



KISSING CASANOVA

By

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Chapter One

A kiss.

A firm, surprising set of lips slammed against Soledad Monroe's. The jarring gesture shook her to her core, jerking the inside of her stomach like unexpected fireworks exploding nearby. It threw her mind and physical state off balance.

She struggled against the uninvited, staged display of affection as she stood among the rowdy crowd of well over thirty-thousand professional wrestling fans in the packed Washington, DC arena. What a way to end her day!

A simple hello and a handshake from her interview subject, hopefully her last subject ever, would have been more appropriate, especially with all of the cameras looming around them.

Before, all she knew about this guy was his stage name. Casanova. Now feeling the gentle vibration against her lips, she knew the man hummed when he kissed. Or maybe he did it for her.

Soledad's shoulders unknotted and for a brief moment her eyelids lowered. A hazy feeling clouded her head. A good kiss, the kind that started off sweet and then increased in intensity, always overruled her sensibility. A great one made her forget her inhibitions. Lord knows she'd allowed herself to melt in the arms of a great kisser too many times.

When she remembered the whole world would be seeing this forced public display of affection, her eyes popped open. She didn't need to be the subject of another gossip story.

"Get off," Soledad tried saying while his lips smothered hers. The demand came out like "Biff puff." The wrestler probably thought she was humming, too. Fuming was more like it.

Casanova's goatee scratched her chin as his hand cupped the back of her head, his fingers entangled in her hair. He kept his eyes closed.

Open your eyes! Soledad flailed her arms, but he kept a tight hold.

Their bodies sandwiched the black foam-covered barricade intended to separate the crowd from the wrestling ring. She kept her eyes open, glaring at the man wearing a white, sparkly bandanna and a hoop earring. When she cut her eyes to the right, she caught the camera lens positioned at the two of them.

Great. So if her mother watched this it would give her even more ammunition to say, "Oh, Soledad. Don't we have enough problems without you embarrassing the family *again*?"

Soledad tried pushing him away by putting one hand on his shoulder and bracing the other against the barricade, but his steel-beam arm clamped around her waist tight enough to keep her trapped.

The Altoid mint she'd popped in her mouth at the end of his match swirled over her tongue, stinging it, as she kept her lips fixed shut.

The crowd chanted Casanova's name as he finally broke the kiss. His hazel eyes glittered from the camera flashes as he stared at her. His skin flushed pink in his cheeks.

Oh, no. He wasn't going to get over on her with a puppy-dog look. She'd handled bigger and better guys than this shopping at Gucci.

With an open hand, she smacked Casanova's face, a sight caught on large screens over

the wrestling ring. Adrenaline coursed through her like flame in a torch. She wouldn't be fodder for late-night talk show jokes. Her hand covered her mouth, wiping away the offending kiss.

When Casanova stumbled from her, security guards rushed toward him. But with a wave of his hand, he signaled he was all right. The way Casanova's mouth had hung open after the kiss, he'd appeared surprised--or maybe shaken would have been a better way to describe him.

Had they been dating, to see a man look so awe-stricken by her kiss would have pumped Soledad's body with electric sparks. From the millisecond she allowed herself to be sucked into the spontaneous display, she knew her toes hadn't curled like this since, well, never. Working for nearly a year had kept her out of trouble ... and away from the altar.

He snatched a microphone off of the announcer's table by the ring.

Oh, no. Not more humiliation to be broadcast.

Soledad bit the inside of her cheek and fought the urge to stomp her behind out of the arena and home to New York. A kiss from a pro wrestler would have tickled her former Gucci Girls, a nickname for the band of party pals she used to hang with when Soledad club hopped.

But her heart raced as she grabbed the barricade sitting in front of her front-row seat, her fingernails embedded in the smooth, black leather and her jaw set. No way was she going to appear less than dignified. And she definitely didn't want to prove to her parents, especially to her mother, that she couldn't make it on her own for a year. This would be her last job. She could do this.

Casanova brought the microphone to his mouth and said, "Baby, if I did it wrong, why don't I just meet you at your hotel room so I can practice loving you the right way." He winked.

Soledad stood still, certain if she moved, lava-like blood would spew from her mouth and melt this pompous jerk down into a pool of spandex and a hoop earring.

Did he just wink at her? How dare he do this drive-by kiss and then have the nerve to be cocky about it. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, leaving a slight, shiny trail from the remains of her gloss.

She hadn't been this uptight about a kiss since Frankie Dunn had tried slipping her the tongue behind the pool house at her parents' home when she was thirteen. Except, the wrestler hadn't fumbled around and done the goofy, teenage boy giggle. He knew what he was doing. And Hoover Lips here had to be stopped.

As the wrestling fans howled even louder, a smile crept up the corner of his mouth as he touched his reddening cheek. Soledad ground her fingers in deeper into the only thing keeping her from this animal. He grabbed his championship belt he'd placed on the barricade and tossed the microphone over his shoulder, careless of where it landed.

The gods of irony must have been working overtime to have her be bussed on the job she'd considered to be her kiss-off article for *Vestige*. Getting disrespected, and now groped, to prove to her parents she could be responsible couldn't be a rite of passage for normal people. She didn't need to take this treatment.

In the noisy arena, Soledad tried blocking the chants and screams by mentally reciting literary prose in her head. Now the clamorous cheering rose to a deafening crescendo, assaulting her ears more than the overwhelming smell of beer and popcorn had sullied her nose.

A young woman patted Soledad on her shoulder. "You are so lucky!" she gushed.

"He's an arrogant, demeaning, self-centered snake with only one thing on his tiny mind," Soledad said. Clearly this fan recognized those traits.

The young woman smacked her gum, glanced at Casanova walking away and said to Soledad after returning her gaze, "But look at his butt. Doesn't he have the best ass in the

world?"

Clearly not one of Gloria Steinem's disciples.

Soledad glared at Casanova as he escaped to the backstage. The crowd roared as he held the belt in the air like a gladiator bearing his shield. Her gut tightened. My God! Was sweat forming on her neck?

She didn't mind getting involved in the story--as long it was mutually agreed upon. She'd tried skateboarding when she'd interviewed a popular skater. She'd even tried surfing in shark-infested waters off Hawaii. Now she was going to interview a wrestler whose claim to fame was kissing strange women and beating people to please a massive crowd.

O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?

Forget it. She could live with the harsh words and disappointed looks from her parents. What happened to that unconditional love mumbo jumbo that had been forced down her throat from those New Age schools she'd attended? Didn't her parents get the memo?

As she turned to retrieve her purse when the arena lights brightened, she felt a vise-like grip around her wrist. Her heart pounded in a crazy rhythm, thinking Casanova had returned for a second kiss. When she looked to see who or what had her she saw a stocky, tank-like man with a black-and-white bandanna around his head and a black tee shirt with "security" stretched across the front in white letters.

First Casanova and now this guy. What was it with bandanna-clad men grabbing women around here? Neanderthal life was alive and well at the Extreme Transnational Championship Wrestling Federation. Her heart slowed but she kept her hand balled in a fist.

"You're the reporter, right?" he asked with a thick Brooklyn accent.

Reporter. Soledad had been called many things before. Socialite. Wild child. Marrying Monroe. But being called a reporter actually made her exhale with some relief.

"Yes, I am." She tried wriggling her wrist from his grip, but he held onto her the way Norman Bates held onto the idea Mother was still alive.

The guard pulled her behind him. "I'm taking you backstage. You still doing the interview, right?"

Actually Soledad's stomach jumped at the idea of going to meet Casanova. Growing up as a Monroe, she'd met world leaders, Pulitzer Prize winners, designers. No one rattled her. But this guy. She had the feeling that the infamous interview ditch king had plans to walk. Good. If he walked, then she would have a perfect out, and she wouldn't be blamed.

Although Casanova made a living taking lumps in the ring, being pummeled by an interviewer paled in comparison. He would have ignored her heart-felt argument of how he should respect women. Thirty-something female fans fawned over him like teenage girls at a boy band concert.

She hiked her purse onto her shoulder and nodded to the security guard. Soledad would offer a quick apology to this half-dressed macho man bent on tempting fate that he would have to accept. Then she could go on to her normal life of shopping, sleeping late and traveling.

She scuttled through a hallway. She lost her footing a couple of times, slipping in the beer spilled on the floor. Fortunately the gum wads and the stickiness of the beer itself aided in maintaining her balance. The bottom of her sandals smacked with each tacky step.

The tank turned to her, but didn't stop his trek. "You know, he doesn't do interviews."

"What?" She scurried to keep up and hear him over the screaming fans.

"Casanova. He's like, private, you know. Hell, I don't even know the cat's real name."

Neither did she. She'd tried finding it. Soledad researched all about the man who had

made professional wrestling entertaining again ... and sexy. But he kept his personal life well-guarded. She wished she could do the same in her life.

With an interest in getting a jump on the interview, Soledad asked the guard, "And how long have you been with the company?"

"Long enough to know not ask too many questions and leave the talent alone."

The tank must have been warned to be just as secretive. Interesting. Made her wonder what Casanova hid behind his persona.

As sweaty men tempting fate went, Casanova epitomized an awesome specimen of a man. Tall, a sleek nose and a light-brown goatee. His pictures from her research didn't do the real thing justice. Of course, the pictures were all posed publicity shots, which made him look handsome and charming. He had a side-of-the-mouth smile that spelled trouble and bordered on arrogant. And his intense eyes could bore a hole through a battleship with their gaze.

She ran Casanova's statistics through her head. Six foot three. Yes, he did look tall. Two-hundred-sixty pounds. Under the ruffled shirt, it was hard to tell what his body looked like.

However, his black tights showed he had incredible legs. Long, powerful. She imagined his arms, chest and stomach rippled with delicious muscles.

Soledad shook her head. So what if he was attractive. A model with some athletic ability best described him. He was an actor with a bad agent, and even worse, bad writers.

How could her parents expect her to get a story by working with an overgrown, pampered, oversexed kid in a man's body?

What a quest. Standing between her one-year anniversary of working seriously and a trip to Fiji stood a man in Batman tights and a *Pirates of Penzance* shirt.

She needed to take control of this interview. Now if she could only convince her jumpy heart and quaky knees, she would be perfect.

* * * *

Tyler Randolph burst through the heavy, black curtain leading backstage. His fans chanted, matching the pounding in his head. It would have been nice to come down from the match-high by listening to the symphony of cheers. Instead he had a bone to pick. He thought being in this business would have prepared him for the unexpected.

He didn't mind the smack. The planted woman had hit him hard, but he had been hit harder, including the whacks he had gotten when he was growing up. He hated being left out of changes in the show, and this was a *big* change.

When he saw Wayne Lucas limping up to him, Tyler wasted no time in getting to the bottom of things.

"You know I am all about spontaneity, Wayne," Tyler began. "But could you at least let me in on what's going on out there, especially before it happens?" He waved his hand in front of his nose in an attempt to cut down the sulfur stench of the pyrotechnic explosives still wafting in the air. "Do you run this show or is the show running you?"

"I-I-I'm sorry, Cass." Wayne held up his hands like a robbery victim, but in his burgundy polyester jogging suit with thick white stripes, he resembled an old school break-dancer.

"Since when does Casanova get slapped?" He hated referring to himself in the third person but it was easier to talk about his character as someone else. No way in the world would *he* wear the white ruffled shirt and tights. But Casanova would.

Damn. Someday he would need therapy to understand all of this.

Wayne shook his hands in the air. "You-you-you weren't listening to me. You ka-ka-kissed the wrong woman."

Tyler shook his head. “You told me the one in white, didn’t you?” He had to get his head into work. Too many distractions in his life weren’t helping him to concentrate. The other night he’d missed his cue, and now tonight he’d embarrassed some poor woman who wasn’t prepared to be a part of his act.

His stinging cheek throbbed even more than the constant ache in his back. He owed that fan an apology--unless she was already running off to an attorney to sue him for sexual assault. His stomach knotted when the brief thought crossed his mind he could be a sexual predator like his father.

“N-n-n-no. You see, sh-sh-sh--”

Tyler cut in. “Geez, is she still out there? I’ve got to make things right with her.” He wiped his forehead and ran his fingers down his goatee.

The bad part about the woman’s kick-butt move was that the slap had worked. The crowd had eaten it up as though it was a part of the show.

Actually, the worst part about the kiss was that he’d enjoyed it, at least the start of the kiss before she clamped her lips so tight he thought she was going to suck his into the trap. Her soft, curvy body stiffened almost immediately. Almost.

He should have known something was wrong, then. Most of the plants eagerly opened their mouths and tried shoving their tongues down his throat. They would press their breasts against him like he was a walking mammogram x-ray machine. With all the bumps and bruises on his body the last thing he wanted to do was feel for any lumps of any kind. Tyler needed his work taken seriously. A stint in Japan would be a nice boost to his career.

Wayne tried to stammer an answer. “The wo-wo-woman in all white is a--is a--is a--”

“Hey, Cass.”

Tyler turned. Behind him stood the woman from the audience who had slapped him, and she was with Kevin Lucas, Wayne’s son and co-owner of the company.

In the full light she looked worthy of Tyler Randolph breast, body and even dental exams. A tall black woman with the creamiest light-brown skin he’d ever seen. Shoulder-length, curly, golden-blond hair with brown streaks. He remembered how soft it was considering its brassy look. When he rubbed his finger under his nose he caught a whiff of a sweet, honey scent. What a great relief from inhaling smoky pyro.

Her eyes were wide, and she had full lips. He wiped his, removing the remaining traces of whatever it was she’d had on hers that was smooth, sticky and sweet. She’d looked so familiar to him, even before he’d kissed her. Maybe because she was such a dream woman.

He fell to his knees in front of her and said, with arms outstretched, “Marry me.”

The woman folded her arms and glared at him, while the crowd backstage laughed. Normally he didn’t associate with or talk to the women Wayne and Kevin planted in the audience. He understood they were doing a job just like him, and they probably felt as awkward as he did.

And now that he really looked at her, her mouth turned down, dragging the rest of her face with it, she appeared still upset about the kiss.

“He’s kidding,” Kevin said to her with a slight laugh. “It’s part of his bit to ask a woman to marry him and then turn her down in front of the fans. I guess the slap threw him off of his game tonight.” He turned to Tyler. “She’s the journalist who’s going to write the story about you, the company and *Wrestlebowl*.”

Tyler ran his hand down his face and sighed. A sickening feeling rolled in his stomach. A whispered curse oozed through his lips.

“Come on, Cass. You promised,” Kevin said as though he read Tyler’s mind. Tyler had almost forgotten about the interview, the one Kevin pressured him into doing.

He stared at the statuesque woman. “Guess I can’t get out of this now.” His tone lowered.

Kevin put his hand on Tyler’s shoulder. “Please, not this time.”

The necessary evils of the world. Cutting promos for the show would have suited him better than to have his life analyzed by some reporter.

“Guess you no longer want to marry me now,” she said coolly.

Tyler touched his face. “I like my women and my reporters a little less hostile.” Not that he’d had either recently. The media called him the “devil in tights.” Didn’t help that he’d accidentally made a popular talk show host pass out when he’d applied a sleeper hold on him.

How was Tyler to know the guy was sensitive to the slightest pressure? Had he really sunk into the submission move, that host’s ostrich-like neck probably would have snapped in two.

And the woman from his last serious relationship came after him with a knife. Okay, so it was a plastic butterknife. But the intention was still there.

Kevin continued. “The woman you were supposed to kiss was--”

Before he could finish his statement, a tall redhead stormed through the curtain. Her lips were a rich blood-red color with matching blush streaks going up her cheeks. Her bright blue eye shadow contrasted with her red patent-leather pants, and her white tee shirt strained against her apparently augmented breasts. In the patented angry-woman look, she tapped her strappy black stiletto heel on the floor.

The redhead pointed to the journalist. “She stole my kiss!” She screwed up her baby-doll face.

“Wow. And she talks, too,” the journalist said. She looked at Tyler. “What a bargain.”

Her voice was rich and commanding. Part Lauren Bacall and part Angela Bassett. Articulate. Strong. Sensual. The sound sent a shiver up Tyler’s spine, shaking him even more than hearing the pop, the initial scream from the fans each time they saw him.

The journalist held out her hand to Tyler. “I’m Soledad.”

He accepted her solid handshake. How in the world could a soft hand like hers hurt so much when she’d slapped him? The touch sent a tingle down his fingers and arm. The ache he’d felt earlier miraculously disappeared.

She pulled her hand from his grip and stared at him as though he must have been holding it way too long. Worse than forgetting his cues, he lost his cool.

Still on bended knee, Casanova turned to Wayne. “You know I get into a zone before a match.” He turned to Soledad. “But you’re so beautiful, it’s no wonder I got off track. You could make a referee lose his place in a three-count.”

Soledad remained expressionless. Tyler had at least hoped for a smile, maybe a little color in her cheeks. Nothing. He had lost his touch.

His mind had fixed on the dull ache in his lower back and wondered if it would subside long enough for him to complete his match. The pressure Kevin and Wayne placed on him to be showier, flashier and over-the-top wore on Tyler’s body. However, he had to hold out for a while longer.

Japanese pro-wrestling affiliates wanted either an established name in the business, which Tyler had, or they wanted wrestlers who didn’t give a damn about their health, but instead put on a great show at the risk of their bodies. Tyler wanted to be a perfect combination of the two concepts. Wrestle hard. Retire early. Sounded good. Besides, playing up to the increasingly rich masses was not his style.

"She stole my kiss! I was supposed to be kissed! I was!" The redhead pouted.

Tyler was surprised the planted woman's whining didn't break glass within a five-mile radius and cause dogs to howl. He liked his women strong, assertive, take charge.

"I didn't steal your kiss," Soledad finally said to her. She glanced at Tyler. "If anything, a kiss was stolen from *me*." She smirked.

Tyler jerked to his feet. The way her chin jutted forward, Soledad looked more like she expected him to grovel at her feet. Not going to happen.

"You know most women would find it a privilege to receive Casanova's kiss." He found the Casanova persona easy to slip in and out of that most times he didn't even realize the transition. Fifteen years into the business and he was losing himself.

"I'll be sure to mention that in the article." Soledad nodded. "But I'll leave out the slap." She flipped her hair off her shoulder. "You caught me off guard."

So did Soledad's smile and cute hair flip.

Okay, buddy. Get it together. She's the enemy.

"I'm normally not so irrational." She craned her head to get a peek at his cheek. "I'm aware of what you do in your act. I just didn't expect to be a part of it."

"Apparently." He touched his face. "You got some right hook. But ol' Cass can handle the rough stuff." He winked at her.

Maybe if he acted truly repulsive she would want to bail out of the interview. He could always hope. So he turned up the jerk factor.

"You're very funny." Soledad put her hands on her hips like a gunslinger preparing to duel. Then she lowered them.

"Should have known you weren't the one." Not that he'd minded.

"Why?" Soledad turned to the redhead, who busied herself by admiring her manicured fingernails. "Because I don't look like her?" She turned back to Tyler.

He smiled. "Exactly. The white skirt and top is way too conservative for this place."

He didn't want to mention although Wayne and Kevin were also black, they had never paired him with a black woman. He'd always wondered about their reluctance since he'd never personally objected to kissing any woman. A kiss was a kiss. At least he thought so before his lips touched perfection.

"And since when does Casanova, an Italian soldier, have a distinctly southern accent and dress like a pirate?" she asked.

He waited for Kevin to bail him out, since it was his idea. His boss wasn't talking.

Tyler answered. "Don't you know? Casanova is from southern Italy."

She pursed her lips, but didn't laugh. He smiled and winked at her again. He could feel the sweat rolling between his shoulder blades.

After taking off his bandanna, exposing his shaved head, he wiped his forehead. Her gaze went from his head to his eyes. Her expression remained blank so he couldn't tell if she liked what she saw or was repulsed. Tyler took in a deep breath to purposely pump out his chest.

"Your fans must find your character ... amusing." She fished through her trash bag-sized purse and retrieved a digital recorder.

Amusing? A new word to describe him. Most female reporters used words like sexy, mysterious, passionate. Tyler exhaled, deflating his chest. At the moment, he felt tired, sweaty and nervous.

"What do you think about me?" He had to know how she would try to pursue him.

She looked over at Kevin, not like she wanted to be saved but more like she wanted to

see if he was listening. Then turned to Tyler. "I think it would be better if we concentrate on how to showcase you and the XTCWF in the article."

"Sounds like a great idea," Kevin said with a grin as big as a shady car-salesman's.

Soledad was a rock. Even rocks crumbled under the right pressure. Tyler just had to find the weak spot.

"Are you sure you don't want to concentrate on something else?" He opened his ruffled shirt, and he watched her gaze move down to his chest, then up to his eyes.

"The photographers should be here Sunday, the day of the show." She pointed to him.

"If that's the image you want your fans to see, then I'd say go for it."

Her cool demeanor took Tyler aback. He blinked hard, and it made her smile.

"Will I still get paid at least?" the redhead asked.

Kevin sighed loudly. He pointed down a hallway filled with people to a woman at a table who would pay her the kissing money.

Soledad pointed to the retreating redhead. "Shouldn't you give her your hotel room key before she goes? I would hate to ruin your--" she watched the redhead wiggling down the hallway, waving at some of the wrestlers and crew members, "--planned evening."

"Jealous?" Tyler asked.

"I don't think so."

Soledad looked jealous. Her head tilted, making all of her curly hair rest on her shoulder, and her lips squeezed together the way Jenny Snodgrass's lips had when he'd told her he was taking someone else to the prom. Ah, things were much simpler in Gates High School in North Carolina where he was just another skinny kid in the crowd.

Tyler said, "Your mouth says no, but your eyes say--"

Kevin cut him off. "Cass, lay off the act, okay?" Kevin stood between them.

No, Tyler was determined to give her more of his act. It would keep Soledad from getting to know the real person behind the persona.

He stood nose to nose to Kevin. "If I have to do this, I'm doing it my way."

Kevin grabbed Tyler's arm and pulled him away from Soledad so she couldn't hear them. "So long as you do it. This is it, Cass. Don't mess this up, or it's your ass. Thanks to your reputation, no other major magazine is knocking down our door to interview you, and we need the publicity. Do you know what this magazine has done for other off-the-wall sports?"

He snatched his arm from Kevin's grip and started down a hallway to his dressing room. Even though he'd won his match earlier, at the moment he felt defeated.

"Where are you going?" Soledad asked.

He turned to her. "I got to get changed so I can get out of here. It's going to be hard to leave soon with the fans waiting outside."

Tyler could have sworn he saw a flash of fear snap over her face. Her eyes grew wide and darkened like a scared cat. She blinked enough that she looked like she was caught in a windstorm.

When her face relaxed, she said, "Then I'll go with you." She stomped toward him. "It'll give us an opportunity to--"

"What?" He smiled salaciously at her. Knowing that she could be broken, he wanted to play with her. It wouldn't take her long to tuck her tail between her rounded cheeks and run.

"Talk," she said.

Joan of Arc without the stake and flames epitomized this aggressive woman.

"You're going to come with me to my dressing room?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm supposed to be with you for the full week. But if you don't want me in there because you're hiding something, then--"

He didn't even give her a chance to finish. His actions would either going to scare her away or intrigue her. Putting his hands at the band of his tights, he said, "I might be hiding more than you want to see."

"I'm interested in what's in your head, not what's in your ... tights."

Quick and unflappable. What a dangerous combination.

Tyler continued down the hall, maneuvering around thick, black cables and steel packing crates littering the floor. Soledad followed him inside of his room.

Lockers decorated the walls, and benches sat in front of each group. The stark white walls brought out the red carpeting. He slammed the door behind himself and locked it.

This locker room wasn't so bad. At least it was carpeted and had the shower stalls in the actual locker room. He had been to venues where there were only two shower stalls for fifty wrestlers and no hot water.

Soledad stood by the door as he sat on the bench and unlaced his boots. "It's interesting, the profession you've chosen." She adjusted her shirt on her shoulders. Maybe it was to hide her incredible cleavage popping out at the vee of her top. She probably caught him staring.

"I could say the same for you." He wasn't about to make her job easy.

"I'm only doing this until something better comes along." Soledad gazed around the stuffy locker room.

"Spoken like a true woman."

Soledad rolled her eyes. At least she didn't try to hit him again.

Did all women follow the same handbook for relationships? Bail out when the going got tough. No woman was worth the trouble of risking another heartbreak. At least his job kept him too busy to worry about anything else but wrestling. Damn, there were days his body ached for the company of a good woman.

She sighed, then tugged on one of her curls. "It must be hard on your body."

He furrowed his eyebrows, a reaction he hoped she didn't catch. He thought about his mannerisms. Did he walk hunched over like usual? Did he wince when he sat down? He'd been successful so far in hiding his steadily increasing pain from most of the staff at XTCWF. He would have to disguise the throbbing ache from her for a full week--well, if he decided to let her stick with him. If she wrote about his health in her magazine, it would be "good-bye Japanese affiliates." Damn, he had to get rid of her, quick.

He turned up his persona. "Being with so many women is never hard on my body."

She took a deep breath and wrapped her arms around herself. She looked away. Even he was disgusted by his own bad bravado. But as long as it kept her at bay, it was fine.

As though she read his mind, she continued. "Please stop making pig-headed remarks about women. I don't mind slapping you again." She took a step closer to him. For some reason, it made him step away from her, not out of fear but more to lessen her temptation.

He slammed his bag onto the floor making her stay in her position. He wouldn't open any old wounds for her. "Doesn't matter what you think of me. Maybe your hatred will fuel an interesting article."

"Aren't you interested in showing another side of you beyond your character, beyond what the general public thinks of you?" she asked.

Her expression softened into something almost human, almost normal. The way she cut her eyes down to the floor, looking more pensive than the question seemed to suggest, Soledad

appeared to have a different meaning behind her question. Could the Ice Princess actually have a heart?

Tyler took a step closer to her, then stopped. No. She had to be acting even more than he had in the wrestling ring. He laughed as he pulled down his tights revealing a jock strap underneath. "Lady, I think my fans have seen every side of me."

If she was a real reporter and hanging out with him for a week, she had to take the good with the bad, which included the bad locker rooms and his naked behind. He hoped what *he* thought was good and bad matched her ideas, but he was pretty sure their perceptions weren't the same.

She kept her eyes on his. "The magazine wants the man behind the hero."

He walked up to her, standing mere inches away. "You'll take what I give you." Even at her statuesque height, he still towered over her. He smelled a scent of honey coming from her hair and noticed she had a small freckle on the side of her nose. He swallowed, cut his eyes down, then retreated. "Do you know what *Wrestlebowl* is at least?"

She cleared her throat, then answered. "From what I understand it's a large show featuring all of the XTCWF wrestlers."

Feeling guilty for his caveman attitude, Tyler softened. "I know the company name has a lot of initials. But call it what we all call it. Ecstasy. If you say XTC kind of fast it sounds like that, doesn't it?"

"Are you sure that's the only meaning behind the name?" She clicked on her digital recorder and had it ready for his answer.

He retreated to his locker without answering her probing question. "It's the *Super Bowl* of wrestling. The show is done every July, and this year we're doing it in Virginia Beach, kind of close to where I grew up." He bit the inside of his lower lip. Maybe she wouldn't pick up on his slip about where he grew up.

Soledad said, "Do you really think you should be undressing in front of me?"

"Do you really think you should wear low-cut shirts?" He stripped off his jockstrap and stood completely naked. "Besides, you're the one who invited yourself in here."

"I'll wait outside until you're dressed." She unlocked the door and flung it open.

He heard the rising frustration in her voice. He'd broken her. His heartbeat slowed, and he felt strangely calmed now that this forced interview would end soon.

"Why don't you do one better and keep walking? Won't hurt my feelings." He wasn't trying to shock her. Or maybe he was. He'd been testing her since they'd met. Either way, she folded like that sad, little treehouse he and his brothers had made when he was twelve.

Soledad turned to Tyler. An easy smile graced her perfect face. "I'll just be outside. But when you're dressed, we can talk about your women."

"My women?" He cackled.

She continued. "And the prescription bottle in your gym bag."

He turned and saw the bottle's white cap poking out of the side of his bag.

"Viagra?" She closed the door behind herself.

Now he felt naked for a whole different reason.

Chapter Two

Outside Casanova's dressing room, the noise and activity overwhelmed Soledad almost as much as seeing Casanova's perfect body had. She fanned her face to lower her rising body heat. No way she could extinguish the flame that easily. As soon as she thought about his cobblestone abs, that round behind and his perfect, dangling member, she got hotter than Palm Springs in the summer.

A group of young men wearing blue, black, white and yellow-striped tights, standing a foot away from each other, screamed their conversation. But she felt safer standing in the hallway knowing what headed her way, rather than in the locker room with Casanova where it seemed anything could happen.

Leaning against the door, she cursed under her breath for allowing Casanova to unnerve her. She asserted herself to get in his dressing room knowing that he didn't want her with him. He didn't need to know that the thought of running into a group of fans and possible paparazzi made her feel nauseous. And what a specimen to run from.

Her suspicions about his body were right. Great chest, muscular arms, sculpted legs. White, black, whatever. Color didn't matter. The man was fine. No doubt about that.

After rifling through her purse to find her turquoise Altoids tin, she opened it and popped two mints into her mouth. By now she was used to the strong mint flavor, but it didn't stop the tablets from tingling her tongue. And although it wasn't a big, tasty turkey-burger with extra tomatoes and honey mustard, it would have to do for now.

She wasn't sure if it was the building itself or if it was because of the showers, but a moldy smell hurled through the hallway. Brown water stains vandalized most of the ceiling tiles. No wonder the smell existed.

Soledad had to concentrate to recall the scents from home. Flowers. That was all she could remember. Roses and lilac. Thank goodness the Altoid covered up most of the stench.

Since Soledad stood alone, she took advantage of the opportunity to call her parents. Maybe if they knew of how badly she'd been treated on this job, they would allow her to slide on finishing up her year deal. For the most part, she'd stayed out of the media spotlight. That not only had to have pleased her parents, but it gave Soledad great relief, too.

After the maid answered the phone, she handed it off to one of Soledad's parents. Soledad crossed her fingers and hoped it would be her father.

"Harwood Monroe."

Her heartbeat quickened. She was saved. Her dear father wouldn't let his only daughter, his baby, be tormented for anything.

"Dad, how are you?" She raised her voice over the noise.

"Soledad. It's great to hear from you. How's my little girl?"

She smiled. "Relieved to hear your voice."

"And work? How's that been?"

She put a finger in her free ear to block out the clamor. Soledad pushed out her bottom lip to really punctuate her grief. "Not so good, Dad. The guy I'm interviewing now doesn't like me, and he's giving me a hard time."

Harwood sighed into the phone and paused before he answered. A smile planted on Soledad's face faster than a camera flash. She had him. Her father was putty in her hands.

Instead, Harwood said, "These things happen, sweetie. Sometimes we're stuck with people we don't want to work with or even like. The trick is making it all work for you."

Oh, no. Her mother had gotten to him. Soledad's smile slipped down to her feet. She shifted her weight from one side to another. "Dad, I know what you and Mom are trying to do. I respect that, and Lord knows I needed a good kick in the pants to get me going. I don't mind working." She really didn't. She enjoyed getting out into the masses and putting in an honest day's work. However there was nothing wrong with living either. "I just don't think that this particular assignment is going to work out. Can't Mom find another me spot in her magazine behind the scenes? I can be an editor's assistant or work in PR."

She chewed on her thumbnail, a habit she thought she dropped ten years ago. She hated being in this position, the position of being so needy. The feeling was foreign to her since she'd never had to want for anything before. Now she had the opportunity to break free. If Dad let her slide this time, there would be no more thumbnail feasting.

Harwood sighed again. Two sighs in one conversation. That could be a good thing ... or a bad thing.

He said, "Your mother and I have decided that if you don't see this through, then all financial assistance from us will stop."

Soledad's heart stopped beating for a moment while the words tumbled in her head. *All financial assistance would stop.* No shopping. No clubs. No getting her out of sticky situations. A nervous smile twitched into place. He couldn't mean it. Surely her parents wouldn't leave her to fend for herself like a baby turtle flapping to make it to sea.

Harwood continued. "You have to stick it out at least for a year, until you can prove you can be on your own. You have to learn to grow up, baby girl."

Her heart sank. This time she pouted and it wasn't an act. "I am grown-up. I am responsible. If you let me come home, I can explain to you better about how I feel." She balled her hand into a fist. "Dad, you can't cut me off. Please."

She heard her father adjusting the phone on his end. In a lowered voice he said, "Tell me what you need, and I'll help you."

She closed her eyes and smiled. Yes, she still had the touch.

She turned her head. "Dad, I want to--"

Static rang through the phone.

"Dad? Can you hear me?" The static got louder until it disconnected the call. Reception in the arena must be poor due to the concrete and steel walls. She would call her father again once she was outside. She retreated down the hallway away from the rowdy group and hit what she thought was a wall. Turning, her gaze panned up a broad, heaving chest. When it reached the man's face, she gasped.

If she had collided with him in a dark alley she would have given up her purse, jewelry, shoes and any shred of her virtue that he wanted, no questions asked. His eyes shone brightly against his dark skin, and the width of his body seemed to encompass the entire hallway. Sweat beaded on his smooth head, and his nostrils flared. Soledad hoped he didn't catch her conversation.

The hulking man pointed to the floor in the hallway and then pointed to Casanova's dressing room.

"What?" she asked as the crowd got closer.

The menacing giant motioned again with urgency this time.

She finally understood his cryptic gesturing and without a word she opened Casanova's locker room door, and he followed her. When she was inside, the man closed the door. He looked down at her without smiling. His head almost touched the low ceiling. Under his gaze, though, she didn't feel intimidated. It was as though he was studying her, like she'd shuttled in from some foreign planet, invading his world. At any moment, she knew he would touch her face and hair and ask her to take him to her leader. What world had she stepped into?

Soledad asked, "You're Monk, right?"

He turned around and pointed to his multiplex screen-sized behind, which bore the name "Monk" in gold letters. He faced her again.

"I thought so. I've watched some of your matches." Required for this assignment. Seemed Monk and Casanova have had a love-hate relationship going. They hated each other enough to want to wrestle each other on a regular basis, and they were going to be opponents in *Wrestlebowl*. So why were these two sharing a dressing room?

He nodded and padded across the room. The floor vibrated with each step. His white tights seemed to strain under his girth, and she had never seen boots that big before.

She told him her name and explained her situation, but Monk kept his attention away from her and did not respond. Maybe he was another one of those wrestlers who didn't like reporters either. He went through his locker and packed some of his clothes into a gym bag. Ah, he was using the silent treatment. Nonviolent but still powerful.

"So how long have you been a wrestler?" she asked. She heard the shower start, followed by what could only be Casanova warbling a Willie Nelson song. At least she thought it was Willie Nelson. He sang so badly it could have been James Brown, and she wouldn't have been able to recognize it.

Monk didn't answer, just kept packing. Maybe if she got Monk to talk about himself, he would be nicer.

"Why do they call you Monk?" She stayed by the doorway and kept her arms folded. "Must be that vow of silence," she muttered.

Her cell phone rang, which was a welcome relief. At least it meant that someone wanted to talk to her. Better yet, it could be her father.

"Hey, Soledad. "How is it going so far?"

Heather Peters. Her editor at *Vestige* was the last person Soledad wanted to talk to at the moment. Heather was Soledad's mother's right arm, right leg, left brain and wallet. No doubt her mother must have had her radar up and had Heather give Soledad a nice reminder call about Soledad's mission. Poor Harwood. Outgunned by his wife.

She looked at Monk's wide back as he packed his things in slow motion. "It's ... different. I don't understand why you would think *Vestige* readers would enjoy reading about this guy." Soledad had to appeal to Heather's business sense. Maybe if Soledad convinced her that she would be better off in the office and have some other journalist cover this story, then she could return to her normal life.

"The same reason our readers wanted to read about The Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice and Eminem. He's popular right now."

A knock on the door startled her. She thought about sending Monk, but she'd never been one to get a man to do what she could do for herself. Besides, she could hear young women squealing on the other side. Probably some fans wanting a sight of Casanova coming from the shower. Lord knows she had been hoping to get another glimpse.

Before she could react, a thin, short, balding man with a long, skinny ponytail rushed inside. She thought it had been odd for Casanova to lock the door when he was already backstage. Seeing this man made her understand why he'd done it. Then again why hadn't Monk locked the door when he'd come in? She slammed the door and locked it this time.

"Hello? Soledad, what's going on?" Heather asked.

"I don't know. Some guy is here to see Casanova I guess." She watched the squirrelly-looking man pacing. Monk hadn't turned around yet, and she now wished she had sent him to answer the door. How could Monk not respond to her opening the door or the man pacing in the room? Was his appearance that common?

"Some guy?" Heather questioned. "Knowing you, if he tries anything you'll set him straight. Besides, it's like I told you. Wrestlers tend to act less violent around female reporters so you're safe."

That's the Heather she knew. Bare bones and bottom line. The woman had no maternal instinct whatsoever. Not that Soledad was looking for a mother figure. It would have been nice to feel like someone else had her best interest at heart.

The man took off his jacket and laid it on the bench. His white tee shirt and sweat shorts accentuated his sinewy body. He disappeared around a wall.

"Sounds like you have things under control, kid. I'll talk to you later," Heather said.

Before Soledad could say another word, Heather disconnected. For once, it would have been nice for Heather to hear her thoughts and concerns.

But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep. Robert Frost. Not a bad selection.

The shower stopped, and fortunately, so did the singing. Casanova emerged wearing a towel around his waist, his body glistening with water droplets, while the strange man followed behind him. Blessed be, Casanova looked even better wet. He may have been a stubborn jerk, but he still made her knees knock.

Soledad turned her gaze to the most unappealing thing in the room: squirrelly man. She had to get her mind off of Casanova's body. That was a feat in itself, but she would be strong. She had to be. She'd married men with perfect bodies. That was the old Soledad. She wouldn't be thinking about boyfriends, marriage or cake with heavy, buttercream frosting.

The stranger placed something in Casanova's hand that looked like a pill, which Casanova popped into his mouth and gulped down with water.

Could this be his supplier? Could be an interesting angle for the article. Maybe it was Ecstasy. Maybe that was the real reason why the wrestlers nicknamed the company Ecstasy. She was sure his fans didn't know anything about this. And she could be the one to break the story. Excitement flooded her body. Her face pulled tight in a wide grin.

Oh, no. Could she actually like this work now? She shook her head.

After pulling out her pad and pen, at the top of the page she wrote 'possible drug user' and underlined it three times. She imagined this was what Barbara Walters must feel like whenever she had managed to get a celebrity to cry on camera, the feeling like she tapped into something. Her heart thrummed.

"That felt good. Nothing like a hot shower after a hard day's work." Casanova peered over at her, his hazel eyes steely as ever. "So you've returned."

The disappointment in his voice was not lost on her. She needed to make up for the ground she'd lost.

He continued. "And I see you've met Monk."

"I tried to talk to him, but it looks like he's a little shy," she said.

"Shy? He's not shy." He put his hand on Monk's shoulder, and the giant turned around. He smiled and embraced Casanova. The embrace almost seemed brotherly and it reminded her of her two brothers. Why couldn't her parents pay more attention to that duo instead of her?

Monk made a series of hand gestures that looked like he was simulating some wrestling moves. The pieces were falling into place now as she watched him. She should have noticed it earlier.

"You're staying with me tonight, right?" Casanova asked him.

Monk nodded his head again and rubbed his stomach.

"You're always hungry, you big ox."

Soledad relaxed knowing that Monk's previous silence wasn't to snub her. Had she been the perceptive reporter that she should have been, she would have realized that Monk was deaf long before Casanova appeared.

Monk waved to the mysterious man who smiled quickly and stretched his arms over his head. Then Monk pointed to her as she stood in a corner.

"Oh, that's Sol-- Sol-- I'm sorry, honey. Can you say your name?" He said "honey" in that condescending, sexist way that made her want to call him "sweetie" in that same tone. See how he liked it. Instead she chose to be professional.

"Don't call me honey. And it's Soledad. It's Spanish for--"

He interrupted her again. "That's too much of a mouthful for me. Your hair is, um, bright like the sun. So we'll just call you Sunny." Casanova turned to Monk. "Monk, this is Sunny. She writes for that magazine you like."

She'd been called a lot of names in her life, but Sunny was not one of them. "My name is not Sunny. It's Soledad. If you have a problem with it, call me Ms. Monroe."

Nicknames implied intimacy and she would not be intimate, literally or otherwise, with this man.

This was a job, and he was making this way too personal. Besides, cracks about a dye job her hairdresser had said looked fierce but she wasn't so sure about made her aware that her initial instinct about the brassy 'do was right on. The radical new look changed her standard appearance, her Monroe look. Maybe that was why she didn't mind the color so much.

Monk balled his hand into a fist and circled it on his chest over his heart.

"What is he apologizing for?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?" Casanova asked.

"The sign he made means 'to apologize.' What's he sorry for?"

"You know sign language?"

The surprise in Casanova's voice raised the hairs on neck. Why were people constantly underestimating her? "Believe it or not."

"I thought all you knew was shopping. Or am I off the mark on that, too?"

Oh, yes. A slow and painful death. That's what this punk deserved.

Casanova continued before Soledad could respond. "Monk lost his hearing when he was about fifteen years old. He's never learned real sign language. He just points and stuff. He makes up his own symbols. That's his symbol for you. I think he likes you. You're lucky he can't hear you."

Soledad could almost envision her hands around this jerk's neck, squeezing until he begged her for mercy. What was it about Casanova that brought out her worst? Even through all of her failed relationships, and she'd had plenty, she'd never felt this much animosity toward

another person.

She began to ask, "If he lost his hearing so late in life, surely he can--"

But Casanova cut her off. "Talk? He can. He chooses not to. And as big as Monk is, whatever he wants to do we let him do it."

Monk ducked into the shower area leaving a silent Casanova and equally tight-lipped squirrely man with her.

Casanova tightened the towel around his waist.

She had lost ground with him. She would have to do some fancy footwork to get in his good graces, especially since it seemed like she couldn't get out of this job without damaging herself financially. "I'm sorry for walking out earlier."

He peered down into her eyes as if he was judging her. "I'm surprised you're here. A prissy little thing like you should be in an office somewhere, not down in the trenches with us regular folks."

Even he recognized how uncomfortable she was with this. So since she hated this and he hated this, she could make a compromise with him to interview him tonight and skip hanging out with him for the week. Casanova would go for that. And Heather wouldn't have to know. Her parents wouldn't know. No one would find out.

Casanova plopped down on his belly on the floor with his arms at his side, palms facing upward. Somehow he managed to keep the towel wrapped securely around his waist. A part of her wanted it to fall open. The man brought out the voyeur in her.

Down on his knees, the stranger straddled Casanova's muscular torso and rubbed his hands over his flesh. Casanova groaned, but kept still as the man performed his magic.

"You're too rough on your body, Cass." He kneaded Casanova's pale skin.

"It's the nature of the business, man. But I can't stop doing it. It's in my blood."

"But in your condition--"

"Hey, Doc, did you meet Sunny over there?" He flipped his head to the side and looked pointedly at her. "She's a reporter."

"Oh, I see." Doc looked over at her and nodded.

"Hiding something from me?" She tried to charm him the way he had been trying to charm her. "Have anything to do with those pills?"

He didn't answer.

"You look familiar," Doc said as he made quick glances to Soledad. "I know you, no?"

"No, you don't know me." Soledad turned away. Reality smacked her in the face again. That famous face. Her famous name.

Doc stood with his feet on either side of Casanova's waist. He leaned down and placed his hands on Casanova and like a gymnast swung his feet into the air and braced them against the wall. He walked his hands down the other man's back. With each step Casanova moaned like he was exorcising ghosts of pain and torture from his body. Was wrestling that hard on him? She almost felt sorry for Casanova. But how sorry could she feel for a man who made his living kissing women?

The moans had a surprising affect on her. He sounded like he was making love. A fleeting image of Casanova's naked body on top of hers crossed her mind as she thought of her own hands kneading him, grabbing his shoulders, tasting his flesh.

What was she doing? *Get it together, girl.* Think, think, think.

Quote the raven, nevermore! Poe. Always a sexual downer.

The massage session lasted about thirty minutes and ended with Doc snapping

Casanova's neck by twisting his head from one side to the other. As though she understood some unspoken rule, she didn't ask Casanova any questions during the session. She felt like she would have been infringing on his special time and decided to leave him alone. Besides, being in a loud arena for hours and treating his body like a rag doll that had been dragged behind a bicycle, the man deserved some quiet time.

Monk stepped out of the shower area fully clothed. He turned down Doc's offer for a massage. From his grimace, it looked like he may have had a bad experience with it. Doc grabbed his jacket and exited the dressing room as quickly as he had entered.

Soledad stared at Monk sitting on the bench tying his sneakers. He was her story. A successful deaf African-American professional wrestler. Instead she was going to write about a man whom she did not feel was being honest with her.

"What a shame," she said out loud.

"Please don't say you feel sorry for him because he's deaf." Casanova shook his head and looked as though he had been defending Monk, his friend, for years. "Monk does just fine. He tells me he's glad he's deaf, so he doesn't have to listen to all the jerks in the world."

With the same ease he had while undressing in front of her, he got dressed. She tried hard to look away from his perfectly sculpted body, although her neck ached in attempting to stop her head from turning for a second show.

Casanova had muscles everywhere. They looked to be obtained from hard work rather than working out in a gym. Hard, rugged, real, approachable.

And she was fairly certain he had seen her look down at his penis briefly when he removed his jock strap. What did he expect? If he was going to show, then she was going to look. Unfortunately, he had nothing to be embarrassed about. Aside from his gruff demeanor, Soledad had to find another feature that turned her off of this ... this ... pro wrestler. That was it.

She continued. "Yes, Monk is smart. But that's not what I was talking about." She paused. "I'm with a magazine that is supposed to celebrate people of color and their achievements. And here I am, doing an article on, well--"

"A white guy?"

"I wanted to be more tactful than that, but yes. Unfortunately I think I know why my editor wants me to do this. Because *you* sell magazines, and someone like Monk wouldn't sell as many." Maybe laying out the facts would make Casanova realize that she should do the article on Monk.

"Oh. Yeah, you might be right. Sad, but true," Casanova said, shaking his head like he was about to give a eulogy.

"I can't believe you think you are such a hot commodity that you don't think twice about anyone else."

"Hold on there, honey." His voice boomed. "You just got here, and you're making a whole lot of snap judgments that aren't all true. Yes, I would sell more magazines because my *character* is more popular than Monk's. But that's all a crapshoot. We can't predict what the fans will like from day to day." He put his hands on his hips and it reminded her of his flat abs. "And another thing, Monk is my best friend. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't even be here. So don't you ever think that I would treat him badly or assume I believe I'm better than him because he's black and I'm white. You don't know anything about me." He stepped up to her again and stared into her eyes. "But you'll learn." He winked.

Soledad smelled mint and couldn't tell if it was the Altoids in her mouth or if the scent emanated from his. She could tell she was getting to the man behind the character when he

talked about Monk. His southern drawl got deeper. Then he reverted to his character with that wink. It was as though the Casanova character was some sort of security blanket for him, and he felt comfortable clutching it and dragging it around.

"I've been around different people all of my life. I've realized that nothing shocks me and everyone supports the stereotypes that they are," she said.

"*You're* talking about stereotypes? Honey, you've done nothing but judge me, this business and everything around me since you've gotten here. Now you need to step down off your soapbox and take a look at yourself."

"I'm going to learn about life from you?" She laughed and ran her fingers through her wild mane. She was interested in people with life experiences beyond a wrestling ring.

"You've got to learn from someone." He pulled his championship belt out of his bag and approached her. "Come on. Time for lesson number one." He grabbed her hand, and she snatched it away.

"Where are you going now?" She crossed her arms over her chest. She didn't know what type of women he was used to dealing with that would allow him to drag them all over the place, but she wasn't that type.

"I want to show you something." He unlocked the door and held it open. The activity that had been in the hallway before had disappeared. Good thing because she felt a little nervous right before he'd opened the door.

A white XTCWF tee shirt covered his chest. On the front it had a collage of all of the major wrestlers with his picture in the middle, and on the back it read "Kickin' Ass All Over The Country!" in bright red and orange. His gray sweat shorts went midway down his perfectly toned thighs.

"You want to show me something out there?" She tried to look calm but her stomach flipped. Was this man going to embarrass her in front of his colleagues to prove something?

"Yeah. You want to know about my wrestling life--"

"As quickly as possible." She interjected. She would keep up her assertive attitude to keep him at a distance. Maybe if she showed she wasn't a pushover, he wouldn't try anything.

"--then you need to see and feel it all." He scanned her from her hair down to her feet. "Maybe you should change. Some shorts and stuff."

She shook her head. "I'm not changing my clothes." She wanted her life, and he wanted her to get too involved.

"Come on, Sunny. Follow me."

"It's Soledad."

He marched down the hallway, his belt slung over his shoulder, to the backstage area where she'd been formally introduced to him.

He stood at the black curtain that led to the arena. Soledad crept to Casanova's side.

He held his hands up, his fingers framing her face. "Now I want you to imagine you're a wrestler."

"Ha!" She barked and put her hands on her hips.

"I guess that means you have the picture in your head." He looked her over again as he'd done in the dressing room. "Honey."

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"That would be a perfect wrestling name for you. Honey."

"I don't believe this." She raised her hands in the air in exasperation. This was more than embarrassing. It was ludicrous. Did everyone in the wrestling business think that they

could mold people into some sexed-up image? She was no one's play toy. And she was no performer. She had to admit, the name was better than the nickname the media had adopted for her, So Mo. She gritted her teeth thinking about abbreviated abomination.

Casanova continued. "So you're standing here about to start your match. Your pyro is going off. Your music is blaring. And there's a crowd of about twenty thousand people chanting your name. Honey! Honey! Honey!"

She scanned the faces of the other performers around them, a little embarrassed that Casanova was carrying on this way. Some of the stagehands looked at her like she was a new talent Casanova was grooming for the next show. The fact that they didn't laugh at the idea strangely comforted her. She felt included for the first time.

"Then you open on the curtain." He parted the black, heavy tarp to an empty arena. The production crew milled around the ring as the arena lights scorched the place in lighting harsher than in a Nordstrom's dressing room.

Soledad followed him down the steel ramp that led to the ring. She saw the burnt spots on the grating where the explosives must have been detonated. The smoky, sulfuric stench stung her nose.

A weight jerked her shoulder down. Turning to him, the glitter of his belt caught her eye. "You're the champ." He winked.

She turned away from him. If this was how he impressed women, it was not working on her. At least she didn't want it to. In the huge arena and with the shiny, massive championship belt, she felt powerful. Her heart pounded in a strange, rhythmic excitement each time she inhaled the worn leather from the belt.

"So then you walk down this ramp." He moved at a slow and steady pace. "But you have to play up to the crowd." He turned his head from one side to the next, throwing mock waves and kisses. He turned to her. "I'm Casanova. The women expect that."

"I see." She met him at the bottom of the ramp at the ring. The ring was a lot bigger and more intimidating than she had imagined.

He jumped on the apron and grabbed the ropes for support. He slipped himself through the top and second ropes.

As though she was being lured into the bright ring, she climbed the steps and walked on the apron without prompting. He stepped on the bottom rope to bring it down and pulled up on the second rope so she could climb through easier.

Inside the ring was a whole different feeling. Soledad was in the middle of it all. She could see from the nosebleed section down to the ringside seats. The lights over the ring made the mat look even brighter. She examined the canvas mat and could see brown spots. Blood stains. Old blood stains.

Her stomach churned, and for a split second she felt light-headed. She kept her eyes on his, another daunting feat considering that his intense stare felt like he was examining her soul.

"Now hold your belt up." Casanova raised his own hand in the air.

Right now she didn't feel like a champion. She felt like a little girl playing dress-up. "I'm not doing that." She slid the heavy, black leather belt with gold and silver plate off of her shoulder.

Casanova held her wrist and raised it so that the belt was over her head. "The crowd has to see you holding up your belt. They want to take your picture. They want to see that you're proud of your championship."

She stared at him holding her arm up. Him viewing her like a champ warmed her heart, a

strange feeling since she didn't really know this man. No man had ever looked at her as strong and fearless. He also rendered her speechless. He took his belt from her and laid it on the mat behind him. He faced her and stared.

"At this point we would be trash talking to each other. You would tell me you're going to kick my behind all over DC, and I would say something like that to you. Of course, if I were wrestling you, I would let you win."

The fearlessness spilled over into her psyche. If she wanted, she could do anything. She had to show this man that. "You wouldn't have to let me win."

"That's what I mean. Trash talking. You got it."

And now he was going to get it. She stepped one foot behind his leg, grabbed his shoulders and knocked him onto the mat with a loud thud. The milling crew stopped long enough to see her standing over Casanova's body as he propped himself on his elbows.

"Good move." He huffed. "Where did you learn that?"

"Self-defense class in college." She liked standing over him. She felt so powerful. And now that a crowd was watching, she felt almost indestructible. She could understand some of the lure for wrestling. The adulation. The fans. The strength.

"You took self-defense in college?" he asked.

"I taught it." She put her hand out to help him to his feet. She had to be a gracious winner. He accepted her hand and brought himself up. Once he stood though, he twisted her arm behind her in a chicken wing move and slid his other arm around her waist.

The way he held her arm loosely, lower than the move required, she could tell he wasn't trying to hurt her. On the other hand it was obvious he wanted her to see that he was dominant.

"Let's see you get out of this one," he growled in her ear. The real and true question was did she want to get out of the hold. She closed her eyes briefly and reclined her head so that it rested on his shoulder. His hold around her waist tightened.

She opened her eyes and saw the crew had stopped working and paying attention to them. Some of them even sat on chairs to watch. She could see the marquee now: "Casanova vs. Honey. The Brawl for it All!" As much as Casanova made her a voyeur, she wasn't an exhibitionist.

He pressed his solid body against her. She could feel his heat through her clothes, and his hot breath cascaded down her face as his head hovered over her shoulder. The move was in no way sexual. So why did she want to rip his clothes off and have him bathe her in kisses?

"She won't be able to get out of that one," she overheard a crewmember saying to one of his coworkers.

His statement snapped her to reality. Soledad was there to do a job. How did this man manage to break her? She balled her free hand into a fist and with her arm in a ninety-degree angle, she jabbed her elbow into Casanova's stomach.

The small crowd gasped as they watched their hero struggling to catch his breath. As he was bent over, she stepped forward, grabbed his hand and she twisted it behind him into the same chicken wing hold.

"Ready to give up?" she asked, feeling pretty confident.

"I've never given up in a fight yet, and I'm sure not going to start now." He said it low enough for only her to hear. He wasn't showing off to the crew. He was talking only to her and it felt strangely ... intimate. Soledad knew he wouldn't have treated a male reporter this way, although she hadn't expected him to wrestle with her either.

With ease, he brought his arm down to break the hold, grabbed her around her waist,

twisted his body and took them both down onto the mat. To her surprise, he executed the move in a gentle fashion, like he was protecting her. He laid his body on top of hers, not across her body like he was pinning her, but lengthwise, positioning his legs on the outside of hers and laying his chest on top of hers.

She could feel the heat rushing to her face and neck. She was in the middle of a wrestling ring, lights over their bodies and a crowd watching. She'd lost triumphantly to the best in the biz. She couldn't feel too bad about that. And she got to fulfill a dream of some men and most women, to brawl with Casanova. What she did feel bad about was the fact that she had an audience watching.

"Oh, man! The Kiss-of-Death finishing move! Didn't see that one coming!" a young man outside of the ring yelled.

"Okay, you won. Get up." She felt uncomfortable being under him in the middle of the ring, on top of the blood spots, with her skirt now above her knees.

He looked into her eyes. A smile drifted at the corner of his mouth. He loved this. She, however, hated being underneath his taut, surprisingly clean-smelling body.

"Just remember that if you ever try to get one over on ol' Cass." He nodded.

"What's going on here?" Kevin screamed so loud that his voice echoed off of the arena walls, a fantastic feat considering the size of the arena and Kevin's thin frame. The small audience got on their feet and continued breaking down the set. Casanova rose and offered his hand to her, which she ignored and stood on her own accord.

"I was just showing her some of my moves." Casanova opened the ring ropes as he had done before and she crept through them.

