

RUTHLESS ACTS



ADRIANNA DANE

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She wore no bra and he dipped his dark head to draw an erect nipple into his mouth. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back, arched her spine, while his teeth razed across her flesh. Her fingers threaded through his thick, curly hair, gripped tightly as he tugged on her nipple.

A hand reached out and fisted into her silk panties, ripping them from her. “Ah, Isandro, I’ll have to go to the store again to purchase new lingerie if you insist on ripping my clothes apart every time we’re together.”

He lifted the panties to his face and inhaled, his eyes closing as he drew in her scent, a look of pleasure on his face. Then his eyes snapped open and he stared at her, his look a combination of sensual need and hard scrutiny. She shivered beneath that primal stare—it made her hot and cold at the same time. There was a lethal undertone to the look that made her fear and desire him, both at the same time.

“Your *padre* can afford a few bits of silk, can he not?”

Her gaze shifted away from his. “Isandro, please—”

He wound a hand in her thick hair, forcing her to look at him. “You’re a rich man’s daughter, *amante*, nothing will

change that. You like fine things. You are accustomed to them.” His hand drifted across her cheek, his gaze holding her captive. “Luxury shows in every move you make. Especially when I’m deep inside your pretty pussy.”

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BY

ADRIANNA DANE

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RUTHLESS ACTS
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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*Memories of growing up in a small town,
the closeness, the tangled lives, the friendship, the passion.
It always stays with you no matter where you go.
Generations make up communities like this. History is rich.
Who can help but write about such intensive passion
and drama? My thanks to my own small college town, now all
grown up, but the core of the community remains.*

PROLOGUE

Elizabeth heard the electronic buzzer sound off as she entered through the front door of Merlow Designs. She saw Willow MacKenzie rise from her crouched position and step down from the display window. The shop was not officially open yet, but Elizabeth needed something special in a dress, and she knew Willow's reputation for creating unique, eye-catching creations. She saw surprise as well as recognition evidenced on Willow's face when she realized it was Elizabeth, her fiancé's ex-wife, who had entered the shop.

"Hello, Elizabeth. It's nice to see you." Willow still appeared uneasy with Elizabeth even though everyone knew J.W. was deeply in love with his fiancé—who also happened

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to be his first, and if one were honest, his only love.

“Hello, Willow.” She gazed around the store at the racks and displays of clothing, impressed by the obvious quality of what she saw. “It’s nice. You do all the designs yourself?”

Willow nodded. “Yes, I do. I have to admit, I’m still a bit nervous about this venture and striking out on my own.”

“I like them. I expect you’ll do well. When I heard you were opening a shop I thought I would stop by. I need something special for a dinner I’m attending next month in Boston.”

“Really? I’m surprised you would come to see me.” Willow peered closer at her. Elizabeth felt the beginnings of a flush rise up to flood her cheeks. “Yes, there’s definitely something different about you. You’re glowing, Elizabeth. Have you met someone?”

How in the world the other woman could have guessed such a thing she had no idea. The man she had met was a business acquaintance of her father’s, and they had been introduced at the opening of a new play. Her father had come to Boston unannounced and invited her to accompany him to the show.

She had liked Evan Manning, and the fact that her father had approved had been an added bonus. So far, the relationship seemed promising, but it was still a little early to tell.

“How could you know that? I only met him in Boston a short time ago.”

“Is it serious?”

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“I think it might be,” Elizabeth answered quietly, afraid to put too much weight in the early bloom of a new relationship. She had grown cautious since her divorce from J.W. She didn’t want to make another mistake like she had with him. “He makes me feel...different. Special.”

“I’m happy for you. Really, I am.” She knew Willow meant it. She wasn’t like the sophisticated crowd in Elizabeth’s circle; she was honest and down-to-earth. Maybe that’s why Elizabeth liked her so much, even knowing that J.W.’s heart had been hers even during his short marriage to Elizabeth.

“And you, Willow? I’ve seen J.W. around and he’s a different man. You’re getting married next month?”

Willow nodded. “Yes, at last.”

“I also saw he’s selling his house.”

She saw heat rise in Willow’s cheeks, but on her it looked like a glow rather than embarrassment. She had heard Willow and J.W. had plans to build a new home. Until then, they were staying at J.W.’s family cabin. She’d never been up there herself.

“Yes. We thought a fresh start for both of us was the way to go.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I can understand that. It’s probably best. Well, I’ll be going. I hope you and J.W. will be very happy, Willow. And I really do mean that.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth. I hope you find what you’re looking for as well. Maybe we can talk next week and see about that new dress for you.”

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Elizabeth nodded. “Thank you. Oh, by the way, I’ll speak with my father. He has some connections in Boston and New York that might be of help to you. Maybe once you and J.W. are more settled I’ll arrange a dinner so you and my father can become acquainted.”

“That’s very generous of you.”

Elizabeth waved her hand in the air. “Oh, think nothing of it. Father loves to help new promising businesses get off the ground.”

As she left Willow’s shop, she stopped outside and inhaled the fresh air of the small town where she had grown up. It was different than the clinging atmosphere of a city like Boston. The scents were different. She walked across the street to where her silver Mercedes convertible was parked—a gift to her from her father two months ago—shortly after he’d introduced her to Evan Manning.

At first she hadn’t wanted it—something about the gift made it feel like he was rewarding her for entering this new relationship and it left a bad taste in her mouth. But he had insisted and she couldn’t very well refuse without angering him. And when he was upset, everyone around him suffered. So she had accepted the gift because it kept peace between them. He was all she had left of family and she didn’t want to cause a rift over something as unimportant as the gift of a car.

She opened the door, seated herself in the soft leather seat, and fastened the seatbelt. Maybe if her acquaintance with Evan Manning worked out, the relationship with her father would improve. After her divorce, he had seemed to distance

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himself from her, and she had clearly felt his disapproval. Until recently, that is. Until Evan.

If only she could make this relationship work, maybe things would be different. She was long past the point of expecting to find love, but if she could just find mutual respect at this point in her life she would be happy with that. Passion was something she read about, but had given up hope of experiencing for herself. What men seemed to want from her had nothing to do with passion and all-consuming love. It had more to do with position, wealth, power. If she could just gain respect and pleasant companionship...that was something she could live with. She hoped.

CHAPTER 1

Three Years Later

Ennui. That was the only word for it, Elizabeth thought as she walked toward the wide staircase leading to the second floor of her father's mansion. Lately, his parties did that to her. Well, not just his parties, any of the elite functions she'd attended, be it for her father, or charity, or whatever, made her feel that way. Whether in Boston or Esmerelda, it didn't matter.

Or maybe disillusioned was a better word for it. The fact that she was finally recovering from the second divorce she had sworn would never occur didn't help matters. A two-time

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divorcee—how pathetic was that? She no longer enjoyed the displays of polite, plastic demonstrations of interest, the polished mask of the sophisticated networking among the affluent. All she could remember now were the little affairs Evan, her second husband, had instigated at those social functions. The last straw had been when she came home unexpectedly early one day and found him and his latest conquest, make that *conquests*—plural—in her own home, in the bed they shared. Evan and two young women cavorting in the sanctity of their home. That was taking things too far and had been the last straw.

Maybe there hadn't been the passion of lovers between them, but there should have been some level of respect. He should have taken his little whores to a hotel, not to their home. *Her home*. The apartment she had paid for with money her mother had left her in a trust fund. But at least it was over now, and it had cost her a pretty penny, as well as the condo, to be shed of him. And it had been worth every cent.

Ascending to the second floor of the mansion, her footsteps muffled by the thickly carpeted hallway, she strode toward her father's office.

How had she become so jaded at thirty-three? She stopped at the polished oak door of her father's small library-cum-study thinking to grab a book and retreat to her room, away from the noise of the party taking place on the first floor. She had made her duty appearance, smiled and sat through dinner listening to the dull yammerings of the handsome, rich businessmen her father had seated near her, obviously hoping

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for a third spouse that might just take this time.

Sorry to disappoint you, Dad, but there will not be a third...anything. Not from this crowd.

She'd gone as far down that road as any dutiful daughter should be required to venture.

They did nothing for her, not even a tingle. Oh, they were handsome enough, just not men who interested her. Ever since her divorce from the county sheriff, J.W. Dalton, she had tried to do her duty to her father. She knew she had disappointed him when her marriage had fallen apart, but she simply could not stay with a man who did not love her. Truth be told, she wasn't sure she had loved him the way she should have. But it had pleased her father and that's what was important. At least it had been for about a year.

She finally realized that if she stayed with J.W., it would ruin the rest of both their lives, because J.W. did love someone else, with a passion that Elizabeth had only dreamed of. Until recently, that is. She had to set J.W. free even if it meant disappointing her father, because if nothing else, she liked J.W. and she wanted to see him happy.

It had taken a while, but Willow MacKenzie, the woman he truly desired, had finally returned to Esmerelda. They'd been married for several years now, with one beautiful daughter and another baby on the way. They looked very happy together, and Elizabeth knew every time she saw them, she'd made the right decision.

Then there had been Evan Manning. J.W. had at least loved Willow. Evan, on the other hand, loved only himself. He

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had hid it very well through their courtship, but Evan was a user, and once they were married he had been very blatant about exactly what kind of man he was.

The marriage to Evan, surprisingly, had lasted two years, but there had been even less holding them together. Certainly a lot less respect. She had tried so hard to make it work, closing her eyes to things she shouldn't have. She would not make that mistake again.

If only she'd been able find the right man for herself. Even to please her father, she could not approach marriage again with any of the potential suitors he'd thought acceptable. She simply couldn't bring herself to do it. She already tried it—twice. Never again.

She'd even gone back to Boston and spent time there, away from Esmerelda, and still hadn't found anyone whom she'd wanted to spend the rest of her life with. And then she'd returned home once more, closing up her condo in Boston, to play hostess for her father. Was it only four weeks since she'd returned this time?

She loved Esmerelda and enjoyed the small-town atmosphere, the familiarity and closeness of the small community. It had taken all her powers of persuasion to get her father to allow her to attend the local high school when she was younger. Only the promise that she would agree to attend Boston University and make the grades necessary to be admitted, kept him from shipping her off to a private school. She had tried so hard to be what he had wanted her to be. But the time had come to be her own person now. Enough was

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enough. And she had only begun to realize there was more to life than what her father expected of her. Much more.

She opened the door to the study and stepped inside. Before she could throw on the light switch a muscular arm snaked around her, twirled her around, and thrust her face first against the door. Her heart thundered in her chest. There was an intruder in her father's study. She struggled against the strong hold. A hard, callused hand pressed over her mouth.

She bit down and tasted blood.

"*Dios*, Elizabeth," a familiar, sensual voice growled in her ear. "What are you trying to do?"

"Isandro." She released a sigh of relief and the tension melted away. Speaking of passion. Who could have known what, or rather who, she would discover with this return to Esmerelda. What she found was that passion wasn't quite the elusive stranger she had thought it was. So what if she found it with the most unlikely person—someone her father would never approve of. Someone who would never enjoy being a part of the elite society her father so revered.

He spun her around and the next thing she knew, her breath was captured by a demanding mouth, his tongue thrust deeply inside. She wound her arms around his neck. Even in the dark, he exuded sexuality, and she was no match for his meandering, sensual possession. He lifted his head and his gaze glittered through the murky darkness of the room.

"What are you doing in here?" she gasped. "How did you get in?" She felt his hand at the zipper of her dress, felt it give beneath his knowledgeable touch. To hell with what her father

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thought. This man made her blood sing in a way it never had before.

“I was waiting for you, *amante*,” he responded.

“But how could you possibly know—”

His mouth descended again, cutting off her words. Any lucid train of thought was immediately shattered.

He slid the dress down her arms and it dropped to the floor in a glittering puddle at her feet. “We wouldn’t want to rip such an expensive, pretty dress, now would we?”

“What are you planning to do?” she gasped. The man had no shame whatsoever. She’d certainly figured that out in the last couple of weeks.

“I’m going to make love to you, what do think I’m going to do?”

“Here?” she squeaked.

He gripped her hand and dragged her across the room to the door leading onto the small balcony. “No, not in here. You know how I feel about enclosed places.” He pulled the door open and yanked her onto the cement landing. He then proceeded to push her behind the potted plants, into the shadowy corner. “That’s better.” Pressing her against the brick wall, he ripped the satiny slip in half and pulled the straps down her shoulders. His demanding hands always elicited ripples of lust throughout her, and she felt her juices gather between her thighs in anticipation of his brand of loving.

She wore no bra and he dipped his dark head to draw an erect nipple into his mouth. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back, arched her spine, while his teeth razed across her

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“Your *padre* can afford a few bits of silk, can he not?”

Her gaze shifted away from his. “Isandro, please—”

He wound a hand in her thick hair, forcing her to look at him. “You’re a rich man’s daughter, *amante*, nothing will change that. You like fine things. You are accustomed to them.” His hand drifted across her cheek, his gaze holding her captive. “Luxury shows in every move you make. Especially when I’m deep inside your pretty pussy.”

She felt her juices drip onto her thighs. Hadn’t she just been with him in his cottage that very afternoon? And still she wanted him. Every bit of common sense left her when she was with him. Propriety was not even a glimmer of a thought. She pressed against him, uncaring that she was for all intents and purposes naked, on her father’s balcony, where he could come out at any moment and find them together. Need sharpened

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inside her.

Any concern for her reputation had flown out the window the first moment she'd met Isandro. It was like someone had flipped on a switch inside her and there was no shutting it off. Nothing mattered but being with him. "I need you," she whispered. "Please, Isandro. I need you inside me."

"Are you certain?" He rubbed against her wet, puffy labia lips. "What will all your friends think if you are discovered here with me?"

"I don't care. You should know that by now. You do something to me that no one else has ever done. You make me want things I never knew existed."

He pulled her out from behind the plant and pushed her toward the balustrade. The cool air stroked over her breasts as he pressed her hands to the railing. "Don't let go," he commanded.

As she clung tightly to the cold iron, she heard a swift rasp of sound as he unzipped his fly, heard the crackle of a condom wrapper as he sheathed himself and then she felt the tip of his cock pressed between her wet lips, at the entrance to her vagina.

She inhaled sharply as he slid inside her; as her eager pussy opened willingly to enclose his thick shaft. From this angle, he pushed deep, so deep she whimpered with the soul-destroying, aching pleasure that consumed her.

Quickly entrenching himself inside, he reached around to mold his warm, callused hands over her breasts, fingering her firm, erect nipples. He undulated his hips and his cock touched

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a spot inside her that had her keening with pleasure. His thumb and index finger rolled her nipple and the painful pleasure shot through her, just as she noticed a couple move out from the overhang below them.

Her attention was fastened on the couple as they walked slowly toward the garden, arms around each other. She stiffened as she recognized them, knew that all they had to do was turn around and look up and they would see her and Isandro above them, spotlighted by the full moon above.

Isandro sank deeper and she tried to suffocate the sounds determined to erupt from her throat.

“Do you want me to stop, *amante*?” She felt him begin to ease from inside her.

She reached a frantic hand around to grab at his hip. “No. God, no, don’t leave me. Please.” Where was her cloak of sophistication, the mantle of her good breeding? Concern for her reputation? With Isandro, no matter where they were, it seemed to disappear, leaving her vulnerable as a new-born babe, allowing him to do whatever he wanted. Truth be told, it wasn’t a question of allowing, she *wanted* him to do it. Why was he so different from the others?

She felt him ease back inside her and she breathed a sigh of relief. She would have begged him, wouldn’t she? She was that taken with him, and something about it frightened her at exactly what she would allow him to do to her. What she would give up to be with him. How much she wanted him, no matter the cost.

“What would they say if they saw you now?” he said as he

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struck up a steady rhythm of fucking her with long, penetrating strokes. “What would you tell them? Who would you say I was?”

She pushed back, forcing the rhythm, wanting his essence branded inside her, on her. Then his hands were at her hips, his fingers pressing into her flesh. And she wanted him. His movements became more staccato, short and fast, driving her higher and higher. One hand moved up to her mouth and he thrust a finger between her lips. She sucked at the callused digit, tasting him, licking and relishing every movement, as each nerve in her body became deliciously alive.

