage the mansion."

"Didn't say that."

But that was the implication of new windows. She could easily have thrown herself at him, clutched him to her, hugged him in thanks. And then ... and then ... kissed him, her tongue firmly planted against his tonsils and going for his throat, one hand on that tight rear end, the other hand pulling, yanking, crushing, that thick, black hair ... until ... until ... she stuck out her foot and tripped him, and they both tumbled onto the floor, and she started ripping at his clothes, and then, and then ...

Nothing then. Fade to black, then.

Something was up with Tomas Ruiz. A leopard doesn't change his spots overnight. Especially not spots as huge as Tomas Ruiz's spots. If he had decided against tearing down the mansion, he had a self-serving reason. What?

"I'm helping with the installation," she offered.

"In a dress?" He strapped on his tool belt. "Passing me a hammer or something is fine, but pull on a pair of jeans first."

"I don't own any."

"You don't own jeans?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Not ever. Not even as a child. Only dresses. My folks didn't think pants looked very ladylike."

"I know your parents were missionaries and everything, but you couldn't have been in church all the time."

"I wasn't raised in a pew if that's what you mean. But my parents had very high expectations. I didn't have a typical upbringing, I guess."

"That makes both of us."

"Were you forced to wear dresses, too?" she asked sweetly.

"Ha. Ha." He reached into his tool chest. "You'll need a crew here everyday, all summer, to open school in September. How many teachers have you hired so far?"

"One." Even when ill, she hadn't been subject to hallucinations. What had he just said? Something about her opening day at school? Like the school opening was a given. "But I plan to hire two teachers each for woodwinds, brass, percussion, strings, voice, and the various ensembles." Dazed, she added, "Of course, there's also Suzuki."

"You're teaching Japanese cooking?"

She laughed. "Suzuki is musical instruction for children aged four and up. The lessons involve the whole family, the theory based on the belief that musical talent isn't inherited, but nurtured within a child's environment. All children share a natural potential to learn, and properly trained teachers help develop their innate musicality."

"You know, I think cooking classes are a real good idea for the kids on the Southside."

"I do, too, but that's not the purpose of a music school."

And what was Tomas Ruiz's purpose? His ulterior motive?

Clearly, he was up to something. His change of heart about the school was just too sudden. And unstated.

"To get started," she said, caution dampening her enthusiasm, "I'll need at least eight sound-proof rooms with a state of the art acoustical system in each."

"That's a big job."

"Is it doable?"

"Yeah, but --"

"That's all I need to hear," she said, throwing caution to the winds. Whatever Tomas was up to, she'd deal with it when the time came. "I'll need a written estimate for the work for the bank when I start shopping for a mortgage."

"Sera, I never said I was selling you the mansion --"

"I know. You never mentioned agreeing to allow the school here at the mansion, either, but that is the topic of this conversation. I realize you aren't making any firm promises, but when I invite the Connors over for dinner, it would be nice to have some speculative figures to discuss."

At his look of intense interest, her brows rose. "Do you know Fred Connors?"

"No. We've never met."

It was time to go fishing. Maybe if she dropped the hook enough, she'd get a bite.

And the reason for Tomas's sudden change of heart.

"The Connors were old and dear friends of my parents. I only wish I understood construction better so I could explain things to Fred. He's agreed to help me get the school up and operational."

She turned to leave. "I'll go change into a work dress now. When I return, I'll start handing you those tools."

* * * * *

"Tomas, what do you expect from me?" Sera asked him later on that same evening as he stowed his tools away in their metal box. "You've installed these beautiful new windows --"

"Hey, you helped." No carpenter had ever had a prettier assistant.

"Yes, but you said you don't expect reimbursement for the materials and labor, and I know you don't approve of my starting a music school on the Southside, so I'm confused. What's in it for you?"

"What's in it for me?" he repeated, like an idiot, like a *cabron*.

"Yes. I told you once before, I'm not naïve. What do you expect in return for all this work and time you and your men have put in? You must want something."

Since she was opening it all up, now was the time to tell her the truth.

Tomas rushed out the words, knowing if he stopped, he'd never finish. "I'm not married," he said, bluntly, "and I find myself in need of ..."

"A home-cooked meal and some sex afterwards?"

"Something like that. But not necessarily in that order."

"Reassuring to know I'm a cut above the meatloaf."

"Hold on there! Don't talk about meatloaf like that! Meatloaf is a personal favorite of mine. Ditto for sex." Only fair to let Sera know where he stood, where she stood, too. He'd tried to do that last night and again today. While working on the windows, he hadn't watched his language, hadn't censored his conversation --

All right, maybe he'd curtailed some of his p's and q's, some of his normal crudity also. But he'd let some four-letter words fly. Now she was smiling and rolling her eyes in that cute way of hers, and he hastily returned to his proposition before he lost his nerve.

"Here's the deal, Sera. You're a nice woman, and because of certain things in my background, I haven't been with many nice women. None actually." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I thought you should know that, considering what we're discussing."

"What exactly are we discussing? I'm afraid I'm not entirely following the direction of this conversation."

Why had he started this? He was making a mess of things. That's what came of sleep deprivation and a near constant hard-on.

After cleaning up the broken glass, he'd spent the rest of last night in his pickup, one bleary eye on the woods, the other on the house. Broken out windows in a crumbled-down house left Sera vulnerable. No way could he return to his comfy bed in the trailer, knowing she wasn't safe. The RP were patrolling the area, but someone had to watch out for her up close and personal.

Her hips shelved her hands. "What kind of a situation is this, Tomas?"

"An awkward situation."

When that cornered look he hated returned to her eyes, he swiftly tried to allay her fears. "Don't worry. I have a solution, one that will work for both of us, so that we both get what we want. I thought ... maybe, that is to say, if you didn't mind too much, that you and I could ..."

Tomas ground to a screeching halt. How to phrase his proposal so it didn't sound calculating? How to ask Sera what he needed to ask Sera and not have the question come off sounding like he was taking advantage of her, when hell, he was taking advantage of her, and the offer was calculating?

He held all the cards. Could make or break her dream for a school. And altruism didn't spark his offer of help. The lady was right, he did want something from her in return. And no way could he make his proposition come out sounding less than crass because, man, his proposition was crass.

A golden opportunity to score points with Connor had fallen smack-dab into his lap. The music school was Connor's pet project. All he had to do was tell Sera he'd changed his mind about the school. That he now thought a music school on the Southside was *mucho muy groovy*. But he couldn't lie like that, so he'd bypassed the whole messy subject and just installed the damn windows. Now, though, the lady was looking for answers. Specific answers.

So he'd tell her he would fix the place up, soundproof practice rooms and everything, that he'd do all that in exchange for her agreeing to help him gain him some much-needed respectability in Fenton. That was the truth.

Tomas let out the breath he was holding, opened his mouth, and --

Couldn't do it. Not even for the sake of the Riverfront Project. He'd been wrong about the lady. She wasn't a white-glove do-gooder who'd descended upon the Southside with a whole lot of pie in the sky dreams to set everything straight. She wasn't a dreamer at all. Sera was a hands-on kind of woman who believed strongly in what she was doing. He didn't happen to think the school would work out, but he couldn't fault her for trying. Not anymore.

La cagada! And shit, too! Sera was already looking at him weird. If he said what he needed to say, she'd throw him out on his *culo*. Worse than getting thrown out on his ass, she'd hate him. He didn't want her to hate him --

And he didn't want to hurt her with the truth.

"Listen, you don't want to cook me supper and -- and the rest, just say so. My idea probably wouldn't have worked out anyway."

"What wouldn't have worked out? What idea?"

"Don't get all bent outta shape. I understand. A nice lady like you never would have gone along with it." He headed for the door. "Forget we even had this conversation!"

"What conversation?" She ran after him to the top of the dilapidated stairs. "I don't understand what we just talked about."

"Us," he yelled back over his shoulder. "And be careful of the damn stairs 'til I get chance to fix 'em. They're rotten all the way through." *Just like him.*

"But -- but -- there is no us," she shouted at him.

"That's where you're wrong. As of last night, we make an us."

"That's where *you're wrong*. As of last night, the candle and I make an us. But you and I?" She shook her head. "We are not an us."

He laughed his ass off all the way to his truck. Sera had to be about the most naïve woman he'd ever known.

Chapter Thirteen

Wouldn't you just know it? Her first night at The Pink Flamingo, and she was running late. She rushed through the service entrance as though her tail feathers were on fire.

When she spied the manager -- impeccably tailored in a white shirt, red tie, striped silk vest, and pleated pants -- tending bar, she hurried over to explain. "Sorry I'm late, Mr. Franco! And on my first night." She picked up a drink-laden tray. "My car broke down on the way, so I had to walk here."

After filling a patron's drink order, he carefully settled the fluted glass on the chrome bar. "You walked here? From the old Monroe place?"

"It's not all that far."

"Not on a map, it isn't." He picked up a cloth and started buffing a beer tap. "I grew up in this neighborhood, the same as Rox and Tomas. A lone woman shouldn't walk these streets alone in broad daylight, never mind at night. I'll give you a ride home after closing. And start calling me Lou. Mr. Franco's my old man."

Not wishing to appear rude, she refrained from telling *Lou* she'd walked far worse streets, alone, at all hours of the day and night. In Calcutta. "Thanks." She smiled. "I'd appreciate the lift."

The weary-faced manager smiled back, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

Lou was a handsome man, surrounded by gorgeous women, and yet he'd smiled at her.

A giggle bubbled up inside her.

Sometimes, she felt sixteen all over again, a young girl spreading her social wings for the first time. Her parents hadn't allowed her to date. She'd never even kissed Matt prior to the wedding night --

They hadn't kissed then, either.

The memory of her wedding night popped her girlish bubble of happiness, and the giggle died. Trapped in memories of a sterile marriage, she balanced the drink tray on the tilt of her hip, and crossed the club floor, the dark atmosphere of the bar competing with the gloom inside herself. This time, though, when the familiar depression descended, she fought back. Somewhere, from some hitherto untapped source, she found the energy to battle her guilt.

No longer the good little daughter of missionary parents, no longer a saintly man's faithful and obedient and dutiful wife, she was an adult woman with needs, answerable to only herself. If she chose to smile at Lou after only just responding to Tomas's terse sexual commands, it was her own dar-- *damn* business. She had a right to a little adventuring, a right to a little recklessness. Not only did she have a right to smile at Lou, she had a right to sex it up with Tomas Ruiz.

Now, if only she could believe her own pep talk.

* * * * *

By midnight, Sera had become adroit at avoiding gropes. Especially, the adolescent gropes coming from the table of obnoxious college kids in the back, a group of frat boys trying to best each other's outrageousness by copping a feel of the singing waitress.

"C'mon! Be nice to us, and a big fat tip will be in it for you at the end of the night," a boy with a buzz-cut told her, to the amusement of his drinking buddies.

"I don't get paid to be that kind of nice." Seraphina removed his pudgy palm from her fishnet stockings. "I get paid to deliver the food and liquid refreshments, and to sing. That's as nice as I get."

"A fifty in my wallet says you'll deliver more." The Lothario's hand crept up the back of her leg again.

She had been about to give the jock the put-down he deserved, something about the size of his mouth being in direct disproportion to the size of his brain, when a deep voice resonated behind her.

"I'm a big tipper, too, pal," Tomas Ruiz said. "Here's yours. Lay a finger on the lady again and I'll mess up your perfect smile. A shame if my fist wasted all those years your mama made you wear braces, don't you think?"

The kid's hand went to his mouth. He really did have a perfectly aligned bite. "No, sir. I mean, yes, sir."

"Apologize to the lady, or I guarantee your retainer won't fit tomorrow."

The college jock stumbled to his feet. "I apologize, ma'am."

She glared at Tomas Ruiz, but spoke to the kid. "Apology accepted."

Tomas held out his hand. "Give the car keys here. You're not driving back to the dorm tonight." After pocketing said keys, he added, "You'll find your wheels in the back lot tomorrow -- after you sober up." Gripping her elbow, he ushered her who knew where.

Sera pulled away. "I could have handled that situation myself."

"Yeah. I saw. Any more of that kind of handling and the frat kid would've pledged his boxers."

His attitude made her *so* angry. In her former line of work, she'd met up with all kinds of hairy situations, situations Tomas Ruiz knew nothing about. He had the wrong idea about her. Setting him straight would require a flying leap off the holier-than-thou pedestal he'd stuck her on.

She started her freefall. "You're here to spy on me, Tomas."

He had the audacity to look offended. "I always drop by on the weekends. You know, to see how everything's doin'. Check in on the girls."

"Check *out* the girls is more like it. Looking to get laid, Ruiz?" Not by her, of course. She'd only joked about the after-meatloaf-sex. She should get so lucky! He didn't want sex from her. The other night -- that was just pity sex --

No, wait. They didn't have sex. The other night? That was just pity.

Wide shoulders carelessly shrugged. "Yeah, well, about getting laid, you know how that goes -- can't let my sleazy downtown image slide."

"Be careful of the pink plumage when you go downtown. Otherwise, you'll still be coughing up feathers on Monday."

His mouth snapped open. "What the hell kind of a thing is that for a nice missionary lady to say!"

"Oh, spare me the stereotyping. I am *so* not a nice missionary lady anymore."

Dark eyes glinted. "I saw your car on the way into town. You need a new battery."

Her fingers squeezed her tray so they wouldn't squeeze his throat. "How do you know I need a new battery?"

"From looking."

"I *locked* the car."

"Yeah, and I *popped* the hood. I'll take care of the repair tomorrow. Tonight, I'm driving you home."

"Thank you, but Lou has already offered."

"He has, huh? Well, since Lou no longer lives on the Southside, and I still do, I'll spare him the trip. I'll go tell him now."

With that, Tomas Ruiz sauntered away.

* * * * *

Apart from aching feet, her first night at The Pink Flamingo had gone remarkably well, her six-hour shift had flown right by. She'd delivered enough drinks to float a battleship and belted out countless bawdy burlesque tunes, which the crowd seemed to have appreciated if her bulging apron pocket was any indication. She must have made a hundred dollars in tips! Lou, thrilled with her reception by the Friday night crowd, had proclaimed the singing-waitress gimmick a huge success.

As it turned out, Lou hated operating a strip-joint. Slowly, but surely, he'd started to change the bar's image from raunchy to classy. Unfortunately, his new classy image still included stiletto strappies for the singing waitresses. After a night spent totally on her feet, her dogs were barking!

True to his word, Tomas waited directly outside the service exit, slouched against the side of his company truck. After removing his baseball cap, he opened the pickup door.

Sera stared at that open door. What should she do? Her insteps were burning, it was after midnight, and she lived in the worst part of town. Should she stamp her aching toes and say, "I'll walk the mile and a half back to the Southside?" Or better yet say, "I'll take a cab," when she couldn't even afford to ride the bus 'til payday?

She compromised. Saying nothing, she climbed up and into the passenger side.

The drive back to the mansion was conducted in silence, both staring out their respective sides of the window glass. Neither of them mentioned Lou or the frat boys. Nor did they mention their earlier discussion about sex and meatloaf. They made absolutely no conversation at all.

Until the truck came to a stop.

Then Tomas turned to her. "I'm walking you inside, Sera. Take a look around, turn on the lights, check the locks, stuff like that."

Entering a dark house, late at night, after a rock-throwing incident, didn't appeal to her.

His arrogance appealed to her less. "No need."

Jumping out of the driver's seat, he walked around to her side and opened the door. Ignoring his helping hand, she slid to the ground on her own.

In a really, *really*, graceless move brought on by a tight skirt and her own stupid stubbornness, she smashed into his chest during the descent.

His arms closed around her. "You all right?"

Blasted pheromones! Tomas Ruiz smelled better than good to her, he smelled right. "Fine. Just dandy."

She straightened out her tight skirt, which had somehow managed to creep up her thighs, by smoothing a palm over her backside.

Tomas coughed. "So nobody sees you associating with the likes of me, I'll make the house-check quick."

He led the way to the back door, forcing her to run, in stilettos no less, panting to keep up. "Who's to see you? I have no neighbors. Furthermore, even if I did have neighbors, there's nothing wrong with you coming inside. We're both adults. Besides which, you didn't seem to have a problem coming inside the other night. While I was bathing." In memory, a delicious shiver ran through her.

Then Tomas went and ruined the fantasy. "About the other night -- you needed someone, and I was available. That's all there was to it."

At the doormat -- not her, the plastic shoe wipe at the threshold -- he added, "If you knew me better, the other night never would've happened."

No, she didn't know him all that well. But she was beginning to believe his press had been greatly exaggerated. She was beginning to believe Tomas Ruiz was not quite as bad as the gossip mill said.

"I guess we're even. I don't know what kind of man you are." She looked into his black brooding eyes. "And you don't know what kind of woman I am, either."

In the end, Tomas came inside, did exactly what he said he would do, and then left. After having pegged him one way, he was turning out to be something else entirely.

Chapter Fourteen

Tomas slumped in a chair beside Myra's desk. "I blew it."

His administrative assistant reached for her mug of coffee mocha. "Uh-huh."

"I choked." His hands held up his drooping chin. "I had this whole speech prepared. Very business-like, too. No emotion at all. I thought it would be so easy!"

"Uh-huh."

"First, I'd list all the reasons why the arrangement would work. All the benefits to both of us. But I couldn't spit out a single word."

Myra eyed him over the cup rim. "Uh-huh" She took another sip of coffee mocha.

"Dammit! Getting the Riverfront Project would mean hundreds of new jobs on the Southside. But I couldn't do it. Asking her just seemed so ... cold somehow."

Myra took another fortifying slurp. "Uh-huh"

"She really is a nice lady."

"Of that, I'm sure. Otherwise, a sweet-talker like you wouldn't have been tongue-tied."

"That's the thing! I don't want to sweet talk her. I want to be up front with her. Honest. But when I left, she seemed kinda ... upset or something."

Myra started tapping her fingers. "Why?"

"I'm guessing she thought I was at The Flamingo spying on her."

Tap. "Were you?"

"Were I what?"

Tap. Tap. "Spying on her."

“Well, hell, yeah! You don’t think I’d let her work there and not make sure she was doing all right? And good thing I did, too. A table of morons tried getting smart with her. I had to break their bal – er -- I had to put them in their places.”

“That’s what Lou does! You know he’s not gonna let things get out of hand over there at The Flamingo. The man’s an ex-cop, for cryin’ out loud. He knows how to settle things down.”

“Yeah, well,” Tomas blustered, still nursing a large resentment over Lou’s offer to drive Sera home. “He wasn’t doing such a hot job last night!”

Tap. Tap. TAP. “Did you give him a chance? Or did you stick your nose in where it didn’t belong?”

“The pric-- er -- the clown had his hand on Sera’s leg!”

“As I see it, a good grovel is the only way out of this mess. A *long* grovel. None of this sound-byte crap. Tell her you made a mistake, and you’re sorry. Then ask her what you need to ask her.”

Tomas lifted his dropped head. “You mean, I should call her? Like, on the phone?”

“Who am I dealing with here?” She directed her question not to him, but to the blinking cursor on her brand-new flat-screened monitor, the one he’d installed because Myra’s best friend, Sally Higgins, worked on one. Not that his administrative assistant ever actually *used* the PC. Hell, pencils didn’t get used in this office.

When she was good-and-ready, Myra turned back to him. “Yes, call her on the phone! Must everything be done by e-mail? My gawd! Between clonin’ and the ‘Net, men and women will never get together anymore.”

When Tomas picked up the receiver, Myra leaned back in her chair to have a listen.

* * * * *

A dilapidated building abutting Riverfront Park housed the Southside’s branch of the Fenton Public Library. On Tuesday, with the help of her new teacher, Calia Vasquez, Seraphina set up a public relations booth on the sidewalk. The idea was to catch mothers with young kids in tow -- their targeted demographic group -- as they came and went to pre-school reading hours. After a productive morning spent explaining the school’s various music programs, Calia looked worriedly at the two remaining school brochures on the table. “We’re running low. Bring any more of these?”

Seraphina grinned. “Only about a mountain or so. They’re back in my car.”

“Great! I’ll go get them.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not at all.” Calia, the good sport, smiled. “Where are you parked?”

Seraphina handed over the keys. "I parked behind the library, on the river side -- blue compact under the maple tree."

From a few paces away, Calia turned back and wildly gestured at a set of giggling triplets, all girls, all dressed identically, who approached the library with their obviously doting mom in tow.

Goody. Live ones ...

A half an hour later had produced three enrollment applications for private instrumental instruction from the triplets' mom.

And no Calia.

The trip to the car for the brochures should have taken no more than ten minutes.

Apprehensive over her teacher's lengthy absence, Seraphina decided to close up shop and go looking. Before she could grab her bag, her pretty music teacher finally appeared. At her side, swaggered a young man wearing gang colors and carrying a box.

The young man set the box down on the table, and Calia presented her companion. "Mrs. Seraphina Norris, I'd like you to meet Enrico Cortez, the leader of the RPs. He insisted on carrying the brochures."

"Very nice to meet you, Enrico." Seraphina didn't know what to make of this. Sweet Calia and a tough gang member? "And thank you for your help."

"Don't mention it."

"Enrico and I attended Fenton High together," Calia explained.

"Oh!" Relieved, but still a little nervous, Seraphina babbled, "You're old school friends!" Calia was a *very* pretty young woman, and the young man looked as hard as the metal tacks running up the legs of his skin-tight jeans.

"Not exactly old *friends*," Enrico corrected. "More like acquaintances. Back in the day, we barely knew each other. Calia Vasquez was valedictorian. I barely graduated shop class." His expression, formerly set in granite, softened a little. "But she did slow dance with me once under the moonlight in the school parking lot."

Calia blushed and dropped her eyes. "I thought you'd forgotten."

"Not me."

Never one to let an opportunity to promote the school escape, Seraphina said brightly, "Enrico, would you be interested in taking an adult course at the conservatory this September?" She read from the schedule. "We offer drums. Electric guitar ..."

"Classical violin," said the young man.

Sera blinked. "Violin? You're interested in taking a course in classical violin?"

"True, dat."

"As it so happens, Calia is our violin teacher."