"She saw them when she watched the match earlier. Now get your things. The car is ready for you." Kevin adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses and strolled up the ramp.

She stared at Casanova in the ring. He picked up his belt, looked around the ring like a kid leaving for college, fell on the mat and rolled under the ropes.

After running to catch up with her, Casanova said, "I hope I didn't hurt you in there."

He hadn't, but he'd made her drop her guard and feel safe. She had to be careful not to get too comfortable. She had to get through this as quickly as possible.

Soledad replied, "You didn't. I hope I didn't hurt you when I jabbed you."

He put his hand to his chest. "If you were aiming for my heart, you missed."

"I didn't think you had a heart."

"You're wrong. It's a soul I don't have." He strolled up the ramp, passing her. He turned and said, "Give up now. You have your interesting story."

Chapter Three

Outside of the arena, the path to the limousine was a cross between a war zone and “Night of The Living Dead.” All Soledad saw were faces, crying, screaming, moaning faces. They all wailed for Casanova. He was their god and making the pilgrimage to the car caused her stomach to clench into a tight ball. Maybe Casanova had taken her with him to make her a human sacrifice. She had but one life to give to her *Vestige* readers. Clawing, fake red fingernails pulled at her, and she was sure that the rip she heard was her arm being yanked out of its socket.

Soledad wasn’t the type of woman to clutch a man when she was scared, but she wanted security. She wanted to wrap her arms around Casanova’s neck and have him save her. She wished she had gotten her own car and driver instead of agreeing to let XTCWF pick her up from the airport. She would have gotten away from a chaotic scene like this much easier. Since Casanova had a habit of ducking out of interviews, she would have also lost out on a story--and her desired lifestyle.

Casanova shielded her with his tree trunk arms without pushing any of his fans. “Get off of her!”

Relief swept over her, but it felt strange to feel so safe with this stranger. He didn’t know her, and he protected her like she was the president. She was looking way too hard into this. He was a celebrity protecting the journalist hired to write a story about him. Maybe Kevin warned Casanova to be nice to her.

Casanova deposited her into the limo and followed her inside. He ordered the driver to go, and from the urgency in his voice, she couldn’t tell if he was also afraid or afraid for her.

Soledad was tired of this life. With her parents, she’d lived the existence of being under the public eye. Money changed everything.

The world is too much with us, late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers. Wordsworth knew what he was talking about.

When Soledad sat in the limo, she moved over to allow for some buffer space. “Thank you for helping me with the crowd.” She almost slipped and asked if Casanova wanted to consider working security for her family, but as much as he hated her, Soledad wasn’t sure he would be willing to throw his body in front of every obstacle.

With ease, as if he’d done it before, Casanova brushed a curl from her face. She shrugged her head away from him.

“Please don’t do that.” She had to make some ground rules up front. No pet names. No touching. No shit. So far he was doing everything he could to break those rules.

“I was just being nice.”

Soledad couldn’t see his facial expression, but he seemed sincere. She also knew he had to have an agenda. Everyone did.

“Would you groom another wrestler? Or if Matt Lauer were sitting here, would you brush a strand of hair from his face?” She folded her arms.

“I might.” He lifted her sleeve ripped at the shoulder, putting it back in its original position as though he was trying to make it less noticeable. So that’s what ripped.

She sighed and cocked her head. "I wish you would ... uh, never mind."

He leaned closer to her. "Tell me what you want." He said it in a seductive way.

Soledad stared at him, the lights along the interstate illuminating his face in intervals.

One moment he was dark and unrecognizable. The next he was all pure and light.

She shook her head. She had to remain focused. Rule number one of being a journalist. Always get your story. At least, that was what her mentor had taught her weeks before she'd started working for one of her mother's magazines.

"It would be nice to get to talk to the real you."

The smile dropped from his face. "That's not very interesting. And it's not what people want. They want to read about a player. A larger-than-life character." He raised his arms in the air, his fingers brushing against the ceiling of the limo. "I'm Casanova, baby. Once this is all said and done, I'll have you so in love with me that you'll be asking me to marry you."

Soledad trembled. So he did know about her and her past seven marriages. Why did he act like he didn't know who she was? Was he just toying with her? He had to have been. Part of Casanova's act was to ask a woman to marry him in front of the fans and turn her down.

"Why? To give you a chance to turn me down? I don't think so. I don't want to be a part of your act." She could feel her fury building inside of her and took a deep breath to extinguish the building fire.

"Too late, Sunny."

She hated to admit it to herself, but he was right. The audience had seen the kiss. The televised audience saw it. Photographers caught it on film. Whether she wanted to admit or not, she would be a part of XTCWF's history. A notch on Casanova's belt.

"It's Soledad. Nothing's going to happen between us except for an interesting interview."

"Interesting? That's a word with potential. Means something might happen." He flittered his eyebrows suggestively à la Groucho Marx.

She almost laughed, but she bit the inside of her cheek to prevent it. How had he done it? A minute before he'd frustrated her. Must be his gift of charm.

"That's not what I meant." She smoothed her hands over her skirt.

"So what's your problem with me?" he interrupted her.

"I'm more attracted to finding out the deal with that little pill you took back in the locker room." She knew if she wanted to find out anything about him she had to catch him off guard. She'd gotten him to slip out of his Casanova character once. Maybe she could catch him again.

"If that turns you on, then you need to get out more." He chuckled.

He wasn't breaking. At least not yet. He would have to crack some time. And to see this man unravel would be worth it to hang out with him for a week.

"So tell me, then. Why don't you like to be interviewed?" Soledad wasn't thinking about the article. Knowing the reason would give her a great topic to discuss with her girlfriends.

"I never said that." He laid his arm on the back of the seat, and it brushed her hair. She sat up straighter, trying hard not to have him touch her. It was bad enough that she couldn't get his naked image out of her head. And looking into his hazel eyes was an even bigger mistake. He was definitely a charmer. God, Husband Number Two had had great eyes, too.

"You run away from interviews," Soledad said, before blurting she wanted to take a trip to Vegas for a quickie wedding.

"I don't run. If I don't like where the interview is going, I walk. No different than if you

go to a doctor and you leave if you don't like the way he treats you. Oh, I mean if you can't find the right shoes to go with your expensive handbag, then you'll leave the high-end boutique." He moved himself closer. "If I feel like the interview is not going anywhere, I'll stop it."

The threat lingered over her head like a swarm of bees. Soledad wanted to blast him for his assumption about her spending style, but instead clamped her mouth shut. She had to stop being so argumentative with him and act like she wanted his story. It was only the first few hours, and he was already threatening to walk. Not a good sign.

She forced a smile, showing so many teeth that he moved back from her. Another bad sign. Her insincerity scared a professional wrestler.

* * * *

He was known as the Ditch King of the Interviews. Secretly, Tyler smiled at that. He'd gotten a reputation for walking out of interviews. Fine. He was left alone, which was what he wanted. That was until Kevin told him that he needed a boost to his character.

"Have you noticed how much attendance for our shows has dropped? Why do you think that is, Cass?" Kevin had asked him. Didn't take a genius to figure out what he meant. Casanova wasn't pulling in the crowds like he used to.

He'd been wrestling for the company for over ten years. It was hard to come up with new material every year, although the kissing bit had lasted longer than he thought. Now he needed something else to carry him. He was getting too old to try something new. And he wasn't about to leave the business he had given up so much of his life to be in.

He glanced at Soledad. The moonlight that filtered into the limo made her look like an angel. Like it or not he needed her. He needed the story to help his career. He couldn't tell what her angle was. She hung onto him like this was important to her, too.

Once they got to the hotel, Tyler held open the limo door for Soledad. His mama would have worn out his behind if he hadn't. Soledad gave him a barely audible thank you as the driver retrieved her luggage from the trunk.

He held open the hotel door for her, and she whisked by him, still smelling of honey and a light flowery scent he couldn't quite put his finger on. She arrived at the counter first and started talking to the front-desk clerk to check into her room.

He stood next to her, gazing at her as he checked into his own room. "I had reservations under the name of..." He glanced at her to make sure she didn't catch his hotel name, the name he used only when he was checking into a hotel so that fans couldn't track him down. He turned his head and whispered the name. "...Patrick Henry." He was in Virginia. He had to be appropriate.

The clerk smiled and nodded while typing on his keyboard.

"So we'll meet up in the morning, right?" Soledad asked as her clerk typed on her keyboard as well. She held up her torn sleeve as she stood at the counter.

"Sure." He knew she had to be embarrassed by the rip. He knew how to handle his exuberant fans, but for as tough as Soledad seemed, she hadn't fared as well. And no matter how hard she tried to cover, she was no struggling writer. He could tell by the way she carried herself, the way she smelled, her manicured fingernails. Something about her was special, different. She was classy, like from old money kind of classy. And she looked so familiar.

She nodded. "What time?"

"In the morning." Since she would be in another room, it would be easy to break from her. As much as he needed the publicity, he wanted his privacy more. She wasn't the one to write his story. It was a shame, though. Something in the way she looked at him, her passion,

her inquisitive nature, told him that she could write a great article.

“What time?” she asked again.

“Oh, you know. Uh, early. I jog. And I have something to do in the morning.” He wasn’t going to lie to her. He would be evasive. Soledad’s clerk got her attention before she could press for more concrete details.

“What do you mean you don’t have my reservation?” Soledad set her purse on the counter. “My magazine was supposed to coordinate hotel stays with him.” She pointed to Tyler but didn’t look at him.

The attendant looked over to her colleague’s computer screen. “His reservation is for two guests. Perhaps they thought you would be staying with--”

Tyler cut in. “Monk stays with me.” He stared at Soledad.

Her jaw set in hard. “Can I get another room?”

The attendant shook her head. “I’m sorry. We’re all booked up tonight.”

“Can you all check with another hotel nearby to see if they have any rooms?” Tyler asked. Separating from her would be easier than he thought, especially since he had his appointment in the morning. She definitely couldn’t tag along.

“No. I don’t want to go to another hotel.” Soledad swerved her attention back to him. “I don’t want to get separated.”

He heard the desperation in her voice. She must really want to keep on top of him.

Don’t do it, man. Keep business and personal separate.

Monk stomped into the hotel. The Goliath even made the floor vibrate there as he had done in the locker room. Monk held his hand out to Tyler for the room key. Tyler handed him a card and showed him the room number on the card holder. Monk nodded and headed to the elevator. Tyler would have gone up also if he wasn’t so concerned about Soledad. She looked lost standing at the counter with her luggage by her feet, her purse on the counter, and her wide doe eyes screaming for help, although she didn’t say a word. Even when she acted strong she seemed vulnerable.

She sighed, then put her hands to her hips. “I’ll stay with you.” She pointed to Tyler.

Not what he wanted to hear. He blinked and looked over at the clerk, who only raised his eyebrows at him as though he was saying, “Way to go.”

Not exactly how he saw this whole thing playing out. “I didn’t extend the offer.”

Batting her long, dark eyelashes she said, “Come on, Casanova. You wouldn’t let a woman sleep out in the street, would you?”

Damn.

He gritted his teeth and forced a smile. “So is that who you want? You want Casanova? I thought you wanted the man behind the hero.”

She slung her purse on her shoulder, picked up her luggage, and headed to the elevator. “I want whoever is going to give me a warm bed for the night.”

He stood stunned. No woman, except for his mama, had ever tried to overpower him. Who was this force of nature?

The elevator doors opened, and she stepped inside as he strolled to her, his bag in his hand and a little weary of the implications of her staying with him, even if it was for one night. Would she want to do this every night that they were together?

“Are you coming?” Her hand held the door open as he stood on the other side.

He attempted to take a step into the mirrored car, but stepped back. His heart raced faster than in any match he had ever competed in or even after his jogs. He took a deep breath and

thought about his family, his work, his friends. Anything to calm down. He glanced over his shoulder back at the front desk just as a trickle of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

"I forgot something." He nodded behind him. "At the desk." He gave her his room number and key, knowing that Monk wouldn't hear her knocking. "I'll see you upstairs."

He went back to the front desk. After asking some questions about getting some dinner, Tyler zoomed in for the real reason for his desk return. "Were you serious about there being no more rooms here? You don't have just one?"

The desk clerk clicked some keys on his keyboard and stared at the screen. He sighed and shook his head. "Nothing, sir. Uh, your show has caused us and a lot of other hotels to be booked up."

Tyler cursed. Although the article would have been nice, he'd decided after the stint with her in the ring, he couldn't have her following him around. He felt like there was something about her that she wasn't revealing and it bothered him.

"If you get a room--"

"Yes, sir. I understand. You'll be the first to know."

He turned and looked for a door marked stairs. When he found it, he bolted inside and took the steps by twos. He didn't want her talking to Monk without him. Monk, for a person who didn't speak, had an amazing ability to tell all of his business to anyone who asked. By now, Monk was probably telling her about his fear of elevators. He moved faster.

* * * *

The room oozed extravagance with its plush green carpet, tan couches, a wide plasma-screen TV, an actual dining room and a kitchen. When Soledad looked around the corner of the living room, she found a large conference room. The room was too much for the *three* of them let alone one person. She wondered whether Casanova stayed in this hotel to impress women, as though a fancy hotel room and room service could sway her.

The picturesque hotel was beautiful. When the limo had rolled up to the pillared front door, she thought she'd been transferred back to the 1800s, and this was their Monticello. The resort he chose was sensual and romantic. She wondered if a place like this was Casanova's choice. And if it was his choice, was it Casanova or his real side that picked this place? Was it an act or genuine?

She set her bags down on the couch and collapsed down next to them. She couldn't believe that she had actually been so bold as to invite herself to stay with Casanova. That wasn't really her style, but she didn't want to let this catch go. He was going to be her ticket to her life again. When she'd asked him about the arrangements for the day, he'd seemed a bit cagey with the answers. He wanted to run. She could feel it in her bones. Not this time. She wasn't about to give up shopping, traveling and clubbing.

Monk came out of a back room and jumped when he saw her. A smile swept over his face as he motioned like he was adjusting an imaginary necktie.

"A tie? Are you looking for a tie?" she asked. He shook his head and motioned again. What was he doing? The pantomime way of expression didn't make sense, like playing charades twenty-four/seven. How could Casanova stand that?

Monk did it again, then pointed to her. She scrunched her eyebrows trying to figure out his gesturing when a knock stopped her concentration. She signaled that there was a knock on the door, and she jumped up to answer it. After looking out of the peephole, she opened the door to let in Casanova. His face looked flushed like he had taken a run around the spacious golf course before coming to the room.

“Did you make yourself at home?” He set down his bags and nodded to Monk.

“I wanted to wait and see what you wanted to do as far as the bedroom is concerned. I think Monk has already taken his room.” She didn’t want to assume that Casanova would let her have the bedroom. This would be a test to see what kind of person, or rather man, he was.

“You have the bedroom.” He pointed down a hallway with such a familiar sense it made apparent he had stayed in the hotel before. “I’ll stay out here on the couch.”

She opened her mouth to object but he stopped her. “I don’t mind sleeping here.” He set his bag next to the couch. “As long as it’s for only one night.” A gentle reminder she needed to have her act together for the rest of the week.

She would have called Heather to ask her why it was that she didn’t have a place to sleep on her very first night with Casanova. At two o’clock in the morning, she knew Heather wouldn’t have been too forthcoming with the information.

It hit her. What if Heather had planned this the whole time? What if Heather purposely failed to make the reservation because she suspected Soledad would invite herself to stay with Casanova? Or worse yet. What if Heather was told by Soledad’s mother not to make Soledad’s reservation to see if she could survive on her own? When would her parents stop testing her and let her be who she wanted to be?

“But since you’re here, I guess there is something that the three of us can do together.” Casanova rubbed his hands like one of those silent film villains. He needed the pencil-thin moustache and train tracks to tie her to, to complete the look.

She sighed. Suddenly the idea of staying in the same hotel room with him looked to be a bad decision.

Error is force that welds men together; truth is communicated to men only by deeds of truth. She was reciting Tolstoy. That was a bad sign.

Usually these literary phases calmed her down, rather than stirring her.

“Eating.” Casanova clapped his hands. “We can order room service. I talked to the guy at the desk. He’ll open the kitchen for us.”

She relaxed her shoulders. “I’m starving.” She patted her stomach.

“You hungry, Monk?” she asked.

He nodded and rubbed his stomach also.

Soledad continued. “We could go down to the restaurant downstairs.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Casanova laughed and stood erect.

“Why? Because it’s so late?”

“That’s part of it. The other part is we can’t eat in public in peace. Right, Monk?”

Monk nodded and curled his fingers like claws. He motioned like an animal to Soledad.

“That bad, huh?”

Monk nodded and pointed to her shirtsleeve. He acted out a sewing motion to Casanova who responded by grabbing the big man’s hands. Casanova shook his head and kept his lips shut tight. What was that about?

Monk removed his hands from his and walked over to the desk next to the large window. He picked up the room service menu.

“So I guess it’ll be room service.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Besides, where would I be able to find another fascinating dinner companion like you?”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. It won’t be the last time you say something nice about me.”

* * * *

Soledad went back to her bedroom and grabbed a robe and her lavender bodywash. As she headed to the bathroom her cell phone rang. She looked at the caller ID display.

Russell. Husband Number Six and generally a whiner. One of the reasons their marriage lasted all of six months.

"Russell?" she said as soon as she answered the phone.

"I forgot that this is the age of caller ID." He chuckled but it sounded more nervous than anything.

"What are you doing calling me so early in the morning?" She sat back down on the bed and was happy Monk and Casanova had given her the bedroom with its own full bath inside.

"I was concerned about you. Who are you interviewing this time?"

She blinked at his question. When they were together, Russell had never asked her about her day. His sudden concern gave her cause to pause.

"Solie?"

Another nickname she hated.

"I'm interviewing a professional wrestler. I'm staying with him, as a matter of fact." She was no longer with Russell so why should she feel guilty about the company she kept?

"Really?" He sounded more than concerned. Was that jealousy?

"Actually two of them." She thought about how incriminating that sounded and almost felt bad for saying it. She had to remind herself that they were no longer together. Friends. Only friends.

"Wow. We barely lived together when we were married, and now you--"

She butted in. "Had I known you were going to rehash the past I would have let you leave a message on my voicemail. Good-bye, Russell." She wasn't about to argue with him so early in the morning. Arguments like those were reserved for relationships, current relationships.

"Wait. I'm sorry. I didn't call to fight with you."

"Then why did you call?"

"You'll be in Richmond tomorrow?" His voice sounded so hollow and lost, so unsure. She recognized the tone, because at one time her voice had sounded that way with him. She wondered if he ever felt the pang of guilt then that she felt when she heard it now.

She took a deep breath and softened her tone. "Yes."

"I would like to take you to dinner."

"Why?" Since they had divorced, she hadn't sat down to have a meal with Russell, so this invitation seemed out of place.

"Your birthday."

"Russell, we shouldn't. We're not--"

"I know. I just want to do something nice for you." His voice lifted. What was he planning?

She would have told him no but something in her said that she owed him something. He deserved more than just a brush-off. And they were still friends. It would be nice to have dinner with a familiar face on her birthday.

"Sure. Why not?" She conceded.

"Sounds great, Solie."

"Don't call me that. You know I hate that name."

"Sorry. I forgot. I'll talk to you later, then."

She closed her phone and set it on the bed. A knock on the bedroom door made her jump.

“Yes?” She stood at the locked door. “I’m naked, so you can’t come in now.” She lied.

“Are you trying to get me to tear this door down or what?” Casanova asked.

“What did you need?” She really was not in the mood to deal with him. He was way too slick and charming for her. Even after being with him for a few hours, she still couldn’t figure him out.

“Just letting you know that I ordered you a tuna steak and a salad. Is that okay?”

How considerate. At least he was thinking of her needs and not his own.

“Yes. Yes. Fine. Thank you. Let me know when it gets here, okay?”

“Sure.” There was a short silence and then, “Are you okay, Sunny? You sound a little funny. Hey, I rhymed. I could be a rapper!”

Soledad laughed and put her hand on the door. It had been a while since she laughed and it really felt good. “I’m just a little tired. I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Okay. Enjoy your bath. You need me to wash any hard to reach places like your back or your--”

“Good-bye, Casanova.”

“Okay. Can’t blame a man for trying.”

It didn’t take her long to strip out of her linen skirt and blouse and submerge herself into the lavender-scented bath. All she wanted to do was get through this interview, get over her twenty-sixth birthday and hope the next job involved less testosterone.

* * * *

Soledad pinned her hair to the top of her head and peered into the fogged-up mirror. She sighed. *Can’t anything be clear?* She walked out of the bathroom just as there was a knock on her door.

“Dinner’s here. Need help drying off?” Casanova asked through the bedroom door.

She opened the door without answering him. The slightly parted robe showed her leg. He scanned the sight from top to bottom and back up again. She closed the robe over her leg.

“Wow.” He said the word with such sincerity and awe that it surprised her.

“What?” she asked.

“You look amazing.” So the soulless man did have a soul.

Her heart jumped and her mouth trembled into a smile she tried hard to suppress.

“You’re just saying that.”

Casanova missed his calling. He should have written a how-to book for men on how to sweep women off of their feet. He did a halfway decent job of catching her off guard. Had she been a fan, she would have been dumbstruck.

“I don’t lie.” He got down on one knee in front of her. He took her hands into his.

“Marry me.”

She released her hands from his grip and walked by him. “Ah, there’s Casanova. I knew he would be back. I feel like I’m dealing with someone with a split personality.”

“I feel like I am two different people sometimes.” He stood. “The man who has you is lucky.” He followed her into the front room.

“I never said I was in a relationship.”

“A pretty thing like you? I figured you would have men stashed all over the country.”

“If there’s something you want to say about my life, just say it.” She was tired of excusing her personal choices to the media, her family and anyone else who felt like they had the right to ask her.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, making it obvious he did not know of her semi-

scandalous past.

Her shoulders relaxed. "I don't have anyone." When the words poured from her mouth she almost choked. Losing Maurice, her seventh husband, had hit her harder than she thought it would. She still missed the pure love Maurice had given her. Would she ever have that type of love again?

She sat at a table made up with a white tablecloth, three settings and Monk already gorging on his food. "And I don't need anyone. I'm fine on my own."

"You're hurting me, woman." He put his hand to his chest and leaned back. Not worthy enough for a death scene in *Hamlet*, but good enough from a professional wrestler.

"Let's eat. It's late, and although I'm hungry, I'm tired." She picked up a fork and knife and was about to dive into her salad.

"Stop!" Casanova held his hand up.

She jumped and dropped her utensils. "What? What's wrong?"

"Close your eyes," he commanded. She looked over at Monk who kept his head down and continued shoveling food into his mouth.

"Stop playing games. I want to eat and go to bed." She picked up her utensils again, and this time Casanova grabbed her salad and set it on the bar next to him. "What are you doing?"

"Close your eyes. I have a surprise for you." He looked down at her and winked.

She took a deep breath. "I can only imagine what kind of surprise you would have for me that requires me to close my eyes."

"It's not that type of surprise. Trust me. I would want your eyes to be open for that."

She shook her head and succumbed to his request. If this was the only way she could eat her dinner, she would do it. She heard the refrigerator door open and close almost instantaneously.

The clinking sound made her furrow her eyebrows.

"Okay, open your eyes," he said. He sounded so excited it was hard to imagine this was the same man who a few hours ago pounded another man's head into a set of steel steps outside of a wrestling ring.

She opened her eyes and glanced down. In front of her sat a perfectly angled slice of cheesecake with red cherry sauce on the top of it and dribbling down its side. "Oh, my. How decadent." The cheesecake reminded Soledad of when her father had brought her a bowl of cookie dough ice cream in the middle of the night after she had lost her big debate in her senior year of high school. Her father had known it was exactly what she needed. She wasn't sure of Casanova's motive. She closed her robe around her neck.

Soledad said, "I love cheesecake. How did you know?"

He set a spoon on the plate. "I didn't. I took a chance." He plopped himself down next to her with the widest just-got-away-with-murder grin. "I know this doesn't make up for my sorry-ass attitude, but this is my way of apologizing."

Soledad let go of her robe and pulled the dessert close to her. Casanova was trying. She needed to give an inch, too. Get off her soapbox as he had put it earlier. Just not by way of her heart. She pushed the pie away from her and got down to business.

"Some of your risk-taking is paying off for you. Is that why you got into wrestling?"

He rolled his eyes back and leaned into his chair. "You're not interviewing me now, are you? Why don't you eat your cake?"

"I can't eat my dessert first. And it's a pie not a cake."

"You can eat that first, and if it's not a cake, then why is it called *cheesecake*?"

“Are we actually going to argue about this at three o’clock in the morning? Just give me back my salad.”

“No. You want the cheesecake.”

“No, I wanted to interview a senator.” She had heard about an opportunity to interview a Rhode Island senator and had actually pitched the idea to Heather when Heather derailed her for this assignment. It was the first time Soledad wanted to work. She felt good about writing and interviewing different people. When Heather had told her no, she no longer cared about what she did. She wanted her old, freewheeling lifestyle back.

“Just wait. You never know. One day I might be a senator. Look at what happened with Jesse Ventura. He was a pro wrestler and he--”

“Please don’t start me talking about that guy.” She waved her hands in the air.

“Why don’t you eat it? Treat yourself. You seem a little, I don’t know ... uptight.” He leaned close to her and tucked some of the loose strands of hair behind her ear. She eased back. “Do something you’ve never done before. Take a chance.”

He scooped some of the cheesecake onto a spoon and held it up to her mouth. She had done everything the way she was expected to by her parents, her professors, the media and now Heather. She parted her lips as he brought the dessert closer to her.

“You have incredible lips,” he said almost in a whisper. His eyes smoldered like he was more concerned about kissing her lips than getting the cheesecake in between them. She closed her mouth and backed away. She had to stop doing what was expected, which is being unexpected.

Good fences make good neighbors.

“I shouldn’t.” She tightened the robe sash tighter around her waist.

Monk dropped his fork onto his plate with a clatter, covered his mouth to suppress a belch, and with a wave he darted from the table and disappeared into his room.

“Here we are. All alone.” Casanova brought the dessert back up to her mouth again. The deep tone of his voice and his eyes said he wasn’t going to give up. Question was, could she be stronger?

Chapter Four

Soledad thought back to her college days, when she and her roommate used to bring dates back to their apartment and how the other would leave the room to give the lucky couple some privacy. She felt Casanova and Monk had planned the same thing tonight.

"Is that what you do to women? You bring women up to your hotel room, seduce them with cheesecake and then take advantage of them?" Soledad asked.

"For one thing, I didn't invite you here. You invited yourself." Casanova set the fork back onto the plate. "Secondly, I thought to take advantage of someone, the instrument of choice was always liquor. Besides, I don't bring women back to my hotel room. Ever." The way Casanova's lips compressed into a tight line, he seemed almost offended that she even offered such a scenario. With a character like Casanova, what did he expect? He wasn't some innocent altar boy. He was a wooer of women. A Don Juan in the squared circle. A charmer with a great smile.

For some reason, she believed him. "And you never lie, do you?"

"Never."

The strong conviction in his voice made her blink. "I think I should eat my salad and my fish." She stood and retrieved her food from the kitchen bar. She sat down again, moving the cheesecake off to the side.

Casanova sat across from her and cut a hunk off of his prime rib. He kept his eyes down onto his plate. A barrier erected between them, and it disappointed her.

Damn it, why did she care? Soledad had already decided that she needed to go and soon. Her parents would have to understand. Only they wouldn't understand. Not this time. She'd burned too many bridges.

After a sigh, she asked, "How did you get started in wrestling?"

"Shouldn't you get your recorder for this?" He pointed to her purse on the bar. She stood and fished through it for her digital recorder. After pressing the record button, she placed it in the middle of the table.

"Okay, how did you get started in wrestling?" she asked again.

"Through some people." He shrugged.

A noiseless, patient spider. Now Soledad understood what Walt Whitman meant as she sat across from the Daddy Longlegs of interview subjects.

She shook her head. "What's going on with you? You're being so difficult now."

He didn't look up. "Sunny, I'm not being difficult."

"Soledad, please." If she didn't let Russell call her a nickname, then she wasn't going to grant latitude to this stranger. "Maybe you're tired and we should do this in the morning."

"Good. Most reporters keep at it until one of us snaps." He glanced at her. "Good to see you know when to get out while the gettin' is good." He winked.

"Excuse me?" She set her fork back down on her plate. "Are you calling me a quitter?"

He opened his mouth as though he wanted to say something in response. Then he shoveled a forkful of meat into it. After he swallowed he followed with, "You're giving up. I don't have to call you a quitter." He mangled his baked potato, chopping it into small pieces. "I

bet you a million bucks you were the one who broke up your last relationship. You seem like the type. Too afraid to stay in for the long haul.” He carved another hunk off of his prime rib.

She clenched her jaw and could feel the heat rising under her robe to her face. Now she could see why people wanted to wrestle him. He was insufferable. “I’ve never given you that impression. I’ve held alligators. I’ve climbed mountains. I have run with the bulls in Pamplona. And my relationships have nothing to do with my work. How dare you, you--you--oh! What is your real name?”

“Very good. That’s what I mean. My real name is Tyler Bertram Randolph III, but you can call me Ty.”

“Tyler Bertram Randolph III, you have a lot to learn about women.”

“You’re right. I know nothing about women. Maybe that’s why you were sent to me.”

“I wasn’t sent to--”

He interrupted her. “To teach me how to better relate to women. Understand them. Give them what they want.”

“What are you talking about? You kiss women as a part of your job, and you don’t know how to relate to them?”

A story idea hit her. Casanova, supposed great lover, was insecure about women. The readers wouldn’t believe that. One look at Tyler and they could see he was sex personified. Well, that would be a great article if she wanted to write it.

“Watch *The View* or read *Cosmopolitan*. I don’t want to be your teacher. I just need a story.” She stabbed a tomato wedge and popped it into her mouth. She could tell he was trying to rattle her, but she wasn’t going to fall for it. First it was his nudity and now the cracks about her personal life.

“What about you? What do you think you’re doing for me?” Not that she thought he actually had a purpose beyond some interesting anecdotes and her ticket back to boutiques in Paris. However it would be interesting to hear his theory.

“I’m the one your parents warned you about.” He winked.

“You obviously don’t know my parents.”

Anita Monroe, Soledad’s mother, wouldn’t have warned her about men like Tyler. Soledad was expected to know better.

“Don’t you get tired of doing what’s expected? Don’t you want something more?” He stared at her until she looked away.

Was she that transparent? She’d tried to change. Soledad only went to parties she’d been invited to instead of crashing every one she’d heard about. Then she’d only gone to parties on the east coast. And shopping. She’d cut that down from every day to twice a week. Thank God for the Internet!

It was hard to abandon habits ingrained for over twenty-five years. Since Soledad wasn’t hurting anyone, she’d given up the need to alter her lifestyle.

“So where did the name Casanova come from?” She continued the questioning without missing a beat.

“My poor Sunny. Can’t get out of the box, huh?”

She heard the pity mixed with a little sarcasm in his voice. She clenched her teeth and kept her gaze on his. She wasn’t about to crumble.

“My first character when I started wrestling semi-professionally was called Cowboy Carl. I was nineteen years old and as skinny as a beanpole. Promoters picked up on my accent so they had me wrestling in cowboy boots, chaps and a vest. I hated it. One time when I wrestled out in

Texas, promoters wanted me to ride to the ring on a horse.”

Soledad chuckled, despite the fact that she’d wanted to pluck his head moments before. “You’re kidding?”

“Yeah, I thought it was funny, too. A damn horse. They brought it to the arena. I swear it was a rodeo horse. It was bucking inside of its trailer. I told them I wouldn’t do it. Awfully bold of me to say that, just starting out in the business and all. So they gave me a choice: ride or die--career-wise I mean. So I rode Tornado. That was the horse’s name. I was young and stupid.”

The story almost sounded like her life. Work or die. Without her parents’ help, Soledad wasn’t sure she could make it on her own. What was she thinking? Her parents wouldn’t cut her off completely. They had to be kidding. Right?

“So what happened?”

“I get on this horse and it was calm, so I thought I would be okay. I thought I’d ride it down to the ring, wrestle and ride backstage after the match. Sounds easy, right?”

She nodded and ate another forkful of salad.

As Tyler told this animated story, he became less animated. He was becoming more real and less of a character. And it was nice. His southern drawl soothed her, covering her like a warm blanket. He maintained eye contact.

“So I’m listening for the announcer to call me, and I notice that the horse is getting a little agitated. When my name was announced, they opened the curtain, and I rode down to the ring. But the crowd got into seeing me on the horse. They thought it was a hoot and it was. Here I am wearing a big white Stetson on my head, a white leather vest and white chaps. I looked like I belonged in The Village People.”

She laughed so hard, she had to wipe away tears.

“The crowd started screaming and flashing their cameras, and the horse went crazy. It started bucking and neighing. I held on for dear life, but it didn’t matter. I got thrown. I hit my head on some steel steps by the ring and busted it wide open. I probably shouldn’t have wrestled, but I went on. Blood in my eyes, and I could barely stand. I was supposed to win the match, but who would have believed that a bleeding six-foot-three idiot would beat a three hundred fifty-pound, six-foot-seven monster. But that’s what happened. We wrestled for about twenty minutes. As my opponent had me up over his head to slam me, he fell back and pulled me on top of him. After the match he pulled me from the ring and threw me on top of the horse. Good thing that horse was smart enough to go back to the backstage area, otherwise I would have had to crawl to the dressing room, and that wouldn’t have been pretty.”

She applauded. “That story would be great for the article.”

He opened his mouth as though he was going to object, then he stopped himself. Second time he’d done that. What was he holding back from her?

“Sure. Why not? Most of my fans know about that story anyway.”

“It’ll make you more human,” she said.

“What? I’m not human now?” He scratched the top of his head.

“That’s not what I meant. I mean it’ll make you look like everyone else. They’ll know that even you can have a bad day at work and can laugh about it.”

“It wasn’t very funny at the time, but now I can laugh about it. It taught me a lot about the theatrics of this business. I still have the scar. See?” He took her hand, placed her fingers above his left eyebrow and ran them slowly over his brow line.

Soledad felt the indentation and his warm breath on the heel of her hand. “That’s deep.

Why would you want to do a job where you get hurt so badly?"

He smiled at the corner of his mouth, and his thumb rubbed the inside of her palm. "Why not? You only live once. Can't be scared of everything, right?"

Too close. She felt she finally met Tyler. And Tyler wasn't half bad. Humble, funny, sexy. If she could figure out a way to keep this personality around instead of his cocky alter ego, Soledad would want to stick around.

"Can you feel it?" he asked, his voice so low it was almost a growl. She moved her hand away and grabbed her fork.

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, old time is still a-flying. And this same flower that smiles today, tomorrow will be dying.

No, this was not a strike-while-the-iron-is-hot sort of situation, thank you very much, poet Herrick. She'd done that before and had seven marriages to prove it.

"So how did you go from Cowboy Carl to Casanova? Doesn't seem like an obvious transition." She finished off her salad and set her plate off to the side. She had to be professional and not get caught up in his performance.

"I got fired from the organization where I wrestled as Cowboy Carl, and I got hired by XTCWF."

"Why did you get fired?"

"Promoters said I wasn't a crowd pleaser. Said I was dull."

Tyler, dull? He was anything but that. Unpredictable. A bit childish. Definitely not dull.

"I bet they're kicking themselves now," Soledad said.

"Wouldn't know. The organization folded a year later, so I guess it was a blessing in disguise. Once I got to XTCWF, I wrestled as Tyler at first, which I liked since that's my name. But at the time I started wrestling for them, I was seeing this one girl. She was my first true love. I dated some in high school, but this was serious. I thought I was going to marry her. But she was a little different. She would dye her hair every week. Red, brunette, blond. At one time she even dyed it blue."

"Seems like you two were perfect for each other. You play a role. She wanted to be someone different."

"I suppose. When she dyed it blond, her hair fell out completely. She was bald. I shaved my head to make her feel better." He glanced at her and did that boyish side of the mouth smile that grew on her now. "Plus my hair was getting a little gray."

She smiled back at him. It went beyond trying to charm him. She started to like him. Soledad pinched her leg. *Snap out of this.*

"So then she would wear different wigs. Long ones. Short ones. Different colors and styles. The guys I worked with thought I was seeing a different girl every day, so they nicknamed me Casanova Romeo. Kevin heard it and liked the nickname so much they started calling me that in the ring. After a while they dropped off the Romeo part."

"So where did the kissing part come in to play?"

"I kissed my girlfriend after all my matches. I was so happy to be working and to have this woman by my side I had to show it. She looked so different each time, so the audience thought I was kissing a different girl each show."

"So when you broke up, Kevin wanted you to keep up the shtick and continue kissing women," she guessed.

"Exactly. So I did. They tell me who to kiss out in the audience before my match and I

do it. It's a living. I guess there are worse things I could be doing."

"So what about the marriage part of the act? You ask each of the women after you kiss them if they want to marry you?" This was the part of the act she was most curious about.

"That was Kevin's idea. As soon as the women say yes, I change my mind. I think it's a little cruel, but audiences love it."

At least he recognized that leading someone on, real or not, was cruel. Maybe he did have a heart underneath the façade.

She continued. "So after you broke up with your girlfriend, you--"

"I never said I broke up with her." He tilted back in his chair. "She broke my heart. Said life on the road was too much for her. Too unstable."

"You didn't think a woman would want to spend her life going from town to town, did you? Women want stability." She folded her arms over her chest. Maybe this guy did need to learn a thing or two about women.

"No, you don't. Women, I mean. Women want to be shocked. Women want to be surprised." He leaned close to her and winked. "You want the adventure."

He was back being Casanova. With the one wink, he had reverted. Damn. She had enjoyed talking to Tyler.

"How would you know that if you know nothing about women?" She pierced the flaky flesh of her tuna steak, imagining the motion could symbolically break through Tyler's tough layer.

He lowered his head. "Because my last girlfriend said I took too long to let her know I cared about her. She said she would die an old maid before I would ever pop the question. She said I was predictable." He scratched the top of his shiny head. "She might have been right. Maybe if I'd whisked her away for a weekend by ourselves or taken her to Vegas to get married, we would be together today."

He may have been a fool in the ring, but he wasn't a fool for love. Even if he hadn't come up with the idea of proposing, then dumping, she bet he had enjoyed every minute of doing it. And if he was married, she wasn't sure Tyler would have opened up as much. And knowing he was completely available made her view him differently. She crossed her legs to extinguish the heat.

Tyler put his dishes on the room service tray as she picked at her tuna.

"So what's wrong with journalists?" She parted the top of her robe to allow the air conditioning to cool her warming flesh.

"Nothing. I don't have a problem with journalists. It's what they write that I have a problem with," Tyler said. "Maybe I'm not giving reporters something interesting to write about." He pulled his tee shirt over his head and flung it across the back of his chair.

She licked her tongue over her dry lips because she was too afraid that he would notice her hand shaking if she tried picking up her glass of water. Up close, his body looked unbelievable. She let her gaze linger over his chest and wander down to his hard abs. Her eyes darted up to meet his gaze.

"Suddenly I'm not so hungry and I'm very tired." After turning off her recorder, she stood and secured her robe tighter around her body until it was almost pinching her. "I'll see you in the morning." She darted down the hallway to her bedroom.

"Don't you want your cheesecake?" he asked.

She turned and watched him holding up the dessert. He picked up a cherry between his index finger and thumb. The thick juices dripped down onto the pie and down his long fingers.

He slid the cherry into his mouth and licked the juices from his fingers. Seeing his tongue snake around his fingers sent her pulse racing and making every soft portion of her body throb from her earlobes to her now moistened vagina. She wondered what his tongue would feel like against her skin. Cool and refreshing? Or hot and hard against her flesh.

No, it was an act. Pure and simple.

"You put your fingers into it. I definitely don't want it now." She had to keep this professional. She had gotten way too personal asking about his ex-girlfriend. Was she really going to use that bit of information in her article? Who was she kidding? Tyler must have known she wasn't going to write an article on him, at least not a serious one.

"What? My hands are clean. I'm very, very clean. Come on. Take a chance." He held the plate to her again.

"I told you. I don't take risks, especially when I know what the outcome will be."

"And what's that?"

"I won't like myself in the morning." She closed the door before he could say anything else. Deep down she knew if he kept talking, she might change her mind about him. And the last thing she needed was to be with another man who was not her type.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by. Robert Frost.
Soledad should have taken that advice years ago.

* * * *

Tyler hated hospitals and doctors' offices. He'd been in enough to develop a distinct disgust for them. The poking. The prodding. The bad news. And as he sat in the dim office, his mind wandered over nonsensical historic facts.

Jonas Salk made his polio vaccine public in 1955. Dr. Daniel Hale Williams performed the first open heart surgery in 1893. Tyler took a deep breath and relaxed his shoulders. So much progress. What's the worst that could happen to him?

He focused his attention onto the slim gray-haired man who stood across from him. "Give it to me straight, Dr. Hilliard." He removed his cap and set it on his knee. "What's it looking like?"

"Truthfully?" The x-ray monitors where the black-and-white films were displayed illuminated the gloomy, cramped doctor's office. The doctor took a deep breath and stared at the shots.

"I would ask you to lie, but I'm sure you won't." Tyler's knee bounced so much that his hat flew off and fell to the floor. He left it there until the doctor spoke, saying what he already knew.

"In your line of work, I give you a year maybe two, tops." He spat the words out as though he was ripping off a band-aid from a child's skinned elbow.

Tyler winced when he heard the words.

"See this right here?" The doctor pointed to a familiar picture, one of his spine.

He looked at the one vertebra that Dr. Hilliard pointed to. "Not good?"

The man took off his glasses and shook his head. "It's gotten worse since your last visit, and that was just a year ago. You're a fairly young man, Tyler." He picked up Tyler's chart. "At thirty-four, your back shouldn't be looking like this. Hell, your back shouldn't look like this at sixty-four."

Tyler exhaled. He didn't want to think that his career was over before he even turned forty. It wasn't right, and it damn sure wasn't fair. So long, Dr. Salk. Take care, Dr. Williams.

Pointing to one disk, Dr. Hilliard showed him how it had shifted from its normal position.

Barely visible to him, but then again, he knew the pain had to have come from somewhere.

As Dr. Hilliard spoke, he thought about what he would do if he couldn't wrestle anymore. Who would he be? He had invested so much of his life into this character, he didn't know if he could do anything else. When he realized that the doctor had stopped talking, he snapped out of his thoughts and gazed at him.

"So what can I do, Doc? Surgery? Physical therapy?"

"Surgery? Yes. Therapy? Of course. Quitting your job? That's the best option."

"Not for me." He stood with some difficulty after grabbing his hat from the floor. "I'm at the height of my career right now. I'm the highest paid pro wrestler out there."

"Good. You can use that money to have people push you around in wheelchairs when you're in your forties and fifties. You're killing yourself, son. Is it worth it?"

He remembered the autograph he signed for the boy in the waiting room that morning. He thought about the children's faces in the cancer ward when they saw him come in to visit them. He knew how much his job had helped his family.

"It's what I love." He put on his cap and extended his hand. "Thanks for seeing me so early in the morning."

"Not a problem, Ty. Thank you for the tickets to the show on Sunday, although after seeing your films, I'm not sure if I'll want to see you further damage yourself." He put his hand on top of Tyler's. "Keep on your diet. Keep exercising. And think about yourself. If you need anything, please let me know."

Tyler asked drolly, "How about a back transplant? Can you hook me up with one of those?"

Dr. Hilliard smirked. The last thing Tyler wanted was his pity. "Did you know that Dr. Daniel Hale Williams did the first open heart surgery?"

"Yes, I am familiar with that. How did you know--"

Tyler cut him off. "A patient was stabbed, and he saved the guy. We've come a long way in medicine, haven't we?"

Dr. Hilliard shook his head. "Yes. But we still have a ways to go."

Tyler shook his hand and strolled out of the office. To be told flat out that he only had a good year left to wrestle hit him harder than he thought it would.

As he walked out of the office building, he peered down at his watch. He had a couple of hours before the XTCWF fan convention.

"You want to go to the hotel in Richmond and wait there until the convention?" Jones, his driver, asked as he attempted to open the door for Tyler.

He grabbed the door handle before Jones could get to it. "Nah. My bags are still in the trunk, right?"

Jones nodded.

"No use waiting around. I'll wait at the convention center for Monk." He plunked down in the cushy seat and grabbed the door to close it. Jones held it open.

"What about that woman? The reporter?"

He hadn't even thought about Soledad. His mind was on too many things, something she would have picked up on if she hung out with him. She'd already asked him about the pills. The last thing he wanted to reveal was his early morning doctor's appointment about his bad back. Casanova was strong and virile. Tyler felt vulnerable and weak at the moment. No, it would be better if they separated. She'd already gotten too close as it was. Part of that was his fault. Something about her made him want to open up like he had known her for years. Plus it was fun

teasing her. She could give as well as she took.

“Just get me to the center.” He yanked the door and slammed it closed. With his head back and his eyes shut, he wondered how much Kevin would yell at him for walking away from yet another interviewer. He didn’t care at the moment, although something in him wanted to keep the very delectable Ms. Monroe around him longer. It may have something to do with his visit into her bedroom earlier that morning.

He’d heard her calling him. He’d thought he’d imagined her sultry voice summoning him to her room, believing it was just wishful thinking on his part. Then he’d heard her again. She’d called him Casanova. He’d thought maybe this time she was testing him. Even with that thought in his mind, he couldn’t resist answering her call like a sailor floating toward the dangerous sirens.

When he’d knocked on Soledad’s bedroom door and it opened on its own, he felt compelled to go inside. That flowery scent, which he’d finally recognized as lavender, invited him into the room. He’d peered inside and saw her lying on her stomach, the bed covering hitting midway down her naked back. God in Heaven, she’d slept in the nude!

Her slow rhythmic breathing had lulled him into a different place where everything was right, fine. It was a place where he could feel comfortable talking to this journalist, this woman, about himself, his life, his past. But even after their pleasant dinner, he still didn’t feel comfortable. He wasn’t running away from her. He was saving her. Saving her from himself. It didn’t help that she’d passed his test last night, the seduction.

He was hip to the industry rule about sending women to interview wrestlers. The female journalists who’d tried to interview him were more interested in seeing if he was actually his Casanova character. Many of them wanted to be kissed. Soledad didn’t. She wasn’t attracted to the flash, the image. She’d been a true professional. All the more reason to cut her loose.

That morning, he’d placed a hand on her bare flesh to wake her, but she slept too soundly to even be stirred. Her curly hair framed her face and brushed her broad shoulders. He moved her hair from her eyes, and she turned away.

Before he left, he had to do one thing for her. Taking her shirt from on top of her suitcase, he’d stitched up her torn sleeve. Years of sewing his costumes had its benefits. And Monk had almost blown his secret right in front of her.

He was careful not to snag the delicate fabric, a trick his mama had taught him. If Soledad knew he’d repaired her shirt, she would have had a field day.

He placed the blouse on a chair in her room. With that he’d walked out.

* * * *

Soledad, used to being in different hotels, woke up surprised that she felt so comfortable in this one, in this bed. She sat up, stretching her arms over her head and let out a long yawn.

Part of the reason for her peaceful night’s sleep may have something to do with the highly erotic dream she’d had about Tyler. Those eyes. Those hands. And the image of him holding the dripping cherry and slurping it into his mouth was certainly not lost on her. Yes, she would miss him when she left. After his little show last night, Soledad decided she needed to go.

As she curved her legs to the side of the bed facing the door, she was brought up short when she saw the door partially open. Gathering the comforter around her body, she hopped out of bed and snatched it open. She remembered locking it before going to bed. Tyler wouldn’t have picked the lock, would he?

She shuffled into the living room and looked around. The couch that Tyler must have slept on had an impression of his body and a blanket tossed over the arm. It hit her then how

quiet the room was.

She darted into the kitchen and then to the conference room. He'd run away. Wait. Maybe Tyler was jogging. He had mentioned that he jogged early in the morning. If that was the case, where were his bags?

To anyone else, to have an interviewee walk out would be devastating. Instead, Soledad's smile seemed branded and unbreakable. If the sheet wasn't so tight around her body she would have done a Happy Dance complete with Rockette-type fan kicks. Tyler had made this really easy on her. *He* ran. *He* ditched *her*. Now that didn't feel good, but going back home would be wonderful.

Soledad ran back to her bedroom. She had to get dressed and catch the next plane to New York. And this time she wouldn't care if the paparazzi took pictures of her entire trip.

Before she could grab the first stitch of clothing, her cell phone chirped. She exhaled, hoping it wasn't Russell reconfirming their dinner date. The man would make obsessive-compulsives look relaxed.

When Soledad saw the number on the caller ID was her parents', she happily answered.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Anita screamed.

Soledad swallowed, then braced herself against a dresser. "Hi, Mom. And how are you doing?" She didn't know what she had done, but from her mother's tone, it wasn't good.

"Do not get cute with me, Soledad Monroe. You promised me you would behave. You swore on your grandmother's life that you wouldn't do anything irrational."

Soledad ran through everything that had happened to her since she'd talked to her father the night before. Other than staying with Tyler, she had done nothing wrong. Maybe the front-desk clerks, looking to cash in on a Soledad Monroe story leaked something to the press about her spending the night in Casanova's room. Snitches. Why couldn't she be left alone?

"Mother, I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't done anything."

"Oh, no? This morning on CNN and MSNBC all they're showing is you kissing that ... that ... performer. Who do you think you are? Paris Hilton? The Monroe name stands for something. We are hard-working, decent people and your latest antic is the nail on the coffin."

Soledad's hand trembled as she held the phone. "It wasn't my idea to get kissed. It was a mistake. If anything, we should sue Casanova and the XTCWF for sexual harassment."

"No. No games this time, Soledad. You're going to finish this story and not because you'll fulfill your year's obligation to our father and me. This is a paying job. As of this morning, I have canceled all of your credit cards, your ATM and debit cards. You will only get money when you send Heather progress reports. And if you don't finish this article, don't bother coming home."

Soledad would have responded, but her throat dried faster than the best salon fingernail polish, another luxury she'd just lost all because of that damn kiss. Anita disconnected the call before Soledad could further defend herself. Now she had a great reason to get to Tyler. He owed her, big. But he was gone.

No need to really panic. She could catch a cab to the convention center and use her all-access backstage pass to get through. Tyler hadn't stopped her. When she couldn't find her passes that she'd left on the desk by her purse, she knew he had. The man had stolen her passes to make sure she stayed away from him.

She returned to the main room and scanned it, hoping Tyler got a change of heart and left her passes in the living room. She leaned against the doorframe that separated the living room from the conference room and slid down to the floor.

In an instant, in her sleep, she had lost her story. She would have nothing for Heather except for the one cute tale Tyler had shared with her during dinner. That wouldn't get her enough money for bus fare. She could probably use her famous name to get backstage. In this environment, no one seemed to know who she was.

She wasn't really a weeper, but at that moment she felt like letting out a long cry. She bowed her head and put her face into her hands.

Because I could not stop for Death, He kindly stopped for me. Emily Dickinson had hit the nail right on the head.

She felt something heavy on her shoulder and thought that Death had truly stopped for her. With a scream, she dropped her hands and scurried back. She peered up and saw Monk hovering over her. Relief swept over her. Not only because she wasn't totally alone, but she had a link. She still had a chance to get close to Tyler. Hopefully Monk would help her.

He motioned like he was adjusting a necktie and this time she got the reference.

"Ty? I don't know where he is. Have you seen him?" Bracing herself against the frame, she slid up. Even at her full height her face only met up with Monk's chest.

He shook his head. He reached into the pocket of his jogging shorts and pulled out a small notepad and a pencil. His hand dwarfed the miniscule pencil as he scribbled something on the pad. He turned it to her so that she could read his note. He asked her to get dressed and go with him to the convention. She nodded and hurried back to her bedroom.

She still had a story. That didn't stop her from being angry at Tyler for not only kissing her and causing her to be in the mess she was in now, but also leaving her. No note. No advanced notice. Yes, she had planned on leaving him. However she would have convinced him leaving was the best thing. No man had ever left her. Ever. She couldn't wait to see his expression at the XTCWF convention.

Chapter Five

Tyler chugged down more water as he paced in the spacious but bare conference waiting room with a few other wrestlers. Folding chairs and long card tables lined the walls. He hoped that Kevin wouldn't want them to crash them over anyone's head today. He wasn't in the mood to use his body like that. From the way the other wrestlers came to this event wearing jeans and other relaxed clothing, they probably felt the same way.

The crowd in the main area of the hall chanted, calling out not only Casanova's name, but also the names of the other wrestlers in the company. He loved doing these fan events. He got to be closer to them, especially the kids. They really got into his character.

Tyler glanced up and saw what he feared coming toward him. Kevin stomped with a purpose. Tyler turned his back and pretended like he didn't notice him.

"Jones said you arrived alone." Kevin walked around Tyler until he could finally get some sort of eye contact.

"I had something to do this morning, then I came here. Would you rather that I'd been late instead?" He wasn't about to explain himself to Kevin, a neatly dressed man who looked like he would have crumbled with a paper cut.

"What? What did you have to do?" Kevin put his hands to his hips. When Tyler didn't answer, Kevin got a strange smile over his face. "Or should I say *who* did you have to do this morning?"

He shook his head. "Kevin, I--"

After adjusting his glasses on his nose, he lifted his hand to silence Tyler. "Say no more. I understand now. Hard to get anything going with a reporter around. Although you know the old show business saying, bad publicity is still good publicity." Kevin nudged him with his pointy elbow.

Tyler sighed. Fine. It was better that Kevin thought he was a playboy than to know the truth. He wasn't about to tell him about the full extent of his medical condition. So he smiled as a way to deflect any other questions.

"I forgive you this time. But you're going to have to charm the pants off of her from here on out."

Tyler shook his head. "Why do I have to be nice to her? If she doesn't like what I've done, she can leave. We can always get another journalist. Or better yet, let's not do the story."

Kevin exhaled. "I guess Dad didn't tell you who this woman is."

Tyler shrugged his shoulders. Aside from being a walking, talking work of art and a general pain in the ass, what else could Soledad be?

"The woman is the oldest child of Anita and Harwood Monroe." Kevin folded his arms. When Tyler didn't react to the name, Kevin continued. "I know we keep you on the road a lot, but come on, man. You must have heard about these people. They make Oprah look like a charity case. Old money."

Tyler knew there was something special about that woman. If she came from a wealthy background like Kevin portrayed, then she wouldn't want to be around a working stiff like him ... not that he was interested.

“So if that’s her story, then why is she working?” Tyler asked.

“Why do any of the Kennedys work? I swear Maria Shriver has more jobs than my Uncle Luther. Who knows. Maybe Soledad wants to see how the other half lives. Maybe this is fun for her, mixing it up with some real folks.” Kevin grunted to loosen some choked up information. “Or maybe she’s been sent here to watch us.”

“What do you mean by that?” Tyler felt his eyebrows coming together and hated that he wore his expressions so easily on his face.

“When XTCWF went public not too long ago, the Monroe Industries bought a large portion of a parent company that has a controlling interest in us, so technically--”

“I’m with the boss’s daughter.” Tyler rubbed his hand over his face. Piss off Soledad and he could kiss Casanova, XTCWF and Japan good-bye. What a way to jumpstart his career. Could his day get any better?

“And now there’s a nice picture of you swapping spit with one of the wealthiest heiresses in the country.” Kevin held up the *Richmond Times Dispatch* turned to the society pages where there was a nice color photo of him kissing Soledad. “So Mo Gets Her Mojo On With Casanova” read the blurb.

Tyler delighted in the fact that the picture wasn’t when she’d slapped him. Something stirred inside looking at this photo of him with his hand at the back of her head and Soledad looking so accepting.

Beneath that was a line that made Tyler grab the paper. “Will Casanova Be Husband Number Seven?”

Tyler gazed at Kevin. “She’s been married six times already? She doesn’t look to be much older than twenty-one.”

“She’s twenty-five or twenty-six. And rumor has it that she’s actually been married seven times. I guess rich folks like collecting people.”

Now Tyler knew why she got so defensive whenever he brought up her personal life. She treated men like toys and marriage like a game. He wasn’t about to let this spoiled princess get the best of him.