Dampness broke out on her skin, sweat trickling down her neck, and still he didn't stop, with the stamina of a young, raging bull he powered into her, demanding her complete attention, and she no longer was aware of the couple below them who had disappeared into the shadowy garden.

His cock slid easily through her juices, pushing inside her like a pistoning poker, flaying each nerve he touched, stoking the flames hotter and hotter. She gripped the railing, her nails biting deep into the fleshy heel of her hands as she clutched the wrought iron.

She bid down on his thick finger as her climax surged through her, yet he didn't flinch, refusing to remove the finger from her mouth, instead gripping her chin and angle her head back, exposing the tender skin of her throat to the moonlight. She panted, unable to catch her breath.

He was an animal, primal and demanding. She knew it was what drew her to him, the sense of a dangerous passion that

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had the ability to send her into a lust-filled vortex of life-threatening dangerous water. From the first, she'd been unable to resist him.

He slowed, but he didn't come to a complete halt, swirling his cock over her engorged clit, trailing along the seam of her puffy pussy lips and then invading her once again. Over and over until her whole world was simply the feel and smell of their mating.

She arched her back, forcing him deeper, unable to stop herself. Her nipples tight and burning, sensitive, as the night wind whipped over her body. All she could do was feel, her heart and soul bursting, boiling over with sensual lust.

Finally, she felt him explode inside her and he sank deep, pinning her to the rail and she sucked on his finger, swirling her tongue over and around the digit, tasting the hint of blood she had drawn in her own sexual frenzy. His hand rose to possess her breast, cupping it decisively as he pulsed inside her. He slipped his finger out of her mouth with a pop, and she dropped forward, gasping for breath as he pulled his softened penis from inside her.

She shook with the emotional aftermath, shifted with cold as he stepped away from her. If she let go of the railing, she knew she'd collapse as echoes of her orgasm sang through her.

Slowly she straightened and turned around. He leaned against the brick wall, a lit cigarette between his fingers. His gaze was hooded as he watched her.

"Isandro..." she said, then stopped, having no idea what she wanted to say. Was it a plea for him to take her in his arms

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again, to make love to her, or simply to hold her? From that first heated encounter in the garden it had never been a question of love. It had been lustful and primal, searing passion that gripped and surged through her, never letting up. Not a moment passed since that first time that he was not in her thoughts, wishing he were in her body.

He took a long drag on the cigarette and then released the swirling smoke into the night air. “Yes, *amante*?”

Lover. He never called her darling or sweetheart, always lover. She shivered in the dampness as a cold breeze washed over her overheated flesh. Just because she had recognized that her feelings had changed in the course of the last week was no reason to believe his had, or ever would. They came from two different worlds—ones that were not meant to commingle. But then again when had love ever made sense?

She might realize that, but she doubted Isandro Santario felt the same way. For him she was certain it was simply sexual lust—at a very basic level. And convenience. He was maybe seven years her junior, the son of her father’s housekeeper. He’d apparently arrived on the estate three months before she came home. He was the new groundskeeper.

When she saw him working in the garden, no shirt, bronzed shoulders gleaming with sweat and he’d looked up at her when she’d approached, it had been like she was hit broadside with a two-by-four. And the feelings hadn’t lessened in all these weeks. In fact, every time they made love it only worsened.

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But watching as he tended the grounds... Some mornings, she'd look out her window and study him as he weeded flower beds, or mowed the lawn. There was something in the way he caressed the buds, brushed a hand across the newly sheared green grass. There was much more to Isandro Santario than what he revealed to her. And she had fallen desperately in love with that man.

She shook her head. "Nothing." She pushed away from the railing and started to walk toward the study, meaning to get dressed. She felt so exposed when he looked at her like that, his dark gaze sliding over her so possessively, yet unemotionally.

Without warning, he reached out, grabbed her arm, and yanked her to him, her sensitive breasts crushed against his soft, worn flannel shirt. She gasped at the action, her body again responding to his nearness.

"I should just throw you over my shoulder and spirit you away to have my way with you. Make you my sex slave. What do you think of that?" he said in that sultry tone of warm, exotic white sand sifting across her senses. At times like this his accent was more pronounced, wedging deep inside her, melting her bones.

"I think you've already had your way with me, Santario. I think you've already made me your sex slave, don't you?"

He traced his thumb over her lips, pressing inward until it was buried inside her mouth and she sucked and swirled her tongue over it, finally bit down on it. He inhaled sharply. It was a simple, intimate act, but one that had her feeling as

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though he already owned her soul. He tilted her head back, arching her neck, studying her closely.

“But, *amante*, there are so many ways to be taken. We have barely scratched the surface of passion.”

Her heartbeat thundered in her chest and her stomach fluttered in anticipation. Slowly he removed his thumb from her mouth and swooped down to possess her lips, pressing his tongue deep inside. She went boneless, collapsing against his chest. Finally, he pulled back and looked down at her.

“*Dios*, the things I want to do to you. You had best go and return to your padre’s high society guests. That’s where you really belong, isn’t it? I’m surprised you did not find one of the suitors presented that would appeal to you.”

It hurt when he said things like that. “Do you think I’m superficial, Isandro? Do you think the money—this house—that it matters to me?” *More than you*, she wanted to add, but didn’t dare.

“Ah, Elizabeth, you are an ethereal, exotic butterfly. You deserve all the pampering that money can buy. I am sure Señor Anthony agrees. You are a hot house flower that must be cared for delicately.”

She gripped the front of his shirt, drawing him down to her again. “Do you think you will damage me, Isandro? You haven’t done so up till now, and I wouldn’t say that what we’ve done has been...delicate, would you?”

He leaned down to claim her lips once more with searing intensity and then suddenly she was free. “Go back to your world, Señorita Anthony. Enough slumming for one night, I

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think.” As she watched, he swung over the balcony and onto the trestle and disappeared from sight.

She rushed over and looked down. “That’s not the way it is, Isandro,” she whispered. He always pushed her away, tried to hurt her with his accusations. Always kept that wall up between them. She wanted to scream at him, to reveal that she loved him, and she’d willingly give it all up for him if he only asked or showed one bit of softening toward her. One moment of wanting more than just sex.

“You should dress, Señorita Elizabeth. Your father could come in at any moment.”

Elizabeth whirled around and crossed her hands over her naked breasts, her body suffusing with the heat of embarrassment. Carmelita Santarío stood before her dressed from head to foot in black, holding out her designer dress of sequined silver as though it was contaminated.

She, on the other hand wore her garter belt, stockings, silver high heels, moonlight, and embarrassment that was unbelievable. Their gazes locked in the darkness, Carmelita’s hard and black with disapproval.

“He is not for you, señorita. It could never be so. If your father finds out, it will be my son who pays a heavy price.”

Elizabeth’s chin shot up as she reached out for the dress with all the dignity she could muster. “I would never let my father fire him.”

Carmelita’s dark brow rose. “Really. Do you think you have that power, Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth quickly slipped into the dress as she faced

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Carmelita. “If I don’t, you do, don’t you? You hold quite a bit of sway with my father. Does Isandro know exactly what...intimate terms you are on with your employer?”

She was surprised when Carmelita’s complexion first darkened and then paled to almost ghostly white. “My relationship with your father is not your concern, señorita. Nor is it Isandro’s. And if you do not wish to bring my son more trouble, you will leave here and return to Boston. Where you belong.”

“Where I belong is my business, señora, not yours.”

“But my son is my business.”

“It seems to me, he’s an adult and can make his own choices.” She moved to sweep past her, but Carmelita reached out to grab her arm in a tight grip forcing her to look at her. What she saw almost curdled Elizabeth’s blood.

“He is my son and he will do as I say. And if you hurt him, señorita, it is me you shall answer to.”

Elizabeth ripped her arm out of the other woman’s grasp and raced out of the room like the hounds of hell were after her. It was only when she reached her own room that she allowed the breath to escape from her lungs.

Carmelita Santario, her father’s new housekeeper, was also her father’s mistress. Elizabeth had caught them together on several occasions. Like father, like daughter, she guessed, because Elizabeth was in love with her father’s new groundskeeper. Yet unlike her father, she hoped one day to convince Isandro that all the trappings of money were far less important to her than convincing him that she truly did love

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him, and was more than willing to give all of this up for him. But how the hell did she even begin to do that?

Since she'd returned to Esmerelda, things seemed different. There was an odd atmosphere in the house and she couldn't figure out what caused it. It could simply be the presence of the beautiful, new housekeeper and her son, or maybe it was the new business associates that kept stopping in at regular intervals to meet with her father. The meetings that seemed to be taking place late at night when her father thought she was sound asleep.

Something was wrong, she just hadn't been able to figure out what it was yet.

CHAPTER 2

Things had gone too far. He knew it, but he couldn't stop himself. He couldn't stay away from her. She was poison and he accepted the truth of that knowledge. He already tread a dangerous line and if her father found out, his life wouldn't be worth much.

For three months he'd slaved for the old man, trying to gain his confidence, to get past his defenses, and nothing had worked. He knew the only reason he'd brought Isandro here was to retain the hold he had on his mother. The bastard.

At first he'd wooed Elizabeth Anthony with revenge as his only motive. He had wanted Anthony to know it was Isandro who was fucking his *precioso*, pampered daughter. And to

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gain information. She was his only key to the knowledge he sought. She looked innocent enough, but he was certain she couldn't possibly be, not with a father like Anthony. Where he'd been, no one was innocent though they might profess to be.

Except his mother. She was the purest thing in Isandro's life, the shining light that had kept him sane in a treacherous world. And he had survived because of her. Now she was his only hope and he would get her free, no matter what he had to do to achieve his goal. No one would get in his way.

He had known Anthony had a daughter, a social butterfly who lived for the most part in Boston, and rarely returned to Esmerelda. He had been shocked one morning to find a beautiful creature, a *diosa*—a goddess, watching him as he weeded one of the beds near the patio on the back lawn. Working in the dirt helped to settle him, help him think. He hated being indoors, more so because of his recent experiences. Even at night, he had to have the doors to the bedroom open so he could feel the night breezes, smell the freedom.

Elizabeth Anthony was not what he'd expected. Outwardly she had the polished sophistication of her class and money, but since then he'd become acquainted with the seething, passionate woman she apparently hid from everyone else. Only he, Isandro Santario, gripped the heart of the woman, held her soul in the palm of his hands. Only he could crush her if he wasn't careful. At first, he hadn't cared, meaning to use everything at his disposal to free his mother. But as he'd come

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to know more about Elizabeth Anthony, she had wedged a spot inside him and he hated himself for what he knew he was doing to her. What would she do when she knew the truth of why he was here?

He knew that continuing the relationship with her was lethal, both to him and to her, and possibly to his mother's safety. But he couldn't stay away from her. The passion she pulled from him was like something he'd never experienced before. She made him forget everything else. When she was near, it was like an animal scenting his mate, drawing him to her and he fought it at every turn. Yet instinct drove him on, to the very cliffs of his demise, if he wasn't careful. It's what made him attempt to hurt her with his cutting remarks, trying to force her to be the one to run the other way. Self-preservation. It had saved him on more than one occasion.

He could see how he wounded her in her doe-soft eyes, yet she would mask her expression and try to hide from him. He found himself admiring her determination, because no matter what he did or said, she would not turn and run. She had a strong heart, more courage, and certainly more compassion than he expected to find in a woman who was the daughter of a man like Anthony. And he couldn't leave her alone.

Last night had been too close. When she'd surprised him by walking into the study unexpectedly, he thought he was done. But then the passion had taken over and she'd never even thought to question his motives for being in her father's study. The desire had overtaken him as well. When it was over, he'd had to get away from her before he lost his mind

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completely and said something he shouldn't.

But he could not forget her, her scent lingering on him, inside him, making it hard to concentrate on why he was here. Even now his cock was hard as the black rock bordering the garden path. And there was only one person who could ease the ache wedged inside him.

“Isandro.”

He stiffened, knowing who spoke his name, afraid to turn around. He had never been afraid of confrontation in his life. He was a man and did what he must, but facing this woman had him quaking, knowing where it would lead.

“What are you doing here?” he said as he pivoted around to look up at her. He dropped the trowel into the dirt.

She bit her lip in that sexy way she had and he felt his cock respond immediately, his primal demand rising to the surface quickly—too quickly, having just had her the night before. They looked at each other, no words, but her gaze told him everything. And he couldn't turn her away. The bodice of the thin, shell-pink sundress she wore, clung to her breasts and he could see she wasn't wearing a bra, her nipples were tight buds pressed enticingly against the fabric. The skirt clung to her thighs, caressing the soft skin the way he wanted to. His gaze slid lower, and he noted she was barefoot, her painted toenails curling into the moist dirt beneath her feet. No matter what happened, he simply couldn't fight the inevitable. If there was a spot in this garden that he had not laid claim to her body, this was it.

He rose up, grabbed her hand and yanked her down, driven

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to taste her once more. She fell against him, wrapped her arms around his neck and plastered herself to him, quenching her thirst from his lips. Her clean scent surrounded him. This morning she smelled like wildflowers, a wild meadow in the mountains.

He lifted his head. “What would your father think?”

“He’s not here,” she said, smiling up at him, an imp reflected in her eyes.

He pushed the tie of her sundress down over her shoulder, baring her breast to the warm sunlight. She arched up into his mouth as his lips settled over her puckered nipple.

“He went to town. The house servants have the day off. I thought maybe you would, too. But then I saw you here.”

He had the day off, but had chosen to work in the garden because it’s how he thought best, when he was working with the earth. His teeth tracked across the milky white surface of her creamy breast, leaving a path of crimson in his wake. He soothed her with his tongue.

“Oh, God, Isandro. I need you.”

“You’ll get all dirty,” he said as he lay her back in the freshly turned earth, crushing several of the flowers he had just pruned.

She looked up at him and he saw the serious expression on her face. She cupped his jaw. “I don’t mind getting dirty—not with you or for you.”

His jaded mind had him wondering if her words were double edged. Was he wrong? Was her soul as blemished as her father’s was? Was she saying that if he was involved in

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something illegal, she didn't care? That she would help him?

All such thoughts left his mind as her soft hand reached out to grasp his cock, stroking along his denim-clad length, and he groaned with the pleasurable pain. He ripped down the other side of her dress, exposing her to him. Reaching out, he cupped his hand beneath a dripping sprinkler. He then proceeded to drizzle the cold water over her skin, watching her nipples pucker temptingly. He then leaned down to lap up the excess water from her skin, leisurely enjoying the essence of her and the slightly metallic taste of the water. This wasn't exactly the place to take his time.

He reached down and unzipped his fly, quickly exposing his hard cock. He then ripped aside her panties and plunged into her ready wetness. He heard her groan of desire as he cupped her buttocks and lifted her. She arched closer.

“Yes, Isandro, oh, yes.”

He wasted no time, building a steady, penetrating rhythm inside her welcoming heat. It gripped him, stroked him, inflamed him with each thrust. She danced with him, there in the sunlight, her breasts tantalizing, gleaming. She was indeed the wanton goddess he had first fantasized about, his garden nymph, driving him higher and higher with passionate intensity. He had to have her, had to have all of her. He reached down to stroke across her stiffened clit. It was only a brief touch, yet he felt her splintering all around him. In seconds he exploded inside her and dropped over her.

“Elizabeth,” he gasped. Unable to utter more than her name. She was so giving, so passionate, so much of everything

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he desired in a woman. Yet she was not the woman he expected to find such bliss with. Nor was she the woman he would ever be able to have.

He reached up to wipe at a smudge of dirt across her nose and she smiled. It was a smile that almost blinded him with its innocence and beauty and sensuality. Its intensity was so brilliant he had to turn away as intense guilt washed through him.

It was only as he slid his softened cock from inside her that shock pervaded him. *'Dios, I forgot to use a condom.'* He looked down at her, panicked and angry at himself for his inattention.

She reached up to stroke the side of his face. "I was here, too, you know. I could have stopped you. I know you didn't use a condom. It's okay. I trust you."

He saw it in her eyes, that complete trust that shouldn't be there. Was she just a superb actress, hiding behind the innocent facade? How could a woman of her beauty, intelligence, and age not be aware of what her father was like? No, it couldn't be real.