“No fooling? What a coincidence.” Enrico’s distant eyes warmed on his former classmate. “Where do I sign up?”

* * * * *

Heading for his truck, Tomas heard a, “Psst! Over here, man” coming from the vicinity of his outdoor equipment shed.

‘Rico.

The RPs leader showing up in the middle of the day at the site meant trouble.

Tomas didn’t waste words. “*Orale?* What’s up?”

“Seraphina Norris was at the library today.”

“Yeah, I know. So?”

“I was watching over them, just like you told me to, but they ran out of the damn pamphlets they were handing out, so Calia left to get some more. There’s only one of me, and I couldn’t watch them both, so I trailed Calia. And lucky I did. Mrs. Norris had parked that blue heap of hers off road at the edge of the park.”

Tomas felt his heart drop to his boots. “What happened?”

“The dealers were waiting for her, man. They wanted the teacher. But they would’ve settled for Calia.”

“Is she all right?”

“Yeah, I got there in time and scared them off. Calia didn’t even know what was going down, didn’t know she was about to get jumped. She could’ve been hurt, Tomas!”

And if that had happened, they wouldn’t still be here talking.

As it was, his hand moved for his steel. “Recognize the muthafuckas?”

“They scattered, but I could finger them if I had to. Punk-ass dopers. They traded out of the mansion before the teacher moved in.” Enrico pounded his fist against his thigh. “They’re after Mrs. Norris, man, and in a big way. I know how those scum dealers operate, and those lowlifes won’t quit ‘til they get the teacher. They almost got Calia today. It won’t happen again.”

Tomas grabbed hold of Enrico’s shoulder. “You did good today. Just stay cool. Don’t do nothing stupid. You got your whole future ahead of you. Let me handle the dealers.”

“They got too close to Calia, Tomas. They almost put their filthy hands on her. And it won’t stop. Now that she’s chillin’ with Mrs. Norris over at the mansion, by association, the dealers will consider her fair game.”

Enrico tightened his gang armband. “From now on, I watch Calia. Where she’s at, that’s where I’m at. I suggest you do the same with Mrs. Norris. Stick to her the way I’m sticking to Calia. If we don’t watch out for our women, who will?”

Our women.

Funny, Tomas didn't correct 'Rico's mistake.

* * * * *

Sera placed the jelly jar on the oak table slightly off-center, the skewed location done to hide the scratches in the wood, and then installed the bright yellow buttercups she'd just picked from the clump that grew wild by the back door. With no time to plant a cutting garden and no money to buy a fancy bouquet, the wildflowers -- okay, weeds -- would have to do.

She stepped back to admire the centerpiece.

Gorgeous! The waxy yellow arrangement cheered up the drab surroundings, even if she did say so herself.

As a child of missionaries, she'd learned early on to get by with very little. Nothing changed upon her marriage to Matt. Her husband had cared very little about the material possessions of this earth, directing his thoughts to a higher, spiritual plane. After her bout with cholera, she'd left India with tons of memories, but with only one small, mostly empty, suitcase. The oak table -- a flea-market special -- was the first stick of furniture she'd ever owned, and she loved it, scratches and all. Later, when she found a free moment, she'd strip the finish and sand out some of the deeper gouges, leaving the superficial imperfections that gave the table character. Shabby chic was fashionable --

She could only hope the same fashion concept applied to herself.

After being out of the country for so long, she knew nothing about current styles and trends. But she did know herself enough to understand last minute jitters explained her fussing over silly things, like a scratched table and the placement of a flower -- okay, *weed* -- arrangement.

Any second now her dinner guest was due to arrive.

At the rap on the rusted screen, she whipped her apron over her head, smoothed her hair one last time, and raced for the back door.

"Please come in." She stepped aside to allow plenty of room. Tomas Ruiz was such a large man!

But the roses he carried almost dwarfed him.

"For me?" she asked -- okay, *squealed*.

"For you." Tomas handed her the armful. Huge red blossoms with long beauty stems, the first flowers she'd ever received from a man.

She hugged the bouquet to her breasts. "Thank you!"

"You're very welcome," he said formally.

And sheepishly -- what was up with that?

He shuffled his feet. "Um -- you look -- um -- real nice."

Her mouth twisted. *Nice, huh?*

Not the look she'd been trying to achieve. She should've gone with the white cotton blouse and tan skirt. At least with the blouse, she could've undone an extra button at the top and shown some skin.

The powder-blue dress was her best outfit, but years old. Horribly outdated, even frumpy, she realized now that it was too late to change. The dress befitted the wife of a missionary -- high collar, long sleeves, a hem that fell mid-calf, and so modest anybody's granny could wear the style.

Why had she ever worn the rag? She felt so *old*.

No point crying over spilt milk. Right after dinner, she'd toss out the dar-- the *damn* -- dress. Okay, well, maybe, not *toss* toss. The fabric was still perfectly good. She'd cut the material up into squares for that quilt she'd been meaning to make ...

Preceding Tomas into the kitchen, she placed the roses in a large tin bucket, which she then filled with water and placed beside the jelly jar on the table. *Voila!* The scratches had all but disappeared.

"By the way, Tomas, feel free to use the front entrance. Now that you fixed the bell, there's no need to walk all the way 'round back to knock."

"Not a good idea. Not until we resolve a few things."

He sounded serious, and Tomas was rarely serious.

Seraphina spun around to face him. "What sorts of things?"

"You have the school to consider, your standing in the community. People talk, and they sure as hell will if you hook up with me."

"We're only having dinner together." And talk about feeling old. Hooking up was a young person's expression, completely appropriate coming from Tomas, years her junior -- *Junior, junior*. Why had she thought junior? Tomas Ruiz was no kid.

She looked down, away. "At any rate, we're safe from gossip. At my advanced age, I'm far too old for anyone to believe we're seeing one another *that* way."

"How old are you -- like thirty?"

Her chin came up. "Almost thirty-one."

Tomas gave a short hoot. "Sera, you ain't nothing but a babe in the wood. I'm twenty-six my next birthday. Factor in my life experience, and I'm cradle robbing here."

No doubt to change the subject, he made a big production of sniffing the air. "What's that delicious aroma, woman?"

"Spaghetti sauce. I hope you like Italian?" To give her hands ... and her reeling mind ... something constructive to do, she went to the stove and stirred the large pot simmering on top. "When I was a kid and living in New York City, I got the recipe from a little old lady."

Little old lady, little old lady. That little old lady was probably her age, almost thirty-one. To her childish eyes back then, the woman had only seemed incredibly old. Did she seem incredibly old to Tomas in her matronly blue dress?

"So, you've been to New York?" he asked.

"My parents had missions in several different states, as well as in South America and Africa. We settled in Calcutta when I was fifteen. I returned to the States for college. After graduation, I went straight back to India."

"I moved around a lot too as a kid."

"Tell me! Maybe we lived in some of the same places. We can compare notes."

"Some other time, all right?" He hiked his jaw to her high ceiling.

Thereby avoiding eye contact. Why did he refuse to look at her?

"That ceiling fan really circulates the air," he offered. "I should get one for my trailer. That tin box overheats in the summer, and in the winter, it's as cold as a witch's ti- er -- cold enough to make ice cubes."

Tomas was trying so hard not to offend her. As if she had never heard the word "tit" before! He must think her the worst prude! "You live in a trailer?"

"Yup. I'm a vagabond, moving from site to site, going wherever a construction job takes me." Bypassing hers, his ebony eyes rested on the bouquet of flowers on the table. "Been on my own since just turned thirteen." He chuckled.

His laugh didn't fool her. "But you were only a child," she said softly, unable to hide her sympathy for this complicated man. "What about your parents?"

"Not legal. I never knew my mother -- she took off when I was only a few months old. My old man tried his best, but he was, well, he was ... not cut out to be strapped down with a kid 24/7. He'd go away for days, weeks at a time. The weeks started turning into months. Eventually, he took off, too. Who could blame him?"

"I could," she said in righteous indignation, charity cast to the winds. "I could blame them both. I wish they were here right now so I could give them each a piece of my mind. You don't just *take off* on a child!"

He coughed. "How'd we get on this subject, anyway? This is no way to talk to a pretty lady who's invited a guy over for a meal."

"Yes, it is! We're getting to know one another. Sharing backgrounds is part of it."

"I'd rather not, if you don't mind? Makes me uncomfortable."

"I apologize for making you feel uncomfortable." Her anger kicked in. "But if I ever run into either of the two parents -- and I use that term loosely -- who abandoned you, I'll tell them exactly what I think!"

"No chance of that happening. They're both dead."

She gasped. "I'm so sorry! What a terrible thing for me to have said!"

He shrugged. "You didn't know. Neither did I, not for a long time." He rubbed the back of his neck. "When I first started making some money, I checked into their whereabouts. I thought maybe I could help them out. Financially. Get them clean and sober. Send them to a good rehab program someplace. Hell, I don't know. I had to do something. They were my flesh and blood! But I was too late. They had both O.D.'d years before. Heroin. Back then, drugs were easy to get on the Southside. They still are."

"I'm so sorry," she said again. Though the word was grossly inadequate, *sorry* was all she could think of to say.

"Here we go again, being polite to each other. We keep apologizing because we're so different."

"Not so very different."

Suddenly, her dinner guest backed up to the door. "I left ... uh ... something in the truck. Give me a minute, all right?"

Before she could say, "Don't go" Tomas Ruiz had raced from the kitchen.

Chapter Fifteen

Tomas paced outside in the dark. What the fuck was he doing having dinner with Sera? Talking about his gritty childhood! What the hell kind of dinner conversation was that to have with a nice lady?

Sure he had some money. *Now*. But he didn't always. In his head, he was still dirt poor. And deep down inside himself he knew people like him didn't associate with people like her. They never rubbed shoulders. Didn't walk the same streets. His rotten childhood was his hot button, and she'd not only pushed it, she'd rubbed his face in it. Some things, a man just didn't ever talk about. Like, the things that drove him. The stuff that ate him up inside, even now, years later.

Tomas kicked a rock that got in his way along the path.

La cagada! Now he'd gone and done it! Blown his chance with her for sure. His inbred hostility had probably hurt her feelings, too. All his fucking fault! He was the man. He never should've let the line of conversation get out of hand. He should have kept his cool, played it cool. But whenever he was with Sera, it was bye-bye *muy suave vato* and hello bumbling idiot.

The lady kept catching him by surprise. Sometimes, she seemed so innocent. Other times, Sera just plain knocked his socks off. Bottom line, she had meant no harm. Her questions were just part of her nice lady's "getting to know you" routine. She couldn't understand he didn't want anyone getting to know him, didn't want anyone getting inside his head, under his skin, not that way, not that deep. He would just have to keep things in control if he wanted to go on seeing Sera --

Check that. He *had* to go on seeing Sera. His men depended on him getting that Riverfront Project. Sera could help him get that job. She was his ticket to respectability. But

man, damn straight, he'd never had to deal with this kind of thing before. By now, he and a date would've been in bed, and sex would've pretty much ended any and all conversation.

Tomas raked his hands through his damp, shower-washed hair. He had to go back inside the house. But he couldn't go back inside the house, not until he got it together. And the thing was, when talking about the past, he never had it together.

"The rumor is, you're having dinner with me tonight," Sera called through the rusted screen door.

"Right. Just catching a breath of fresh air, is all. I'll go to the truck and be right in."

He pocketed what he needed from the glove compartment along with his hands and walked back up the stairs.

Sera met him at the top.

Pulling a hand out of his pocket, he took her arm. "Hey -- careful on that last step. Man, I gotta get to these rotten steps this week --"

"Tomas, forget the stairs, at least for now." She cocked her light-brown brow at him as they reentered the aromatic kitchen. "Call me silly, but I think you left rather than discuss your childhood."

"Hey, silly." He flashed the condoms and a smile. "I went to get these. Didn't want a trip to the truck interrupting the romance, especially not at a critical moment."

He yanked Sera close. A hand cupped to her nape, where tendrils of silky fine hair tickled his fingers, he leaned down and in, and captured her slightly parted mouth. One way or the other, he'd get her to back off the subject of his childhood ...

Only his big seduction backfired. Sera didn't pull back. Didn't keep him out when his tongue made the giant leap from a friendly kiss to a bedroom kiss. Instead of clamping shut against his intrusion, her mouth opened, inviting him inside.

There went his socks again, knocked clean off.

Sera was kissing him back. Not nice-lady, missionary kind of kisses, either. Hot kisses. Wet kisses. Deep kisses. Tongue kisses. He wasn't prepared for the passion of Sera, the heat of Sera, the damn, sweet womanliness of Sera.

He lost it. Again.

His mouth ground against her mouth, his lips squashed against her teeth, his tongue squeezed halfway down her throat, his dick, already erect, rammed against his fly, trying to get at her.

Two choices -- break the kiss or unzip.

As though he were flinging himself off a girder swinging ten floors up and there was no way for him to land without sustaining some major broken bones, Tomas fell off Sera's lips. Panting, chest heaving, his gut all tied up in knots, he staggered back against the wall.

Man, he had to get the fuck out of the house. Had to push himself out the door. Had to get away from her fast, before he put it to her right there and right then.

Her lips. *Christ*, her lips. So damned soft. Her mouth was so giving. Kissing Sera meant ... kissing Sera meant ...

Something.

Edging away, he rasped, "I'm way out of line here. I should leave."

She stalked him like quarry. One step, another, until she stood under his chin. "I know what you're doing, Tomas, and it won't work. Not with me."

She smiled serenely, like a statue of the Madonna, completely unfazed by the kiss, while he was dying, falling apart, unable to breathe, needing to get out of the damn house before he made a grab for her.

That kiss ... that kiss was the end of his world as he knew it. And there she was looking at him all expectant, like she really wanted to be kissed again, and fool that he was, he bent to her again -- a big mistake, that -- and sank right back into the softness of her mouth.

Kissing Sera felt better than nice.

Her arms wrapped his neck, wound around his neck. To make the fit more secure, he took a step closer, and his big hands started roaming. Filling his palms with her bottom, he drew her tight against his erection, letting her know he wasn't her kind of nice, he would never be her kind of nice.

Slap my face, Sera! Please slap my face. Or knee me in the balls. They're twice their normal size so they're real easy to find.

Rather than slapping his face or smashing his nuts or even telling him where to get off, she opened her legs and cradled his hurting dick.

Ah. More, more, give me more.

While his 'nads demanded more, his tattered conscience put on the brakes.

What are you doing with a nice lady, Ruiz?

This was going too fast. Much too fast. Since she wasn't stopping it, he would have to stop it.

He broke them apart. Again. Forced himself to move away from her. Again. His heart felt like it was about to bust wide open. Again. How much could a man take before he exploded, before his cock rammed right through a metal fly and into a woman who wouldn't recognize a dangerous situation even when that dangerous situation bulged against her belly.

His arms dropped like lead to his sides. "Before we start something there's only one way to finish, you've gotta understand what you're letting yourself in for, Sera."

She nodded. "Excellent idea, discussing this like adults." She took a step closer.

He pinned her with a look and took two backward steps. "Sera, we need to get things straight first."

How? This was one sexual position he'd never found himself in before. Generally, women liked him. Generally, he liked them. Generally, they just did IT, and had a helluva good time. Generally, there was no discussion before, during, or after. What was the etiquette in a situation like this?

While he pondered the correct protocol, she rammed him into a corner. Two hands on his shoulders, she held him there.

He shook his head, hard enough to rattle his brain, hoping to knock some sense into himself. "Wh-what are you doing?"

"Turn around."

"Wh-what?"

"You heard me, Tomas."

"But why?" He whined.

"Because you're tense!"

For a small woman, Sera had a powerful grip. Man, she whipped him around so fast, his head spun. With his nose flattened to the plaster, she commenced to rubbing between his shoulder blades.

Since Sera had come into his life, he hadn't kept up his weekly sessions with Lucille, the Dom of the magical fingers and cat-o'-nine-tail whips. So yeah, his spine did feel a little outta whack --

"You know, Tomas," she said, moving in real close, "I read somewhere that the human body has these pressure points, and if an acupuncturist inserts a needle --"

He felt himself go tight.

Sera tssked. Her fingers dug into the back of his neck. "Don't tell me a big strong man like you is afraid of needles?"

No, he was afraid of Sera. Because her pointed tits were drilling two holes in his back, and he liked it. A lot.

"Could we maybe talk first?" he asked, edging away. She wanted to talk, he'd give her talk, he'd give her anything if she'd only just get away. Things had passed critical here.

When he couldn't budge her, he shook like a dog after a swim in a mud hole, until Sera fell off him.

He faced her. "Look, I should ... you know ... leave ..."

"I don't want you to leave. You're right. We really should talk first. Let's start with the condoms." She smirked. "Overkill, Tomas. Two condoms would have done the trick. Anything more pointed to an ulterior motive. Your purpose was to get me off the topic of your youth, and your ten-condom method was to get me angry."

"Damn! I knew I should've gone with subtlety."

Sera folded her arms around her middle. "Tomas, you're nothing but a snob!"

"I've been called a lot of names in my time, but snob was never one of them."

"But that's what you are -- a Grade-A snob! You have this preconceived notion of what I'm supposed to be like, and that's what you're reacting to. You're certainly not reacting to the real me, the woman cooking you dinner, the woman who just kissed you." She wagged a finger at his nose. "Cut it out!"

Then Sera went from scolding him to looking sad. "I shouldn't have pressed you for personal information. I should have kept our conversation superficial."

Superficial. That was the ticket!

Only superficial wasn't what he wanted, either, not if superficial made Sera look sad.

"After my old man took off, I got involved in some bad stuff," he blurted. "Gangs. Fights. Trouble with the cops. I served some time for assault -- I beat in a guy's skull for trying to rape a young prostitute I knew. The dude didn't want his wife to know he was banging little girls, so he said his caved skull was an accident, and the charges against me were dropped. Just dumb luck my record is clean."

He watched her back away. Nothing abrupt, just a slow, inch-by-inch withdrawal. He doubted she even realized she was retreating. But he knew. He'd seen that look too many times not to know it for what it was.

"Don't be scared," he said, softly so as not to further frighten her.

Her chin came up. "I'm not scared."

She was plenty scared, but he gave her a hoarse "Good" anyway, hating the emotion creeping into his voice. "One scared person is enough for any kitchen."

"You're scared?"

"Terrified."

"Of what?"

"Of doing or saying something that will spoil our evening."

"You never could," she replied with a tremulous smile. "Unless you left. Don't go, Tomas. Please?"

He said manfully, "I'm not going nowhere, Sera."

"I'm glad."

"Fact is -- had you ordered me out of this house with dinner smelling as good as it does, I would've broken down in tears."

Sera moved to the sink, washing an already spotlessly clean but hopeless wreck of a broken-down countertop. After the stairs, the kitchen got his attention next. Women liked nice kitchens --

To break the tension, Tomas asked, "Can I help?"

"Slice the bread while I strain the spaghetti." She pointed to the drawer behind him. "Knives are in there."

After selecting the sharpest one he could find, he began making long, easy slices in the crusty loaf.

"Lately, I haven't felt much like cooking," she said, by way of small talk. "Creating appetizing meals for only one person hardly seems worth the effort."

Suddenly, like a ghostly chaperone, her husband squeezed in between them in the kitchen. The man she loved was dead, and so Sera didn't feel much like cooking anymore. She'd only kissed him so hot, because she missed her husband. His mouth substituted for another mouth, a mouth that belonged to the husband she mourned.

Sera strained the boiling spaghetti water into the sink. Steam circled her head like a halo. Wisps of golden-brown hair crimped into tiny corkscrews. Her face flushed pink and dewy. Sera was so beautiful. Angelically beautiful.

Tomas twirled the knife, making the blade spin in a revolution before catching its narrow hilt.

He took pride in his hands. His fingers were fast and well-coordinated. Maybe he could've learned to play the piano, if he'd had the opportunity.

Sera looked over her shoulder, warily eyeing the glint of the twirling steel. "Where did you learn to do that?"

He carefully placed the knife beside the breadboard. "Sorry."

"But where did you learn ...?"

"Here and there." Like a knife slices a loaf of narrow Italian bread, he cut her questions short. "It's a skill like any other, Sera. Not a skill maybe I would have chosen, but I'm stuck with it now." He took a deep breath. "Listen -- are we gonna pussy-foot around each other all night? Because if we are, I'm telling you right now, my digestion won't stand up to it. If you look at me like you're about to jump out of your skin every time I do something outside your realm of experience, we're in deep trouble here."

"No, I ..."

"Don't bother. I know fear when I see it."

She dumped the hot spaghetti onto a large serving platter. "Okay, maybe your experiences are unlike mine, but that doesn't mean we can't be friends --"

She poured the most delicious smelling sauce he'd ever had the pleasure of inhaling over the white mound of pasta. Oregano and tomatoes and piping hot spaghetti took up the whole platter. Not the rubbery, open-up-a-can variety of spaghetti, either. The real deal. Sera was the real deal, too.

Fuck the spaghetti! Let him at the cook. Sera looked so tasty, he could eat her up.

He stomped on that impulse fast. No eating the cook. "We can't never be friends, Sera. We're from two different worlds."

Plunk on the table went the platter of spaghetti and sauce and about a million round meatballs. "As soon as you're done with the bread, we can eat," Sera said.

"Done."

"Then please take a seat." His hostess gestured to a place setting across from hers.

He had scared Sera, and for that, he was sorry. Sorry about pissing her off, too. But making her understand some basic facts about himself was the kindest thing he could've done for her.

Chapter Sixteen

After dinner, Sera filled the cracked enamel sink with hot water and detergent, and began dunking the stacked mismatched plates. When Tomas came up softly behind her, she jumped only the tiniest bit.

“A dishwasher didn’t come with these digs, huh?” he said.

“Yeah, right. I’m lucky a sink came with this dump.” She squinched up her face. “Oops. Caught me.”

He chuckled. “I’ll dry and put away if you show me where.”

Never one to turn down an offer of help, Seraphina tossed him a dishtowel and then ran a soapy sponge over her best supermarket glasses. Not crystal, but pretty all the same.