“It would have been nice the other night if you could have asked her to marry you and then turned her down,” Kevin said. “What a coup that would have been. The media would have been all over us if that had happened. Which is why I propose this.” Kevin leaned closer. “Get So Mo to agree to marry you for real. We could do it on *Wrestlebow*. Talk about a grand finale.”

Tyler hated that part of his act. He couldn’t deny that Kevin was right about her association being huge for the company. He didn’t really know her and knew that she must have married men for attention. Why not him? If only he hadn’t left her in his hotel room. Tyler swallowed before telling that bit of information to Kevin, who would no doubt blow his stack.

Kevin looked over Tyler’s shoulder. “And she’s here.”

“She’s what?” Tyler turned as Monk walked into the room with Soledad. Where was his mind? He should have known Monk would have brought her with him. That would have been her only way to get backstage since he had her backstage passes in his pocket.

Dressed in a plain white tee shirt and shorts, Soledad still looked wonderful. Tyler cleared his throat as she approached him. This was a first. The first time he ditched a reporter, intentionally or not, and the reporter found him again. He folded the newspaper and tucked it under his arm.

She stood in front of him with Monk by her side. Her arms were folded over her chest,

and her chin jutted out. The gleam in her eyes told him she was ready for a fight.

Kevin patted him on his shoulder. "We're on in fifteen minutes."

Soledad turned to Monk and asked him for some time alone with Tyler. He nodded and wrote a note to her, to which she replied, "Oh, you'll get your chance with him, too."

Monk had barely turned around before Soledad laid into him.

She dropped her hands to her hips. "Is this what I should be expecting of you, you walking away without a word? I'm supposed to stay with you until *Wrestlebowl*."

"I know." It was all he could say during her rant. God, she hated him. He couldn't convince her to marry him if he was the sultan of Sudan.

"So why would you leave me alone in a hotel room with Monk? I'm not interviewing him, although I did offer. You're my subject. And I expect to be treated with a modicum of dignity and--"

"You're right."

She blinked several times before staring into his eyes. "What?"

"You deserve to be respected." He finished off his water and tossed the bottle into a nearby trashcan. "So Mo."

Soledad sucked in a quick breath as soon as he'd mention the nickname. So that was what she was hiding. Why hadn't she revealed her true self to him? He was glad now that he hadn't opened up to her any more than he already had.

"Had I known I was being interviewed by some spoiled, rich girl I would have worn a better shirt."

She huffed. "And had I known I had to interview a judgmental jerk like you, I would have carried my Mace."

He walked by her. "I think your story here is Monk." He pointed to the hulking man who was busy feasting at the Craft Services table. "No one wants to read about me. And I'm not sure I want you interviewing me." This would be their clean break. "By the way--" He showed her the newspaper picture of the two of them. "--you might want to think about blowing these up for some nice Christmas cards. I'm sure your friends will find this amusing." He shoved the paper into her hand. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have some fans to see."

* * * *

Soledad stared at the incriminating picture. From the look of it, the way her eyes were closed and Tyler seemed to caress her cheek, it looked like a legitimate, soulful kiss instead of a set up. No wonder her mother was so upset. Soledad had slapped Tyler. Didn't her mother see she hadn't wanted this?

And the way Tyler seemed so angry at the picture, maybe he felt he'd made a mistake in kissing her. Something else was up. He was beyond angry. He'd acted betrayed.

And when she caught the line about Tyler potentially being husband number seven, she gritted her teeth. If she were to wed the wrestler, he would actually be Husband Number Eight.

She'd vowed a year ago when Maurice died that she would not be what the media created her to be. Sure she liked to go to parties and shop. That wasn't all to her. No way was she going to give the media any more ammunition than they already had.

As she watched Tyler walking away from her, she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned to find Monk holding up a cup of orange juice. She smiled and accepted it.

He scanned the room and made his necktie motion, then hunched his shoulders.

"Tyler doesn't want me writing the article about him. He says I should write about you." She took a sip of the juice. "But I can't. I have to do the article on him." Soledad felt her throat

tighten. She covered her quivering chin and bottom lip. Maybe she couldn't handle working or being on her own. She wasn't built that way.

"If you see Tyler again, let him know I'm going home ... wherever that is."

Before she could speak again, Monk held up his hand to her and shook his head. He wrote in his pad for her to stay in her spot and that he would be right back. With that, the big man rushed out of the room, probably after Tyler.

* * * *

When Monk shoved Tyler back against the wall in the hallway, Tyler thought that their *Wrestlebowl* match had been moved up a week.

"What's that for?" Tyler pushed Monk's hand away from him. Monk circled his fist over his heart, then pointed in the direction of where he had walked away from Soledad. She'd told him what he'd done. And Monk, being his usual protective self, came to straighten things.

"It's not a good time for me right now." He looked toward the room where Soledad waited. A make-up artist walked out the door, and while it was open he caught a glimpse of Soledad standing alone, waiting. He turned to Monk. "She should be writing about you. You fit the magazine."

Monk slammed his monstrous fist into Tyler's shoulder and shook his head. He wasn't used to being manhandled by anyone outside of the wrestling ring, but Monk was sure doing his best to put across his feelings.

Again, he pushed Monk back. "You know where I went to this morning. I don't want her finding out and writing about it. Besides, do you know who she is?"

Monk, in an exasperated motion, raised his hands in the air. He pulled out his notepad and scribbled the words "trust her." Besides Tyler's family, he hated having Monk be disappointed in him. They were one in the same. Brothers in every sense of the word.

Monk pointed to his back, then pointed to Tyler.

"Yeah, my back." He didn't know if he could choke the words out tell him the diagnosis. He needed to tell his friend. "Not good, buddy."

Monk shook his head and patted Tyler on his shoulder. He held up his notepad and showed Tyler the note again.

"I can't trust her. I've done that before with reporters, and it got me burned. You remember the thing with my dad. All she needs to know about me is that I'm the champ and I kiss women. That's it." He turned to leave, but Monk halted him with a stop sign-sized hand on his chest. He lowered himself onto his knees and put his hands together in a prayer position and nodded his head toward Soledad.

"Apologize? I'm not apologizing. I didn't do anything wrong. Besides, I've been bowing to rich folks all of my life. Let them squirm for a change." When he attempted to walk away again, Monk grabbed his ankle causing Tyler to fall onto the burgundy-colored, carpeted floor. The pain in his back hit sharply and made Tyler catch his breath.

This was Monk's method of tough love. Monk wasted no time in grabbing Tyler's shirt and lifting him up so that he could look at him eye to eye. He stared. He didn't move a muscle or twitch or even blinked. Just glared at him.

Monk's look said everything. Tyler needed to do this interview for all of the wrestlers, not just himself. He needed to represent the profession. He needed to stop running from his fears.

"Okay. Fine. I'll tell her I'll do the article. You don't have to go on about it." Tyler braced himself up on his hands as Monk let him go. Monk got to his feet first and put out his

hand to help Tyler.

"I'll tell her after the convention." He walked toward the main hall and was cut short again by the giant. Monk pointed to the waiting room and nudged his friend that way.

"It's a good thing you don't talk." He joked before walking back to the waiting area. He opened the door and strolled up to Soledad with her watching his every move. He stopped a couple of feet away and put his hands on his hips.

"Yes?" she asked.

Tyler looked back at Monk who put his meaty hands on top of his shoulders to ensure that he didn't walk away again. "I wanted to apologize for leaving you this morning without saying anything. It was wrong and unprofessional, and I'm sorry."

She bit her lower lip like she was trying to fully assess the situation.

"Please say something. Monk is reading your lips and if he doesn't think I've apologized to you he'll keep squeezing my shoulders until he's gotten them ground down to a fine powder."

Her face remained hard. "So. Don't you know spoiled, rich girls like myself don't care about anyone?"

Tyler winced and his knees buckled. Tyler didn't have to worry about the pain in his back now. Thanks to Monk he now had to think about the pain in his shoulders. His friend was really putting a hurting on him, but not as much as seeing Soledad looking so hurt. Why did Tyler care so much about what she thought of him? In any other circumstance, she wouldn't give a damn about him.

Soledad's face softened. "I'm here to capture the real you. Please trust me."

He couldn't. Not yet. Under gritted teeth, he answered, "I'm sorry about the rich girl crack. Why didn't you tell me who you were, I mean, are?"

"At this point in my life it seems like the whole world knows who I am. Besides, it was nice being with someone who didn't see me as America's Daughter, *Casanova*."

A sheepish grin graced his face. "I think I know what you mean."

She nodded. "Good." She gazed up to Monk. "Apology accepted."

Monk slowly eased his grip. Tyler's face relaxed and he exhaled.

"From now on, you don't go anywhere or do anything without telling me. Please. I was serious when I said that I want to show fans a side of you that they haven't seen before."

"Please don't tell me you're going to follow me into the bathroom now." Tyler smiled.

She laughed and it was refreshing to hear. Her determination paled even his when he first got into the business. She was serious about her work.

"I guess I've gone from heel to 'face.'" He adjusted his cap on his head.

"What?"

"In the business, what you as an audience member think of as a good guy is called a baby face or 'face for short. The bad guy is a heel. So am I a 'face or a heel now?"

She made a tantalizing expression that stopped his heart. Her gaze lowered slightly, then she brought it up to meet his while licking her full lips. "I'll have to get back with you on that one."

He laughed. She was already catching on to his type of humor.

* * * *

Soledad was in awe at the number of fans at the convention. Each wrestler had a line that reached to the back of the center. All except for Tyler. Tyler's fans went to the back of the center, outside and down the side of the building. It was incredible. And the convention center was packed with memorabilia, posters on every wall, TV screens with continuous loops of

wrestling matches and a wrestling ring set up in the center.

Monk sat at the opposite end of the table. Kevin's idea. Keep them as separate as possible until the big match. Before Tyler and Monk took their places, Kevin had whispered some directions for them to do during the signing, which made them both roll their eyes. She couldn't hear them, but in catching their reaction she knew it had to be something over the top.

Watching him from the time he sat down, she could see that Tyler was wonderful to his fans, especially the children. He didn't talk down to them. They'd asked him a question and he'd answered them honestly. She pulled her notebook out and scrawled the word "compassionate" under her steadily growing list of descriptive words.

She still couldn't fully forgive him for leaving her. The funny part about the whole situation was that she had dreamed he was in her room touching her back, trying to wake her. However in her dream he had done so much more. He'd caressed her face, kissed her softly and made love to her with such tenderness that she almost had a real orgasm from just the dream. She didn't have to imagine his naked body because she'd seen it.

The mother of a little boy Tyler had given an autograph to stepped up to the table covered in a red tablecloth. With all of the noise in the room, she could barely hear Tyler or what the fans were saying to him.

The woman put her long, red fingernails on Tyler's arm and let it remain longer than Soledad thought she should have. Under the table, she could see Tyler's leg bouncing up and down, and he clicked the pen he held repeatedly until it rivaled the *60 Minutes* stopwatch.

The woman held up a yellow disposable camera as her other hand pulled up on her black tube top. Soledad was certain she had asked him for a picture, a big no-no to Kevin. He wanted the fans to buy the pictures the wrestlers were signing.

From the way the woman squealed and tiptoed in her high strappy heels over to Tyler's side of the table, she could tell he agreed to the picture. Before he could get up to stand next to her, the overly excited fan jumped onto his lap and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. She handed her camera to the next fan in line.

Soledad turned her head when she heard a scream from the other end of the convention hall. When she brought her attention back to Tyler, she caught him kissing the woman on the lips. Soledad shook her head and turned her back on the whole scene. She was disgusted by the way Tyler used sex to gain popularity. And now she saw that he just didn't kiss the planted women in the audience, but basically anyone who asked. Kevin stood behind Soledad with a wide grin.

"Enjoying yourself, Ms. Monroe?" Kevin asked.

"It's a different experience, I must admit." She turned back to see the woman getting off Tyler's lap and wiping his mouth to remove the rose-red lipstick she had smudged on his lips and face. "I didn't realize how popular Tyler is."

"Who?" Kevin asked.

"I mean Casanova." She couldn't believe Kevin didn't know Casanova's real name. He was no better than the fans if he only saw him as his character.

"Oh, yes. Cass is very popular." He leaned down. "Especially with the ladies."

"I can see that." She watched him sign another autograph for a male fan this time. She saw he still had a smudge of lipstick on the side of his face. She reached in her purse and pulled out a cloth handkerchief and headed toward him. She felt a tug at her shirt and she turned around to see that Kevin was pulling her back.

"What are you doing? Cass is working." Kevin pulled her next to him and glared down

at her like she was about to disturb some nearly extinct animal in its rainforest habitat.

“He’s got a lipstick smudge on his face. I thought I would wipe it off for him. Well, give him the hanky so that *he* can wipe it off.” She motioned to the side of her mouth and pointed to Tyler.

“No. Leave it. Do you think this is the first time a fan has done that? Do you think that this is the first time he has had lipstick all over his face? He enjoys this type of attention. And the fans like seeing that he is just as much of a mack daddy out of the ring as he is in the ring. The lipstick smudge gives him an appeal.”

Kevin treated Tyler like one of those sad Russian dancing bears in a small, traveling circus sideshow. Tyler wasn’t a person to him, but a commodity. Tyler was Casanova to him. And probably always would be. She knew that feeling, growing up a Monroe. She wasn’t a person with her own goals. She was supposed to be a junior version of her mother.

Kevin finally let go of Soledad’s shirt.

“Tyl--uh, Casanova is quite a character.” She smoothed out her shirt and tried to get Tyler’s attention at the table by clearing her throat. The noise level in the center overpowered her grunts. She looked over at him several times, and when she couldn’t grab his attention she let her weighty purse fall to the floor with a thud. Luckily she had her recorder in her hand, the only thing in her purse that she cared enough about if it were to break.

Tyler looked over at her and furrowed his eyebrows. Still crouched over, she rubbed her finger against the side of her mouth, then pointed to him. Tyler rubbed his hand against his face and smiled. He mouthed “thank you” and went on to the next autograph.

“Casanova is a bad boy. Women usually respond to that, don’t they?” Kevin helped replace her purse strap onto her shoulder, where he left his hand resting on it for longer than he should have.

She peered into his eyes. He smiled at her in a way she imagined snakes, if they could smile, would look after devouring a mouse. She moved away and crossed her arms over her chest, wary of his intentions.

She scanned the women in line. It looked like a line going into a party at the Playboy Mansion. Short shorts, miniskirts, halter-tops, high heels, some women even wore bikini tops.

Soledad looked down at the shorts and tee shirt she had owned since college and felt dowdy. Were the women in line Tyler’s type? Why was she even wondering in the first place? She couldn’t have a future with him or even a relationship.

Kevin cleared his throat and leaned down to Soledad. “I heard that you, um, spent the night in Casanova’s room.” He raised his eyebrows and had a goofy smile in the same way her brothers would look when they talked about women. Did Kevin think she was some fan looking for a good time and used work as a cover?

“I don’t know what happened between the two of you. Knowing your family’s background, I’ll assure you that I’ll keep it discreet. But let me give you some advice, Ms. Monroe. Don’t take the fling you had to heart. Casanova meets a lot of women and he’s an attractive man. He’s going to have appetites that need to be fulfilled. I believe that’s where he was this morning when he disappeared. I hate to say that you were just a conquest, but--”

Soledad had to stop him. “Mr. Lucas, you have me and the situation all wrong.” She noticed that the volume of her voice caused a few fans to look at them. And she knew Kevin couldn’t have been right about Tyler. Tyler hadn’t left to be with another woman. Not when he had been so sweet and seductive with her in the early morning while they ate dinner. Right?

She continued. “Nothing happened last night. And I am a professional. I will write a

great story. But don't insult my integrity by insinuating that I had sex with Casanova last night."

"What? You had what?" a female fan in a denim shorts jumpsuit asked as she grabbed Soledad's arm.

Soledad wriggled her arm from the woman's grasp. "Excuse me. I'm trying to have a conversation--"

The woman turned to the large crowd and bellowed, "Hey, this woman had sex with--"

"Uh, Casanova, I think Monk said something about you!" Kevin waved his arms in the air. He stood by Tyler and pointed down to the end of the room where Monk was. Wayne stood next to Monk, and he tapped Monk's shoulder.

Tyler signed another autograph. "What?"

"I said Monk said something about you. Said he was going to beat you in the Iron Man match at *Wrestlebow*l."

Tyler nodded and stood from his folding chair. "Is that right?" He looked down the end of the room just as Monk was standing up.

"You think you can last an hour in the ring with me? You're mine, dead meat!" He ran across the room to Monk and Monk did the same thing, causing a riotous but well-choreographed brawl. The other wrestlers pulled them apart and made Monk go to another room, moving his line from the main convention center room.

Over the PA system, Kevin said, "Sorry for the commotion, folks. With titans like these, it's hard to keep them from going after each other. For those who want Monk's autograph, please follow the line to the West Room. Enjoy the rest of the convention."

Before Tyler sat back down, he rushed to Soledad, who was amazed at the quickness of the action. It had been as fast as the brawl between Mike Tyson and Lennox Lewis at their press conference in Las Vegas. And these two men looked as angry and threw hard punches as the two boxers had.

"Keep them people back, Jones." Tyler took Soledad's arm and moved her from the crowd. "That was all an act, okay."

She nodded and tried to smile. Tyler and Monk looked so angry at each other, she truly thought they were mad. Apparently Tyler picked up on her fear.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Soledad let out a long breath. She smiled, masking her draining fear. "Fine. I'm fine. Go. Go back to your fans."

Tyler stared into her eyes as though trying to see if she had told the truth. She patted his hand still on her arm. He brought his hand up like he was going to touch her cheek. When a camera flash went off in their faces, Tyler turned toward it.

Media. Not XTCWF's photographers either. Soledad had almost forgotten that this form of entertainment was popular now and outside media covered it, too.

Instead of touching Soledad's cheek, Tyler patted her shoulder and returned to his table. He must have picked up on how tense her body became after seeing the paparazzi and decided to spare her another embarrassing shot.

She sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. Maybe he had been concerned about her. Or maybe he was being Casanova. Soledad's mind rolled over a William Carlos Williams' poem.

Let the snake wait under his weed and the writing be of words, slow and quick, sharp to strike, quiet to wait, sleepless.

* * * *

Watching Tyler prepare for his match was like watching a man with an obsessive-compulsive disorder preparing to leave his house. He paced in the dressing room, mumbling under his breath and swinging his arms around as if he was fighting an invisible opponent. It was the first time she'd seen him appear so serious about his work. He didn't smile. He kept his eyes down to the floor. Some words like "drop kick" and "hip toss" came out clearly in his rant.

He put his foot up on the bench next to her to put on his kneepad. She crossed her legs and glanced at him. She didn't know what kind of reaction to expect.

He stared over at her, but it was like he wasn't seeing her at all. Almost like his gaze went *through* her. He said, "Make sure I land in the center of the ring for Chop's big move, then jump up at the two count."

She wasn't sure if she should respond or if he was even speaking to her. She opened her mouth, but he dropped his attention to his kneepads. Then he got down onto the floor and did about twenty military push-ups. His body was taut, straight, stiff, perfect. On each push up, Tyler let out a grunt, a growl. It was so deep and guttural that it sounded as though he was making love. Hot wetness formed between her legs. Soledad squeezed them together, surprised by her body's reaction.

His dedication to the character impressed her. He was determined to give a good show and give the fans what they wanted--an athletic, powerful, vibrant man who happened to look like Blackbeard. She was seeing Tyler in a whole new light. He was a professional, an entertainer, a perfectionist.

A knock sounded on the door. "Five minutes, Cass," a crewmember said through it. Tyler shook his arms and legs as though they had been covered with cobwebs. He stretched his arms over his head and then twisted to the left and right.

He surprised her by snapping out of his trance-like state and said, "There's a table backstage where you can sit with Wayne and Kevin to watch the match on a monitor."

She nodded, fearing that speaking would take him out of his zone. She had to talk to him. That was her job. "Are you nervous?"

"A little." He pulled his championship belt out of his bag, but kept his gaze from her.

"Are you going to kiss a woman tonight?" she asked. She chewed her bottom lip in anticipation of the answer.

He paused before he answered. "It's my job."

"It's the president's job to run the country, but even he hunts and fishes." She didn't know why the idea of the kiss bothered her, but it did. She felt like he was better than that. Or maybe she wanted him to be. She felt their connection earlier, both of them trying to live down a public perception. As much as she didn't want the world thinking she was a castoff mold of her mother or some flighty socialite, Tyler should have wanted to drop his playboy image.

Do not go gentle into that good night. That was what she wanted to tell him.

She'd known he was better than that. And she was going to prove it. "When I woke up this morning, I noticed that my door was open and my torn shirt had been repaired. Do you know how that happened?"

"I didn't break into your room." He twisted his head from side to side.

She caught a defensive tone in his voice. "I didn't say you did."

He cleared his throat. "You ask a lot of questions. Can't you appreciate that it's fixed?"

"It would be nice to thank the person who did it--or arranged to have it done. There were some fine details in the stitching."

"I think the hotel has a laundry service." He jumped up and down.

She'd already checked with them. No one on their staff had picked up any laundry items from their room. Monk wouldn't even tell her. It was a sweet gesture. Why didn't he want to take credit?

He peered down into her eyes. "Maybe it was the Sewing Fairy. You know. Like a Tooth Fairy. Just goes around sewing up ripped clothes."

He pulled out a roll of what looked like black electrical tape. Sitting on the bench next to her, he peeled a corner of the tape off its roll. Before using it though, she noticed that he kept squeezing his hand into a fist and wiggling his fingers.

"Something wrong?" She moved closer to him.

He shook his head. "Signed too many autographs today. My hand feels ... I don't know. It's--"

"Here." She took his large hand into hers. She felt the calluses on his palm as she gently massaged his wrist. "My grandmother used to knit all the time. She developed carpal tunnel before doctors had a name for the syndrome. I used to rub her wrists when they bothered her."

His skin was like smooth leather. Tough, but still soft to the touch like a well-worn catcher's mitt. He allowed his hand to be relaxed in hers. She kneaded her fingers in his inner wrist with small circles. It felt good to finally help him this time. He'd used his brawn to help her to the limo yesterday. Now it was her chance to return the favor. He flinched once.

She loosened her grip. "Sorry. It's been a while since I've done this."

"No. You're fine." His voice lowered to a beautifully low and seductive octave that made her insides quiver.

She peered into his eyes. He no longer looked like a half-crazed man as he had minutes before. If she hadn't known better, she would say that he seemed more like a man who's been offered shelter from the cold.

"Maybe you should ask Doc to do this for you, too, instead of having him just do your back." She moved closer to him again.

"It's enough that he does my back." His voice grumbled.

"Why? What's wrong with your back?"

His eyes widened. "Nothing." He jumped up and quickly wrapped both wrists with the tape. "Thanks for the rub." He exited the room before she could respond.

She thought she was getting closer to him, even getting to know the real Tyler. It would take longer than a week to understand a man like him. And he would probably never trust her. That pained her more than she thought it should.

He marched to the curtain where he stood waiting for his cue. Kevin walked up to Ty and leaned in close. "The one tonight is the blonde wearing the bright red jumpsuit on the left hand side of the ring as you come down the ramp, okay?" Kevin said.

The crowd's cries were muffled by the heavy black tarps that separated the backstage area to the arena. One thing was distinct though. They chanted Casanova's name in unison.

Tyler nodded but it was nearly impossible to tell if anything was registering. No wonder he'd kissed her the night before.

"And coming down to the ring, at six foot three and weighing in at two hundred and sixty pounds, is our own XTCWF champion. He is the one, the only, Casanova!" the ring announcer said over the PA system. The sound of trumpets, horns, flutes and harps with a heavy bass beat behind it filled the arena. Casanova's signature music.

Ty turned and said, "Be right back." He stared at her for a second as though he wanted to say something else, then disappeared through the curtain. The crowd went into hysterics.

Wayne pointed to his monitor. "They--they--they love him. He's the b-b-b-best." His headphones dug into his gray afro as he made notes on a pad. Mainly he was scribbling down times. How long it took Casanova to get to the ring. How long it took him to acknowledge the crowd and how long until the first move was executed. She sat next to him and slipped on another pair of headphones as she watched the monitors with Wayne.

Kevin sat down to her left and put on a set of headphones himself, but his set had a microphone attached to it. "Cue up the ring lights and stop the music," he said through the mouthpiece.

She pulled out her notepad and wrote down the feeling she got from watching her first live professional wrestling match. She recognized the athleticism that the wrestlers possessed. She watched as Tyler hurled his body into the ring ropes and allowed himself to get thrown down onto the mat. She found herself cringing every time he was knocked down, kicked or punched.

Midway through the match, he took off his bandanna and ripped off his shirt to the delight of his female fans. Even on the small black and white monitor, she had to admit Tyler looked sexy in the ring. She rubbed her hand on the back of her neck, then billowed her shirt to cool down her now heaving chest. Kevin and Wayne bickered over buying him more shirts. But she couldn't take her eyes off of him.

"Are you getting some good information for your article?" Kevin asked.

"Yes, I am. I never realized how much work went into a show." She stared at the monitor. "I also didn't realize how much hard work went into a performance either."

"We were lucky when we recruited Casanova. No one works harder than him." Kevin leaned over and whispered again. "But you be wary of him. There's his stage persona and the real person, and I don't think either personality is very different from the other."

"I don't think he's the one I need to protect myself against."

Kevin returned his attention to the monitors. She didn't know why hearing Kevin talk about Tyler like he was a true Casanova bothered her so much, especially since she had wondered the same thing the first time she met him. He was a good-looking man with charisma. What woman wouldn't fall for him?

After twenty minutes of a hard-fought match, the referee slammed his hand down to the mat for the third time as Casanova covered the body of The Chopper, a man who looked like he came straight out from the Hell's Angels with his long, braided ponytail, jeans and leather vest.

The crowd in the audience and backstage rejoiced as Tyler raised his hands in victory. Even Soledad clapped her hands. He was given his belt back by the referee, and his music started up again. He perched himself onto each ring corner and raised his belt into the air. Enough flashbulbs went off to light up the darkened arena. He commanded the audience and anyone else looking at him.

He jumped down to the floor and strolled around the ring.

"Now for the kiss and the proposal. I'm sure you're familiar with that." Kevin poked his bony elbow into her side. "Well, you slapped him before he got to propose."

Her eyes were glued to the small monitor screen as Tyler made his way around the ring. She didn't want to witness it. However she couldn't stop watching. She had to see him in action.

He looked into the crowd like a hawk searching for its next prey. Then he stopped and looked at a busty woman in the front row.

The planted woman smiled and cut her eyes up and down. He slithered to her, his belt

over his shoulder with one hand holding it, and that same smirk on his face that gave him a mischievous little boy in a man's body appearance. He put his hand to the back of her head, moved in close and kissed her--on her cheek.

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Soledad sighed.

Chapter Six

Once Soledad heard the crowd screaming with a mixture of laughter, she ripped off her headphones, but kept her eyes glued to the monitor. The planted woman looked a little surprised by the way her mouth hung open as she glanced at the fans around her. The woman smiled and placed a hand on her chest as though she was still flattered by Tyler's polite kiss.

"N-n-no proposal," Wayne said and peered across Soledad to eye his steadily seething son.

Kevin cursed and shook his head.

Strangely, though, Tyler kept his head down, his face away from the camera's eye. His was the reaction Soledad really wanted to catch. She wanted to figure out why it was that he didn't kiss that woman on the lips instead. At the moment, she felt so much relief. He'd listened to her. He'd taken her seriously. Aside from her father, no man had ever done that.

"What the hell was that?" Kevin slammed his headphones on the table and stood up. "Since when does Casanova start kissing the cheek and not the lips?"

She felt a sense of pride swelling inside. She imagined that this is what Oprah would feel like when she would get through to a troubled person on her show. Now Tyler was looking more and more attractive.

I caught a tremendous fish and held him beside the boat.

The cameras followed Tyler up the ramp to the backstage area. She stood to greet him when he came through the curtain, hoping to intercept the meeting between him and Kevin. She had a feeling Kevin was going to let Tyler have it, and that wouldn't have been fair--at least, not in her eyes, and especially since it was her fault that he made the change. She'd planted the thought in his head.

As Tyler burst through, he was greeted with well wishes and congratulations from the crew and other wrestlers. Kevin wasn't as supportive.

"What did you do?" Kevin flailed his skinny arms in the air.

"What? That was a good match. Chop and I worked hard." Tyler's voice boomed through the backstage area.

"I'm not talking about the match." Kevin took a step back. "I'm talking about the kiss. You have a system that works here. The men come see you wrestle. The women come see you kiss. You're supposed to kiss the woman on the lips. That's sexy. What you did was kiss that woman like she was your sister. That won't bring crowds back."

"I decided to do something different." Tyler headed back to his dressing room. Soledad noticed that he kept his gaze from her. He should be thanking her. This could be a new era for Casanova. A serious wrestler only interested in doing his job.

"Oh, you did? Without telling any of us." Kevin adjusted his glasses on his nose.

"The crowd still ate it up." He glanced at Soledad, but she could have sworn he sneered. Her heart beat a little slower. Was he angry?

He turned to Kevin. "Don't worry. At *Wrestlebowl* I'll do it up right." Then stared right at her this time. "I'll kiss two and three women if you want."

What was he trying to prove? Why was he so angry? Soledad balled her hands into fists,

channeling her feelings of confusion and fear into them. She followed Tyler as he stomped to his dressing room, her knees knocking with each step. He almost closed the door on her, but he stopped and stepped aside to allow her in.

"That's the Casanova I was looking for!" Kevin shouted as Tyler closed the door.

He sat on the bench by a set of wooden lockers and started taking off his boots.

Soledad needed to get him talking. "This was the first live professional wrestling match I have ever seen from start to finish." She sat down next to him, feeling a little apprehensive. It was the first time since she had been with him that he didn't stare at her constantly. Not that she'd missed that. She was over feeling like a specimen to be studied. At least, she thought she was.

"You didn't watch me last night, the night I kissed you?" He kept his gaze down to the floor.

That kiss. The same one that angered her before was making her blush now. His firm but soft lips had felt heavenly on hers. Almost like they were meant to be there. She could barely look at him when she thought about it. "I didn't get to see the whole match. I had just been escorted to the side of the ring when you, um, kissed me."

"Really? So you understand what it is I do for a living and you try to mess with that?" He slammed his boots into his bag. "It's entertainment. That's it."

She blinked at his reaction. He was angry. Worse yet, he was angry with her when all she tried to do was help.

Oh, no. She was the Yoko Ono of the pro-wrestling world. She gazed at him from his shiny, sweaty bald head down to his large, taped feet.

"The only thing I said was that you're better than just a guy kissing different women. Are you saying I'm wrong?" Deep down she wanted him to smile that boyish smile and say he was just kidding. She knew he wouldn't. He looked as serious as she had been when she'd confronted him about leaving her.

"It's all an act. I told you that. I'm not serious when I kiss any of those women. But you made me think I was wrong for doing my job."

"I hate to be the one to tell you, but you are wrong. You treat these women like sex objects."

"I treat *them* like sex objects?" He swung his leg around so that he was straddling the bench to face her. "In case you've forgotten, *I'm* the one who has to kiss the women. And when I'm not wrestling, and I'm out in public, I'm the one who gets his butt pinched. I'm the one who gets room keys and panties thrown at me." He looked like he wanted to say more, but he raised his hands in the air in frustration and turned back to his locker.

She wanted to touch him, hold him. She could tell he was torn. He loved his work and if putting up with getting mauled by his female fans was a part of it, then he seemed content to do it. "If you're so dead set on keeping up that part of your character, it would be nice if you would kiss someone who looks like--"

"A nice, intelligent woman in conservative clothes and a sweet smile?" he said, interrupting her speech. He peered at her, his hazel eyes soft now, and he smiled.

From the top of her head down to her toes, she felt a stream of heat rush through her. He had done it again. With one line spoken so sincerely, he had won her over.

"I don't pick the women I have to kiss. That's decided by Kevin. But if I had my choice, she would look ... well, she wouldn't look like the ones Kevin has picked." He stood up and started to pull down his tights. She jumped to her feet and retreated to the other side of the room.

If she watched him undress again, she may have to attack him.

“Let’s make a deal with each other before you leave. I won’t tell you how to do your job or talk about your marriages and money.” He removed his tights and moved closer to her. “And you don’t make me feel guilty about my job.”

Soledad got a headache from trying so hard not to look down at his legs and jock strap. “If I have an opinion, I’m going to offer it. It just seems to me like you’d want to be taken seriously at your work. I thought I was being helpful.”

“And when I told you what I thought about you the first time we met I was being honest.” He held his hand up before she could say another word. “I don’t want to fight. I think you have enough to bury me in your article. Just be sure to spell my name right.”

“Fine. Is that Casanova or Tyler?” She wanted to know if this was all an act for her or did he have a heart and soul.

“You decide,” he said.

Soledad’s heart squeezed out its last pump of hope. “And where do you see yourself in ten years?” she asked. And with whom, she wanted to follow up.

He looked a little pensive as he sat back down on the bench. He rested his hands on his knees and gazed up at her. “Happy. Just happy. I know I won’t be wrestling. There’s no room for a forty-five to fifty-year-old wrestler. And I don’t think I would do well commentating. Nah, I’ll do what makes me happy.” He smiled at the corner of his mouth. “With a woman who makes me happy.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and then dropped them down to her side when she realized how hard she must have looked. Looking into his eyes and seeing that smile, she eased closer. She didn’t know what she was going to do. Kiss him. Hug him. Shake his hand. She knew at that moment she should be in his space.

Monk entered the room, which startled her. She stumbled to the other side of the room, and Tyler swung around to his locker. She was glad there was another distraction to cut through the heat between her and Tyler. Monk waved to her and padded over to his locker.

“Since we have a few days before the big show, we usually go out and do something to celebrate.” Tyler grabbed a towel from his locker. “You want to join us tomorrow night? Us being Monk and me. I don’t want you accuse me of trying to run from you again.”

“No, I’m going to stay in my room and work.” She held up her notebook as though she needed to prove she was working. Besides, she didn’t need great food, candlelight or a cozy restaurant clouding her judgment where Tyler was concerned.

“I am your work. You are interviewing and following me. So why don’t you come on out with us. It’ll be a lot of fun.”

Great. Now all of the sudden he was starting to make sense.

“Why didn’t you kiss that woman?” She didn’t know what she wanted to hear. And maybe she would use the information in the article. But she had to know.

“I don’t know.” He looked over his shoulder at her. “My heart wasn’t in it.”

And her heart throbbed. “Kevin was really mad.”

“Yeah, I think he’ll be glad when you’re gone. I think he thinks you’re a bad influence.” He stood up displaying his firm, rounded cheeks framed by the straps of his jockstrap. This time Soledad looked. She stared. She fantasized about how it must feel in her hands if he were on top of her, positioned between her legs, making love to her. She wanted so much to reach out and grab him, pull him in. Before she broke out of her fantasy, she glanced up and found Tyler smiling.

Tyler stared back. His eyes twinkled more than she remembered.

He laughed. "Were you staring at me?"

She folded her arms and leaned back against the wall on the opposite side of the room. "You shouldn't be undressing in front of me anyway. It's inappropriate."

"So you're telling me that when you interviewed all of those surfer guys all coming out of the water, wet and hot, that you told them it was inappropriate, too?" He glanced over at Monk, who faced his locker, then sauntered to her.

She pressed against the wall so hard that her shoulder blades hurt. She didn't know why he made her so nervous. Probably because she was denying her attraction to him.

He put his hand above her shoulder and curved down to her ear. "Come on. Loosen up. Why don't you come out with us? Let all of that pretty, curly hair down and let loose." Guess he wasn't mad at her anymore.

"I, um, shouldn't be in a social situation with you."

"Shouldn't?" he questioned with a smirk.

Did he know what he was doing to her? Her lips were just inches from his. It would have been so easy to turn her head slightly, tilt it upward and have him give the kiss she knew would send her soaring.

Her breathing became heavy and the more she tried controlling it, the more obvious it was that she was both breathing heavy and trying not to. She swallowed hard.

"Can't, really. I've made plans with my--" Before she could finish her statement, her cell phone in her bag chirped.

"Saved by the bell." He retreated to his locker.

She flipped it open and answered it. "Hello?"

"Solie, how's the wrestling world? Full of freaks and losers?" Russell laughed. She looked over at Monk and Tyler who were talking to each other. She squeezed into the farthest corner of the room. These men weren't freaks. And they certainly weren't losers. They were sweet men, doing an unusual job. And she respected that because she was no different.

"The article's coming along nicely. Where are you?" she asked.

"At work. Your mother wanted me to finish up these financial reports before I fly down to Richmond. You know what a perfectionist she is." He was preaching to the choir. This was a woman who conducted bed-making classes for her and her brothers every Saturday morning complete with quarters to bounce from the beds and rulers to measure the corners.

"Yes, I know. So what time are you arriving down here--" She saw it was already after midnight. "--today?"

"I should be in town by five. I'll need you to come pick me up at the airport. Will you have your own room?"

"Yes. But you'll need to arrange to have your own room, Russell. I don't think it'll be wise if we--"

"I know. I know. I get it, Solie." He sighed.

The hairs in the back of her neck prickled. "Don't call me that."

"Damn, I can't do anything right tonight, can I?"

As she stared at Tyler, he glanced over to her and winked. "Things have changed. I've changed." She exhaled. "Why don't you stay in New York? I'll celebrate my birthday alone. It's not a big deal." The idea of going out with Tyler ... and Monk ... enticed her. He was probably a good date. However, it wouldn't be a date. Just another opportunity to interview him. Yes. That was it.

“It is a big deal. I was thinking about taking you to Le Chateau de Renoir. I’ve heard nothing but good things about them.”

“Le Chateau de Renoir. French food. Sounds rich.” She really wasn’t a fan of French cuisine.

“I’m sure you’ll like it. Okay, Solie, I have to run. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Again, he hung up before she could object to the name or even finish the conversation. She closed her phone and took a deep breath. Looking over at Monk and Tyler, the men scurried away from her like kids caught doing something they shouldn’t have. If she hadn’t been across the room the whole time, she would have suspected they were eavesdropping.

“We’re going to go shower up, then we’ll be leaving.” Tyler put his hand on the band of his jock strap and peered at her. He smiled and had an expression on his face like he was challenging her, daring her to look or be a coward and turn away.

She buckled. She cleared her throat and faced to the door. After counting to ten, she glanced back and saw the two had disappeared into the shower.

* * * *

It was rare for Tyler to ask Monk to read someone’s lips. Since Soledad had gotten that secret phone call, he wanted to know what she was doing that she gave her a reason not to go out with him.

“So tell me what you got,” Tyler asked Monk.

Monk made a series of gestures that Tyler guessed as being a restaurant he had never heard of.

“Shadow Dee Ben-wah?” Tyler asked. “That’s the name of the restaurant she’s going with a guy?”

Monk nodded and clapped his hands.

Although Monk was an expert at reading lips, Ty felt he was probably off of his game when he read hers. Her perfectly shaped, juicy-looking lips distracted the big man.

“That doesn’t make any sense. Shadow Dee Ben-wah? I’ve never heard of a restaurant like that. Are you sure that’s what she said?”

He nodded, put the tips of his fingers and his thumb together, put the union to his lips and kissed.

“French? It’s a French place?”

Monk nodded and patted him on his back. Then the big man pantomimed blowing candles out of an imaginary cake.

“And it’s her birthday?” Tyler asked.

Monk nodded.

He wished she had shared that with him. But then again why would she? She was there to do a job. She’d even said so.

“Thanks, Monk. I’m sure I can figure out where she’s going. Can’t be too many French places around here with a name that sounds like that, right?”

He hunched his shoulders again and disappeared into one of the shower stalls.

“Yep, Sunny can’t celebrate her birthday without me. After all, it is a special occasion.”

* * * *

“Are you going to wear that to dinner?” Russell asked as they descended in the elevator to the lobby.

Soledad rubbed her hands down her black wrap dress with a plunging neckline, spaghetti straps and slit on the side. Her black, strappy high-heeled sandals were not very comfortable but

they looked great with the dress. At least, that's what she thought before she left the room. Hell, she still thought that. Russell just didn't know what he was talking about.

I am a woman. Phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, that's me.

And since she had picked him up from the airport a couple of hours earlier, he had done nothing but criticize her and the surroundings. What had she been thinking when she first went out with him *and* married him? She remembered. Mom liked him, and Soledad, at the time, was interested in pleasing Mom. She had made a mistake in her mother's eyes when she married the previous five other men. Russell was supposed to redeem herself in her mother's eyes.

With her head held high, Soledad stated, "I look fierce. Phenomenal."

Russell opened the door to the cab and before she could get in, he jumped inside. She shook her head and followed.

"Thank you for holding the door open for me." She hoped he caught her sarcasm.

"Are you kidding me? You're the same woman who refused to change your last name when we got married. Now all of the sudden you want doors held open for you?"

"Did you ever think that if you had done some things like hold doors open for me that maybe we would still be together?"

He brushed his jacket and adjusted his buttoned up collar. Her first instinct was right. She should have never accepted his offer to go out to dinner. She didn't deserve to be treated this way, especially on her birthday.

She briefly thought about Tyler and what he must be doing. Or maybe she should have thought *who* he was doing. Their interview sessions that day had gone from a sexy breakfast where his intense stares made her stomach flip to a fun lunch where he made her laugh so much she was in tears. An exciting man like that in a hotel room was a dangerous prospect.

The cab stopped in front of the restaurant. It was decorated to look like an authentic French bistro with tables and chairs sitting outside and music rich with accordions and violins playing both outside and inside. Russell opened the door and almost walked in front of her, but seemed to think better of it and stepped aside.

"After you." He bowed his head as she stepped inside. She didn't know at what point in their relationship that Russell had changed. Russell's definition of a perfect union was himself and his career. She couldn't be with a man who was so obsessed about his work that he barely thought of her.

The beauty of the dimly lit restaurant with its Renoir paintings and crystal chandeliers took her breath away. An eggshell color covered the walls and cream-colored tablecloths blanketed the tables with lit candles adorning the centers. It was like a dream.

The maitre d' led them to a table in the middle of the restaurant, right below the largest of all of the chandeliers. It was as though this table was the center of the restaurant and the best light in the building spotlighted it.

"This is a fabulous place." She glanced around as Russell scanned the wine selection.

"Surely, with your family's background, you have been to restaurants much more lavish than this. I'm sure you've even eaten in French restaurants that are actually in France, right?"

"Not necessarily." She hated talking about her family's money. Did people only see her as that spoiled, rich socialite? She was more than that. Much more.

Russell ordered champagne as soon as their waiter returned. "I must excuse myself, Solie. I'll be right back."

She couldn't help feeling happy he left the table. She wanted to enjoy looking at the restaurant and viewing the artwork. She took in the rich aromas of creams and sweet butter

saucers that permeated from the kitchen. She observed couples talking to each other, holding hands, looking so in love. It was the same type of look Tyler would have given her.

Soledad felt the table move slightly.

"This is a great restau--" She stopped when she saw who was sitting across from her. "What are you doing here, and why are you sitting at my table?"

"Well, hello to you, too." Tyler smiled at her. He wore a white, buttoned-up shirt, a black suit jacket, jeans and black combat boots. He was casually clean. Everything about him seemed to glimmer from his smooth bald head to his sparkling hazel eyes and his white teeth. The man oozed confidence and sex appeal. A fantastic feat in combat boots.

He eased closer. "You look absolutely sexy. But you shouldn't be eating alone."

"Who says I am?" She looked at Russell's glass, which got Tyler to direct his gaze to it as well.

Tyler nodded. "So you have company?"

"My ex."

"Which one?" he asked.

"What do you want?" She wasn't about to fuel his curiosity, although she should be thanking him. His return would give her a chance to accept his offer of going out with him ... and Monk. Strictly to finish her job, of course.

"I wanted to help celebrate your birthday." He slid his chair so that he sat a foot away from her. "Happy birthday, Sunny." Tyler crouched down and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. She fought the urge to curve her head and ease into his soft kiss. She exhaled and closed her eyes. Tyler at least, without prompting, wished her a happy birthday.

She pulled away and eased her eyelids open. "And how did you know I would be here?" She stared into his eyes.

"I had Monk read your lips when you were on your phone." He scanned the restaurant and nodded his head to the diners looking at him.

Soledad didn't know what kind of game Tyler was playing but she wouldn't be a part of it. And if was going to disarm her with his charm, then she to shake him up, too.

"Mr. Randolph, I'm not rich. My parents are. If your sudden interest in me is to get at some Monroe money, then you can--"

Tyler cut her off. "I don't need or want any more money than I have. I earn my own way. I just want you..." he put his hand to her cheek and let his fingers travel down the side of her face. "...to have a happy birthday," he concluded.

Soledad's stomach wrenched into a knot as she remained frozen to the spot.

Their waiter returned to the table with a bucket of ice and the champagne. He split his gaze between Soledad and Tyler. "Should I bring another glass?" he asked.

She turned away from Tyler, keeping her attention squarely on the young waiter's thin, smooth face. "Please wait." She pointed to Tyler without looking at him. "And show this gentleman to his table."

"Not necessary." Tyler's southern accent seemed out of place in the restaurant, or maybe not the accent but the volume. Tyler crouched down and whispered to her, "I would never ruin your day. I've put a present under your chair. I hope you like it. I'm going to sit at my table back there. If you need me, come get me." He turned to go, but then crouched down next to her again. "And I'm not acting."

His words came in between her pounding heartbeats that thrummed in her head. Soledad resisted the urge to rub her sweaty palms on the fine tablecloth. And she did everything she

could to keep from turning her head. She knew gazing into his eyes would have been a mistake.

As he walked away, Russell came back to the table. Perfect timing.

Russell sat down. "You're looking a little flushed."

She looked over at the champagne bottle still in the waiter's hands. "Just thirsty."

"Then by all means, let's have champagne." Russell motioned to the young man.

As he poured the golden bubbles into two fluted glasses, she thought about Tyler. She imagined he was probably sitting right behind her, staring at her. Her body trembled thinking about his seductive eyes looking her over from her upswept hairdo, down her bare back and to her legs.

"Are you listening to me, Solie?" Russell asked as he held up his champagne glass.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm trying to toast you, and you're spacing out on me."

"No, I'm not. I'm thinking about some things."

"Grab your glass. Let's toast."

She picked up her chilled glass and held it up to Russell's. "What are we toasting?"

"To perfect unions." He clinked his glass against hers. "And new beginnings."

"I'll drink to that." She smiled and took a sip.

It had been years since she'd had a drink. Not that she'd had a problem with alcohol. Just a self-imposed hiatus on all alcohol to clear her mind. Tonight she needed it.

"So what have you discovered with your little story? Anything revealing? Any tantalizing news?" Russell asked as he set his glass down.

She took a deep breath and set her glass down also. "No. Not really."

"Come on," Russell prodded. "There has to be something."

Soledad chewed her lower lip. Before could stop herself she blurted, "I think the wrestler I'm interviewing is on drugs." She wanted the focus off of her, but as soon as the words came out of her mouth she wanted so much to swallow them.

"Really? Like crack or speed?"

She wiped her forehead. "I don't know. Maybe speed. He's so hyper, but he doesn't talk about it."

"What a thing to uncover. You're going to write about that, right?" he asked.

"I don't know. Probably not. I don't have enough solid information to write about it. Besides, I would be no better than a tabloid journalist if I had something like that printed."

"You're America's Daughter. People forgave John-John when he failed the Bar so many times. You would be allowed to stumble, too."

It wouldn't be a stumble if she wrote a bad story on Tyler. She would fall flat on her face in a big, steamy pile if she failed and disgrace her family in the process. She turned and Tyler stared at her. He raised his glass in a silent toast. What a way to spend her birthday.

Chapter Seven

As Soledad suspected, dinner was rich but delicious. She wondered through the meal about her friends back at Lyrics, an open mike poetry coffee shop. They would spit rhymes with such passion that the words would have pummeled anything Russell uttered.

Soledad excused herself, grabbed her black clutch and sauntered to the bathroom. Once inside she plopped herself down onto the plush, off-white couch in the waiting room.

No matter how hard she'd tried, she couldn't get Tyler off her mind. His smile enraptured her thoughts.

Shake this off, girl. He's the guy you're interviewing and he's a character--literally!

Character or not, Tyler treated her better in the few days he had been around her than Russell had in their whole marriage. Tyler's attitude had made it easy for her to rub his aching wrists back in the locker room. It warmed her to see his eyes soften when he looked at her. Then he'd pulled away. Scared away by the journalist flag waving above her head. He would never see her as anything but that ... and a rich girl.

She stood and looked at herself in the mirror. She applied a coat of wine-colored glossy lipstick and fluffed her hair up in the front. She pulled the fabric between her breasts in together to eliminate a bit of her cleavage. Then she thought about it. She pulled the top of her dress back to its original position. *Damn Russell for making me doubt myself!*

She walked out of the bathroom and almost into Tyler's back. Staring out into the restaurant, he had his hands on his hips. She wondered if he was waiting for her, and she didn't know what to think. Should she be flattered or scared? Either way she was above all curious. If she couldn't tell that from the way her heart jumped, then the way she tried not to smile definitely tipped her off. It was the same feeling she had when he approached her at her table.

She tapped him on his shoulder. "We keep meeting like this and people will start talking."

He spun around and smiled so wide that it seemed to light up the darkened area in front of the bathrooms. "I wanted to say happy birthday to you again. And tell you how damn sexy you look tonight. That's a really pretty dress."

Hearing him say how much he liked her dress lifted her spirits. He said it at the right moment and it cost him nothing. He took a step closer, and she took one back to a corner next to the payphones.

"That's very nice of you, Mr. Randolph."

Keep it together. You still have the upper hand.

"Tyler. Or Ty. Cut this mister crap." He took another step toward her.

Again, she stepped back. "Okay, Tyler. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go back to my table. You can't keep ambushing me like this. I'm not a deer you're hunting."

He kept coming toward her until her back met with the corner. "I don't hunt. Don't let the southern accent cloud your judgment." He leaned over her, putting his hand over her shoulder.

She tried hard to keep herself composed but smelling his musky scent and gazing into his incredible eyes, she couldn't even think of a literary quote.

“Come on, Sunny. I don’t know about you, but I hate this place. They don’t serve anything I like or can eat. Everyone here acts like they have a bug up their butt and nobody’s really talking.”

She hated to agree with him, but he was right. It wasn’t a place she would have normally gone herself, but Russell was into posing. Despite the fact that Soledad loved the nightlife, she wanted something simple. Great conversation was what she sought.

“There’s nothing wrong with this place.” She lied. “And if you’re so uncomfortable maybe you should go and be with your friends.” She attempted to leave again and he blocked her with his arm around her waist.

“I thought we were starting a good friendship.” He whispered but it came out in a low growl. “I mean with breakfast this morning and lunch.” He winked.

After he said that, she felt bad telling Russell about Tyler’s pills. Tyler’s eyes were clear. His motions were deliberate. Soledad didn’t know why she’d said anything, except she desperately tried finding something, anything, unattractive about the man aside from his questionable profession. She still couldn’t fall to his charms.

“You’re my work.” She said it coolly so that he could leave her alone.

He put his hand to his chest and feigned that he was heartbroken. “Ouch, Sunny. That hurts.”

“It’s Soledad.”

“I hate to butt into your private affairs, but it’s a good thing you left that guy. You need someone who’s going to thank the good Lord above that you were born.”

She could barely stand, let alone control her fluttering heart. She couldn’t admit that he was right.

“You’re right. It’s none of your business.” She made it past him but he held her wrist. She gave him her full attention.

His thumb rubbed the inside of her wrist. “I’ve been watching you all night. You haven’t smiled once.”

Soledad no longer could control the functions of her hand, wrists, legs or any part of her body. “How could you tell? You’re sitting behind me,” she said almost in a whisper. “You don’t have Monk here reading my lips, do you?”

“There are things I can read on my own.” His fingers trailed down the side of her face.

Her breath caught and her lower lip trembled.

He continued. “The body doesn’t lie. But I know you can’t like a place like this. Let’s go and have some fun. I know this great jazz club that serves some tasty shrimp and crawdads. We could eat until we burst, unlike this place where you eat until you vomit.”

She laughed in spite of herself. “I’ve already eaten.”

He pulled her close to him. “Then we can ... talk.”

Talk. Yeah, that was what she was thinking they could do. Definitely not seeing his naked body or kissing him until their faces hurt. “Tyler--”

“Sunny.”

She put her hand to his chest to push him back. Mistake. She could feel his muscular chest and her mind swam with thoughts of getting intimate beyond asking him about his personal life. “Why me? You can have any woman.”

“I don’t want just any woman.” He leaned down. “I want the woman who looks out for me, like telling me when I have lipstick on my face. Or making me believe I’m better than what I feel like sometimes. I want a woman who rubs my wrists when she can tell they’re bothering

me.”

The heat from his mouth warmed her lips, he was that close. She closed her eyes but gripped her purse with both hands to keep them occupied. He feathered his lips over hers. And she was fairly certain she uttered the words, “Oh, God” when he’d done it, otherwise why would he have chuckled?

“The test is over. You definitely passed.”

Her eyes snapped open, and she put her hand to his neck to push him away this time. “A test? What are you talking about?”

He swallowed, evident by the way his Adam’s apple tickled the palm of her hand. He smiled, but it was sheepish, not his same side-of-the-mouth smile.

“Nothing. I didn’t mean anything by it.” He took a step back.

“Oh, I think you meant something, or you wouldn’t have said it. Now what kind of test did I pass?” She removed her hand from his neck and placed it on her hip.

He inspected the enclosed space, then gazed at her. “I know when a reporter is sent to interview me, it’s normally a woman. And usually the women want more than a story.”

She raised her eyebrows. He sounded more like Kevin. Now she felt even more foolish. Happy birthday to her. Allen Ginsberg possessed her body and all she wanted to do was howl, rage against his insanity and her naïveté.

“So you thought that if I kissed you or had sex with you, then that would prove I was like the other women, right?”

He remained silent.

“So what were you proving by following me here and trying to kiss me just now? Was that part of your test, too?”

“No. What I did was--”

“Was just as mean and cruel as your act when you ask women to marry you and then turn them down. You are nothing more than your character.”

A customer walked by them and gave them suspicious glances before disappearing into the bathroom. When Soledad pushed past him, a flash blinded her.

Paparazzi. They were everywhere and they’d managed to find her again. She cursed as she made it past Tyler. The photographer made some comment about her birthday, but she kept her eyes straight.

“Are you quitting?” Tyler followed her.

She didn’t feel so bad about basically using Tyler to get her life back. He didn’t believe her and had some stupid test to discredit her. And to think, she’d almost told him the deal with her and her mother because she thought he would be sympathetic.

“I wouldn’t give you the pleasure.” This time she grabbed Tyler’s large hand. She had to finish this story, and he wasn’t going to scare her away with any of his strange tactics.

She hustled back into the dining area with Tyler trailing behind her. If her feet moved as fast as her heart, she would have been at the table in milliseconds.

“Are you all right, Solie?” Russell asked, blinking when the camera flashes blinded him.

“No. And please stop calling me that.” She grabbed the champagne bottle by its neck.

Russell peered behind her, obviously looking at whom she was dragging. “Who is that?” He pointed to Tyler.

“I’m sorry. I should introduce myself.” Tyler extended his free hand to Russell. “My name’s Tyler Randolph. I’m a--”

“He’s the man I’m interviewing,” she interrupted him. “And I need to get back to work.”

Russell dropped his hand. "What? But what about--"

She butted in. "Nothing else matters right now, Russell. I'm sorry to leave you like this but you knew I was working when you came down."

"What are you working on, So Mo?" a photographer asked. "Husband Seven?"

"Cheap shot, buddy," Tyler said, pumping up his chest to the weasel-like leech.

Soledad tugged on Tyler's hand. If he was going to be chewed up and spit out, she wanted to be the one doing it.

Tyler split his attention between her and Russell.

"Thank you for dinner." She turned to Tyler who had a confused look on his face.

"We're going back to my room, and we're not coming out until I'm satisfied."

"What?" Russell and Tyler asked in unison.

She didn't mean to say that the way it sounded, but thinking clearly was the last thing on her mind. "Come on." With bottle in hand and Tyler's hand in the other, she pulled him toward the door.