He smoothed his expression. "Nevertheless, I will not be so foolish again. You go to my head, Elizabeth."

He saw the shadow fall across her face, as it did when he made some cutting remark, but it smoothed quickly as she rose to her feet and grabbed his hand.

"Come swimming with me," she pleaded.

He pulled to his feet slowly. "It is not right. I am the gardener and you are the lady of the house."

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“I won’t let you ruin today, Isandro. I know you say those things to try to push me away. I won’t let you do it. I...care about you, and I don’t care what anyone says. Do you hear me? There’s no one at home. Come play with me today.”

How could he resist her? Even if she was what he thought, she gave him a great deal of pleasure. At least until the day when the complete truth of this estate was revealed to everyone. He would give her this. He would play her game for the time they had left.

He allowed her to pull him along, then realized they weren’t headed to the pool. “Where are we going?”

She released his hand and laughed, then began running. “To the lake. I thought you might enjoy it more than that starchy pool. We can play with the fishes.” Her laughter echoed out behind her, tempting him, as she raced on ahead like a young gazelle let loose to run. He would not be bested, and he sprinted after her, like a fierce lion on the hunt, prepared to bring his prey to ground.

She zigzagged through the shadowy forest until she reached a clearing. Sunlight drifted through the trees to reflect on the water. She waited for him to join her.

“Is this private enough for you?” she asked as she unzipped her dress and let it fall to the grass. As he watched, she stepped out of her panties. Lifting her hands, she pulled the pins from her hair and it fell in shimmering, golden waves around her shoulders. Then she pivoted around, ran toward the lake, and jumped in.

Isandro wasted no time in shedding his own clothing and

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following suit. His body was so hot, he needed some cooling off.

Just as he reached her, she dove beneath the surface of the glass-smooth water. He dove after her, his powerful arms allowing him to catch her quickly. She wiggled like a fish trying to get away from him, but he managed to wrap his arms around her and yanked her close to his body.

Flesh on flesh, his stiff cock nudged tightly against her slick folds, he thought he would burst if he didn't get inside her right that minute. She stopped struggling and he clamped his mouth over hers as he kicked his way to the surface.

Her arms were wrapped tightly around his neck, her breasts flattened against his chest. He lifted his head to look down at her, then bent forward again to lick the drops of water from her, eating at her lips.

She was no longer the sophisticated lady, but a siren set out to seduce him. His arms tightened around her. He should let her go, should swim back to shore and do what he'd come here to do—to do his duty. But it was as though his arms were locked into place, his body glued to hers. He knew he shouldn't let her temptation sway him, but he couldn't help himself. Dammit, he wanted her, wanted to be with her, inside her. He wanted there to be no past, just Elizabeth and Isandro, timeless. He wanted to tell her—

He ripped away from her suddenly and turned onto his back. He needed distance before he lost his head completely. For one second she bobbed below the surface and then kicked her way up to reach his side.

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“Isandro?”

She could never understand him no matter how hard she tried. He didn’t want her to understand. He didn’t want her to wiggle her way into his heart. Not that she hadn’t come too damn close already. He was playing with fire and he knew it.

He kicked his way back toward shore. He had to get away from her. How could he possibly know how deeply she was involved with her father’s operations? She looked like an angel, but was there a dark side to her that she hid from him? He’d been unable to discover anything from his midnight search of her father’s study. She had done nothing obvious to implicate her in his organization. But she was his daughter. How could she be oblivious to what he was doing?

He reached shallow water and stalked onto the beach.

“Isandro, what is it?” she breathlessly called out to him. He heard the splash of footsteps behind him. And then she was beside him, her small hand gripping his wrist.

He stopped walking, allowing the water to sluice down his body, trying to get a grip on his emotions. If he looked at her he would be lost. Yet, how could he not? In that moment he finally admitted to himself she had become more than just the lady of the manor to him, more than a duty. And none of it had to do with revenge. And acknowledging what he felt could get him killed.

“I need to get back to work,” he managed to mumble as he moved toward his pile of clothing without turning, twisting his arm from her grasp.

“Isandro.” His named uttered in that breathless tone, tinged

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with pain, pleading, stopped him in his tracks. He hated doing this to her. But she was too close, got under his skin far too easily. From the first moment he'd seen her walking toward him in the garden, he'd known he was in trouble.

He pivoted around, and looked at her standing at the edge of the lake like a beautiful, mythical sea siren—a mermaid turned woman. Like a piece of thread in her hands, he was pulled back to her, lifted her and branded her lips with his own, tasting her, inhaling the clean, wild scent of her, perfumed by the water and the earth.

She wound her arms and legs around him, clinging to him. God, he had to have her, just once more.

Who was he trying to kid? It was going to take more than once to gain his fill of her. He was like a bottomless glass when it came to Elizabeth, the need for her never-ending, never completely assuaged.

She lifted her face to look at him and her clear gaze searched his features. She leaned up to kiss his eyelids, his nose, then trailed kisses along his jaw. The need for her drove an arrow through his privates, throbbing with a pain that must be fulfilled.

The time would come when he would have to let her go, to turn his back on her because of his duty to the government and to his mother. But he couldn't do it today, not today, in the sunlight and warmth of this secluded glen. He needed what she offered too badly to walk away just yet. Somehow her touch, her passion cleansed him in ways he couldn't fathom. Time with her made him aware of the beauty of touch, of skin,

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of pleasure. Even if he did try to convince himself it couldn't be real. For now, it felt right.

She nuzzled at his neck and with her in his arms he slowly walked back to his discarded clothing and dropped to his knees. He pressed her back onto the soft ground and leaned up to look down at her, to memorize this moment, to brand this vision of her deep inside himself, because he had a feeling his days of knowing this special blend of passion were numbered. For now, she belonged to him, every inch of her, she gave to him willingly. She had a bright, clean fire and he needed to cleanse himself within her beautiful heat. Even if it was only an illusion. For now.

CHAPTER 3

He was such a contradiction, running first hot, then cold, then hot again. Would she ever understand him? Right now it didn't matter because she needed him. Had to have him so deep inside her that he touched her soul. He had done it before and she needed him to do it again.

She leaned back on the ground and opened herself to him. She cupped her breasts, kneading the nipples to tight, little beads, keeping her gaze locked with his. She saw his pupils dilate, black, ebony pools that she fell into every time she was with him. She couldn't help herself.

"Touch yourself." His request was a growl deep in his chest, an indication of his arousal. He reached down to fist his

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thick penis as he watched her.

She smiled and tilted her head back, gazing up at him through slitted lids. He knelt there like a thundering god between her outstretched legs. His hard, golden body absorbing the heated rays of the sun. His chest and abs rippled as he rasped out breaths, watching her. The bulge of his biceps tightened as he stroked his shaft. His cock jutted out proudly from a dark triangle of short wiry curls. The purple veins pulsed with blood, the hooded cap slitted and glistening with moisture.

Elizabeth licked her lips and reached out to touch him, but he grabbed her wrist. “Pleasure yourself.” He lowered her hand to rest atop her sensitive mound. “I want to see you make yourself come. I want to watch you.”

She couldn’t resist him. Leaning back, she trailed the fingertips of one hand along the column of her throat and swirled over her passionately distended nipples, inhaling sharply at the sensation.

A gentle breeze caressed her skin, arousing her more intensely. She could smell the scent of fresh pine from the trees nearby and the bed of needles beneath the clothing that cushioned her body. It was almost as though she could smell the sunlight as she drifted her other hand down between the fleshy, engorged lips of her pussy.

She watched Isandro masturbate as she circled her thumb over her stiffened clit, arching at the intense arousal the touch elicited. She spread her lips and sank two fingers into her heated core, shuddered at the sensation, and then it became

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even more intense as Isandro stroked her sensitive, inner thigh with his strong, callused hand, urging her on.

“Yes,” he whispered, “just like that.”

Her fingers grew more urgent at his encouragement, at his touch, as she watched his thick shaft engorge even more. The hand stroking her thigh joined the rhythm of her slick fingers as they entered and retreated inside her body, driving her higher and higher. She was a flame burning out of control, lost in the passion of the moment, unable to feel the ground beneath her.

Closing her eyes, concentrating on the pleasure, on the vision of Isandro, her fingers thrust hard, her hips, unable to deny the pleasure, arched and dropped, building a rhythm of their own, answering the primal need building and consuming her. She gasped and her eyes flew open as she felt Isandro lift her legs and plant her feet flat on the ground, widening her, watching her, and her juices flowed faster, driving her higher.

She was close, so very close. And she could see in his eyes that he knew it as well. Suddenly, he reached out and touched her hard, little bud and she screamed as she convulsed, pulsing with pleasure, throb after throb of searing desire coursing through her.

She gasped as he pulled her hands away, lifted her hips and sank his tongue deep inside her, sucking at her juices, causing her to come again, fast on the heels of the orgasm she had just experienced. She spun out of control as he sucked, his tongue twirling over her sensitive clitoris, driving deep inside her again and again, lapping at her slick inner lips.

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She couldn't catch her breath as he kept her at the pinnacle of need. She pumped her hips against his mouth, needing him deeper. He pulled back and nipped at her inner thighs and then she felt his fingers inside her, stretching her, curling and stroking at that sweet spot, until she couldn't stand it for one second more.

"Isandro," she screamed. "Fuck me. I need you inside me. Now. Right now. Please. Oh, God, I can't stand it any more."

He lowered her and dropped over her. Without pause, he rammed inside her welcoming pussy. She lifted her hips to meet his forceful thrust, wanting hard, wanting fast, and deep, so deep, there was no thought of separation between them.

She felt him. Oh, God, she felt the sweet ache when he touched her soul. Tears bathed her face at the exquisite pain of his soul-destroying penetration and she wrapped her legs around his hips, forcing him past her cervix, to the very heart of her womb. She felt him explode, felt his cum bathe her and she had never felt more complete than in that moment when her body accepted his seed. Again, she climaxed and it was more than pleasure that consumed her, there was a rightness to the love act, a knowledge of fate as souls touched and united for a brief instant.

And then she felt fear grip her like nothing she'd ever known before and her hold on him tightened. She tried to lock onto the joy, but slowly, like a pair of gossamer wings it drifted away. She trembled from the lingering aftershocks.

He pulled from inside her and dropped to the ground beside her. She turned on her side to gaze over at him and was

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surprised to find that he was trembling as well, trying to catch his breath. She reached out to lay a hand over his rapidly beating heart, stroked a soothing hand over his hard chest.

He gazed up at the sky as though unseeing, deep in some thought far away.

She leaned toward him and placed a light kiss on his hollowed cheek. As she surveyed him she realized she knew next to nothing about him. There were often shadows in his eyes she could not decipher. Memories he wouldn't share with her. There were times she knew something dark gripped him and she didn't know how to reach him.

"I love you." She said it softly, unable to keep the words imprisoned inside.

He whipped his head around to glare at her with those dark, expressionless eyes. "You don't know what you're saying. That's the heat of sex talking. Nothing more."

She felt the pain of unrequited love wash through her. She shook her head and imprisoned his face with her hands, forcing him to look at her. "No, it's not. I've known what I felt for you was love for some time now. I-I know you don't love me. I just needed you to know how I felt. I couldn't hide it any longer."

His dark gaze studied her intently. After long moments, he pulled her hands away and rose to a sitting position. He looked out over the lake and ran a quick hand through his hair. Then he turned to look at her and she saw those dark secrets in his eyes again.

"We are too different. You don't know anything about me.

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This is just...just fucking...a pleasant way for you to deal with the boredom in your life. I'm just a new toy you'll soon grow tired of and move on to something else."

Like a striking snake he turned and pressed her back onto the ground. "And that's just fine with me. You excite me, Elizabeth, but the blush of this will soon fade." He leaned down to claim her lips, drugging her with his kisses.

He left her breathless and she looked up at him helplessly. Yet, the pain of his words rushed through her like a raging thunderstorm. "You know as little about me as you say I know about you. It's more than the sex, at least for me it is. But I realize it's probably not the same for you. I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't have said anything. At least not yet."

He pulled away from her, laced his fingers behind his head and gazed up at the sky. "There's a great deal you don't understand. If you knew the truth about me, you'd run so fast, you'd beat a rocket to the moon, trying to get away from me."

"I know you have secrets. Tell me and I'll prove I'm made of stronger stuff than what you think I am."

He turned his head to look at her. "You're a hot-house flower, Elizabeth, and you need very special care and attention. I'm not the man to do it." He turned away. "I need a woman who can work at my side, not expect others do it all for her. Right now, I'm not fit to even think about the future in that way. You need someone to pamper and cosset you."

She rose up and placed her hands on her hips and glared at him. "You know nothing about me at all, Isandro Santario. How dare you assume." She turned to find her clothing and

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dragged her dress on over her head. “You have a lot to learn. Maybe, you’re right, I’m not the woman for you and this was all a mistake.” She felt the hot tears of anger and pain blur her vision. She did not want to do this right now. Not in front of him.

Suddenly, she felt herself being pulled backward onto the ground and drawn across his lap. A callused thumb brushed the tears from her cheek. Then his mouth descended over hers and the pain she felt drew inward. She tried to free herself, but he was having none of it. He forced her hands back down, arching her upward, drawing her passion into himself yet again. And she couldn’t resist.

He looked down at her. “Don’t fight me, Elizabeth. Our passion is here and now. There is no future, but we have the present. Let’s make the best of it.”

“Oh, God, Isandro. I need you so much.” She wound her arms around his neck and pressed closer.

He lifted her and she twisted to straddle him. Her slick pussy brushed against his thickening erection. She ground herself against him. Whenever he touched her it was like a match striking flint and she burst into flames. She couldn’t help herself.

“Help me,” she whispered against his lips.

Again he lifted her and positioned his broad tip against her opening. Slowly she sank down, her channel expanding to sheath all of him inside her. He yanked the dress over her head and tossed it to the side. “There’s nothing between us right now. Don’t question it, just go with the flow.”

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He lay back upon the ground and looked up at her, his eyes, dark, fathomless pools. “Fuck me, Elizabeth.”

She rose up and sank down, her breasts bobbing enticingly with her movements, savoring the feel of his cock pressing against her sensitive walls. She dropped her head back and began a rhythm of rocking that lasted a long, long time. Neither of them urgent for orgasm, but the intimacy of the act was enough. And for, Elizabeth, the ties of passion threaded through them, binding them together.

Sweat sheened both their bodies until finally she couldn't bear it any long and she increased the tempo, gripping his hips, driving fast and hard, until they both climaxed. Pulsing pleasure shimmered around and through them, and she dropped onto his chest. With his softening prick still buried inside her, they lay together, drifting into sleep, with the sound and scents of nature and their passion, blanketing them.

CHAPTER 4

“Do you have any idea what kind of risk you’re taking?” the shorter man growled.

“That is none of your business,” Isandro responded tightly. “I can take care of myself.”

“What about your mother? Are you willing to take a chance with her life? You’re there to ferret out information not to fuck the bastard’s daughter.”

Isandro felt the heat surge into his face and he took an angry step toward Agent Hiram Elliott. Before he reached him, the larger man stepped between them.

“Hold it. This isn’t what we’re here for. Take a deep breath and put ’em back in your pants boys.” Sheriff Dalton turned to

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face Isandro. “Anything new to report? This is my county and I want to see this thing finished. Is there any evidence that Elizabeth is involved?”

Isandro ran a hand through his hair and turned his head to gaze in the direction of the house. From where they stood on a hill hidden by an outcropping of trees, about a mile away from the main part of the estate, he could see everything clearly.

He shook his head. “No, I haven’t been able to discover anything that ties her to what’s been going on here.”

“You sure about that and it’s not just your dick talking? Our people say the two of you have been going at it like rabbits in heat.”

Agent Elliott was asking for a punch in the face if he didn’t zip it. And Isandro would be more than happy to oblige. The man was just asking for a quick lesson in respect.

Slowly, he turned toward him. “If you don’t keep your filthy mouth shut about her, you’re going to find yourself in a whole world of pain. And you know damn well, from where I’ve been, I can do a thorough job of it. Now back off.”