“The mansion’s got some good solid underpinnings,” Tomas began slowly.

“Developers don’t build houses like this anymore.” She covered her mouth with a sudsy hand. “That was not meant as a snarky attack on your construction company, Tomas. I simply happen to prefer antiques to contemporaries.”

“No offence taken. Personally, I’d rather renovate old buildings than tear them down -- if a structure can be saved. Some can’t. Listen, stop trying to convince me this house can be rehabbed. You’ve already swung my opinion.”

She turned off the tap. “Oh, really?”

“Yeah. Just tell me what you want done, and I’ll start fixing the house up for you.”

“Forgive me for repeating myself, but why?”

“Let’s just say, as a kid I wanted to learn the piano and never got the chance, and let it go at that.”

"Sorry. No can do. While commendable to ensure kids get an opportunity you missed ... what's in it for you, Tomas? You're a businessman, and I don't mean to look a gift horse in the mouth, but charity doesn't seem to be your thing."

"Here it is: I thought maybe if folks saw us together, they might think I was turning over a new leaf."

"Are you? Are you turning over a new leaf?"

"No," he said, baldly. "But for business reasons, I need to make folks believe I'm upstanding member of the community." He rubbed his neck. "I have plans, Sera, big plans, and making them become a reality involves cleaning up my act. Superficial stuff. You know, some rough edge smoothin'."

"And that's where I come in, to smooth out your rough edges?"

"Yeah. I thought maybe some of your class might rub off on me if we ... uh ... dated. I'd take you out, show you off, go to nice restaurants for dinners. We'd see the occasional movie. And, whenever either one of us needed to attend a public function, we'd be there for each other."

"I want you to bring me up, but I don't want to bring you down. I want everyone in town to think you're with me, that we're a couple. Behind closed doors is another matter. To be blunt, going to bed with me isn't part of the deal."

In principle, she didn't approve of hoodwinking people. But first and foremost, she was a practical woman. Upon occasion, she stretched principles for the sake of the greater good. In this instance, the school was the greater good. "I'm sorry. I have a problem with what you propose."

"A man like me ... a lady like you ... I knew it was a long shot."

"You misunderstand. I'm willing to act as your 'date' for public functions. That's not the problematic part. The behind closed doors aspect of the arrangement is the problem. Frankly, I need physical release. No sentiment. No romance. No pledges of undying devotion. Just sex. I believe you're the right man for the job."

As soapsuds floated all around them, she looked over at her dish dryer. "Close your mouth, Tomas, before you swallow a bubble. Soap has laxative properties."

"Hell! Are all missionary ladies straight-talkers like you?"

No more than men with ponytails and earrings and two-day beard stubble are all alike

...

Seraphina squared her shoulders. "One should never judge a book by its cover. I made that mistake with you when we first met. Don't make that mistake with me now. I'm nice, but I'm not that nice. And even if I were *that* nice, even nice women need sex." She winked. "Give it some thought. I wouldn't want to take advantage of you behind closed doors. Tell me your decision -- say, Monday? Unless you don't normally have sex on Monday? Unless you're a Saturday night sort of lover?"

“No, I’m pretty damn versatile.” Slapping the dishtowel down on the counter, her dinner guest headed for the door.

At the threshold, he turned back. “What was his name?”

“Whose name?”

“Your husband. You’ve never really mentioned him.”

The same feeling she’d experienced in intermittent intervals since his death descended and swamped her. Coming and going in waves, the feeling rolled over her when she least expected it, hitting her from some place in left field, and not only when she talked about him. She could be practicing a piece of music at the piano or taking out the garbage or getting ready to climb into bed, and it would just be there, waiting for her. Sometimes she pushed through it. Other times, the feeling engulfed her until she felt as though she were drowning in a sea of ... in a sea of ...

Nothing.

Those were the worst times. She felt like such an imposter then.

“Matt,” she said, quietly. “My husband’s name was Matt. He was a good man. Too good, really.”

“I’m here if you ever want to talk about him.”

“Thanks for the offer, Tomas, but you’ve convinced me to keep our arrangement superficial. I need sex, you need to change your image. Why complicate the deal with sappy heart-to-hearts?”

“Anything you say, Sera. “

Tomas left without saying anything more.

* * * * *

That Monday morning at Ruiz Construction, Tomas sat slouched over his desk, pouring over his blueprints. But no matter how hard he stared at his drawings, no matter how many times he picked up his pencil, he couldn’t concentrate enough to make the changes he knew had to be made. Sera’s twist on his plan kept interfering with his concentration.

Having her think of him as a cock first and a man second didn’t make him feel cheap or sordid or used. He’d been in Sera’s position once or twice himself. At times, he’d needed the comfort of a female body, and the woman attached to that body got lost in the need. He wasn’t proud of that, but it was what it was. Bottom line, he was giving her condition consideration. Plenty of consideration. And that consideration boiled down to this:

Sera wanted to have sex. Period.

He wanted to have sex with Sera. Period.

Those two little words -- *with Sera* -- made for one of those defining moments in life. Suddenly, pretending to be a couple to trick the good folks of Fenton took on less importance than becoming a couple for real. Scary.

Not the part about taking Sera to bed. That wasn't scary. That was easy. He could satisfy her sexually. But all the rest of the junk had him worried. Beyond mind-blowing sex, what?

Sera was a professional, a teacher with a college degree. His yearly income fell well over six figures, but in terms of outlook, he was strictly a blue-collar hard hat. She'd grown up in a loving family, with minister parents. He'd grown up on the streets, with no parents. She had culture. He had uncouth.

He couldn't change the past. Couldn't change the man he was inside. The future was all that was important now. Sera could help him accomplish his goals, but at what cost to her?

A sexual arrangement would do dirt to her good name, make her a target for town gossip. He knew how that went. But while his thick skin could take the crap dished out, Sera's delicate skin would bruise. He didn't want Sera hurt. She'd been hurt enough already. He couldn't even imagine loving someone the way she'd loved her husband and then lose him to disease.

Not *him*. Matt. Her husband's name was Matt. Probably short for Matthew. Nice name. Saying his name probably hurt too much, and that was why she never mentioned him. Not at all. As in never.

Sera needed to talk to someone about her husband, needed to get those grieving tears out. He couldn't say he was comfortable around weepy women. What guy was? But the way he looked at it, better he lend her a shoulder than have her keep all the sadness locked up inside. Sometimes, just being there for someone was enough. The words that got said really didn't matter. A good thing, since he'd never been good with words. But he was pretty good at being friends.

Of course -- Sera might see things different. Could be, friendship would breach their agreement's superficiality bylaws or something. Couldn't have friendship fucking up the sex

--

Williams poked his head inside the trailer door. "Hey, boss! The new hydraulic lifts ain't worth shit."

"Yeah, and I'm not doing shit about 'em, not 'til I fix the defective pump problem," Tomas shot back, temper flying. "What do I look like, a fuckin' octopus?"

"Anything you say." The hardhat backed down the metal steps fast. "I was only passing along the information."

Tomas rubbed the back of his neck. All in all, his day had been a royal pain.

Then Myra walked in.

He didn't look up from the blueprint when his administrative assistant heaved into her usual seat behind her desk. "I'm fine. Thanks for inquiring."

"Sorry. How was your weekend?"

"No complaints. Yours?"

"Had dinner over to the Monroe place."

"A step in the right direction, Tommie."

"S'pose so."

Sera had only kissed him because she was lonely. Grief did that sometimes. A person in pain would reach out to anyone. She wanted her dead husband, not him.

Tomas lifted up the seat of his jeans. "I'm going out, Myra."

"Comin' back to the trailer later on today?"

He'd never been able to keep anything from Myra, and he wasn't about to try now. "A while back, a rock got chucked through a window over at the Monroe place. Displaced dealers are looking to cause trouble, and Sera is caught in the middle. My presence at the house might get them to think twice about trying something again. If that doesn't work -- at least they'll target the right person. "

"Those dealers have an ax to grind. Don't let 'em grind it on you."

"Don't worry about me, cupcake. I can take care of myself. And I'll take care of Sera, too."

Myra gave him one of her special and seldom seen looks, an expression that fell between giving him a big sloppy kiss on the forehead and kicking his butt all over town. Either way, her affection came through pure and strong. "Ya know somethin', Tommie Ruiz?"

"What's that, Myra?"

She wiped at her streaming mascara and then blew her nose into a tissue that had seen better days. "Never mind," she croaked with a hoarseness that had nothing to do with all those cigs she snuck behind his back.

Sometimes, like him, Myra had trouble verbalizing her deeper emotions. And that was all right. She didn't have to. He understood. "Me, too."

He bent, kissed Myra's cheek, straightening back up quick before she slapped him upside the head.

She waved him off. "Go on. Get the hell outta here. Do what you gotta do."

* * * * *

Sera dragged her feet up the path to the back porch, a bag of groceries tucked under each arm. She'd spent the whole exhausting day canvassing various college music departments, interviewing prospective music teachers. The day had been a complete waste of

time. Not one qualified candidate had accepted any of the available positions. Upon hearing the jobs were located in a dilapidated mansion on Fenton's Southside, every applicant had said thanks, but no thanks. Consequently, Calia Vasquez remained her only teacher. How on earth could she possibly open a conservatory of music with only one instructor, not including herself?

Lost in worry, she didn't notice the yard-wide strip of freshly tilled dirt on either side of the walk until she was almost at the steps -- the new, freshly painted, steps.

Someone had repaired the stairs and started preparations for a garden!

Not *someone*. Tomas! Who else?

She could picture the perennials now!

And picturing them was all she would do.

Where would she come up with the money for landscaping? Plants were expensive, and by the looks of the layout, she'd need hundreds.

Still, just dreaming about the flowers made her feel better.

Brown grocery bags jiggling, Sera raced up the newly painted, but fortunately dried treads.

During her solitary dinner that night, she kept checking the back door expecting to see Tomas at the screen. While washing the dishes in the kitchen sink, she listened for the sound of his footsteps. Finally, literally going crazy inside the house, she took the musical score she was composing outside to wait for Tomas on the porch.

Around ten o'clock, she gave up the wait and went back inside the house.

After showering, Sera changed into a lightweight summer nightgown and moped her way to bed.

Monday night and Tomas wasn't coming.

And neither was she.

Unless she took matters into her own hands.

And why not? Why not masturbate? What was masturbation but a voyage of self-discovery?

She was all about finding out who she was now that she was no longer an obedient daughter or an obedient wife. So Tomas had stood her up for sex -- who needed a man, anyway? She could *date* herself, *make love* to herself. She did love herself, didn't she?

Thanks to Tomas, she had learned the rudiments of masturbation. But like any educational pursuit, once an instructor had taught the basics, the student -- she -- needed to master the subject -- orgasm -- all on her own.

Seraphina reclined on her back on the bed, pulled the sheets up to her chin, and split her thighs. A finger found her clitoris.

“Work your clit,” Tomas had said matter-of-factly, as if she knew exactly what he meant, as if she made a daily pilgrimage to that area of her anatomy.

Before her initiation with a candle, that region below her waist had either fallen under the auspices of a husband or a medical professional. But *she* owned her body, nobody else, and she had every right to touch herself wherever the hell *she* wanted to and for whatever the hell the reason -- even for a selfish and hedonistic reason like pleasure. After all, how could she expect anyone else to think she was worth spending intimate time with if she never spent any intimate time with herself?

Gently, tenderly -- because she was worth the time and attention -- she ministered to herself.

Good, so good.

After stroking herself for as long as she damn well felt like, what had happened before with Tomas started to happen again -- she was about to climax.

One hand moving still between her legs, the other hand on her breast, on her nipple, pinching and pulling and doing whatever felt nice, she brought herself to closer and closer to orgasm.

See? Who needed a man --

After only just thinking that little piece of self-delusion, the dark face of a bad boy entered her mind and tripped her over the edge.

“Tomas, Tomas, Tomas,” she gasped and groaned and grimaced.

And came.

Chapter Seventeen

Sera removed a four-inch galvanized nail from her mouth, a three-pound hammer from under her armpit, and proceeded to pound the poster into a wooden telephone pole.

Above the whirr of speeding downtown traffic, she yelled over to her teacher, who was putting up a sign next pole down on the busy city street, "What d'ya think? Did the Julliard start like this?"

"Doubt it. But if this gig doesn't work out, we can always fall back on construction." After missing the head on her nail about a million times, Calia Vasquez finally hammered her sign up, too.

"I think we should stick with music." Sera wiggled her painfully bruised thumb.

Slaphappy after tacking up flyers advertising the opening of the music school all over town, they collapsed in a fit of exhaustive hysterics. Still laughing, Calia stretched her arms above her head, her midriff blouse exposing a wide expanse of trim waist. "How's about I go get us two sodas from Simpson's Variety?"

"Anything cold sounds great."

"You're on." Taking her life in her hands, Calia skipped across the four-lanes of traffic, *against* the light.

Under the striped awning of the little mom and pop store stood a glaring Enrico Cortez, waiting for Seraphina's teacher.

No surprise there. Lately, the gang member who had enrolled in five private violin classes with Calia seemed to be everywhere.

While gathering up her gear, Sera kept one eye on the wildly dissimilar pair.

What was with Enrico's hand gestures? Her levelheaded violin teacher looked ready to cry as she entered the store.

A few red lights later, and obviously still upset, Calia exited the store carrying two bottles. Without a glance in Enrico's direction, she crossed the street again. This time *with* the light. "Let's drink our sodas in the park."

"Okay," Sera agreed. "The trees will shade us from the heat." On a cement bench, she took a seat beside Calia, busy wiping at her eyes with a tissue.

Her teacher took a noisy sniff. "You know, I just don't understand Enrico Cortez. One minute, he's all pleasant and everything, and the next minute, he's this obnoxious thug."

To give her teacher a moment to compose herself, Sera took a sip of her soda, then asked, "What happened?"

"He said a shirt that shows my bellybutton gives men the wrong impression. Enrico is only a couple years older than me, but he sounds just like my father! He's been following me, too, and not even my dad would do that."

Seraphina bit her lip. So -- Enrico had been following her teacher. She'd suspected as much. "You mean, he's stalking you?"

"Not exactly. More like he's my bodyguard or my chaperone. He's scaring off any guy who comes close. Who says I even want my virginity protected!"

"The virginity part -- is that what Enrico said?"

"Not exactly. He said virgins like me shouldn't wear clothes that show off their bodies. He says only a man who respects me should get to see my body. Do you believe that?" Calia brushed her thick, black hair behind an ear. "Where does he get off telling me how to dress? My body, my choice."

Calia undid her midriff blouse and tied the ends even higher on her torso. "There! That's what I think about his fashion advice. It's *my* belly button, and if I want to show it off, that's *my* business."

Sitting there in her modest white cotton blouse and plain tan cotton skirt, not an inch of bare skin revealed, Seraphina said dryly, "You go, girl."

"You know what I'm doing?"

Seraphina was afraid to ask.

Calia blazed ahead. "I'm getting my bellybutton pierced. That's what I'm doing. See what he says then!"

"Men," Sera scoffed.

"Men," Calia agreed.

"But you don't think his reason for following you is ... well ... sinister?"

Calia shook her head. "Enrico isn't like that. He's just hopelessly outdated about women. And it's *so* embarrassing that he could tell I'm a virgin. That's not something I go around broadcasting, not at my age!"

"But you're what -- twenty-one?"

Calia sniffed again. "Twenty-two!"

"Okay, twenty-two. Plenty of women are still virgins at your age, Calia."

Even at the advanced age of almost thirty-one. Talk about embarrassing!

Technically, Sera supposed, the candle had taken care of her hymen. And technically, she supposed she could also say she'd given her virginity to a hunk -- a hunk of wax -- but by no stretch of her imagination could she pretend that hunk of wax held a candle to Tomas Ruiz.

Calia interrupted her thoughts. "As an experienced woman, do you think waiting for marriage is corny?"

Now there was irony! Technicality aside, Seraphina had zilch experience with men. Until he became ill, she had never seen her husband nude, nor he her. On their wedding night, Matt had worn pajamas. At his gentle urging, she'd kept her button-to-the-ears nightgown in place. After praying together on their knees beside the bed, they had gotten under the covers, at which point her husband had raised her nightie high enough to allow for penetration and then covered her body.

Nothing followed.

While she remained silent, perfectly still, legs straight, arms down by her sides, devastated, and *frustrated*, Matt had vacated the bed. For the next six months, he'd assigned himself penance. She could hear the repeated *swish* of his self-flagellation through the paper-thin walls of the guest bedroom, where he had slept every night for the remainder of their marriage. Oh, she supposed, she might have knocked on the door and demanded her connubial rights. But she'd never made that long trip down the hall. What woman wants to think of herself as a marital duty? As an occasion of sin? As a reason for penance?

It was her own fault. She should never have forced the issue by insisting they consummate the marriage.

Prior to their wedding, Matt had lived as a celibate missionary. Desperate to stay on in India after the deaths of her parents, she'd begged him to marry her. In pity, he had agreed. But his pity had only extended so far. He had never agreed to sex.

Her husband had been a good man who had lived his whole life as an austere and pious ascetic, devoted totally to his mission. In embracing a higher plane of spirituality, Matt had forsaken embracing human beings. Sex was only one pleasure from which he'd abstained. He rarely spoke, ate, slept, or smiled. His life was spent in prayer.

Unable to tell her young teacher any of that, Sera said instead, "Intimacy is an individual decision."

Calia folded and unfolded her fingers. "It's just that ... I don't want that arrogant ass Enrico thinking I haven't had opportunities, because I have had opportunities. Or that I'm this completely innocent baby. There have been guys. I just didn't go all the way with them. Nothing past kisses."

“Kissing is good --”

Diamonds sparkled in Calia’s dark eyes. “Enrico is awfully cute, though, don’t you think? I mean, for an arrogant ass?”

“He’s a very good-looking arrogant ass, yes.”

“Intelligent, too. A natural leader. He could go places.” Calia undid the knot in her shirt and let the tails cover her tummy. “I guess a woman walking around the Southside has to be a little more cautious than a woman walking around a college campus. This is the real world, not some ivy tower in academia.”

“Enrico certainly seems to care about your safety. Caring is an admirable trait.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Calia picked up her bag. “Enrico is way more mature than any of the college guys I dated. He’s probably had scads of women. I don’t understand why he’d even bother with a know-nothing virgin like me.” With a long sigh, she got out her car keys. “I’m heading home. Thanks for listening.”

After getting her gear together, Sera drove home, too.

And found Tomas waiting for her on the drive.

One day too late.

Hefting her bag of equipment, she slammed out of the car and headed for the house.

He met her more than halfway.

She spoke into his eyes. “Tomas, I just want to say thank you for everything you’ve done --”

Waving her gratitude aside, he grabbed the supplies from her arms. “I tried calling and got no answer.”

She walked ahead of him up the stairs into the porch. “I was canvassing the Southside for new students.”

Reaching a long, muscled arm around her, he opened the screen door. After plunking the supplies on the kitchen counter, he turned to her. “Find any?”

“Some. Not nearly enough.”

“I’ll have Myra scout around town for you.”

“Myra?”

“My office manager. It’s sort of her ... um ... hobby to find out stuff about people. Like, for instance, whether or not they’d be interested in taking music lessons.”

“How?”

“Basically, though a combination of brow beating and bullying. It works every time. At least it does with me.” He sighed. “Myra is the closest thing I have to family. When my old man took off, she sorta took me in. She does that with strays. Nothing official, ‘cause she doesn’t do official, and neither do I. She’s the toughest woman I ever had the pleasure of

knowing. She's been with me from the beginning of Ruiz Construction, even when I couldn't afford to pay her."

"She must be a wonderful woman, to have so much faith in you."

Tomas shuffled his work boots. "I'd like you two to meet before we start."

"But, Tomas, when you no-showed on Monday, I assumed our agreement was off."

Tomas rubbed the back of his neck. "The project I'm working on right now is a small condo complex in downtown Fenton. A beautiful piece of property, right on the river. Used to be a run-down warehouse. I bought the property for practically nothing and rehabbed it. The building is just about completed, and later on this week, real estate agents will start giving guided tours, showing units to prospective buyers. Because it's a luxury complex, all the buyers are wealthy, many are influential in Fenton. Just the type of folks I want to see us together in the future."

"But, Tomas --"

"Wait, Sera! Let me spit all of this out before I lose my nerve."

"I'm sorry for interrupting. Please continue."

"See! Like that. That's exactly what I mean. You know how to smooth out tricky conversational bumps. There's gonna be social occasions that I'll have to attend because they translate into business opportunities. I get in my own way at formal affairs. Frankly, I suck at the social occasions. I'm outclassed at stuffed shirt events, and I know it, so my back goes up, and everything just gets worse. But, Sera, you've got class coming out the ... coming out the ... uh ..."

He thumbed his chin. "See there. That's why I want you with me, at my side, when I meet those people. I need you to give me a swift kick in the pants when I say or do something that's street. But I don't want to introduce you to those folks as my date because everybody knows what being my date comes down to."

Her lips quivered. Tomas was such a big and tough man, yet he looked absolutely distraught. His upset endeared him to her in a way his phony-baloney machismo charm never could. "I presume being your date comes down to sex, Tomas."

"Hell, yeah. But I don't want folks thinking that about you. I don't want anyone disrespecting you. So -- I'm introducing you to those stuffed shirts as my wife. Hell, everyone knows, married folks don't have sex. At least not with each other. " He beamed at her.

Chapter Eighteen

Tomas hadn't set out to buy a ring.

The day before, he got up out of bed, showered and dressed, same as usual. Somehow, though, after flushing and brushing, he found himself wandering around the downtown jeweler's district. While cruising down the sidewalk, looking in the plate glass windows, checking out the merchandise, he happened upon diamond solitaires in the display case, and the random thought occurred to him that marrying Sera was the right thing to do, considering the circumstances of their deal and everything.

Sera was a nice, respectable lady. Teaming up with him would drag her good name through the mud. Since everyone would assume he was screwing the missionary lady, making their association legal would save her reputation. Made sense to him.

All *muy suave*, Tomas reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue velvet box. A two-fingered snap released the top to reveal the engagement ring he'd spent the whole day before selecting. "I'd like you to start wearing this."