"Wait." Tyler, still clutching onto Soledad's hand, twirled her around and crouched down. He grabbed the package he'd set under her chair. When he stood up, he glanced at Russell and said, "It was nice meeting you. Sorry circumstances couldn't have been better."

Tyler almost sounded smug with his apology. She was about to wipe that smug look right off of his face.

* * * *

The silent cab ride back to the hotel should have made Soledad nervous. She'd never been with Tyler when he didn't have something smart to say. If she weren't so pissed off about whole test thing, then she wouldn't have minded the silence. And now he wasn't even touching her anymore. That was fine. She had to be professional.

"My place or yours?" Tyler asked in a low murmur.

Her body shook as soon as she heard his voice. "What?"

"Do you want to go to my room or yours?"

What a question. She should have chosen a neutral place. The hotel bar or something.

"My room," she said. She would feel more comfortable in her own room. Then again, Tyler could always claim exhaustion and cut out on her early. "No, your room."

"My room?"

The indecent rise in his voice was not lost on her.

"That way you can't cut out on me," she quickly followed.

He dropped his head back and covered his eyes with his hand. "The things you try to live down."

He couldn't seriously think that he could convince her that he was interested in changing his image. She'd fallen for it once.

"If we make it an all night session, you can get rid of me." And she meant that. She had questions ready for him. She knew the angles for the story. She could pick his brain for one long evening and be done with it. Then she could get paid, go back home, resume a normal life.

The cab driver cleared his throat, and Soledad found him staring in his rearview mirror.

"So what are you saying? I lay it all out for you tonight and--"

"And I'll be out of your hair, uh, way for the rest of the week. Deal?" She held out her hand.

He took a deep breath but didn't move. "You want to be rid of me that badly?"

"Come on. Don't put this all on me. You've wanted out since the first time we met. I'm

just making it equitable. So do we have a deal?” She jutted her hand closer to him.

Finally he accepted it and gave her three hearty pumps. “Deal. We’ll both get what we want.”

She withdrew her hand and had to avert her gaze. So this was it. He made it easy. So why did she feel like she’d just lost a dear friend? And would her parents still cut her off for not staying with Tyler for the full week?

The cab slowed to a stop in front of the Marriott Hotel. Tyler stepped out first, held his hand out for her as he held the car door and waited patiently. Apprehensively she took his strong, but gentle hand. Something about his touch made her feel safe.

She hadn’t even realized that she held onto his hand as she walked into the hotel until he halted at the elevators and jerked his hand back.

“I’ll take the stairs.” He headed toward a side door.

“Why?” she asked. “The elevator’s right here.”

Tyler looked at the door from the stairs, then at the elevator. He huffed and wiped his hand on his now shining forehead.

“It’s healthier.” He bolted to the door without another word. The elevator doors opened and Soledad split her gaze between it and Tyler.

She pulled off her heels. “This job is going to kill me.” She sprinted after him with her sandals in one hand and the champagne bottle in the other. How she managed not to spill a drop was a feat in itself. But she knew she would need it some time in the evening.

At the third floor she asked him, “So why don’t you take elevators?”

Tyler looked back at her without breaking his stride. “Like I said. It’s healthier. I’m always training.”

No, she’d see athletes in training. She’d seen the intensity in their eyes. His eyes weren’t intense. They contained fear. She knew the look. She had the same look when she’d told her parents about each marriage, especially marriage number seven.

When they got to the fifth floor, Tyler held the door open for her. Panting, she sauntered through it while trying not to completely pass out from weakness.

He asked, “The stairs too much for you?”

Soledad took a swig straight from the bottle and leaned against the wall next to his hotel room door. “Oh, no. I always run up seventeen flights of stairs.”

He opened the door and ushered her inside. “I didn’t ask you to take the stairs. You could have taken the elevator.”

“Yeah. And I’m sure you would have let me into your room if you made it upstairs before me, right?” She stumbled into his room.

“I’ve already told you that you look good. Do you really think I would leave you out in the hallway?”

She smiled, but she wasn’t going to let him get the best of her. “I guess it wouldn’t be you, Casanova, if you did.” She knew using his stage name would get to him. From his pained expression as he closed the door behind her and locked it, she knew she was right.

“Okay, reporter.” An obvious dig at her. “Why don’t you sit down and make yourself comfortable.” He pointed to her bottle still affixed to her hand. “Need a glass?”

Soledad eased herself onto the couch and sat the bottle on the coffee table. “Sure. Joining me?”

Tyler retrieved a glass from the kitchen cabinet and rinsed it out. “Nope. I told you I’m in training.” He dried it off and handed it to her.

She hadn't expected to be drinking alone. Honestly, she didn't know what to expect when she snagged Russell's expensive champagne. In the back of her mind, did she really think that Tyler would see this as a romantic opportunity? She took a deep breath. Bottom line was that she did and that was wrong.

Soledad poured a glass of the golden bubbly liquid, but set it on the table. The sweet apple-like scent wafted to her nose. It had been years since she had champagne let alone any alcohol.

"I almost forgot." He picked up the white bag he'd placed on the kitchen counter when they first got to his room and handed it to her. "Happy birthday."

The excitement in his face forced her to smile in response. She finished off her champagne and poured herself another glass without acknowledging the present.

"Don't you want it?" he asked.

She nearly dropped the bottle onto the floor, but managed to recover it and herself without turning into a complete fool.

"The gift, I mean." Tyler winked.

"I know that." Was it that obvious that everything the man said made her toes curl? One thing she couldn't deny was that she was excited to see just what this man thought would impress her. He barely knew her. So what made him think that he could buy a present she would like? It was probably something wrestling related. A DVD set of his matches or a calendar.

She opened the bag and pulled out a copy of Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*. She gasped and slammed her hand against her lips. She'd pressed her other hand against the cover and caressed it like a child.

"How did you know I love this author?" She looked at the back cover and ran her hand over the book's spine. Nothing flashy. It was just perfect. Chalk one up for this man. He'd found the perfect gift.

"A little bird told me. Look inside the cover." Tyler instructed. She opened the front cover and inside was an autograph. "Thank you for being such a big fan. I hope you know how special you are to your friends. Keep reading and keep writing. Toni Morrison."

She wanted to cry. Maybe it was the champagne, but she wanted to give Tyler a kiss right there and then. No, it wasn't the alcohol. He'd done something so incredibly sweet that he deserved a kiss even if he had been a jerk in the restaurant.

"You like it?" Tyler asked. "I got it on a barter system. Her grandson loves wrestling so in exchange for some front row seats, I asked her to send me an autographed copy of one of her books. She even Fed Ex-ed it to me, too. I know you must be used to something more glitzy than just a book."

Truthfully, she had been. The expensive gifts never meant that much to her. This gift. This thoughtful, wonderful gift spoke volumes of a man who appeared to be selfish and self-centered. She couldn't keep it.

"I love it." She held the book to him. "But I can't accept gifts from my interview subjects. *Vestige* policy." Her hand shook when she tried returning it. This really hurt.

"Come on. Keep it. I won't tell if you don't." He winked. "It'll be our little secret."

Nope. She couldn't keep it now. She didn't want anything over her head where she felt like she owed him something. It was bad enough her parents had her by the throat. With eyes closed, she put the book on the coffee table and picked up her glass. She downed her champagne in one gulp.

"I can't take it. It's a lovely gesture. But it would be wrong to accept this gift."

He shook his head. "Stubborn, stubborn, stubborn. I had a mule who didn't kick up as much fuss as you're doing."

"Forget the book." Easier said than done. Her eyes constantly gazed at the cover, and her mind tripped over the ways in which Tyler used his charm to get such a precious offering. "We need to get down to business."

Tyler stretched his long arm across the back of the couch and hitched up a smile at the corner of his mouth. The whole look was so delicious she could have devoured him on the spot.

"What business would that be?" he asked as though he had no idea why she was even in his room.

He was getting too coy. Time to bring him down a peg or two. "Why did you try to kiss me before? Was it really because you were testing me?" She sat up straight.

He winced. "You're not going to mention that in the article, are you? I shouldn't have told you that. Made me sound like I can attract any woman."

Actually he could. Sexy Tyler with his large hands, luscious mouth and piercing eyes. She wasn't about to tell him that.

"But that's your character. You're supposed to act like that." She reached her hand down and rubbed the top of her toes where a deep strap impression from her sandals still remained. Beauty hurt.

"Yeah, when I'm working." He stared into her eyes. "I'm not working." He glanced at her feet.

"Give me those." Without permission and without a fight from Soledad, Tyler picked up her feet and gently placed them on his lap. He rubbed them with the firmness and careful precision of an artist molding clay.

She eased down, unable and unwilling to do anything else but enjoy this magnificent treatment.

"Is this okay?" he asked.

In a nonchalant tone, she replied, "It's all right." What she couldn't say verbally her body certainly responded. Her breath quickened, and she could feel the molten lava pooling between her legs. It was heavenly.

Gliding his hand up her calf, he massaged it gently. His touch sent shivers down her spine.

"Smooth," he whispered. His hand traveled to her knee. He allowed the heel of his hand to rest on her knee as his fingers tickled her inner thigh. He'd actually found a spot on her body, aside from the obvious, that drove her crazy.

As though he realized what he was doing to her, he stopped stroking her leg. He looked into the kitchenette. "Let me get you a cup of coffee."

Perhaps he thought she had too much to drink because of her swirling eyes. Alcohol had nothing to do with her look.

She sighed and relaxed the growing knot in her stomach. His brief touch was enough to stir her. Like a junkie, she wanted more of him. She watched him leave and pour her a cup. She struggled to her feet and tried to get her bearings. Maybe she had had too much.

Stumbling to the kitchenette, she carried a smile on her face, a warm feeling in her stomach and an even hotter feeling between her legs.

"So how do you like your coffee? Cream and sugar? You probably should have it black to--"

She spun him around and pushed him against the wall. She didn't know where she got the strength to move this large man and pin him. And he wasn't really fighting.

She kissed him hungrily, starved for the affection she'd been missing for a while. She let her fingers dance over his smooth head. Her tongue slipped easily into his hot, waiting mouth. With his hands on her hips, he pulled her in close. She moved her hands down the side of his face. His bristly cheeks felt like fine-grit sandpaper, but underneath that his jaw was strong and angled. His lips were soft, and his mouth tasted like mint.

She moved her hands to his muscled neck, then to his chest. Her panting breath matched his, and the only way she knew that either one of them was breathing was because she felt the hot breath from his nose feathering across her cheek. Otherwise she could only hear her heart pounding in her head.

She undid the top button of his shirt. As though that was an unspoken cue, he scooped his hands under her butt and set her on the counter.

"God, tell me I'm not dreaming," he managed to say in between kisses. She wrapped her legs around him.

"I see what people mean by liquid courage." She pulled his shirt out from his pants and stripped it off. She buried her face into the side of his neck, kissing him and moving up to nibble his earlobe.

"Wait," he said feebly, still with his hands on her hips.

His salty skin was distinguishable even with the stale aftertaste of Cristal on her palate.

Her mouth moved easily from one earlobe to under his chin to the other earlobe. After pulling her black lace panties down to her ankles, she kicked them off. She guided his large hands down her thighs and slipped them under her dress. It was the most forward she'd ever been with a man. She'd never made love to her husbands before she married them. Sure, they had done everything else! She liked this new aggressive attitude.

She licked her tongue from his bouncy Adam's apple to underneath his chin and up to his mouth. Her hands were busy with the button and zipper of his jeans.

She sucked his lower lip in between her lips and tugged it gently. Like a preying mantis, her legs rubbed up and down his firm backside. Her mouth moved over to his earlobe.

"Wait." His tone was stronger this time, but she didn't stop.

He was what she needed. Her Gucci Girls would call him a "bit of strange," the one man you would probably never have sex with in any normal circumstance, but he would be exciting enough to have sex with because he would be different. If there was one thing that could be said about Tyler, it was that he was a bit strange. Maybe not strange, but different.

As her hand reached down into his jeans, he stopped her.

"Wait!" He was more forceful this time.

"What?" She sat up erect and looked directly into his now gray eyes. How was it possible for his eyes to be so many colors?

"We can't. You've been drinking." He looked as serious as when he wrestled.

She didn't answer. She couldn't even think. The one thing she didn't want to do was to think about what she was doing. She wanted to be impulsive. It was the one thing she was good at. How could Tyler be the one with the level head now?

She put her hand on his shoulder, still looking into his eyes, and drew him in. "I've only had one drink at dinner." Maybe if she didn't mention the drinks she'd had just now, Tyler wouldn't bring them up. She brushed her lips over his, her tongue playfully licking his lips.

"Oh, Tyler," she cooed between kisses.

“Sunny, we can’t.” He grabbed her hands and brought them down to her lap.

“You’re kidding me.” The lava that was once between her legs now coursed through her body. Even if he didn’t say he didn’t want her, his actions certainly proved it.

He shook his head.

She balled her hands into fists. “Is this another test?”

He cursed between gritted teeth. “I’m sorry I ever said--”

She interrupted him. “Ask me to marry you, then.”

Maybe he would feel better being with her if he was Casanova instead of Tyler. If that was the game he wanted to play, then she would be more than happy to play along.

I shut my eyes and the world drops dead. I lift my lids and all is born again. I think I made you up inside my head.

“I don’t want to do that.” He took a step back, but her strong legs brought him back close to her.

“Wait a minute. Since I’ve met you, you’ve asked me to marry you on a daily basis. I ask you to do it now and you won’t? Why? Because of my other seven marriages?”

“Seven? But I thought--”

“Or because I’m not a doctor like your friend?”

“What friend?”

She rolled her eyes. No, he wasn’t trying to play dumb. “I found that business card in the limo when we were leaving the convention. Dr. Leslie Hilliard. I guess you’re into those professional women.” She hated hearing the jealous tone that screeched from her voice. Finding that card did bother her. It shouldn’t have, considering he was only her interview subject. Somewhere between her rubbing his wrists and the sewn shirt, something had changed.

A thud on the floor from the back bedroom broke the mood and her concentration. Soledad stopped and pulled back from him.

“What was that?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Oh, I get it. It’s one of your girlfriends, right?”

He silenced her with his hand over her mouth.

“I told you that I don’t invite women back to my room. Ever.” In one fluid motion, he pulled her from the counter and positioned her behind him. “You’re the first, last and only woman I’ve had in my room.”

“Is it Monk?” she asked.

He shook his head.

An intruder in his room? Tyler was a professional wrestler. Who would dare break into his room? Maybe robbers trying to jack him for his money.

She felt safe behind him. Her mood quickly shifted into fear after Tyler zipped up his pants, reached into one of his combat boots and pulled out a long and lethal switchblade.

Chapter Eight

“Oh, my God!” Soledad screamed through her hand over her mouth. Nothing like good ol’ adrenaline to knock a person stone-cold sober.

“Shh! Stay in the kitchen. I don’t want you getting hurt.” Tyler positioned her by the stove and walked out of the kitchenette.

She wanted to protect him, too. “I’m not leaving you.” She didn’t want him getting hurt either, and it wasn’t because of her job.

She clung to his back, but felt suddenly ridiculous when the cool air that drifted up her dress reminded her she was without panties. What would her mother say if there was some dangerous intruder in the hotel room who killed her, and the police found her with no panties? How disappointed she would be.

He turned to her, and this time she could swear his eyes were now green. “I’m not asking you to go, I’m telling you. This isn’t a game. You’re not Wonder Woman.”

“And you’re not Superman. You have a knife, but what if this person has a gun?”

“Then we’ll both get shot. Stay here.” He hissed between gritted teeth.

“I’m going with you.” She looked around the kitchenette and grabbed the mug he’d filled with coffee.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

“You going to give the intruder coffee? Figure if you’re polite, they’ll just up and go?”

“Oh. Uh, no.” She poured the contents down the sink and held the mug handle firmly.

“Casanova?” A woman’s voice. A young woman’s voice. She called him like she was calling him to bed, like she’d done it before. Suddenly, Soledad wasn’t feeling protective. She wanted to bounce the mug off of his head.

“Stay behind me.” He crept around the corner of the kitchenette to the darkened hallway. He didn’t act as though he recognized the voice. Maybe she wasn’t one of his discards. She would know for sure when she saw the woman.

Tyler held the knife up with its glinting blade in front of him. With no shirt on and knife in hand, he looked primal. As he approached his bedroom at the end of the hall, a figure jumped out that scared Soledad and even made Tyler jump.

He held his knife up until the figure was revealed to be a young woman.

“Who are you?” He grabbed her arm and backed up. Soledad retreated into the front room as he pulled the woman after him and pushed her down onto the couch.

She was so small and nearly naked. Her pointy breasts were exposed and she only had on white cotton panties. Her straight, auburn hair was parted in the middle and brushed the tops of her shoulders.

She crossed her thin legs and chewed on her thumbnail. “I’m Mandy. Mandy Joliff. Don’t you remember me?”

“Do we know each other?” he asked.

“I sent you letters every day telling you I love you. My last letter, I told you I would be coming to see you in Richmond. I held up a sign in the audience asking you to marry me and you smiled and winked at me. I’m sure you did that to me and only me. Didn’t you?”

Soledad put her hand to her spinning head. She needed to sit, but didn't want to move during this intense situation.

"What are you doing in my room? How did you get in here?" He was slow to lower his knife. "Is there someone else back in the bedroom?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm--I'm--I'm a fan. I just wanted to see you." She attempted to get up. She held her arms open like she wanted to hug him, but Tyler stomped away.

"Stay right here. I'm going to check out the room." He looked over at Soledad who, still held onto her mug. "You hold your mug against her and don't let her leave. I'll be back."

He tiptoed to the back area. The sound of opening doors and a thump to the floor let her know that he looked in the closets and under the bed.

While he was in the bedroom, Soledad studied Mandy. She looked so incredibly young. Her pale skin accentuated her dark, brown eyes. Her facial features were small. Delicate, angled nose, lips that looked like a bow, and pencil-thin eyebrows. Her doe eyes were the largest things on her face. She resembled a sad doll.

As though she recognized that she was being studied, Mandy brought her hands up and covered her small breasts.

"Are you his girlfriend?" Mandy asked.

She scanned her. She had chipped, hot-pink nail polish on her toes, a small hole on the side of her panties, and an amateur greenish tattoo on her shoulder that bore Casanova's name.

"I'm working with him," Soledad said.

"Good. 'Cause once we get married he can't be seeing other women. What would I tell our kids if he did that?"

Soledad was amazed that this young woman had this whole fantasy life with Tyler in her head down to children. "Do you really know this man?"

"Yeah. He's a champion. And he's romantic. He can kick any man's butt except for that time Chopper and Monk jumped on him and beat him up. But that was two guys against one. No one could win with those odds." Mandy's eyes gleamed. "And he has a lot of money 'cause his family is royalty in some small town in Italy and he's a prince or something."

"Italy? You didn't notice the southern accent?" Now Soledad was annoyed that this girl could be this naïve to believe a story like that. It frightened her that Tyler had fans that would go this far and fall so deep into his character. How many of these people did he encounter a day? How could he take it?

"Yeah. That's part of his trick. The accent is fake. See he was on a pirate ship and he escaped and stayed in Texas while his parents tried to find him. That's why I ran away, too. If Casanova can do it, then I can, too."

She could say nothing to this girl that would convince her that who she saw was not exactly who she wanted to see. Mandy was right on many points. Tyler was romantic. And he was a good protector. And he might even have some money. But pirate ships in this day and age? Incredible.

And it was even more incredible and frightening that this girl had admitted to running away from home. She was chasing a dream. An impossible dream. Or maybe she was doing what Soledad had done, run off with a man to rebel, to escape an unsatisfying home life.

Tyler returned to the room with a pile of colorful clothes in one hand and his cell phone in the other. He folded his knife into its casing and put it back into his boot. Even as big of a star as he was, Soledad was surprised that he would still be carrying around a knife to protect himself. Then again, why not? He didn't have a big entourage like other celebrities. Besides,

who would jump a pro wrestler?

He directed his attention to Mandy. He handed her clothes to her and turned his back, waiting for her to get dressed, which she did slowly.

"How did you get in here?" he asked again. He put his hands on his hips, which brought Soledad's attention down to his muscular abdomen. Not a good time to think about sex.

Mandy tucked her hair behind her ears. She stood to slip on her belt-sized miniskirt and Soledad was horrified to see what she at first thought was another tattoo but soon realized that it was a bruise. Upon closer inspection, she noticed that bruises spotted the girl's legs and arms.

"Tyler, look at her legs," she whispered. He pivoted and scanned her from head to toe.

"There was a guy in the lobby. He said he was with security." Mandy chewed on the skin by her thumbnail.

"Hotel or XTCWF?" He punched numbers into the phone.

"I--I--don't know. He said he could get me in your room to meet you if I--if I--" Mandy broke down and wept. He patted the top of her head.

"It's going to be all right." He put the phone to his ear. "Hey, Jones. Need you down here quick."

Soledad couldn't take her eyes off of this young girl. She was a child, and Soledad could bet that she wanted to do something impulsive--just like she herself had. This was Mandy's freedom.

Jones wasted no time in getting to Tyler's room. As soon as Soledad opened the door, the tall but heavy man whisked by her and went to Tyler.

"What's going on?" Jones asked as he stood back and looked at Ty holding the waif-like young woman.

Tyler glanced at Jones and nodded toward the kitchen. He directed his attention to Mandy. "You want something to eat or drink? I can send out for something."

She shook her head. Soledad felt cemented into her spot.

"Just stay here and relax." He followed Jones into the kitchenette. Soledad felt embarrassed when she remembered that her panties were still on the floor. Her small wardrobe malfunction was nothing compared to what this young girl had gone through. She hoped, at least, Tyler hid the panties from Jones' view.

Tyler paced in the small kitchenette. "Look, you call the police and keep this on a low profile. I'll call Kevin."

Jones went to the back bedroom and made his phone call from there. Tyler went over to Soledad who kept her arms folded over her chest. Her throat tightened like she wanted to cry, but she knew she couldn't. Not in front of that scared little girl who'd only wanted to meet her favorite celebrity and instead had been used by a pervert wanting some of Tyler's glory.

He held onto her shoulders. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and forced a smile on her face.

He kissed her forehead. "You can go lie down in my room. I'm sorry about the coffee. When all this is over, I'll bring you another cup."

Again, like a trained seal she nodded. "I don't need it now. Thanks."

"You can do me a favor though."

Soledad perked up. In this whole chaotic mess she felt useless. Now Tyler needed her.

She puffed up her chest. "What can I do for you?"

"Don't write about this in your article. She's too young to have her life ruined." He directed his attention back to Mandy.

Something inside of Soledad broke. He still saw her as some opportunistic journalist instead of a compassionate cohort, woman, friend. He should have known that she wouldn't have written about Mandy's plight. It would have been cruel. His statement proved to her that he still didn't trust her. Amazingly, knowing that hurt.

Tyler held Mandy again and whispered something to her. He was the nurturer again. This time he was more like an older brother with Mandy than like a lover with her just a few moments before.

Oh, a few moments before. Soledad wanted to have sex with him just a few minutes ago. And this young girl was willing to do that and then some to be with Tyler. She wanted to throw up. Unlike with Mandy, Soledad's partner, Tyler, knew she wasn't lucid enough to make a decision about sex. He wasn't about to take advantage of her. In that way, she felt lucky, luckier than Mandy. Mandy's vulnerabilities were taken advantage of by a sick opportunist.

As soon as a detective showed up, Soledad grabbed her sandals and her clutch and crept out of the room while Tyler concentrated on Mandy and the detective. This time she felt no guilt leaving. They had crossed a personal imaginary line, and they couldn't go back. How could she look him in the eye the next day and ask him questions about his career when both of them knew that they'd kissed and probably would have done a lot more if Mandy hadn't made her presence known.

She couldn't even retrieve her panties. She left them, left the situation, left the job. Oprah would have never been caught in a situation like this.

And the way Tyler watched over the girl, Soledad knew she would be well taken care of. Tyler had made sure that she was comfortable and fed. He wasn't Casanova with her. He was pure Tyler. That was what upset Soledad so much. It wasn't Casanova asking her not to write about the girl. It was Tyler, the one she'd grown to trust.

Soledad went down to her room and packed. Only one place could make her feel safe right now. Home.

* * * *

When Soledad heard the kitchen cabinet door slam for the fourth time, she figured that it was her cue from her mother for her to wake up.

She covered her face with her comforter, hoping the Downy freshness would seep into her brain and erase her memories of the night before. No matter what, she could still feel Tyler's hands on her waist. She could still taste his minty breath. She could still remember hearing him say he didn't want to have sex with her. That was the memory that kept bouncing around in her head. Why would someone like Casanova not take advantage of an obviously excited woman?

Because he's not like other men, stupid!

While her mother was on the warpath, Soledad knew staying in bed was not an option. She emerged from under the comforter force field and stretched her arms over her head.

She reached for her watch on the nightstand. Eleven-ten. Soledad lumbered out of bed and ducked into the bathroom for a quick shower and dressed in denim shorts and a tee shirt.

By the time she got to the kitchen, her brothers Justin and Lionel jumped up from the table that sat next to the bay window.

"Last to the table is the one to clean up!" Lionel said and patted her on her back.

She sighed and picked up their plates. "Feels like old times."

"Give me those and eat." Anita took the plates and scraped off their remaining contents into the trashcan.

Soledad picked up a plate and cut herself a piece of lasagna. She set a breadstick on her

plate and turned back to the table, only to be met by her mother.

"So you quit." Anita began. "You couldn't last a year. You couldn't even finish the article."

Soledad knew it wouldn't have taken her long to talk about her love life, her job or her hair color. "It's not like that, Mom. I'm still writing the article."

"Heather told me that your assignment was to stay with your subject for a whole week. You're back early. What happened?"

Mom, we nearly had sex and I left my panties on his hotel room floor. Yeah, that excuse would fly. When Soledad remained quiet, her mother didn't.

"It's funny, Soledad. You'll run over here to get the support you need whenever things get tough. But when we try to help you, we're wrong." Anita put her hand on Soledad's shoulder. "Honey, you think your father and I are being unreasonable when we ask you to be more responsible. But we're not doing it for our benefit."

Her mother picked up a newspaper from the counter and placed it in front of Soledad. A picture of Soledad and Tyler huddled in the corner of the French restaurant in Richmond was in the center of the celebrity section of the paper. Underneath read the caption "Things Look Hot And Serious For Our New, Daring Couple."

Soledad knew the shot had been taken at the point she was walking away from Tyler but the photo made it look like she was going for a hug. As much as she hated to admit it, her mother was right. She'd made a mess of her life and dragged her family's good name with her. And when she'd gotten scared, she'd run home to be saved. She couldn't do that anymore.

"It's not what you think, Mom," Soledad said.

"It doesn't matter. The public has already made its opinion of you. I hope you're happy."

Her father walked into the kitchen. Perfect timing as usual. "How are my two favorite women?"

"Fine. Just peachy." Anita kissed Harwood on his cheek and did the same to Soledad. She walked out of the kitchen.

"What was all that about?" Harwood asked.

"The usual." Soledad closed the paper and pushed it to the side. She took another bite of her lasagna. Even though Anita was a control freak, she was an excellent cook.

"So what about this other man Russell said you're with now?" Harwood freshened her tea and sat.

"Russell exaggerates. He was the person I'm interviewing."

She thought about Tyler and what eventually happened between the two of them and felt bad that she had technically lied.

"Dad, let's talk about something else. So how are your students? Any violin prodigies?"

"They're all talented. And you're avoiding the subject." He grabbed her hand and held it. "Why don't you tell me what's really going on?"

Soledad opened her mouth to refute his statement, and he put his finger up to her lips.

"Call it fatherly intuition." He patted the paper. "And word of mouth."

She smiled. Her close relationship with her father was more valuable to her than anything else. She was her father's daughter. She got her creativity from him and his wonderful heart. And he always knew when something bothered her. He knew it when she lost her debate back in high school. And he picked up on her emotional state now as she pondered about Tyler.

"It is your heart that is vexing you, no?" Harwood said with an awful gypsy accent that

made her laugh every time. She got her compassion from her father. She was sure of that, too.

"It's hard to talk seriously with you, Dad, when you do that ridiculous accent."

"Okay, seriously, honey. What is it? You know you can tell me."

She thought about her words carefully. Did she want to talk about her job? Did she even want to talk about her hair? "Dad, when did you know you were falling for Mom?" Bottom line, she wanted to talk about Tyler.

"When did I know? When she told me," Harwood said.

"Very funny."

"I just knew. We knew. I couldn't be without her. I thought about her all of the time. I can tell you the moment I really knew we were in love."

"When was that?" Soledad asked.

Her father lowered his head and his voice. His eyes twinkled like she hadn't seen since Christmas. "After a date and I was home, I was thinking about her and suddenly the phone rang and it was your mother. All she said was 'I know.' That was enough." The man was still in love with his wife.

"What did that mean?" Soledad asked.

"It meant that she knew I was thinking about her without me saying anything."

"All that says to me is that even then Mom was in people's heads. Now she has honed her craft and is using it for evil instead of good." Not that she really thought her mother was Satan's sister.

"Your mother isn't as bad as you think. She really loves you. She wants what's best for you." He kissed the back of her hand.

She looked down the hallway to see Anita scurrying from one bedroom to another. The woman never stopped.

"Now, tell me why you asked me that question in the first place," Harwood said.

Soledad took a deep breath. "I don't know. I've made some terrible errors in judgment."

"Did you get married again?" He released her hand.

She really did make a terrible impression of herself, didn't she? "No, Dad."

His shoulders relaxed. "Other than your love for all things matrimonial, you're pretty level-headed. When you were five, you used to set up my office for my students. Remember that? You would put out the chairs. Set up the easels for the students' sheet music. You even scolded a child for being late one time. And the child had to have been twice your age."

So she did have some of her mother in her. She cringed at the thought. She scooped up some more food, brought it to her mouth but then set the fork back down onto her plate. "Dad, what I've done would be as inappropriate as you falling for one of your students."

"I doubt that whatever you've done could be that inappropriate. My students are all eleven, twelve, or thirteen years old. *That's* not only inappropriate, it's disgusting. *You*, on the other hand, interview and interact with adults. Intelligent, thinking people with opinions and radical ideas. I can see where you would find a person like that attractive."

Tyler did fit some of those descriptions. He did have radical ideas. Intelligent? Definitely. Attractive? Surely.

He continued. "Besides, we're not in a world where there are distinct lines for roles anymore. Just because you're an interviewer doesn't mean you stop being a woman. And just because he's being interviewed by you doesn't mean that he stopped being a man. It *is* a man that we're talking about, right? Your big news isn't that you're a lesbian now?"

"No, Dad." She snickered and put her hand on top of his.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with that. I’m a liberal thinker, and I think I’ve taught all of you kids to do what feels right, natural.”

“I would tell you if I was lesbian. I’m talking about another man.” She could see the relief in her father’s face. As liberal as he wanted to be, he was, essentially, conservative.

“What’s the problem? You’re single. Why not start dating?” He flipped the newspaper over to hide her picture.

“I shouldn’t give in to every impulse, either.” She scraped the contents of her plate into the garbage.

“Look at Phil Donahue and Marlo Thomas. He was interviewing her on *Donahue* when he fell in love with her. If you’ve ever seen that footage, you can see he’s basically hitting on her during the whole show. And then there’s Frank and Kathie Lee Gifford.”

“You’re comparing my situation to Frank and Kathie Lee?”

“Those two were working together and fell for each other. It’s not a crime.” He stood.

“Thanks, Dad. I needed that.”

“That’s what I’m here for. Of course, your mother thinks I’m here for tax reasons but that’s a different story.”

She laughed as she stood, then kissed his cheek. As she strolled from the kitchen she stopped. Her hand caressed the marble countertop that her mother had to have. Her gaze caught the crystal chandelier that had to be imported from Italy. Her bare feet swept over the tile floor that came from Spain.

She turned to her father. “Dad, there’s another reason why I don’t want to be with that other man. He’s career-oriented and chasing after the all mighty dollar. I don’t want that.” She raised her hands in the air like a game show prize girl. “I don’t want this. I thought I did. I used to think shopping, traveling and partying were everything. And what has it gotten me?”

He sighed. “Baby girl, you can name all the excuses you want about why it would never work with that man. Bottom line, you’re going to need to figure out what it is that you want.”

She shook her head. “I get sick of being called America’s Daughter like I’m some orphaned Kennedy kid. I’m not So Mo. I’m not Marrying Monroe. I’m Soledad Monroe. Why can’t anyone see that?”

“Soledad, no one can see that because you’re not showing anyone any other side of you than the young woman who likes to get married. Prove the world wrong. I know you can do it.”

He was right. It was time for her to grow up.

Harwood continued. “And you need to do this.” He sighed. “Your mother and I have discussed our deal.”

Soledad’s shoulders bunched around her head. As she wrung her hands together, she waited for her father to reveal her fate.

He continued. “Unless you go back and finish this job, you will have to move out at the end of the month.”

Soledad’s throat went dirt dry. Struggling not to cry, she broke from her father’s hold. “Don’t give up on me, Dad. I’m not done with my life.” She kept her face from his view so that he couldn’t see the embarrassment that masked her.

“And maybe someone to call?” he asked with a slyness in his voice.

“I’ll call my editor later.” She didn’t want to have to deal with Heather right now.

Soledad knew by now Heather and her mother had talked about how pitiful Soledad was to have walked away from her job.

“That’s not who I was talking about, but I suspect you know that. So tell me, honey, who

is this man? Is he a senator or something? Another writer? Oh, an educator. That's it. I read your wonderful article about public schools a month ago. Very moving."

"Thanks, Dad. And trust me. You wouldn't know this man at all."

Before he could ask another question, she returned to her bedroom. Her mother had already stripped her bed of its sheets, pillowcases and even dust ruffle. As much money as her parents made, Anita still insisted on doing her own housework. How the woman managed to fit it into her busy schedule was beyond Soledad. Anita never looked happier unless she was doing laundry or cooking. Soledad, however, had never used a washer and barely used the microwave.

"Laundry day. Anything you need cleaned?" Anita asked as she stood outside of Soledad's bedroom door.

"My clothes." She retrieved some clothes out of her suitcase and walked over to Anita. They looked at each other, neither saying a word. Anita looked as though she wanted to say something, then turned away.

"Leave them in a pile outside of your door. Dinner is at six." She started down the hall, then stopped. "I'll be in the laundry room if you, um, want to ... bring me more clothes."

Soledad smiled. Anita was trying. Soledad needed to try, too. "I'm going back to work, Mom."

Anita smiled and said again, "Dinner's at six." She moved away from Soledad as she was reaching out to her. She darted down the hall and disappeared into the laundry room.

After leaving her clothes in a pile in the hallway as instructed, she opened her laptop, turned it on, and stared at the laughing, blinking cursor. She didn't know how to even start the article.

Should she start talking about the wrestling business in general and taper it down to Tyler? Or maybe talk about the dynamics of the wrestlers--men, women, black, white. Or maybe she should mention that Tyler had the firmest ass of any man she had ever known? She was sure Heather would enjoy getting that article submitted.

"You know, if your punch those things with letters on them, they make words," Justin said as he stared at Soledad, who was hypnotized by the screen.

"Very funny." She got out of bed and walked to the door. "I have to get to work." She closed the door in her brother's face. Before she got back into bed, she went to her purse and pulled out her recorder. *Maybe hearing some of my interview will get my creative juices going.* She pulled out a set of headphones and plugged them into the recorder.

She sat on the bed with the laptop in front of her and the recorder sitting next to it. She played it, and her body tingled instantly as soon as she heard Tyler's voice. His voice was gruff and that quick southern accent automatically made him likable.

She laughed at the sections of the recording when he made corny jokes. And her heart melted when she got to the section where he talked about his first wrestling experience. He seemed so open and honest. And she had forgotten that she'd left the recorder on when he'd taken off his tee shirt and tried to seduce her. The test.

She slid down to her side on the bed and listened to that section of the recording repeatedly. Even after three days of being around him, she missed him. She missed his southern accent. She missed his eyes. She missed the way he winked. She really missed the way he would parade around naked. She even missed when he would ask her to marry him on a regular basis ... even if it was part of his act.

No, leaving him was the best thing she could have done. Cut out all the complications in her life. That was her plan. Was. Now she needed to get her butt in gear and get back to Tyler.

She had some unfinished business ... beyond just the story.

Chapter Nine

After tonight, Soledad would eat some crow and find Tyler. After making her bed, she packed her clean clothes into her suitcase. She had to stop hiding out at her parents' house. She had gotten the support she needed, when she needed it.

Her cell phone rang, and she answered it without looking at the caller ID screen. Briefly she hoped it was Tyler. That thought alone knotted her stomach.

"What were you thinking when you left Casanova?"

Heather's voice jolted Soledad to the painful reality that leaving Tyler was a boneheaded move.

"I know. I should have stayed." Soledad scratched her head.

Heather cut her off. "Damn right. Look, I took you on for your mother who said you wanted to work. But if you're going to pull this prima donna stuff, then you're going to--"

Soledad cut her off. "I get it. It won't happen again."

Heather sighed so heavily that Soledad almost felt her hair move. Heather continued. "Good, because I have some info that's going to knock your socks off."

Soledad's ears perked up. "What is it?"

"Good idea getting him to reveal his real name. Oh, that Dr. Hilliard is a back doctor with a very loyal staff. They wouldn't say word one about Casanova, although I suspect something's up with his back. Have you noticed him favoring it or talking about pain when he's around you?"

Not that she would admit that to Heather even if she did. She'd made the mistake of revealing too much to Russell. She wouldn't do it again.

How strange that she wanted to protect Tyler now. Even stranger that she liked the feeling. "No, I haven't. Dr. Leslie Hilliard is a 'he'?"

No wonder Tyler looked so confused when she'd accused him of running off to see another woman. He'd run off to see a man. A doctor. A back doctor.

"Yes, Dr. Hilliard is a man. But forget about him. We found a lot of good information on Casanova. Get this guy talking about his family. Seems he has some skeletons in his closet, mainly with his father," Heather said.

"We all have skeletons in our closets that shouldn't be revealed. Trust me. I know." Soledad felt something pinching in her chest. Was that guilt? Something had changed about the way she saw him. Damn that foot massage. It was like kryptonite on her.

"What about his father?" If she knew the story, she could probably help protect his secret. Plus she was curious.

"He died about ten years ago under some suspicious circumstances. May have been drug-related."

Every pulse in Soledad's body thrummed with that news. So she was on the right track? The apple didn't fall far from the tree.

"To top it off, Casanova may have had something to do with it. The police didn't report it that way, but the news sure did," Heather said.

She shook her head. A murderer? He couldn't be. She thought about the way he held

his knife in the hotel room. Could he be? Soledad shook her head. Absolutely not.

“Casanova called here looking for you. He sounded a little frantic. What happened these last couple of days?” Heather asked.

Tyler had called Heather? This was the same man who ran from her within the first twenty-four hours of meeting. Now he was interested in the article? “Heather, I can’t really go into it right now.”

“Are you kidding me? I don’t know if you get the whole publication thing, but I’m your boss. You have to tell me what’s going on because, guess what, I’ll print it. Plus you’ll get paid. Don’t you want to get paid for working for once in your life?”

Soledad ground her fingernails into her plush-top bed linen after hearing what Heather had thought of her. All Soledad had wanted throughout this whole year experience, besides regaining her natural hair color, was to be able to get this little test over with so she could get on with her life. Hell, at least Paris Hilton got her own TV show.

Now more than ever, Soledad wanted to do something with her life that wouldn’t involve cashing in on her family’s name. Damn it, she had to get back to Tyler. It went beyond a lifestyle. Her pride and self-worth depended on it.

“You need to figure out how to get back with Casanova to finish this story. If you don’t get me that story you can forget about getting paid, and you know what that means.” Heather’s anger was so strong that Soledad had to sit down on her bed.

The one thing Soledad didn’t want was to be fired. Her mother would never let her live that down. “Give me his cell phone number. I’ll call him myself.” Time to take charge of her life and the situation. If Tyler no longer wanted to talk to her, she wanted to hear it from him.

Soledad disconnected the call and punched in Tyler’s number like a frantic contestant on a game show. She wasn’t going to lose out again.

When Tyler answered the phone, Soledad swallowed hard, eased back on her bed and prayed to herself that she would make it through the conversation.

“Uh, Mr. Randolph.” Her voice broke. “Tyler. It’s me. Sole--”

He cut in. “Soledad.”

A million pin pricks tingled her skin, and her knotting stomach tightened, letting her know that he had a much bigger hold on her than she thought.

She took a deep breath. “Yes, I want to apologize for--”

He interrupted her again. “For what?”

“Let me finish.” She thought about her tone and softened it. “Please.”

Such an impatient man. Not a good sign.

“Sorry. Patience is not one of my virtues.”

She heard him laugh and it made her smile. “I want to apologize for my behavior last night. It was unprofessional and inexcusable.”

“No,” he said simply.

She shook her head like she hadn’t heard him. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not accepting that apology. The way I see it, as soon as you planted those sweet lips on mine, you were no longer working. So your behavior was acceptable. I’d say more than acceptable.”

Thank goodness he wasn’t there with her to see the hugest grin she’d ever sported in her life. “What will you accept? I would like to finish this job.” She needed him. The only way she could get back with him was for him to know the full truth.

Through the phone, she heard a door slam. Sounded like a car door. The man was on the

move. Her leg bounced as she anxiously anticipated his reply.

"Dinner," he answered.

At this point she was willing to do just about anything. If the man wanted to be taken out to dinner, then she would put the lobster bib on him herself.

"Fine. You got it. When?" She stood and packed her remaining clothes.

"Where are you now?"

She inhaled and held her breath. After a long exhalation she replied, "At my parents' house in Connecticut."

Folks, I come up North 'cause they told me de North was fine.

"Perfect."

The lift in his voice sounded suspicious. Almost mischievous. What was this man plotting?

"Come to the front door. At least, I hope I'm at the right place."

Soledad nearly dropped the phone. He couldn't be here in Connecticut. He couldn't have found her. How could he? Why would he even look for her? She slid into her sandals and ran to the front door. She could already see a baseball cap in the glass pane at the top of the door. Shots of excitement, mixed with fear, mixed with happiness zipped through her body in one amazing jolt.

She opened the door and saw Tyler.

Been up here a day--I'm about to lose my mind.

"Well, don't just stand there, Sunny. Come over and give me a hug!" He held out his arms, still holding his cell phone in one hand. If her senses hadn't taken over her she would have hugged him so hard, he would have thought she was a part of his natural-born anatomy.

Tyler wore knee-length denim shorts, a white tee shirt, a baseball hat and sneakers. He looked like an overgrown lost little boy. He immediately took off his hat and tucked it under his arm. After peering over her shoulder to see if her family had noticed her at the door, she stepped out onto the porch.

His eyes scanned from one side of the property to the other. Tyler let out a long, low whistle. "What a place. No wonder the security guards gave me a hard time when I tried to come in here. Why do you even work for a living? You could let your parents hook you up for the rest of your life."

Her smile dropped, and she folded her arms over her chest. "Just like my parents, I work. I'm not some spoiled brat." She would purposely leave out the fact that she was about to be cut off if he hadn't showed up on her doorstep. She would withhold that part now and admit it at a different time ... say after the article was printed.

He curved down. "You're right. You're not." He seemed sincere. She hoped he believed her. She wanted to prove that she could make it. Money didn't matter. The way Tyler looked at her and the house, she was sure he thought otherwise.

"What are you doing here in Connecticut?" She closed the door behind her.

"Because you forgot something." He ran over to a blue compact car parked in her parents' driveway. He returned with one hand behind his back.

She felt a stinging in her cheeks and hoped he wasn't about to whip out the black panties she'd left on his kitchen floor.

He brought his hand in front of him and showed her the autographed book. She smiled, relieved it wasn't something else.

She reached for the book, but stopped and crossed her arms over her chest again. "I told

you. I can't accept that."

"Accept it as my way of saying sorry for acting like a horse's ass last night. And I'd like to make it up to you."

"How?"

A curious smile crept up and he leaned down to her. "You think I want to finish what we started in the kitchen?"

Yep, she was blushing now. "No, of course not."

"I talked to your boss. She was the one who told me how to find you."

"I'll have to thank her the next time I talk to her," she muttered under her breath. "I don't get it. Since the first time I met you, you've wanted to get out of this interview. And now that I've given you your freedom you track me down again. Why is that? I thought you'd be happy."

"So you want me to go?" He turned and headed back to his small clown car.

She grabbed his steely arm. "No!" She tapered back the desperation in her voice. "I mean, I would hate for your fans to miss out on getting to know their idol."

He gave her a look like he knew she meant more than that. And maybe she did. Her curiosity was piqued as soon as she saw him at the door. And for more than for the interview. She did want to know more about him.

"But before we go on, I have one thing to say." She hadn't forgotten the main reason why she ran in the first place, the crack he made about her writing about Mandy. By the expression on his face, it looked like he hoped she meant something else. She wasn't going to be swayed by his charm this time. He stepped closer until her back met with the front door.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You hurt me when you asked me not to write about Mandy. I would have never done anything like that. She's a child."

He stared into her eyes. "I didn't know." He put his hand on her cheek when she turned away. "I should have known, though."

She closed the space between them, her arms easing down her sides.

"I didn't know you valued my opinion to even be hurt by anything I said." He smiled.

She could kiss him right now. She wanted to for all the right reasons. She moved in. Nothing could break the force pulling them together.

"Soledad!" Anita called through the closed door. "Dinner's getting cold!"

Nothing except for a mother's voice.

"Did you want to go somewhere to eat? I know this great restaurant where we can--"

He put his hand up. "No, I want to eat here. That is, if it's okay with your folks. I want to meet your family."

She blinked. No man interested in her had ever wanted to meet her parents. Like Tyler had said once, he wasn't like other men. What was his agenda? What did he really want?

He opened the door and stood off to the side to let her walk past him. She furrowed her eyebrows and tried to think of what he was planning. With Tyler, it could have been anything. She had to admit. There was something so charming, so utterly traditional, for a man to want to meet a woman's family.

"Guess who's coming to dinner?" He winked at her as he closed the door behind himself.

* * * *

So much for getting through dinner unscathed. With Tyler sitting next to her, Soledad knew that that wasn't going to be possible.

Dinner had been quiet at first, with Soledad's brothers, Lionel and Justin, staring at Tyler the whole time, and Harwood splitting his gaze from Tyler to Soledad as though he was still trying to figure out the attraction.

"So what is it that you do?" Anita asked Tyler. Soledad kept her eyes on Anita. She knew her mother was setting Tyler up for the kill.

"I beat up guys for a living," Tyler said. "For entertainment." He mixed his peas and risotto together and scooped a forkful of it into his mouth.

"Mom, he's the XTCWF champion!" Lionel said it as though Tyler was the President of the United States. Clearly, Anita was still not impressed from the way she eyed Tyler and tapped her manicured fingernails on her wine glass.

"So what are you? A boxer or hockey player?" Anita took a sip of her wine. Soledad was glad. Maybe with a buzz the news of what he did would sound better. She could always hope. She knew hearing that Tyler was a wrestler wouldn't sit well with her mother. At some point, maybe it was when he hadn't kissed that planted woman in the audience, Soledad separated him from his job, from his character.

"He's a professional wrestler," Justin said, almost in a smarmy way, like he wanted to see Soledad squirm.

Instead, Soledad put her hand on Tyler's arm and smiled. He smiled back and winked. Anita set her glass down hard and rubbed her temples.

"He's the one in the articles with Soledad." Lionel laughed and pointed to her.

Soledad wanted to take the focus off of Tyler. Things would go much smoother if the family talked about something else. He wasn't there as a spectacle. "Justin will be graduating from college soon."

"Really? Congrats, partner. Good work." Tyler reached across the table and shook Justin's hand. Justin, who had tried to act unruffled about having Casanova at the dinner table, finally let a smile slip when Tyler shook his hand.

"Yes, it is good. So what about you, Mr. Randolph," Anita began. "Did you go to college?"

"Mom, that's none of your business," Soledad hissed.

"It should be your business. After all, you are interviewing this man, right? You'll need to know his history."

Soledad knew her mother's plan. She would invite him into her lair, chew him up and spit him out. She didn't want to see that happen.

He cleared his throat. "I graduated magna cum laude with a Masters in history from the University of North Carolina." He lifted his glass of water and finished it.

"You need some more? I can get you more." Lionel jumped to his feet and ran to the kitchen before Anita could say anything.

Soledad furrowed her eyebrows. Why would Tyler make up a story like that? Did he really want to impress her mother that much that he would lie? She didn't know whether to be impressed by his gesture or be afraid for him, because she knew Anita would see through his lie and tear him apart.

Nobody heard him, the dead man, but still he lay moaning. He was much further out than I thought and not waving, but drowning.

"Isn't that interesting?" Harwood said and wiped his hands. "That's quite an accomplishment."

Good ol' Dad. Always giving people the benefit of the doubt.

“Wrestling career get in the way of you pursuing your doctorate?” Anita snickered and pushed her glasses up her nose. Soledad looked over at Tyler. She wanted him to get offended at some point and just get up and leave. But he didn’t. He stayed and continued. He was either too proud or a glutton for punishment. Either way, she saw Tyler in a new light. He was a fighter.

Tyler laid his hand across the back of Soledad’s chair. “As a matter of fact, yes, it did.”

As Lionel poured more water for Tyler, Soledad looked at Tyler incredulously. At some point he would have to stop and say he was kidding. He couldn’t keep going on with the story for much longer. This wasn’t professional wrestling, and she could honestly say, aside from Lionel and Justin, no one at the table was his fan.

“Thank you, Lionel.” Tyler turned his attention to Anita. “I barely got through graduate school, and by the time I received my degree, my wrestling character had gotten so popular that I was touring way too much to keep going. Disappointed my mama, but she’s happy that I’m happy.”

“Uh-huh. I see.” Anita looked at Tyler and Soledad sitting side by side.

Soledad could tell that Anita was assessing the situation. Anita looked like she was planning her next move, a move that would create so deep of a wound that it would leave Tyler limping away from their home. Soledad had tried deflecting the attention off of Tyler before. She felt this time she would keep quiet. Tyler was doing fine on his own.

“So how long have you two been married?” Tyler asked and looked at both Harwood and Anita. Soledad thought Tyler was putting his head right into the lion’s mouth.

“Thirty years,” Harwood answered.

“Thirty-one.” Anita corrected.

“Time goes by so fast when you’re in love,” Harwood said and smiled.

“I hear what you’re saying. I think finding the right person to be with is so important. Isn’t that right, Soledad?” Tyler nudged her on her arm and winked. She knew exactly what he was trying to do. He was setting her up. Tyler wanted so much for her to admit some feeling for him in front of her family. She wasn’t ready. She didn’t even know how she felt.

She saw how smug her mother looked, like she had won a major battle. She wouldn’t let her have this victory or any other in her life again.

She sat up tall. “You’re absolutely right.”

“The heart is a funny thing.” He gazed at Soledad with such passion in his eyes that she had to look away. “Makes you do things you’d never thought you would do.”

Anita stared pointedly at Tyler. “Mr. Randolph, if I have come off as terse this evening it’s because Soledad is my little girl. She’s my heart. And I don’t want to see her embarrassed or humiliated.”

Soledad blinked hard at her mother’s open display of love, especially in front of a stranger. “Mom, trust me. I won’t be.” Soledad put her hand on top of Anita’s. “I’ll make you proud.”

Anita stood and gathered the empty plates. “You’re more than welcome to stay for dessert. But you’ll have to excuse me.” She disappeared into the kitchen.

“I think I had better go in there.” Harwood stood and went over to Tyler. “Despite what you may think, I have enjoyed meeting you. Any friend of Soledad’s can’t be a bad person. I hope you come back soon.” He shook Tyler’s hand vigorously.

Tyler stood. “Thank you, sir. It was nice meeting you, too.”

After Tyler posed for pictures for Justin and Lionel, Soledad walked him to his car.

"Sorry dinner was so awkward," she said.

"Nah, I've faced worse opponents than your mama." He winked and brushed a stray curl from her forehead. She didn't back away this time. She liked feeling his fingers brushing against her skin. With him by her side, she felt invincible.

"I have a feeling your mama doesn't like me," Tyler said.

"She doesn't like things getting out of order. You showed up during dinnertime which is a big *faux pas* in her book, and you made it obvious to her that you like me more than just as an interviewer." She strolled down the driveway with Tyler next to her. "Plus all the press about us lately doesn't help."

"You think I like you?" he asked once they got to his car. "You have me all wrong. I think you have a nice, um, head on your shoulders."

She laughed. It was nice to laugh with him again. She felt so comfortable around him. Soledad stopped and grabbed his arm. "I'm an awful person."

"What? No, you're not. What are you talking about?"

"I treated you the same way my mother did the first time I met you. I didn't give you a chance, and I judged you on what you did." She looked in his eyes. "I am so sorry."

"Don't worry about it. It's obvious from her little display that you were reacting the way you were taught. I got to say. You have a lot of your mama in you."

She put her hands to her hips, and before she could defend herself, Tyler continued.

"But you got a whole lot of your daddy in you, too. Your daddy has a good heart and so do you. Otherwise you wouldn't have apologized." He patted her on her shoulder. "I almost forgot to do something."

"What? Do you have to tag me for migrating purposes?" She snickered and looked up at the house. Lionel and Justin had their faces pressed against the front window. Anita would hit the roof seeing the smudges on the glass.

"Something like that." He got down on one knee in front of her faster than she could react. "Sunny, will you marry me?" He pulled a red velvet box from his shorts pocket and opened it. Inside was the most exquisite ring she had ever seen. It was simple in design. In a platinum setting, the ring had a large, square-cut diamond on top, big enough for her to ice skate on top of, with smaller square diamonds going around inside the band.

He pulled the ring out of the box and slipped it on her finger before she could say a word. On her hand the ring looked even more beautiful, sparkling and gleaming even without direct lighting on it. The ring weighed down on her hand--and heart. This was going too far. She couldn't keep going on with this game.

"Tyler. Or should I call you Casanova?" she asked. "Even after all we have been through these last few days, why would you still try to hide under this Casanova character?"

"I'm not hiding. But there's only one way for you to find out for sure." Tyler stood up. "Are you ready?"

"Ready for what? Is this the point where you turn me down and take the ring back?" She tried pulling it off, but he held her hands. "I have no interest in being a part of your act."

Tyler winced as thought she had hit on something, but said, "I'll tell you what you want to know. I'll finish the interview. But not here. I want to go somewhere else. Do you trust me?"

She didn't even look back at the house. It was time for her to spread her wings and go. Even if it was under the guise of an interview, she was ready to leave with Tyler. She wanted to peel back more layers to find the real man, because so far what she was seeing looked good.

Without a word she nodded, which seemed to make him happy from the way he smiled. "Just think of this as an adventure," he said.

* * * *

Soledad didn't know that Tyler's idea of conducting the interview somewhere else meant taking a spur-of-the-moment private plane ride to some unknown territory. When he took her to the small airport, she thought he wanted to sit in the parking lot and talk. Then he handed his keys to a man who must have been his friend. When Tyler grabbed his duffel bag and helped her onto a private plane, she knew this was something else.

An impromptu trip characterized the old Soledad. She wasn't that same woman. She'd promised her parents she wouldn't embarrass herself or the family again.

She walked with him to the parking lot. She was struck at that moment with the realization that she did not have a stitch of clothing except for what was on her back. Maybe Tyler realized that and had not planned on staying wherever they were for longer than a couple of hours.

"What are we doing here?" she asked.

"The interview," he answered without stopping. "Don't worry. We'll be done by show time."

Wrestlebowl was in a few days. Her brothers had seen Tyler slip a ring on her finger and her leaving with him. Not that she would think her family would rat her out but the neighborhood security had seen them leave, so did the pilots and the people at the airport. News would get out that she and Tyler were altar-bound.

"Tyler," she whispered as he allowed her to walk in front of him, "I have no clothes except for what I'm wearing. I have no money, no shoes, no underwear--"

"Thank God for small favors." He laughed.

"And I have no ID on me. Everything I need is back at my parents' house." Maybe she could trick him into taking her back home. He couldn't think this was a good idea.

"I was hoping to be everything you needed."

She sighed loudly. "I can't *wear* you. And if I need to buy something, I need money."