He felt the sheriff’s intent gaze on him. “Are you losing your perspective, Santario?” he asked him quietly. “Elizabeth’s a fine woman and it would be easy to do.”

“Dammit, no. I just—she’s got nothing to do with this. I’m certain of it.” He met Dalton’s stare. “You should be the last person to think she might. You were married to her.”

Something shifted in the Sheriff’s gaze. “That was a long time ago. Lots of things can change over the years. You know that yourself. You’ve changed, haven’t you? Don’t lose your

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focus.”

“From what I hear, you almost made a big mistake yourself when you misunderstood a situation with your own wife.”

If he'd been any other man he'd have turned tail and run at the ice cold look in J.W. Dalton's eyes. “Leave my wife out of this.”

Instead he challenged Dalton with his own glare. After the hell he'd inhabited for so long, he retreated from no man. “Then let's get back to what we came here for. And Elizabeth is not part of that reason.”

Hiram stepped forward as though to try to exert his authority. “Then tell us what you do know.”

“My mother tells me there's going to be some kind of meeting at the house. I don't have names yet, but she seems certain they aren't from the elite set from Boston. They're supposed to be arriving tomorrow night. She's been told to get the house ready and then to give the servants the weekend off. Of course, that bastard Anthony expects her to stick around and play hostess.”

“This might just be the break we're waiting for.” He looked at Isandro. “This could all be over sooner than we expected. Too bad he has his people do a sweep of the place on a daily basis or we might not have needed you at all. But it's almost over now and they'll all be behind bars soon enough.”

A raid such as the one they were planning could go bad. “You'll make sure my mother is safe?”

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Elliott nodded. “We’ll make sure she’s safe. You don’t have to worry about her. She’ll go into protective custody, just as you will, until the trial and they’re all locked behind bars.”

Neither he nor his mother had wanted to go into the witness protection program. He didn’t want to ask the next question, but he couldn’t help himself. He didn’t want to care. “About Elizabeth Anthony...”

“I don’t know that I can do anything for her. If she’s innocent of any wrongdoing, she’ll be free to go. But we have to take her in for questioning along with the others, you know that. We can’t just let her loose on your say so.”

He nodded. “I know. She’s not going to understand.”

Dalton placed a firm hand on his shoulder. “I’ll see that she doesn’t get hurt, Santario. We can’t do more than that. We have to find out the truth, you know we do. At least your mother will be out from under it and as soon as the trial is over, you’ll be free to live your lives and start over. That has to be worth something.”

He didn’t have a choice. He could save his mother, the reason he had come here in the first place, or he could take a chance that his lover was innocent of her father’s wrongdoing. He knew a person could hide a black heart beneath the face of an angel. But something told him Elizabeth Anthony wasn’t like that. He truly didn’t believe she deserved what she was going to be faced with in a matter of hours. But there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

If he told her the truth, there was a chance she would go to her father and try to save him. Or worse, would warn him

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because she was in it as deep as he was. It could end up causing his mother's death and that was something he could not chance. He only hoped he could live with himself when it was all over. And the memories of a woman who burned him alive anytime he got close to her. He knew her memory would haunt him for a long time to come. He turned to look at the two men and nodded.

“Whatever it takes to get my mother out of this safely, I’ll do it.” And be damned for eternity because he’d had to make a choice between his love for the woman who had raised and nurtured him, and the woman who had wrapped herself around his heart imprisoning him as surely as any jail would do. He’d never felt quite so helpless.

* * *

Elizabeth had a plan that involved the old MacKenzie homestead which was still on the market. She would show Isandro Santario exactly what she was made of. Hothouse flower indeed. It might have been true once, but not any longer. She squared her shoulders. She had changed. She didn’t know exactly when it had occurred, but she knew who had made her see herself differently. And she wanted to be that woman Isandro made her yearn to be. She wanted him to want that woman for more than just a bed partner. She wanted him to see she *was* the type of woman who could stand beside him, no matter the circumstances.

She took a deep breath. She wanted his respect and she knew she would have to earn it. All of her life had been about

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social acceptance. Her father had ingrained that into her. Even her marriage to J.W. hadn't been what she had wanted for herself. She had loved him in her own way, but she had known his heart lay elsewhere.

But her father had wanted the marriage and she had wanted to please her father. It was a bargain she thought she could live with, until the day came when she couldn't live with it any longer. He'd been livid when she told him she had asked J.W. for a divorce. She'd ended up going to Boston more because her father had exiled her there once J.W. had married Willow MacKenzie and all his hopes for a reconciliation had been dashed. And because of that, everyone had gotten the wrong idea about her because she had given in to his demands.

Well, it was time for her to take control of her life instead of drifting through it. She now had a purpose and a goal and her own dream of a future. She hurried down the front hallway stairs to the entryway and grabbed for her keys lying on the polished oak table near the door.

"Elizabeth," her father called to her from the front parlor. She stiffened her shoulders before turning toward the doorway. Slowly, she made her way to where he sat, with the morning paper lying across his lap, a cup of coffee on the table next to his chair.

"What is it, Father?"

His steel-gray eyes bore into her. This wasn't going to be good, she could feel it.

He was still a handsome man with an aura of power that

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had not wavered over the years. She looked at him differently now. Why is it he looked so cold, so unapproachable now? Had he always been that way and she simply hadn't wanted to see it?

He cleared his throat and pulled off his reading glasses, dropping them onto the coffee table. "Stop seeing him. He's going to ruin you."

She stilled, yet she could feel her heart thundering in her chest. "Who are you talking about?"

He glared at her. "That damned convict, Isandro Santario. Do you think I don't know you've been fucking him? I thought once you got him out of your system it would die down and you'd find a man to marry. But it's not getting any better. I want it to end. Now."

She straightened her spine and met his glare. "I'll see and be with whomever I please, Father. You have no say in the matter." And then something struck her. "Why did you call him a convict?"

The smile that spread across his lips did not reach his eyes. She shivered at its coldness. "He didn't tell you, did he?"

"What are you talking about?"

"He murdered a man. His own father. He was in prison before he came here. I gave him a job because of his mother, nothing else. I had a few connections and got him released early. But I'm not giving him you. So stay away from him. He's a dangerous man and not for you."

She felt the color drain from her face. No, he'd never told her. Was that the darkness she felt hovering around him? It

RUTHLESS ACTS

couldn't be true. Her father was using this to turn her against Isandro.

"I don't believe you."

He shrugged and picked up his paper. "Ask him yourself. Ask his mother if you don't believe me."

She whirled away and raced out the door, her world shattering around her. It couldn't be true. Yet so many things suddenly made sense. His hatred for enclosed spaces, his pleasure in the outdoors, that hardness that seemed to grip him at times.

She yanked opened the front door and hurried down the steps to her Mercedes. She had to get away from this place before she became sick. Suddenly, she felt like she was suffocating. Jamming the key into the ignition, she started the engine and spun out of the circular drive.

Nothing was the way it was supposed to be, nothing and just at that moment she didn't know what she was going to do. Was this a nightmare or a dream she was living? Isandro had killed a man. She tried to wrap her mind around that thought, but it was too much, too hard, too painful to accept. It was a secret he'd kept from her, if it were true and her father wasn't just trying to goad her into turning on Isandro and accusing him of all manner of terrible deeds. Those kinds of accusations were certain to tear them apart. She needed time to come to grips with this information.

This was supposed to be a day when she would change her life, but not like this. Oh, God, what did she do now?

CHAPTER 5

Elizabeth had picked up the keys from the Realtor's office and now she stood in the empty front room and surveyed the property through the large picture window. A lot of work had been put into the place, but with its past it still hadn't sold.

She turned to again look around the room. The renovations had made it into a beautiful historic home and she was undaunted by its history, with knowing that Willow's mother had run her drug trade from this house. There was now no sign of its murky past.

Sunlight filled the room, the smell of polished wood and new paint filled her nostrils. The fireplace was newly bricked, waiting for someone to make this their home.

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And then there was the land. Three hundred acres of fertile ground was a good start. It was a big dream, a frightening future, but one she was willing to take a chance on. She had a degree in business and marketing. She might not know much about farming and horticulture, but she would learn.

If nothing else, Isandro had taught her an appreciation of the earth as she watched him from her window as he worked the ground with a reverence that was almost contradictory to the hard, sexual man she had become intimately acquainted with.

Her father's words bothered her. She still could not wrap her mind around the fact that he might be a murderer. She'd never known anyone who had been incarcerated in the county jail much less prison. In her heart she knew Isandro wasn't a bad man. There simply had to be more to the story. Settling that in her mind seemed to bring her some peace. She had to trust her instincts. That was something she hadn't done with either of her ex-husbands.

After all, she wouldn't have fallen so deeply in love with him otherwise. Wouldn't she have sensed something if he were a terrible person? Wouldn't there have been some indications, some violent cruelty evident?

No, she simply would not accept that Isandro Santario was a ruthless person who would murder someone in cold blood. As soon as she got home she planned to get online with her laptop and find out what she could. If all else failed, she would go to J.W. and beg a favor. As much as she hated to draw attention to Isandro if there was some basis to what her father

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said, she'd go to J.W. as a last resort.

She surveyed the room. In any event, she wanted this house, wanted this land. It felt right being here. It was time for her to make something of her life even if things didn't work out with Isandro. She saw him in her mind as they lay by the lake, as he had talked about his mother on various, rare occasions, as she watched him work the grounds on her father's estate. Would she ever be able to get past his barriers?

There would be time to deal with her concerns. Right now, she wanted to settle the matter of the house. Her mother had left her a trust, so she wouldn't need to go to her father and ask for his financial help. She knew he would just laugh at her and belittle her dream. The one dream that had nothing to do with him. This was to please herself.

Why is it she had never realized before how little he must respect her? She loved her father and had tried hard to please him over the years, with little to no success. But then again, maybe if she succeeded in this on her own, she might finally succeed where she had failed so often before.

Making a firm resolve, she left the house and returned to the Realtor's office, her heart thundering in her chest. It was a big chance she was taking. She was betting her whole future on the success of this venture. In the back of her mind she hoped that she wouldn't be alone, that Isandro would be there with her, that it would be something they could build together, but she wasn't going to put all her apples in one basket, so to speak. So many ideas raced through her head, offering a life far different from what she had right now.

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She stopped at the receptionist's desk and cleared her throat. The young receptionist looked up questioningly. "Yes?"

"I'd like to speak to someone about the MacKenzie homestead. Is that possible?"

The receptionist nodded. "I'll get Henry Anderson. He's the lead agent on that listing. He'll be thrilled, I'm sure."

Henry hurried out to the front office and stopped short as he saw her and from the look on his face, recognized her. "Ms. Anthony? You're interested in the MacKenzie farm?"

She nodded. "Yes, I am. How soon can the paperwork be ready for me to sign?"

"Are you sure about this? Does your father have an interest in the property? Maybe for development?"

"No, Mr. Anderson. I'll be purchasing the house and land. I have plans for it."

"Well, I'll be. Come right back and we'll talk about it." He turned to glance at the receptionist. "Lanie, can you get me the paperwork for the farm?"

This was it. Without consulting her father, or anyone else, it was a huge step she was taking. But everything inside her was telling her it was the right move—the only move. Her life had been stagnant and she had become bored beyond belief.

Isandro had been the catalyst that made her look at herself and her life more clearly. She would show him she wasn't a hothouse flower and that she was made of stronger stuff than he knew. If he had been in prison there absolutely had to be a good reason for what had happened, for whatever he did. She

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had come to believe in him that deeply.

* * *

When she walked out of Henry Anderson's office two hours later, a copy of the signed offer in her purse, she felt exhilarated. She hadn't wanted to talk to Willow about it directly—hadn't wanted anyone to try to talk her out of it. She stood on the step for a minute and breathed in the fragrant afternoon air.

She was tired, but it was a good feeling after her visit to the Realtor. It had been a long, stressful day, beginning with the confrontation with her father, but ending on the high note of signing the offer. Her gaze fell upon the hardware store across the street. With a determined step she hurried across and walked inside.

"Can I help you?" a store clerk asked her.

"Yes, where's your gardening department?"

The woman looked at her as if she had lost her mind, which may very well have been the case. She looked down at her own clothing. Well, it was true the designer silk dress she wore wasn't exactly meant for browsing in a hardware store. Her wardrobe was certainly going to require a makeover.

"Gardening?"

"Yes. I want seeds."

"To plant?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Yes. Would I want to do something else with them?"

The woman blushed. "Sorry. Aisle 9 is what you're

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looking for. Is there something particular I can help you find?"

"No, thank you," she said as she made a swift beeline for Aisle 9. This was her break for independence, the first act she would take in forming the basis for the rest of her life.

Fifteen minutes later, she walked out of the store with six small seed envelopes, the necessary implements, and a book on gardening in a brown paper bag tucked under her arm. That bag represented the seeds to her future, something solid for her to hold in her hand as she planned. When the time was right, these would be the first she would plant and watch grow, a sign of her new-found path. She wouldn't tell anyone about it until she'd signed the final papers. Once that was done there would be so much work to do. Hiring architects, taking classes, finding people to help work the farm the way it was meant to be. It was scary, but also exhilarating.

She was going to prove them all wrong about her. Her mantle as a socialite, a hothouse flower, was going to be blown to smithereens. And she hoped that the person who rose from the rubble was different than what she had been forced to become for all these years.

CHAPTER 6

A cool breeze wafted across her sweat-slickened body as she gripped the wood rails of the bed. She arched her back and his cock slid deeper into her greedy pussy. The bed creaked in a slow, steady rhythm in time to his intense thrusts. His demanding fingers played across her stiff clitoris.

She leaned her head back, her neck arched and he took her mouth, pushing his tongue deep inside. She sucked hard, pulling him deeper. Sweat trailed down along the side of her face. His one hand gripped the curve of her hip tighter and the other continued to weave his magic spell over her slippery lips.

She felt the orgasm building inside her, spinning fast and

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furious, until she arched and shattered once again, her moan captured by his lips. She felt his orgasm burst free shortly after her own. She fell forward against the headboard, his arms wrapped around her, his cock still buried inside her. Both of them breathless from their spent passion.

It never failed. She had come here to talk with him, to tell him of her surprise. And to see how he would respond. She had planned to ask him about what her father had told her. But the minute she'd set foot inside the small house, it was like she became enchanted and all thoughts of conversation were ripped from her mind.

He had just walked out of the bathroom, still damp from a shower, his black hair slicked back, a beige towel slung low about his hips. The clean smell of masculine soap and spicy shaving cream assaulted her senses and there was no thought in her mind but the need to have him inside her as quickly as possible. They could talk things out later, much later.

"Isandro," she started. But could get no further as he spotted her across the bedroom. For one moment they stood locked there looking at each other. There was a fleeting look of pain that crossed his face, just before his eyes dilated with the desire she had learned to become so familiar with. He stalked across the room and ripped the silk dress down her body where it pooled at her feet. A hand wound itself into her delicate panties and with little effort she was naked in front of him before she could utter another sound.

He dragged the damp towel from around his hips and tossed it behind him. She glanced down and saw he was hard

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as marble already. He grabbed her hips and lifted her as though she weighed no more than a child, bringing her close to his body and she wrapped her legs around his hips, opening to him, feeling the press of his shaft against her opened and wet lips. She rubbed up and down as he cupped her neck and pulled her mouth down to his. There was definitely no room for words as he made love to her, suffocating everything from her mind, except for him. He had become her world.

That's how she ended up gripping the headboard of his bed. She released the wooden spindles and sighed as she gazed across the lawn to the mansion where she could see her father's guests on the patio.

"I don't think I like them," she murmured.

She felt his lips against the nape of her neck. "Who don't you like?"

She leaned back and closed her eyes. "Those men that are here for the meeting with my father. Something's wrong, Isandro. I can feel it in the house. Something in the atmosphere has changed. I've felt it every now and then since I returned from Boston. Things are different."

"In what way?"

She could feel the tenseness, his body tightening. Did Isandro know more than he was letting on? Was something illegal going on here? Is that why her father had brought Isandro here? And how he knew about his past?

His hands were on her breasts, kneading her flesh, but she had a feeling his mind was elsewhere. She glanced down and suddenly her gaze encountered a tattoo on his arm.