She blinked. "Did that rock fall off the back of a truck?"

"What kind of two-bit hood do you take me for? I wouldn't give you a hot stone!"

"Geez, look at the glitter. What they can do with paste these days, huh?"

The diamond wasn't one of those huge-ass, butt-ugly, Rock-of-Gibraltar stones. He wanted something perfect, no flaws, and of a respectable size. Just like Sera.

He narrowed his eyes. "Guess again."

"You mean the diamond is real? Buying a real engagement ring is a bit drastic, don't you think? Zirconium would've been the way to go. No one would've been able to tell." She shook her head. "I hope the store has a decent pretend-marriage return policy."

His mouth gaped, banged shut, opened wide enough to speak tightly. "The ring isn't going back afterwards."

Suspecting Sera for a real stickler about slippery emotions like love, he thought she'd rake his ass over the coals for presenting marriage as a business proposition. But no, she hadn't used that line of reasoning. Floored him that she hadn't. "After the divorce, you keep the ring."

"After the divorce." She chuckled. "That's a good one. You need to get married for real to get divorced."

When he shot her a look, she sobered instantly. "You can't be serious. Do you mean to say ... are you asking me to divorce you?"

"Like you said, we'll need to get married first. And we could get always get an annulment instead."

She frowned. "No annulment."

"All right. A divorce."

"How will we explain why we're going our separate ways?"

He shrugged. "People split up all the time. Times get tough, and people walk. Say I cheated. Everyone in town will believe that story."

She shook her head. "I could never lie."

"Whose says it would be a lie?"

"You're not a cheat, Tomas. If you make a vow of fidelity, you'll keep it."

His heart clutched. Why did she have that kind of faith in him, that kind of confidence? Hadn't she heard the gossip?

Tomas hung his head. Her trust actually hurt.

"And besides," she continued, "why would I demean you to the very people you're trying so hard to impress? Why would I agree to marry you, with the intention of helping you gain respectability, only to tear you down afterwards?"

She took a deep breath. "Furthermore, walking away from a marriage because of tough times doesn't sound very admirable, and that's not the kind of promo you need. You need to come across as a man of integrity."

"Listen, Sera, I can't let you live at the mansion by yourself, not until the riverfront is safe. And sleeping in my truck is murder on my back."

"You've been sleeping in your truck? But why?"

Sera needed to take off those rose-colored glasses of hers and face some ugly facts. "Dealers worked out of the Monroe mansion right up to the day you moved in. They're pissed you disrupted their operation. A widow living alone makes for an easy target. If I make you less vulnerable, like all bullies, the dealers will quit harassing you."

"A dealer threw that rock through my window." Her eyes went wide. "I can't believe someone I don't even know actually wants to harm me."

All right, this was *way* too much reality. "Baby, listen to me. The dealers want me, not you. I'm the one who owns the mansion and who's forcing them out. If you don't want to marry me, I suggest you vacate the house --"

"I'm staying!"

"Then, there's no other way."

"What about the police?"

Tomas snorted. "For years, the cops have turned a blind eye to the Southside. Why do you think Anderson sold out to me?"

He answered his own question, "Because the dealers sabotaged Anderson at every turn. That won't happen with me. I fight dirty. After growing up on these streets, I know how these little fuckers -- excuse my language -- think. I'm building million-dollar estate homes on this parcel of land, whether the dealers like it or not. They wanna tangle, we're on."

"Tomas, maybe I should leave the mansion, after all. You could get hurt --"

"It's only a matter of time before the dealers wise up and realize they have to go someplace else, crawl under some other rock. Right now, they're not in the mindset; they're pushing back. They can't win, though. They're scum, and they're getting the hell out of this neighborhood, out of the Southside, out of Fenton, too. Until that happens, I'm moving in with you, and I can't do that unless we're married."

She bit her lip. "This is all so wrong!"

"This is only a temporary arrangement, just so folks don't get the wrong impression about you. I don't want anyone thinking you're just another one of my good-time women. If we shack up together, if you're viewed as one of my easy lays, that will defeat the whole purpose of our agreement. And to show my appreciation for helping me out, I'll make the mansion my wedding gift to you." As he put it all on the line, he started sweating under the collar.

Sera always looked so neat and cool, even in the heat. How the hell did she manage? And why the hell did a snowy-white blouse and prim beige skirt seem sexier than The Flamingo's pink-feathered costumes?

Sera's eyes went wide as saucers. "You'll give me the house?"

Finally, the right inducement! "That's what I said."

"No wedding, no deal?"

"No wedding, no deal."

She held out her work-chapped hand. "Would you please put the ring on my finger, Tomas?"

"I'd be proud to."

The ring looked good. Damn good. A little too good. Liking the way the ring looked just a little too much, liking the significance of that glittering stone way fucking too much, he backed up for the door --

A rumble coming up the driveway stopped him cold.

Not Sera. His fiancée -- even thinking the word gave him a case of the happy hives -- raced out of the house, with him following.

"Tomas, why is there a Ruiz Construction truck in the yard?"

Before he could explain, the hardhat asked, "Where do you want the flowers, boss?"

Tomas pointed to the excavation work he'd done earlier. "Over there, Hank. We'll let the lady decide which plant goes where."

Sera, still drooling over the plants -- he wished the hell she'd look at *him* like that -- finally turned her attention to him. "All those flowers are for me?"

He pulled on his hoop earring. "Flowers go hand-in-hand with a marriage proposal."

"But there's hundreds, maybe thousands, of plants out there."

"I'm wooing you."

"W-woo?"

"That's right. Woo. And I don't woo in a small way, Sera."

She threw her hands up in the air. "I give up. Absolutely give up. You're entirely too charming to be taken seriously."

"That's the idea," Tomas replied and got the hell outta there fast.

* * * * *

Three days later, when a Justice of the Peace yawned, "You may kiss your bride now," Tomas needed no further persuading.

Though, he did pull out of the kiss real quick. Not because he wanted to, because he hadn't want to -- he could've gone on kissing Sera's soft clinging lips for days -- but he wasn't about to put his breaking point to the test.

His lady-bride looked like a dream, enchanting, otherworldly, in the garland of wildflowers she'd woven in her hair. Her eyes were slumberous, her mouth giving, her cheeks flushed. She was the prettiest, nicest, sweetest woman he'd ever kissed, but he couldn't do what she wanted him to do. He wasn't having sex with her on the wedding night.

Too bad his dick had other plans.

A fact Sera would've caught onto had her belly accidentally connected with the spike-hard bulge in his best black jeans -- another reason he'd pulled out of the kiss.

He'd lay odds that Sera had been a virgin before her first marriage, her *real marriage*, that her sexual experience was limited to one man, the man she'd loved. Her husband. Her *real* husband.

He wanted Sera, but how could a badass *hombre* like himself compete with the memory of a good man? Tough fighting Sera's recollections of her saintly husband.

Tomas Ruiz was no saint. As for being a good man ... he was still working at it. Thank you, Jesus, for second chances.

Bottom line, Sera didn't love him, and so sex with him wouldn't be special.

He wanted special.

For the wedding, he would have liked special, too. But they'd had no altar. No flowers. No music. A civil ceremony all the way. That was how Sera had wanted things done.

Maybe because of his unstable childhood, he liked tradition. Even a little pomp and circumstance. He would have liked nothing better than for his pretty Sera to have walked toward him down the center aisle of a church, the scent of incense in the air. The church's denomination didn't matter shit, just so long as the man saying the words was a man of God.

Someone's God. Anyone's God. Sera's God!

Whatever happened to the Big Guy she used to work for, anyway? Wasn't Sera a former missionary? Wasn't she supposed to be big on God? No sign of the Holy Dude here, not that Tomas could tell.

After thanking the two complete strangers who had acted as their witnesses, Tomas turned to his Sera. "I'll drop you off at home."

Her brows bunched over her nose. "Why? Where are you going?"

"Back to the site. Ready to leave?"

Chapter Nineteen

Circumventing a mud puddle at the Ruiz Construction site, Seraphina tried to get her bearings. Tomas had suggested they meet later so he could show her around his condo project, and here she stood, in the flooded yard, unable to find him anywhere.

Workers rushed every which way, yelling at other workers in what sounded like a foreign language. The noise level made hearing herself think just about impossible, never mind asking anyone for directions. And the dirt! The site was a dust bowl in some places, a mud hole in others. And she thought Calcutta had issues.

Wanting to look bride-like when Tomas introduced her to Myra, Seraphina still wore her wedding finery: a pastel print with a large lace collar and matching white pumps. This past spring, she'd visited the dress twice a week at the discount department store, checking to make sure size twelve still hung on the rack, but holding off the purchase until the end of season clearance sale.

Filth now splattered the hem.

Only a dress, Seraphina told herself, surveying the damage.

Her glance dropped to her hopelessly muddy feet.

And her best pair of shoes.

Sighing, she knocked on the metal door of a construction trailer.

A woman in purple lamé answered. "Yeah?"

"Er ... maybe this isn't the right place."

"We'll never know, will we, unless you tell me who you're looking for."

"I'm Seraphina Norris ... I mean, I mean ... Seraphina Ruiz. Tomas is expecting me."

"Expecting you to do what?"

Seraphina blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Come in, come in. Just funning you. Tomas said you were the serious type. I heard you sing, you know. Over to the Chamber of Commerce."

"Aha! You must be Myra!" Sera started climbing the stairs up into the trailer. "I've heard so much about --"

Snap!

On the last step, her heel caught and broke. "Drat! That's why these shoes were in the half-price bin!"

"Quality shows true in both shoes and men. Looks like you got better taste in men. Tomas is a real gem. One in a million." Myra lowered her voice. "Don't tell him I said so. Promise?"

"Oh, I won't." Kicking free of her broken pumps, she hobbled inside the trailer.

Myra took in Seraphina's soiled dress. "The boss didn't tell you to wear your worst duds to the site, did he? Wait 'til I get my hands on him!" She yelled toward the back of the trailer. "Tomas Ruiz, get your inconsiderate rear-end out here, pronto. Your wife is here to see you."

Her handsome new husband came rushing out from a back room. "Sera! You walked in here alone? I told you I'd meet you at the gate."

"Yeah, and you should've, too!" Myra's look shot daggers at her boss. "Look at her!"

"It's nothing, really. A little dust. The dress is washable," Seraphina said quickly, trying to patch things up between Tomas and the woman who meant so much to him. Why hadn't she called Tomas on her cell phone from the gate like he had told her to do?

Tomas shook his head, "Sorry, Sera. I should've warned you about the dirt at the site."

Myra folded her arms over her chest. "Her shoe's broken, too."

"How's the weather today, Myra?" he shot back. "Should I apologize for that, too?"

"Smart ass," Myra grumbled. "Nice meetin' you, Sera. I'll leave you two alone now."

Tomas gave her a fond wave, which Myra ignored as she shuffled past.

Seraphina barely suppressed a nervous giggle when the trailer door slammed. "My. That certainly went well."

"Yeah, it did. Myra liked you. Normally, she's not so pleasant."

Strolling the trailer's interior, a tour that encompassed no more than a few steps, she came upon a grouping of cardboard buildings in miniature scale set on a drawing table. "What does this architectural model depict, Tomas?"

"Nothing." Her new husband raced over and covered the display. "Just something I'm playing around with is all." He dimpled. "Sera, about the dress -- you'll need to wear something else around the site."

"But I didn't bring a change of clothes!"

"S'all right. I bought you a pair of jeans and a top."

She bit her lip in excitement. "Did you say jeans?"

"Yep."

He sauntered down the trailer's abbreviated hall to a built-in wardrobe, returning with two folded garments, which he handed to her. "Leave your shoes with me, and I'll fix the heel."

Sera kicked off her remaining shoe. "Where do I change?" She loved the dress, but these were *jeans* they were talking about.

He pointed to the rear of the trailer. "My room is the one that looks like a closet stuffed with a bed."

At his apt description, she smiled. In the cramped space, Tomas appeared positively immense. His wide shoulders spanned the walls, his head almost scraped the ceiling.

She turned to go. "Back in a sec."

"Sera?"

"Yes?" She kept walking.

"Leave off the bra."

A shiver of arousal ran up her spine. "Oh?"

"No panties or stockings. Bare underneath. And Sera -- take down your hair."

Now we're talking ...

Inside the bedroom, she tore off the wedding finery, removed her styling clips and shook her hair loose. Over her naked skin, she pulled on a brand new image, not quite a sex kitten, but not dowdy, either. At least not according to the mirror.

Rather than try to minimize her generous rear end, the jeans highlighted her ass -- *um* -- et. Rather than try to maximize her less than generous breasts, the thin white cotton top showcased her -- dare she say -- *perky* nipples. In the new clothes, with her hair free, she looked different. Younger, hipper.

She looked like a *ruca*.

Sans underwear, her body moving fluidly, her breasts shifting with each step, her nipples tightening as the peaks rubbed against the soft cotton, the tight jeans abrading the sensitive skin on the inside of her thighs, she left the bedroom. Conscious of the inseat pressing into her vagina, the rough new denim scraping her clitoris, her hips actually *rolled* as walked down the narrow hall.

Amazing what clothes -- or the lack thereof -- did for a woman's sex drive. Hers had always been a strong, though untapped, natural resource. The outfit brought out her inner naughty minx, the bad girl she'd always kept hidden. Look out, Tomas! Her groom didn't stand a chance.

As she approached, her husband's eyes went from dark brown to black. The lids hooded, his gaze lingering on her breast in a hot caress. "Good thing all my workers have

already punched out for the day. I wouldn't want any man, especially not randy hard hats, seeing my wife looking so fine." He stroked a finger along her bare arm.

The clothes had loosened her inhibitions, but a lifetime's worth of modesty made her suggest, "I could wear one of your jackets --"

"Cover up your gorgeous shape? No way, baby. And no worries -- I'm giving you a strictly private tour of the condo."

Goody. She had him in her clutches now, and Tomas Ruiz was going down.

She had only just thought the double entendre, when the tough desperado fell onto his knees at her feet.

"I fixed your broke heel, Sera."

Fingers crossed, her shoe was the least of what Tomas Ruiz would fix tonight.

He lifted her foot, caressed her foot, delicately shoed her feet, first one and then the other.

By the time he stood again, her nipples were throbbing.

"Shall we go?" he asked.

Accidentally on purpose, Seraphina allowed her breast to rub against her husband's arm as they walked side-by-side to the trailer door.

Chapter Twenty

Standing close together, they rode the elevator up to the rooftop luxury unit.

When the ride hit a bump, his beautiful bride lost her balance, and her cute tit smashed against his side.

He steadied her, and she smiled shyly up at him. "Hard to believe this building was once an old warehouse. I've never seen anything so spectacular."

Tomas had. Sera was the most spectacular sight he'd ever seen.

"I'm glad you like the renovation. Your opinion matters a lot to me." Breaking free, he went to slouch against the elevator's leather-padded wall. But still two floors away from the penthouse suite, he couldn't turn his burning gaze away from the two sharp points sticking out from beneath his bride's white cotton tank top.

He jammed his hands into his pockets -- to keep from fondling those frisky arrowheads.

Her slender arm swung in a graceful arc over her head. "I very much approve of salvaging, rather than demolishing, old buildings."

And he very much approved of the way her round breast had just about popped out of the jersey's low neckline. Could two nipples get any higher?

Conveniently, Sera now stood sideways, so he got two views simultaneously.

First, he checked out her ass. Mouthwatering. Just knowing her sweet pussy was tucked bare into her jeans made him go a little nuts. The denims were so tight, he could make out her cleft.

His bride was wet. No need to finger-fuck her to make sure. Just as he'd suspected, going without underwear had primed her, but good. Now that the nice lady was turned on, her body shouted out for release.

She was getting it, too.

Just because this marriage wasn't getting consummated didn't mean his sweet bride was missing out on the wedding night jollies. Sera was getting her fireworks, all right, just not in the usual way.

Gifted with his hands, in possession of a talented mouth, too -- or so he'd been told more than once -- he could do all sorts of inventive stuff to ensure she came.

And then there was dirty talk.

He'd never been good at social conversation, but bedroom conversation was a whole different story. The turn of a phrase could act as a powerful aphrodisiac. Once a man mastered the fine art of verbal foreplay he could pleasure a woman from across the room, without ever touching her. Words -- pretty potent stuff.

Tonight, he'd do the right thing by his wife. In fear of bumping into Matt's memory, he wouldn't be putting his dick inside Sera, but he would do things to her no missionary man would ever think to do.

No time like the present to start. "Push that jersey up, so I can see your tits."

Her hand fluttered to her throat. "Pardon?"

Seeing her shocked expression, he brought the dirty talk down a pitch. "We're married now, sweetheart, and I want to get a look at my beautiful bride."

She darted her green eyes from wall to wall. "In an elevator?"

"Why not? We're alone in the building and this here is a private elevator. The doors won't open until we reach our honeymoon destination."

Damn! His blushing bride sent a worried glance to the high tech, high definition surveillance equipment overhead. "Could you shut that thing off first, Tomas?"

The penthouse suite came equipped with romantic allure *and* state-of-the-art security. Both explained why he'd chosen to take Sera here tonight. Later on this evening, when he wasn't available to protect her, others could.

Instead of patrolling the grounds over at the mansion like they usually did, tonight Rico and his warriors would guard the fenced-in condo. If the alarm system went off, signifying someone had broken into the rooftop unit, Tomas had left instructions for the gang to come running, steel drawn.

So, no, he was not dismantling the alarm system. Instead, he'd use the blinking red light overhead as a sex prop.

"That's a security cam. But don't fret -- I'm the only one who'll see the pictures." He smiled reassuringly. "Consider the photos a wedding gift to your husband."

Sera licked her lips, wanting to do as he said, but hesitating. "But --"

"No arguments. Just do it, Sera."

"But why can't I simply remove my top altogether?"

And he thought she was hesitating?

At her eagerness, his cock rammed his fly.

Control, Ruiz. Get it under control. "Did I tell you take off your top?"

"No, but I --"

"You'll do exactly what I tell you to do, and you won't question me again. I'm your husband now. Remember? A good wife obeys her husband."

"So sorry." She raised the white cotton tee.

But to only slightly above her belly button.

"Like this?" Her eyes twinkled in understanding. Sera caught onto the game real fast.

He swallowed. "No. Over your nipples."

Grinning, the little wanton hiked the white cotton top clean up to her chin, the abrupt movement setting her titties jiggling.

Fuck. She was killing him!

Too bad. Suck it in, Ruiz.

This was her wedding night, and Sera was getting her fantasies. That meant not revealing how completely she owned him, how totally she could twist him around her little finger, how submissive he was to her every whim, how he was dying of lust, inch-by-inch.

"Your nipples are very ... large, wife. Hard, too. Are they always so large and hard?"

"No, husband," the quick study replied, role-playing serious. "My nipples have never been this large and hard before. You make them so."

He nodded his head in approval. "Do they hurt?"

"Yes," she said with a sub's meekness. "Dreadfully. The pain is almost unbearable. I ache for you, husband."

"Would touching them help the ache?"

"Yes."

"Ask me politely, like a good wife should."

"Please touch me, husband."

He pressed the elevator's stop button, said in a tone that came right out of BDSM central casting, "You may come to me, wife, and present your nipples."

Sera moved slowly across the elevator floor. Standing before him, she gazed up at him from under the fringe of her lashes. Her ladylike hand cupped a breast underneath.

He almost lost it then.

She pouted. "I'd like a kiss, husband, first."

He moved his thumb pad gently over the peak, and she squirmed in response. His game plan was right on schedule. "Good wives do not demand kisses of their husbands. You must be punished!"

Man, how did Doms carry off this routine without cracking up? This D/s crap was not for him. Give him equal opportunity sex --

"Punishment?" Sera asked. "What sort of punishment?" Her green eyes sparkled. "A bare-bottom spanking?"

Paddle Sera's ass? Bruise her silky flesh?

"Hell, no!" he shouted.

Sera's eyes went from sparkling to disappointed.

La cagada! He had created a monster.

He slipped back into character. "Disobey me again, and yes, I will spank your bottom pink."

"Glowing pink?" Her animated face held rapture.

"Yeah, baby. Anything you want. Glow-in-the-dark pink."

"Rats! I have this great wooden hairbrush, but it's back at the mansion. I suppose we could substitute some sort of tool. Do you think any of the workmen left a hammer in the condo? You could use the handle --"

Hammer? On Sera's ass?

He'd clobber himself over the head first.

His back muscles tightened. "Silence, woman!"

"Sorry."

"Now for your nipples," he said, sternly. "Do you require a hard or a soft touch?"

"Hard."

What else?

Tomas squeezed the end of Sera's distended nipple between two fingers, and she raised a hand to his chest, as if to touch his nipple, too.

"Touch me," he chastised, "and your wifely training ends."

Both hands disappeared behind her back. "Sorry."

"You're learning," he praised her apology, while preferring she smack him upside the head. "Your tits are small --"

"I was hoping you wouldn't notice."

"Before you interrupted me, wife, I was about to say, your tits are small beauties, perfect in every way."

"Oh, Tom -- I mean, husband. What a romantic compliment."

Too romantic, he thought glumly. He needed to get tougher with her, harder on her. "Remove the jeans, wife. Show me your succulent pussy."

He thought she would go all haughty at his coarseness. Either that, or give a lady-like swoon. But no, not his Sera. Kicking off her shoes, she reached for the snap, pushing the low-riding denim jeans down and off.

His bride's pretty pussy was weeping. Her golden-brown pubic hair glistened with sex tears, her upper thighs slick with her juices.

Tomas felt his heart constrict. *Oh, Sera, baby! You gotta be hurtin' so bad.*

"Open it," he said tersely.

"Ex-excuse me?"

For the sake of her sensibilities, he forced out the V-word. "Open your vagina."

With two fingers, she pulled up on the swollen lips.

"More, baby," he ordered.

Panting, her small breasts bobbing, she widened the slit.

Easy does it, he slipped his hand between her slippery thighs, his index finger going up and in, his thumb rubbing her clit. His first touch of Sera.