"Yes, you can buy things. You see I have this little job. It's nothing much, but I like the work. And I make a little money off it."

"I can't spend your money. I don't know you that well."

"Let's see. We've kissed each other twice. You've spent the night in my hotel room. I've fed you and given you a birthday present. I ate dinner with your family. Hell, I have a pair of your panties. I think we're on good terms at this point, don't you think?" He arrived at a black Jeep Wrangler in the passenger car parking area.

He undid the snaps on the soft convertible top to the Jeep. She walked around to the other side and helped him. She met him at the back of the Jeep with the cover in his hands. She handed him her part of it, and he accepted it with a grin.

She asked, "What's going on?"

He smiled. "I told you. It's a surprise." Tyler rolled the top up and secured it with straps while she climbed in the passenger seat. She glanced down and the shine of the ring caught her attention. It felt so natural on her finger that she'd almost forgotten that she was wearing it. Maybe because in her lifetime she'd already worn seven on her finger. However this one was different. It didn't help that lately she'd thought about marrying Tyler.

She imagined their wedding and the honeymoon. Then she remembered the looks on her parents' faces when they talked about her past, her marriages, her recent press. What was wrong

with her? Why did she want to marry so much, and what was Tyler trying to prove?

Tyler jumped in the Jeep and looked at her with a smile. She put on her seatbelt.

"No answer yet, huh?" he asked. "When you know for sure, you let me know."

"Answer about what? You were kidding, right? This is a joke. What? Did you get this out of a bubblegum machine?" She ran her thumb against the band.

"I don't think so." He started the Jeep and music blared from his speakers. He immediately turned it down and looked over at Soledad. "I like my music loud. I want everyone around me to enjoy it."

"I can see. So where are we? Are you going to at least tell me that?" she asked.

"Norfolk, Virginia. Norfolk is about ninety minutes south of Richmond." He headed out of the parking lot.

"And where are we going?"

"First we've got to get you some essentials."

"It's three o'clock in the morning. What's open now besides a 7-Eleven?"

"Oh, you're a Yankee, aren't you? We are going to one of my favorite places. Wal-Mart. They're open twenty-four hours a day. Now I know it's not fashion that you're used to, but they got everything, and with it being so early in the morning there won't be a lot of people there."

"I've heard of Wal-Mart. I'm not in a complete bubble."

"See, I knew you were smart. And they sell a line of clothing from that Kathie Lee Gifford woman."

"Oh, great. My father would love the irony in that," she mumbled.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing." She held onto her seatbelt and prepared herself for the ride of her life.

Chapter Ten

Soledad held onto her seatbelt and door as Tyler jetted down the barren streets. She soon discovered that he didn't like using the brakes. For as wild of a driver he was, every time he stopped, it was always an easy one. No jerking. No abrupt stops. It was like he went from ninety miles an hour to zero without any effort ... kind of like the way he was in life. Tyler turned way up as he'd once said. Then, like when he talked about his education, he could be quiet, subdued almost. It was mesmerizing to watch the metamorphosis.

He pulled into a Wal-Mart parking lot and jumped out of the Jeep. He ran over to her side to open her door. Very gentlemanly.

They stepped inside the bright store. He grabbed a cart and pushed it alongside of her, a sight she didn't think she would ever see, a multi-million dollar-salaried professional wrestler pushing a wobbly-wheeled grocery cart inside of a Wal-Mart. It was perfect.

Tyler followed Soledad to the clothing section. His excited expression made her think that he anticipated seeing her try on the clothes. She smiled. A fashion show for Tyler. An interesting prospect, but she had to keep her mind on business. And the business at hand besides clothes was the interview.

Soledad flipped through the shorts rack. Curious about his response, she took a deep breath before saying, "You don't talk much about your family. Tell me about them." She chose a couple pairs of denim shorts. It was already Friday morning so she figured she wouldn't need that much clothing. She picked up a pair of denim overall shorts, then a few different colored tee shirts.

Tyler said, "I have six brothers and one sister. I'm the second to the youngest."

"Wow. Large family." She didn't know why, but she'd assumed he would have been from a smaller family like her own. What a woman his mother must be to have had eight children with Tyler being one of them. Soledad looked through some other shirts. "Do they approve of what you do?" When she turned around to put the load in the cart she saw he was gone although the cart stood in the same spot.

"Tyler?" She put the clothes in the cart and scanned the store. How could she have lost an over six foot tall bald man? Suddenly, a silky fabric slid across her and arms and settled around her waist. She jumped until she discovered it was Tyler standing behind her holding a flowered dress.

"I saw this and it reminded me of you." He held the hanger under her chin and pressed the dress close to her body. It was tan colored with pale red roses, short sleeves and a slit up the side.

"It's, um, very pretty." She didn't know why she was so nervous. Maybe it was because she could feel his body pressing against her back, and his hand rested so comfortably on her stomach. His skin was hot and his musky scent swarmed around her, reminding her of last night when she'd kissed him in his hotel room. She pressed herself against him. She never knew how much a body could ache to be touched until she encountered the very touchy-feely Tyler.

"I think the dressing rooms are closed," he said.

"For a guy like you, you can get anything you want." She ran her hands down the

amazingly soft fabric of the dress.

“Anything?” He moved around in front of her.

More than with any man, or person even, that she’d ever been around, he had an amazing gift of making her blush. She couldn’t even look into his eyes.

“Is it the right size for you? I guessed.” He handed her the dress.

She looked into the dress tag and saw that it was. “Yes, it’s right. How did you know?”

“I have an eye for body styles, shapes.” He swirled his hands in the air in the shape of a voluptuous woman. She wondered what else he had an eye for. He didn’t wink this time. Something in that, the fact that he’d abandoned that gimmicky gesture, made her heart flutter.

He continued. “What else did you get?”

She placed the dress into the cart along with the tee shirts and shorts she already had picked up. He surveyed the contents in the cart.

“Let’s see, you got this morning, that’s one outfit, then lunch time, that’s another. Then there’s supper tonight that’s a third. Then Saturday, yeah, about the same. Then Sunday. And you have, what, three pairs of shorts and one dress? We need to get you more clothes. And a bathing suit.”

“A bathing suit? Tyler, tell me what’s going on here. Where are we going?” she asked as he went through the aisles like a child on an Easter egg hunt. Where had this man planned on taking her? To the Bahamas? Jamaica? Puerto Rico? The list was endless. The possibilities excited her. She hated to admit that he’d been right when he’d said that women wanted excitement and adventure. She loved every moment of not knowing what was ahead.

“You’ll see. How about this skirt?” He held up a long, white skirt. “This reminds me of the outfit you wore the first time I met you. Remember? You had on all white.” He looked through the same rack and found a matching white tunic. “You like this?”

She couldn’t help but be flattered at his enthusiasm to please her. “It’s very nice. Looks comfortable, too. And it’s not ripped like my other top was when we went through that crowd. But thankfully, you repaired that, right?”

Tyler hadn’t admitted that he fixed her top while she’d slept. If he confessed to it now it would change a lot for her.

He remained quiet for a moment. Then he placed the garments into the cart. “Right.”

She grinned. “Why wouldn’t you take credit for something so nice?”

“Because I didn’t want you writing in your article how a pro wrestler sewed your shirt.” He whispered to her like a child telling secrets. “I’m supposed to be this tough SOB. Not some sensitive guy who could make a dress.”

Icing on the cake. The man could make her a dress. What a catch!

With a reassuring smile, she said, “I think it makes you sexy. Besides, there are a lot of men who sew. Let’s see. Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, Giorgio Armani, Tom Ford. Do you want me to go on?”

“Please, don’t. I get it.” He smiled at her and winked.

She continued shopping with him, eventually picking up five pairs of shorts of different styles, two pairs of the overall shorts, three dresses, two skirt outfits, and a two-piece red bathing suit he finally convinced her to get.

“So tell me,” Tyler began, “why do you shop at thrift stores?”

Soledad’s mouth hung open. Not that she’d kept it a secret. She also didn’t advertise the fact that she’d gotten the white tunic she’d worn the first time she’d met Tyler from a thrift store. Her Gucci Girl friends would have never let her live that down.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Years of doing a lot of before-school-shopping at the Salvation Army, you get to recognize what they do to the tags inside of the garments." Tyler didn't sound ashamed of the fact that he came from meager beginnings. He wore it like a badge of honor. His strength of character was overwhelming.

"I don't want to say. It'll sound silly to you." She flipped through the shirts on the circular rack.

"I wear tights and a ruffled shirt to work. Nothing would sound silly to me."

She took a deep breath. "All of my life, I've wanted to be like everyone else. I wanted to blend in with other people and not be recognized." When she saw Tyler's doubting expression, Soledad clarified her statement. "I know I don't act like it all of the time with my marriages and partying. I did those things to get attention. The wrong attention. I don't shop at thrift stores for the inexpensive clothes. That's fine and all. But what I really do there is talk to people. I love it when I go to the store, and people come up to me who don't even know me and show off a great find. A perfect pair of Levi's. A new pair of shoes, just the right size. A book someone's been looking for for years in a conventional bookstore. It's life. It's getting in touch with your fellow man. It's real and honest." She could hardly look at Tyler. She was sure he was laughing at her. "Then the paparazzi shows up, and the people realize that they've been talking to a celebrity. Everything changes."

When she did glance up at him, Tyler had an awestruck look on his face. He was beyond impressed. He seemed amazed. Without a word, he placed his hands on her cheeks, bent over and placed the sweetest kiss on her lips. Her legs trembled, and she held onto his waist for support and comfort.

He pulled back from her and brushed her hair from her face. "You're beautiful."

She couldn't even think of a proper response. She knew one thing. She was ready to go.

"I think I have enough clothes for three more days. And it's almost four o'clock in the morning."

"Now we get to go to the fun part."

She looked at him strangely as he pushed the cart into the intimate apparel section. She blushed immediately thinking about picking out underwear in front of him. She hadn't been this embarrassed about buying underwear since shopping with her dad for her first training bra when she was twelve years old, and Anita was away on a business trip.

"Get whatever you like. And pick up what you think I might like, too." Tyler laughed as she headed into the section.

She searched for her comfortable Calvin Klein thong panties. When she didn't find them, she reverted to the standard reliable white, support bras and pre-packaged panties. Then she thought about her selections. She was on an adventure with an exciting man.

She put the bras and panties back on the racks, which made Tyler stare at her strangely. Then she perused over a more lacy selection of underwear. She picked up a red satin bra-and-panty set and held them up in front of her. He nodded and licked his tongue over his lips. Then she selected a sky-blue lace bra-and-panty set. He placed his hand over his heart. When she picked up the tan, lacy bra-and-panty set, Tyler groaned out loud.

"I'm going to go look for a suitcase for you before you completely blow my mind." He turned around and looked through the luggage area beside the intimate apparel section.

Soledad selected about ten bra-and-panty sets and put them in the cart. He wheeled over a black suitcase.

"Is this okay? I saw something else over there that you might like better, but this one's neat. Look." He pushed the bag back and forth.

"It'll be just fine." She smiled at him and realized that she was actually having fun. "Guess what I found to sleep in?"

"What?" He put the suitcase on the bottom rack of the cart.

"This." She held up a large, black tee shirt with a picture of Casanova on the front and the words "Kiss of Death" emblazoned over his character's head.

"Oh, no. Don't wear that thing. You know how embarrassing it is to see your face on stuff? Tee shirts, lunch boxes, key chains. Hell, I even saw me on wrapping paper once." He tried taking the shirt from her, but Soledad kept a tight grip on it.

"No, I want it. Please." She stared into his hazel eyes. She could see his resistance melting away. To see a man like Tyler succumb to only her words pumped her heart.

"Yeah, go ahead. Put it in the cart. But if you want to sleep with me, you don't need a tee shirt with my picture on it. All you need to do is ask." He raised his eyebrows as though he was challenging her.

Not being one to back down to a challenge, she answered, "I'll remember that." She set the shirt into the cart. She liked flirting with him. It helped that he was extremely easy to talk to.

"Now what? Oh, shoes." He pushed the cart over to the shoe area. "I guess you'll need some sneakers." He looked down the aisle. "No Nike's or Reeboks. Maybe we can go to a shoe store later today and pick up a pair."

"One of these will be fine. It's only for a few days, and I have my sandals." She snickered thinking that this was the first time that clothes didn't matter. Even when she went to thrift stores, she would still look for designer labels.

"I want you comfortable and happy. You're America's Daughter." He laughed. She didn't.

"You should have thought about that before you put me on a plane without telling me ahead of time." She picked up a white pair of white sneakers that tried very hard to look like a pair of Nike's and put them in the cart.

"What about these?" Tyler held up a pair of black, high-heeled strappy sandals that were very sexy. "You would look perfect in these."

"What would I wear these with?"

Tyler looked in the cart for the clothes she selected. Then he dove in and pulled out the black bra-and-panty set and held them up to the shoes. She squealed with laughter and grabbed the intimates away from him.

"You wish!"

"You're right. Besides, what are you going to wear with your dresses? You can't wear sneakers."

Soledad looked through the sparse selection and picked up a pair of cream-colored slides. "These should be fine." She put them in the cart.

"Are you sure you don't want these shoes? Trust me. You won't be walking in these for very long." He winked at her.

She pushed them away. Flirting was one thing. She didn't want to go too far with him. "I have the shoes I want."

"Can't blame a guy for trying." He put the shoes on the rack and headed the cart down to the personal hygiene section. As he passed Wal-Mart employees, they pointed and acknowledged him.

“Does it bother you that you don’t have any privacy when you go out?” she asked.

“Used to. Now I don’t really mind. But it would be nice to do normal stuff, you know, like grocery shop at a decent hour or take a vacation without having a bunch of people wanting you to be ‘on’ all the time. That’s one of the reasons I like you so much. You’re not all impressed by Casanova.”

She felt bad putting his tee shirt in the cart now. She could see that having no life hurt him. “I’m sure it must be hard to live like you do.” She knew the feeling of being in the public eye.

“I guess you would know.” He nudged her shoulder. “Call me silly, but coming here to buy you clothes and stuff is a treat. If I shop, it’s always late at night and it’s fast.”

“Please don’t say you consider this a date.”

“Why not? I’ll buy you dinner. Well, now it’ll be breakfast.” He smiled and turned down an aisle. She picked up some deodorant, a tube of toothpaste, a new toothbrush, dental floss, a new comb and hair brush, scrunchies and hair clips for her hair, shampoo and conditioner, facial cleanser and some products that closely resembled her favorite lavender body wash and lotion.

“So that’s the stuff you use to make yourself smell so nice?” He inspected the bottle.

“It’s like it. I get what I use at a specialty store in New York. The smell soothes me.”

“Okay, how about make-up? Not that you need any.”

She wasn’t really a big make-up user, but she did wear lip gloss on occasion so she picked up a tube of that.

“Anything else?” she asked.

He stopped by the pharmacy area and gazed down the aisle. He gazed at her and smiled. She found what he spotted.

Condoms.

Soledad gasped and hoped Tyler missed the motion. Her body begged, bargained and beseeched Soledad’s unwavering conscience to grab as many of the ribbed-for-her-pleasure packages and take the man up on his innuendo. She rubbed the back of her neck and turned away, trying hard not to grab onto his easy lure.

“Uh, I don’t think so. Nice try.” She walked ahead to the cash register.

“Are you sure? Where we’re going it’s a long way to get to an open store that sells these. I would hate for us to get caught up in the moment without them.” He followed her.

“There will be no moment for us to get caught up in.” She hoped.

As attracted as she was to him, she had allowed herself to be distracted once. She didn’t want to do that again.

“If you say so.” He wheeled the full cart to the register, and she unloaded the items.

The cashier worked quickly, but kept her eye on them. She had a look on her face like either Soledad or Tyler looked familiar to her, but she remained quiet. She scanned the suitcase and set it on the floor, then she stopped.

“Oh, my God,” the cashier said. Another Casanova fan, Soledad thought. “Look at that gorgeous ring on your finger!” The cashier picked up her hand and studied the ring.

“Is that white gold?” she asked.

“Platinum,” Tyler quickly said. The opportunity to find out the meaning behind the ring was now, especially since he seemed so willing to offer up information.

Soledad pulled her hand from the cashier. “It’s not real.” She glanced at him and saw his mouth gaped open. “He does this sort of thing all of time. How can you take a man seriously

who proposes at least once a week?"

The cashier scrunched her eyebrows and continued scanning the clothes.

"She got me there, uh," Tyler looked for her nametag, "Nikki. I *love* love. And I love women. But not every woman I asked got a ring." He picked up Soledad's hand and it trembled in his. He must have felt it because he covered her hand with his other one. So much for acting cool, calm and collected. Now she was going for conscious, clear and coherent.

He said, "This ring reminded me of her when I picked it out. Elegant, sophisticated." He looked right down at her. "Beautiful."

How did he do it? With a simple phrase, a sweet look, she was falling for him. No doubt about it. This action was murderous for the interview.

Nikki scanned the last of the items and got to the Casanova tee shirt. She took it off the hanger and was folding it when she stopped. She looked at the shirt, then back to Tyler.

"Has anyone ever told you that you look a lot like--"

"Casanova? Yeah, I get that a lot." He pulled his baseball hat down further and hung his head.

"If you ever want to earn some extra money, you should do celebrity look-a-like work. A second cousin of mine does that. She's a dead ringer for Elizabeth Taylor."

"I'll think about it." He winked at Soledad.

Soledad tried hard not to laugh, but he made it nearly impossible.

"Okay, will this be it for the two of you?" Nikki asked.

He reached into his back pocket for his money. "Yeah, I think this'll do it for us."

"Your total is--"

"Wait!" Soledad went over to the rack next to the cashier and pulled off a disposable camera. She was a reporter and had a job to do.

"Good idea, babe." He patted her on the shoulder as Nikki rang up the camera.

She totaled up the amount, and Tyler pulled out a wad of bills from his pocket. He paid her and pushed the cart out of the store. He loaded the bags into the back of the Jeep, making sure everything was secure.

After opening her door for her, Tyler said, "I forgot something. I'll be right back."

He ran back to the store. It was the perfect opportunity to make a call. Soledad scurried to a payphone next to the doors and hoped Tyler would be a while. First she called her parents. After an earful from Anita, Soledad assured her that she was safe and happy. It seemed to calm Anita down, but the woman promised to send hit men to rough up Tyler if even one hair on her dyed head was harmed. Sweet, if not creepy.

She slammed the phone down and went back over to the Jeep.

Tyler returned and hopped inside. He handed her a bouquet of roses.

"A woman should always get flowers."

She smelled the flowers and touched their velvety petals. "They're beautiful. Thank you so much."

"I got a couple of other things, too, while I was in there."

She looked at him suspiciously thinking that he returned to get the condoms anyway.

"Tyler--" He was still trying to play her after everything he said and did.

"I got you this." From the backseat he pulled out a heavy, blue fleece throw blanket.

"The night air might be a little chilly for you. I like it. But I didn't think you would." He ripped off the tag and covered her legs.

Again, he made her feel so small. He'd been a gentleman, and she thought the worst. As

much as she hated to admit it, she enjoyed being taken care of. She liked the way he fussed over her and bent over backwards to make her happy. She tried to hold back a smile, but it forced its way out. "Thanks for being considerate." She laid her flowers on her lap above the blanket. He stared at her.

"Why are you looking at me that way?"

"You are so damn perfect. I'm sure you hear that a lot from guys, but I mean it." He started the Jeep and pulled out of the parking lot.

No poetic verses could match the beauty in his sincere words. She felt overjoyed and overwhelmed.

And as though he was reading her mind, as she thought it, he said, "She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies. And all that's best of dark and bright, meet in her aspect and her eyes. Lord Byron." He winked.

Stunned, she put her hand to her chest. "I know that. But how did you?"

"I took poetry in college. I remembered that poem. It moved me."

The smile that forced its way out couldn't be removed from her face no matter what she tried. His sincerity struck her deep. She wanted to kiss him at that moment. Not sexual, but sweet.

"So now where are we going? To Virginia Beach?" Her head was still reeling from Tyler's compliment. Either he really did have feelings for her, or he was one hell of an actor. To protect her feelings, she leaned toward the notion that he was acting.

"Nope. We're going past there."

"We are? So where are you taking m--"

"Just relax. You'll see when we get there."

"I can't relax. I'm supposed to be working." She thought he understood the whole reason she'd agreed to leave her parents' house. The last thing she needed to come back with in this trip was a story and a new husband. The longer she stayed with him, the more she liked him.

"You are working."

She didn't feel any reassurance. She settled down in her seat and read all of the signs on the road once they got on the interstate. She saw signs going to Virginia Beach, some for Norfolk, Chesapeake, Suffolk and Outer Banks, North Carolina. At least that was what she thought she saw before her eyelids became heavy and eventually closed.

Exhaustion overtook her. During the ride, she fell asleep. And even though he managed to hit every bump in the road, it was the last bump that finally jarred her awake.

She opened her eyes and realized that the Jeep had stopped. She focused her eyes and saw they were in front of an older white house with a wrap-around porch. She saw a large oak tree in the front yard and a white picket fence. There were no other houses for as far as she could see. A field sat across the road, and trees surrounded the house.

The sun radiated over the home, emitting gold and red rays of light over the sky.

"Where are we?" she asked. Before he could answer, the large mahogany front door swung open. A tall black man stood in the doorway. He had on jeans and a blue flannel shirt with cut off sleeves and a hard expression on his face. He stomped out of the door, and behind him was another equally tall black man wearing a tee shirt and jeans.

"Do you know these people?" she asked.

"What? Are you scared?" He turned off the Jeep. "You don't think I can protect you from those two guys?"

She widened her eyes. "Protect? I wasn't even thinking about that? Do you need to

protect me?”

A third black man, a little shorter than the first two and a lot heavier, came through the door behind the other two. He had on overalls and no shirt. Not a good look for such a large man, but she wasn't about to critique him on his fashion sense.

“Three guys. If you're not supposed to be here, I think you need to leave now.” She tugged at his arm. She knew how to defend herself in a one-on-one situation. Not three-on-one.

“I'll be fine. I can reason with them. I'm charming. You said so yourself.” He took off his seatbelt and turned sideways. He had a strange smile on his face that he kept trying to cover with his hand. Did he think this was a joke or that it was funny? They were in an unknown place and three strange, menacing men are approaching them. The only thing that raced through her mind was her self-defense techniques. *Keep it together, Soledad.*

The men stood around Tyler's side of the Jeep with their hands on their hips. The red rays coming from the sun shone behind them. Their dark skin made their eyes shine like pearls on coals.

Their breathing sounded like a chugging train. Dogs barked in the background. At that moment, she could have sworn she could hear the whistling from *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* and Tyler was Clint Eastwood. For some reason the only literary phrase that kept bouncing around in her head was Gwendolyn Brooks' poem “We Real Cool.”

We jazz June. We die soon.

“Let's get out of here, Tyler.” She whispered in his ear and reached for the key still in the ignition.

“You might want to listen to your girl, man,” the first man said, his voice as deep as thunder rolling over the hills. He also smiled. Was this a southern thing? Did people down here smile before engaging in a fight?

“Is that right?” Tyler said. “What are you going to do if I don't?”

“You think you're bad, huh. Trying to impress your woman, ain't you?” the second man shouted. Suddenly the first two men grabbed Tyler by his collar and dragged him out of the Jeep. The third man picked up one of his legs and they carried him into the house, all the while Soledad screamed.

Chapter Eleven

Combat pay was not included in Soledad's salary. If these men thought they were going to harm Tyler, they had another thing coming.

She wasn't protecting Casanova, her lucrative interviewee and her meal ticket. These men were threatening Tyler, the man who'd given her roses, a blanket to warm her legs, smiles to flutter her heart. And she was more afraid for him than her own safety. She didn't have time to think how odd it felt to think about someone else's life. Her adrenaline pumped liquid mercury through her body. Overall, though, her protectiveness felt right.

"Put him down! Leave him alone!" Soledad beat on the smaller man's back and arm as she followed the three men. Tyler thrashed around, but he couldn't break the men's holds.

The strangest part about the abduction was that the men were laughing--no--giggling--like schoolboys who'd dropped a cherry bomb into the school's toilet.

"I say we dump him in the lake in back!" the first man announced, keeping a tight grip around Tyler's neck.

"Nah! Let's put him in the dog house!" The second man held onto Tyler's arm.

"No, do him like y'all used to do me and lock him in the compost bin," the third man said.

"Put him down!" Soledad balled her hand into a fist and punched the first man in his eye.

"Owww!" He let go of Tyler causing him to fall on his head. The other two still held onto Tyler's other arm and legs.

"Hey, man! What are you doing?" Tyler rubbed his head with his one free hand.

A door at the end of the hallway creaked opened, halting the mayhem. Soledad and the men stopped in their tracks. From the doorway emerged a large black woman wearing a flowered dress, bedroom slippers and a scarf around her head. Her complexion was the same as Soledad's only a little more ashen. Her wrinkles were set in her face, and her eyes were a grayish brown. She appeared weary, but still ready for a fight. Soledad's stomach twisted as she kept her gaze on her.

The woman walked slowly toward the mass of men. Even though she was slightly shorter than Soledad, the woman's presence knocked Soledad back.

The woman went directly to the first man. "What are y'all doing, making all that noise?" Her gravelly voice echoed off of the off-white walls.

"She hit me." The first man pointed to Soledad.

"Probably deserved it." She wagged her finger at him. "Now put your brother down."

"Brother?" Soledad asked.

The two men released Tyler's arm and legs, and Tyler got his bearings and stood. "Yeah, these are three of my six brothers." He pointed to the men.

"I don't understand." She felt a little dumbfounded at the moment. She couldn't exactly relate these three black men with the very pale-skinned, hazel-eyed Tyler. The only thing they all had in common was the southern accent.

"Well, this is my mama and these are my brothers." He said it as though it all made sense. He turned to the woman. "Mama, this is the woman I was telling you about. This is

Soledad Monroe.”

“Sol-lee-dad? What kind of name is that?” the woman asked as she shook her hand.

Soledad started to say, “It’s Spanish for--”

But Tyler interrupted her. “I call her Sunny. Look at her hair, Mama. Doesn’t it remind you of the sunrises here? All the reds, golds and yellows and stuff?”

“It’s pretty hair.” The woman glanced at Soledad’s hair, then wrinkled her nose.

“Sunny, this is my mama, Shirley Anne Collins.”

“It’s very nice to meet you. I’m afraid I’m at a disadvantage. Tyler’s never told me about you.” She looked at Tyler, who only raised his eyebrows. She couldn’t tell if he was trying to be sneaky or not. Why wouldn’t he have told her that he’d been adopted into a black family?

“It’s not surprising. Ty never brings women over here, and he don’t ever tell anyone his real name. He must like you, gal.” Shirley patted Soledad on her cheek.

“Sunny, these are some of my brothers. This is Clyde.” He pointed to the first man.

Tyler smiled so hard that his face looked like it would crack at any moment. It was apparent that his family brought him some peace, some level of happiness.

“Nice to meet you. You got some right hook on you.” Clyde rubbed his eye.

“I told you so.” Tyler patted her shoulder.

“I’m so sorry I hit you,” she said. “I thought you were hurting him.”

“Mama’s right. I deserved it.” Clyde laughed and blinked the gradually swelling eye several times.

Tyler continued. “This is my other brother, Donald. We call him Donnie.”

“Hope we didn’t scare you back there. We were just horsing around.” Donnie shook her hand and smiled.

“And this is my brother, Jerry.” Tyler pointed to the smaller man.

“I’m sorry I hit you, too. I didn’t know you were all related.” She shook his hand.

“Not surprising. Ty doesn’t talk about his family much. He doesn’t want people bothering us and all. I think this is the first time since that weird girl that he’s brought a woman home for our family reunion.” Jerry scratched his nearly bald head.

“She wasn’t weird. She just liked coloring her hair is all.” Tyler took off his hat and hung it on the coat rack by the front door.

“You look a lot more normal than that other gal. I think I’ll like you better than her. Welcome to my home.” Shirley patted her hand and smiled.

“Now that I have been properly introduced,” Soledad began, “let me just tell you all that you scared me half to death.”

The smiles dropped from all the men’s faces including Tyler’s.

“I didn’t know what was going on.”

“I’m sorry, Sunny. It’s a game we’ve played since we were kids. We call it punking each other out. We try to look real hard at each other to see who will chicken out first. Sometimes we even roughhouse, but we don’t mean anything by it.”

“How would I have known these men were your brothers? You could have let me know something before you all started.” She folded her arms.

“Let ‘em have it, girl!” Shirley bellowed.

She continued. “It was inconsiderate.”

“That’s right!” Shirley clapped her hands.

“Mean.”

"Tell it to 'em!"

"And as a first impression, you've made a bad one on me. Now what do you all have to say for yourselves?"

The brothers glanced over at Tyler, and he hunched his shoulders.

"I'm sorry," Tyler said.

"We're sorry," his brothers quickly followed in unison.

"We didn't mean to scare you. Really. We were just teasing each other," Donnie said.

"That's better. The next time you do something like that in front of someone you don't know, warn that person first, so they're not sitting there thinking something bad is happening. I was scared out of my mind." She kept her hard expression. She wasn't going to let them off the hook so easily. They looked sorry by the way they all dropped their gazes to the floor.

"Oh, I like her." Shirley laughed and patted Tyler on his arm. "She don't take no mess." Shirley looked around the group. "Ty, where are her bags?"

"In the Je--"

"Go get them and bring 'em in the house. Don't act like you ain't got no manners." She looked at Clyde, Donnie and Jerry. "And what are you three doing? Did you get the backyard cleaned up? Everyone will be by in a few hours."

Not only had Tyler brought her to his family's home, he was going to introduce her to his entire family. She didn't know what his last girlfriend was thinking. This man romanced at the speed of light!

"We were about to get started when we heard Ty's Jeep drive up." Donnie pointed outside.

Shirley walked over to the door and looked outside. "Oh, no, you didn't park that thing on my lawn. Move your car and fix that lawn the way it was, or I'll take a switch to you."

"Yes, ma'am. Right away." Tyler smiled and kissed Shirley on the cheek. "I'm glad to be home, Mama."

"Good to have you back home, baby." She hugged him. She directed her attention to Soledad. "Sunny, you're probably tired from all that riding. Ty, when you come back in with her bags, you show her to the back bedroom, where she can get some sleep."

"Yes, Mama."

"But you, mister, will be working outside with your brothers, so don't you get all lazy on me."

"No, ma'am." He ran out to the Jeep.

If Shirley was impressed with Soledad, Soledad was equally impressed by the way she handled these big men. She was the final word on everything that occurred in that house. If Tyler was as wild as a child as he was now, then Shirley probably had to be tough. But it must have been her tough attitude that made Tyler the gentleman he was. She would have to thank Shirley.

"We got to get to work. I'm sure you'll have a great time at the party tonight, Ms. Monroe." Clyde shook her hand again.

"It was nice meeting you all, too." She waved to the men. "And if there's anything I can do to help, please let me know."

The three men and Shirley went off to a side room, which when Soledad walked passed it, turned out to be the kitchen, with a door that led to the backyard. It wasn't long before she heard a heavy tractor chugging and some saws buzzing. She walked through the large, open dining room and looked through the window.

The yard was huge. Land as far as her eyes could see. The grass was dark green, darker than what she had ever seen on any of Trump's golf courses, and plusher. Trees lined the perimeter, and they were all tall and full of leaves offering shade. A clothesline sat on the side of the yard, and there were four picnic tables set up in a semi-circle in the middle.

Jerry started digging a hole at the back of the property and Donnie busied himself with making what looked to be another pen. As she watched the men taking such care in the backyard, the idea of attending a family party thrilled her. It had been a while since she had let her hair down, and despite the less than stellar first meeting, Tyler's brothers and mama seemed nice and down to earth.

"You ready to go to bed?" Tyler whispered in her ear.

She jumped and turned around. "You startled me." She looked out the window again. "I guess I'm going to a party tonight."

"Yep, you've been cordially invited. That was one of my surprises."

"One of many, as I'm seeing." She pointed outside. "What are they all doing?"

He looked outside the window at their work. "Well, Clyde is mowing the yard. Gotta get the grass cut short and treated to keep the bugs away. And Jerry is making the pit for the barbecue. We normally have a pig, and it takes a little while to cook a whole one. And Donnie's making a play area for the kids. We don't need them playing by the barbecue pit or touching anything they're not supposed to."

"Kids?"

"Yeah, my other brother, David, has two. My sister, Tracey, but we all call her Sissy, she has three, and my brother, King, well that we know of, he has about five kids." He smirked. "King has been known to be a bit of a player. There have been a number of women that have come to the house to accuse him of fathering their babies. Now King, he's the original Casanova."

"More like the original dog." Soledad shook her head. "Your brother sounds irresponsible where women and relationships are concerned." She wanted to hear his reaction. Was he the same love-them-and-leave-them type person?

"We were all raised in the same house, but we all don't do the same things. I've told King on many occasions that he needed to change his ways. I should have been talking to a tree. The tree probably would have listened."

She believed him. He'd never lied to her before. And the sincerity in his voice calmed her fears. And he didn't bring up her irresponsible nature where marriages and relationships were concerned. He could have thrown that in her face quick.

She continued. "Ten nephews and nieces. Must be fun here at Christmas time." She followed him as he led her down the long hallway. Her family's Christmases were always very quiet. Little to no fuss. They ate breakfast first, went to church, opened presents, then ate dinner. In that order every year until she went off to college. After that, it was rare for the family to all be together. She'd always wondered what it would be like to have a Christmas around a lot of children, to see their happy faces as they ripped through wrapping paper and comparing gifts.

"I guess it can be. I don't know. It's been such a long time since I've been home for Christmas. I'm always on the road."

She heard a longing in his voice that touched her. With all of his bravado and carrying on, deep down he did want the stable home life. He wanted the white picket fence and a bunch of children playing in the yard. He wanted ... what she wanted.

He brought her to a bedroom. The room was simple but homey with its blue and white puckered comforter on the bed, all mahogany furniture including a nightstand and dresser, a bowl and pitcher on top of the dresser with a picture of a black Jesus over the bed.

"This used to be Sissy's room when we were kids." He set the bags of clothing and the suitcase on the bed.

"It's a nice room. Very charming." Walking into the room was like walking into a hug.

"Yeah, I'm surprised Mama let her have this one 'cause it's right at the front porch. She could have climbed right out the window to the porch and run off with any guy. But Sissy's a good girl. She wouldn't have done that." Tyler peered into the closet that was stuffed with Christmas decorations and lots of bags of yarn.

"And what about you boys?"

"We were bad-ass kids. I'm surprised Mama didn't kill us. We got into trouble all of the time."

She could imagine Tyler and the messes he would have gotten in as a child. He probably never got into fights, though, because he would have talked his way out of it. But if he did, she was sure he could handle himself.

He took her hand and she let him. "Come on. I'll show you around." He walked out of the bedroom and went across the hall. "This is Mama's room."

The room was a little larger than the bedroom she would be sleeping in. It had a crocheted pink and white cover over the white comforter, and the bed was perfectly made up. In the corner was a tall dresser with pictures in frames covering the top, and in the other corner stood a wardrobe.

"And in that door is a little bathroom. Clyde and I added that on. Took us all summer, but we did it." He acted so proud of his work as he pulled her into the small room which only had a sink, a cabinet above it and a toilet. If he hadn't mentioned he had added the bathroom on, she wouldn't have known it wasn't already a part of the house when it was originally built.

She walked over to the pictures and looked at them. Some of them were so old they were yellowed and peeling, only the glass of the frame keeping them together. "Tell me who's who."

He surveyed the pictures. "This one right here, the boy with the fish in his hand and the boy standing next to him with the tee shirt on, that's me and that's King, the brother you haven't met yet. I guess you can tell who's who."

She looked closely at the picture. The boy holding the fish had a side of the mouth smirk, his hair cut in a crew cut style and hazel eyes. Even as a child she could tell he was a little charmer. "That's you?"

"I'm not the black boy, that's for sure." He chuckled. "Skinny little thing, aren't I? I'm surprised I even caught that fish that day and that the fish didn't reel me in. But King helped me. And this right here is Sissy when she was about ten."

He pointed to a school picture of a girl with straight, brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a bright orange and brown dress. Aside from the blue eyes, she looked just like the girl who broke into his hotel room the last night they were together. No wonder he was upset. Instinctively, Soledad put her hand to her chest, covering her throbbing heart in hopes of controlling her emotions.

"Here's a picture with all us kids." He lifted the biggest picture on the dresser. "This was taken about fifteen or sixteen years ago. There's Mama, and me with hair and a bad mustache. There's my brother, Hunter. And there's my brother David wearing the blue denim shirt. He's the oldest between him, me, Sissy and Hunter. Right down the front is Clyde,

Donnie and Jerry. And King is here on the corner next to Sissy. I think this picture was taken right after Sissy graduated from high school. We were all so proud of her. Besides Mama, she was the only girl in the house, so we all sort of looked after her like a baby bird.”

With her own two brothers, she couldn’t imagine the teasing Sissy must have put up with from seven. The poor woman must have had no peace as a child. “Must have been interesting for her to have seven brothers.” She ran her fingers over the picture, which looked to have been taken right out in the backyard. She could see the trees and the clothesline in the shot.

“We were always picking on her dates.” He chuckled to himself like he was remembering some of those moments. Soledad let him have that private memory but smiled. This was no act. At home, he was full on Tyler and she liked that.

“So tell me about your family.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s obvious you, Sissy, Hunter and David come from a different family. You’re all white and everyone else is black.”

“You caught that?” he said sarcastically. He smiled, but didn’t seem uncomfortable with the topic. So why didn’t he say anything?

“I would have asked earlier, but I didn’t want to be rude. I thought you would have said something by now. Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked.

“Why didn’t you tell me about your six or seven husbands?” He stared at her but it didn’t feel like he was judging her like the first day they’d met. His eyes were full of curiosity. When Soledad didn’t answer immediately, he continued. “Besides, why should I go into detail about my family? I don’t see them as anything different from yours. And why should you assume that because I’m white that my immediate family would be also?”

“Because--”

“Because I have a southern accent and you know that all white southerners are racist pigs, right?”

It was her mother coming out of her again. Her father would have had an open mind to all of this. She pressed her eyelids closed and sighed. She wasn’t her mother. “It’s a perception. But you have to admit your family dynamic is very unusual.”

He looked on the dresser and pulled out a small-framed picture. The woman in the picture was beautiful with black hair, green eyes, tall and thin. She had on no make-up that Soledad could tell, and she wore a light green dress and black pumps. She stood demurely with her hands behind her back, her pelvis slightly tilted forward and her feet crossed. She looked like a model.

“This here’s my mother. Pretty, isn’t she?” He rubbed his hand over the picture to remove some dust. His tone was so soft she could have spread it on toast. The love he had for the woman was obvious in his eyes. They sparkled like she had never seen before.

Soledad said, “She is stunning.”

“Her name was Suzanne Blythe. At one time she was crowned Miss Elizabeth City. That’s where we are now. Elizabeth City, North Carolina. She got pregnant right out of high school, and she wasn’t married. That’s when she had David. She worked at a couple of jobs like a cashier down at the Piggly Wiggly and stuff, but when her parents cut her off for getting pregnant the second time with Sissy and not being married, it was hard for her to find a babysitter. And she couldn’t keep a job.”

“That’s awful. So what did she do?”

“She took a job working at a hotel cleaning up the rooms and stuff. She found that if she

came in early enough, she could bring in the babies and keep them in the rooms with her while she cleaned. That's where she met Mama. Mama worked there, too. She had Clyde and Donnie at that time, and they would all be together. Then my mother met a slick talker named Tyler Randolph II, my daddy. Everyone called him Bubba. He married her, and she had me. Then a year later, she had my brother Hunter. By that time Mama had two more of her own, Jerry and King, who is named after Martin Luther King, Jr. on account that Mama and my mother went to see him speak in Washington, DC when they first met, years before she had me and Hunter."

"I was wondering about that."

"My daddy liked to drink a lot, and he wasn't a fun drunk either. He would beat on my mother, and when he got tired of doing that he would beat on us kids. See this scar?" He set the picture down and held up one arm, projecting his elbow into her face. A faint scar traveled from the middle of his forearm to the tip of his elbow. "That's where he broke my arm when I told him to stop hitting my mother."

She ran her fingertips down the scar. The puckered flesh was smooth, but it sickened her to know that a father would do that to his own child. Harwood barely even raised his voice to her or her brothers. When he had expressed his disappointment whenever they had done something wrong, that had been enough punishment for them. She could never imagine a parent physically abusing their child.

She looked into Tyler's eyes. The same glimmer that was there before when he'd talked about his mother was now extinguished. His eyes looked harsh and beady. Her heart beat slower as though she absorbed some of his anger.

"I would never hit my kids. Ever!" he hissed between gritted teeth. "I don't care if they set the house on fire. I wouldn't do it. I just--" His voice trailed off and he turned his gaze.

She knew he meant it. And if he had anything to do with his father's death she would have understood. She touched his arm, and he returned his gaze back to her. She wanted to know more about the man that damaged Tyler, physically and mentally. What happened to him and would Tyler be willing to talk about it?

"What about your father? Where is he now?" She hoped he trusted her enough now to know that she wouldn't use it for the story. She needed to know for herself. And she felt like if he talked about it, then maybe it would be good for him, too. Cathartic in a way.

Tyler glanced at her and shook his head. He wasn't ready. And if he wasn't ready to talk about it, then maybe she wasn't ready to hear it. She wouldn't push the issue. It wasn't about the story. It was about this man and his life.

He took a deep breath and continued. "When I was about ten, my mother and Mama had us all helping them clean up the hotel rooms and stuff. We kids would do the bathrooms, while my mother and Mama would do the beds and stuff. It was fun for us to be together. I've never known a time when we weren't together. During that summer, my mother developed this cough. I remember it because it sounded so bad, and we all kept telling her to see a doctor."

"Did she smoke?"

"Nope, but my daddy did. Like a chimney. When my mother started coughing up blood, Mama wasted no time taking her to the doctor. But by then it was too late. Lung cancer had spread up through her throat and into her spinal cord. While she was in the hospital, my daddy left her. That dumb sumbitch left my mother to die in a hospital." His voice cracked.

No amount of force could have kept Soledad from holding him in her arms. She hugged him, and he wrapped his long arms around her. There was nothing sexual about the hold. He held her like he wanted a hug from someone for a long time. Her whole body relaxed when she

realized how much comfort she'd given Tyler. Forget what she had with the Gucci Girls. This was true friendship.

She pulled back from him, and he wiped his eyes, making them even redder.

"What a jerk. I can't believe he left your mother when she needed him the most." She put her hand on his shoulder.

Touching him, Soledad understood the appeal for a spouse. She wanted to be needed and she wanted someone to support her emotionally. God forbid if she ever became ill, she didn't want to have the same fate as Tyler's mother. She wanted to be loved, cherished, happy.

"My mother still remembered, even years later as she was lying in that hospital room, that part in Dr. King's 'I Have A Dream' speech about the black kids and white kids holding hands and all. So my mother asked Mama to promise her to take all of us kids in and raise us like we were her own. Mama swore that's what she would do. And the day my mother died, Mama made good on her promise. We lived in a little apartment before, and when Daddy left, it was only going to be a matter of time before we were going to get thrown out anyway, or taken to foster homes."

"Was your Mama married?"

"Yeah, but her husband had a massive heart attack a year after we moved into the house. He was a good man. Treated me like I was his son. So it's been the eight of us kids and Mama for a long time. I remember my mother, but Mama is the one who raised me. And I don't see color when I look at her or my brothers. They're my family." He put his hands on the sides of her face and tilted it upward so she could look into his eyes.

Soledad's knees were as soft as taffy. She could tell this was no act and that made her even more nervous. She knew how to protect herself when he was in Casanova mode. She just sloughed it off. Now it was different. He was real. He was honest. He told her the truth when he didn't have to. Now she would have to deal with Tyler, not Casanova, and with her own feelings.

After hearing about his background, it was clear. She was head over heels for him. If the pounding of her heart didn't prove it, then it was the way he looked like a prince to her now.

He kissed her forehead and led her into the hallway. He showed her the rest of the modest house.

"So did Shirley adopt you all?" Soledad asked during the tour.

"Nope. We just moved in. We all have different last names. Mama's boys are Collins. Hunter and I are Randolphins. And David and Sissy are Blythes. Under this roof though, we're all one family."

"And Social Services never pulled you from the house?" Her curiosity went beyond that of being a reporter. She liked this man who was opening up to her.

"Social Services came by a few times. But Mama would just tell them that Daddy did live with us, but he was working out of town. People in town knew the deal, but they didn't say anything."

"Amazing." She squeezed his hand. "But very fortunate for you kids. And you hadn't seen your father since?" The question came out before she could stop herself. She didn't want to come off like she was prying.

He kept his gaze from her. "Saw him once before he died about ten or eleven years ago."

She could tell it pained him to talk about his father. She didn't want to keep hurting him. He would tell her more when he was ready.

"Does your mama like what you do for a living?" she asked.

"She watches my matches but she doesn't get it sometimes. She thinks the guys are actually hurting me. You should have seen her tear into Monk when she first met him. I was glad he couldn't hear her." He laughed.

"My mom doesn't like what I've done in my life." It was the first time she had ever shared that fear with anyone. "She thinks I'm a loser. I think she would be happier if I just crawled in some hole and kept quiet. Protect the family name."

"Are you going to tell me about your husbands?" he asked.

She cleared her throat and turned. He wouldn't have understood. To look at it from the outside, sure to be married seven times before the age of twenty-five seemed flighty and irresponsible. But it wasn't that way.

"I'll tell you some other time." She forced the words out. How could she tell this man love and sex had little to do with those unions? Except for two, they were rebellious moments. It seemed childish now. Eventually she would tell him. She owed him that much.

He squeezed her hand. "I understand."

She blinked at his response.

"You light your own path. Don't worry about what anyone else thinks." He opened a door at the back of the room that led to a utility room with a white Maytag washer and dryer. "You go through that door there and it takes you to the garage." He pointed to a door off to the side. "Go through here and it's the backyard." He opened the door and walked outside.

The grass was an even deeper green than what she had seen through the dining room window. It smelled like summer, fresh cut grass, a clean breeze, the sweet scent of flowers. She looked off to the sides and saw no other neighbors or people. It was their sanctuary. Peaceful and quiet.

"It's nice. I bet you kids had fun playing around here."

"Oh, yeah. With the eight of us, we could always find something to do. We played baseball and softball back here. Kickball. Did you ever play kickball?"

She shook her head. Being with Tyler, she realized how much she missed out on a regular life. She hadn't kicked, caught or hit a ball.

"Oh, it's a fun game. I'll have to show you how to play it sometime. It's like baseball and dodge ball put together. Then there's a lake right behind the house. Just walk through the woods a bit and it's there. That's where we would go swimming." He whispered in her ear, "If you want, later on tonight we can go skinny dipping."

"Keep dreaming, Tyler." She nudged him back. She found herself easily picturing him splashing around under the moonlight in the lake completely naked. She was no longer fighting urges and thoughts about Tyler. She ran her hand behind her head where perspiration formed.

"A man's gotta try." He pointed to the right. "About a mile that way is where Sissy lives. It's good to have her close by Mama. And a couple of miles down that way is where David lives. He built a house close to her, too."

"This whole area--"

"Mama owns all the land here and across the street. I'm glad 'cause I don't want any developers building by her. It's about a thousand acres or more. She has the lake back there and trees. This street here is called Collins Way. And where Sissy lives, it's Blythe Manor. And David lives on Randolph Street."

"That's very nice."

"I keep telling her that I'll tear down this house and build her a better one, but she won't hear of it. You remind me of her. Stubborn as a mule."

“Maybe she’s not good with change.” She faced Tyler.

“Maybe she just needs to accept when someone’s trying to be nice to her.”

He stared into her eyes, and she was hypnotized. She couldn’t even hear the tractor going as Clyde rode it back and forth over the lawn. Tyler slid down, and she curved her head upward. Inches away from his lips, the moment was broken by Shirley’s voice.

“Tyler, I told you to show her to the bedroom!” Shirley walked in between them with a brown paper bag full of green beans. “What are y’all doing out here?”

Soledad sighed in exasperation. It was the second time she had wanted to kiss Tyler and the mood was broken. Mothers must have some sort of sex radar. As soon as the blips on their radar got too fast and too close, they torpedoed the targets.

One thing was for sure. She couldn’t do anything with him at his mama’s house. They had to get away, get some alone time. Maybe the lake wasn’t such a bad idea.

“I was showing her around the house.” He turned to Shirley.

“You have a lovely home, Mrs. Collins.” Soledad smiled.

“You can call me Shirley.” She cradled her face. “Baby, you look so tired. You got dark circles under your eyes. Ty, take her to the bedroom.”

“Yes, ma’am!” he said.

“And you come straight back out. You need to help with the pit and set up the tables. Sissy should be by here later this morning to help with the decorations.”

He walked her through the garage and into the kitchen to go through the house. He took her to the bedroom. “If you need anything, come and get me, okay? I’ll be outside.”

She nodded and he closed the door behind himself. She was amazed that she felt so at home in this strange house, miles from anything or anyone she knew. His family members were wonderful, giving people. It was obvious that he talked to them about her, but she wasn’t sure what had been said. One thing was for sure. No one mentioned her family background or called her America’s Daughter or So Mo.

As she thought about it, the fact that Tyler brought her to his mama’s house and not off to some hotel room to have sex, touched her. He was a romantic, even if what he did wasn’t sexual. He thought enough of her to introduce her to his family.

And she couldn’t believe how good it felt to be with a man unashamed to introduce her to his family. Rick couldn’t do it. And even after being with Russell, she had only met his family one time and that was accidental when they crossed paths at Russell’s country club. Tyler was nothing like the men she knew. He was better. Much better.

After making sure the curtains were closed completely, she removed her clothes and put on her Casanova tee shirt. She felt a little silly now wearing it with his family just outside of the room. She crawled into the bed, and it didn’t take her long to fall asleep.

Chapter Twelve

A loud, cackling laugh woke Soledad from her peaceful sleep. She was covered in sweat, and she realized that as cozy as the house and room were, it didn't mean that there was air conditioning. Or at least the air conditioning was not on. She crawled out of bed and threw open the window. The road was lined with cars. Looking at her watch, she saw she had slept over six hours.

She picked a pair of denim shorts and tee shirt from the blue Wal-Mart bags along with the sky-blue bra-and-panty set. Soledad cracked the door open and craned her head around the corner to see if anyone could see her.

She crept to the bathroom door and opened it only to be surprised by a shirtless Tyler. Sweat covered him from his shaved head and down his smooth, muscular chest.

"Hello, sleepyhead." He stood in the doorway.

"Step aside. I need to get in." She tried getting around him but he wouldn't budge.

"Hey, where are your pants?"

"Move. I need to get in and take a shower."

Grabbing her around the waist, he pulled her into the bathroom with him and closed the door. "I need to take a shower, too. You want to save some water and take one together?"

As tempting as it was to see him naked again, she didn't want to give in to temptation. Soledad had done that before. "This is your mother's house. You shouldn't talk this way under her roof."

"Oh, now you really sound like Mama. No wonder I like you so much." He wiped his head with a towel. Setting her on the countertop by the sink, Tyler positioned his body between her legs. It was the same position she had been when she was in his hotel room. It would have been so easy to be out of her panties and have him inside of her.

She held her clothes close to her body as a barrier between them. She felt the wetness gathering between her legs, and she hoped she would have enough strength to kick him out of the bathroom before she would have to jump him.

"So you're wearing the blue one today," he said as he surveyed the bundle in her arms.

She glanced at the contents in her arms. The tee shirt she had was red and he couldn't have been talking about the shorts. Then she looked at her underwear. She felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

"That should look great against your skin." He winked at her and slid out of the bathroom. She immediately locked the door. She didn't want to have another surprise while she was naked. Although if he did come back, maybe she could muster enough strength to show him how she truly felt about him. She needed to figure that out first.

After taking a shower and getting dressed, Soledad went to the kitchen. The loud laughter that woke her up earlier, howled again. She stepped into the kitchen to see Shirley sitting at the head of the table with a large, light green bowl set on the table beside her, a white woman sitting next to her holding a toddler on her lap, and a black woman at the other end.

"Did you sleep well, baby?" Shirley asked.

"Yes, ma'am, I did. Thank you." Soledad put her hands on the back of the empty chair

in front of her.

"And who is this?" the black woman asked. She looked to be a little older than Soledad and had long braids and wore a white halter-top and short denim shorts. The woman was in amazing shape.

"This is Tyler's friend, Soledad." Shirley picked up a corncob from a paper bag sitting on the floor.

"Hi." Soledad extended her hand to the woman, but she didn't accept it. She made a grunting noise and continued snapping the ends off of some string beans she had in a bowl. Then she rolled her eyes at Soledad.

"Don't be rude." Shirley snapped. She turned to Soledad. "That's Tanya Johnson. She lives at the farm a few miles away. She and the kids have been friends for years."

"Yeah. I was Tyler's first true love." She wagged her head and snapped off an end to a bean as though she imagined it to be Soledad's neck.

Soledad wondered how high and mighty this woman would still be if she learned that Tyler didn't consider her his first love. He'd never mentioned her before.

"And this here is my little girl, Sissy, and her little girl, Susie Anne." Shirley pointed to the woman who was trying to keep her child from grabbing everything off the kitchen table while she snapped beans.

Sissy set down her bean, wiped her hands on a dishtowel and extended one of them. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Ty has told me a lot about you."

"It's nice to meet you, too." Soledad turned to Shirley. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"You know how to shuck corn?"

Corn needed shucking?

"No. But I can learn." The paparazzi would have loved to get a picture of that. *The* Soledad Monroe, America's Daughter, So Mo, the Marrying Monroe doing something domestic. The thought even made Soledad smile even wider. She sat between Shirley and Tanya.

Shirley lumbered to the kitchen window. "Ty! Tyler!"

"Yes!" He called back.

"Go get me another bag of corn from out the garage." Shirley struggled to her chair and sat back down a little uneasily.

"Are you okay?" Soledad asked.

"Yeah, just my knees. Seems like everything makes them act up. Warm weather. Cold weather. Rain. Snow. Don't matter."

Sissy set Susie Anne down on the floor, and her daughter scrambled over to Shirley. Shirley lifted Susie Anne onto her lap.

The little girl giggled and hugged Shirley around her neck. "I love you, Gam Ma."

"Grandma loves you, too." She kissed the child on her cheek. The scene touched Soledad. Where was Norman Rockwell when you needed him?

"It's good that your children are here to help you," Soledad said.

"Hmph, those boys? You can't rely on some men." Tanya bit into a bean and chewed it like it was someone's soul. "They come and go whenever they want. And they do whatever they want. Love don't mean a thing to them. And commitment? Please. That's a word they don't understand. But if you can manage to find a good one, and I mean a really good one--"

Tyler walked into the kitchen, still bare-chested, still sweaty, still sexy.

Tanya's gaze followed his every step. "--then you had better hold on to that man with

both hands. They are one in a million. And I do mean million.”

If Soledad didn’t know any better, she could have sworn she heard the ringing of a cash register in Tanya’s head. That was the one thing her family’s money afforded her. She had the luxury of marrying anyone without people suspecting it was because of money.

“Not my boys. I didn’t raise no heathens,” Shirley said, wagging her finger at Tanya.

“Here’s your corn, Mama.” He set the bag on the counter.

“Uncle Ty! Uncle Ty!” Susie Anne raised her skinny arms into the air.

“Susie Anne! Susie Anne! How’s my baby girl?” He hugged her into his arms and kissed her on her cheek.

“Fine, Uncle Ty.”

“Are you ready for the kiss of death?” he asked her. She nodded, eyes gleaming with anticipation. Tyler pulled up her tee shirt and blew into her stomach making the little girl squeal with laughter.

“Stop making that little girl laugh so much. You’re going to make her stutter.” Shirley set a freshly shucked corn cob into the bowl. “And don’t set the bag there. Put it on the floor next to Sunny.”

“Who’s Sunny?” Tanya asked as she screwed up the expression on her face as though she smelled something awful.