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“I never noticed that before.”

“What?”

“That you had a tattoo.” She was afraid to ask the next question. Afraid of a lie, of a chasm that would exist between them, of destroying what she had with him. But she had to ask. “Where did you get it?”

He separated himself from her and rose to his feet. “Why do you ask? It’s of no importance.”

She turned over on the bed to face him. He had discarded the used condom and was in the act of dressing, dismissing her, distancing himself from her. “Is it from prison?” she asked him quietly, as she rose to a sitting position.

He stopped in the act of fastening his pants, but he didn’t look at her, he stared out the window. “What do you want me to say?”

She rose to her knees. “The truth, Isandro. Just tell me the truth. You’ve always been so secretive, never told me anything about your past. Why?”

And then he turned his head and she wished he hadn’t. His eyes were hard, cold shards of black glass as he studied her. Suddenly he turned away and yanked on a black T-shirt over his head. “It has nothing to do with you, nothing to do with us having sex and enjoying it.” He turned back to her, but the expression of amused contempt on his face made her shiver. “You did enjoy it, didn’t you? Every minute of it. I satisfied you, didn’t I, society lady?”

The knife dug deep and she gasped at the cruelty of the penetration. “Isandro, don’t do this. Please.”

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He shrugged as he pulled on his scarred, brown leather boots. “I have to go, I have things to do.” He turned to look at her. “It was good while it lasted. You can tell all your friends how you had some hot sex with a dangerous ex-con.”

He pivoted and strode toward the door. He hesitated at the entrance, but didn’t turn back to look at her. “You should leave. Tonight. As soon as you get back to the house, pack a bag and hightail it back to Boston. You’ll be better off there.” Then he was gone.

“Isandro,” she screamed, “don’t do this. Damn you, come back.” But he was gone. Her heart shattered inside her chest because something told her it might be the last time she saw him and she couldn’t bear the thought of that. Damn him for not seeing what they could have had together. For not trusting her.

* * *

He strode across the lawn, needing to get as far away from her as possible as quickly as he could. It was only hours away that the DEA in conjunction with the Sheriff’s Department would descend on the Anthony estate and it was because of him and his mother that Elizabeth Anthony’s life would be ripped from her.

Isandro wanted to pick her up, toss her over his shoulder, and drive away to where no one would ever find them. He wanted to protect her from what was coming, from the destruction of everything she had known. He wanted a fantasy where they would live happily ever after. He drew on the

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cigarette, pulling the nicotine into his lungs. As he exhaled, he looked down at the smoldering cancer stick he held between his thumb and index finger.

He'd never smoked when he was a teenager; it hadn't been a vice he'd indulged in. No, that hadn't happened until he'd been sent to prison. He'd changed a lot since he'd passed through those gates. So many wrong turns he'd taken, but there'd been no other choice. Not if he wanted to save his family.

And still there was no choice. It was as though he was locked onto a path with no other way out and it was going to lead to his own demise. If he didn't follow through and do as he'd agreed, he'd not only go back to prison, but his whole family would suffer—especially his mother. Anthony was a poisonous viper at the head of a nest of snakes and they had to be stamped out before anyone else was hurt.

He dropped the butt and stamped down with the heel of his boot. He'd lain awake at night trying to come up with some other alternative. He'd tried to push Elizabeth away, to force her to return to Boston, away from the danger, away from him and the way she tempted him.

He wanted to trust her. His instincts told him she had nothing to do with all this, but ever since his incarceration something had become twisted inside him and he no longer trusted anyone. He didn't have the luxury of that emotion.

His gaze turned toward the gardener's cottage and he saw her emerge and head toward the mansion. He wanted to go after her, to enfold her in his arms and tell her how he felt. His

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hungry gaze followed her. When she had disappeared from sight back into the lion's den, he exhaled raggedly and dragged a hand through his hair. God, he didn't know what he'd do if something happened to her. Even now she was in so much danger with the unscrupulous men who inhabited the mansion, it made his skin crawl. He could only hope she was innocent of her father's dealings and therefore he'd keep them away from her, or she was so deeply entrenched in his activities, Isandro was a fool to worry about her. But wouldn't his mother have discovered something about her by now if that was the case? Wouldn't he have sensed something after his instincts had been honed so well in prison?

God, he just didn't know. If anything did happen to her, the guilt would lie at his door. He never should have succumbed to the attraction, never should have allowed himself to be sucked into the vortex of sexual need she aroused in him. If he hadn't, he wouldn't care so much that he was willing to lay everything on the line. Did his dick rule his emotions to such an extent he would put everything in jeopardy to have her? Would he sacrifice his family's lives for her? And so much more?

He would be glad when it was over. His hands were tied. And there was still that nudge of doubt. Was she really just a great actress? Had her father sent her to him to seduce him into working for him in other ways rather than tending the grounds? He'd tried to talk him into joining his illicit operations on more than one occasion. So far, Isandro had managed to evade his not-so-subtle enticements. At least after

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tonight he wouldn't need to worry about that. Under normal circumstances, he was not a man to break the law, and every time he thought about the children who were ruined by the drugs, his hate for Anthony increased by leaps and bounds.

It felt like his balls were being crushed by a vise because in the end it wouldn't matter. If she was involved, she'd go to prison, and if she wasn't, she'd find out he was there to get information; she'd assume he made love to her to get what details he could out of her, and she'd hate him for that. He wouldn't have her either way, so he might as well get used to it.

CHAPTER 7

Something woke her. She had just turned to reach for the light on the nightstand when her bedroom door crashed open, clamoring back against the wall. She screamed when she saw the small black gun pointed at her.

“Elizabeth Anthony? DEA.” A woman dressed in dark clothing spoke from the doorway as she slowly edged inside the room. Another agent waited outside the door. DEA? Drug Enforcement Agency?

“What? I don’t understand. What are you doing in this house, in my bedroom?” She cringed back against the headboard of the bed. Her brain was still befuddled from being roused from a deep sleep.

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“You need to get dressed and come with us. You’re wanted for questioning.”

“My father—” she began as she slowly slid from the bed.

“He and the others have already been rounded up.”

Elizabeth shot her a quick look as she padded uncertainly toward her closet. “Rounded up? Why? What are you *doing* here?”

“Ma’am, I’m just following orders.”

“Can you leave me alone so I can dress?”

The agent shook her head. “Can’t do that.”

Elizabeth sighed in exasperation. “If I’m not under arrest, and I can’t imagine why I would be, why can’t you give me a moment’s privacy?”

The agent sighed. “Please just get dressed, and if you’re not ready in five minutes, I’m afraid you’ll have to go dressed just the way you are. Now, do you change or do you want to go to the station in your night clothes?”

Elizabeth straightened her shoulders and glared at the officer. “Would you at least close the door so everyone in the house doesn’t share the view?”

The agent stepped back toward the door and closed it. She turned on Elizabeth, raised the gun and glared at her pointedly. “Now, if you please?”

Elizabeth had no choice but to get dressed. As she did so, she could hear shouting coming from below, then there was the sound of glass shattering, and more shouts.

Her hands shook as she tugged on a pair of gray wool pants and a white sweater, and confined her hair in a quick

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ponytail at the nape of her neck. She had no idea what this was all about and couldn't imagine what the DEA wanted in her father's house.

She turned back to the agent when she was dressed. "All right, I'm ready to go. Can't I take my own car?"

"No, ma'am, we have a car waiting below." She opened the door and stepped back for Elizabeth to precede her out of the room, where the other man waited for them.

As Elizabeth hurried down the front stairs, she noticed that all the lights were blazing in the house and there were men in uniform everywhere. She glanced into the front room and saw it had been ransacked. She whirled around on the officers.

"What on earth is happening here? Where is my father? What have you done with him?"

Both agents stepped to either side of her, grabbed an arm and hurried her out the door. "No time. They're waiting for us."

As she stepped outside, she couldn't believe the number of vehicles parked there. She gasped when she noted several of her father's guests were handcuffed and being helped into two waiting black vans. The agents led her to an unmarked car setting off to the side and helped her into the backseat.

This didn't feel like they were escorting her somewhere for questioning. Something had happened here and she had no idea what it was. And then she remembered Isandro was an ex-con and suddenly her heart stopped beating.

"Where's my father? What's happened to him?" Oh, God, what if Isandro had done something to him? This was like a

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waking nightmare.

* * *

Isandro viewed the whole scene from one of the cars. Watched as they rounded up all of the men he had indicated. His mother had already been swept away to a safe house, but he had refused to leave. Not until he knew Elizabeth was safe.

“You told them not to handcuff her. To treat her like a lady.” He had to be sure. He warned Elliott if they hurt her, or humiliated her in any way, he would refuse to testify. If they sent him back to prison, so be it.

“I gave the orders,” Elliott said into the darkness. “Don’t worry, I told them she was to be handled with kid gloves, just like you asked. Are you satisfied now? We need to get you out of here before anyone realizes you aren’t one of the ones we rounded up.”

Careful handling by the government could mean a whole range of things in Isandro’s estimation. “I’m not leaving until I see her and am certain your people have done as you ordered.”

He heard the exasperated sigh hiss from the agent. And then Isandro’s attention was drawn back to the front of the house and he saw her on the steps. He exhaled as he realized she wasn’t in handcuffs as he feared she might be. She looked so pale, and so young, like a teenager with her hair swept back in a ponytail, and the dark pants caressing her lean hips. She looked confused and frightened, and even angry. Her eyes flashed as the agents guided her down the steps. He saw her stumble and then right herself as she turned her head to look

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back over her shoulder. The agents stopped her from tumbling to the ground and she whipped her head back around, pulling back as they led her toward another dark, unmarked car.

Isandro yanked at the handle. He needed to get to her. Needed to assure her that everything was going to be all right.

The agent's arm snaked out and grabbed his hand. "You aren't going anywhere, Santario. You'll ruin everything. We need her off balance. She's more likely to tell us what she knows that way."

"You assume she's guilty. There has been no evidence."

"Get us out of here," Elliott ordered the driver. "We have to assume she's guilty, and we don't know any differently. Your brain's in your dick right now, but forget it. You aren't fucking up this operation for us and you'll do as you're told or you'll be viewing the world from behind iron bars again. You got me?"

The car pulled out of the driveway and Isandro folded into the seat. Nothing was in his control right now. Anthony had been made to believe he was the one who got Isandro out of prison, but it had been the government who had pulled the strings. He'd made the best of a bad deal from the beginning and felt like a man washed downstream in a flash flood. He straightened in the seat and turned his head to look out the window into the night. He felt the impotent rage fill him and his hands tightened into fists.

"Once you're satisfied, Agent Elliott," he bit out, "I want to see her before I leave the country to await your summons. You will give me that at least."

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There was a long silence. “I don’t know why you’d want to; she’s going to hate your guts no matter what you do from here on out. You’re the man who’s going to send her daddy to prison and destroy her nice, comfortable life. You really think she’s going to want to have anything to do with you? You’re an ex-con and you may have been good for a tumble in bed, but I figure she’s going to be glad to be rid of you.”

His hands tightened into fists. He knew Elliott spoke the truth—had known that would be the way of it all along. But he had to see her one last time, even if he didn’t know what he would say to her.

“Arrange it.”

“Fine. I’ll see what I can do. But after that you’re out of here. We’re not taking any chances on breaking this ring up and you’re going under lock and key until that’s done. Got me?”

“Sí, I get it.” The majority of his life until this moment had been spent that way, so why should anything be different now?

* * *

Elizabeth tried to stem the trembling, but it was no use. No one said anything; no one would answer her questions, until finally the car pulled up to the courthouse and she was led into the station. She blinked as she walked in from the darkness to the brightly lit station and was led to a small interrogation room and told to sit, that someone would be with her shortly.

She looked around the room. She’d been to the station

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several times during the course of her marriage to J.W. Dalton, but never under circumstances like this.

Suddenly, the door opened and two men walked in. One of them was J.W. and she breathed a little easier. He would answer her questions. But then she studied his face, which looked like it had been carved in granite, his eyes blazing bright.

She slowly rose from the chair. “What’s this all about, J.W.? Why have I been brought here in the middle of the night? Is my father all right?”

“Sit down, Elizabeth. It’s going to be a long night. You’re father is being booked on drug charges and he’s called his attorney. What we need to know is how involved you are in this whole damned business.”

Elizabeth fell into the chair; nothing could have shocked her more than what J.W. had just said. “Are you crazy? My father’s not involved in drugs.”

He leaned forward across the scarred wooden table. “He’s more than involved—he’s the head man here in my county. How long did you all think you were going to get away with this?”

Elizabeth reared back in her chair. “Just because Willow’s mother was involved with drugs, doesn’t mean the whole county was. J.W., how can you think such a thing?”

“We’ve got evidence and we’ve got witnesses. If you come clean, we might be able to cut you a deal.”

Suddenly the man sitting across from her wasn’t anyone she knew. He was a stranger and all business and she could

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tell by looking at him that he didn't trust her one little bit. It was as though they had never been married. She now knew how Willow must have felt all those years ago when he had accused her of being involved in drugs.

"You can't be serious. How long have you known me, J.W.? And you think I'd be involved with illegal drugs? I can't believe you would think such a thing?"

"Lots of people don't look like they're criminals, Elizabeth. I have no way of knowing if you've changed all that much. I'm guessing your father wanted you married to me so he could keep his finger on the pulse, so to speak. He's played a fine hand, but we have him dead to rights now."

Another shock and she couldn't quite take it all in. Her father was a criminal. J.W. thought she was a criminal. If her father was involved in drugs—which she found hard to credit—is that why Isandro Santario was at the estate? Was he helping her father with his criminal activities?

She leaned her elbows on the table and dropped her head into her hands. Her whole life was shattering all around her. People whom she believed in, whom she loved, were nothing like she thought. "I don't believe this," she whispered desperately. "I don't believe any of this. You have to be mistaken."

"There's no mistake. Tell us what you know and the judge might go easy on you." He turned to look up at the other man, who stood back against the wall, his intense eyes on her every move. "This is Agent Elliott and he'll listen to whatever you have to say. He's letting me question you out of courtesy to

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me and my position here, knowing you were my wife at one time. Be sensible, Elizabeth.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she yelled. “I haven’t done anything and I don’t know anything. I can’t help you with something I know nothing about.”

J.W. huffed and leaned back in his chair. “We know about you and Santario. He’s been feeding us information since he arrived in Esmerelda.”

She’d thought she’d heard everything, thought there wasn’t anything else they could say to shock her. “He’s been working for the government?”

“Yes. He and his mother.”

She didn’t think she could take much more. No wonder Isandro had never said he loved her. He didn’t, of course. He’d been ruthlessly using her all along. Just as her father had apparently tried to use her while she was married to J.W. She felt her stomach begin to churn.

“But my father said he was an ex-con...”

J.W. nodded. “He was. He was offered a deal in exchange for going in.”

“And my father didn’t suspect?”

“Your father was more focused on forcing Carmelita Santario to become his whore. He probably figured having Santario around would help to keep her in line.”

“Are you saying that Carmelita was being kept against her will?”

J.W. nodded. “He used Isandro—told her he had contacts in prison that would do his bidding. He gave her no choice.”

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Sweat broke out on her forehead and she knew if she didn't get out of that room she was truly going to be physically ill. Gripping the edges of the table tightly, she slowly rose unsteadily to her feet.

"I need the bathroom right now, J.W."

"Elizabeth—" J.W. began.

She shook her head, and covered her mouth as she raced around the table and yanked open the door. Thank God, she'd been at the station enough times to know exactly where the ladies' room was located.

She fled from the room and flew into the bathroom just in time. Gripping the edges of the cold toilet with clammy hands, she spewed the contents of her stomach until it was completely empty.

This couldn't be happening. Had she really been so naïve? First her father, and then Isandro. They had used her ruthlessly for their own ends. Neither of them had cared about her one iota. And J.W. thought she was involved. When word got out, how many other people would think the same thing? This was her home and suddenly it felt like it was closing in on her and there was nowhere to turn, no one to help her. No one who wanted to.