Bowled over, he fell back against the elevator's wall. Luckily, still within reachable range, he worked two fingers gently up inside her.

Tight! How come she was so damned tight?

"How do you want me to do you?" he asked.

"I -- I don't know what you mean."

"Your clit. How-do-like-your-clit-done?" Some women liked direct stimulation; others preferred an indirect stroke. He wanted to pleasure Sera, not hurt her.

To show her what he meant, he slid his thumb directly over the little nub and pressed.

Head thrown back, Sera convulsed with a scream, then sagged.

That made two of them.

Manfully, he stiffened his spine. With a bend of his knees and a scoop of his arms, he picked up Sera and hit the elevator release button.

The doors opened.

Into the honeymoon suite, he carried his lady-bride. Her beautiful loosened hair trailed behind, almost like a wedding veil.

Chapter Twenty-one

Seraphina couldn't seem to hold up her head. Her skull lolled back against her husband's solid chest as he carried her down a long hall.

Yep, she had Tomas right where she wanted him.

Annulment indeed! He was easy pickings now.

Bye-bye business arrangement, hullo honeymoon. By hook or by crook, this marriage was getting consummated.

Giddy with happiness, she giggled. "I didn't realize you were such a traditionalist, Tomas. Carrying me over the threshold and everything ..."

With an upward heave, she was tossed.

Landing in a sprawl on the middle of a king-sized bed, her bottom bouncing on the comfy mattress, she snorted. *So much for tradition ...*

Then, she noticed the coverlet.

"Oh, Tomas." She picked up a handful of red petals, careful not to crush the delicate blossoms. "Roses!"

"A bride should have a wedding bouquet. Since you didn't want to carry flowers during the vows, you got 'em now."

Opening her fingers, she released the dewy-soft petals. Soft as whispery kisses, the rose blossoms tickled her bare skin.

When Tomas had palmed her breast in the elevator, his brown fingers closing around the tip, the contrast of their skin pigments had excited her, as had the size of his thick fingers.

Sera smacked her lips. If hand span translated to body parts, then her bridegroom had to be *huge!*

Things were looking ... well ... rosy. All that masculine power! She couldn't wait to feel him thrust inside her.

The white tank top, hiked up somewhere around her neck, comprised the extent of her wardrobe. Her big strong husband must have liked the new look because he stared at her intently --

Before switching off the bedroom light.

So much for vanity. Would he have plummeted the bedroom into cave-like darkness if he had liked what he saw?

Like what he saw or not, he still grabbed hold of her ankles and parted her legs.

Yes! Yes! Yes!

Her husband's staccato breathing placed his location at somewhere directly in front of her. Disappointingly, she realized he hadn't undressed -- the outside of her bare legs contacted denim, not skin. As he came over her, the urge to tell him how much she wanted him hovered on the tip of her tongue.

She didn't put her desire into words. There was the rejection factor to consider. Her groom might still run screaming from the room. Or worse yet, yawn in apathy. Too afraid to move naturally, too afraid that if she did, she'd do something really, really, incredibly stupid, and he'd give up on her in disgust, she lay statue still, practically frozen. Turned down once already on a wedding night, she was hardly over-confident --

In order to continue her parents' work, she had stayed on in India. To accomplish their mission, she'd given up a precious part of herself to a sterile marriage. As a result, she'd withered up like a dried flower blossom. Even before the cholera outbreak, she had begun to feel dead inside. This new her, the one who wore tight jeans and a revealing tank top, wanted to live, live, live.

Reaching up over her head, she shed the white cotton top.

She was naked. Totally naked. Stark naked. Blissfully naked. Naked as the day she was born. New, new, all of this was so new to her! She was new, too. Reborn.

Sex. It was all due to sex.

And to Tomas Ruiz.

In the dark room, she felt his large and capable hands play with her hair. Running his fingers through the messy strands, lifting the tangle, Tomas lustfully inhaled.

"Sweetheart, I've wanted to do this since that first day, when you tried to put a polish on me with the window cleaner. You smell like nothing I've ever smelled before. Like raindrops on flowers."

Raindrops on flowers ...

What a romantic thing to say! And the poetic words had fallen from the lips of a man whose rough edges she was supposed to smooth. He sounded plenty smooth enough already.

The doubts crept in. Of course, he'd had plenty of opportunities to rehearse lines like that, ample occasions to perfect their delivery. There were some decadent stories going around town about Tomas. Talk that he'd made love to scores of gorgeous women, exotic dancers whom he employed. She couldn't compete with those gorgeous women.

Turning her face to the wall, she categorized all her faults, enumerating each and every imperfection in her head. How could she hold the attention of an incredibly sexy man like Tomas Ruiz for even a night?

She had to let him off the sex hook. Why force him to do something he clearly didn't want to do?

She tilted her jaw. "Tomas, perhaps including sex in our bargain wasn't such a good idea after all."

"I wouldn't have to put it to you. Not inside of you." A big hand skimmed her shoulder. "You know what I mean?" He cupped a breast. "Know what I mean, Sera? Just like in the elevator. We could do it like that --"

Arching her back, she moaned, the lusty noise taking her by surprise.

"Know what I mean, baby?" He stroked her nipple.

What he was doing was so, so good. For the first time in years, she had started to feel.

When his hand moved between her thighs to cradle her vulva, she held her breath. The outer folds of her labia were separated with two large fingers. A digit -- the index? -- slid up into her vagina, penetrating the slick passage, just as he had done in the elevator. Trembling took hold of her and wouldn't let go.

"I can tell it's been a while for you," he whispered. "You're wet, but tight. Your cunt --"

She didn't mean to, but at that word, she gasped.

Immediately, he withdrew his touch. "Listen, I know you're nice. Refined. And I know I'm not. That's what I keep telling you." He sighed. "I use crude words, Sera. I think crude words. Now, I'm gonna do some things to you, sex things, that maybe you're not used to having done. And I'm gonna say some things, too, sex things, that maybe you're not used to hearing. If that offends you, better speak up quick."

He interjected before she could do any of that speaking up quick. "But you know something? I don't think you are offended. I think you like my crude language, Sera. And I think you like what I'm doing to you, too."

Bingo!

The crude word had excited her, not offended her. She'd gasped in pleasure, not outrage. And she very much liked what he had done to her so far. She was hungry for more! How to ask for what she needed?

Married for five years, a widow for one, she had only just lost her virginity. *To a candle*. Pathetic! She'd never had sexual intercourse. Her marriage had not been

consummated. But confiding her inexperience to Tomas would expose the lie of her first marriage. How could she show such disloyalty to Matt?

"I need release, Tomas. There's a knot in my belly that won't go away. You're good at this. At sex," she panted. "Please! Treat me as you do all your other women. You won't offend me."

"So, if tell you I want to look inside your pussy, you wouldn't swoon on me? Like, I wouldn't burn my hand on your blush if I turned on the light again?"

"I'm fine with that."

He kissed her lips, softly, delicately, romantically, his gentle touch belying his rough language. The mattress shifted as his weight lifted. She blinked as the lights came back on.

"Even your toes are rosy," he teased as he spread her thighs. "And I don't understand why. You've got the prettiest damned cunt, Sera."

She groaned. "Oh, dear ..."

"I think I understand what you want from me now, and you'll get it, too. Everything." He took her lips, his tongue entered her mouth, sampling the interior.

He spoke again. "We'll do it all, Sera. Except sheep. Those are only rumors about me and barnyard animals. Too wooly, even for a depraved degenerate like me. All that *baaaing* would get on my nerves."

No bestiality?

She could live with that.

To prove it, she pressed her breasts into his face.

He chuckled. "I'm gonna fondle you, don't you fret. I'm gonna have my hands all over you before the night is through."

And then he was searing her with his mouth, branding her with kisses. Not just on her mouth. Everywhere. He sipped the perspiration from her skin, tongued her long and thoroughly. When his mouth attached itself to her nipple, sucking noisily on the distended flesh, she pulled off the leather tie that secured his ponytail and threaded her fingers through the sweep of his loosened hair. As his teeth attached themselves to the hardened tip and actually bit into her flesh, she yanked on his hair and screamed, vaulting from numbness into sensation.

Mark my skin, leave hickies behind, give me something to remember you by tomorrow.

Tomas moved lower. His mouth slid down to her belly, his tongue jabbing in and out of her navel. His whiskered jaw rubbed back and forth on her pelvis, his scratchy beard catching her pubic hair like Velcro. He kissed the inside of each thigh and then he was there, at her core, a generalized penetration, before specifically seeking and finding the small sensitized bump at the top of her sex.

His teeth. He was scraping her with his teeth.

She bucked. Sobbing and weeping, her hips rocking, she came apart.

Still panting, the last tremor not even yet subsided, she placed her greedy demand. "More! I need more. Please, Tomas, come inside me."

He lifted up from between her legs. Hunkering over her, he gave her his mouth.

She tasted herself on his lips! Smelled herself, too, as his tongue darted inside her.

Pulling back, he grinned wickedly into her eyes. "That's how your honey tastes."

Shocking!

Wonderful, too, because she could tell Tomas liked it! He liked her scent, her taste. He had liked kissing her *there*.

"Roll over onto your belly," he said with the authority that drove her wild.

She scrambled over onto her belly, flattening herself on the sheets.

"Baby, you ain't acting like you want me," he said, his voice colored by something she didn't understand. Had she done something wrong already?

"Please, Tomas, just tell me what you want."

"Doggie-style, in the light. Or do you only do the missionary, in the dark?"

Her face warmed in embarrassment. This missionary had never done anything, in the dark or otherwise. But she hungered to do it all now.

She went to all fours, a fast reshuffling of her body, and he began to undress.

For joy!

As naked as she -- but gorgeous, devastatingly gorgeous, with a bronzed, sculpted, *hard* body any statue would envy, he climbed up on top of the bed and went behind her.

Tomas was all healthy and virile manhood. The thick rigidity of his sex prodded her, the extension of his penis unbelievably prominent. Anticipation swelled inside her --

Until he told her, "Bring your ass up."

Her bottom was large. She didn't want to bring her big bottom up anywhere, not in polite conversation, certainly not with a man who'd seen his share of *small, shapely* bottoms, and never in a lit room.

But wanting him, wanting this, she raised her big bottom.

Full disclosure. He now knew the broadness of her hips, the generous proportions of her rear end. In this position, with the lights on, there was nowhere to hide.

"Wife, I'd never want to have to judge which part of you is the most beautiful, but your ass is beyond compare. I dreamt about this."

His rasp told Sera her husband was serious.

Seriously farsighted.

She was about to tell him to get his vision checked, when Tomas began filling his hands with her buttocks, spreading her bottom cheeks, kissing his way inside, actually tonguing her inside, and her mind went to other things.

Knowing her husband's reputation, she'd been prepared for less than gentlemanly sex. Even kinky sex. But this?

Yes, even this! Absolute possession and nothing less. "Come inside me. I don't care how."

His mouth lifted, his hands tightened on her hips. "Dry humping only."

What! "But --"

"No butts, either." He chuckled.

How could he joke at a time like this?

Obviously, he wasn't feeling the same intensity as she.

But her argument fell by the wayside when his penis -- excruciatingly hot, unbelievably thick, devastatingly long -- rubbed back and forth, smooth strokes across her perineum.

Her forehead plopped onto the pillow. "Yes," she screamed breathlessly. "Oh, yes. Yes. *Yes!*"

Chapter Twenty-two

Wouldn't ya just know it? Tomas mused, kissing along Sera's beautiful spine as his cock sawed back and forth between her legs. Just when he was trying to live down his reputation, he married a woman who insisted he live up to the rumors.

The false rumors.

Sure, he liked pussy, and he'd had women, but not *hundreds* of women. And he hadn't done most of the things the good folks of Fenton liked to say he'd done, that Sera obviously *wanted* to believe he'd done. If ever a woman was ripe for sexual adventuring, it was his bride.

Why?

Had to have something to do with her grief, with the way she'd lost her husband. Sera needed an escape valve.

That would be him.

So, he'd help her let go of her sorrow. Whatever she needed, he'd provide. Sera was getting her fantasies. Tomorrow, he'd hit the sex shops and buy some toys. Hell, for his bride, he'd even break his "no more than two batteries rule."

Tomas moved his aching cock back and forth across the plump lips of Sera's pussy, back to front. Up on his knees behind her, he could more easily maintain control. Even so, keeping his dick out in the cold was pure misery, especially when she moaned, "Oh, Tomas, oh, Tomas," then screamed and came. Again.

He soothed her during the after-quakes, his balls aching so bad, he knew getting up off the bed would slam dunk him.

And he had to get off the bed.

How else could he take care of his damn nobility in the shower if he didn't get up off the bed?

Tomas eased away.

No hurry. He was good to go for another thirty seconds.

Before he exploded.

"My turn," Sera announced.

Huh?

"Pardon?" he said politely.

"My turn to dry hump you."

With a sigh, Tomas postponed his date with himself in favor of explaining the facts of life to Sera. A short explanation, as he pointed toward the bathroom, and he never argued his dick's sense of direction. "Sweetie, you don't have what it takes to dry hump me. You don't got the right equipment."

Sera wiggled away from him. "Don't move. Stay right there."

That said, she mounted him. Her mouth, her hands all over him, kissing and feeling him up and down, grinding her pussy against his ass, while he panted on all fours like a *dawg*. Damn humiliating.

"No! No! Not there," he shouted. "Don't touch me there!"

Too late. She cupped his balls.

The date with his fist in the shower?

No longer necessary.

* * * * *

After sexing it up with Tomas, Sera fell asleep face down on the bed. When she awakened, she found herself alone in the room.

No way was she taking her husband's desertion lying down.

As mad as hell, she pulled on her discarded white tank top, stomped out of the bedroom, in search of her missing bridegroom.

Tomas was not getting away with this abandonment!

Her husband had taken his cold feet out to the roof garden. She confronted him there on the deck. "What do you mean by --"

During her tongue-lashing, he happened to step to one side, and she spied the table set for two.

"How thoughtful!" she exclaimed.

Tomas's close shave emphasized his rock-hard jaw, while at the same time, managed to retain just a hint of the desperado, a certain "gem in the rough"-quality look that bowled

women over, herself included. Totally masculine, totally assured, Tomas didn't need refined features and manners to make her heart skip a beat. Flashing black eyes did that. As to the rest ... her mouth watered at the immense wall of his smoothly hairless chest, against which brown nipples lay in starkly flat relief. His white, loosely woven PJ bottoms hung low at the waist. The tented, and very nearly transparent fabric, revealed he wore nothing underneath. Impressively erect, Tomas did nothing to hide his aroused state. The enormous jut of his sex looked every bit as daunting it had felt between her legs. Turning to light a single white candle situated on the table, he carelessly displayed tight flanks and muscled legs.

Tomas Ruiz. All-over gorgeous.

And all-over legally hers. At least temporarily.

He grinned. "A bride should have a wedding night dinner. Don't fret -- the meal is catered."

He mentioned one of Fenton's premier hotels. "So extravagant," she murmured or something close, her gaze widened on what looked like a bottle of very expensive champagne chilling in a bucket.

"I'm not a poor man, Sera."

With the matter-of-fact acknowledgement of his wealth, she tugged on the hem of the white tank top, which barely skimmed the top of her thighs. He had married her to help improve his image and look at her. What a mess!

"I'm a little underdressed, Tomas. I think I should go find those jeans."

"This patio is completely private. But, if you would like to dress for dinner, you'll find something to wear in the master suite's closet."

"You bought me something else to wear?"

He shrugged. "I enjoy shopping for you."

On the heels of one concern, another worry escalated. "Tomas, is it okay for us to use this condo? I mean, it's for sale, and here we are, making ourselves at home."

"Sera, I own the whole building, furnishings included."

"But why bring me here? We could've stayed at the mansion."

"I'm having an ... uh ... overnight work crew gut a few rooms, and I thought they'd disturb us on our wedding night."

"You didn't say anything to me earlier about an over-night work crew --"

His dimples flashed. "Surprise!"

"Indeed," she said dryly, still unconvinced of his motives.

"I told you, Sera, the house is my wedding gift to you. No reason to delay what ... uh ... has to be done. I thought staying here would beat staying overnight in a hotel."

She frowned. Why did she get the distinct feeling Tomas, her husband of only a few short hours, was lying through his even, white, sexy teeth?

It must've been the stammer. The display of insecurity in such a self-confident man gave him away. But gave *what* away?

"Go try on the gift," he said, no insecurity in his voice now. "When you're ready, rejoin me up here on the roof."

In a rush of happiness, her apprehension about her husband's possible lack of truthfulness was forgotten. She raced to dress for their first meal together as a married couple.

* * * * *

The dinner did not turn out the way Seraphina had envisioned.

She barely noticed the *haute cuisine* food on her plate. After lifting the fork to her mouth several times, she couldn't remember whether or not she had swallowed. Certainly, the taste of what she might or might not have eaten made no impression. Excitement over the coming night tuned the meal into a complete blur.

She plucked at the white gauzy dress Tomas had picked out for her to wear.

The dress was sexy. *She* on the other hand must have looked absolutely hideous in the dress ...

Tomas hadn't looked at her directly once throughout the ordeal of their silent meal. Was she so painfully ugly, he couldn't bring himself to glance her way?

She could only assume the answer was yes. How else to explain his strained discomfort?

She missed his teasing. Though difficult to admit, she even missed his studied charm. Why wouldn't he at least look at her?

But no, he refused to glance at her across the width of the fancy white linen tablecloth. He was entertaining second thoughts about their bargain, of course.

His earlier loss of control had made her feel like a desirable woman for the first time in her life. The illusion that he wanted *her*, genuinely wanted *her*, had done much to restore her lost sexual pride. Now this! The silent treatment and no eye contact.

Oh, he'd said he liked her big bottom, but in reality, he must've found the size of her hips repulsive. A complete turn-off. Or, maybe, her small breasts had turned him off. Men liked busty women. And she was anything but. Or, maybe, everything about her, both big and small, had turned him off.

She took the bull by the horns. "I don't want to sleep alone on my wedding night." *Again*, she thought, but refused to say. She would *not* dwell on her disastrous first wedding night now. "Will you share that big bed with me?"

"I'm sorry, Sera. I just can't." He pushed away from the table and went to stand by the roof's brick wall.

She went after him. "You could close your eyes." Standing before him, she undid the ties on her flowing dress. "You could pretend I was another woman, some woman you'd rather be with, an attractive woman." She slipped the dress off one shoulder, then the other. The white gauze fell softly around her ankles.

"What the hell are you trying to do to me, Sera? And what the hell is this shit about me pretending you're another woman? I know damn well who you are. You're my wife. And I only have so much control. When you touched my bal -- my testicles -- I lost it. I want you to know that has never, and I do mean NEVER, happened to me before. Except with you. I can usually keep a woman happy all night long without ever ... without ever ..."

"Ejaculating?"

Tomas blushed. "Geez, you talk blunt! But, yeah. That," he said bashfully. "I make damn sure the woman is always wearing a smile of satisfaction before I even think of ... before I even think of ..."

"Ejaculating?"

How had Tomas Ruiz earned his womanizing reputation if he couldn't talk frankly about sex?

"Yeah. That. A gentleman always takes care of his lady first."

"You did take care of me first, Tomas. I was only trying to return the favor. And now I'd like us to sleep together in the same bed. Is that too much for a bride to ask of her husband on their wedding night?"

"*Fuck!*" Tomas frantically rubbed the back of his neck. "Sera, look at my cock, woman!"

She did, and decided what she saw had nothing to do with her, but resulted from a young man's physiology.

Tomas shook his head. "That's what you do to me. That's what your tits and your ass and your sweet, luscious cunt do to me, and that's why I can't sleep with you. I'm already in pain. How much more do you expect me to take before I can't take no more and ram my dick into your lady-like pussy? Now get away from me quick."

Ignoring the directive, she sank to her knees in front of him and reached for his astonishingly huge penis.

"Sera, no!" he shouted. "You're a lady. No way are you going down on me."

Misguided? Or was her husband hunting down excuses to avoid intimacy with her?

She could make her lust clear, tell him she wanted him in her mouth, how she would do anything to know his taste, his scent, his essence. But to do so risked sending him running in the opposite direction.

No, the trick was to keep the sex light, no pressure on him to give her more emotionally than he could. "We're married, Tomas. Why not enjoy each other's bodies while we're together? It won't mean anything --"

After undoing the buttons on the front of his muslin trousers, she handled the substantial weight of his manhood. Having never held ... or seen for that matter ... an erection close up, the reality came as rather a shock.

His penis, though incredibly firm, pulsed as her fingers wrapped around the end. His dimensions were unbelievably long and thick, but all too human at the same time. His masculine hardness was unquestionably adult, yet the texture of his skin felt baby soft.

Unable to mask her eagerness, she stroked down his astounding length, tried to ring his thick girth with two fingers and failed. In compensation for that failure, she pressed her face, her nose, against the enormous dark head and inhaled the scent of his sex. When she could wait no longer, she tasted him with the tip of her tongue.

Tomas dug his hands into her hair. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

Oh, my, but her husband's rough edges stimulated her.

"Yes. Yes. Yes," she replied and took him into her mouth.

His thrust, though infinitely gentle, took her unprepared. She hadn't known, hadn't known at all, what to expect. Her gag reflex went into overdrive, and she coughed, fell backwards, released him from her mouth.

How stupid could she get! What must he think of her?

Embarrassed, she looked out over the brick wall.

"I won't have my own wife turn her face away from me like everybody else does in this whole fuckin' town. It's your right to reject me in private, it's your right not to want my cum on your ladylike lips, just don't make the mistake of rejecting me in public."

Wh-what? She hadn't turned away from *him*! She hadn't rejected *him*. In her false pride, it was her own ineptness she couldn't face.

She needed to explain!

Instead, she swayed on her knees.

He steadied her. "Don't worry, you'll still get the mansion."

What was he saying, what did he mean?

"The mansion," she repeated, dully. "The mansion is my dream. The school is all I've ever wanted."

Until I met you.

Right now, right this very instant, she had to tell him how much he was beginning to mean to her!