Tyler set Susie Anne back down and she resumed her spot on Shirley’s lap. “That’s what I call her, being that every time I look at her she reminds me of the sun.” He placed his hand possessively on Soledad’s shoulder and set the bag by her feet. The scent of hickory smoke and a sweet, spicy aroma rose from his skin and surrounded her until she wanted to lick him. Men shouldn’t be this appetizing.

“Oh, I just thought that that was a bad dye job.” Tanya snickered. “I suppose you have to come up with a name to call her since her original name is so complicated.”

Yep, she was going to hate Tanya. And just as she was getting used to the nickname, Tanya tried to ruin it for her.

“We all can’t be simple, can we, Tanya?” Soledad said.

Tanya frowned, as if she wasn’t sure if she’d been complimented or insulted.

“Let’s finish them beans.” Shirley ordered. “We’re losing valuable cooking time, now.”

“Tanya’s just mad because my nickname for her was Trouble.” Tyler put his hands on his hips.

“Yeah, seemed like we was always getting into some mess.” Tanya laughed and Soledad figured out who was doing all of the cackling now.

“We had some good times when we were kids. But we’re not kids any more.” He shook his head.

“Nope. We sure ain’t.” Tanya stood from the table. She was a lot shorter than Soledad thought.

“I see you’re doing well for yourself now.” Tanya stood next to Tyler and leaned in close to him. Soledad ripped the corn husks down the cob and imagined the yellow hairs on the corn were Tanya’s and was sure to pick off each and every strand.

“I’m doing okay. I love what I do.” He put his hands on his hips.

“And you make plenty of money doing it, don’t you?” Tanya asked.

“Don’t be asking him about his money, Tanya. Go sit your fast ass down.” Shirley grabbed Tanya’s arm and pulled her away from Tyler. Soledad knew she would really like Shirley.

"I'm not hurting for money. But hey, how are you and Junior Watkins? I heard you had a couple of kids by him."

Tanya crept to her seat. "Oh, you heard that? The kids are fine. They're at home with my mama. And I ain't really with Junior."

"What? I heard you two were supposed to get married at the end of the summer. That's not true?" Sissy asked.

Tanya cut her eyes at her. To watch Tanya squirm was the highlight of Soledad's day.

"You are? Well, congratulations!" He clapped his hands. "Whenever you send out your invitations, be sure to invite me. I would love to come and watch you and Junior get married."

"Don't you have some more work to be doing?" Shirley demanded of Tyler while holding Susie Anne tight as the little girl pulled off the hairs on the corn one by one.

"Okay, Mama. We're almost done anyway. The pig's looking real nice and all the tables are set up. Do you want me to take Susie Anne to the playpen, Sissy?"

"Nah, let her stay in here with us for a bit. We'll be out in a minute."

He started toward the door. He made a whistling noise and it got Soledad's attention. He winked as soon as her gaze met his, then descended the steps. She smiled and picked up another ear of corn.

"Mama, I'll call Hank and make sure he's bringing the boys." Sissy jumped from the table and hurried down the hallway.

"You want to help Grandma get some eggs from the coop so we can make deviled eggs?"

Susie Anne nodded her head and went outside with Shirley. Soledad continued shucking her corn until she felt Tanya staring.

Soledad waited a beat before she addressed her. "So you've known Tyler a while, huh?"

"Like I said. We go way back." Tanya reclined in her chair. She had a natural beauty that was slightly tarnished, but still shined through. Her lips were heart-shaped and her dark chocolate eyes still carried some sultriness she must have used in her prime. She could see why Tyler would have wanted this woman.

"I feel very privileged that Tyler invited me here to his family's special party." Soledad put an ear of corn into a bowl and picked up another one. She decided to go for a friendly approach with Tanya. If she came off as jealous, she would appear weak and clingy and that was not her style.

Tanya cocked her head and licked her tongue over her teeth. "Ty's no stranger to taking in strays."

Too bad Tanya wasn't going for the friendly approach.

"If there's one thing I do know about Ty is that he loves his home and everything around it. He loves familiar people, not strangers. And when I remind him how good things were between us, it'll be a matter of time before we're reminiscing about the good ol' days out in the pond." Tanya sauntered to the door. "Don't get too comfortable here."

Soledad wasn't a violent person, but she could see herself ripping out each braid from Tanya's swelled head. The idea that Tyler craved the familiar did hit her. As much as she hated to admit it, Tanya was right. Tyler had already expressed that he didn't particularly care for the made-up women he had to kiss. And he did seem happier at his mama's house than anywhere they had been, including in the wrestling ring.

She ripped down the husks and thought about her next move--with Tyler.

* * * *

The party was in full swing by seven o'clock that night. Soledad stood off to the side and

watched this diverse group of people mingling with each other. Tyler played horseshoes with his brothers David, Hunter, Jerry and King. Sissy was sitting with King's wife talking about children as they both watched theirs playing in the newly built outdoor playpen. David's children were playing with their Uncle Clyde. And Shirley held court in the middle, smiling and laughing at everything.

The comfortable mixture between the races moved Soledad. Music blared through the speakers and Sissy's son spun tunes on turntables and a compact disc player. This wasn't work. She almost felt guilty. Almost.

Before sitting down to a wonderful meal complete with the barbecued pig, fried chicken, corn on the cob, green bean casserole, deviled eggs, potato salad, cornbread, baked beans and every type of dessert she could imagine, Soledad decided to change into the dress Tyler had picked out when they had shopped at Wal-Mart.

Despite the fact that she didn't get to try on the dress before he bought it, it fit perfectly. She even changed her underwear to the tan bra-and-panty set just to make sure everything matched. She applied the lip gloss and allowed her hair to tumble freely.

After a quick shower, Tyler had also changed into another pair of denim knee-length shorts and a white tee shirt. But thanks to him working shirtless outside most of the day, the sun kissed his skin and gave him a glowing tan that made him look even more irresistible. His brown goatee blended in well with his skin tone almost making his face look monochromatic except for the fact that his eyes sparkled.

Soledad pulled out her disposable camera and started taking pictures of everyone. After the first flash, it was apparent that they were not camera shy. They all hammed it up for her. Tyler and his brothers stopped playing horseshoes long enough to pose and smile. Shirley, who at first waved Soledad away, eventually caved in, showing off her gapped-tooth smile. All of the children in the pen smiled happily as they held onto each other.

"You like taking pictures, too?"

Soledad turned around and saw Tanya with a smirk on her face.

"I'm a bit of a shutterbug myself," Tanya said, tossing her braids off her shoulder.

Soledad didn't know what Tanya's angle was. Was the woman bucking for a job with her magazine? Or did she think she was making her jealous? Again, taking the high road, Soledad said, "Really? I would like to see some of your work someday."

Tanya sauntered by her. "I'm sure you will soon." She smiled and headed toward Tyler and his brothers. Soledad didn't know what Tanya meant by that, but it didn't sound good.

Soledad looked down at her incredible ring, which she hadn't taken off since Tyler slipped it on her finger. No one at the party asked her about it, so maybe they hadn't noticed it. Not just yet. She glanced over at Tyler, who at that very moment stared with the biggest grin.

It wasn't until Tanya blocked her view by standing in front of Tyler that their gaze broke. Soledad wanted so much to go over to the duo and hear what Tanya needed to discuss but she stayed her ground. And Soledad felt she had made a good decision until the two slipped around to the other side of the house. Tanya may be an opportunist, but Tyler wasn't. She had to trust him.

By now everyone danced and sang. Shirley clapped her hands to the music, and Sissy sat next to her with a smile.

Dusty, Sissy's oldest son, put on Chubby Checker's "The Twist," which got everyone up. Clyde and Jerry moved to the middle of the yard and started dancing. They all sang the words.

As she watched the crowd she spotted Tyler and Tanya coming from the side of the

house. He headed toward Soledad. Tanya made her way to the dancing area and mingled with the men. Tyler stood next to Soledad and clapped along with the music.

"This is the song." He smiled as he watched his brothers do the dance. "We used to do this back when I was in junior high and high school. Do you know how to do it?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't dance." Jealousy coursed through her body and she hated the feeling.

"Oh, come on. Everybody can dance. Hell, if I can, I know you can." He dragged her to the makeshift dance area in the middle of the backyard and held her hands.

"I didn't say I couldn't dance. I don't want to." She pulled her hand from his and headed back to the picnic table. He followed her.

He sat next to her on the bench. "You're mad at me, aren't you?"

She didn't answer him. Instead she kept her gaze from his. How could he have brought her all this way, introduce her to his family and then have the nerve to sneak off with an old girlfriend right under her nose? What annoyed her the most was that he was playing dumb.

Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt.

He put his hand on the side of her face and pulled her head around to meet his gaze. "What did I do wrong? I asked you if you wanted to come with me, and you said yes. I bought you clothes. I made sure everyone here made you feel at home."

"And then you go off with your ex for a make out session." She huffed for losing her cool and turned away.

This time he got up and moved to the other side to meet her gaze.

"Not really enough time for a groping session." He laughed and although she should have found it reassuring that he found the idea amusing, instead it angered her even more.

"What were you doing with her?" Soledad asked.

"She wanted me to help her get a job in the media. She thought my connections would get her in. I guess she's not aware of my background with the press." He winked at her and she couldn't help but smile. "Tanya got upset when I told her I couldn't do a thing for her but wish her luck. But that's all we talked about. I swear."

"Since you're being so honest, tell me what happened to your father." The words came out faster than she could stop them. She could barely look at him. Something inside of her felt so deceitful that she even brought it up. But her curiosity got the best of her.

"Shirley's husband had a heart attack." He relaxed against the table.

His art is eccentricity, his aim how not to hit the mark he seems to aim at, his passion how to avoid the obvious, his technique how to vary the avoidance.

"No. Not Shirley's husband. Your biological father. Tyler II." She chewed her thumbnail as she waited for the answer.

He smirked. "Didn't you hear? I killed him." His hard gaze melted her bones and froze her blood. He couldn't have been serious. This prince who would have fought dragons couldn't have hurt a Republican. And yet, even as he said it, she still slid closer. Any other woman would have run away.

"What are you talking about? You couldn't have--"

"But that's how the news reported it. You probably read that in some archived newspaper, didn't you?" He cursed and turned his head away. "I thought that story was buried along with my father."

She shouldn't have asked him. As a person who was starting to care about him, she

should have kept her mouth closed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to--"

"I've never admitted this to anyone outside of the family." He wrung his hands together. "When I was starting to make it big in wrestling, my deadbeat father decided it was time to look me up. I hadn't seen that man in years, but all of the sudden he wanted to see me again."

She held the union of his hands and grasped them as though he was falling off of a cliff, and she was saving him. Nothing mattered except for Tyler. This was what a true partnership was about. The more he shared, the more she wanted to share secrets with him.

"He caught me out in the parking lot after one of my matches. I didn't know what to think when I saw him. He gave me life, but he gave me and my family hell. And he looked so bad. His clothes were dirty, he'd lost almost all of his teeth, he hadn't shaved in a while and from the way he smelled, it didn't seem like he'd bathed in a long time either. I didn't even think it was him. Then I saw that tattoo with my mother's name on his neck."

"So what did you do? Did you talk?"

He cleared his throat. "I wanted to. You know, get things right between us. But then he asked for money. He hadn't changed. He was still the same bloodsucker he was when I was a kid. So I gave him everything I had in my pockets. I think it was about five hundred dollars. It was my pay for the month. I was supposed to use it for food and motel stays for the tour. If Monk hadn't let me stay with him, I would have had to sleep in my car and eat those free ketchup and mustard packets you get in fast food restaurants."

She'd made him go to a place that was painful. She would have felt like the dirt under the picnic table if Tyler hadn't seemed relieved to tell the story. His shoulders slumped and his breathing slowed. Her body responded in kind like the two were one.

"He took the money. I told him I never wanted to see his sorry face again. The next day cops were knocking on my motel room door. They wanted me to identify the body of a man who had overdosed on crack and crystal meth. They said that before he died he kept babbling that his son was a professional wrestler so that's how they knew to find me. When I got to the morgue, I couldn't believe he was dead. I put the money in his hand that made him go out and buy the drugs that killed him. I killed him. I killed my father. And I kept screaming that. It was my fault. I killed my father."

Soledad's throat closed up so tightly she couldn't respond.

"The police had the autopsy report. They didn't believe I had killed him. Hell, they even suggested I see their counselor to get over it. But some blabbermouth in the morgue thought he could get rich by talking about how a local celeb admitted to offing his own father, so he told the story to the local newspaper. They ran the article about me killing my old man. At least that's what the headlines read. The article hinted at the truth, but slammed me for giving a, quote, obvious addict money for his dangerous addiction, end quote." He pulled his hands away from hers. "I guess you can understand why I don't like journalists now."

She swallowed, then cleared her throat, but her voice still cracked when she spoke. "The reporter who wrote that story was out of line. He didn't get your side or have all of the information. One bad apple shouldn't spoil the whole bunch."

"It would be easy if it was just one." He stood.

"Is that why you gave me this ring, to get back at all journalists?" The bullet-like questions shooting from her mouth surprised even her. "Or did you read all the tabloid stories about how much So Mo loves to marry and wanted your turn at me?"

He crouched down in front of her. The way he winced meant it was a painful feat. "I have been honest with you from Day One. And trust me, that wasn't easy." He moved closer to

her, his face inches from hers. "More than anyone I have ever met in my life, you make me feel like I have nothing to fear. And I don't know if it's some reporter technique that you've developed." He stared into her eyes. "Or if it's just you. I have my feeling, but I'm not one hundred percent certain about it."

She knew exactly what to do.

Placing her hands on his face, she brought his head down and kissed him with so much passion that her own breath caught and her body shook. He stroked her cheeks with his thumbs. Her tongue slid into his mouth, and it was as though this had been her first kiss. He had awakened a part of her that she had left dormant for a long time. Her passion. Her heart.

When Soledad pulled back from the kiss, she noticed Tyler's eyes were still closed, and he had a smile that made her want to kiss him again. So she did.

Tyler put his hand to the back of her head and allowed his fingers to swim in her curls.

He stopped the kiss by sinking down to the ground, then gazed into her eyes. "What was that for?"

"Because ... well--" She put her hand to his chest. "Because."

For a tall, strong man, he possessed gentleness. He kissed her upper lip, then moved down to her lower lip, sucking it in before tugging it teasingly.

"Someone taught me how to do that." He smiled and winked.

He went for another kiss and a flash interrupted them. Soledad whipped her head to the quick light with nightmares that, besides being watched by Tyler's whole family and especially his mother, that somehow the paparazzi found her again in the middle of nowhere. Instead she found Susie Anne holding Soledad's camera. The child put her hand to her mouth and giggled.

Soledad let out a long breath.

"I caught you, Uncle Ty, kissing that lady." She almost dropped the camera.

"Yep, baby girl. You caught me kissing Sunny. You think she's pretty?" He left his hand on Soledad's shoulder.

Susie Anne nodded and tugged at her shirt. "Can I take another picture?"

"Sure, sweetie." Soledad glanced at Tyler and smiled. "That would be nice."

He sat on the edge of the bench, put his hands on her waist and pulled her onto his lap.

"Tyler--" What Shirley must think of her now.

"Say cheese!" Susie Anne aimed the camera at them. Soledad wrapped her arms around his shoulders and got comfortable on his hard lap.

"Cheese," Soledad and Tyler said at the same time, as they kept their eyes on each other.

The flash went off, and it was as though she was seeing him for the first time. She felt his heart beating through his chest.

"No more pictures." Susie Anne looked at the counter on the top and pouted. She handed the camera to Soledad.

"That's okay, sweetie." Soledad accepted the camera. "I think we have enough shots."

Sissy called for Susie Anne, and she skipped across the yard.

"Is your bag packed?" He kept a tight hold on Soledad.

"It can be. We aren't spending the night here?" She ran her fingertips down the side of his face and over his goatee.

"It's part of my surprise I was telling you about before." He nuzzled his face into her ear. "Can you be ready in about thirty minutes?"

She nodded. She wasn't sure how he managed to get a hold over her. But he did.

"I'll go. But remember. I'm still working. No messing around." Now if she could hold

herself to that, she would be able to make it through this new location.

* * * *

As Soledad packed her new clothes into her one suitcase, Tyler sat in the backyard with his Mama. Coming home always felt so good. His Mama's tangy barbecue sauce would stay with him forever. And he wished he could bottle up the smell of home, honeysuckle and that sweet, woody smell from the creek behind the house.

If it weren't for the fact that he wanted to spend some private time with Soledad, he would have stayed until the *Wrestlebow* show. As he thought about spending some alone time with Soledad, a wave of nervousness rushed over him. She would want to know about the ring. At some point, he knew Dr. Hilliard would come up again. She didn't have to know everything. That would have been true if all he thought about her was as a reporter. After she hopped on a plane with him without question, that image flew out of the window. What the hell was he going to do?

"Boy, are you listening to me?" Shirley playfully slapped him with her fan.

Tyler shook his head. He took his Mama's hand. "Just doing some thinking."

"Thinking about that woman in there?" She nodded toward the house.

He snickered. "You always knew what I was on my mind." He sighed.

"You getting serious about her?"

He squeezed her hand. He couldn't exactly vocalize his emotions about Soledad. Oh, sure, he could buy Soledad whatever she wanted, not that she needed him to do that. She came from one of the wealthiest families in the country. She stared at him as though he meant something. She'd gazed at the ring as though she could see herself with him. Was that what he wanted? Did he want a life full of even more press chronicling his life and relationship? Was that what Soledad wanted? Bottom line, would she go to the ends of the earth for him? That was what scared him.

Shirley's voice brought Tyler's gaze to hers.

"If you are serious about her, baby," she began, "then hold nothing back. Tell her everything. If it's real, then she'll be there for you."

He took a deep breath. "Mama, do you know her background?"

Crickets chirped and frogs creaked before his mama finally answered.

"Sure I do. Everybody's seen her in the news. What? Do you live in a box?"

He had to laugh. Even his mama was hipper than him.

He let his Mama's hand go. "You know right after the show I'm flying out to Japan. One day of press," he grumbled. "Then a flight there. I'll stay there for six months. Do you think that she would want to go with me?"

At first he didn't tell Soledad about the trip because he didn't trust her as a journalist. Not that his trip to XTCWF's Japanese affiliate was such a big secret. The real reason for his decision to go was. Japanese paid high dollar for American pro wrestlers. Those people respected the profession as a sport. They also craved blood. He would have to run his body ragged to collect the windfall from this trip.

However looking at the chipped paint on his Mama's house, the new roof that still seemed to sag in the middle, and the warped kitchen floors, he wasn't risking his health for nothing. He had his Mama to think about. He wanted to make sure that aside from living well that, if she ever needed to go to the hospital, he could afford any and all treatment for her. She wouldn't go like his mother.

Shirley said, "If Sunny goes with you, it could be a good thing or a bad thing."

Tyler's furrowed eyebrows made her explain herself further.

"If she goes, it could be because she wants to be with you, which is good. Or it could be because she wants to hide from the media here. That poor girl hasn't had a moment's peace in her life." Shirley took Tyler's hand again. "I just hope you're not the lesser of two evils."

Those two thoughts had crossed his mind. He'd hoped the ring would open up her feelings, but she kept as mum about them as he had. What was holding her back? Then again, what kept him from being so open?

"Baby, why did you give her the ring? Do you love her already?" Shirley asked.

Tyler sighed. Not proud of his decision, he'd gotten the ring to cash in on Kevin's plan to wed Soledad Monroe in the middle of the wrestling ring. Tyler thought if he didn't tell her right away, maybe she would go for it, especially if he got her the right bauble. Looking at her, being around her, he understood why men wanted to marry her immediately. He had to tell her the truth.

She was altogether wild and free-spirited while being the type of woman you wanted to bring home to Mom. He wasn't exactly sure if he loved her. He just knew that he didn't want her out of his life just yet. He thought the ring would keep her with him a little longer. It had worked so far. He couldn't avoid her questions for too much longer. Eventually he would have to tell her. He was just afraid of her reaction.

Soledad sauntered out of the backdoor, her suitcase wheeled behind her. "Ready?"

Chapter Thirteen

Soledad was learning fast that Tyler was the king of surprises. First it was ring with no explanation, and now it was wherever he was taking her. The hour-long drive from Shirley's house gave them a chance to talk.

Soledad told Tyler about growing up in Connecticut, the beauty of the changing seasons and the cozy atmosphere. Then she talked about her parents. She told him how her very corporate mother had a car to drive her into New York every morning and how her father tutored children out of their home.

As she spoke, Tyler rested his hand on her knee. She jumped with his familiarity with her body. Her body tingled and for a moment her thoughts drifted to an empty bed or at least an empty road, where they could have some privacy.

He removed his hand and put it back on the steering wheel. "Sorry. Habit."

A habit with whom? Surely he didn't touch Monk this way. It was better, though, that he took his hand away even though she still felt it blanketing her knee, like the feeling of ocean waves washing over her feet could be felt long after being away from the water.

He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. Okay, even for Tyler he was acting strange. He barely even looked at her. She'd never been with a man who touched her all of the time. And if they did, it was only because they wanted one thing and that was not her score on the SATs. Now that he stopped, it felt ... odd. He must have felt her tension.

"So are you going to tell me about the marriages, or do I have to leave you on the side of the road?" he asked. In the game show world, this question would be called the "Million Dollar Question." Now, on to the lightning round.

She gritted her teeth. "Some teenagers rebel with drinking or drugs. Me? I run to the chapel."

Tyler glanced at her. "Tell me about some of your most rebellious moments."

Soledad took a deep breath. "Let's see. Husband Number One happened when I was a senior in prep school. My parents missed one of my debates, so I married my friend's cousin to get back at them. I was only seventeen and he was eighteen. Even though he never touched me, my parents screamed statutory rape and got the marriage annulled."

"Number Two?" Tyler shifted the Jeep into overdrive.

"Number Two I married as soon as I turned eighteen. I figured by this point my parents couldn't split us up. I met him my first year of college. As soon as I married him, my parents dragged me to England for a month for a summer vacation. I realized how stupid it was to have gotten married to a guy I had met at a party, told my parents, and they bailed me out again."

He split his attention between the road and her. Now Soledad would have preferred if he kept his eyes on the road. She held onto her seatbelt tighter as he took another curve at breakneck speed.

Soledad continued. "Husband Number Three wasn't too bad. I actually liked him. I met him when I was nineteen. He was fifty-five. My shrink said I was looking for a daddy figure. I don't think that was true. On our wedding night, before we--" Soledad cleared her throat. She didn't think it would have been this difficult to talk about sex, but she blushed thinking about it.

--before we could make love for the first time, he had a heart attack and died.”

“Whoa. What a way to start a marriage.”

“I know. His grown children accused me of wanting his money. I didn’t want a dime. I gave it all to them.”

When, in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes, I all alone beweeep my outcast state.

Tyler put his hand back on Soledad’s knee. He must have recognized the longing in her eyes. “Number Four?”

She gazed at him and smiled. Yes, she needed to move on. “Number Four was an extreme sports fanatic. He loved taking risks. I met him while traveling through Europe to forget about Husband Number Three. A month after meeting him, we married. To celebrate, he wanted to dive off of a mountain into a river.”

He put his hand to his chest. “Oh, no. Don’t tell me.”

She smoothed her hand over her Wal-Mart dress. “He hit his head on a rock on the way down. We couldn’t find him in the water for several hours. Then he washed up on a bank a few miles down from where he’d jumped.”

“I have never heard of someone being so unlucky in love as you.”

She looked down to her lap. “With those men, I don’t think I was ever in love. I just loved the idea of getting married and pissing off my parents. Except for Number Three, all of those men were poor. My parents worried that they would take my money. I think that egged me on to keep getting married.”

He pointed up the road. “We’re not that far. Just another mile or so.”

She looked around at the scenery that they drove by. The clear night sky perfectly offset the white beach sand. He pulled up to a small cottage by the beach. It was set up on stilts and as soon as the Jeep stopped next to it, the motion sensor light on the side flashed on.

“My home in the Outer Banks.” Tyler grabbed his bag and hers.

She looked down the darkened beach and could not see a thing. The waves were all she could hear. “It must be very peaceful out here.” The fresh ocean air filled her lungs. So this was what life was like away from a congested city. Nice. She could definitely get used to this.

“It can be.” He stood next to her as he waited for her to precede him up the stairs. “It can also be real lonely.”

She climbed the wooden steps to the porch. He set her suitcase down as he pulled his keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door.

“Step inside.”

The cottage smelled like the beach, fresh with a salty, ocean smell. It was minimally decorated. Dark woods covered the walls and the space was open. Off to the side was a set of stairs that went to a loft area. The honey-colored hardwood floors were barely covered by scattered rugs. A dining room table with two chairs sat by a large window. The only adornments were pictures of his family hanging on the walls and a set on top of shelves.

“You like?” He closed the door and locked it.

The tumble of the locks made it click in her head that she was alone with him. Truly alone. She licked her tongue over her dry lips.

“It’s very cozy.” She smiled and twirled around as she took all of it in. “So did you buy this place after you hit it big in wrestling?”

He walked into the kitchen that was only separated from the rest of the living area by a bar. Poking his head in the refrigerator, he answered, “No, I bought this with money I earned digging ditches. You want something to eat or drink? Looks like Hunter got my favorites. Tea,

milk, juice, beer.”

Beer. The date enhancer, she and her girlfriends used to say. She shook her head.

“I’m going to put your bag up in the loft. You make yourself comfortable.” He flew up the stairs, and she strolled into the living room area. Nothing unusual about the way the room was decorated. Couch, chair, coffee table and a floor lamp, just like in her apartment. She eased down on the couch.

The brown plaid couch was sturdy, but soft and blended in with the wood floors and walls. She sank in the cushions and it was like falling on a fluffy pile of cotton. Rubbing her face against the chair, she inhaled Tyler’s scent on the fabric, that strong, musky smell that enraptured her before. With a sensuous pass of her hand, she coasted her palm over the velvety material.

If he gave her another foot massage like he did at the hotel, she would be nothing more than melted chocolate over a mound of vanilla ice cream.

Tyler’s home epitomized him. He didn’t live beyond his means. And even though he’d mentioned that he’d wanted to tear down Shirley’s house and build another in the same spot, something in her told her that he enjoyed the old home. It was in the way he talked about the bathroom he’d helped build and the family room Shirley’s husband had made.

He plopped down next to her on the couch. “I love this couch. It’s comfy. That’s what I like. Comfort.”

She crossed her legs and turned to him. He sat so close she could feel his warm breath on her face. Preparing for another toe-curling kiss, she smoothed her hair back, then bowed forward as though he was going to kiss her. She closed her eyes in anticipation. The slight rustle she heard kicked up the fluttering butterflies in her stomach. When it took too long to feel his lips on hers, she opened them and found that he had moved to the other side of the couch.

So he was keeping his distance. He was probably turned off by all of the marriage stories. What man wouldn’t be? She wasn’t looking very intelligent right now.

“I believe you were up to Husband Number Five.” He stretched his arm across the back of the couch. Then he picked at a piece of string hanging off the middle cushion, barely even looking at her. Who was this man, and what did he do to that sweet man who rubbed her feet and looked her directly in the eyes whenever he spoke?

Not wanting to look too disappointed, she answered his question. “Ah, Husband Number Five. Jonah. He was my first true love.” She tucked one leg under herself causing the hem of her skirt to rise.

His eyes were fixed on her legs, and he ran his tongue over his lips. When she placed her hands on her lap, it broke his concentration, and he moved his gaze up. “You were on your fifth husband before you were in love? Seems kind of sad and strange. What were the rest of the guys? Practice?” He snickered and it hurt her to her core. He laughed at her feelings.

She wanted to throw him off of the couch.

“I told you. I married before to get back at my parents. But Jonah. I fell for him hard. He was worldly, sophisticated, smart and gorgeous. He could speak five languages fluently, and he worked hard to earn his money. I married him when I turned twenty-two, after graduating from college.”

“And what happened with him?”

She billowed the top of her dress. She felt sweat rolling between her breasts. “I caught him cheating on me. I guess since he could speak in five different languages, he felt like he should have just as many women calling his name in those languages.”

“What an idiot. What kind of guy would cheat on you?”

She couldn't blast the smile from her face. She kicked her leg back and forth.

“And then there was Number Six.”

“You've met him. Russell from the restaurant. I married him because I was trying to redeem myself in my mother's eyes. As you can see, so far I hadn't done a great job of being the perfect daughter. And of course the media chronicled all of this. I was fodder for jokes on late-night talk shows. But the worse they talked about me, the more I wanted to rebel.” She shifted her weight to get more comfortable. “And at six months, Russell and I had the longest marriage. But enough about me. Tell me about you. If you couldn't wrestle, what would you do?”

“Why are you changing the subject?” he asked, a twinkle in his eyes.

“I'm tired of talking about myself.” Plus she needed some strength to talk about Maurice.

“Don't think you're off the hook yet.” He looked a little thoughtful. “If I couldn't wrestle, I would teach.”

“Teach wrestling?” She lifted her hair and fanned the back of her neck with her free hand. She wished he would take a hint and open a window or crank up the A/C.

“Nah. History,” he answered.

“History? Like American history? George Washington and stuff?”

“Yep. I love history. It was my favorite subject in school. And it's not like the history will ever change, you know.”

“That's true.” She sighed. “Very interesting.” Sad to think that for the rest of her life she would be thought of as the Marrying Monroe. What man would want that association?

“I told you I got my Masters in history,” he said.

“I thought you said it to impress my mother.”

“Oh, no. Your mama looks like she can tell a liar from a mile away. I wasn't gonna make up anything for her to embarrass me.” He raised his foot in the air and undid his sneaker. He kicked it off with his other foot, then removed the other shoe the same way.

“Getting more comfortable?” She stretched both legs out on the couch. She could have sworn she heard him groan.

“Whenever I come here I can't help but take off my shoes. While we're here we have to take a walk on the beach with no shoes on. I love the feeling of the sand between my toes and the water rushing over my feet. There's nothing like it.” He wiggled his toes and stretched his long limbs.

He yanked the string from the cushion. That poor string didn't have a chance.

Soledad continued. “Before we left Shirley's house, she told me a couple of things that bothered me.”

“What?”

“She said that although she likes me, and even though her house was full of colorless love, that I needed to really think if a relationship with you was wise, because the world wasn't as tolerant as she was.”

“And what do you think?” He gazed into her eyes.

“Color doesn't matter to me. My husbands were every shade of the rainbow. No, what I don't like is when routine marriage issues come up, they appear in the paper. I can't have a simple argument with my husband without it hitting the front page.”

He put his hands on his lap. “What else did my mama say?”

“She wanted me to remind you about your pills.” She'd wondered about those pills since

the first day. Now that she knew Shirley wanted him to take them, she realized that they couldn't be illegal. So why was he hiding them?

He was quiet before he spoke, "She always worries about me."

"What are the pills for, Tyler? Be honest with me."

He interlaced his fingers and sighed heavily. "Off the record, okay?"

She turned her head away. His assumption that she would betray his trust crushed her. She nodded her head.

He said, "I have diabetes."

Not exactly what she had expected to hear. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I didn't know if I could trust you. It's not something I want you to write about."

"Why? I thought you were on drugs."

"I would rather you write that in your article than to report I have diabetes." He sat up straighter.

"Ty, do you realize what an impact the article can have on your life, your career? People read what's in newspapers and magazines and take it as gospel. If I report that I suspect you're a drug user, it could ruin you, not make you." Soledad understood the power of the media all too well. She couldn't count how many times she'd ended up on the cover of some magazine or newspaper, all of them reporting lies about her. Well, not all of them. "I want to help you. Why can't you just trust me?"

Tyler shook his head and didn't look at her. "When everything happened with my mother, and my daddy skipped town, I made the mistake of telling another student what had happened. Little did I know, his father was a reporter for the local paper, and he said he wanted to do a story about my family. 'Blind Love.' I think that's what he called the story. Anyway, I told him all about my parents and everything my mama and her husband did for us. When the story came out, he called us welfare castoffs. He said we were a family looking for a handout, and he called my mother a woman without morals who got her comeuppance when she died. I've never trusted a journalist since then."

Her heart felt heavy. She'd gone beyond just liking Tyler. She cared about him. When he admitted he was sick, everything changed. She neglected to tell him about her last husband, Maurice. The press knew nothing about him, even though rumors circulated about a possible seventh husband, but nothing they could prove.

She cleared her throat. "The truth is better. Your condition would be a wonderful angle. I could do a joint story. A deaf wrestler and a wrestler afflicted with diabetes. Do you know how many kids look up to you and Monk? You guys are their heroes. If diabetic children knew you also have--"

"No!" His voice thundered. He sprang to his feet. "I don't want anyone else knowing about this. This is my problem. No one else's."

"I understand that, but--"

He got down on one knee in front of her and put his hand on her cheek. "No buts. This is not up for discussion. The only ones who know besides you and my immediate family are Wayne and Kevin, Doc and Monk. I don't want people passing judgments or feeling sorry for me. I'm not a charity case."

Soledad understood that feeling. She didn't want people feeling sorry for Maurice as she cared for him. There were days she'd wished she could relate to someone else going through what she was going through with him. "I have to report the story that's going to be of interest to our readers--"

“Please. I’m not asking this of Soledad Monroe, the writer. I’m asking this to Sunny, someone I call my friend now.”

She put her hand to his that rested on her face. She couldn’t hurt him. “I won’t write about your diabetes in the article. I promise.”

He smiled. “Thank you, babe.” At least the terms of endearments had returned.

She stroked his head. “Does it affect your work? Are you okay?”

He stared at her, beaming. “I’m fine.” Then told her about the type and his medication. The more he spoke, the more the walls came down around him.

“So tell me about you and elevators,” she asked.

“You’re just going for it all, huh?” He dropped his hand from her face. “I got trapped in one once back when I used to help my mother and Mama clean the hotel. I was in a completely dark elevator car for four hours by myself. Since then, I can’t get in them to save my life.”

And there it was. The transition was complete. She knew from that moment he would be Tyler. No more Casanova while he was with her. He had confessed two very important and personal things to her. No turning back now. She needed to do the same.

“I have to tell you something, Sunny. I’m not proud of this.” He took a deep breath. “That first night when you spent the night in my room, I walked in on you while you were sleeping.”

Her heart drummed a wild rhythm. She didn’t know whether to be frightened or mad or flattered. And now she knew she wasn’t dreaming.

“I was about to leave, and I thought I heard you calling for me.” He stared into her eyes. “I knocked on your door, but you didn’t answer. I heard you say my name so I opened the door. I saw you sleeping.” A dreamy expression crossed his face. “I touched your back. But I swear I didn’t do anything else.”

She remained silent. She didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t physically hurt her. To be honest, she didn’t know what she would have done if the situation was reversed.

“What is it, Sunny? Talk to me. Say something.”

“I don’t know what to say.” She stood. When she faced him, he had a concerned expression. She approached him. Since he got to touch her while she slept, she was going to return the favor. Grabbing his shoulders, she pushed him back so that he was lying on the floor. She straddled his body, holding his arms down.

“So how about I teach you a lesson.” She smiled.

“Oh, girl! Are you sure you’ve never wrestled before?”

“I told you that I taught self-defense in college.” It felt good to have his body in between her legs. Almost like he was meant to be there.

“That was pretty good. You’re quick and caught me off guard. But you know what?”

“What?”

He sat up, grabbed her hands and twisted them behind her back. Again, he wasn’t hurting her. He loosened his grip so that if she wanted she could have pulled away. If she wanted. She let her wrists stay in his grasp. Her face was slightly higher than his.

“Now I have you.” He winked.

Her breathing increased. “Yes, you do. I guess you win.”

“What’s my prize?” His southern drawl was really drawn out now. He let her hands go and allowed his large hands to rest on her hips. She knew he wanted more than friendship. And if she was honest with herself, she would admit the same thing. Fear kept her from going to that next level.

She tried to stand up. "You can have some more great conversation. Come on. Let's--" "Stop running away from me." He grabbed her waist and pulled her back down on him. "Every time we get a little close you run off like some scared rabbit. I'm not going to bite you-- unless you want me to." He winked at her.

She could feel heat rush into her cheeks as she put her hands on his shoulders to brace herself from falling forward. "What happened to that guy who likes to take things slow? You said that your first girlfriend left you because you took your time with her."

"Exactly. I don't want to make that mistake again." He nuzzled his face into her neck and kissed it. Her head fell back. His cool tongue felt wonderful against her skin. And although she didn't want to, a moan escaped her mouth.

He must have taken that as a cue to keep going because he kissed down the side of her neck to her shoulders, which, thanks to his crafty hands that moved the straps of her dress down, were now bare.

"Ty, wait," she said almost breathlessly. "We should talk."

"I can talk during foreplay." He continued kissing her shoulders, licking his tongue up and down her arm. "Most women like that." He moved his mouth over to her chest. His soft lips kissed her bare flesh and easily moved its way down to her cleavage.

"Stop! Wait!" She put her hands to the sides of his head and tilted it upward.

"What's wrong?"

"I-I can't move this fast. I need to take it slow." She attempted to get off of his lap again, and again, he held her down.

"I don't want to. Not this time." He couldn't look her in the eyes.

Tyler sighed as though he had been under water holding his breath for five minutes. He leaned his head down so that it rested on her chest. She wondered why was he in such a rush? He'd made it seem like he was with his last serious girlfriend for years. Now he wanted to run a full relationship in a few days. She didn't understand. Then she let his words tumble in her head. *I don't want to make that mistake again.* It hit her right away.

"You're still testing me. I'm a journalist, so you're seeing if I'll betray you. And as a woman, you're checking to see if I'll be different from your last relationships." She stared into his eyes. "You can't measure me against those people and those situations." She slid the impressive ring off her finger, removed his hand from her hip and gave it back.

Still stretched out on the floor, Tyler released his hold, and she jumped from his lap. She paced. In the cottage she felt the same claustrophobia she had in the restaurant with Tyler when he had her pinned to the wall. Her heart raced.

"It's not a test. I wish I'd never told you that." Tyler covered his eyes with his hand.

"I wish I had never forgotten my professionalism. I came here for a story. What's your angle?" The words came out of her mouth, and she wanted to swallow them back and let them fester in her stomach, be burned by the acid. She didn't mean it the way she'd said it, but the bottom line was that she still had a job to do. And neither love nor money nor different locations nor anything else was going to stop her.

He sprang to his feet. "This is Tanya and Mia all over again. It must be me. I kept thinking that it was them. But, no. I'm the one getting dumped so it has to be me." He towered over her and stared into her eyes. "That's all I am to you is a story, huh?"

Now was not the time to tell him about Maurice. He would have held that against her, too. "Tyler, I didn't mean--"

He interrupted her. "You want your story?" He looked around the cottage and snatched

up an opened envelope and an ink pen from the coffee table. "Here."

She raised her hands and took the materials.

"I hope you can write fast, 'cause I'm going to give you the exclusive you've been dying to get. And then if you want to go, you can go."

"I don't need--"

"I'm going to Japan after the match on Sunday." He continued like a freight train. "And do you know why?"

She shook her head. She felt as though if she said anything, his reaction would be even worse. But her heart begged to know why he would want to go halfway across the world.

"Money. Feel fortunate that in your life, Ms. Monroe, you work because you want to, not because you have to like the rest of us. And this trip will allow me to retire comfortably ... if it doesn't kill me first." He looked at her hands. "Are you getting all this down, Ms. Monroe?"

She shot her eyes to the envelope and pen. The only thing she had written was a vertical line. "Yes." She lied. She returned her gaze.

He'd planned on leaving her. Although she knew about his Japanese stint, she'd hoped that he would want to take time off to be with her. And she never imagined that money still propelled him.

Soledad had never seen Tyler so upset before, and frankly, she didn't like it. However she didn't feel like he would strike her or hurt her. She wasn't sure why she felt that. He was large and intimidating enough. And it didn't help that his career involved him being physically aggressive. Something in his eyes made her feel like he was more disappointed than angry. That hurt.

He continued. "Write about my diabetes. I'm sure you were going to anyway."

"Now wait a minute. I was not--"

"Do I hate being a diabetic?" He continued. "Yeah. But I deal with it. My sister has it. Hunter has it. I knew I would get it eventually, and I did. Type II got me a few years ago. Since the diagnosis, I've been taking pills." He darted into the small dining room area and snatched his bag from the floor. He slammed it on the table and rifled through the contents. After pulling out a small, yellowish-orange prescription bottle, he held it before her. "These pills. The ones you were so curious about." He set the bottle on the coffee table. He stopped for a moment, removed the engagement ring he had lodged on the upper portion of his thick middle finger and slammed that next to the bottle.

She stared at the bottle as though it might become animated and reveal the secrets of the universe. Men weren't from Mars. They were from Uranus. And women were the center of the universe, although at the very moment she felt smaller than the tip of a baby's eyelash.

He turned to the front door and jerked it open. He turned back to her. "And the funny part about all of this is that from the moment we met, you have out-and-out lied to me. You said you wanted to write an article that would showcase me, and all you've done is try to dig up some dirt. You said you were okay that night in my hotel, and you ran off. You said you weren't attracted to me. Big ol' lie! I have been honest with you."

He was right. If anything, she was the character. *Honey, the XTCWF Ladies' Champion! She'll do anything she can to win!* If she were a wrestler, she would be a heel. No question.

She went after him. She wouldn't let their argument end like that. Not without her having her say. "Where are you going?" She looked down at his large, bare feet. "Without any shoes on. You can't keep running when things get hard."

"It works for you." His answer was fast and surprising like a gunshot.

Without thinking she put her hand to the side of his face. He flinched back momentarily, but then allowed the touch. She could feel his fine-grit sandpaper beard already coming in. She closed her eyes and pressed her body against his, savoring the moment and attempting to repair what she had broken. His heart. His faith in her. His trust.

She took a deep breath. He still smelled of the barbecue, woody and sweet, but his strong, masculine scent permeated through. She put her other hand behind his head and allowed her fingers to stroke his warm flesh.

"We can't leave it like this. Please." She laid her head on his chest. His breathing was even, and his body was rigid. He didn't hold her. His head didn't move.

She could feel the tension in the back of his neck. "Will you talk to me?"

He didn't respond. The cool July wind coming off of the ocean whipped through their bodies and caused her dress to flare up to midway on her thighs.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. "Please look at me, Tyler."

His gaze returned to hers. His hazel eyes appeared green now.

"You still don't trust me," he said. "That's what all this is about."

"I think we both have issues with trust."

He wanted to do things quickly, thinking that that was supposed to make her happy. And here he was ready to commit, have sex and get married--in that order--in a matter of days. She'd given up on living that life. And after her final marriage to Maurice, she couldn't risk her heart on someone with an illness again.

He gently took her hands and removed them from his face. He brought them down to her side. "Then leave me alone to think."

She felt him slipping away from her as he walked out of the front door and down the steps. At this point she didn't care about losing a story. She was losing him, a special friend.

"We should talk!" she called after him. She didn't want him out of her life necessarily. She didn't want to commit so quickly. She wanted more time. Couldn't he understand that?

"You should decide what you want." His voice boomed over the crashing waves. "If, when I get back, the ring is still on the coffee table, then I'll know I need to drive you to the airport in the morning so you can go running back to mommy and daddy."

"Hey, that's not fair."

His last statement cut her deep inside. She hadn't run back to them. Sure she had called them when she had a problem instead of heading back to her apartment in New York. Sure her father had picked her up from the airport in the family Land Rover. And sure her mother had cooked her meals and done her laundry.

She had run back home. Ran like a scared teenage runaway girl, right into their arms.

Mankind should have been my business. Dickens? At a time like this A Christmas Carol comes to mind? Get a grip, girl.

"Nothing is fair!" He threw his hands in the air. The desperation she'd accused Russell of having in his voice when they'd broken up, she now heard in Tyler's voice. The tone sounded foreign.

"Nothing is fair," he said again. He stomped his way down the steps so hard that she thought he was going to break through them. He marched down the beach close to the water until the motion detector light went out, cloaking him in darkness.

She closed the door. No use going after him now. He wasn't ready to talk and quite frankly, she really did need to think about what it was that she wanted. All of her life she had wanted what she was *supposed* to want.

What was she thinking to come here with Tyler? Getting so close to him so fast scared her. Properly raised African-American women didn't date professional wrestlers. Fairy tales didn't glamorize relationships like that. Cinderella didn't go to the ball expecting to find her Prince Charming hitting the evil stepmother over the head with a chair. Funny. Of course. Appropriate? Of course not.

So what's the problem, kid? Time. She needed time to sort things out. Make sense out of everything. She wanted more than just a life experience. Something she could look back on and have an amusing story to tell her grandchildren. *Did I ever tell you the story about when I married a professional wrestler for a hot month?* She had had enough of those types of stories.

She sat on the couch determined to wait for his return. As if of its own volition, her gaze settled on the ring. She couldn't put it back on. Not yet. It wouldn't be honest. She had to talk to Tyler first. She needed to know where his head was.

* * * *

While waiting for Tyler to return to the cottage, Soledad eventually fell asleep on the couch. She opened her eyes and found the room dark except for light coming through a large window beside the ... bed? How did she get up to the bedroom?

Tyler must have carried her to the room and put her in the king-size bed. Even took off her shoes and covered her with the plain, white comforter. The lights downstairs as well as the bright moonlight lit the loft area. She jumped from the bed and reached her hand up to pull the ceiling fan chain that she could see thanks to the living room light. There were too many dark corners in the bedroom, and she wanted to get a full view of her new surroundings.

She surveyed the loft area. The fan was larger than she imagined it would look. The gold-plated center portion shimmered and the oak blades were so long they looked like boat oars.

Off to the side was a door. She opened it and found a small bathroom, almost like the one in Shirley's house that Tyler help build, except this bathroom had a small shower stall. A light blue bathmat covered the tan ceramic tile floor. Other than that, no decorations covered the walls or shelves. No flowers. No pictures. No comb or brush, naturally. There wasn't even a smell in the bathroom.

She did notice a fresh bar of soap, still with the deep "Ivory" impression on the top of it, in the dish at the sink. She pulled back the curtain and in that dish was another fresh, unused bar of soap. Very sweet of him to think about her. She still wasn't over that mommy and daddy remark he'd made before he took his walk. And they still had a lot to talk about.

She left the bathroom light on and jumped when she heard the shower downstairs start.

Tyler. Even without seeing him, she felt relieved that he was there. She looked over at the digital clock on the nightstand by the bed. One-fifty-five in the morning. He must have taken one hell of a walk. She padded over the hardwood floor to his stereo system. At that moment she realized that for a man whose livelihood depended on television, he didn't have a TV set in his home. The home was truly his retreat.

Her finger moved down the CD jewel cases. Etta James, Otis Redding, Janis Joplin, Aretha Franklin, Brian McKnight, Boys II Men, Mary J. Blige, Rick James, B.B. King, Jill Scott, Marvin Gaye. Tyler liked his R&B and blues. Down at the bottom he had other CD's like the soundtrack to the Broadway show *Phantom of the Opera* and the soundtrack for the movie *9½ Weeks* along with *The Three Tenors* and Bach. She didn't know why she was surprised by the selection. Tyler wasn't like anyone she knew.

A dresser, almost as tall as she was, sat next to the stereo system. By the stairs was another, skinnier door. She opened it and saw it was a small closet. It contained some of his

clothes and shoes. Different colored tee shirts hung from equally different colored hangers. A couple of pairs of slacks also hung along with them, but they did not look worn. The same with the one necktie she found on the top shelf, still in its box. On the closet floor were about ten pairs of sneakers. Black, white, blue, even an orange pair lined the floor. No dress shoes. Dressy clothes, but no dress shoes?

She ran her fingers over the shirts. She let her hand dive between them and she pulled one forward, still on its hanger. As she held the blue tee shirt to her face, she inhaled deeply. Tyler was all over it. His scent.

She removed the shirt from the hanger and held it up. An XTCWF tee shirt. Flames surrounded the logo. She turned it around and on the back read, "Can you take the heat!" in red letters. She would wear that shirt to bed. If the only way she could be close to him would be by wearing his shirt, she would have to accept it.

She tossed it onto the bed and stripped out of her own clothing. Might as well shower while Tyler was showering. He'd left a clean purple towel and matching washcloth on the sink for her. Before she started the shower, she wanted to play some music. Tyler's music.

She looked down the selection. Marvin Gaye? Too sexy. Rick James? Too freaky! Etta James. Yes! Couldn't go wrong with her. She pulled the CD from its case and popped it into the player.

As soon as Etta belted the words, "At last," Soledad turned on the water, feeling the stream to get the right temperature. Then she submerged herself under the hot pellets. She shampooed her hair and worked it into a thick lather. She loved using the honey-based shampoo. The sweet scent seemed innocent, kind. The opposite of what Tyler must have felt about her. He probably thought she was the devil herself with horns hidden in her hair.

She ducked her head and body under the jetting water and rinsed her hair, her body, her thoughts. *I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair!* Oh, no! Show tunes.

Etta's sweet sounds and heavenly violins were muffled by the soap in her ears. She rinsed off thoroughly, clearing her ears of any soap as well as her hair. A loud banging echoed in the small bathroom. To hear what it was, she turned off the water hoping that it was the pipes. She didn't think Etta James had a song with a heavy bass beat in it. Then a voice followed, and it certainly wasn't Etta's.

"Soledad!" Tyler screamed. At least he was talking to her. And better still, using her real name. She didn't know if that was a good thing or bad thing yet.

She didn't even dry her hair. She wrapped the towel around her body and pulled the door open. And there he stood, eyebrows furrowed, skin damp, a white towel around his tapered waist, his lips closed tight into a line. She could see his wet footprints on the floor and the stairs.

"You took all of the hot water!" he exclaimed. "Didn't you hear me in the shower?" He wiped his hand over his head.

She was relieved it wasn't something truly serious, although he was taking this very seriously. "I'm sorry. I didn't know me taking a shower at the same time would do that."

"It's a small cottage. How big of a tank do you think I have?"

"I'm sure I don't know." And she didn't care. His whiny attitude annoyed her now.

"Maybe you should think about someone other than yourself." He turned to leave but there was no way in this whole wide world that she was going to let him get away with that.

She put her hand on his cold, wet shoulder and turned him around. "I think about myself? That's a joke, right? Why don't we replay these last few days. You walk into my bedroom while I'm sleeping. You take me on a plane trip to a place I wasn't familiar with." She

went over to her bag and grabbed a handful of clothes. "You bought every stitch of clothes I have. And you still haven't come clean about the ring. How dare you call me selfish, you--you--oh, just get out!" She slammed the clothes back into the bag. "You know nothing about me and what I've gone through."

"Fine!" He snapped back. He headed down the stairs.

She ran to the top landing and looked down at him. "And here!" She screamed after him. He turned around and looked up. She removed her towel from her still wet body. "Take your towel!" She threw it down to him, and he caught it in his free hand as his mouth hung open.

She felt so free standing in front of him fully nude, but very proud. She didn't move. She put her hands on her hips and stood firmly in her spot.

Tyler wasn't as composed. He took one step back and lost his footing. He fell down the last four onto the dining room floor. He landed on his back as a low groan forced its way from his body.

"Tyler!" She ran down the stairs trying hard to avoid the wet spots. She managed to do that until the last step, where she slipped and landed on top of him. He wrapped his arms around her to keep her from rolling off, and apparently, causing any more damage.

"Ow, woman," he said as he held her. "Are you sure you've never wrestled before?"

With her hands on the floor on either side of his head, her legs spread and positioned around his body, she laughed. She had banged her knees pretty hard on the fall, and landing on him, admittedly softer than the floor, was still hard and knocked the wind out of her.

"Are you okay?" she asked him as she stared into his eyes. He smiled with the side of his mouth, and he moved her heavy, wet hair from her face to her back.

"I'm fine. Had I known you were going to pull a stunt like that, I would have waited to get to the bottom before I looked up." He chuckled causing her to bounce on his body. The connection of their bodies warmed her considerably. Or maybe it was because she was on top of him stark naked with only a towel separating them.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "You're absolutely right."

"About what?" She baited him but he deserved it.

"About wanting to take your time with the relationship. Especially since I don't even know if that's what you want." Now he was baiting her. Clever man. She wasn't ready to talk.

She ran her fingers down the side of his face and let her hand rest on his chest. "And?"

"And I'm sorry I called you selfish. You're far from that, and you're right about everything I've done. I didn't see it that way, but you put me straight. And that's what I need. Someone who's not gonna let me get away with crap. Put me in check as you call it."

"There's one more thing. The crack about me running."

"You did run. And you ran right to your parents' house," he said, obviously sticking to his guns on this point.

"Okay, so I did. You didn't have to be so condescending about it, saying I ran to mommy and daddy. It wasn't as simple as that. I needed to talk to someone close. I trust my family. You understand that, right? You still go home to your family when you have to talk about something heavy, don't you? And remember, you are the Ditch King."

He thought, sighed, then responded. "I'm sorry I was so nasty about it. I didn't mean it the way I said it." He kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings."

"Good. I'm glad we got that straightened--"

"And I want to make love to you."

If she'd shocked him with her nudity, he did her with that statement. She finally felt naked. She picked up the purple towel from the floor and raised herself up on her knees, immediately covering up.

"I want to make love to you." He said it again as she struggled to her feet.

She didn't know what to think. He had an amazing body. She already knew he was a great kisser. And he was considerate. Most men, or at least the men she was familiar with, wouldn't admit fault to anything. She wasn't sure if she was ready for a physical relationship yet. That wasn't her style. "Maybe we should--"

"We don't have to right now." He stood and held the towel around his waist. "I'll wait. For you, I'll wait." He held her hand and brought it up to his mouth to kiss it. "Besides, I'm really tired. I haven't slept in a day." He looked over into the living room, then back at her. "And we need to talk."

She glanced into the living room to see what he must have been looking at to make that statement.

The ring. It still sat on the table next to his prescription bottle. She nodded.

She held the towel under her chin so that it draped the front of her body. "It's late. I mean early. We should get some sleep." She turned to the stairs, but before she could take a step he stopped her by blocking her path.

"Maybe for tonight we can sleep down here. Neither one of us should be trying to take those stairs again." He guided her toward a door by the stairs.

"We?" She slid her hand from him and wondered when she gave him the impression that she wanted to sleep in the same bed. She did. She thought she was cool about it. Then again, she was just lying on top of the man in her birthday suit. What could he expect?

He held up his hand. "You're right. I'm pushing you too much again. You stay down here, and I'll brave the stairs."

She touched his hand. Soledad knew he wouldn't hurt her. Without a word she nodded and smiled. He must have known what she meant, because he took her hand again and headed to the downstairs bedroom.

"But what about the music?" she asked.

He peered up to the loft, then at her. "Wait right here. I'll be right back." He crept up the stairs. He looked like Elmer Fudd trying to get that wascally wabbit.

"Not funny, Sunny. Hey, I rhymed again." He got to the top and turned off the music, the bathroom light, and the ceiling fan light. Then he slinked back downstairs. He clicked off the other bathroom light and took her hand.

"Did you take me upstairs to bed?" she asked as he pulled her inside.

"Yeah. You looked all cute lying on the sofa, but your neck was crimped up."

"Why didn't you bring me in here?" The room was small with a full-size bed that had a burgundy spread on top, a desk with a cushioned chair on casters sat under it and one waist-high, but wide dresser with his bag set on top. Just like the rest of the house, it was simple and understated.

"Because upstairs has the biggest and best bed. You deserve the best." He looked a little sheepish saying that, as though he was losing cool points. He wasn't. She would have never dreamed that the man who would be the most kind, considerate and thoughtful would be a professional wrestler. He made her feel like a queen even when they'd fought.

He pulled back the comforter, then finished drying his body as he kept his eyes on her. She towel dried her hair as much as she could, then the rest of herself. It would be interesting

sleeping naked with him for the first time.

He climbed into the bed and held the covers open for her. She slipped inside and he turned off the light. She almost hated that he turned off the light. She wanted to look at his naked form. For all the times he had been nude around her, she never really looked at it. Studied its form and beauty.

She fell easily into the crook of his arm. Her back pressed against his smooth chest. His arm draped over her waist, and as though they had done it before, she interlaced her fingers with his. His warm breath cascaded over her head and down her face. They fit. For whatever reason, they just fit.

She wriggled, pressing against him, and let out a long breath. His once hardened chest relaxed into hers. He raised his legs so that they rested easily behind hers. She brought her hand down and touched his thigh over the covers.