The fact that she'd lived most of the last years in Boston would mean nothing to them. Maybe that's why her father had sent her there, so she wouldn't be around to witness what he didn't want her to know. She was good enough for him to use, but not to trust. Well, thank God for that. If she had known the truth, what would she have done? And would her father have

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allowed her to live if she'd gone to the police herself? Somehow she doubted it.

She should have done as Isandro suggested and gone back to Boston. Had he known what would happen tonight? Where was he now?

She shoved back the straggling strands of hair from her face. What did she do now? Where did she turn? Suddenly, her stomach rumbled again, but there was nothing left. Not in her stomach, not in her heart, nothing of her life.

She stiffened as she heard the creak of the ladies' room door as it was opened, afraid to look around. Afraid of what would happen next.

CHAPTER 8

“Elizabeth.”

She stiffened at the sound of the female voice outside the stall.

“I’m all right, just leave me alone for a minute,” she responded in a weak voice.

Suddenly the door to the stall was pushed open and Elizabeth wheeled around, her back against the harsh, unmoving stall panel. She couldn’t manage to get to her feet fast enough and felt as weak as a newborn. She stared up into the sympathetic eyes of Willow Dalton.

“I’m not going to leave you alone. I’ve come to help,” Willow said.

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“You’re seeing me at my worst, Willow. I really don’t want a witness to this.”

Willow reached out and placed a gentle hand on Elizabeth’s arm and helped her to rise unsteadily to her feet. She leaned back against the stall and closed her eyes.

“Wait here, I’ll be right back,” Willow said.

Swiftly she turned and strode away, as quickly as anyone who is in the latter months of pregnancy can do. Elizabeth heard the water running and then Willow came back to her clasping a wet paper towel.

She looked down at the limp rag and made a wry face. “It isn’t much, but it’s better than nothing, and I think the cold water will help.” She held it out to Elizabeth, who took it from her with shaking hands.

Willow was right, the cold water did help to revive her some. “You shouldn’t be here.” She finally felt strong enough to move out of the stall and Willow stepped back so she could do so.

“When I heard about the raid, I knew they’d probably bring you here. Knowing J.W., and you know what I mean, I thought you could use some support. By the way, I called my attorney and he came with me. He’s more into real estate than criminal law, but I figured he’d do in a pinch. He’s with J.W. and that DEA agent now.”

An attorney. Yes, she probably would need one. At the import of that knowledge she lifted her hands to her face and slowly slid to the floor, leaning back against the wall. Had she ever been driven any lower than she was tonight? Even

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finding Evan with those women hadn't been this bad. It was as though she were being bombarded from all sides and no safe haven in sight.

"Elizabeth, look at me."

Elizabeth moved her hands away from her face and looked at Willow, who had somehow sunk to her knees so they were eye-to-eye. "I know what this is like. Remember my mother? Remember what J.W. thought about me being involved with the drugs? *I know.*"

Tears welled in Elizabeth's eyes. "I feel so dirty," she whispered. "Like I'll never be clean again."

Willow reached out to place her hands on Elizabeth's shoulder. "I'm getting you out of here. I know you. I know you didn't have anything to do with this."

"They don't believe that." The pain wedged deep in her heart. "Isandro doesn't know it. They all think I've had some part in this dirty mess."

"I know differently and J.W. will have me to contend with if he doesn't get his act together. I know it's the way he's wired. He contends with criminals every day and sometimes he can't see the innocent because he sees so many of the guilty. But he'll figure it out."

A small smile tugged at Elizabeth's lips. "You give J.W. humanity, Willow. You always did. I was never the wife he needed. You keep him grounded. I didn't love him the way he deserved to be loved—only you did."

"Yet you were generous enough to come to me when I came back to town. You didn't hate me. And you didn't want

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to hurt J.W. for being the person he was. That takes a special person. Someone like that couldn't be involved in this drug business."

"I never knew why you didn't hate me for marrying him." She sighed. "I didn't care for him the way you did. I think I finally realized that. I had to let him go for all of our sakes."

"When I first heard about your marriage, I thought everything was lost. I think that was my lowest point. I had a mother who could have cared less what happened to me, and I lost someone I loved more than anything in the world. I drowned my sorrows with a bottle of booze. But I had to go on and I knew it. You are a good person, Elizabeth Anthony. The world will come right for you again. And right now I'm getting you out of here."

"Will they let me leave yet?"

"That's why I brought my attorney. He'll make it his business to convince them. You're not under arrest and they apparently don't have anything to hold you on. I think you've had about all you can take." Slowly, helping each other, they both rose to their feet. Willow linked her arm through Elizabeth's. "You're not alone, I'm right here with you. You know, we're not so very different after all."

"I've never had a sister or a close friend. You are someone special, Willow. Even after everything that's happened, you're here to help me. Just on faith. I can't tell you what that means to me right now. I hope J.W. appreciates you."

"I consider you a friend, Elizabeth. You and I share something I don't think anyone else could ever understand. In

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some ways I think it makes us closer than sisters. Actually, we share more than I ever thought possible coming from two such different parts of town. I never had a sister and I value your friendship. I hope you'll let me continue to be your friend."

"I can't go home—I can't go back there," Elizabeth gasped out. Willow reached for her hand and she felt like it was an anchor keeping her from being swept out to sea.

Willow's fingers curled and tightened around hers reassuringly. "You can come home with me."

Elizabeth's steps faltered just before they were about to exit the bathroom and she looked at Willow solemnly. "No. I can't go there either." She tried to think for a minute. Her mind was so scattered she couldn't seem to get two thoughts to align correctly, but finally she decided. "Take me to the Lodge. I'll stay there until I've got things sorted out."

"Are you certain? You shouldn't be alone right now."

Elizabeth exhaled a long, shuddering breath. "Yes, I'm certain. And right now I need to be by myself to get things figured out." She would never go back to the place she had once called home. Nightmares and pain were the only things that existed for her there. Tomorrow she would think about what to do regarding her father. And Isandro.

CHAPTER 9

Elizabeth walked back into her motel room and tossed her purse and room key onto the bed. After kicking off her shoes she dropped down onto the overly soft, lumpy mattress. Two days had passed since the nightmare at the police station and she had just returned from an appointment with her attorney.

Edward Garber. He had been the one who accompanied Willow that night to the police station. His specialty was estate planning and real estate. Not criminal law. At her best estimate, he was about six feet tall, a slender build, with brown sun-streaked hair and brown eyes. Kind of a boy-next-door look. Not quite old enough to have worked with the law long enough to become jaded by what he'd seen. But then

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again, in his area of law it might not become quite so evident as quickly. Definitely not the criminal defense type, but he had recommended a good criminal defense attorney.

She learned that her father had managed to obtain bail. He'd tried to contact her, but she hadn't been in the mood to speak with him just yet. Everything she had thought he was had been totally destroyed in her mind. From what she read in the headlines, the man they described was simply not the father she had known. One of his high-profile attorneys had phoned her as well, but Elizabeth had not been in the mood to share her father's big-name defense team in any way, shape, or form. This is something she planned to handle on her own. One thing she had learned from this whole experience was that she had become far too dependent on her father's approval and it was now time for her to stand on her own two feet. It seemed freeing in some way to sever those ties.

And if it was possible to become more shocked, she had been when the attorney called her back. Her father hadn't been worried about her—he had wanted her to appear as a character witness to clear *his* good name. She owed it to him, the attorney said. If she'd had any doubts about her father's ulterior motives when it came to her, they were effectively dashed. That second time, she had simply slammed the phone down. The attorney hadn't tried to call her again.

Yet, there was still the matter of Isandro Santario and his mother. Although it was her father who had blackmailed Carmelita Santario, Elizabeth still felt tainted by what he had done, and now she understood the mistrust and hate in

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Carmelita's eyes when she looked at Elizabeth. She wanted to do something for her, but she didn't know where to begin. And for the moment she had vanished off the face of the earth, probably gone into the witness protection program until the trial.

And then there was Isandro. The pain she felt at his betrayal and lack of faith in her hurt the most, and the only way she had of dealing with it right now was not to do so.

For the first time in her life she had felt true, deep passion for a man. She had loved him with every fiber of her being and would have done anything for him. And it hurt deeply that he had only made love to her out of revenge for what had happened to his mother, and to gain information about her father.

She felt used and bruised worse than a street prostitute who was exploited by the men in her life for their own gain. She needed time to recover. Whether she would ever be able to trust her feelings again, she had no idea. One gets burned too many times and eventually she has to learn to steer clear of the fire. The scars were painful, but the chance of a repeat could be deadly.

She had to look forward now. The trust fund her mother had left her was being drained dramatically as she tried to get her feet planted firmly beneath her. She would take nothing from her father's house and so had replaced her Mercedes with a car more suited to the life she planned to pursue. She'd managed to pick up a used SUV. Although not a luxury vehicle, it would suit her.

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Mr. Garber had agreed to help her to push the closing for the MacKenzie homestead on the fast track so she could move in immediately. Of course, once Willow found out she was the purchaser, she offered to help in any way she could to hurry things along so Elizabeth could be free of the visibility of staying at the motel and the headlines of her estrangement from her father. Her closest neighbors would be about two miles away. Right now the thought of peace and quiet was very tempting.

She felt much older these days. It was an effort to keep putting one foot in front of the other, but it was something she was determined to do. She tried to focus on her plans for the farm. Even without Isandro she expected to move forward. She needed to and had a meeting set up with an architect for later in the week. She had even spoken with Mr. Garber about her tentative expectations for the homestead, as she would need to consider what business entity she should use, and had looked into some college courses regarding horticulture and agriculture.

One positive thing had come out of her relationship with Isandro Santario and that was her discovery of her love for the land and the desire to nurture and grow things. Plants that gave pleasure, plants that healed, plants that nourished, not only the body, but the spirit. It gave her focus, a way to heal, to learn, and to feel useful for once in her life. And that, at least, was something she was grateful for.

The nights were the worst, when she was alone in the dark, and it wasn't just her mind that wouldn't rest, but her body.

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She missed Isandro, his touch, his possession. The feel of him inside her, the passion he'd drawn from her, the delight she'd felt in learning and loving him. It was something she would never experience again. It was in the darkest depths of nighttime her unruly heart would quiver with the repressed pain. She would wonder where he was, could he feel her, did he care? And she decided he probably didn't. Yes, he may have used her, but she had loved him, given him everything she was capable of.

She wished she could hate him, it would be easier. Hate simply wasn't an emotion that came easily to her. She still didn't know all of the facts regarding his incarceration in prison, but she knew that above all he was devoted to his mother and her well being. She had always known that from the things he'd said, from the things Carmelita had said that they were devoted to each other.

She didn't think she could ever forgive him for not having faith in her, but she understood his love for his mother and the need to avenge the wrong that had been done to her by Elizabeth's father. Carmelita was a very lucky woman to inspire such devotion.

At the end of the week she would pick up the keys to the house and sign all the necessary documents. The following week she would register for classes. She specifically didn't want to do these courses online, she wanted to be able to feel the earth and ask the questions of a real person. She hated to admit it, as much as she wanted the isolation of the farm, if she wasn't careful she could become a crusty old hermit lady

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if she didn't watch herself. It would be very easy to do right now.

Her life was beginning to have purpose, something that had been severely missing up until now. She tried to push the person who had put her on this path out of her mind.

Her life had changed dramatically and it hadn't all been bad. Out of the ashes had come friendships she never would have expected. Real people, not the illusory, one-dimensional acquaintances of her past. These were relationships she would cherish.

Even J.W. had come around and apologized for thinking she was involved with the drug trafficking. Elizabeth had a feeling the apology was Willow's doing, but even so, it helped that he voiced the words.

If only it didn't still feel like a dark cloud hung over her head. She knew what it would take to dispel it, but understood that would never happen. J.W. had told her that Isandro was currently under government protection and shortly would be leaving the country to maintain his security. She didn't expect to hear from him again, but memories of him refused to release her.

She had to give it time. Wounds this deep didn't heal over night. She flung an arm up over her eyes to seal out the late afternoon sunlight. She just wanted to sleep, to pretend it was all a nightmare.

In her dreams she could smell him, as though he were lying next to her on the bed. She could feel the heat of his body.

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“*Isandro*,” she whispered into the still air of the motel room. The ache his name invoked was all too familiar.

* * *

A knock sounded at the door, waking her from a sound sleep. She scrambled from the bed, still caught in the throes of the nightmare as she relived the moment when the agents had pounded on her bedroom door back in the mansion. Her heart thundered as she attempted to gain her bearings and remember where she was. It had been a long, trying day and she must have fallen asleep. She had no idea what time it was, but it now appeared to be dark outside, so she must have been out for several hours.

Another fierce knock startled her. Who could it be? Cautiously, she made her way to the door and peered through the small, peephole, yet couldn’t really make out who stood on the other side of the door.

“Who is it?”

“Open the door, Elizabeth. I must speak with you.”

She recognized that voice, yet she knew it couldn’t be him. Her sanity must be fading. With the chain engaged, she cracked open the door and gazed up into the fierce, chocolate gaze of the last man she’d expected to see standing on her step.

“What do you want?” Seeing him in the flesh brought to the surface all the anger and hurt she felt at his betrayal. Right now love was the farthest thing from her mind.

“Let me in, Elizabeth. I don’t have long and I have to see

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you. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to speak with you for five minutes. Then I will leave you alone."

If only that were true. His image had not left her in peace since the moment she'd first met him, and at this point she doubted it ever would.

Against her better judgment she released the chain and opened the door. She noticed a second man standing near him. Isandro watched her silently. Finally, she stepped back, allowing him to enter. He strode inside and she closed the door, shutting out the offending agent who stood guard outside.

She turned around, leaned against the door, and folded her arms over her chest.

"I don't know what you can possibly have to say to me, Isandro. You obviously got what you came for. You don't need me any longer." She lifted her chin, forcing the tears back. She would not allow them to fall while this man was here.

She saw him clench and unclench his fists. His eyes were deep, dark fathoms that she once would have willingly drowned in. Why he should be nervous she had no idea. He wasn't the one who had been lied to and used like a whore, and then thrown away like a sack of garbage.

"You have a right to know the truth."

"A right? This has nothing to do with right. You used me, Isandro, for revenge. I'm sorry for what happened to your mother—truly I am. I never knew what my father was like. I thought I knew, but I didn't. I even understand your anger and

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your desire to pay him back for what he did. So now you can go.”

“I had to make sure you were all right.”

All right? She would never be all right again. “I’m fine, as you can see. I’ll bounce back, have no fear. So go, with a clear conscience. You did what you had to do for you and the government and now its over.” She turned back toward the door, preparing to open it and send him away. If she didn’t get him out of here, even after all he had done, she would end up begging him to stay.

She stiffened when she felt his hands on her shoulders. She would not break down.

“I never meant to hurt you, Elizabeth. It was not what I wanted, but the first minute I saw you, I knew I was a doomed man. There can be nothing substantial between us—we come from different worlds, but I could not stop myself from taking you, even if only for the short time we had together.”

She rested her forehead against the hard door. “You thought I was a part of it, didn’t you?”

There was a long silence before he spoke. “I did not know for certain. My instinct told me you were not, but I no longer trusted my emotions.”

“You used me.”

He twirled her around and clamped his mouth over hers, bending her to his will. It was always the way with him. She beat her closed fists against his chest—she wanted him to hurt as much as she did, as much as she would after he was gone.

Yet when his tongue drove into her mouth, claiming her as

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effectively as he had ever done, as though nothing separated them now, her arms twined around his neck, needing him as much as she ever had.

It had always been like that between them. The very air around them became combustible, filled with heat and flame.

A knock sounded at the door.

He lifted his head to look down at her and there was such sadness in his eyes, all the anger inside her seemed to melt away. He released her and strode across the room. She watched him silently as he stood there, his back to her. He raised a hand and rubbed the back of his neck.

It was difficult for her to gain control of her own raging emotions. A part of her wanted to rant and rage at him, and yet another part wanted him to make love to her. Needed him to stay with her.

“Why did you come here, Isandro?” she asked him quietly.

He pivoted toward her. “I am sorry, Elizabeth. I should not have done that. It seems when I come within fifty feet of you I cannot keep my hands off you.”