She said incoherently, "I owe you ... so much ... my dream ... you've given me more than my dream ..." Oh, she was saying everything all wrong, doing everything all wrong! In wanting him so badly, she was botching this.

Mortified, she couldn't go on, couldn't complete the thought, couldn't tell him that he was more important to her than her dream for a school, that because of him, she was able to feel again.

His face tightened, darkened. "You don't owe me nothing."

In a rush to show him how wrong he was, she virtually pounced on his penis, inexpertly taking him once again between her lips.

He moaned deep in his throat. Had she hurt him? Bitten him by mistake? Damaged him in some undefined way?

He didn't appear injured. His big hands supported her as he moved.

Relieved he hadn't rejected her, still, she couldn't relax. This man had droves of women lined up to please him, women who knew what they were doing. Her enthusiasm couldn't possibly make up for their expertise. Almost thirty-one-years old and a widow, and she didn't know how to pleasure a man. Consequently, it was over before it really began. A few tepid thrusts, a gruff groan, a hot spurt at the back of her throat, and Tomas disengaged. The whole encounter couldn't have lasted more than a minute. She was a complete failure as a woman.

Not knowing what to do next, she looked to Tomas for guidance.

"Your call," he told her, his voice defeated.

She'd done that to him, she thought as she swallowed. She'd put that horrible resignation in his voice. He was too kind to ever tell her so, but she knew just the same. He regretted their bargain, realized what a mistake he had made, wanted their marriage dissolved before it had even begun. He wanted an annulment.

He helped her to her feet. "Sera --"

Too upset to talk it out, she waved his explanation aside and bolted for the master suite.

What on earth was wrong with her? Something *had* to be wrong with her!

Under the quilt on the big bed, she cried herself to sleep.

Sometime much later she awakened with a *déjà vu* feeling of dread. Her search of the luxury unit only confirmed her suspicions. Unable to bring himself to sleep with her, Tomas had left her alone in the condo.

What were the chances of marrying two men, neither of whom wanted to sleep with her?

In her case, one hundred percent. After the disaster of her attempted seduction of Matt, she should have known better than to expect *any* man to want her. As it turned out, her second wedding night was proving a repeat of the first.

Only so much worse.

Chapter Twenty-three

"Tomas?" His wife called out to him from inside the bedroom. "Is that you?"

Damn! He'd disturbed her! He thought he was being so quiet about sneaking back into the condo. The elevator doors opened and closed with hardly a squeak. He'd even taken off his boots before walking down the hall. How had she heard him?

After one hell of a long night, he had to dig deep for a shallow answer. "Yep. It's only me, Sera." To set her mind at ease, he stuck his hand in the cracked door and waved.

"Won't you come in? Please?"

Her voice sounded all quivery. Probably she was scared. What harm would reassuring her do? Besides, something might have happened while he'd been gone --

He hadn't had time to wash up and change. But in the dark bedroom, maybe Sera wouldn't see the filth ...

He'd take his chances. Selfishly, he had to see her.

Tomas eased open the bedroom door.

And froze. No lights, but plenty of moonlight streamed in through the bare windows, enough for his excellent night vision to make out that Sera, wearing one of the white lace nightgowns he'd bought her, had been waiting up for him.

He stepped into the room, automatically clinging to the violet shadows that would hide his messed-up clothes. Just in case she could make out his teeth in the darkness, he flashed her a smile. "Everything all right?"

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug. "In a strange place, in a different bed, I got a little ... I don't know ... disoriented, I guess."

He knew how that went. As a kid, never knowing in advance where he would end up sleeping at night, he'd often wake up disoriented. "I'm right next door. I just ... um ... got up for a glass of water. Sorry for disturbing you. Go back to sleep."

Rising from her perch at the edge of the bed, Sera stretched to a stand and reached for the light switch.

Late or not, tired or not, he felt his cock twitch, then go spike hard. "No lights. They ... uh ... hurt my eyes."

"Okay," she said softly. "But please stay. We need to talk."

He took a hesitant step closer. Knowing he'd regret it, he took another, until he faced her. Hanging onto what remained of his control, he allowed his eyes to rest on his wife.

Not for the first time, he noticed the subtle details that contributed to his wife's beauty -- her long fingers, the delicate shells of her ears, her stubborn chin, her incredibly dark lashes.

Without thinking, he touched a strand of golden-brown hair that curled over her shoulder in front. "Once, I must have been about five or six, home alone and bored, I bumped into a shoebox filled with photos. One picture was of me cradled in my mother's lap. She had the same color hair as yours."

His fingers slid down the strand, brushing over Sera's breast. There, temptation won out, and all five of his bloodied digits claimed the dainty mound. "I shouldn't be doing this --"

"We're married," she whispered. "And your hand feels right."

Better than right. Which was why he definitely should leave. Because his wife didn't want him. Not really. She wanted Matt, her dead husband.

Unable to compete with a memory locked in time, he turned tail and beat it the hell out of there.

Inside the connecting bedroom, Tomas tore off his T-shirt. The scratch on his jaw started to bleed again. During that night's scuffle, one dealer, broken bottle in hand, had gotten a little too close for comfort.

Not for long. His fist had smashed into the motherfucker's face. One creep down, a whole waterfront to go. That drug pimp wouldn't be bothering Sera no more --

Dirty, bloody, covered with glass particles, his clothes ripped, he carried the stench of the recent fight on his body. And always, whenever he was near Sera, the need for sex pumped in his veins. For those reasons, and then some, staying in the condo with his bride scared him shitless.

Running began to look bitchin' good. But he couldn't leave Sera alone. Not yet. Tonight, he'd handled the situation, but with dealers who knew? How could he walk out on her?

Circling the floor, the refrain hammered inside his head. How could he walk out on her? How could he walk out on her ...

He couldn't walk out on her!

But neither could they fuc ...

No! Dammit, no! He'd never fuck Sera -- he'd make love to his wife.

Returning to the trailer wouldn't end the torment. Not tonight, not any night. His only recourse was to face down the woman who caused him agony.

He stormed back into Sera's room, purposefully hitting the light switch so she could see him when he said what needed saying.

"You've hurt the side of your face," she said quietly before he could get out the words.

He brushed his fingers over the tear in his skin. "Yeah, I know."

She came toward him, a winged angel, bare feet gliding seemingly above the floor. "Come into the bathroom with me. The light's better in there."

"Better for what?"

"To get a look at that cut. You might require stitches."

Like a fool, he followed her inside, like a fool he let her clean him up at the sink.

After a while, she shook her head in that cute exasperated way of hers. "Where did you go when you left here tonight, Tomas?"

He hated lying to Sera, but he had no choice. "The Flamingo."

"All night? The bar closed hours ago."

"No, not all night. I got into a brawl over a woman I met at the bar. That's why I'm all cut up. Afterwards, she took me back to her place for a winner's fuck."

She started to laugh. "My, you think you would have cleaned up before getting into bed with her."

"We never made it to a bed. I three-holed her in the kitchen. Believe me, sweetheart, we were both too high to care about a little dirt."

She sniffed in his direction. "I don't detect alcohol on your breath."

Damn!

He covered his tracks. "I said, high, Sera, not drunk."

"You don't do drugs, Tomas, and you weren't with any barfly tonight. If you only wanted sex, and any woman would do, you had me."

She wasn't any woman! Sera was his wife, and he didn't only just want sex from her.

The despair inside him ate at his gut, his lie made him sick enough to puke. "I wanted raunchy. I wanted down and dirty. I wanted ass-fucking. You're too much of a lady for what I wanted."

"Oh, but I'm not." She loosened the ribbon at the neck of her bridal nightgown, letting the white lace fall to the bathroom floor. "Fuck my ass, Tomas. Take me just as you said you took that woman. Three-hole me."

He should've known. Any woman tough enough to blast him with ammonia spray wouldn't scare off easy.

That's when he surrendered his pride. "I need your sweetness, Sera, your goodness, 'cuz I got none of my own," he grated out between clenched teeth, his nostrils flaring at her scent. "But it ain't all poetry and sighs, 'cuz I need your cunt, too. And I also need for you to understand my gritty world, where strangers, people I don't even know, think I'm little better than the dirt under their feet. You take all the rotten stuff away, Sera. You give me peace." He shook his head. "You were right when you said I'd never cheat on you. I wasn't out fucking another woman. The only woman I want is you."

She hung tough. "Now tell me where you went tonight. And this time, don't lie to me."

"I was out breaking some skulls."

"Anyone I know?"

He let go a sigh. *Jesus!* Sera was one ballsy missionary lady.

"No, you wouldn't know these creeps. They were scum drug dealers."

"I see. Well, I don't approve of fighting as a way to resolve conflict."

"I didn't suppose you would."

She twisted and turned her head. "Do you have any other injuries? Any I can't see?"

"No, I fight dirty."

"Glad to hear it, Tomas, because if those dealers had hurt you, I would've had to hunt them down and hurt them back. And I fight dirty, too."

Funny, he actually believed her.

Her cool fingers stroked his hot skin, soothing the flesh wound on his jaw. Without speaking, she washed away the dried blood, then pushed him badass naked into the shower. Afterwards, when he came back out spanking clean, she clasped his hand, and started leading him somewhere.

Needing to know if she was leading him to Heaven or right back to Hell, he asked, "Woman, where you taking me -- to the elevator or to our bedroom?"

Chapter Twenty-four

Sera smiled. *Our bedroom.*

If everything else they'd said to one another had been misunderstood, misinterpreted, or just dead wrong, the meaning of those two simple words rang true and real and strong. They were married, and starting tonight, they would begin sharing a bedroom. This time, she intended to fight for her marriage, because this time, she had something for which to fight.

Tomas needed her. For respectability. For sex. Maybe for something more.

Her smile widened. "We're returning to *our* bedroom."

His free hand, which had been playing with her hair, sank low. "I love your ass, Sera."

The rough compliment, the lusty sentiment, gave her the courage to pull him down on top of her on the mattress.

Tomas was a big man. Even up on his elbows, suspended above her, he couldn't spare her all his weight. Okay with her. She liked his weight. Liked his size. Liked the way he both dominated and protected her and needed her, too --

Right now, far too much for foreplay.

Though technically a candle had ended her virginity, she'd never had intercourse. His penis was ... well ... impressive, much larger than a stick of wax with a wick at one end. She'd been aroused all night, and though ready for sex, his entry, even that first tentative bit, hurt.

"You seem tense," Tomas said, his own voice strained.

"Only because I'm not used to ..." She stopped, unable to go on.

"A man like me," he completed for her, and withdrew.

No, that wasn't what she meant! She wasn't used to having sex with *any* man.

Should she admit the painful secret of her first marriage, tell him her relationship with Matt had been a pathetic failure, that their union was all about appearance, not substance?

That her first husband had placed celibacy before her need, and as a result, they had lived as brother and sister, not husband and wife? Was now the time to reveal she'd never done this before --?

No! For whatever reason, communication did not come easily for them --

But wait! Wasn't sex the most profound communication of all?

Tomas must have thought so, for rather than talk ... or walk ... he reached between her spread legs, gently inserting a finger into her vagina, followed by a second. Patiently and considerately, he stretched the path he would take, then folded her knees back to her chest, until her bottom hitched up off the bed. Her eyes widened when he fingered her clitoris --

Okay, *now* she was ready. *Come into me NOW, Tomas!*

Suspecting her sudden impatience, he started easing the enormous head of his penis into her vagina. In a move that captured her heart, Tomas captured her hand, entwining their fingers. "It must be tough, you know, the first time out with another man. But I want you to understand -- I don't expect nothing from you. I know how much you loved Matt."

Once again, she bit her lips against screaming out that this was her first time with *any man!* And that no, she hadn't loved Matt!

But how could she scream her dreadful secret? How could she admit never having loved a good man like her missionary husband?

She had tried. Oh, how she had tried to love the man who couldn't bring himself to touch her. And she had failed. Even without the sex, if she only could have loved him, maybe then they both wouldn't have been so miserable. Maybe then he would've found the strength to fight back against the disease that had claimed his life.

As she'd nursed Matt, she'd begged him to fight. But rather than fight, Matt had given into the disease. And she couldn't help but think that he had chosen death as a means to escape her and the marriage he hadn't wanted. Cholera hadn't killed Matt. She had killed Matt by forcing him to marry her.

"So good," Tomas rasped, moving shallowly within the tight clasp of her body. "So good," he told her, sliding in and out of her vagina with the most gentle of strokes. "Ah! You feel so good, so good. Too good. You're too good for me."

Tomas pumped between her legs, deeper now, faster now. There was still discomfort as her body accommodated his, but there was a lovely fullness, too, and a tension inside her building and growing.

"Let go," Tomas whispered. "Just let it all go, baby. Cry. You need to."

The fist inside her unclenched, the dam bursting with her climax.

Pleasure first, then pain.

Afterwards, Tomas held her while she cried and sobbed and wailed, while her eyes grew inflamed and hot streams of moisture streamed off her nose and plopped off her chin.

Caught up in physical satisfaction and then in emotional upheaval, it wasn't until later, much later, that her own selfishness occurred to her.

Within the comforting confines of her husband's arms, she spoke into his chest, a chest saturated with her tears. "But what about you?"

"Don't fret none over me, Sera."

"Tomas, please," she begged, her defenses stripped away. "I need to know why."

He sighed. "Are you on anything?"

She mentally slapped herself.

Their bargain ... their marriage ... was only temporary. Of course, Tomas was concerned this night might bring unwanted results. Not sharing those concerns, she had never once given the question of birth control a thought.

"Thought so," he said tightly. "And I left the damn condoms in the truck."

* * * * *

At dawn, Sera moved in on his dick. Her hands on his shoulders, she drew him down on top of her. Lucky for him, during the night, he'd had the foresight to get out of bed and pull on his jeans -- ain't no way her hands were getting past the snug denim to him.

Just in case his tough woman managed, he had also made a quick trip back to the pickup.

A flip over onto his side, and he flanked her. "Baby, rest now."

Big mistake, spooning her. Right away, her bare buttocks snuggled up to his zippered crotch.

Without a doubt, he had a thing for Sera's bottom. His bride's lush ass was the kind of ass most men could only dream of snuggling up to. He loved her ass. He could hardly wait *to* love her ass.

But not tonight!

Not good enough for his bride to just *let* him. She had to want it, too, and not just to escape her grief over the man she still loved. He wanted her to genuinely want it with *him*.

On the heel of that thought, Sera pulled his hand over to cover her cute tit. His other hand she commandeered between her legs. His palm cradling her pussy, she raised her leg, bent her knee. No mistaking her invitation --

No mistaking his weak willpower, either.

"Open it up for me," he groaned.

She widened the slit with two fingers, displaying her swollen clit. "Like this?"

"Oh, yeah. Like that." At first, looking over her shoulder satisfied his hunger to see her. Then she purred, and *only* looking escalated to *only* touching. Just the sweet outside lips at

first. But the more Sera's sweet bottom wiggled up and down his crotch, the higher his index finger worked up inside her. Pretty soon, his finger moved deep inside her, his thumb rubbing her clit, romancing her pussy all over again. Though plenty swollen, she didn't tell him to quit. Wet, her body hummin', her need taking over, Sera was all systems go.

For sex. Not for him.

He had needs, too. For the first time in his life, he needed a woman, couldn't get enough of a woman, wanted that woman to want only him. They had some work to do there, so before he got the real bad idea of unzipping his fly, he withdrew his hand. "Let's go out to the rooftop. Catch the sun come up."

"But I thought we were going to ..."

"Too soon." Letting a further explanation go, he helped her up and out of the bed.

Straight away, Sera reached for her gauzy dress.

"No, baby. I'd like to look at you, too, not just the sky." He led his bashful bride up the stairs to the rooftop garden.

Since Sera liked flowers, he'd planted up a dozen cedar boxes to line the walled-in patio area. Her smile of appreciation swelled his chest with pride. Swelled up something else, too - not that he'd been exactly deflated before. Good thing, the jeans. Bad thing, his weak willpower.

When she kissed him, his hands started roaming, and pretty soon he was groaning, "Open your legs" against a pair of clinging lips. Hell, even if he could only use his hand, at least he'd have one part of himself inside Sera!

She looked around. "Not here."

At that moment, he didn't care if every voyeur in Fenton witnessed them making love, but his shy Sera needed reassurance. "No one can see. We're up too high."

"Oh, peepers are not the reason." She grinned. "I want to do it in the elevator, while we're going up and down."

"It's me you want going up and down, woman, not the damn elevator," he growled. "And the answer is no! Hell, no. Take it or leave it -- we do it out here on the roof, like respectably married folks, or not at all."

She giggled, then laughed, then did a giant belly whoop, and he plain didn't care that she was cracking up at his expense or that his hard-on would have to wait. Sera sounded happy, and that was all that mattered. Hearing her weep before had just about broken his heart. That his bride was thinking of her first husband, not her new husband, during their marriage consummation wounded his pride, too. But he understood. Sex. Tears. Sera needed the release of both.

He lifted her on top of the table, where they'd had their wedding dinner, and stepped between her splayed legs. Melting at the greedy expression on Sera's face, he reached into the pocket of his jeans, pulled out, and pulled on a condom, and then slid his way in.

Two hands in a stranglehold around his neck, she forced a deeper connection.

"Give it up, woman! Don't matter how much you pout, forget about getting my all. You ain't got enough space for ten inches of rough." He kissed her lips. "Let me do you sweet."

With his Sera, he always wanted sweet.

Chapter Twenty-five

Sera stirred chocolate chips into the brownie batter, careful not to let any fall on the shiny new emerald-green linoleum floor, an absurdly exotic color that her husband insisted matched her eyes. A gross exaggeration, as her eyes were a very common shade of hazel. When she'd argued that the real *green* saved on a less expensive brand could go toward the purchase of classroom equipment, he'd countered that the linoleum was a remnant he'd intended to discard anyway -- a preposterous fib, of course.

Shaking her head at her husband's flexible idea of truthfulness, Sera stirred more chips into the brownie batter.

Tomas and his sweet tooth! No matter how often she baked, she couldn't keep him in desserts. Making up for treats he'd missed out on as a kid, she suspected.

At her encouragement, Tomas had recently acquired suits and ties and formal footwear, done to create a professional image. Over her highly vocal discouragement -- okay, over her furious screams -- he'd also cut his gorgeous long hair. He wore his hair short and to the point now, and shaved on a regular basis.

He looked like a changed man --

Whereas, she *felt* like a changed woman.

Since their wedding night, her guilt over Matt's death had lessened. She'd begun to accept that she'd done all she could to make him happy. She had fought to save his life when he'd sickened and had tried to love him. Their marriage had been a mistake, but not their friendship. A sad wedding night hadn't blighted their genuine fondness for each other.

No longer dwelling on only that tragic last year in India, she now recalled the happy times, too. At night, after dinner, she'd tell Tomas about the mission. He never said much -- mainly, he listened -- but talking helped.

With the diminishing of sadness, her joy in little things returned. Often, her husband would sit beside her on the piano bench as she practiced the scales, intently following her fingers. He'd then mimic her hand movements on the keys. Upon seeing his natural ability, naturally, she offered him private instruction. He declined with a little crooked smile. "Someday, baby. Someday I'll get the chance."

When?

Her husband was a self-made man, driven to make something out of himself, to carve a niche in a world that had abandoned him years before. Not enough to bring himself up, he brought others up with him. Though he never spoke of his accomplishments, Sera had done her research. Tomas was making a difference on the Southside. The preponderance of employees on his payroll lived on the Southside. Few had a high school degree. Many had been in trouble. The Ruiz apprenticeship program gave these disenfranchised individuals a shot at success.

Now was Tomas's chance.

She had seen the architectural model inside his trailer. She understood what that builder's rendition meant.

Tomas had bid on the Riverfront Project.

Call her arrogant, but when presented with an opportunity, she grabbed it and held on tight. Fred Connor was her husband's opportunity, his chance to gain respect. Why not use her influence with Fred to ensure Tomas's dream? she asked herself as the man of her dreams came loping through the kitchen door.

Like a little kid, he let out a whoop. "Yipppeee! Brownies!"

She slapped his hand away from the mixing bowl. "They're for dessert!"

"You're my dessert. This will hold me 'til I get to eat you up." He scooped some raw dough onto his finger.

"Tomas --"

"Yeah, sweetie?" he asked with a chocolate grin.

"I saw Fred Connor today."

The playful man grew suddenly serious. "Oh?"

"Yes. I invited Fred and his wife over to show off the school. A dinner party. I hope that's okay?"

"Sure. When?"

"Next week. I know how busy you are with work, and that it's a tremendous imposition, but I'd feel so much better if you could be here with me. I can explain the musical end of things, but I'm hopeless at building codes! They just lose me. Please say you'll help?"

"I'll see what I can do, Seraphina."

Seraphina.

Tomas never called her that!

She undid her apron. "Supper's in thirty minutes."

"Oh, yeah? That long, eh? Whatever will we do while we wait?"

She undid her blouse.

His bright floral shirt came whipping off. "You'd better not be wearing a bra, woman."

"You told me not to."

"Panties?"

She shook her head. "Not since our wedding night, a week ago today."

"Prove it."

Dominance colored his tone. His possessiveness thrilled her. "How?" she asked guilelessly. Although, after seven days of marriage, she was not so innocent anymore. She already knew the evidence he would require.

"Lift your skirt, woman."

"But I have to put the brownies in the oven."

"So?"

She sighed theatrically. "Oh, very well --" Skirt lifted waist-high, she bent over and slid the pan onto the top rack.

Behind her came a sharp intake of breath. "Have I ever told you how much I love your ass?"

Only every day in every way ...

"You might have mentioned your admiration once or twice in passing." Closing the oven door, Sera turned to see that her wily husband had taken a seat on a kitchen chair. His tan trousers, open at the fly, revealed a nest of crisp black hair that cushioned the weight of his enormously jutting, already sheathed in rubber, penis.

He crooked a finger. "C'mere."

Straddling him, she lowered herself onto his erection, squirming to adjust to the increasing fullness inside her.

"Am I hurting you, baby?"

"Yes."

His gaze, heavy lidded in arousal, closed in on her in speculation. "Can you take the hurt?"