“Good night, Tyler,” she whispered. He responded with a grunting noise.

He smelled like soap, and when she brought his hand up to kiss it, he tasted like soap, bitter mixed with the salt from his skin. He kissed her shoulder. She eased into him more. Her sex prompted her every motion, especially since it knew more of what it wanted than she would ever admit.

She could feel him getting hard, his hardness pressing against her back, and she was turned on. She kissed each one of his fingers, eventually sliding his thumb into her mouth. She had never done anything like that with Rick, the only husband of seven that she’d actually made love to. With Tyler it was different. She wanted to seduce him. She wanted him to take her. She was ready for that next level. The question now was, would he want to?

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead!” Tyler flipped her body over and laid his on top hers. It was time for her to let go.

Chapter Fourteen

Soledad felt amazed, astounded, floored and downright shocked that sex with Tyler, with his muscular body, killer eyes, round, firm backside and big hands, would be the absolute worst experience she had ever had. This was a man whose bravado preceded him. He was, after all, Casanova, a romantic character, sure of himself and a wooer of women. She assumed Tyler was as well.

In the early morning, after he'd turned her over and kissed her so passionately, it had all gone downhill from there. He had poked his nose in her eye more than once. He'd jammed a knee into her inner thigh by mistake and even elbowed her ribs. If she hadn't known any better, she could have sworn he was preparing for his upcoming match.

Not that she had been any better. She'd banged her teeth against his when they attempted to kiss again. And she wanted to forget that she'd accidentally kneed him in the groin when she tried to position herself on top of him.

The fumbling foreplay screeched to a halt when she finally screamed, "Do you know what you're doing?"

He'd groaned, or rather, growled worthy of Gentle Ben, then rolled back on his side behind her and continued holding her, despite the fact that the near-sex experience was an embarrassment.

When she woke up later that morning, she carefully turned and saw that Tyler was already gone. With a hand on the spot where he'd slept, she felt how cold the bed was, and it chilled her down her spine to her toes. She looked across the room to a wall clock decorated with trains, and as soon as she focused her eyes, it chimed with the sound of a train chugging along the tracks, whistling as the clock signaled that it was ten o'clock in the morning. No wonder she'd dreamed about trains while she slept. She thought for sure it was some Freudian thing with trains and tunnels.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. What a night. She stretched her arms over her head and arched her back. Maybe Tyler was out for his morning jog and she could just slip into the shower and be dressed before he returned.

First she had to think of an appropriate way to ease his mind on the horrible event and restore what must have been a now-shattered ego. She could always use the line "It happens to all men." or "Maybe it was stress." One thing she wouldn't do would be to ignore the situation or run away again.

She heard some commotion out in the living room and got still. She needed more time to think.

"Hey, Wayne," he began, his voice drifting into the open door. "Yeah, I know I should have called before. But I just needed some time away, you know." He paused. "I'll go on Leno after the event, and if he doesn't want to book me again because I blew him off, oh, well. I have different priorities."

She crawled out of bed and opened the door a little more. He had blown off an important TV interview for her? He had a reputation for ditching interviews, so she wasn't exactly flattered.

"I need for you to do me a favor. I need four tickets sent to 13483 Peery Lane in Westport, Connecticut."

Her parents' address. After the disastrous early morning event, he was still willing to send tickets to her brothers.

"Yeah, four of them. Front row. Address it to Lionel Monroe. Get the tickets to him by today or call and tell him they'll be at the ticket office."

She looked through his dresser drawers and found a white, buttoned-up shirt. She slipped it on, buttoning a few buttons in the middle and walked out of the bedroom. His back was to her, and he had on a white tee shirt, gray sweat shorts and sneakers. She came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He didn't jump. He didn't even flinch. He put his hand on her arms.

"I gotta go, Wayne. I'll see you tomorrow night ... Yeah, I know. I made my reservations yesterday. Talk to you later." He disconnected the call and turned around, still with her arms around him.

"You've been up for a while. I mean, awake." She didn't know why she had to correct herself as though mentioning anything about being up or hard or erect would just shatter him to pieces.

"Got up at seven. Went out for a jog on the beach, then made some breakfast. Want some? I can make it if you want." He kissed her forehead.

"I'm not that hungry." She lied. She was ravenous--for food and for sex. And she wasn't really sure if he could satisfy either one of those hungers.

"Come on, now. Mama's cooking couldn't have stuck with you all night long. Look, I make a mean blueberry waffle, and I can scramble some cheese eggs. I've already squeezed the juice. So just get yourself into the bathroom." He smiled. "Or come to the table wearing that. You look sexy in my clothes."

The man was a rock. This couldn't have been the same man who'd given her a memorable evening for all the wrong reasons.

"No cheese in my eggs," she finally said and forced a smile. "Do you have any strawberries? I would really like some fruit."

He thought for a while, then answered. "Got some grapes, I think. I don't know what all Hunter put in the fridge, but I'll check. So come on, take a shower and I'll cook for you." He gave her a playful slap on her behind and gave her a peck on her lips. He let her go and headed to the kitchen.

She chewed her thumbnail until it was down to the nub. Why was he so upbeat? He couldn't possibly be pleased with his performance. Could he?

He stopped in the doorway. Then he rushed to her. He enveloped her in his arms.

"You don't have to say it so I will. Early this morning was the worst time of my life." He shook his head, but he maintained eye contact with her.

"It was a little lackluster." She smiled and it was sincere this time. "But don't worry. I know it--"

He held up his hand to her mouth. "And don't say it happens to all men, 'cause I am not like other guys."

"But it does happen to all men. Stop putting on an act. It's okay for you to just be Tyler and not Casanova all of the time." She heard her own words and wanted to kick herself because she had wanted him to be Casanova when he flipped her over. She wanted the fantasy and when nothing happened, she was brought right back down to reality.

The biggest difference was that he stayed. He held her. He was talking to her about it and not trying to play it off. He wasn't like other men.

"And please don't think I, um, couldn't because of you. The best part about the whole night was that I got to hold you when we were sleeping. But I knew I shouldn't have tried anything. I knew I should have just gotten some sleep, but I was like a kid at Christmas. And I just want to apologize for not giving you the night you deserve. I was selfish and I'm sorry."

And there it was again. That was what made him sexy. He was up front and honest, humbled and sincere. Tyler was Tyler.

"Don't take all of the blame. I was there, too, and I was as awkward as you were. By the way, are you okay?" She pointed into his groin area.

"Oh, that? Yeah, I'm fine. Had worse hits than that wrestling."

She laughed, then nuzzled her head against his large hand. "It's okay that nothing happened last night." She lied again. She wanted him. Naked, primal, hard, pounding.

"Do me a favor. If you're trying to make me feel better, tell me the truth no matter what. Please don't lie to spare my feelings." He moved in close to her. "And don't base a relationship on that one experience. You'll be making a mistake." He kissed her lips, which she kept tightly closed for fear she would really scare him away with her morning breath. "Now get on up the stairs. I'll start your breakfast." He kissed her forehead again. He headed into the kitchen as she sauntered up the stairs.

After brushing her teeth and washing her face, she took a long, hot shower. She emerged and heard Tyler call, "Your breakfast is ready!"

"Okay!" she called back. She picked up the blue tee shirt she'd pulled out of the closet earlier that morning and decided she would wear that. She looked through her selection of underwear and stopped. She wanted to be exciting, sexy and spontaneous. What she did in bed with him was the first step. She was ready to keep seducing him.

She smoothed lotion on her body, slid some deodorant under her arms, misted her body with body spray, and primped her hair up before going downstairs to the kitchen wearing only the tee shirt. She couldn't wait to see his face when she showed him what was under the shirt. Could *he* take the heat?

She came into the kitchen and sat down at the table. "Here I am."

He laid the last waffle on her plate and walked over to her wearing an apron that said "Ty's Kitchen." Already set in front of her was a tall glass of orange juice and a bowl of green grapes and pineapple chunks.

"Sorry, no strawberries. But I can go to the store and get you some if you want." He set the plate down in front of her and as though he was seeing her for the first time he exclaimed, "Damn! Do you always look this good in the morning?"

"Yes." Self-confidence suited her just fine, thank you very much.

"I like your style." He turned around, and her mouth dropped open. Beneath the apron he was completely naked. The apron string ties bounced from cheek to cheek as he walked away from her to go to the sink. What a heavenly sight. She imagined her fingers squeezing his firm backside that was still paler than the rest of his body.

"Tyler!" she exclaimed. "You're naked!" Her body responded to what her eyes took in. Her nipples perked up, goose bumps formed on her flesh, and her legs bounced.

"Yeah. I always walk around my house naked. Don't you?" He winked.

"Not when I cook."

She picked up a white, small pitcher full of dark maple syrup and poured it on her

waffles. She cut a piece of the thick waffle with her fork and shoveled it into her mouth. It melted, and the berries were just right inside of the fluffy pastry. "Oh, this is good. I thought only my mother could cook a waffle this well." She took another bite and followed it with some juice.

"Give me a chance, and I'll show you other stuff I can do really well." He wiped his hands on a towel and sat at the opposite end of the table. He picked up a packet of papers and started reading them as she ate.

"You're not going to have any?" She scooped up some of the yellowish, crumpled eggs on her fork and shoved that into her mouth. So far, if she was keeping score set to a scale from one to ten, he would have gotten a zero for sex and an eleven for cooking. She was still hoping the score for sex would come up--along with other parts of his anatomy.

"No, I had my big bowl of oatmeal this morning. But you enjoy." He buried his head into the papers again, his eyebrows furrowing as he read.

"What are you reading?" she asked, after finishing off one of her waffles.

"Contracts. I like to read them over before I get my attorney to read them. That way if I have any questions I can ask her. I have to be an entertainer and a businessman. I wish I could be just one or the other sometimes, you know."

"I understand. That's good that you do that." She wiped her mouth on a tan cloth napkin and set it back on her lap. She lifted another piece of waffle and a dollop of thick maple syrup dripped on her naked thigh.

"Oh, great." She immediately reached for her napkin. Tyler jumped from his chair.

"I'll get that." He positioned himself on his knees and lowered his head into her lap. What a position! His tongue heated her skin as he dragged it across her flesh. His bald head rubbed against her breasts, and she wanted so much to kiss it. Instead she refrained. For now. She balled her hands into fists and shoved them on the sides of her thighs to keep them still. She couldn't keep her heart from pounding. He had to have seen it through the tee shirt.

He pulled back from her and hitched a smile at the corner of his mouth. His eyes sparkled. "That'll set my diet off but it was worth it."

"Thank you. I've never had a human napkin before." She pressed her back against the chair as though that was going to move away from him. Instead it made her look like she had great posture and was trying to jut out her breasts.

"Just remember, if you drop anything else on your body, let me know. I'm here for you." He winked, brought his lips mere millimeters from hers and then returned to his chair.

"You tease." She breathed out heavily and picked up her fork hoping that he couldn't see her hand shaking.

Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright.

He sat back down in his chair and continued reading as she finished eating.

She ate her eggs and was halfway through her waffle when she decided enough was enough. She was full. The breakfast was wonderful, but she didn't want to leave the table the way it was. Tense. Sexually tense. Of course, the tension was more from her than him--she believed.

She picked up a grape and popped it into her mouth. She was brazen enough to come down to breakfast in just a tee shirt. Of course, he one-upped her by being completely naked and licking her thigh. Now she wanted to do something else to get his attention.

She picked up another green grape and brought it to her lips. Before she put it into her mouth she stopped and looked at it. A smile slithered over her face. She cocked her hand and

propelled the green orb. The grape sailed over his head. An unintended target, but she had a bowl full of ammunition and plenty of time. He didn't even notice it.

She picked up another grape. She couldn't miss this time. She hurled the tiny green grenade at him again, but this time it hit the back of his contracts and landed on the floor. He peered above the contracts at her, and she quickly averted her eyes. If she had looked at him she wouldn't have been able to contain her laughter.

He brought his contracts up to his face, and she picked up another grape. This time she reached her intended target. The grape bounced off the top of his head and fell behind him. She covered her mouth with her hand as she watched him rub his head as though a fly must have landed on it and flown away.

This time she would really get him. She picked up another grape. As she reared her hand back, he dropped his papers and saw her.

"Oops." She froze with her hand in the air still holding onto the grape.

"Oops? Oh, no. You don't get off that easy." He jumped from the table and she screamed as she sprang to her feet and ran into the living room.

"Tyler! Tyler! I was just playing! I was trying to get your attention!" she gasped in between her laughter.

"Well, you got it!" He chased her around the coffee table, while she tried desperately to avoid him.

"Okay! Okay! I'm sorry." She ran to the opposite side of the coffee table from him. He finally decided to step up on it and cross it.

"Oh, no. It's too late for that." He jumped down from the table almost catching her.

She shrieked and ran to the small kitchen. As she headed to a backdoor, he caught her around her waist. He pinned her where the counter top made a corner and tickled her waist with his long fingers.

"No! No! No! Please! I'm ticklish!" She laughed hysterically, tears streaming down her face. She tried hard to remove his hands from her, but his arms were like petrified wood and they weren't budging.

"Oh, I can see you're ticklish." He laughed at her but continued. "And what were you going to do? Go outside in your tee shirt?"

"Maybe. Maybe once I got outside, I would have stripped down naked and taken a swim in the ocean." She felt liberated. Free. Happy.

He stopped tickling her and looked into her eyes. "Oh, really?" He held her around her waist and set her up on the counter, positioning himself between her knees. "You would do that? Run around outside naked as a jaybird?"

"Why not? You could go out there with me."

"I don't think so." He put his hands on her hips and moved closer. "But I'll watch you. Running on the beach." He kissed her cheek. "Naked on the beach." He kissed her other cheek. "Playing in the water." He moved up to kiss her lips, but she backed away, bumping her head on the cabinets behind her.

She winced and rubbed the sore spot on her head.

"You don't have to knock yourself out. I want you to be awake." He leaned in closer, and she stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Maybe we--"

"What?" He interrupted her.

"--shouldn't." She finished.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because--”

“Of this morning?” He completed her thought. “I told you I was tired. I promise you that’s all it was.”

“We should talk. Don’t you think we should talk more first?”

He smiled. “Sure. You talk. You start.” He lowered himself onto his knees.

“Tyler--”

“No, no. I’m listening.” He slid his hands up her shirt. “You’re not wearing underwear. I like that.” He had her shirt up to her waist. “So tell me about your childhood.”

With her naked sex exposed to him that was the last thing on her mind. Ordinarily she would have felt silly in the position. The way Tyler looked at her like she was the most perfect specimen he’d ever laid his eyes on, she felt normal, beautiful, sexy.

“I can’t. Not right now. And that’s not what I want to talk about.” Then again, with Tyler down on his knees, she couldn’t even remember what it was she wanted to talk about. Maurice? The interview? Japan? The sex? The relationship? Where her G-spot was and how to get to it. She would tell him whatever came to her mind first.

“Yeah, that would be kind of weird right now, huh.” He kissed her inner thigh. “Then tell me about your first time, Sunny.”

She couldn’t even remember her first name at that moment.

He licked his tongue up her inner thigh dangerously close to what she could now call the center of her nervous system. Her hands went to his head, and she rubbed it. His head still felt like fine-grit sandpaper, but still wonderful to touch as she moved her hands back and forth.

“Ty.” She breathed his name out as she exhaled.

He blew cool air between her legs, and she trembled. “Your first time. Tell me about it.” He kissed down her other leg.

“Husband Number Five.” She blurted the information and ran her fingertips over his head.

He stopped as though she told him the cure for the common cold. He looked up, a confused look covering his face. “You had been married four other times, but didn’t have sex until your fifth marriage?”

She nodded. “And we didn’t have sex until after we were married.” She closed her legs around his head and he parted them with his strong hands. “So now you know why last night was a disaster. It was my fault. I’m not very experienced.”

He made butterfly kisses up her leg. “Not your fault.”

She closed her eyes. He was definitely doing something that sent her to a different stratosphere of pleasure.

He gave a peck to her central nervous system, causing a spark, making her breath catch and her heart leap.

“But there’s only one way to find out who’s to blame.” He swept her into his arms and carried her up the stairs.

“Whatever you do, don’t tickle me.” She braced her hands against his wide back.

He laid her on the bed and removed his apron. The problem he had had earlier that morning no longer existed. His points were going up with each minute.

He pulled off her tee shirt and threw it to the floor. He positioned his body on top of hers.

“Am I too heavy?” He stroked her hair.

She was sure he didn't know the double meaning behind his innocent question. "Yes. I mean no."

His mouth covered hers, and he slid his tongue inside. His mouth tasted fruity, tart as if he had eaten some of the pineapples himself. His scent was still musky, but now mixed in with the fresh ocean scent wafting through the opened window. The moment was intoxicating.

She grabbed his shoulders and pulled him closer. She intertwined her legs with his, until she had him wrapped up in her like she was a black widow spider capturing its prey. Her body hungered for touch. He was what she needed. Exactly what she wanted. And it wasn't strange. It was almost familiar.

His fingertips danced down the side of her body from her hand, over her arm, down her shoulder, down the side of her breast to her waist and finally to her hip. All of her nerves followed his electrically charged fingers with each movement. Her skin felt prickly and warm and alive all at the same time.

He stopped kissing her long enough to look down at her face and smile. "I'll be the luckiest man alive if you let me make love to you." He lowered himself again and kissed down the side of her face to her ear. "Say you want me, Sunny. Please say it. If you want to wait, I'll wait. But damn it, it'll kill me if you say wait."

She dug her fingernails into his hard flesh. Torturing him would be torturing herself. "I do want you. I do. I do." She rubbed her legs up and down his. At this point she didn't know who was being captured, her or Tyler.

In one amazingly strong motion that even surprised her, she pushed her shoulder into his and managed to flip him over.

He managed to keep her in his arms. She straddled his waist and pinned his wrists against the bed. She knew holding him down was all show, since he was obviously stronger and could pin her at a moment's notice. He remained still, smiling, obliging, happy.

"You know if I had handcuffs, I could cuff you to the bed and have my way with you." She smiled at him and closed her knees in closer, tighter, around his body.

"Yeah, like I would run away." He laughed but maintained his passive position. "But if that's what you really want--" He nodded toward the dresser. When Soledad directed her attention to it, she saw his bag sitting next to hers. He thrust his pelvis up, propelling her and making her fall forward, so that he could kiss her again. Her mouth covered his as she kissed him hungrily, nipping his bottom lip.

She jumped from the bed. She dove into his bag to look for the handcuffs. "Where are they?"

Suddenly she felt his arm go around her waist. She hadn't even heard him leave of the bed. He placed his hand on top of hers and guided it to the bag's side pocket where he pulled out the shiny handcuffs.

"Right here." He breathed into her ear.

"And why do you have these?" She closed her eyes and prayed that her knees would stay strong enough for her to continue standing up let alone get back to the bed. When she opened her eyes, she caught the reflection of herself and Tyler in the mirror on the dresser. His chin was on her shoulder, and his arm remained tight around her waist.

"*These* are for my act. Everything else is real."

She sighed, relieved to know that his attraction to her was real. She laid her arm on top of the one he held around her waist and interlaced her fingers with his.

"We do look good together, don't we?" He swayed her.

She thought he was referring to the contrast in their skin tones, although her honey-colored skin was only slightly darker than his. She had to admit that he was right. He looked great next to her. His striking hazel eyes. His sleek nose and strong jaw line. Those magnificent lips. And for a fleeting moment, she imagined what their children would look like. Damn, what was he doing to her?

"Your hair smells so good." He set the handcuffs down on the dresser and allowed his hand to travel down her body. It eased between her legs, and she took one step over to allow him passage.

"Shouldn't we go back to bed?" she asked, closing her eyes.

"We should do whatever feels right. Right now, this feels right." His fingers parted her smoothness and he slid them back and forth against her. "Three times," he added.

"What?" Her blood pulsed so hard she barely heard him.

"Three times. That's how many times I want you to come before we have sex."

"You can't. I mean I'm not multi-orgasmic." She tried looking at him, but he kept her body straight, facing the mirror. He was definitely in control, and even if she could get the handcuffs on him, he would still be in control.

"Then I'll drive you crazy trying to find out for sure." His middle finger slid inside of her warmth. "Tell me when I'm there."

No use asking him to find her G-spot. He was going for it on his own.

"I think you'll know when you hit it," she said.

"I can't wait to hear you." He moved his long finger in and out of her. Tyler was different. Passionate, exciting, generous. Tyler. Oh, Tyler.

"Oh, Tyler," she moaned as he delved deeper inside of her and curved his finger to the side.

"Must be getting close to the spot." The hand around her waist slid up to her breast, cupping it.

She planted her hands on the dresser as his thumb played with her hard nipple.

"Look up, Sunny." His voice was low, but commanding. She gazed into the mirror. "We look good." He winked at her as his finger played inside of her, faster and faster.

She curved her foot around his ankle. She had never watched herself being pleased before. She thought it would have been embarrassing to see her body in the throes of ecstasy. There she was. Standing at a dresser, nude, open, trusting, loving.

She brought her hand down to his between her legs and guided him, pushed him, made him plunge deeper inside until she got him to her spot.

"Oh ... my ... God!" She spaced the words out as though each word had its special power.

"Bingo!" He kissed the side of her face and plunged deeper into her wetness. She cradled his head, bringing him close to her as her other hand clawed the dresser. Panting for air, she erupted inside.

"Scream, Sunny! Do it!" He didn't stop thrusting inside of her with his finger. As much as she wanted to scream, she couldn't. It wasn't in her to scream during sex or even to talk. Number Five had always told her it was unladylike.

He rubbed the heel of his hand against her hard nub as he moved his finger in and out of her.

Forget trying to act like I'm in the royal family! She screamed. "I'm--I'm--coming!"

"That's it! Say it again!" he demanded.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" She cried it over and over again as her body moved in sync with his hand. He kissed her shoulder and nibbled at her with his teeth. He was devouring her, mind, body and soul and she loved it. They were glued together by a thin layer of sweat. She heard a pounding, but she wasn't sure if it was her own heart, Tyler's heart or the ocean waves crashing on the beach. Or maybe it was all three beating together, pounding out rhythms. She knew it had to have taken heaven, earth and a bit of Tyler Bertram Randolph III magic to move her like that.

He slowly slid his finger out of her and kissed her neck. "That was one."

She tried to catch her breath. "And that was amazing. How did you do that?"

"Shh. A magician never reveals his secrets." He brought her around and kissed her.

After the kiss, she demanded, "Why didn't you do that this morning?"

He laughed and put his forehead against hers. "Look, I told you I was tired. I wasn't really thinking this morning." He sat her on top of the dresser and spread her legs as he positioned himself between them. "But I'm thinking now. And I'm thinking I need to go for number two." He kissed her quickly and lowered himself down to his knees.

"No, baby. I know my body. You had better strike while the iron is hot." Getting her to reach an orgasm so quickly had to have been a fluke. One thing she knew for sure was that she could never achieve an orgasm by a man giving her oral sex.

"You may know your body, but I know what I'm doing." He winked at her.

And as confident as he was that he could do it, he did. He parted her with his fingers and allowed his tongue to make a pilgrimage from bottom to top and down again. He placed his mouth on her clit and hummed, vibrating her. As though he turned on a part of her she didn't know existed, she spoke, she moaned, she reacted. She wasn't herself, but yet, this *was* her.

Soledad interlaced her fingers with his and held his hand as he plunged his tongue inside of her. His thumb was now directing all of its attention to the one spot most men seemed to forget on women. He didn't miss a thing.

She arched her back and gripped the edge of the dresser. A series of *yes* and *more* came from her lips as she felt the buildup inside of her. Impossible. He couldn't have done it again, could he?

Oh, yes he could. Her toes curled as she gyrated her body. She screamed as she came again, to her amazement. Her body shook as she relaxed herself against the dresser's mirror. She covered her eyes with her hand and attempted to catch her breath.

"I thought you weren't multi-orgasmic." He stood on his feet and rubbed her thighs with his hands.

"I didn't think I was." Soledad uncovered her eyes. "Turns out I've only been with a really bad lover."

He laughed and patted her on her thighs. "Come on."

She didn't question him. So far he'd been right about a lot of things, including the reaction of her body. In the bathroom, Tyler flipped on the light. He started the shower.

"In this stall?" Soledad pointed to it. "It's so small."

Putting his hand in the stream to test the temperature, he said, "I know." He winked. Once inside the stall, he stood at the showerhead and she stood behind him, almost touching the wall.

He poured some of her lavender body wash into his hands and made a thick, white ball of lather. Then he rubbed it all over his face, head and neck and ducked under the water to rinse.

Turning to her, he took her into his arms and kissed her. With great delicacy and balance,

he managed to switch their positions so that now she was by the showerhead. The water streamed over her as he continued kissing her, allowing his tongue to probe her mouth.

His arms were strong around her, and she liked the way the lavender smelled on him. On Tyler, there was nothing delicate about it.

“Oh, Sunny,” he said and put his hands on her hips. And when he called her that now, she loved it because he made the nickname his own, like he had done with her body. It was her turn to let the water stream over her face. She took his hands and brought them up to her mouth. With great delicacy, she kissed them and then wrapped his arms around her body.

He pressed into her, and she could feel his hardness against the small of her back. Lowering his head, he whispered into her ear, “There is no woman who is as sexy as you. You are beautiful, and I want you so much.”

Feeling cherished and more aroused than she’d ever felt before, she cuddled closer. With slow and deliberate movements, he rubbed the purple shower gel from her shoulders to her thighs. His large hands moved over her smoothly, at first he cupped her breasts before moving to her stomach and her thighs. He curved his fingers as though they were claws and dragged his short fingernails over her flesh.

Nothing could describe the feeling, how this passionate man made her come alive with simple movements and touches. He listened to her. He responded to her body. He was the food that fed her sexual soul, and she was ready for more.

She faced him, lather still covering her body. Like he needed to keep touching her, he pushed her wet hair off of her shoulder and away from her face and rubbed his soapy thumb against her cheek. Desiring more, he kissed her upper lip, then kissed her lower lip.

“I can’t wait. Please, Tyler. Now.”

“No.”

“Why?” She blinked hard. Was he teasing her? He couldn’t have brought her to the brink of insanity to bring her down now.

He whispered, “Wait.”

“No.”

“But--”

“Please? You said you would never say no to me.” She gazed into his eyes.

He sighed. “I want it perfect. I wanted it to be special.”

She smiled. “It is. Trust me. It is.”

He ran his fingers through her drenched hair that now felt so heavy on her head. After rinsing off, he stopped the shower. Without a word he led her to the bedroom.

“I need to dry off first.” She flicked her fingers, spraying water droplets on him.

“The wetter, the better.” He laid her on the bed so that her head rested on the pillows. When he ducked into the closet, he grabbed a shoebox. He pulled out a handful of condoms. Before she could admonish him for buying the condoms when they were at Wal-Mart, he said, “These are Hunter’s. He uses this place when I’m on the road. See.” He turned the box and showed her Hunter’s name on the side.

He came to bed and set the foiled pile on the nightstand. Creeping into bed, he laid his body on top of hers. Thank God, because she couldn’t wait to hold him. One hand rested on his arm as the other caressed the back of his neck. His hand moved down to her breast, and he massaged it. Ever since she met him, she had imagined what his large hands would feel like on her body. Her imagination did not do the real feeling justice. He held her like she belonged to him, as though he was what she needed.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” he asked.

She looked into his eyes and knew she could no longer deny him anything. Slowly she nodded her head.

He smiled and pressed his body against hers. She parted her legs and brought them around his waist.

“Whatever you do, don’t stop looking at me, okay?” He reached over to the small table and grabbed a package. She rolled him onto his back and removed the package from his hand. She wanted to be instrumental in protecting them both.

He rolled on top of her with a smile on his face. He kissed her as he positioned himself at her opening. He attempted to slide his thickness inside but met with some resistance. “Relax,” he said softly.

“I’m fine.” She nodded her head and grabbed his shoulders. Her heart drummed. She took deep breaths to try to relax, but each time she stared into his eyes, everything in her body stirred into a mad frenzy of excitement.

He tried again and she winced, jerking her body upward.

“Easy,” she said and looked up at the ceiling.

With his hand, he tilted her head so that she could keep eye contact. “Relax,” he said again. “I would never hurt you.”

She exhaled and eased her body down to a workable frenzy. “I’m okay. Don’t stop.”

He slid himself inside of her, and a low moan escaped her lips as he invaded her, opening her up.

“All the way,” she whispered. She wanted all of him.

He pushed himself further into her and stared into her eyes. “Jesus.” He moved in and out of her.

Soledad’s lips parted as though she wanted to say something, but she couldn’t. Hearing Tyler react to her touch, to being inside of her, drove her crazy. Her skin vibrated, thrummed. She stared at him, this wonderful lover who wanted nothing more than to please her.

Their breathing matched, and their moans echoed off of the walls. Soledad stared into his eyes, and Tyler kept his gaze on her. Sexual fury fueled her as she raked her fingernails over his damp flesh, and he massaged her behind. She kissed him, biting his lip and closing her legs around his body.

“You’re mine,” she said. “I want all of you.” Her commanding tone sounded foreign. “You make me so happy.”

“Sunny, I’m never leaving you. Never.” He drove into her faster, pressing her hard into the bed, hypnotizing her with his eyes, loving her as she’d needed to be loved for such a long, long time.

Tears filled her eyes, and she wanted to look away. She didn’t want him to think he was hurting her or that she regretted this experience. She was overwhelmed by the passion and hated that she had spent so much time with the wrong people.

“Ty.” She felt the familiar feeling from down below.

“Sunny?” He slowed down his thrusts.

“Oh, Ty.” She gripped his steely arms.

“Are you crying?”

“Don’t stop. Please.” She kissed him as a tear rolled down her face. “I’m close again.”

Sweeping away the wet strands of her hair from her face, he comforted her by planting soft, butterfly kisses over her face. She even liked his deep and loud bear-like growl. When he

wasn't making animal noises, he swore. With each swear, he immediately apologized.

However, when Soledad screamed and cursed, she didn't apologize. She was feeling for the first time, and she wasn't ashamed. As much as she wanted her body to hold out for more, she came with a glass-shattering scream.

Soledad wasn't sure if it was because of her orgasm that pushed Tyler to come or if he had been holding out for her, but it took him no time to let out a long, low grunt when he finally came.

What seemed like several minutes later, he looked into her eyes and rubbed his nose over hers. "I would tell you something right now, but I don't want you thinking I'm saying it 'cause you just blew my mind."

"Humor me." She smoothed her hand over his head.

He slid himself out of her but remained on top. In a whisper, he said, "You're cool. Even if you are a reporter." He smirked.

"Cute. Well, you're okay for a professional wrestler."

He laughed and held her in his arms. "We're going to be good together."

Even she was starting to think so.

Chapter Fifteen

Tyler was certain that songs, poems, paintings, sculptures and books had to have been written about how amazing making love to a woman was. Women, with their soft skin, sweet smell and gentle touch. All of it enamored him. And Soledad was the pure embodiment of it all. Her look, her scent, her touch. He couldn't think of any artwork appropriate enough to compare to her as he held her in bed, hours after they had rewritten the history books on the best sex ever on the planet--pigs with their thirty minute orgasms had to come in a close second.

Tyler sat in bed, his legs outstretched and his back propped against the headboard. Beside him, Soledad lay on her stomach, resting her head on his chest. This was perfection. A refreshingly cool ocean breeze whispered through the windows and cooled off their heated flesh. He tumbled Soledad's name around in his head until something she said struck him.

"What do you mean, you're bad luck?" he asked.

"I didn't say I was bad luck," she replied. "I thought it was bad luck to have sex before you engage in a sporting event. I know that boxers and football players don't have sex before a match or a game."

"I'm not hung up on superstition." He reached out a hand to stroke her brown, curly hair.

"What are you hung up on?" She gazed at him, resting her chin on his chest.

She had to have known what the answer would be. Her baiting smile said she wanted to hear it anyway. He smiled and eased himself down on the bed until he was stretched out beside her. He gave her a soft, whisper of a kiss. Her lips tasted bitter from the wine they'd drunk a few hours earlier.

"You can't guess what I'm hung up on?" He ran his fingertips over her smooth skin. When she shuddered, he couldn't help, but feel a twinge inside his stomach that he'd made her body react from a slight touch.

When he'd first met her, she came off as a woman who didn't need anyone, especially some hick from the sticks. However she had changed. He had changed. And although she was still a woman from the richest family in America, she wanted him. And making love to her was like going to heaven.

She was hot inside. Tight. Passionate. Also, vulnerable and caring. She was not the same woman who had once been offended by his nudity in the locker room--although he knew she'd really wanted him then.

And when she had cried when they made love, it took everything he had inside not to break. She was beautiful. Their lovemaking was beautiful. He hadn't felt this weak since he had his nose broken in his first wrestling match. Made him wonder what would happen when Sunday rolled around, when their week was up.

"There's something I have to tell you." She ran her fingertips over his chest.

"What?" he asked, thoroughly confused.

"Husband Number Seven." She kept her gaze away from his.

"Seven? I thought you were only married six times." He held her tight and felt a pang in his heart thinking of another man touching her.

"Why? Because that's what you read in the papers? No one outside of my immediate

family knows.”

“Why did you keep this one a secret?” And why was she telling him now?

She shook her head. “Maurice was special.”

Aside from Russell and Jonah, Soledad had never named her other husbands. He must have meant something.

She continued. “I met him at NYU. He was my poetry professor.”

Calling Dr. Freud. Another father figure. If this woman couldn’t see that, then she was wasting her money on therapy.

She snuggled closer to him. “We became really close. He got me to appreciate classic poetry. I taught him how to get the best deals at Bloomie’s.”

“A match made in heaven.” Tyler didn’t intend for his statement to come out so sarcastic. From the way she shot him a harsh look, he must have. As a way of apologizing, he slid his hand up and down her bare arm and mouthed the words “I’m sorry.” Soledad rested her chin on his chest again.

“Maurice confided in me that he was sick. He had full-blown AIDS and was dying pretty fast. All he’d ever wanted was a complete home life. So that was my gift to him” She smiled but had a far away look in her eyes. “We married, and I lived in his Greenwich Village apartment with him, taking care of him day and night. He didn’t have any family and his partner had died a year before, so he was truly alone. I didn’t want him to die that way. And we did love each other. Without sex or posturing for the public, we had a great love.”

Tyler felt a teardrop hit his chest. As she wiped her cheek and sniffled, he continued holding her tight, reassuring her she would not be alone.

“He died five months later. That was well over a year ago. Since then I haven’t dated or had sex ... until now.” She finally connected her gaze to his. Her red eyes held pain for a dear love. “I don’t know if I have it in me to love someone like that again, especially someone who is sick.”

He finally understood why she shied away from questions about marriage and why she freaked out about hearing about his diabetic condition.

“I’m not dying, Soledad.” He used her real name to punctuate how serious he was. “I take really good care of myself.” He didn’t want her worrying. Kissing her soft hand compared to pressing a handful of cotton to his lips. She smelled like a great combination of both of them, her lavender scent and his cologne, a wonderful concoction.

She laid one bare leg across his. How long had it been since he’d held a woman in bed? Too long. Tyler had been touring so much when he had been with his last girlfriend that he barely had time to sleep, let alone sleep with her. Probably the reason why the relationship didn’t work out.

With Soledad, it would be different. He would be there. Would she want him? He was so broken. Diabetic. Bad back. In her eyes, she probably thought he wasn’t one hundred percent. From what she’d been through with her last husband, she was the type of woman who deserved perfection.

She stopped her hand at his nipple and touched a scar next to it. Though the old wound no longer hurt, the sensitive spot made him twitch.

“What’s the story behind this scar? Looks like a little star. Hey, now I rhymed.” As she laughed, he grabbed her hand and held it away from the damaged area. Her smile drifted.

He exhaled before he answered. “That’s where I got stabbed.”

She gasped and sat up. “What? When? Why?”

He never thought he would be telling anyone this story, but he couldn't hold anything from her. "I was a senior in high school. Some knuckleheads tried disrespecting me and my family. Behind my back they called my brothers gorillas and called me a--" he swallowed hard, "--nigger lover."

Pain clouded her eyes. She curled her body closer to his.

"I confronted one of the boys after school. Told him that he needed to watch his mouth when he talked about me and my family. He didn't like me telling him that, and we started fighting. I had the best of him, left him lying on the ground. I didn't even hear him getting up and coming after me until it was too late. I turned around and he stabbed me." He touched the scar. "Right here. Luckily it was only a Swiss Army knife with a short blade. It didn't go that deep. But he was close to my heart. At least that's what the doctors told me. It's shaped like a star because the little bastard twisted the knife around. The police arrested him at his house. He went to juvenile hall, but that's it." He kissed her forehead. "I guess that was the start of my bad-ass Casanova days." He laughed as a way to calm her. Her body had stiffened when he told the story and that melted his heart.

She held him tighter.

He put a finger to her lips. "Come on. Let's talk about something else. Tell me what your fantasy is." He was going to do his level best to make sure she had a happy time with him. No more drama.

"Why don't you guess what my fantasy would be?" she teased.

"You are a true reporter, aren't you? Steadily turning the tables on me. Okay, I'll bite. You guess mine, and I'll try to guess yours. I'm warning you though. I don't think I'll do well at this." He moved her hair from her face. Who knew touching a woman's hair could be so sensual, especially Soledad's. So soft and curly.

She cleared her throat. "Okay. Let's see. You'll probably want to have sex right in the middle of the wrestling ring. Spotlight right down on you--"

"Us," he corrected quickly.

"And right after the climax, you would be awarded a championship belt for being the best lover."

He laughed and put his hand to his chest. "There would be people watching us?"

"Of course. Why else would you want to have sex in the middle of the wrestling ring?"

"I hate to say you're wrong, Sunny, but you're way off." He ran his hand down her toned arm.

"Really?"

He couldn't tell if she was surprised because he said she was wrong or because that wasn't his fantasy. "Why would you think I would want to have sex in the middle of the wrestling ring? I live my life in front of millions of people almost everyday, and I'm always half-dressed anyway. Nah, the public thing is not my bag. I like to be private." He gave her a quick peck. "My fantasy goes something like this. In the middle of nowhere. Right on the beach." He squeezed her. "With you."

"You're just trying to charm me." She crawled on top of him, and he wrapped his arms around her.

"I would never lie to you." He dropped his smile. What he should have said is that he couldn't lie to her. Not when he looked into her soulful eyes. "Okay, is it my turn?"

She nodded.

"I can see you want to be wild and dangerous, so I think that *you're* the one who wants to

have sex in public. You want to go right out on the beach naked and have sex right there with the water lapping over us.”

He imagined her body, so tight. Her breasts with their dark areolas fit perfectly in his hands, like they were sized just for him. That firm ass was worthy enough to be called an onion, a nickname he and his brothers used when they were teenagers about a girl’s behind. If a girl had an onion, it meant that her butt looked so good, it would make a man cry. Her legs seemed to go on forever. When she wrapped them around his body, he was sure she had looped them around twice, which he knew was physically impossible, but he felt lassoed whenever she captured him and he was more than willing to be caught.

She laughed, her body shaking. He couldn’t get enough of her. The sound, full and light, eased his aches and pains. He forgot about the shifted disk in his spine when she smiled. His knees didn’t hurt as much when she laughed. She was just what the doctor ordered.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Maybe.” She ran her finger over his lips. “I know it’s a cliché. But I’ve never done anything wild like that.” She smiled and leaned forward to kiss him, then suddenly stopped. “Oh, no!”

“What’s wrong, Sunny?”

“I should have called Heather.”

She was going to leap from the bed, but he held her legs. He wasn’t going to let her go. Not just yet.

“Call her in the morning. Today is our time.” He brought her forward, sliding her body over his stomach. “I want you in bed with me all day.”

“I need to at least check my messages.” Like a doe, she wriggled from his trap, sprang from the bed and sprinted to Tyler’s bag. Soledad fished through it and found his cell phone. As she punched in a series of numbers, he sat up and watched her like a patient hunter. To the count of five. That was all he would give her to get off the phone.

Five. Tyler planted his feet to the floor, a sheet covering his lap.

Soledad held up her hand to him like she wanted him to stay. “Okay, a message from my mom. Typical.”

Four. He threw off the sheet. Seeing her stand naked across the room was enough to motivate him to get out of bed and go after her.

She continued. “Heather. The photographers will be at the arena tomorrow.”

Three. He ignored the twinges in his knees and stood.

Staring at his erection, Soledad licked her lips and smiled. If that wasn’t a come hither look, then he was way off his mark.

Two. He approached her slowly. Another lovemaking session would do him fine.

One. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he stood behind her and kissed her bare shoulder up to her neck.

“Oh, my God!” She jumped up and down.

He must have hit a good spot.

“Another magazine wants me to work for them.” She returned the phone to his bag. “Do you know what this means?”

Tyler didn’t know exactly what it meant to her, but he saw how excited she was so it had to have been a good thing.

“My parents didn’t believe I could maintain a job for a year. They made me work to see if I could make it. And although I hated writing on extreme sports stories at first, I love writing.

And I wasn't really sure I make it on my own until this call. They recognize my talents, Tyler. Another magazine left a message that they're giving me an office in California, an expense account, an unheard of advance and they'll print a teaser that I'll be writing for their magazine if I accept. My parents will be thrilled if I do. If I want, I can start next week. Isn't that great?"

His lack of response made her smile drop. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her, but something inside made him feel like this opportunity would be the end to their beginning.

"What's the name of the publication?" he asked.

"*One* magazine. I can stop doing extreme sports stories and write on issues that really interest me." She put her hands on his shoulders and tried to kiss him but he recoiled.

She'd given him a double whammy. First, she was writing for a magazine he had a bad history with. And second, knowing that she didn't want to even do his story bothered him.

"*One*? You're going to be writing for them?" Tyler retreated to the bed.

"Yes. Why?" She followed him but kept standing as he sat on the bed.

"Let's just say I have a history with them, and it's not a good one." He glared at her. "Did they tell you anything about me?"

"Everyone knows you duck out on interviews. That's no secret."

"Let me put it this way. They came after me hard. They threw every trick at me, and I didn't break. I don't respect that magazine. I don't like their tactics. I hope you call that person and turn down their offer."

She blinked repeatedly and crossed her arms. He knew that look. He was in for a fight. Damn. Planting his feet to the floor, he prepared himself.

"I'm not going to turn it down." She shook her head. "I've been floundering my whole life, and I finally figure out what it is I want to do. I thought you would be happy for me."

"Happy? How can I be happy when you tell me you're writing for the enemy?" It was bad enough that her new job prospect was in California. For it to be that magazine, that loathsome magazine, he had to say something, even if it meant angering her.

"Please, Tyler, with your feelings on the media, you wouldn't have been happy with any magazine I chose to write for, and you know it."

He shook his head. "That's not true."

"It is. But I have my own life to lead. I have dreams I want to pursue." She crouched in front of him and took his hands into hers. "I can't stop now."

Why did she have to look at him? He couldn't ruin her dreams, especially since he could see the passion in her eyes. He remembered when he'd gotten the call from XTCWF. He would have moved to Mars if they'd asked him. When he was this close to flawlessness, he didn't want to give her up.

He asked. "So you're just going to up and move to California for this job?"

"I'll have to. And I have so many things to do and plan." She gazed up like she studied a list in her mind. While she made plans without him, he realized he wasn't even a consideration.

"So what about us?" He motioned between the two of them.

She brought her gaze to meet his. "You can come visit me any time. And I'll come see you--"

"In Japan?"

"--when I can. My schedule will be pretty busy the first few months. But we can talk on the phone."

The hammering sound he heard in his head had to have been that nail being slammed into the coffin.

He needed to shake her up. "I'm not interested in a part-time relationship." He'd done that before. Long distances and long working hours were killers on a relationship.

She stood. "And I'm not interested in a full-time man. And I especially don't want to move to Japan. If I want the good stories, I have to be here. Don't you see how important this is to me?"

"And don't you see that this is pissing me off? Or does that not factor into your consideration?" He rose to his feet. He steeled his face so that his physical pain didn't show. Maybe the idea of having to take care of a man with diabetes was what scared her off. She'd done her humanitarian share to last her a lifetime.

This time it was her turn to growl. "You're nothing but a hypocrite. I am my own person, and I deserve happiness in my career like anybody else. Like you."

No use fighting the inevitable. She wasn't going to budge. And he wasn't about to give her an ultimatum. She had that same fire in her eyes that he did when Shirley begged him not to sign on with XTCWF.

He couldn't stop her. Her mind was set on going.

Forcing a smile, he felt his insides crumbling. "Good luck." He thought about the way that sounded and said, "I really mean that. I'm sure you'll be fine though. You're a tough little thing." He playfully nudged her chin.

"Why do you act like this is the end of us? I'm not moving to another country."

"Like me?" he asked.

She held his hand and kissed it. God, he would miss her.

"We could be friends with benefits." He couldn't go from having the best sex of his life to cold turkey. Hopefully she felt the same, too.

She pulled away. "We'll see. I mean, I travel and you--"

He cut in. "--will be gone in a couple of days." Even looking at her proved painful.

"That's right." She smiled a smile worthy of a Mona Lisa. "You'll be free. You can live your life."

"Alone." He felt a knot forming in his stomach. God must have been testing him. This would be his punishment for all the years of kissing women and pretending to break their hearts.

"You could stay at my place in California whenever you wanted."

He shook his head. "We'll see." Tyler had no interest in hanging out at her house or apartment waiting for her to come home like some golden retriever waiting for its master. With his hands on her waist, he stepped toward the bed.

"What are you doing, Mr. Randolph?" She put her hands on his.

"Pulling you to the bed." He wanted her so much. And if she was going to kiss him off, then he wanted his full good-bye kiss.

"What makes you think I want to go to bed with you? I do have an article to write."

He sat on the bed with Soledad still standing in front of him. Her sweet scent permeating the room, overpowering the aroma of sex. With a slow exhalation, Tyler pressed his face against Soledad's stomach. How could he remember her smell and yet let her walk out of his life?

She cleared her throat. "You're not making this easy on me." When he kissed her stomach, she quivered again. God, that was addicting.

"Then stop fighting it," he said, staring into her brown eyes. "Come to bed with me." To make sure she didn't escape, he took her hand and pulled her forward. Landing on top of his body with a thud, he held her tightly, then kissed her hard. One hand cradled her head, lost in the tangled mass of her wild hair, as the other hand rested on her rounded ass. He didn't want to let

her go.

He thrust his tongue into her hot mouth and she moaned. A better reaction came when he squeezed her behind.

“I have to get to work.” Regret laced her direct words.

“Fine. Later.” He tried to kiss her again, but she moved out of his reach.

“No. Right now. I just want to flesh out the article.” She rummaged in her bag and put on one of the tee shirts he’d bought and a pair of panties.

“Oh, no. You have on clothes.” He sat up in bed. “Did I tell you that you really know how to ruin a moment? And I was all--” he looked at himself pointedly, “--ready for you.”

Her gaze went to his steadily growing erection. Her smile and the way she strolled to him, he felt she wouldn’t leave.

She put her hands on his shoulders. “Be ready for me again in a few hours.” She kissed him chastely on the forehead before heading for the stairs.

“A few hours? I thought it was going to take you about five minutes to write the article.” He watched her leave, and he stood up to make sure she got to the bottom step. He also liked the way the hem of the tee shirt swayed under her butt.

“If you leave me be, I might be done in a couple of hours.” At the bottom of the stairs she peered up at him.

“What am I supposed to do until then?” He rubbed his hand over his stomach.

She smiled and put her hands on the railing. “I’m sure you’ll find something to keep you occupied.” She disappeared into the bedroom downstairs, and he could hear her close the door.

He wasn’t prepared to give up without a fight. It was just the afternoon. She could have all night to write. He turned to the stereo system, and a sly smile crept over his face. He made sure the Etta James CD was still in the player, and he cued up the first song. Then he sprinted to her sanctuary. As soon as Etta belted out the words, “At last,” he hit the bottom step.

He knocked on the bedroom door. “Sunny, do you remember this song?”

Nothing. Not a sound.

He knocked again. “Come on, baby. Let me inside. We can talk some more. I’ll watch you work, and I won’t make a sound. I promise.”

Nothing. He knew she was serious about her work but this was dedication. He pressed his hand against the wood. As he started to walk away, it swung open.

She wasn’t smiling though. “Tyler, please. Remember those times in the locker room when I didn’t talk to you while you were getting your massage, and I left you alone when you were getting ready for your match? This is my match. This is my job. Respect my work as I have respected yours.”

She was right. Stubborn but right. He held his hands up in defeat. “I’m sorry.” As he turned to the stairs, he felt her hand on his arm.

She pulled him to her and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “Thank you.”

For some reason, he couldn’t reciprocate the hug. Not yet. It was as though this might be the last time he would hold her like this. When that realization hit him, he enveloped her in his arms.

She broke the embrace. “See you in a couple of hours.”

He went for a kiss and she put her finger over his lips. “In a couple of hours.”

He nodded.

“As much as I love Etta, and that song will always be ‘our song’, could you please turn it down? I can’t write with music playing.”

“Sure, Sunny.” He turned to the stairs, stopped and turned back to her. “So this is our song?”

She smiled and lowered her head. “It seems to work on both of us, don’t you think?”

He said, “To be honest, I could hear ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ and still be hot for you.” He ran up the stairs to turn off the music. Now he’ll have two things to remember her by. Her scent and her song.

* * * *

Tyler was true to his word. As Soledad sat at the small desk in the bedroom writing the article, he’d kept quiet. He was like no other man she had been with before. He was romantic and thoughtful and caring. It would be hard to leave him tomorrow. She would have to. She hadn’t expected *One* to call. Now she was ready to take on the challenge.

Besides, she was no more ready for a relationship than he was. He would be going to Japan soon. There would be no time for her.

And from what he’d told her, he was harboring some deep-seated anger toward all things media-related. Would he constantly make her feel uncomfortable about doing her job? And what was his deal a few hours ago with wanting to watch her work? Was that his way getting her because she watched him or was he truly interested? Or maybe he wanted something to remember her by.

If he had only said what it was that he was feeling, maybe the deal with *One* wouldn’t have looked so good. He didn’t say it. He’d tried convincing her not to accept the job. It wasn’t for the reasons that would have gotten her to stay. It was time for her to get her head out of the clouds and get on with the task at hand.

She struggled with what to write about. She wanted an article that *Vestige* readers would be interested in reading while making it a thoughtful article on Casanova/Tyler. Then it hit her as she scanned her eyes over the few pictures he had of his family.

Although she promised she wouldn’t write about *his* diabetic condition, she would write about all of the wonderful organizations that he lent his celebrity name and influence toward and one in particular being the diabetes research charities. While looking through his desk drawer she found pictures of him at diabetic research centers and letters from a hospital thanking him for his donation and time.

As an African-American woman, she knew diabetes affected more black people than any other race, so that angle would work for the magazine.

She wanted people to see Tyler as more than just a professional wrestler. He was a shrewd businessman who loved his family and friends, generous to a fault with a heart as big as the sun. He was a fighter in every sense of the word and a great entertainer--and lover. She couldn’t write about that in the article.

No one would care that he had looked her directly in her eyes when they had made love. Or that he had whispered in her ear how beautiful she was. Or that he had the best body she had ever seen. Long, lean, strong with small pink nipples and a wide back. She tried clearing her head, because she knew the more she thought about him the more she would want him. She could feel the familiar stirrings in between her legs already.

She wrote feverishly until her mind drifted off again into thoughts of seeing Tyler naked and the way he had made love to her--and with him it *was* making love. It wasn’t just sex. He treated her so tenderly. With the outline and first draft of her article in hand, she opened the door half expecting to find Tyler waiting outside as he’d done at the restaurant when she was with Russell. He wasn’t there. She would have to get used to the feeling of him not being there once

the interview was over.

The cottage was quiet. Only the sound of the waves and the call of seagulls hovered in the rooms. She peered into the kitchen, but didn't see him. She tiptoed up the stairs to the loft. She found Tyler lying in bed, his arm carelessly hanging off the side and his other covering his eyes.

His lips were slightly parted and a sheet covered his beefy body. The comforter on the bed had been kicked to the floor. She eased his arm onto the bed. She knew he couldn't have been comfortable that way.

He stirred at the motion and mumbled something incoherent. She wanted to take care of him, and she had never felt that way about any man she had been with except for Maurice.

She didn't want to be some trophy wife who did what her husband told her to do. She wanted to keep working not only to exert her independence, but also to become the person she always envisioned herself to be.

She gazed down at him and smiled. He was what she needed at the right time. A bit of strange in her already disorganized life.

He'd opened up about being stabbed. It still scared her to think that he could have died because he loved his family. Would that happen again because he was with her? She didn't want to think about that now. While they had the chance, tucked away in their own private sanctuary, she wanted to be happy.

Then be not coy, but use your time; and while ye may, go marry. For having lost but once your prime, you may for ever tarry.

She took off her tee shirt and tossed it to the floor. As she was about to climb into bed, her eye caught the bars in the sleigh bed headboard. She stopped and smiled. She looked over the dresser and spotted the handcuffs. Gliding over to the dresser, she picked up the cuffs, then returned to bed.

With great care, she wrapped the cuff around the wrist that was already above his head. She brought the other cuff around the wooden bar in the headboard. As with the first hand, she moved his other arm above his head. She held her breath as he mumbled again and tossed his head to the side, but he didn't wake up. She cuffed his other wrist, making sure they were not tight.

She slipped off her panties and pulled the sheet off of his body. Then as she straddled him, she kissed his lips. He breathed out heavily and let his head fall to the side. She rubbed her nose over his, and when he tried to move his hand to swat away what had irritated his nose, the chain in the handcuffs clinked and his eyelids popped up.

"What's going on?" he asked, sounding confused.

She whispered into his ear. "You're my love slave." Then she nibbled on his lobe and ran her fingertips over his head.

"I have died and gone to heaven." He turned his head so that he could kiss her, but she slithered to the side.

"Oh, no, no. You're my slave. You do what I want. Your body belongs to me."

He grinned in anticipation. "Yes, ma'am."

She squeezed his hardness. "And this belongs to me."

"That's for damn sure." He laughed and wiggled his hands again. "I gotta touch you, babe. Come on. Undo the cuffs."

"You can't. Not yet. I'm running the show here. You just lie back and relax."

"Relax? How am I going to do that when--"

She put her finger over his lips again. “Shh. Let me lead.” She hovered her lips over his and allowed her tongue to lightly brush over them. He brought his head up to kiss her, and she righted herself. She kissed his body, going over his smooth, muscular chest and licked his nipples.

“Oh, unfair. Sunny, let me go. Please.” He begged, and she could hear the chains of the handcuffs scraping against the wooden bar. She kissed to his muscled stomach. Once at his navel, she kissed around it and slid her tongue inside. She felt his body contract with each kiss and lick. Having control over Tyler’s physical responses turned her on more than touching him.

His body was hard under her, and she could smell that familiar musky scent. He was all man. His body was strong and solid, not like Russell’s, which was thin and gangly.

“Look at me, Ty.” She connected her gaze to his. His hazel eyes hypnotized her.

And suddenly he said, “I know.”

She stopped, remembering these were the same words her mother had told her father when they were dating. And was he saying it to her like she had suspected why her mother told her father the same line when they were dating, to control her? Did he want to show that he was still the dominant one between them? He wasn’t. She would show him that.

She continued kissing his body until she got to his inner thighs. She blew her breath on the sensitive spot. She licked her tongue up his leg dangerously close to his hardness. He drew in a quick, hard breath and growled.

“You’re in dangerous territory, Sunny,” he said.

“Why do you think you’re cuffed? I have to keep you controlled for a little while.” She licked her tongue over his long, solid leg to his foot. She picked it up and looked at him through heavy lids. She kissed his big toe, then opened her mouth and grated her teeth over it. When her tongue flicked against the tip, he moaned and called out her name. Her real name. She must have done something right.

Her mouth covered his toe, and she sucked on his salty skin. As her mouth worked, her hands caressed his large foot down to his ankle. She would have never done anything like this with any of her previous husbands. She would never have handcuffed a man to a bed and sucked on his toes. Seeing Tyler react, writhing on the bed and pulling at his handcuffs, was enough for her to try this again.

“Where did you learn to do that?” He balled his hands into fists as he kept his eyes on her.