A small smile curved her lips. “It’s always been mutual.”

“This is insane. I’m an ex-convict, not someone you should have ever gotten involved with. I’m a murderer, Elizabeth. I killed a man.”

Her heart thudded to a halt in her chest. So it was true, he’d murdered a man. Her father hadn’t been lying about that.

“What happened? I don’t believe you’re the kind of man to take a person’s life without a very good reason, or some terrible accident. Was that it? Was it an automobile accident of

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some sort?"

The expression on his face was bleak. "No. It is an ugly story. I went to prison for the murder of my stepfather. He was abusing my mother and he would have killed her if someone hadn't stopped him. I do not regret my decisions, but I have to live with them. I could never ask another to do so."

"What if you didn't have to ask? What if... someone... offered?" God, whatever had happened to him must have been terrible. What kind of life had he had? What terrible thing had driven him to do what he did?

He shook his head. "It's no use. The government has control of my life, and my mother's, at least for a time. I don't know what will happen to me when they have no further use for my services. I did what I had to do and the only thing I regret is the way I have hurt you. This is what I had to come here for...to tell you this."

There was a more urgent knock at the door.

"I have no more time, I must go. I leave the country tonight."

"Will I ever see you again? I don't think I can bear the thought of that."

"It is for the best. It is doubtful we will meet again."

He pushed past her too quickly and opened the door. "Good-bye, Elizabeth." And then he was gone.

She couldn't bring herself to open the door and watch him disappear into the night. The pain raged through her at this final loss. If this is what passion had to offer her, she wanted no part of it.

CHAPTER 10

Elizabeth had been in the house for three weeks when the first telltale signs became evident. Standing in the upstairs bathroom, she looked down at the indicator and knew her instinct had been correct. Isandro Santario had left her with more than one bittersweet memory. This was reality.

The morning sickness had been her first clue. That had begun last week. And she knew the exact afternoon that his seed had been planted. It was the day they had gone to the lake. There was no other time they'd had unprotected sex. He had always been especially careful about using a condom every time they made love. Except on that one afternoon and only then. It was one of the reasons she thought maybe he felt

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something more for her than lust. Obviously she had been wrong and that afternoon had been a mistake.

She pressed a hand over her abdomen. She did not regret that afternoon, not one bit. She would love this child with every fiber of her being and wouldn't have to wonder what its primary goal was, or whether or not it wanted to use her for its own ruthless purpose. Oh, yes, she planned to cherish this child, lavish him or her with so much love there would never be any doubt it was wanted.

Suddenly, the world shifted once again and the sun shone brightly. A door had opened and there was so much to look forward to. She would have to make an appointment with the doctor. But she didn't want to use someone in town, too many people still looked at her suspiciously and she wanted to take no chances.

Her father's trial would be taking place in another month and she wanted to wait to tell anyone about the baby until it was over. It would be stressful enough when everything was dredged back up, including her father's connection with Moira MacKenzie, Willow's mother. Once that was behind her, behind them all, then they could start to rebuild. All of them. And by the time the baby was born things would be settled down. She had to remain optimistic and she wanted to bring up her child in a small town like Esmerelda, not some large metropolitan city, like Boston. This was her home.

And then she thought of Isandro and some of the light dimmed. What would he think about the prospect of becoming a father? She closed her eyes and tried to envision him before

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her.

Love shone from the eyes of the man in her dreams as he looked at her. And as she trembled at his closeness.

The love turned to desire and then to joy as she held up the stick. He picked her up and whirled her around the room, his strength pouring into her. As he lowered her, he pressed her to him, his mouth covering hers and all the passion and pleasure flooded her, the heat soothing and arousing her.

Slowly, he would peel the robe from her body and drop his head to nuzzle at her nipple, sucking it deeply into his mouth. She would arch toward him, allowing him to draw it deeper. His hard hands pushed down her panties and she was naked before him.

In her mind, she reached out to unfasten his pants, pulling down the zipper and releasing his cock. So hot and hard in her hand, throbbing with life. Oh, she remembered the feel of him so achingly well. He would lift her, press his thick length between her wet lips, rubbing against her clitoris, and finally bury himself inside her welcoming channel.

There would be no need for protection between them. There would be love shared, mutual desire. There would be no lies, no faithlessness, no subterfuge, just the joy of knowing their child was nestled inside her womb, a baby they had created together.

Why couldn't dreams be real? Why did people have to hurt and use each other, causing so much pain, when there was so much joy to be experienced?

She opened her eyes, felt the tears slip down her face.

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What she wouldn't give for this moment to be real, for him to be here to share this with her.

She dropped her hand away and tossed the indicator into the garbage. Reality, that was what she was left with. But today it was worth more than yesterday. Far more. She turned and left the bathroom. There was much to be done and it helped no one for her to continue to wallow in the past and what she could not have.

* * *

The doctor had confirmed she was four weeks pregnant and the glow she felt inside had not left her since that appointment. A few more weeks and her father's trial would begin. She just needed to make it past that and everything would be fine. She knew Isandro and Carmelita would be there, and she didn't plan to attend other than when she would be called as a witness to testify regarding the people at the house on that fateful night. She would be testifying for the government, not her father. She could only hope she wouldn't run into either of the Santarios. With the way her hormones were acting up, she doubted she'd be able to control her emotions and cried enough all ready.

The doorbell sounded. Willow was planning to stop in so they could chat. She had taken to stopping in to see Elizabeth about once a week. Her baby was due any day now and more than anything, Elizabeth wanted to share her own good news. She hurried toward the staircase and was half way down when she remembered the gift of the hand-crocheted baby blanket

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she had left lying on the bed upstairs. It was her first decent handcrafted project and she was eager to give it to her today.

Twisting around, she was about to step up, when for some reason her ankle gave way and she lost her footing. She reached for the banister, missed, and screamed as she tumbled backward down the staircase, landing in a crumpled heap at the bottom.

It was then that the pain erupted through her, stemming from her womb. She knew, just as surely as the rest of her life had crumbled to ashes, exactly what was happening.

“No!” she cried out, wrapping her arms around her waist, curling into a fetal position, just before another pain ripped through her and the world went black.

CHAPTER 11

She awoke to feelings of intense physical pain and an emptiness that was devastating. Her brain felt like it was enclosed in dense fog. Slowly it began to dissipate. And then she remembered...all of it. She tried to hold back a sob. As she attempted to move her arm, and pain shot through her, she realized someone had probably administered a pain medication and it was the IV needle digging into her flesh. She tested her legs and although she could move them, there was a throbbing at the base of her spine and she let out a soft moan.

“Elizabeth?”

She turned her head to see Willow hovering anxiously near

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the bed. She leaned closer and brushed back a lock of Elizabeth's hair.

"How do you feel?"

Elizabeth licked her lips, tried to say something and found her throat didn't seem to want to work. Willow held a cup with a straw in front of her, and she swallowed a few sips. That felt better.

"Thank you. I'm okay, I guess." Except for the fact that she seemed to be numb. She couldn't feel anything, except that she knew she was empty—of life, of death, of all emotion. Maybe it was for the best.

"You scared us. When I looked through that window and saw you lying there on the floor in a pool of blood." Elizabeth could almost feel the shudder of breath that escaped from Willow.

"How did I get here?" The last thing she remembered was falling. And pain. Lots of pain.

"I still had a key to the house and I used it. Then I called 9-1-1 on my cell."

"How long have I been here?" She had no sense of time whatsoever.

"It happened yesterday. It's been a little over twenty-four hours. It's late afternoon now."

Elizabeth felt herself starting to nod off. Must be the drugs kicking in again. "You should go home," she managed to slur out. "Think...need...sleep." She closed her eyes and turned her head.

She felt Willow stroke a hand through her hair. "I'll come

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back tomorrow.” There was a long hesitation and Elizabeth thought she had left. “I’m sorry, Elizabeth. So very sorry,” she said in a low voice. And then there was no more, just a blanket of nothingness.

When next she woke, she noted that the shades were pulled and there was a soft yellow light glowing. Her brain felt just a bit clearer than it had when last she had awoken. Slowly, she turned her head and was shocked by the sight of a familiar form sitting in a chair near the bed watching her.

“Carmelita.” She wasn’t up to a confrontation with her father’s former housekeeper. “What are you doing here?”

Carmelita’s expression was solemn, but it didn’t seem to hold the same hostility she remembered so well. She rose and walked over to the side of the bed, her expression indecipherable.

“Señora Dalton came to see me. I have returned to Massachusetts for the trial.”

“Oh, I see. You didn’t have to come to see me.”

“It was my son’s child, was it not?”

There was a moment of pain, but she stifled it down, and turned her head away. If she allowed herself to feel anything right now, she would surely shatter. “Yes.” The lies were past her. She wanted nothing to do with the subterfuge that these people had lived. She couldn’t bear looking at the woman who so closely resembled Isandro with her dusky, beautiful features.

“I have been wrong about you, Elizabeth. Isandro and I were both wrong, I think.”

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She turned back to look at her, but said nothing. She noted the sad expression on the other woman's face.

"I was filled with so much hate for the position your father had put me in that I could no longer see clearly. If I had been more observant I would have realized you were not like him, and that you truly did love my son."

"How can you know I loved him? Maybe I was just using him, the same as he was using me," she challenged.

The look in Carmelita's eyes told her she saw through her words. "No. You loved him or you would have never thought to carry his child. I am sorry for your pain."

"It wasn't your fault; it was my own clumsiness. I tripped and fell down the stairs."

"I can call Isandro. I know where he is. He would come immediately if he knew—"

"No." Elizabeth turned her head too quickly and winced as pain shot through her temple. "No more, Carmelita. He doesn't want me and I don't want him to return out of some misplaced sense of pity and duty. It's better this way."

There were twinges of pain in her heart again and she couldn't let it drown her. Not now. Not this way.

The look in Carmelita's eyes spoke of confusion, guilt, and indecision. Then she released a long sigh. "There is something I must tell you that I have never revealed to anyone else." She moved closer to the bed. "It is a secret I swore to Isandro I would carry to my grave. But I must tell you, so that you understand."

Carmelita had her full attention. "Are you certain you want

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to share it with me?"

"I must. You see, after Isandro's father died he always tried to be the man for the family. He was the oldest and he wanted to take care of me. I-I made mistakes, very bad mistakes, and my children suffered because of them. Isandro, the worst."

"He told me what happened to his stepfather. Why he went to prison. I'm sorry your life has been so hard, and that my father added to your pain."

"What did he tell you?"

"He came to me before he left town and told me he went to prison for killing his stepfather."

Carmelita bowed her head. "He has sacrificed so much for me. I cannot allow you to believe the lie."

"What are you talking about?"

Carmelita shifted, then licked her lips. First she turned to look at the door and then back to Elizabeth. "It was not Isandro who was the murderer. It was me. Isandro took the blame because he did not want his brother and sister to be orphaned, without their mother." Tears glittered in her eyes. "I was weak, and frightened, and I let my son take the blame for the terrible thing that I did. My heart has been heavy with this terrible mortal sin, but Isandro would not allow me to reveal the truth. But I had to tell you, so you know the kind of man he is. He was only seventeen at the time, but more a man than any I have met since."

"Oh, my God." How had he stood those years of incarceration knowing he didn't belong there, that he had not

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committed the crime? What kind of strength would it take to accept such a life for the love of his family? In her heart she had known there was so much more to him than he would share with her.

With what little strength she had left, she reached over to clasp the other woman's hand. Carmelita gazed down at her, a small, quivering smile played at the corner of her lips as she studied Elizabeth.

She then nodded and Elizabeth saw her lips firm as though she had come to a decision. Carmelita turned and walked back to the chair and sat down.

“What are you doing?”

“If I cannot contact Isandro to come to your aid, then I stay. You will require help until you are well. I can do no less for you and my son.”

“No, it's not necessary.”

A dark eyebrow lifted, reminding her so much of the man she still loved even after everything that had transpired.

“Sí, I most certainly can. You had best get used to the idea. Now you need your rest. Sleep. I stay until my son returns. I have no doubt that one day he will do so.” Her commanding manner gave Elizabeth a good idea of how she had managed to control Isandro in his youth.

“You're very sure of yourself.”

“You have no one else to care for you. Señora Dalton is soon to have her child and is certainly in no position to help. I shall stay.”

Elizabeth saw there was no point in arguing. Likely she

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wouldn't win the argument anyway as the woman seemed determined to have her way no matter what Elizabeth said. And anyway, she really was very tired, too tired to argue.

There was one thing she was certain Carmelita was wrong about. Isandro would not return. He had made his intentions very clear when last they had met.

CHAPTER 12

He parked the rental car and inspected the old farmhouse and surrounding land. What had brought her here? Why hadn't she returned to Boston where she belonged? He had a lot of questions and wanted some answers.

Isandro had tried to push thoughts of her out of his head. It was easier that way. Better for her. Her father was in prison and he had helped to put him there. It was a place where he'd spent a great deal of time himself. Those two reasons alone should have kept him far away from her. They were things he couldn't expect her to forget...or to forgive. And he'd carry the weight of them on his shoulders for the rest of his life.

Too bad if he couldn't sleep at night, his body hard and

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wanting, thinking of her, of being inside her, of touching her, holding her. These months without her had been like trying to walk into hurricane-strength winds.

He'd envisioned her moving on with her life, safely tucked into her socialite world, with friends, and suitors vying for her company. Again, he looked up at the house. He hadn't pictured her here. Not even close.

When Sheriff Dalton had called him three days ago, what he'd revealed had shocked him to his core. Elizabeth hadn't wanted him to know. She'd carried just as much pain on her shoulders—no, that wasn't true. From what Dalton had told him, she had almost died because Isandro Santario had been too proud to forget his past and try to work something out in order to be with her.

Dalton's phone call had shaken him to his soul. He had not been here when she had most needed him. She could have died. He had so many sins racked up against him, what was one more? This time he was staying.

But what was she doing in a farmhouse out in the countryside? With acres of farmland? What was she planning to do? Hide here after all the notoriety surrounding her father's arrest and then return to her previous lifestyle?

All these months he had fought against acknowledging his love for her, trying to convince himself that in some way she knew what her father was doing. In prison everyone had an ulterior motive; everyone used everyone else. He had brought that baggage with him.

He had used her and he had tried to convince himself that

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she was using him. It made it easier. He had refused to accept that he loved her, even thinking she might be involved somehow, he couldn't resist her. He'd lain awake at night trying to think of a way to extricate her from the blow-up that was going to inevitably occur.

In the end all he could think of was the fact that drugs had made his stepfather the way he was, had magnified the brutality of that last attack on his mother. He couldn't think beyond that. He knew it was only a drop in the huge, bottomless ocean of illegal drug activity, but he had needed to be there not only to help his mother, but others who would fall beneath the hypnotic enticement of easy acquisition to the drugs. There had been no other way.

In determining his path, he had tried to harden his heart against the beautiful, sensual daughter of the man he was there to help take down. Yet, little by little she had wedged a way into his heart and soul.

He wasn't running anymore. That's exactly what he had been doing since he'd left the Anthony estate all those months ago. And he'd been running from her and his feelings for her, convincing himself his past would only drive a wedge between them, no matter how deep the passion that existed. It would only turn sour and destroy them. But he couldn't forget that call from Dalton.

He couldn't postpone it any longer. He stepped out of the car, strode up to the door, and rang the bell. When the door opened, he couldn't have been more shocked if he'd been met by his dead stepfather.

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“*Madre*, what are you doing here?”

Her eyes widened when she saw him standing there. In all these months, when he had spoken with her, she had never mentioned where she was staying. And if that was the case, why hadn't she told him what had happened, instead of him having to hear it from Elizabeth's ex-husband?

He saw his mother straighten her shoulders and stare back at him stoically. “I am here because I was needed. But why are you here? I am certain it is not to see me, nor did you know I would be here. How did you know where she was?”

“You should have told me. Is she all right?”

“She did not wish for you to know. She thinks you would only come out of pity. It has been a hard struggle for her, gaining back her strength, her sense of purpose.”

Isandro felt the weight grow heavier in his chest. “I know that. I'm not here out of pity. I love her, and I should have never left her. But you know why I did it. You, most of all, have to understand how it was.”