"Oh, yes." Always before he'd held back, never allowing himself a complete connection. Now, she understood why. Stretched to the limits, her vagina throbbed, burned, protested the invasion. But over and above her discomfort, she experienced a keen sense of womanly pride. This time, she'd take *all* of him.

"Ditch the blouse. Show me how your pretty tits bounce as you ride me."

At his sexy compliment, at the naughty image that sexy compliment provoked, her vagina gushed wet, her natural lubricant easing the fit.

He kissed her earlobe. "Better now?"

Why he'd done that intentionally! He'd purposefully used off-color language to get her hot. And the ploy had worked. As her passage moistened, her discomfort receded. "Much better. Thank you." She dropped her blouse to the floor.

Dipping his jaw, he nuzzled a nipple, and their joining went from merely bearable to absolutely delicious. She arched her spine and purred.

Her lover, her husband, her sexy desperado, grinned. "Begin. But take it slow at first."

To hell with slow! She wanted fast! Ignoring his order, she went full throttle. And gasped.

He spanked her bare bottom. "What I tell you? Slow!"

After that, she heeded his instruction, finding a tempo that suited them both.

In this position, her climax took longer than usual -- when he was in charge, usually she came almost immediately. After cresting, she couldn't quite get over the last hurdle.

"Tomas," she groaned, her body jerking up and down the length of his shaft, "I don't think I can ..."

"Your slit is milking me already. Just like when you put me in your mouth and I lost control. I won't be able to hold on much longer now, either ..."

Is that why it had ended so quickly? Her husband had lost control?

Upon hearing the real reason for his speedy resolution -- that she'd excited him so much he'd prematurely ejaculated -- she trembled all over.

"You can do it," he crooned. "You're the wettest, most lusciously tight cunt I've ever had." He cupped her pumping bottom, squeezed her flesh biting hard.

She started to come.

"Your cunt is so pretty, so wet. Feel me inside you. That's right, baby. Let go."

"Yes, yes, yes," she screamed.

"Sera," he groaned and followed.

* * * * *

The evening of the dinner party, Tomas stood by Sera's side at the bay window.

"They like the gardens," she hissed, peering out at the middle-aged couple as they made their way along the winding brick walk to the mansion. "See? Mrs. Connors is smiling at all the exotic flowers --"

"Sera, before the Connors get inside, I want to tell you something -- I've changed my mind about the music school. Southside kids need a woman like you."

"Oh, Tomas." Her eyes welled with tears. "Your approval means so much!"

Floating on a happy cloud, she flung open the front door.

"Please come in." She kissed both dear friends on the cheek. Then turning, performed the introductions. "Helen, Fred, I'd like you to meet my husband, Tomas Ruiz."

Fred Connor pumped Tomas's hand. "Congratulations on the nuptials, son! You found yourself a fine woman."

Sera did the required honeymoon giggling. "It was love at first sight. Tomas swept me right off my feet."

His dark eyes twinkling, her husband nodded. "And Sera near blinded me."

As the woman in question not so surreptitiously elbowed her gloating husband, Fred looked around the house. "The old Monroe place sure looks great! You've both done an outstanding job. The kiddoes will feel like big shots taking lessons here."

"That's the idea," she replied. "I can't wait for September. I've missed teaching so. And did I tell you, Fred, that Tomas is not only donating this mansion, he's personally funding all the renovations?"

Fred clapped Tomas on the back. "You and I have a lot to talk about, son."

After dinner, while the ladies chatted in the kitchen, the two men went outside. From the bay window, Sera observed their animated conversation. Surely, their discussion didn't center only on the school.

Taking no chances, tomorrow, she'd follow up the dinner party with a phone call to Fred Connor about her husband's bid on the Riverfront Project.

While saying their goodnights at the front door, Fred gave Tomas another clap on the back. "I want you to come sailing with me real soon."

When the door finally closed behind their dinner guests, Tomas turned to her. "What do I know about sailing? People who grow up on the Southside do not sail."

Every once in a while, her husband came out with these negative, stereotypical, self-depreciation put-downs. When would Tomas realize he could accomplish anything he set his mind to?

Sera loaded the new dishwasher, another appliance Tomas insisted upon buying for their little apartment attached at the rear of the school. "You and Fred Connor seemed to get on well. Discuss about anything interesting?"

He came up behind her. "Let's not talk about the Connors anymore tonight."

Her new raw silk dress -- another present from her doting husband -- was understated in style, and both elegant and ladylike in its simplicity. The jewel shade of gold satisfied her

love of warm and vibrant colors, while feeling pleasingly cool against her skin. Especially so since she wore little underneath -- only a garter belt and stockings, both selected by Tomas.

Moving like a panther, he turned her to face him, raised her dress, and slipped his large hand between her eagerly opening thighs.

"You drive me wild," he growled, sampling her with a long finger. "Your pussy is already damp."

That was an understatement. Actually, she was drenched in anticipation. Marriage had turned her into an insatiable sex fiend, unable to go an entire day without her Tomas fix. They had made love that morning, but that seemed like an eternity ago.

Knowing her appetites, her sexy desperado made a habit of sneaking home for a "quickie" at lunch. Today, though, he'd telephoned to say he couldn't make their nooner -- a business meeting had him tied up.

She wanted to be tied up, too. By Tomas. Velvet ropes, satin ribbons ... fur-lined handcuffs. She'd positively cream over leather restraining straps. Bound and spread-eagled to a bed, her husband doing unspeakable things to her.

Her breasts swelled, the nipples tightened. No midday date, a whopper of a fantasy, and she felt more than a little frustrated.

"Why didn't you use the vibrator I got you?" he asked, separating her labia and beginning to stroke, his thumb finding and rubbing her clit.

"It's not the same without you," she gasped, her hips rolling.

"From now on, if I can't be here, you masturbate."

"Tomas, I'd rather wait for you."

His hand came down on her bare bottom. "Do what I say, wife."

Every blessed time he said the word "wife" like that, in that dominant tone, he triggered her orgasm. Combined with the sharp spank on her bottom, she spun out of control. "Tomas," she wailed shrilly and came and came and came.

"Now on -- if I can't do you at lunch, use the damn toy."

She loved the explosive sex, but explosive sex hadn't been all she'd missed that day.

She'd missed Tomas.

Her husband.

The man she loved.

Chapter Twenty-six

Sera was off somewhere chatting up a storm. Disoriented without her, Tomas skulked deeper in his corner, his black tux and brown skin blending him into the shadows.

Fred Connor had decided to host a big fancy wedding reception in their honor, with anyone who was anyone in Fenton in attendance. Tomas knew he should have been taking advantage of the great public relations opportunity for his company by pumping politicians' hands. But man, this scene just wasn't his deal. Give him a rib barbeque any day of the week. This snooty society bash amounted to pure torture.

First, came the cocktail hour. Man! Only an hour? The sixty minutes seemed to go on forever. Next, came dinner. A ten-course meal. Everything from soup to nuts and some stuff in between he couldn't identify, but ate anyway so as not to appear rude. Making nice-nice over coffee followed dessert. Just idling 'til bedtime, he couldn't help that his one-track mind was all about getting Sera nekkid.

But first he'd have to find her.

Some hotshot bank president had stolen his bride after the meal. Then, an orchestral conductor whose name Tomas couldn't pronounce. After that, an out-of-state, real estate developer had monopolized her attention.

That was when, clean out of clever small talk, Tomas started looking for places to hide.

A dark spot outside on the veranda provided the perfect escape. Every so often, he'd emerge from behind the bushes, ditch the moping expression, plaster on a phony-baloney party smile, and take a spin around the reception hall to see how Sera was doing.

Fine, was how his bride had been doing.

Every time he checked, Sera was talking and laughing, looking completely at ease and breathtakingly beautiful. After seeing him, she'd wander back his way, some interesting

party guest in tow. Linking her slender arm through his, she'd prompt him to contribute to their scintillating discussion.

Scintillating didn't cut it, not with a king-sized mattress waiting for them at home.

His smile muscles aching, hoping he looked interested, Tomas suddenly realized that Sera fit into this upscale social circle, and he never would.

By midnight, with the party gnawing at his nerve endings, his short breaks outside turned into an extended hiatus.

"There you are," Sera called to him. "What on earth are you doing out here all by yourself? And in the shrubs, too! We all missed you inside!"

Tomas laughed. "Yeah. Right."

"No, we did, honestly. The Dilmonts are discussing next year's charity auction. We could use your input."

He laughed some more. "You gotta be kidding!"

"Well, I thought maybe you could --"

Drawing her into the bushes with him, he hushed her lips with a kiss. "I don't belong in there, baby," he whispered against her pretty ear lobe. "You do, but I'm like a fish out of water. Just call me floundering!"

"You are not floundering! Social occasions just take time getting used to."

"I'd rather have our own *private* wedding reception." Meaning to make her laugh, he wiggled his brows and leered at her.

"Me, too. Let's sneak out early."

"Baby, I like how you think." His eyes hooded on Sera's plain black cocktail dress, a simple slip-like number that showed off her delicate curves and her amazingly lush ass.

Wrapping his lady up in his arms, the next kiss turned hot. Breathing hard, feeling reckless, he broke it off. "I can't wait to get you home, *ruca*. The things I'm gonna do to you tonight --"

"Why wait?" She presented him with her back. "This little corner is dark and private."

"Here?" he asked, but already releasing her back zipper. "What if someone comes out for air or something?"

She turned to face him. Her green eyes contained a wicked sparkle. "The risk of discovery is half the fun."

"You little exhibitionist, you."

"This coming from a voyeur?"

"I'm no peeper!"

"Ha! Only last week, I caught you staring at me through a crack in the door when I was bathing in the tub."

"I knew you knew I was watching, so that doesn't count. And you put on quite the little performance for me, too, with your new bath toy.

She laughed. "I did, didn't I?"

"Next time, don't put it all the way to HIGH. The friction is too much." He cradled her. "This here is my pussy, and I don't want it getting bruised."

"An exhibitionist and a voyeur -- a perfect match." Twittering, she went for his zipper.

He held her off. "Sera, what if someone hears? You're a screamer --"

She shimmied out of the little black dress, her skin as pale and white as marble in the moonlight. "The band will cover it."

He loved his wife's breasts and told her so. In Spanish.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"Loosely translated, it means your womanliness brings me to my knees with longing and that I want to suckle at your nipples."

She fanned a hand in front of her face. "Why, thank you, sir. Nothing would pleasure me more. Unless, of course, it's a bout of dirty sex in the shrubs."

Brushing away her zipper-challenged fingers, he finished what she'd started and then got himself ready -- these days, he never went nowhere without protection. Then two hands at Sera's waist -- his wife was so tiny -- he swung her feet off the veranda's floor. "Hook your legs around my spine."

Before her high heels hit the deck, he was up and in, moving inside her tight wet passage.

"Mmm," she purred, meeting his thrusts with thrusts of her own.

"That's right, baby, that's right. So good," he growled, his big palms shelving her lush, round bottom.

When he fingered her ass, she startled. "Tomas?"

"Hush, pretty baby," he crooned. "Let me, just let me."

He had never touched her there before and didn't know why he'd decided to try something new then, unless --

Unless, he had something to prove. Namely, that Sera belonged to him. That she was his, whether she was too good for him or not.

She held still while he rubbed her back opening. Possessively. While taking her mouth, he pressed his pinkie finger against the ring, then entered the delicate dimple. Owning her.

Sera was his. Not Matt's. *His!* She'd loved her husband, but she belonged to *him* now. She screamed for *him*.

But would Sera ever want him, freely want him, not out of a damn sense of obligation, not because he was acting as a substitute for a dead man, but because she had genuine feelings for him? When would Sera want him for something other than sex?

Never. Sera would never want him any other way, for anything more than sex, because she didn't love him.

Then, dammit, if all they had going on was sex, he would at least own her body, every inch of her body, including her ass -- her missionary husband never would have owned her there.

Groaning into her mouth, he moved his finger in and out of her sweet hole, taking it slow but insistent, as his cock moved fast in her pussy -- all three of her orifices under his possession at the same time.

And Sera liked it. She writhed with how much she liked it. When she started to scream with how much she liked it, their kiss smothered her ecstatic cries.

She didn't love him. Could never love a lowlife like him. But she did appreciate his lowlife lovemaking.

* * * * *

"Seraphina? Tomas? Are you out here on the patio?"

At the interruption, his bride jumped out of his arms, and motioned to their host. "Over here, Fred. We're ... um ... looking at the moon."

Tomas had already zipped Sera back into her dress and taken care of his end of housekeeping, too, but that didn't prevent him from grinding his teeth.

When would this damn night get over? When would he have his wife all to himself?

"I've been searching all over for you two," Fred continued. "If your husband wouldn't mind, Seraphina, we'd love to hear you sing."

Her *husband* said, "I don't mind."

How the hell could he object? Sera loved to sing, and Tomas wasn't about to spoil her fun. So he had recurring fantasies about having his wife all to himself on some deserted island, where he'd keep her naked and feed her peeled pineapple and mangos -- that was his problem.

"Since Tomas doesn't object, lead the way," Sera told their host.

A hush fell over the reception hall as she introduced her first number, an operatic ballad she sang in Italian, a tune everyone seemed to know but him.

Above the thunderous applause at the song's completion, Fred turned to Tomas. "Seraphina is quite a talented woman."

"She is, sir. And I don't deserve her."

But Tomas intended to keep her.

Sera had loved Matt. She *still* loved Matt. But Sera's husband was dead. And Tomas planned to fight for her affection.

As Sera moved on to another song, an image of a baby crept into his thoughts. Fast forward a few years, and the baby turned into a little girl practicing scales on a piano. Funny, the image in his head didn't seem like a farfetched dream anymore. It seemed like a goal, something he could strive to achieve. He'd like to have children. With Sera. The marriage was no temporary arrangement. Not to him. Not anymore. He was in this for the long haul. As far as he was concerned, this marriage was for keeps.

He loved Sera.

Tomas Ruiz loved his wife! Wanted to have a family with his wife.

His former romantic commitments had lasted no longer than his attention span, and so marriage presented a weighty challenge. Sticking with someone longer than a one-night stand was hard for anyone to do these days. Or maybe, marriage had always been hard, only now people went on Oprah and bitched -- he didn't know which. But he did know this -- if commitment could be learned, if permanence could be taught, he'd married a fine teacher. No two ways about it, Sera knew how to stick with something. As in forever. Would she give him forever?

A street punk like him didn't *deserve* a life-time with a golden-haired angel, the unreachable kind that decorated Christmas tree tops. Other people's Christmas tree tops, not his. But he'd work his fingers to the bone to earn the *privilege* of forever with Sera.

Over Sera's standing ovation, Fred spoke to Tomas again. "The town has decided to award the Riverfront Project to Ruiz Construction. Everyone is satisfied with your plans and your basic philosophy about the direction Fenton should take over the next decade. You have the city council's full endorsement."

"Thank you, sir. You won't be sorry you picked my men for the job."

"As soon as the contracts are all signed, we can put the news in the paper."

Fred winked. "You and your talented bride will have a lot of celebrating to do tonight, eh?"

If not for the Monroe mansion, he and Sera would never have met. If not for the Riverfront Project, they never would have married. And now that he'd gotten the project and she'd gotten the school, they had no reason to stay together.

Except sex.

Her song finished, his wife left the piano and crossed the room, walking toward them. "What are you two men talking about way back here?"

Fred beamed. "I was just congratulating your husband."

"Oh?" Sera's smile never wavered.

In horror, Tomas pivoted to Fred.

Chingadero! His brain screamed. Don't tell her now! Not this way. Let me tell her later, in private! Let me make her understand I didn't use her to get the job.

Fred kept right on talking. "Sera, you must be thrilled!"

Sera's face was the picture of poise. "Well, naturally."

Naturally?

Thrilled about something she knew nothing about?

Tomas hadn't told Sera about the bid on the Riverfront Project. Their wedding day, when she'd given him the opportunity, rather than talk about his proposal, he'd made a half-assed, totally lame excuse and covered up the architectural model.

"As I told the city council, any man who has this lady's full endorsement, as you certainly do, Tomas, has mine as well. Your wife really believes in you, son, and your dreams for Fenton's future. She told me all about the way you donated your time to the music school, about how you've been working days and nights to ensure its September opening. Why that's commendable. But your commitment to the school isn't what swayed me. You had my vote for the Riverfront Project because of all your charitable work on the Southside. I didn't realize all you've accomplished. I'm so glad Seraphina brought your good works to my attention. In light of your social contributions, I knew you were the only man for the job. Isn't that right, Seraphina?"

"That's right, Fred. I fell in love with Tomas's architectural model the first time he showed the layout to me, too."

Showed the layout to her?

He'd never showed her the model! What was she talking about?

Sera continued. "You know how much restoring historically significant buildings means to me, Fred, and when I found out my husband proposed the rehab of the existing downtown district, rather than its demolition, I just had to bring his bid to your attention."

"Glad you did! Otherwise, I might not have given Tomas's proposal the serious consideration it deserved. You two make a great little team."

"Yes, we do," Sera agreed.

Tomas avoided eye contact with his smiling wife. "The stores downtown are turn-of-the-century buildings. I'd like to see their flavor preserved. Thank you once again for your vote of confidence, sir,"

After shaking hands, Fred left and Tomas turned to Sera. "We're leaving. Right now. We'll discuss this at home."

Chapter Twenty-seven

Too angry to speak, afraid of what he'd say, scared he'd lose control, Tomas drove back to the mansion in silence.

How could Sera have gone behind his back like that? How could she have betrayed his trust? And smile about the treachery, too?

Never once letting on that she'd known about his bid, she let him believe he'd gotten the project on his own, when she'd influenced all the right people, swinging the decision in his direction. And why?

Because his wife didn't believe in him, didn't respect his abilities or his manhood.

The front door had no sooner clicked closed behind them when she said softly, "After all your hard work on behalf of the Southside, you deserve to see your vision realized. I'm happy your dreams are about to come true."

Sera was so damn wrong! His dreams weren't coming true! His dreams were toppling around his ears.

Anger flying, he shouted, "You knew I wanted in on the Riverfront Project!"

"Yes," she calmly replied.

"And you never said nuthin'!"

"Yes."

"Why?" he choked out. "Why didn't you come to me with your discovery?"

"I kept waiting for you to tell me. When you never did, I acted in your best interests."

"I didn't want you to think I was using you to meet Fred Connor. I didn't want to hurt you. That's why I didn't tell you."

"I believe you. I also believe you didn't trust me enough to tell me the truth. From the moment we met, you misjudged me and my intentions. You've always considered me too

shallow to understand where you're coming from. Do you think I don't know how torn, how ambivalent, you've been about our relationship?"

"Only because you were a good woman, and I had a lousy reputation. And then I got hopeful, and I began to think that maybe some of your goodness might rub off on me --"

"The bad boy reformed by the good girl." She laughed. "What a joke! You're twice as good as I'll ever be, Tomas, but only half as cynical." She shook her head. "Do you think I would sit idly by and let your dreams crash and burn without doing everything in my power to prevent that from happening? That's not me. I knew a man who could help you realize your goal. I knew I could influence him with one brief phone call. I made that phone call. And I'm not sorry I did. That's how things get done in this world. It's not luck --"

"No, it's who you fuck!"

At her gasp, Tomas raked his hands through his hair. "I fucked you, Sera, but I never once screwed you like you screwed me. You went behind my back!"

"You gave me no other choice."

"I could have gotten that bid on my own!"

"You *did* get that bid on your own. I saw your model of the project. Your plans are amazing. The scope of your vision awes me. I merely brought your ideas to Fred's attention. Your design spoke for itself."

"That dinner with the Connors -- it wasn't about the school at all, was it?"

"Fred wanted to meet you as much as you wanted to meet him. I merely arranged for it to happen in a place where you would feel most comfortable. You swayed Fred's decision that night, not me. I'm happy about the way things turned out for you and for Fenton. This town needs a man like you. The Southside needs a man like you. *I* need a man like you, Tomas."

"Don't make me out to be noble, when I was being self serving."

"Self serving?" She laughed. "You don't know the meaning of the word. I did my research on you, Tomas. When I canvassed the neighborhood for the school, I spoke with the women on the Southside -- mothers, wives, sisters -- and they all had the same tale to tell -- you gave their men a chance when nobody else in town would. I know who you hire and put to work, troubled individuals another contractor wouldn't touch. You've given those men and women a second shot at a decent life. You've given them back the pride and self-respect that comes with earning a living wage. I also know all about your plans to hire more disenfranchised workers, contingent upon the waterfront contract."

She pointed an accusing finger at his face. "Tomas Ruiz, you own the Rec Center across the street from The Pink Flamingo. You bought that old warehouse and rehabbed it so kids would have someplace to go after school instead of just hanging out and getting in trouble. You're a man with a mission. Do you blame me for wanting in on that?"

"You had no right to interfere," he said, torn up with emotion. "No right at all!"

"I realize you're angry now --"

"Yeah, I'm angry. Good and angry: You set me up!"

"That's rather harsh," she said evenly.

"I'm a harsh man, and I'm glad you're learning it sooner rather than later."

She wiped a hand over her eyes. "Okay, Tomas. I'm all out of arguments. I accept the blame for what I've done, but please, don't penalize your crew because of me. You've been right about me all along. I am arrogant. I swept into town thinking I could solve the world's social problems by opening up a music school. How silly."

"It's not silly. The school is a sound idea! It's an investment in those kids' futures!"

Once the impassioned declaration left his lips, Tomas couldn't take the words back, didn't know if he wanted to take them back. More than what he should have said considering the present circumstances, the words were still so much less than the depth of his true feelings.

"I was just kidding myself about us," he said slowly. "I'll never be good enough for a lady like you. It's not about how you went behind my back to Connor. It's about who I am inside. I have money, but I'll never know nuthin' about culture. About music. The arts. You belong with high-class people. You have an education. Style. I have none of those things. We're too different. We don't see the world the same way. And we can't make this thing work between us."

Sera's face paled to the whitest of creams. Tomas could make out the tiny blue veins running under the translucent surface of her lowered eyelids. Calling himself every foul name he could think of, he stopped the argument cold.