She nodded. “We were wrong about her, Isandro. I hope you do love her as much as I think you might because she does not deserve any more pain. These last months I have spent here, I have come to know and respect her. To care for her like my own *hija*. I would protect her as a daughter I bore. I only wish I could have done the same for you.”

“That is finished, *Madre*. We both did what we had to do and should speak no more of it. My brother and sister needed you. I do not regret what I did.”

His mother stared at him for a long moment and he saw the

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deep sadness in her eyes. “If only I could have changed things. I thought you all needed a father to help guide you, but instead it only became worse. I am sorry for that. I ruined your life.”

“*Madre*, don’t. I am fine and it was worth it to see Anna and Carlo do well for themselves over the years. We made the right choice.”

She was silent for a minute. “Elizabeth knows the truth. I could not continue to let her think you did that horrible thing.”

He reached out to grip her shoulders. “You shouldn’t have done that. It was a secret never to be shared.”

She looked up at him. “I trust her, Isandro. And you should as well. She loves you, and if you stay, you will see how much. She does not say it, but I know, she bought this place for you. Do not hurt her.”

“Take me to her. I have to see her.”

His mother stepped away from the door, allowing him to enter the house. She turned toward the right and motioned for him to follow her. He closed the door and moved toward her. Looking into the room, he caught his first glimpse of her as she lay curled up on a forest-green sofa, a gold crocheted blanket covering her, one arm flung above her head.

He had the sense of a cozy, lived-in room, but he had eyes for nothing but her. She was wearing a sweater, her face was that of an angel in repose, her long, golden brown lashes, vivid against her pale complexion. Her lips were slightly parted as though waiting for him to claim them. Suddenly, her small pink tongue darted out, circling over them, and she shifted on the couch.

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“I must go out,” his mother said softly from behind him, startling him. “I have things to do. I will be gone for several hours. Be good to her, Isandro. I love you both and I wish to see you happy.”

He reached out to clasp her hand and squeezed. “I will do my best, *Madre*.”

“Tell her the truth and you will find the right path, my son.” She pulled her hand from his and stepped away.

After a time he heard the front door open and close, as he stood there drinking in the sight of her. He wanted to lift her off the couch and take her upstairs to make passionate love to her, to claim her as thoroughly as possible for his own. The Spanish blood of his ancestors rose thickly in his veins. He couldn't wait another moment, and walked toward the couch, where he squatted in front of her. He leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss across her parted lips. She inhaled sharply, her lashes fluttered, and she opened her eyes, like sleeping beauty awakened by the kiss of her prince.

CHAPTER 13

She knew who was there. She could smell the clean scent of him. Inhaling deeply, it was as though she was running through the woods, with the smell of pine, earth, and rain mingling together. It was a wild scent that flowed through her, a feeling as though wedges of scarred ground separated by deep chasms slowly closed together making her whole once again. One solid stretch of lush earth.

She opened her eyes and focused on the handsome, dark face so close to her own. His bottomless eyes studied her closely and she saw glimpses of sadness and regret. Lifting a hand, she stroked the side of his lean face. Like a hungry wolf, he swooped down once again to press his lips against hers,

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driving his tongue deep, and she tasted him, as though gorging herself after a lengthy fast. And the taste was filled with so much more poignant ecstasy after the lengthy absence.

Long moments later he lifted his head to gaze down at her.

“Your mother called you,” she said in a husky voice. She couldn’t seem to break her gaze from his, afraid he would disappear—that this was all a dream.

“No. It was your ex-husband. You should have gotten word to me. I would have come, you know that.” He raised a hand to press it against her abdomen.

Tears rose to her eyes at the gentle touch. Yet, she heard the bite to his words, the censure.

“Oh. Willow’s doing, I would assume. She has a habit of taking the bit between her teeth and running with it. She handles J.W. well.” She looked at him, smoothed a hand along his rough, darkened jaw. “You have enough to deal with. If you came back, it had to be because you wanted to be here, not because you were forced.”

He reached out to cup her face. “It is my fault. I left you without the words you needed to hear, to know if I came back it was because of you. Always you. But I didn’t want you saddled with my past. And everything I am is colored by that.”

“Your mother told me the truth. She’s been wonderful. I wish I’d known my own mother. Maybe things would have been different if she had lived.” She looked away toward the fireplace. “I went to see my father after the sentencing. He’s no longer the man I knew. Or maybe it’s just that I never wanted to see that side of him. He was so heartless, so cold.

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So bitter.” She closed her eyes and shook her head, remembering the stark scene at the prison.

She turned back to Isandro. “How did you stand it all those years? Knowing you’d done nothing wrong—it must have been terrible.”

He brushed her hair away from her face. “It is the past. I did what I must.”

“You’ll stay? You won’t leave again?”

“I have had a long time to think about what has happened. I have made many mistakes, especially with you. I do not know if I can be the man you deserve; there is much darkness inside me. But I could not stay away any longer, even if I felt it was for your own good.”

She clasped her hands around his neck. “Love is not always neat and orderly—if nothing else I’ve figured that out. I felt so much anger and pain when I found out why you were in Esmerelda. I couldn’t believe that my father was mixed up with the drugs, that you were there for revenge. And then as things came to light, I realized my father had used me as well. I didn’t feel like a person any longer—I felt like a thing, a possession, to be used and discarded.”

Quickly, he stood up and lifted her into his arms, then sat back on the couch, notching her close against him, her head against his shoulder. “I’m sorry. God, I’m sorry.”

“No,” she said against his neck. “I realize now I saw what I wanted to see. A pampered socialite, that’s how you saw me, didn’t you? How everyone saw me. Someone who was spoiled, who didn’t have to work for a living, who liked the

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good life and didn't care where the money came from. Above it all, safely tucked into my gilded cage."

"At first, maybe, but not once I came to know you. In my head, I had to keep my distance, but in my heart I loved you even then. Even though I knew it was wrong."

She smiled. "I knew some part of you did." She lifted her head and looked around. "I put an offer on this place before everything fell apart. I used money from my trust fund. You made me want to be more than I was, to show something for my life. I had planned to tell you about it. I wanted to prove to you, and maybe to myself, I wasn't a hot-house flower. You were part of the dream. And then it all shattered. Everything I thought I knew—it was all lies, and I wasn't sure where to go to from there. Having this land has helped me—it's all I've had to hold on to."

"I never wanted to hurt you that way. But I also couldn't let you suffer for the stigma of my past."

"You didn't think I was strong enough to deal with it. Don't say that's not true because I know it is. You saw me as fluff."

"I wanted to protect you," he protested.

"Maybe, but I didn't want protection. I wanted love. I thought, given enough time, you would understand and realize I wasn't made of gossamer, that I wouldn't disappear. I thought I'd found it with you, and then you were gone and everything was destroyed." His arms tightened around her. "And then I found out I was pregnant," she said softly. "Suddenly, there was a reason to make my dreams a reality."

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You gave me the dream in more ways than one and you never realized it.”

“I’m sorry you lost the baby. I should have been here. If I hadn’t been so busy running away to try to protect you from me, I would have been here.”

“You’ve come now. But is it where you want to be? Where were you?”

“I was in California, trying to start over. But it was no good—not without you. Yes, I wish to be wherever you are. But why here and not in Boston?”

“I never wanted to live in Boston. I did it to please my father. In a way, I married J.W. to please him, I married Evan, my second husband, to please him. I guess I thought he would love me if I married the person he approved of. I never realized he wanted me to marry J.W. so he would be closer to the Sheriff’s Department and could get information on their movements. God, I was so stupid.”

“You are an intelligent woman and deserving of a father’s love and respect for the person you are. I love you for the person you are. You believe in people.”

She shook her head. “It wasn’t enough. The money and power were far more important.” She turned to look up at him. “But you,” she curled her fingers into the cloth of his shirt. “I wanted you for myself, just for me—not to please anyone but me. It was only then I discovered true passion.”

He leaned down to claim her lips and she slowly began to unbutton his shirt. He lifted his head. “I can’t wait another moment. I need you.”

RUTHLESS ACTS

Smiling, she lifted up from his lap. “I don’t want to waste another second.” She held out her hand. “I have something to show you.”

“The bedroom?” he asked with a hopeful smile as he rose to his feet.

Clasping his hand with hers, she led him from the room, down the hallway and out past the kitchen. It was something she’d had especially built with him in mind. A place she could retreat to and dream.

CHAPTER 14

“What is this room?” he said as he gazed unbelievably around the area. It was a sun room, completely enclosed in glass, filled with all kinds of plants and trees and blooming flowers. He could smell mint and lavender flavoring the air. Planted around the outside were roses in shades of crimson red, fleshy, deep pink reminding him of her skin, and cloud white. Elizabeth walked ahead of him and began opening doors that were set at regular intervals around the room. The fragrant scent of roses filled the air inside.

“My God,” he breathed. “It’s beautiful. You designed this?”

What would he think of her plans, her ideas? She turned to

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look at him. “Yes. I needed to do something to occupy my time after...after losing the baby. I needed to nurture something good to live. Your mother helped me. Willow comes over sometimes to help. What I didn’t know, either your mother taught me, or I learned from reading books on plants and horticulture. I hired an architect to design it and had it built. It was a priority.” She surveyed the lush vegetation filling the room. “It doesn’t exactly match the architecture of the house, but I didn’t care. I needed this place.”

“Why?”

She turned in a circle, gazing around. “I call it my dream room. It feels clean, and good, and reminds me of you. It grounds me, reminds me.” She turned to look at him. “What my father did...what Willow’s mother did—well, we needed to cleanse ourselves, and we want to take it even a step further. I want to bring something special back to this house...to the town where I grew up. Cleanse it from the ugly things that have taken place here. Willow used the money her mother left her to start a trust for the children who were victims of their parents’ drug use and abuse. I want to create a place for them to come to learn about the earth and all the good, natural things that can help us to heal. In the spring, I want fields and fields of strawberries and raspberries so they can come and pick to their heart’s desire. In the summer, I want to teach them about the wildflowers and the pleasure they can bring. In the autumn I want orange pumpkins growing across the ground. And in winter, I want to be surrounded by the smell of winter and crops of pine trees.”

RUTHLESS ACTS

Would he understand, would he see that she wanted—needed—him to be a part of her dream? “Oh, I know it can’t happen overnight, but it’s a dream that can be made real. Given enough belief and hard work. Something good out of the ashes of what has happened and the lives that were ruined.” She felt the tears begin to clog her throat. So many bad things had seeped into their small town and it was time to bring back some pleasure to the people who lived there.

She blinked rapidly to try to stop the tears from falling and to push the sadness away. This room was not meant for sadness. It’s not what she had created it for.

CHAPTER 15

It was as though he was looking at an angel because suddenly the rays of the late afternoon sun burst into the room, reflecting into every corner and bathing it with an aura of warm gold light. And he knew, that no matter what came before, he could not, would not, walk away. No matter the rightness, the self-sacrifice, the determination to protect her even from himself.

He found himself walking toward her, unable to resist the call of paradise. He finally reached her and raised his hands to cup her face, his eyes burning, tracking over every inch of her expression.

He'd come from a ruthless, unforgiving hell, and how he

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had managed to end up here, with her, he would never know. Fate played interesting tricks on people sometimes.

“You and I,” she said, breaking the silence between them, “we’ve both been in prison, only my bars were gold and yours were gray steel.” She reached up to touch his face. “We’re free, Isandro. Look around you. Creating this place has helped to channel some of the anger and pain I felt at all that has happened. I want you to feel it as well. I love you and I want you here with me.”

“I don’t know if I can. Too much has happened. How can you possibly forgive me?”

“Because I love you, more than I hated what you did. I went to see my father, I told you that. I wanted to see some of the love a father holds for his child—but there wasn’t any. I’m not sure there was ever any love in his heart. But what about you, Isandro? Do you have room to forgive your past. Can you love me?”

And suddenly he felt it pouring out of him, all the passion he had maintained a tight control on, afraid of where it would lead him, who it would hurt. He swooped down and claimed her lips with a driving need that scared him. Her arms rose up to encircle his neck, pressing close to him.

“Oh, Isandro, I do love you. Let me share this world we will create together.” She reached over to a bowl on the table near them and withdrew a juicy peach. She took a bite and then pressed her lips to his, passing the slice of fruit into his mouth. She looked up at him.

“Forbidden fruit, Isandro. Does anything taste sweeter?”

RUTHLESS ACTS

And she was so very right. He allowed the juice from the sweet flesh to trickle down his throat and it was as though a deep thirst inside him was at last allowed to be quenched.

He picked her up and carried her to the lounge chair nestled between two large, green ferns, and laid her upon it. He took the peach from her hand and placed it on a small, circular, brightly-colored mosaic table.

He was a starving man with a need to feast on the lush banquet that was Elizabeth, and quickly proceeded to divest her of her clothing. He needed to be inside her now. Immediately. He stripped and looked down at her. Her skin vibrated with life, pearly and blushing. Her nipples bloomed with a deep, rosy hue, almost the same color as the deep crimson of the roses outside the room. The sun-kissed, silky curls on her mound glistened, telling him of her arousal, her legs slightly splayed, knees upraised and waiting.

He licked his lips as he surveyed her. He reached over for the peach and held it over her body. He saw the light in her eyes and her pupils dilated with desire. He squeezed the fruit and its juices combined with hers. He moved his hand upward and more juice drizzled onto her nipples. He heard her sigh and she bit her lip. His cock grew so hard, he thought he would burst if he didn't have her soon.

He tossed the mangled pulp of fruit aside and dropped down between her legs. Spreading her wide, her labia lips parted, revealing her swollen inner lips and stiffened clitoris. Lowering his head, he swirled his tongue over her engorged entrance, between her slick lips and over her hard, little nub.

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He tasted nectar he was certain could only be found in paradise. He played her wide, sank his tongue deep inside her hot channel. He consumed her voraciously as his fingers played over her clit. She squirmed beneath him, her hands tangled in his hair and she arched upward as his tongue sank more deeply inside her.

Suddenly, he felt her soar, as she screamed his name, her fingers twisting deeper into his hair and he sucked at her juices, drowning in pleasure, baptized by her ecstasy. She was the gate to his future.

He rose over her, notching himself between her legs, his cock poised at her entrance as he looked down at her flushed face. He dropped forward to suckle at her breasts, savoring her taste until her essence was so deeply embedded and intertwined inside him he no longer felt the difference between her and himself.

Slowly he entered her, drowning in her exquisite body, bathed by her love. He had risen from the depths of hell on earth and now, as he sank deeper, retreated and thrust to the very depths of her womb, he shouted with joy as he pulsed inside her.

All along he had held the key to paradise and had been afraid of using it. But now as her arms enclosed him and his seed poured into her, at last the gates of paradise were open and there was no longer any hesitation as he reveled in its beauty and she cleansed him with her love.

ADRIANNA DANE

Theresa Gallup uses the pen names of Tess Maynard and Adrianna Dane. Theresa has been writing since the age of 10. A legal secretary for 30 years, she is currently working on another erotic romance, as well as a full-length romantic mystery/suspense. She has been married for 30 years and has three grown children (a daughter and twin sons), and is a new grandmother.

Writing as Tess Maynard, her first published short story appeared in the ezine, *The Whispering Forest*, in January of 2004. Writing as Adrianna Dane, where adding sensual heat to romance is her motto, *Esmerelda's Secret* was her first foray into the erotic romance genre.

Having traveled and lived from the East Coast to the West Coast, Theresa receives inspiration for her stories from a variety of sources, including music and poetry, and her tastes are eclectic.

For more information about current projects, visit Theresa's web sites at:

www.tessmaynard.com
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***Don't miss Smooth Finish, by Adrianna Dane,
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Cody Marx had dated Jared Creed for a short time back in high school and she'd never forgotten him. But when Jared's stepfather died and his half brother, Kenny, got into trouble, they drifted apart. Years later, they're both professional subcontractors working on the same remodeling project—the old MacKenzie Homestead just outside Esmerelda, Massachusetts.

Cody and Jared have both changed and matured since those teenage years, but will the innocent spark of passion ignited long ago burst into the blazing flame of revitalized desire?

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