His fault, anyway. Getting above himself, he'd reached too high when he'd reached for Sera. All for the best, their split happening tonight. They would've gone their separate ways, anyway. Better to go on his own than be asked to leave.

"Sera, we were never meant to be together. If it wasn't this, it would have been something else. Have your lawyer draw up the divorce papers. Whatever you want, I'll agree to. See you around." He turned away.

"Don't go, Tomas. Please don't go. I -- I need you!"

He stalked back to her. "You don't need me. You need this." His hand shot between her thighs, cupped her pussy.

"That's right, Tomas." Her small breasts heaved under her dress. "Sex was all I ever needed you for, right? Everything else meant nothing."

"You said it, baby. Not me."

"Fine. Fuck me one last time. That's what I want. All I want from you."

At the suggestion, he went hard as steel.

She tossed her head. "For the next twenty-four hours, I want non-stop fucking. A fucking marathon. I want it all. Everything the rumors say about you."

"You've got it, lady. Turn the fuck around."

While she swiveled, he unzipped his fly. His breath was coming in hard, his lungs on fire with anger and self-contempt and lust. Always lust. His balls ached with lust for her.

"If you want it, baby, you gotta show me you want it. Pull that dress up outta my way and spread your legs."

Hiking the dress up to her waist, his wife -- make that his soon-to-be *estranged* wife -- braced her upper body on her outstretched arms, her palms flattened on the wall. She parted her thighs. "I will always want *you*, Tomas."

Heedless of her assertion, he drove his cock up and in, back to front, the thrust causing her body to violently jolt.

Never before had he taken Sera roughly, with nothing in the way of foreplay, especially when he couldn't read her expression. He was big; she was small. Face-to-face helped him gauge her level of comfort. Despite her five-year marriage, she was still tight, so he had always taken extra special care.

He took less than no care now. Fact was, he was careless.

When she cried out, he pretended not to hear. And if he remained unflinching at her distress, her tearful climax left him equally unmoved. Or so he told himself.

After that first rough fuck against the wall, he turned her around to face him. Man, he coveted her ass, but he loved watching her expression as she came.

"Strip off, baby."

"Here?" she asked in a small voice. "In the hallway?"

"That's what I said, ain't it?"

They had always been playful about sex --

Not this time. This was no game they played. She wanted the full fuck experience, he'd give her the full fuck experience.

When she was nude, he followed the cum streaming from Sera's pussy down her legs, from thigh to knee. Her pubic hair was slick with it. He liked seeing his cum there. Liked knowing he had shot his load deep inside her. And for the first time.

Reaching his arm around her, he smacked her ass. "Get going."

"Where?"

"The head."

She walked ahead of him. Since her hair was still piled up on top of her head, he had an unrestricted view of her back. Of her hips. Of that ass he loved. "None of that ladylike walking. Shake your bootie, baby. Work it for me."

Her hips started to roll, and he started to salivate like a *dawg*. The lady was smokin'.

En route to their destination, he made a brief stop at his stash of love toys, kept in the hallway closet, and then continued on with her into the bathroom. "Soap up at the sink." He jerked a nod. "You know -- down below." He smiled cruelly. "Bubble up your cunt for me, baby."

He watched her. When she had finished, he threaded his fingers through the slippery golden-brown pelt. Then, he picked up the razor.

She never once questioned him, but he told her anyway. "Usually strippers wear theirs in a heart-shape. But I want your cunt bare. Makes getting at your clit easier." He ran a finger across the plump pubic lips. "And I want this kept open. You don't keep it open, I'll clamp it open. Understand?"

"Yes, Tomas."

He shaved her bare, smoothing his palm over her dewy skin when he was done.

"I'm sorry," she murmured and two-fingered her pussy, drawing upwards on the silky pink flesh.

"Good," he grunted.

Better than good. Her clit was right there for him to see.

He handed her the dildo. "On your knees on the floor and put it in."

She sank gracefully onto the tile, opened her thighs, and started pushing the dildo into her shaven slit.

Her tits shifted. And that's all it took. He ran his hand over her, across the up-tilted nipples, into the girlish cleavage. Unable to reach her belly, not even with his legs bent, he dropped to the floor with her.

He smirked to himself. She had gotten down for him, but he'd quick ended up on his knees, too.

Sera had a real nice belly, and he kneaded her there awhile, before pushing his hand between her spread thighs to the dildo. Pushing her hand away, he started jerking the plastic cock in and out. "Pick up the tempo. Got it?"

"Yes, Tomas."

While she worked on that, he slipped his palm beneath her, petting her as the muscles in her ass tightened, then clenched.

Straightening back up, he pulled his dick out. "You know what I want, Sera."

Her eyes widened on his sex.

His eyes widened on her mouth. "And while you're going down on me, keep the pussy action going."

She licked the throbbing head of his dick, lapping his hot skin, before tonguing down the length. Kissing back up to the top again, she cupped his balls and opened her mouth, taking him all in.

Ah. Sera, Sera, Sera. What you do to me, lady ...

As he thrust for her throat, the dildo pumped between her legs.

A few rough strokes, and he pulled out. "Down on the floor," he rasped.

She prostrated herself for him on the tiles, the dildo still pumping in and out between her splayed legs.

As Sera writhed in orgasm, he straddled her prone body, one leg on either side. He came on an angry shout of jettison, his cum marking her from mouth to belly.

* * * * *

Much later in bed, he turned to Sera. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she answered, but her voice sounded muffled in the darkened room.

Had he hurt her? Was she crying?

Peeling his sweaty body off Sera's sweaty body, he flicked on the lamp.

He had her spread-eagled on her belly, her arms and legs stretched out, leather ties securing her ankles and wrists to the bed frame, her face hidden in the pillow. "Look at me, dammit!"

When she turned her jaw to profile, relief washed over him.

She was grinning from ear-to-ear.

After fucking for hours, at least *one* of them could smile.

He cupped her lush bottom. "You're a great lay, baby. The best I've ever had."

"Considering the numbers, that's quite the compliment."

"Sera," he began soulfully, "there haven't been all that many women. And I only ever asked *you* to marry me."

She sighed. "Yours was the first proposal I'd ever received."

His fingers stopped moving on her ass. "Matt didn't ask you to marry him?"

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about my first marriage." She turned her face away. "Will you release me for a few minutes? I'd like to bathe, if I may?"

His thoughts taken up with Sera's revelation, he untied her.

Free from bondage, she eased her legs from the bed.

First step, her expression tightened.

Man, he understood. With his dick on fire, he could barely walk himself. They both needed a dousing of water to put out the flames.

Swinging her up into his arms, he carried her into the adjoining bath, where he set her feet down in the tub. "This should help with the soreness." Stripping off the rest of his clothes, he got in with her. After sliding the glass door closed, he turned on the shower, spray at full blast.

He washed her. Beautiful face, long white throat, dainty little breasts.

Her nipples showed bruising from his mouth, and from his pinching fingers. Teeth marks discolored one delicate slope. Her ass sported similar decorations. He hadn't broken the skin, but he'd come damn close.

He kept all reflection from his voice. "What I tell you about keeping your legs open for business?" he said gruffly.

When she had splayed herself, he directed the showerhead, softly spraying the stickiness of his cum away.

"Turn," he said, his tone devoid of emotion.

This time, he directed the spray between her shoulder blades, down her spine, between her buttocks. His semen pearled down the drain.

She'd said nothing as he washed her, remained silent as he dried her, stood mute when he dropped to his knees before her and placed his jaw against her belly. Sinking lower, he kissed a bruise he'd made on her inner thigh.

"Open it," he whispered.

When she had, he licked her out, long strokes with his extra-long tongue, the tongue all his partners raved on and on about. Going downtown had always been his specialty.

But his claim to fame had never meant anything 'til now.

Her fingers knotted in his hair, she started to heave and roll and whimper and cry and scream. The sounds of her climax were still ringing in his ears when she ordered up, "Anal next."

If she had asked him to crawl, he would've made like a lizard. If she had kneed his nuts, after howling for a few minutes, he would have gone back for more. Of all the things she could have asked, could have said, could have demanded, that was the one thing he hadn't expected.

He looked up at her, into green eyes bright with excitement. "What the hell are you talking about, Sera?"

"Before we go our separate ways, I want it all. I want to know my body belonged to you completely."

Possession was a two-way street. She had owned him, body and soul, since day one of their marriage. Even before then. What she did to him! How helpless and weak she made him feel.

She stole his hand away, placed his palm on her lush ass cheek. About to die with lust, his fingers dug into her bruised flesh. "If you can't admit to anything else, at least admit to wanting to fuck my ass."

"*Christ*," he prayed and turned her so she faced away.

He worshipped a buttock with his mouth, before slipping his tongue inside, moving it inside, until she started to writhe.

He'd needed some sign, some proof that she cared, an acknowledgement that this was about more than bodies, and that maybe, despite everything, they had a shot at permanence. But Sera hadn't given him anything to nourish his hope. She wanted sex. That's all she'd ever wanted from him.

Scooping her up into his arms, he carried her back to the bed, placing her at the edge. "You'll need lube. Lots of lube." He swallowed hard. "At least for the first time."

Opening the top drawer of the nightstand, he one-handed the top of the tube open. When his lubed finger made contact, she went very still. "We can stop any time, baby."

"I don't want you to stop! I was only ... well ... startled."

Sometimes it was metaphysical, and sometimes it was all about the mechanics ...

He lubed her good and then lubed his cock better.

Kissing the small of her back first, he opened her buttocks and fingered the dimple. When she could take two fingers inside, he knew it was time.

"We'll take it nice and slow," he promised, and fed himself into her lush ass.

"Oh," she gasped when he made the slow push. "Oh!"

"It's all right, sweet baby." His free hand went to her clit. "You're so damned sexy. So sexy. You feel so fine. Show me you want me, baby."

She reached behind. With two hands, she opened herself in back. "Don't ever doubt I want you, Tomas."

It was so beautiful, the way she did that for him.

He put it to her, petting her, saying over and over again, "Feel how much I want you, feel how much I want you," as his cock sank into the crevice and then into her.

Her cry at penetration was soft and low.

"Shh," he soothed. "Shh."

Madness driving him, he watched himself go in, her body accepting his all.

"Mmm," she purred through her tears, pushing back against him, meeting his forward thrust, taking his all so he had not an inch to spare.

"Oh, yes," she sobbed. "Yes, yes, yes. Don't hold back."

He didn't.

Tightening his grip on her hips, he pushed them both over the edge into oblivion where deceit and disappointment and confused words like love don't matter.

Because he was weak, because his pride had deserted him, he had it from Sera again, doing her until he had nothing more to give. Then, strung out and sick and empty, he turned on his heel, found his clothes, and left her there, naked and rounded over, on the bed.

He cried all the way back to his trailer.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Two months later ...

"Hi, Mrs. Ruiz!" Consuelo Rodriguez boomed from the top step of The Southside Conservatory of Music. Her best pal, Kelley O'Donnell, hung back and played with the wispy bangs that decorated her forehead like red feathers.

Sera grinned at both girls over her armload of music books. "What's up?"

While Kelley continued to fiddle with her hair, the more exuberant Connie offered, "We're both like *so* totally blown away to have you for voice workshop again next semester."

Sera shuffled the book's weight from her arms to a hip. "Cool."

"*Way* cool," Connie enthused, while Kelley vigorously nodded her ponytails. "We couldn't wait to come back here, Mrs. Ruiz. Me and Kelley are both taking piano, too. On scholarship."

"Which one?" Sera asked absently. The school had so many now, keeping track proved difficult.

"The Ruiz Construction Scholarship," Connie said proudly. "On account of we're so talented. My brother, Jose, is taking Computer Graphics 101 with Mr. Ruiz at the Rec Center."

"I understand that class is quite popular," Sera said dryly.

"The Rec Center offers all kinds of neat courses. Everything but music."

"Tomas Ruiz better not cut into *my* territory."

Connie giggled. "He's so cute. All my girlfriends are half in love with him. Some older ladies your age, too. How come you two ain't married no more?"

Thankfully, Sera didn't need to try to think up an appropriate answer because the exuberant Connie asked another question on the heels of the first. "Anybody else we know in next semester's class?"

"I'm stopping off at the office now to find out my spring schedule, before heading home. Come along, and we'll check out the class list together."

With Connie and Kelley tagging after her, Sera entered the administrative area. While the girls waited, she asked the registrar, "Miss True, may I see my class schedule for next semester?"

Sera was proud of their automated registration system. Computerization was so much more efficient than doing everything manually. The new office supply store that had donated the computer was one of the many small businesses opening on the Southside. Developers were scooping up abandoned buildings left and right for renovation. Real estate values had started to soar. There was even talk of building a new public school ...

Sometimes, washing windows, one pane at a time, was all it took to restore pride in a neighborhood.

Moderately-priced new homes in various phases of construction surrounded the mansion now. Soon, the sounds of Bach and Beethoven would drift through manicured backyards as student musicians learned their craft. Employment was up. Crime was down. Optimism was the new political slogan. The Southside had started to turn around.

When Roxanne handed her the computer run, Sera stared at the print-out in disbelief. "That man!"

The former exotic dancer looked up from tapping at the keypad. "What man?"

"Tomas Ruiz!"

"I thought you knew. Tommie is in every one of your classes next term. According to rumor, someone told him he had the hands for the piano, and he decided to give lessons a go."

Tomas did have the hands for the piano. Sera had told him so herself.

Her soon-to-be-ex seemed to be on a self-improvement crash course, culture-wise. When Myra called the other day, she'd related that Tomas had started taking art courses at the community college, poetry classes at the library, as well as music here.

Sera sniffed. An effort to make her life more miserable explained why he hadn't elected to take either of the other two piano and voice teachers currently on staff, their hiring necessary due to increasing enrollments.

Class sizes were up now, but that hadn't been the case in the beginning.

After a disappointing start, Calia had once again canvassed the neighborhood, distributing flyers offering instrumental instruction during mothers' hours. The very next week, the classes filled to capacity, all students on full tuition-reimbursement waivers from Ruiz Construction. The next week, in an effort to promote his new company program, Tomas

had sent a professional photographer to the school to shoot a video. Considering the school benefited from his program, Sera could hardly refuse. Somehow, the DVD found its way to every college placement office in the country. Before she knew what was happening, applicants started calling *her* to set up interviews, all dying to work at the beautiful new school.

All thanks to Tomas Ruiz.

Damn him! He was a constant thorn in her side. Sometimes she thought he interfered in her life on purpose, just to irritate her.

Sera handed the computer report back to Roxanne. "Have you seen Calia today?"

"She's outside with Enrico. Those two are a hot item." Roxanne leaned her elbow on the desk. "I hope Enrico gives her some time before they get ... *involved*."

Seraphina lowered her voice. "Calia tells me he's not applying any pressure. She says, 'He's a complete gentleman.'"

"Speaking of gentlemen and pressure --" Roxanne beamed at the door as she jumped to her feet. "Here's my friend now to take me out for a movie and dinner. To get more than a kiss goodnight at the door from that gent, I'll have to apply oodles of pressure."

With a wink and a wave, the statuesque former Pink Flamingo employee strutted away.

Seraphina smiled. With Roxie's ample powers of persuasion, the school's new vocal coach didn't stand a chance.

Now that she had a steady income from the school, Seraphina no longer moonlighted at The Pink Flamingo. With that day's teaching schedule completed, she headed down the hall to spend another evening in her lonely apartment.

The phone was ringing as she stepped over the threshold.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Her hand shaking, Sera hung up the phone. The call from a frantic Myra had relayed some devastating news: a gas explosion had leveled an abandoned warehouse that Ruiz Construction had been renovating. All members of the crew had gotten out safely ...

Except Tomas.

Her husband was still missing, buried under tons of brick and mortar.

With a voice cracking with emotion, Myra had related how, when Tomas returned to perform another sweep of the area, the relic of a building, constructed long before codes and regulations, had swayed, then crumbled, the single girder holding the roof in place breaking in half like a toothpick, trapping her husband somewhere beneath the avalanche.

And so, Sera had simply gone to him. Sneaking past the yellow security ribbon, the police too, she had entered the collapsed building to find her husband.

Ignoring the falling rubble, she crept forward on hands and knees in the dim light, while jagged shards of glass barely missed her head, billowing clouds of concrete dust choked her lungs, and particles of plaster gritted her eyes.

India had stolen her faith and her ability to pray. But now, when she'd needed them the most, both had been miraculously restored to her.

As her lips moved in prayer, she never once doubted she'd find Tomas alive.

Tomas! Where are you?

A cough from somewhere up ahead. A groan. A curse. Movement!

Using her elbows like ski poles, Seraphina dragged herself along on her tummy to a mountain of cinder blocks. Ignoring her panic, she squeezed through a small opening in front.

"Tomas?" She whispered the question, fearful a raised voice might bring the whole thing down on top of them.

"Sera! Is that you?"

"Yes. Thank God, you're okay."

"Don't come any closer," he wheezed. "This area is unstable. Get the hell out of here fast."

"I can't," she answered, directing her voice to the echo of his. "Not without you."

"My leg is all busted up. The ceiling landed on my head. I'm whipped, Sera. I'm not going nowhere."

No clearance overhead. Little light. Thin air. Literally entombed in the rubble with her husband, she laughed. "I told you -- I'm not leaving without you."

"This place could blow again any minute -- a leak in the gas main."

"I know. But the rescuers will find us in time. The workmen are digging directly above us now. Just hold on a little longer. They'll get us both out."

"There is no us!" he exploded with the same force that must have leveled the building. "There never was an *us*."

"I'm your wife."

"Not for long," he rasped. "My lawyer is drawing up the paperwork that will free you of this farce of a marriage."

"I don't want my freedom."

"And I don't care what you want!"

Tomas wore a shroud of gray plaster dotted with bright red blood. His leg stuck out at an unnatural angle, a bone protruded white under his ripped black jeans. Only his back supported their plaster igloo. If his shoulders gave way, the igloo's ceiling would descend, the surrounding debris smothering them to death.

"How the hell did you get in here, Sera?"

She breathed a shallow breath of heavy air. "I snuck around the police barricade."

"Why the fuck would you pull an idiotic stunt like that?"

"To tell you to come home. To tell you, I need you."

"Don't con me, Sera. You don't need me."

"Then how's this?" she said, defiantly. "You're my only chance of survival. The rescuers know your location. But no one knows about me. I *snuck* in here. If you send me away, they'll never find me. I'll die. Just as well, I suppose, because I can't go on without you."

"You survived without Matt. After he died, you went on. You can go on without me, too."

"Oh, Tomas, haven't you caught on yet?" She reached across the broken glass until their fingers joined.

"Don't do that. Don't you touch me!"

"I have to. I can't breathe, Tomas. Without touching you, without feeling your strength, I'll lose consciousness."

"You don't play fair."

She clung to his hand. "Help me, Tomas. I need you to live. For the first time in a long time, I *want* to live."

"Damn." He laughed grimly. "Well, who knows? Maybe my back will hold, and the rescuers really will arrive before this place blows. Anything's possible. And hey, this building needed to be demolished any way. The explosion just speeded things up."

Her tears started to fall. "I've missed you so much."

"Don't cry, baby."

"I can't help it. Oh, Tomas, please come home."

"Why?" he asked again.

"Because I love you."

"What about your feelings for Matt? He still owns your heart. And I'm warning you, Sera, I won't take leftovers. I never had affection as a kid, and I want the real thing now. Not only your body, but I want everything else, too. I won't settle for second best. If I can't be first in your heart, then I can't come home."

"You're my heart's passion! Don't you understand? It's you! You're the one. Not Matt. What I had with Matt was friendship. You're my first and only lover."

"What?"

"Matt was a good man, but he didn't want me as his wife. He only married me so I could continue my missionary work in India. When my parents died, he took over their mission. I could stay with him only if we married. Our marriage was never consummated. I lost my virginity that night with the candle."

"Shit, Sera! Why the fuck didn't you say something?"

She shook her head. "None of that matters now. All that is in the past. My future belongs to you."

"You're only promising me a future because you know that's what I need to hear."

"I would never tell you something like that if I didn't mean it! You're strong enough to handle the truth. Strong enough to hold up this building on your shoulders to save me. Strong enough to give your crew a shot at a better life." She wept openly. "Strong enough to love me. You do love me. You've never told me, but I know you do. And I love you."

"I can't lose another home. There's been so many houses, Sera. So many different families. They came and went. They'd let me into their lives for a short while, and then I'd ...

and then for one reason or another ... I'd have to move on. I can't move on anymore. I love you, Sera, but this time I want to stay put." He visibly struggled for control. "And even if we do try to make a life together, it won't be easy for us. I'll always be an outsider, looking in."

"All you'll ever have to do, Tomas Ruiz, is look into my heart. There's so much love there," she said half-giggle, half-tear, "I'm surprised there's room for anything else. Come home. Please come home."

"Two things --"

"Name them," she whispered.

"Marry me again."

"Yes."

"In a real church this time."

"Yes."

"And Sera, I want babies. Lots of babies." As their rescuers grew closer, Tomas rushed out the words. "And never, ever, wear your hair all tight again. And keep baking those desserts. And --"

"Wait a sec. You said *two* things."

"Here's one and two. Let me love you. Always let me love you."

"Done. And now I have something to tell you."

"Go on!"

"I'm pregnant, Tomas."

As the rescuer lowered the sling through the rubble, big, tough Tomas Ruiz fainted.

A swoon Seraphina considered Heaven-sent.

Taking her husband home would be so much easier now that he no longer fought her love.

 THE END 

Louisa Trent

I am a writer raised in a family of storytellers. My earliest and fondest memory is of my Irish Nana relating a mystical story of a man looking in a window upon a beautiful lady whose long silvery hair swept the floor as she walked. With a simple telling, my grandmother drew me into her tale. A man. A woman. A forbidden love that wouldn't die. From opening word to shivery conclusion, I lived that story with her. Many years later, I'm still awed by the spell of the fantasy world she created with only the dip and swell of her voice.

There's power in words. Hope in love stories. Joy in a happy ending. I'm proud to carry on my family's storytelling tradition.

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