“Trial and error. I guess you like this.” She kissed the top of his foot and ran her hand over his shin. She wasn’t done. Not yet.

She moved her naked body between his legs. She blew her breath on his hot flesh and he shook.

“Honey, let me touch you. Don’t leave me like this.” He was no longer cool and calm. She could hear the frustration in his voice. Although she didn’t like frustrating him, she liked knowing that she could keep him under her command—even if for a short while.

Ignoring his pleas, she kissed his other inner thigh and ran her tongue over the other leg. She picked up his foot and kissed the tip of his big toe. She licked the underside of it and eventually slid it into her mouth. She kissed the top of his foot and set it back on the bed.

She crawled over his body like a lioness about to devour a helpless elk. Hovering over his face, she said, “I’ll be right back.”

“What? You’re not leaving me like this, are you? Where are you going?” He sounded frantic. She bet this wasn’t a side his wrestling fans had ever seen.

She turned to wink at him as she walked out of the room. She was sure it had to be driving him crazy to not only be handcuffed, but that she was truly turning the tables on him by using his gesture.

“Sunny!” He screamed at the top of his lungs as she went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. She pulled out the bowl of grapes and pineapple chunks she’d had for breakfast. She returned to the bedroom and stood by the bed holding the cold bowl in her hand.

“I got a little hungry.” She set the bowl down the nightstand by the bed. Slowly, deliberately, she pulled a green grape from the bowl. After straddling his body again, she smiled and held the grape aloft in her hand.

He gave a strained laugh. “Are you going to throw it at me like before?”

Smiling, she shook her head. “No. But I thought you would like to share these with me.” She placed the grape in between her teeth and lowered her head. He gently bit into the protruding fruit and kissed her in the process. She sat up and put another grape into her mouth and did the routine all over again with Tyler kissing her after biting into the grape.

“Mmmm, you are so sexy.” She moaned as she ran her hands over his chest and arms.

“You’re not doing so bad yourself,” he said. “I didn’t know you had it in you to be a little freaky.”

Her lips just inches from his, she told him, “Baby, you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Her mother would have cringed to hear her use the word “ain’t.” But if there was one thing she’d learned from Tyler it was to do what felt right.

She tore open a condom package, removed the rubber and rolled it over his erection. After positioning herself over him, she stared into his eyes, not wanting to break the contact.

He cleared his throat and swallowed hard. “Be gentle with me,” he said jokingly. His hands gripped the handcuff chain, and she could see them trembling. She had never been so turned on by watching a man sexually frustrated beyond capacity.

She slid him inside of her. He grabbed the bars of the headboard and arched his back until he was inside of her, fully and completely.

“Tyler.” She breathed his name like a prayer. He filled her, stretched and consumed her. She had to have him. All of him. Her hands rested on his ankles as she undulated her hips, her back arched. She couldn’t believe that she had initiated this. She had a hot, sexy man handcuffed to a bed, and she was making uninhibited love to him.

Releasing his ankles, she leaned forward and planted her hands on his chest as she moved faster.

“Easy, babe. I’m not going anywhere.” He growled at her and raised his hips into the air. She screamed with pure pleasure and clutched at his shoulders. This was good. She had never been the aggressor in a romantic relationship. The control was intoxicating.

She moved faster. It was as though her body had its own agenda, and it was to derive quick, easy pleasure. He felt good inside of her. Almost as though he was meant to be there.

“Tyler.” She cooed. “Tyler.” She moaned. “Tyler!” She screamed.

“Easy. Easy. Sunny.” He growled and clenched his teeth. She could see the muscles flexing in his arms. And in one quick motion, he brought his fists forward, breaking the bar on the headboard into splinters. With his cuffed hands, he grabbed her around her waist.

“You’re crazy!” She screamed as he pulled her down onto the mattress and rolled on top of her.

“You make me crazy. I want you so much.” He kissed her hard and cradled her body underneath his. He positioned his cuffed wrists above her head with his elbows on either side of

it. Just moments before, Soledad couldn't imagine what could be sexier than having a man under her control. Now it pleased her to no end to know she'd driven a man so crazy he'd destroyed furniture to please her. That was an intoxicating feeling she didn't want a twelve-step program to cure her of.

His first thrust was deep. She wrapped her legs around him.

They moved together in a rhythm she hadn't developed with Russell until a few months into the marriage. She and Tyler just worked.

She could feel the heat build inside of her as he thrust deeper and harder. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as her body trembled from the release. He swore softly under his breath and collapsed his large body on hers.

She stroked his sweaty head. "I was supposed to capture you. You weren't supposed to get free." Not that she was disappointed. She'd never been with a man so crazy.

Breathing heavily, he held his hands up, his wrists still cuffed. "Trust me. You have me. I'm not going anywhere." He kissed her again, softer this time. "I'm not going anywhere."

Too bad. Maybe if he had been willing to move, to not be so stubborn about her working, then things could have been perfect for the two of them. As it was, they would be parting soon. She already missed him.

Chapter Sixteen

In the early morning, Soledad stirred with Tyler's arm over her stomach and his heavy breathing in her ear. Aside from the clicking noise she made on her laptop when she typed, it was the best sound she'd heard in a long time.

When Tyler held her after they'd finally slept, Soledad never felt so safe. His powerful limb draped over her body and when she moved, he would move with her. He was already responding as one with her and that added to the comfort level. Then again if he was so wonderful, how in the world could she possibly leave him?

She couldn't stay. He combined qualities of her previous husbands. He was gorgeous like Number One and Four. A risk-taker like Number Two. Mature like Number Three. Sexy like Number Five. And had a great business mind like Russell, Number Six. What scared her the most was not knowing what the diabetes would do. Then again, Tyler took care of himself. He exercised, took his medication and did one of the most physically demanding jobs in the world.

She could never allow the media make fun of their union. One good thing about being so far from civilization was that she couldn't read the headlines about her antics, her loves.

She slipped from the bed, then made sure Tyler remained sleeping. He gave a soft moan.

After donning a tee shirt, she kissed him on his ear. She could have sworn a smile crept up at the corner of his mouth. That made her smile.

"You act like you deserved to be kissed. Even when you're sleeping, you're arrogant," she said to his still body. She inched her way downstairs. This was the first time she'd woken before him. She wanted to surprise him this time by making breakfast.

As soon as she hit the bottom step, something out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. A shiny, red covered box with a silver and black bow wrapped around it. The package was bigger than a breadbox, she thought as she walked up to it.

Keeping her eye on the present as if a bomb existed inside, she eased down on the couch. Tyler couldn't have gotten her a gift. She put her hand on the box and ran it over the silky ribbon. Beneath the silver-and-black bow was a card. Glancing up the stairs to see if he was awake yet, Soledad decided to succumb to her curiosity. She felt like she was violating Tyler's trust by looking at the card, but then again she still shook presents with her name on them under Christmas trees.

She opened the envelope flap and slipped the card from inside. The card read, 'To my Sunny. Happy one-week anniversary. I knew we could make it! Ty.'

He was crazy. Absolutely, positively, wonderfully crazy. She picked up the box and ran back up the steps, taking them by twos. She plopped down on the mattress, which immediately woke him up. With a jolt, Tyler propped his upper body on his elbows and shook his head.

"What's going on?" he asked and rubbed his eyes.

"What is this?" She set the box next to his head.

He flipped over to his side. "I know I'm not that smart, but from the look of it, I would say it's a gift."

"Cute."

“So open it up. I know you already read the card.” He moved himself up on the bed and rested against the headboard. As she was going to defend herself he followed with, “And don’t say you didn’t ‘cause you still have the card in your hand. I wanted to get up early and give it to you right.” He captured her in his steely gaze. “But you wore me out last night.”

Flames rose from under her tee shirt, up her neck and over her face. This time it wasn’t from embarrassment. Even in the early morning he was devastatingly sexy with his deep voice, a five o’clock shadow on his face and head, and this air of confidence swirling about him.

“Go on.” He prodded her again. “Open it.”

She put her hand on top of the box. “How could you do this? I mean, when did you--”

“Baby, I got moves and skills you haven’t seen yet. You think I’m going to show you all my cards so early in the game? That’s not a good way to play poker, and it’s not a good way to be in a relationship.” He stopped and scratched his head. “Open it.” He seemed to regret it when he said the word “relationship” the way he squeezed his eyes shut.

Her knotted stomach wrenched even more. She wanted to know what was in his head. Maybe what he’d wrapped up would solve that mystery.

She slipped her finger underneath the ribbon. “I just can’t believe you did this.” She kept her gaze his as she tore into the present. “It’s very romantic.”

“They don’t call me Casanova for nothing.” He laughed and it was good to see that he didn’t even believe his own hype. “Now will you please open that box before I do it for you?”

Inside the wrapper was a plain, brown box. Her fingernail slit the tape that secured the top flaps. Her heart pumped sparks into her skin until she tingled all over as she flipped open the top. She peered inside and furrowed her eyebrows at what she saw.

“What? You don’t like it?”

Soledad reached into the box and pulled out a potted plant. “An aloe plant?” Not the type of gift she was expecting although she didn’t know what she should have expected. One day he was giving her a ring that had to be worth more than a small home in Connecticut, and another day he was shopping with her at Wal-Mart.

And as she held the plant, she wondered what his motive. Was he trying to show her that he could be down home and simple, too? Not that he really had to prove that.

“You don’t get it, do you?” He pushed the box onto the floor.

“No, I get it. Some guys give flowers. You? You give aloe. It’s the gift that keeps on giving.” She set the pot on the end table and looked at the plant with its spiny thick limbs that sprawled out beyond its colorful terracotta casing. Midwestern housewives probably would have loved a present like this. Or maybe an eight-year-old girl. However Soledad was a grown woman. A woman who could have or buy anything. A woman in love with a man who’d given her a plant that looked like an octopus.

“So you do get it.” He scooted closer and wrapped his legs around her. “I could have bought you flowers like before. But they die. An aloe plant has so many uses. And it’s tough.” He put his finger to her chin and turned her face around to him. “I thought it would remind you of me, of us really.”

“How’s that?” Her voice was low now.

“It looks hard on the outside. It’s not one of those pretty plants like a rose.”

“So now I’m not attractive?”

He smirked and stroked her cheek. “You are my calendar girl, my Miss America, my *Baywatch* babe all rolled into one.”

Nice save.

He continued. "But if you really look at it, it's got its own beauty. And if you get burned, you can break off a piece and rub it into your skin." His fingertips feathered over her arm. "And when I'm not with you when you make your move, you'll look at it and remember me."

She wanted to kick herself. She'd gotten what she wanted, which was to work and to be taken seriously. It had cost her a special relationship.

Some say the world will end in fire. Some say in ice.

She crossed her arms. "So you plan on setting me on fire?"

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in close. "While I still have you." He brushed her hair off her shoulder. To steady herself, she put her hands on the leg that draped over her lap.

He pulled back. "And another thing is that it's strong. You can break off a piece of it and it'll grow back. Better than ever."

"How is that like us?" she asked.

He took a beat before he answered. "Because when you go home, I want you to remember that you've created an unbreakable bond with me."

She blinked and clasped her hands together. Was he going to sincerely admit his true feelings to her? He wouldn't let them part without telling her what was in his heart. And if he did, how in the world would she respond?

She bit her lower lip.

"You're my honorary tag team partner. I have to look out for you." He put his hand to the back of her neck and pulled closer, kissing her so sweetly her spine felt like it was made of nothing more substantial than the jelly inside of the plant.

She wanted to fold into herself. Soledad truly believed her heart had stopped beating. The sentiment wasn't a romantic line, but it would have to do.

She pulled from him and smiled. "Thank you for the plant." She wiped her lips. "It was very thoughtful. It really was."

He rolled his eyes and fell back onto the bed. "Now you're making me sound like a sap. And on the day of my big match."

Acting like she hadn't remembered, she said, "That's right. You have--"

"Have to go to work tonight."

The way he said it made it sound like it was completely normal.

Soledad took his mammoth hand into both of hers and held it tight. She had to ask him one thing that had been on her mind for a couple of days after she last spoke to Heather.

Looking into Tyler's eyes, she asked, "Tyler, baby, what's going on with your back?"

Something caught in Tyler's throat from the way he coughed. He averted his gaze and attempted a reassuring smile, but Soledad wasn't fooled. She squeezed his hand.

"You've been with me these last couple of days. Does anything seem wrong with it?" he asked with a wink.

"Don't give me that. You know I know Dr. Hilliard is more than your friend." She stroked his hand. "I'm worried about you."

As soon as she said that, his smile dropped. Releasing one hand from her grip, he touched her cheek, caressing it. She nuzzled her face into his callused palm, careless of how his rough skin scratched her face.

If he truly cared for her, he would tell her the truth. Forget that crap. If he *loved* her, he would tell her. It was a big leap in her thinking, but if he wasn't going to admit it when she told

him she was moving to California and working on a magazine he hated, or when he gave her that ring, or now with the plant, when would he say it? If she wasn't so afraid that he may not be in love with her, she would have admitted it to him first. The last thing she wanted to experience again was another heartbreak.

Tyler gave her a quick peck. "Don't worry about me. With this Japan gig I won't be wrestling for long anyway."

"But you could hurt yourself, seriously."

He sighed, looked away before answering, "I could hurt myself here."

Something lingered in the air. It was that big pink elephant in the room that no one wanted to acknowledge existed. Why now could he not put his feelings on the line? From the moment she had met him, he was all over her, seducing her. Now that they'd made love, he was treating her like a buddy. He called her his honorary tag team partner. Did Tyler leave all the romance with Casanova?

He gave her a playful slap on her backside. "Come on. Let's get up and get going. Gotta jog. Gotta make breakfast. Gotta--"

She wrapped her arm around his neck and pulled him forward. She planted a hard, adoring kiss on him. Tyler surprising her was good. *Her* shocking him was priceless.

"We have to do what feels right. Isn't that what you told me?" She ran her fingertips over his warm skin and wondered if he felt the tingles on his naked flesh that she had felt whenever he touched her.

"Not in front of the plant, Sunny. It's just a baby."

This would be their last day together. She would have to make it memorable.

* * * *

Soledad packed her one bag and carried her plant, which she had named Spike, down the stairs from the loft. Even after one day, she loved the cottage and wanted to stay longer. The crashing waves were peaceful. The secluded beaches were romantic. And being with Tyler lifted her spirits and made her forget reality. Seemed like a good idea at the time, but once the doors to the cottage opened, she had to face the real world. They both did.

She heard him running up the outside stairs, and her heart fell in rhythm with his steps.

"I don't understand why we can't come here after your match tonight." She set her bag on the floor and the plant on the dining room table. Maybe an extra day would give her the courage to admit her feelings. Or maybe a couple of days. A week? Maybe a month?

"Cause after the match I'm gonna have to record some special feature for the DVD. I have to do a commentary during my match and behind-the-scenes junk. It would make more sense for us to spend the night in Virginia Beach." He put his hands on his hips.

"I have to go back to New York to turn in my article. I also have to pick up my things from my parents' house. I left the birthday present you gave me there along with my I.D. and my clothes." She had almost forgotten that she was working.

"I'll go with you to your apartment. I would love to see your place." He picked up her bag and gave her a quick kiss on her lips.

She picked up Spike. "Then why don't you come stay with me in California?" She knew she was going to ask that question. She'd practiced it in her head all night. It came out clearer than she thought.

"Why don't you come with me to Japan?" He grabbed the pot and attempted to take it out of her hand, but she kept a tight hold on her new baby. "I tried that long-distance relationship thing. It doesn't work."

“You haven’t tried it with me.” As though her life depended on it, she gripped the pot closer to her chest. “It could be great. Me, you and Spike.” She held up the plant, introducing Tyler to her newborn.

“Spike?”

“Don’t you want to see him grow up?” What was she doing? Now she was using a plant as emotional leverage? It was her last option. If he turned the plant down it wouldn’t hurt her as much as if he turned her down.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and kissed her. The spines of the plant poked her in her chest, and she knew it must have been spearing Tyler also. He reluctantly pulled from her. “I know this is not the politically correct thing to say, but why don’t you drop that offer and come stay with me? I’ll need someone to argue with.”

Her heart pounded and her stomach twisted. “I can’t. Not now. I’ve screwed up my life so much that turning this offer down would prove to my parents, to the media and to me that I couldn’t cut it. I don’t want people to see me as that irresponsible spoiled brat anymore. And with an opportunity like this, if I didn’t take it, I would always wonder--”

He butted in. “What if?”

The spark in his speech and his eyes was gone. Something changed in Tyler. One thing was for sure. He wasn’t budging and neither would she. She’d been the one in the relationship who admitted love and need. She’d ended up getting hurt at the end.

Tyler walked behind her with her bag in his hand. Soledad descended the stairs, holding Spike as though he was her own baby that she had labored for hours to deliver.

At the bottom, she scanned the beach. A gentle breeze swept over the sand, swirling her hair around her face and neck. She closed her eyes and inhaled the salty air. Recalling their jog on the beach that morning and how her feet sank into the sand with each step, her mind drifted to images of how her body would be on the sand along with Tyler’s, sinking with each move.

He bounded past her and crossed to his Jeep. “Are you ready to go?” he asked.

She smiled and sauntered to the Jeep, Spike in her arms and that same familiar feeling in her body.

When she stood beside him, she glanced at him. “As ready as I’ll ever be.” She got into the Jeep, and he closed the door behind her. He jumped inside and slid the key into the ignition. Before he was able to turn it, she put her hand on top of his. His hand was warm as she curled her fingers around it and rubbed her thumb across his skin.

He looked over at her, smiling. “Did you forget something?” There was intent in his voice that went beyond meaning her toothbrush or hair clip.

“Yes.” She set Spike down on the floor between her feet. She hiked up her short denim skirt and straddled his lap in one swift, albeit clumsy move. She put her hands on his shoulders and with a slow descent, kissed him. She slid her tongue into his hot mouth as he put his hands on her hips and gathered her in.

As he slid his hands up her tee shirt he asked, “Now?”

She responded with a nod.

“Damn, you’re sexy.” He went to kiss her again and stopped. “By the way, you almost forgot this.” He reached over to his left ear and removed the ring. He picked up her left hand, but before he could slide it on her finger she pulled it away.

“I can’t wear that ring. We’re not--”

“It’s a friendship ring.” Hurt and pain laced his words. She’d never seen Tyler like this, defeated. What happened to that fighter? This time she wished he had some of that Casanova

bravado that had once annoyed her.

A lump choked in her throat. He couldn't be doing this. "That's an expensive friendship ring. And we're not back in high school. I can't accept that. Give it to someone you love." She bit the inside of her lower lip as she waited for his response. She'd dropped enough bait for him. Even fishermen weren't this patient.

"I don't know when that'll happen." He stared at her. He had a little grin, but something behind his eyes showed that he was hiding something. "Besides, even you said it wasn't real, right?"

Was he baiting her for a response? What did he want her to say?

"I was kidding. This? This is real." Her hand shook so much she knew he had to have noticed. He held her tighter. She didn't want him to ever let her go.

Soledad continued. "I don't even know why you gave this to me. You never really said."

Tyler sighed and averted his gaze for a split second. After returning his gaze, he said, "I thought you might like it." He slid the ring on her finger before she could respond. It was a heavy feeling--physically, emotionally, morally.

"I can't." She pulled at the ring and he held her hands. "The media will have a field day seeing me with another ring on my left ring finger."

"Please." The desperation in his voice weakened her. What was he not saying? Just say it. Just say it.

"Just say it." Her thoughts, materializing as words, shocked even her.

He blinked hard, took off his baseball cap and moved his seat back. "Make love to me."

Her body melted. It was what she wanted, but not exactly what she wanted to hear. She kissed his forehead, right above the eyebrow where his scar was. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him for what seemed like an eternity before either one of them made a physical move on each other.

And when they made love, it was as though this was their last act before going to the electric chair. No meal, warden. Just hot, incredible sex with the best-looking man walking on this planet.

Neither one of them spoke during the lovemaking. She stared into his eyes so intensely that she got lost in them. Nothing existed. No sky, no birds, no sand nor ocean. And this time she cried. Wept openly. The first time she cried when they'd made love, it was because she had never felt so beautiful and desirable as she did with him. Now it was because she never felt so alone.

Tyler kissed her tears away and never stopped holding her.

I stand amid the roar of a surf-tormented shore, and I hold within my hand grains of golden sand. How few! Yet how they creep through my fingers into the deep, while I weep, while I weep! O God! Can I not grasp them with a tighter clasp? O God! Can I not save one from the pitiless wave? Is all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream?

Poe. Still a sexual downer.

* * * *

"How far are we from Virginia Beach?" Soledad asked as the Jeep bounced along the interstate. She had already called her brothers to bring her suitcase and purse with them to the show.

"About another hour or so. We'll get to the hotel and settle in for a while. But I have to stop and get something to eat. I'm starving." Tyler put his hand on his stomach. "There's a little store right off the next exit. And I need something to drink."

“For your pill?”

“Yep.” He smiled at her.

She was already feeling like a partner to him. Like a friend. Like a wife. Letting out a ragged breath, Soledad whipped her head to stare at the man who had her heart and mind. Wife. It was the first time she thought of herself as a wife instead of Soledad Monroe with a new husband. She hadn’t realized she was smiling until a bug hit her upper lip, narrowly missing her teeth. Scrubbing her face with her hand, Soledad twitched her head around, spat and whined ... of course, in as dignified a way as possible.

He took the next exit. A minute later, he pulled into the parking lot of a small country store decorated with old Texaco and vintage Coca-Cola signs. It was as though the store was stuck in fifties.

He unhooked his seatbelt. “Do you need anything?”

“I’m okay. Besides, how am I supposed to buy anything? I still have no money.”

He reached into his shorts pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. Like a mack-daddy player at a New York club, he peeled off two twenty-dollar bills and handed them to her.

“Great. You’re like my sugar daddy.” She accepted the money, but felt like a child taking her allowance from her father.

“Friends do that for each other.” He went to pull off more bills, but she put her hand up.

“No. I don’t even want this.” She tried handing him the money. “Tyler, we need to talk.”

“You’re right.”

If Tyler hadn’t held onto her hands, she would have chewed on her thumbnail. As it was, she sacrificed her bottom lip to subside her anxiousness.

“It’s not the middle ages. You have choices. And maybe I’m not the one you want.” He raised his head. “I love--”

She stared into his eyes. Was he going to say it? She squeezed his hands, somehow hoping that that would slow her thrumming heart.

He continued. “I love your passion for wanting to work.”

She loosened her grip and smiled. She didn’t want to show him how achingly sorry she was that he couldn’t say what he was really feeling. He wasn’t ready. And neither was she. Since he had been so honest with her, she had to be with him.

He continued. “You deserve this position.”

Soledad spoke silently. “Thank you.” Forget it. She wasn’t known for being demure or patient. “No, I don’t. I need you. Marry me.”

He snickered. “Your thank-you was good enough.”

“Funny.” She attempted a light laugh, but it came out like a sputter. “What do you say?”

Tyler blinked. “Are you serious?”

Touching the ring, she twisted a nervous smile into place. “Yeah.” She giggled. “Yeah. Yes! Let’s do it.”

Instead of giving her the expected hug, hoot and howl, he repeatedly adjusted his baseball cap on his bald head, a sign of nervousness she’d discovered from watching him. The more he adjusted, the slower her heart pounded. She’d known this would happen. Why was he rejecting her?

“I’ve never been proposed to before. Are you sure?” he finally asked.

Soledad took a deep breath. “Yes.”

It was then that he snaked his arms around her and squeezed her hard enough that she felt

him trembling. She made a pro wrestler nervous? Or was he excited? *Please be excited.*

"It'll be great, us being together." She kissed the side of his face, hoping to calm his new nerves.

"Why?" he whispered in her ear.

Breaking the embrace, she shimmied into her seat. "Why what?"

"Why now?"

"Why not? If we're married, we'll have to be together. We won't have to fight about going to California or Japan. It's simple." She playfully slapped his leg. "Come on. Stop playing around and say yes."

When Tyler furrowed his eyebrows, Soledad knew she'd said something wrong. "What? Like everyone else?"

The words punched her in her heart so hard she gasped.

"You are the most incredible woman I have ever met," Tyler said.

This time his words sucked her breath out her body. Touching her chest to check for a heartbeat, Soledad couldn't say a word. She'd been waiting for days to hear how Tyler truly felt about her. From the way he looked so serious, she had a feeling that she wasn't going to be so happy to hear what he planned to say after that bombshell.

He continued. "I've held off telling you that because I wasn't sure of how you felt. And to be honest, I still don't know." He let her hand go. "Marriage is not a quick fix to all life's problems."

Soledad turned away, ashamed to hear what had been lying under the surface. He'd hit it right on the head. Although she thought she'd left her rebellious streak behind her, it was obvious that it was still an easy fallback. This time she found a man who wasn't falling for it.

Through her tightened throat, she squeaked, "Don't put this all on me. You're gun-shy about getting married. You told me so."

"Maybe I wouldn't be if I knew for sure that the woman I want to have my last name loved me more than the problems she's trying to escape." He had jumped from the Jeep and headed toward the store, when she asked to use his cell phone. After rifling through his bag, he retrieved the small, black phone and handed it to her. After a quick peck he disappeared into the store.

Being a responsible grown-up proved to be too hard. First Tyler wasn't giving in to her batting-eyelashes charm, and now she had a new career to think about. One thing was for sure. She needed to call Heather. She knew by now the woman had to have seen the news that she was going to a rival magazine.

"Talk to me," Heather said after only one ring.

She cleared her throat. "Hey, boss."

"Don't give me that boss crap. I'm pissed with you."

Soledad could hear Heather rustling papers around. Always busy working. She must have heard about the deal with *One*.

"You spend all of this time with Casanova." Heather began.

"Yes." Soledad wondered where she was going with this conversation.

"And you're supposed to go after the big story. The news he's going to break to *Vestige* magazine and only *Vestige* magazine."

"Yes."

"Then explain to me why I heard all about the big surprise on *Entertainment Tonight* and from Kevin Lucas."

Soledad thought everyone knew Tyler was going to Japan. Was there something else behind that that she didn't know about?

"What surprise?" She looked down at the ring.

"All about the wedding." Heather's voice was tight.

Wedding? There was no wedding. Tyler made that clear.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Heather asked.

"Because it's not going to happen."

"Not according to Kevin."

She twisted her ring around her finger. "Kevin Lucas? What does he have to do with it?" She was growing more and more confused with every word.

"He planned the whole thing. Said he set you up to interview Casanova because he knew he would ask you to marry him, and that you would say yes."

Soledad dropped her hand down to her lap and held the phone close to her ear. "But Casanova didn't ask me." Soledad had asked him, but she would leave that juicy tidbit from this conversation. Wait. The ring. The whole thing. Tyler had set her up.

"Oh. But you're still planning on being a part of the big finale, right? I mean, I heard he gave you a big ring as a part of the gag."

Soledad's heart fell to the pit of her stomach, and she felt the humiliation, hatred and embarrassment come up so quickly that she felt nauseous. The bile burned her throat and stomach. Aloe couldn't fix the ache in her heart.

After opening her self to Tyler, sharing secrets, sharing fears, it had all been a joke. She could feel her head thumping in an excruciating headache, but she was determined not to cry again. Not over Tyler. No. Casanova. That was all he was. Just a character. Nothing more.

"I have to go, Heather. I'll have the article to you by tomorrow."

"Hey, are you upset about something? Soledad--"

She disconnected the call and threw the cell phone onto the driver's seat. Her chin quivered until she looked into the store and saw the top of Tyler's baseball cap going down an aisle. She couldn't go on the rest of the trip with him. She couldn't let him get away with treating her like a stage prop.

Soledad knew then she had made the right decision in choosing to work instead of going off with Tyler. How could she have believed his lies? She felt beyond foolish. She felt exposed, dirty, hated. How could anyone who said he cared about her keep the fact that her interview with him was a set-up for the XTCWF's finale?

She picked up the phone and called *One* magazine. She had the motivation now to truly bury Tyler. If he were going to use her, then she would tell the magazine about his bad back and the diabetes.

When the editor answered, Soledad opened her mouth, but the words caught in her throat. Even if she suspected Tyler had used her in the worst way, she couldn't do the same to him. She had changed--even if he hadn't.

"This is Soledad Monroe. I can't work for your magazine. I'm sorry." Her quivering voice almost gave her away before she disconnected the call.

After dropping the phone into Tyler's seat, she stomped her way into the store. She didn't want to talk to Tyler again, and she wasn't sure what she would say if he confronted her. He would probably try to charm her. She was wise to his game now. It was all about him.

She walked up to the counter to the old, weary cashier who reminded her of her thin, small grandfather before he died. The whites of his eyes were yellowish, and his irises were

gray. He smiled at her when she approached him.

"There's a man I came here with. He's about six-foot-three or so, shorts, uh--"

"Casanova. You don't have to go on. If it won't for my grandkids, I wouldn't have recognized him. He's in the john." The cashier's voice cracked as he spoke, and he screamed instead of talked with a normal tone.

She turned and looked at the door. With a stride more like a military step than her natural gait, she stomped to the door. She balled her hand into a fist and pounded on the door.

"Keep your shirt on!" he screamed through the door. "Almost done."

She was going to keep everything on after what she'd heard. "It's me."

Short pause, then, "Oh. Need something?"

"An answer." She heard a quiet trickle and hoped he was washing his hands. "Who picked me to do this interview?"

Tyler cleared his throat. Was he nervous? "You know it wasn't me. Can't say that I mind it, now."

Hell, no. She'd almost smiled, but then she remembered about the show, the ring, the lie.

"So Kevin?"

"I'm sure."

"Did you know why he picked me?" She raised her hand to her mouth to chew on her thumbnail, but stopped. She had to quit pacifying herself.

"Sure do." Then he laughed. He actually laughed ... at her. "Even with our setbacks, I think it'll be great."

She picked up a chair and jammed it under the doorknob. Let him feel helpless and a little silly for a while.

"So you're okay with the whole finale thing?" she asked. "The proposal and all?"

A flush sounded through the door. So much for thinking he was washing his hands.

"Sure. Yeah. Why not? I told you, it's just an act."

That was all she needed to hear. "Jerk!" she spat. After making sure the chair was secure, she went back to the cashier.

"Do you have an envelope?" she asked.

"For you, young lady, anything." He reached under the counter and pulled out a yellow envelope and handed it to her. She set the envelope on the counter and thought for a while. She wanted to say something that summed up how she felt, about the situation, and also how she felt about him at the moment. She scribbled, "I can't believe it was all a joke. Soledad."

She put the two twenty dollar bills inside, licked the flap and sealed it. She didn't want him thinking she was using him for his money even though he would have deserved the treatment.

"Could you give this to him?" She handed him the envelope.

"Uh, sure." He pointed to the bathroom door. "You know our doors do have locks on them." He took the envelope carefully.

"I know."

He looked at the envelope. "Are you sure you don't want to give it to him yourself?"

"Is there a cab or something near by? I need a ride to Virginia Beach." If she wasn't prepared to talk to her family about the situation, then this kindly old man was really going to be left in the dark.

"This is a bus station," he said.

And as though he cued it himself, a large silver bus rolled up to the store. It wasn't a

chariot, but it would do.

“Where can I buy a ticket?” She tapped her fingernails on the counter.

“From here. The next stop is Norfolk. Suppose you can take a cab to the Beach if that’s where you need to go.”

“How much?” As soon as she asked she realized very quickly that she had no money--except for the forty dollars in the envelope. The hell she would use any of his money.

Leaning over the counter, Soledad snatched the phone receiver from its cradle. With one call and a threat to Lionel, she got her reluctant younger brother to pay for the ticket.

The cashier stamped the ticket and handed it to her.

She said, “Thank you.” Before leaving she turned back to the cashier. “Can you do me another favor? I don’t want you telling him where I’ve gone. Tell him that I dropped off the envelope and left. It’s really important that he not know where I am.”

“Sure, young lady. You know, you read about how celebrities treat normal folk like they ain’t nothing. They throw some money around and think that that can get them by. I see it all the time up in here. Men mistreating women. Ain’t right.” He took her arm gently and ushered her to the door. “You go on now. I’ll hold him off ‘til you’re out.”

Her throat compressed so tight, she couldn’t even say “thank you.” She ran out of the door with her escape ticket in her hand. After passing Tyler’s Jeep, she stopped. She wasn’t about to leave her baby. She felt like a woman leaving her boyfriend or husband and taking her child with her. She dove into her suitcase and retrieved her article notes. She was working. She had forgotten that once.

And she surely wasn’t going to leave with that so-called friendship ring on her finger. She pulled it off and searched through Tyler’s bag for his handcuffs. She looped the ring through a cuff and locked it. Let him use that ring to string some other woman along.

With the pot clutched in one hand and her ticket in the other, she jumped onto the bus and found a seat in the back. She had played the fool in love. She wouldn’t make that mistake again. She sat on the opposite side of the bus away from the store, covered her eyes with her hand, and cried for the second time that day.

Chapter Seventeen

Tyler wasn't sure he'd heard Soledad correctly. Had she just called him a jerk just because he knew *Vestige* magazine did great stories on unusual sports? Maybe she wanted to be taken seriously before she started working for the devil's magazine, otherwise known as *One* magazine. Or maybe she was pissed he turned down her proposal.

He thought he could rush into marriage. He really did. After his last girlfriend got on him about taking too much time in their relationship, he decided the next woman he fell in love with would be swept off her feet. He never expected the rug to be pulled from under him.

No matter. He didn't have much time with her. Maybe he could convince her to write for a publication in Japan. Yeah, maybe good, ol' stubborn Soledad would go for that deal.

When he grabbed the doorknob in the cramped bathroom and felt resistance, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. It was an old convenience store. Heat probably expanded the wood. Probably got stuck all of the time.

Ripping another paper towel from the wall-mounted holder, he wiped his hands again, getting in between each finger and making sure his palms were dry. He balled the brown wad, tossed it into the trashcan behind him and tried his luck again.

He turned the knob and pushed on the door. Nothing. The door wouldn't even crack open so that he could see the inside of the store. At that point, the only two things he could hear were his heavy breathing and his hammering heart. He slammed his open hand against the wall next to the door and the lights flickered.

The brief darkness brought him back to the elevator car almost twenty-five years ago. It was ridiculous. He was a grown man. A professional wrestler, for God's sake. He wasn't that same scared ten-year-old who had huddled down in the corner of the elevator car praying that someone would find him and get him out before he ran out of tears and before his voice gave out from screaming.

Susie Anne's laugh. Swimming in Mama's pond. Making love to Soledad. He braced his hands against the door, took a deep breath and repeated in his head, "It'll be okay. It'll be okay." He still felt a sense of urgency, but it was different this time. When he'd wanted to get out of the elevator car, it was because he was alone. Now he wanted out of this bathroom to be with Soledad.

When he remembered how she reminded him about his medication and when they made love in his Jeep that morning, he was certain of one thing. The woman drove him crazy. He was being stubborn. They could make the relationship work even if she worked all of the time and lived in California. They would both have to rack up some frequent flyer miles.

He had to get out. Get out of the bathroom. Get out of his character. Get out of his thinking that Soledad could never love him because of her job or his job. It was all about them. Funny how all of this came to him inside of a dingy bathroom with a strong ammonia-type odor wafting in the air. He really wanted out now.

Tyler pounded on the bathroom door. "Hey, Sunny! Little help here. The door's stuck." He didn't hear anything on the other side. "You've seen me tear up a bed. Don't make me break down this door."

“Hold on, son,” a voice said from the other side. He heard some commotion, then the doorknob twisted. Tyler pushed himself out of the bathroom. He never thought he would be happy to see the black-and-white checkered board patterned floor and aisles and aisles of snack cakes and potato chips in his entire life.

“You may want to look into having that door fixed.” He looked down at the older, black cashier. As Tyler walked by the man, he noticed behind the opened door was a toppled chair. “Was that what kept me in the bathroom?”

The cashier shrugged. “Maybe. Could have gotten stuck under the knob when you was trying to open the door.”

The door hadn’t swelled. He had been locked inside. Someone didn’t want him coming out for some reason. Could have been a joke. But why?

Tyler put his hands to his hips. “How did the chair get so close to the door? It wasn’t like that when I went in.”

He shuffled back behind the counter. “Don’t know. Kids maybe.”

Tyler scanned the store. “What kids? This place is empty.”

The old man tilted his head to the front of the store. “Bus just stopped here.”

The bus pulled off as he went through the aisles picking up what he needed. Either the old man was telling the truth or he was covering up for someone. He wouldn’t meet Tyler’s gaze when he spoke. Tyler didn’t like that. Usually meant that the person was up to no good. Maybe he was the one who had trapped him in the bathroom. Probably wanted to see how he would react so the man could run and tell some magazine or TV show. It was hard being a celebrity sometimes. He couldn’t be himself. He had to be Casanova all of the time.

As he walked through the store, he picked up some Granny Smith apples and wrapped turkey sandwiches from a refrigerated cabinet. Then he seized a six-pack of bottled water. He really hoped Soledad bought something for herself. He didn’t like that she still felt closed off to him, even after he had been so open. With that realization, he felt that maybe she wasn’t ready to go headlong into a relationship. He would just have to convince her. Give her that ol’ Tyler charm.

He dropped his groceries on the counter. He reached over to pick up a pack of peppermint-flavored chewing gum and an image of himself caught his eye. He’d been used to seeing his picture on a number of things. This time his face was somewhere he didn’t expect to see it, the cover of *One* magazine. It was a shot of him and Soledad kissing the first time after his match. Not surprising. The kiss had been televised, and there was a whole group of fans who could have taken the shot and sold it to the magazine. Then again, Kevin would do anything to get his wrestlers in print. Under the photo, it had a short caption that read “America’s Heartthrob Smooches America’s Daughter.”

He winced when he saw the phrase “America’s Daughter.” He’d seen how Soledad had reacted to it when he’d called her that. Tyler would never do that again. And articles like these would be prevalent for the two of them. He could endure them as long as he got to be with Soledad.

When he continued reading the cover, looking over the highlighted articles, he found one that really grabbed his attention. The teaser read “Casanova, A Pill-Popping Womanizer Hooked on Speed.” Underneath was the name of the author who was going to break the story.

Soledad Monroe.

He snatched the magazine from the rack. His gaze jumped from the words “womanizer” and “speed” and her name. He flipped through the flimsy pages until he got to his story. His

stomach churned when he read the bold type under surveillance-type pictures of him. One particular picture made his heart stop. It was a shot of him at his mama's house during his family reunion.

He closed the magazine and scanned the front cover for the print date. It had been printed the day before. She had a lot of time alone in the cottage when he had taken a walk. Guess the editor liked what she had to tell him, and that was why he offered her the job. What a fool he'd been. And he even encouraged her to go for it.

The old feelings waved over him. Someone in the media had betrayed him again, someone he'd grown to trust. This time though he wasn't going to keep silent about it. This time he had a chance to confront this ... this ... journalist.

Scanning the store, Tyler searched for Soledad. When he didn't see her, he ran outside to his Jeep just as the bus curved around a corner. When he noticed that his vehicle was empty, he looked down the street back and forth, panting like an animal and sweat dripping from his forehead.

The cashier stood in the doorway of the store. "Hey, you gotta pay for that, it don't matter who you are!"

Ignoring the cashier's screams, Tyler ran to the side of the store and glanced around. "Sunny!"

She couldn't have gotten far if she went on foot. He wasn't in the store that long.

"Come on inside and pay for that." The cashier held the door open as Tyler begrudgingly walked into the store. He threw the magazine down next to his sandwiches, apples and six-pack of water.

"I can't believe this. I cannot believe this." He pounded his fist onto the counter. The cashier jumped, then rang up his groceries.

The man held up the magazine. "You want this, too?"

Tyler snatched the tabloid rag out of his hand. "No. I don't want this trash."

Soledad couldn't have betrayed him like that. She'd looked into his eyes and told him that she cared about him. Seemed the only thing she cared about was getting a good story. She had a disposable camera, a camera he bought.

Working in a make-believe world really screwed up his perceptions. He should have stuck to his guns when he was determined to play it up as his Casanova character for the interview. The worst part about the whole thing was that the picture was taken at his family's house. His sanctuary. His people. No one messed with them. No one.

The cashier raised his eyebrows. "Nine fifty-two." He held out his hand.

"I mean, you trust a woman, right? You give her the world. Okay, so it was only for a week, but it was a special week. How could she do this?" Tyler put a ten-dollar bill in the man's hand. "I thought I could trust her, but I guess she's like the rest of them tabloid journalists who stalk celebrities and write stuff that sells."

"Here's your change." The cashier put the coins into his hand.

"Now she's gone. She got what she wanted, and she's gone." He picked up the bag, turned to the door, then turned back. "I was so close to making a fool of myself." He said this to the cashier like he was confessing to the Pope. He would have forgiven her anything. But not this. If he couldn't trust the woman he was with, then there could be nothing between them.

"Wait. I got something for you." The cashier reached under the counter and pulled out a yellow envelope. "She left this."

"So she came in here? Where is she? Where did she go? What did she say?" He

snatched the envelope from the cashier's hand. He whipped his head to look out of the front window. Why hadn't he thought about it before? "The bus. She took the bus out of here."

The old man put his hand on Tyler's. His grip was strong. "No, she didn't!" The cashier shook his head.

Tyler looked at the man's nametag, Willie, then down to his hand. "How do you know?"

Willie finally stared at him in his eyes. "'Cause I know. She asked for the envelope and left in some car. I don't know where she went."

A car, huh? So this was all a setup. She had someone waiting in the wings for her to pick her up when things got hairy. She must have known he would have seen the magazine when he went to the store. That was why she was so edgy about coming inside and needing to use his phone. It wasn't because of money. It was because of guilt.

After Willie released his grip, Tyler read the envelope. "I can't believe it was all a joke. Soledad." So he was right. She had played him for a fool. Played him like a dumb country, pro-wrestling bumpkin. And he trusted her so much. He had told her things he hadn't told anyone. He'd almost told her about his back. He was a fool.

He opened the envelope, and inside was the forty dollars he had given her. She must have had some sort of conscience to give back the money. Didn't make him feel any better.

"Sometimes a couple needs a cooling-off period." The cashier put his hand on Tyler's shoulder. "Maybe you two will get back together."

He shoved the envelope in his back pocket and took a deep breath. "I don't think so. Not this time." He turned to the door and then looked back at the cashier. "Thanks for the advice, anyway. And I'm sorry for my attitude. It's not your fault my love life sucks."

"Maybe this is what you need to get you into your match tonight. Good luck, son." He gave him a thumbs-up sign.

His match. He couldn't even think about that. If he hadn't been the headliner, he would have found a way to get out of wrestling that night. He couldn't let his fans down. He couldn't let himself down. This would be his last match in the States. He had to go out with a bang. And Sunny, she would be his last heartbreak. Never again would he open himself up to a woman.

At his Jeep, Tyler was about to jump into his seat when he saw his cell phone. He picked it up and hit redial. Who did Soledad talk to before she ran from him this time? Who was her connection?

"Hi, this is Edgar Goodfellow with *One* magazine," the voicemail began.

One magazine? She must have been telling this Edgar guy more information about him.

"Leave me a message, and I'll get back to you."

He disconnected before the beep sounded. No use giving this guy any more ammunition against him. He was sure Soledad had given him enough information to ruin his life.

As he set the phone back into his bag, the glinting steel of his handcuffs caught his eye. He remembered packing them in a different pocket. He lifted them and it stopped his heart to see the ring, Soledad's ring, dangling from one of the cuffs. She had truly flipped his own game on him. Propose, then dump. Lesson learned. Now he had to teach her something.

* * * *

By some miracle, or act of God, or plain luck, Soledad managed to get from the bus station in Norfolk and meet up with her brothers at their hotel in Virginia Beach. Of course, they promptly made her pay them back for the cab ride to the hotel.

"You're such gentlemen," she'd said. She was never so happy to see a wallet or a cell phone in her entire life. She wanted to kiss them, but that would have been going overboard.

She studied her New York state identification card as though she was going to be tested on the information. She looked at her face in the photo and the rest of personal data. She was still Soledad Dia Monroe. She still lived at the same place. She was the same height and weight. According to her ID, she was the same person. So why didn't she feel the same?

Once she, her brothers and their friends decided on room arrangements, she and Justin went to dinner. Since Lionel and his friends took their rental car, they had to walk over to the Red Lobster restaurant across the street from the hotel. The walk reminded her of the stroll she and Tyler had on the beach at his house. Tyler had held her hand and hung on her every word. All a part of his act. And the lovemaking? He wasn't sincere. He was going to use her.

After they ordered their food and had gotten their drinks, Justin made a direct hit.

"So tell me what's going on between you and Casanova." He picked up a cheese biscuit and took a healthy bite from it.

"Is it that obvious?" She ran her finger around the rim of her glass.

"Let's see, you leave with him during dinner without your purse or clothes. The next time we hear from you, you're supposed to be getting married to him or something. He sends us these exquisite tickets to the show tonight. And now you're here instead of being with him. It's a little obvious."

She thought about the past week. It all seemed to be a blur. Everything happened so quickly. Was there even a courtship? It didn't matter because she wasn't going to go back to him or that situation or that life again. Who needed it?

"I thought he was someone else. Hell, I thought I was someone else. Justin, I made some big mistakes, and now I'm totally confused."

"I don't believe we make mistakes."

"What?"

"I learned in philosophy class that we do things for a reason. And what appears as a mistake is actually a life lesson. So whatever it was that you had with Casanova, it wasn't a mistake. You learned something from it. So what did you learn?" Justin asked.

"I learned that I'm a bigger sucker for love than I thought." She drank some of her ginger ale and shook her head.

"Tell me what happen. What caused this tension between the two of you? I have to tell you. When I watched you guys at the house that night, I thought you both complemented each other well. The way you stood up to him, and the way he wouldn't back down to Mom. You two were better than Monk and The Chopper tag team put together."

More wrestling references. Unfortunately, she understood it. She couldn't wait until she could get all pro-wrestling thoughts out of her head.

"This is so embarrassing to say this." She looked around the restaurant to make sure no one was listening to them. Then she leaned in close to Justin and lowered her voice. "Tyler was going to use me in the show tonight."

"Use you? How?"

"I heard from Heather that the big finale in the show was that he was supposed to marry me in the middle of the ring."

He leaned back in his chair. "Is that right? Sounds like a hell of a finale. So what did he say when you talked to him about it?"

She leaned back in her chair. "Say? What could he say if I'd asked him about it? He would have sweet talked me just like--"

Justin held his hand up to stop her. "Whoa. You didn't talk to him about it?"

She blinked. “No. I didn’t have to. You saw him give me that ring at the house. It was all a setup. I felt it in my gut.”

“What you’re saying is that you left him without telling him what you’d heard? Did you think maybe they got the story wrong? From whom did Heather hear it?”

She cleared her throat. “Kevin Lucas, the co-owner of XTCWF.”

Justin rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and he wouldn’t lie to promote his show, now would he?”

She was starting to feel a little foolish for a whole new reason now. “When you say it like that, it makes me sound like an idiot.”

“It should. You should have talked to Tyler. Why didn’t you ask him if what you had heard was true?”

“You know, I needed a sympathetic ear and not a critical mouth. If I wanted to hear this I would have called Mom.” She folded her arms over her chest.

“Don’t attack me. I stood up for you. When Mom was calling you crazy for going off with Casanova, I told her that you were going with your heart. You cared about him, didn’t you? You weren’t just with him to get back at Mom, right?”

“I would never do that--again.” She rubbed her ring finger on her left hand where she once had the ring. Part of her wanted it to still be there. She wanted things back to the way they were back at the cottage. Honesty flowed at that house. Life was real there. And as soon as they headed back to the unreal world, the world of professional wrestling, tabloid stories and paparazzi, things fell apart again. It reminded her of Huckleberry Finn and Jim. They were fine as long as they stayed on the raft. When they got off, bad things happened.

“When you think of Casanova, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?” Justin asked.

A smile crept across her face. She thought of how he happy he had been when they were shopping together. She thought about the way he’d chased her around the kitchen when she’d thrown grapes at him. She thought about the way he’d made love to her.

If she stopped trying to silence that little voice in the back of her head she would have realized that Tyler wouldn’t have been that cruel to her. He’d sewn her shirt. Why would he have bothered doing that if all he wanted was to use her? She was wrong. Completely wrong. She had to get back to him. Somehow she had to make things right.

As though reading her mind, Justin reached across the table and grabbed her hand. Inside of her palm, he had placed his front row ticket. “Go and talk to him before it’s too late.”

She patted his hand. Not surprising that Justin would have given away his ticket. He used to cover for her whenever she’d broken curfew as a teenager. He had given her every cent he’d earned at a paid internship at a hospital one summer to help her pay for her first car. He was going to make some woman happy one day if he ever decided to settle down.

She pushed the ticket back to him. She had to be the giving one this time. “No. You keep it. I have to work some of my magic and eat a little crow and see if I can get backstage. Maybe I can get in with the *Vestige* photographers. That’s if he still wants to see me.” She grabbed her cell phone and started punching in numbers as soon as the waitress set their plates in front of them. “Besides, I’m a Monroe. We can get anything, right?”

Her brother smirked as though he couldn’t believe she’d actually uttered that phrase.

“I’ll be back.” She jumped from the table and went outside. She first called Heather. Heather would have the inside track.

“Talk to me,” Heather said.

“Hey, it’s me.” She covered her free ear.

"I'm glad you called. Are you moonlighting on me?"

Soledad swallowed hard. Heather had found out about *One*. Soledad had planned on telling her the truth.

Heather continued. "What's this crap I'm reading about Casanova in this *One* magazine?"

Soledad leaned against the side of the restaurant before she could fall to her knees. Her throat went dry, and she felt a sudden urge to pray.

"I didn't mind that *Entertainment Tonight* had that marriage bit on him. Everyone's talking about that now. But you had exclusive rights to this guy for a week for *Vestige* readers. And they print a teaser for a story about Casanova being a pill-popping womanizer courtesy of Soledad Monroe. Tell me this is a lie, both the story and the fact that you're working for them."

Soledad shook her head. "What are you talking about with Tyler? He doesn't do drugs." Where would the magazine get that idea? Her mind scanned over possibilities until it found the connection.

Russell.

He was the only person she'd talked to about Casanova and confided in him when she thought Tyler was on illegal drugs. Because she cut out on dinner early, he went behind her back and gave false information.

Heather continued. "Let me read you something."

Soledad heard the paper rustling over the phone.

"'Sources close to the family say that it is not uncommon for the grappler to have women flocking around him.' And there's a nice little picture of him somewhere out in the country. And guess who's in the shot? You."

Who could have done this to Tyler? That picture was taken during the family reunion. No one in his family would have sold the picture to the magazine. The only person who could have done this was Tanya, the one so interested in getting in Soledad's line of work. She wasn't jealous of Tyler wanting to be with Soledad. She needed to sell her pictures to the highest bidder.

"Heather, I couldn't have been in on the story. I'm in the shot."

Heather huffed, sounding like she didn't believe Soledad.

"When the photographers took pictures of Casanova today, they said that he looked great, like a real hard-ass. Didn't smile once. I hope you can write an article for this magazine to match that expression."

He was hurting, too. She had to talk to him. This was the biggest mistake, nope, not mistake, learning lesson, that she had ever made.

"So what about you working for *One* magazine? Is that true?"

Soledad couldn't run anymore. She had to stand on her own two feet and be honest.

After taking a deep breath she said, "I was going to work for the magazine after I turned in my story to you. I know how you feel about your reporters moonlighting."

"I don't have reporters who moonlight." Heather's voice rose. "They're either with me or somewhere else. Does your mother know about this?" Heather spoke through gritted teeth. Normally that would have scared Soledad. Part of that fear stemmed from her overwhelming need to please. She hated disappointing anyone. This time she felt calm.

Heather huffed on the phone. "So what's it going to be, kid? Are you with me or against me?"

Soledad smiled. Even standing alone outside of a Red Lobster, she felt stronger now than

even when she was with Tyler. One thing she did like about Heather was that she treated Soledad just like her other reporters who worked under her. Soledad didn't get any special treatment because of who she was.

"I turned down the offer at *One*," Soledad said. She could hear Heather sigh.

"I knew you had brains," Heather said and cackled.

Soledad had nothing to prove to anyone but herself. She'd proven she could get a job on her own. Now it was time to push herself to other limits. Personal limits.

"And I'm resigning with you. I'll turn in my story and have my office cleared out by tomorrow." Soledad smiled, and the first giggle that came out of her mouth tickled her. Then the giggle became a full on laugh, and she couldn't stop even after Heather had hung up on her.

Soledad needed that. She'd needed a good laugh since she'd gotten on that bus. As she was heading back into the restaurant, she stopped in her tracks when she remembered something crucial. She'd called Tyler when she was at her parents' house on her cell phone. She had his number. She had his number!

She went to her archived numbers dialed on her phone. She noticed some numbers she didn't enter. Must have been Lionel calling his girlfriends again. Then she found Tyler's number. She selected it and dialed.

She brought her thumb up to her mouth as the phone rang, but stopped herself. She didn't need to revert to her old nervous habits. No more running. No more chewing.

On the third ring she heard a click. She straightened herself as though Tyler could actually see her.

"Hello." His voice was clear.

"Tyler, it's me. I wanted to--"

"I'm either on the phone or away from it," his voicemail said. "So leave me the important stuff and I'll get back to you."

She sighed until she heard the beep. "Tyler, we need to talk. I'm staying at the--" Click. The phone went dead. She looked at the display and saw that the battery was low. She ran back into the restaurant. She wasn't about to be defeated again.

"Guess things didn't go well," Justin said as he finished up his lobster tail.

She held up her phone. "I have his number. I called him."

With a mouth full of lobster meat, Justin gave her a thumbs-up sign.

"But I got his voicemail and my phone died. I need my charger. I have to talk to that man."

"Good for you." He pushed his ticket toward her again. "Go to the show. Figure out a way for him to notice you. If he feels the same way you do, he'll talk to you."

She smiled as she snatched the ticket from the table. "I'll make this up to you."

"I had better get front row seat tickets to every XTCWF show after all of this." He laughed. "Do you know how you're going to get his attention?"

She nodded her head. She knew how to catch his eye. And this time, she would react differently.

Chapter Eighteen

Tyler sat on the bench in front of a row of lockers in the dressing room and taped his fingers. He kept seeing that magazine with his face splashed over it in his head. How could Soledad do that to him? He'd trusted her. His own fault. He deserved that for having his heart on his sleeve.

He threw his tape into his bag and pulled out his kneepads. He kept his head down until he heard a loud clap that echoed off of the dressing room walls. Peering up, he saw Monk standing over him. He had that same magazine in his hand, and he pointed to it and then him.

"Yeah, I saw it today. I can't believe she sold me out like that." He brought his other leg up and slipped on that kneepad.

Monk hunched his shoulders, which Tyler knew meant he was asking who he was talking about.

"Soledad. Sunny. See her name on it?"

Monk kept shaking his head and rubbing his fist over his chest. Tyler jumped from the bench and grabbed Monk's fist.

"She's not who you think, man. She left me. She betrayed me."

With a jerk, Monk turned Tyler's head. He touched the hoop earring where the engagement ring hung. Releasing a long breath, Tyler was glad his friend didn't yank the hoop through his ear. Monk shook his head and simulated putting on a ring on his left hand ring finger.

"No, man. Look at what she left me." He dove into his bag and pulled out the envelope where Soledad had written her cryptic note. He showed it to Monk. "She was using me. Played me like fiddle. And I'll never see her again."

Monk's expression turned to disbelief. How could he think Soledad could be anything else? She lived in front of the camera. Yeah, but she hated that.

With gestures Tyler understood, Monk pointed to him, crossed his arms over his chest, then rubbed his fist over his heart.

Tyler took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He was kind of glad that the locker room smelled of bleach and ammonia. It numbed his senses.

Monk made the same three motions again and hunched his shoulders.

"Yes, I love her, okay! Damn, I can't get her out of my head." It was the first time he had admitted that out loud. Now his feelings felt validated. He had changed. "I can't believe she would do this to me, man. She betrayed me."

Monk sauntered back to his locker and pulled out his pad and pencil. He scribbled something down and showed him.

Tyler furrowed his eyebrows. "What do you mean, it's better this way?"

Monk wrote again and turned the pad toward him. *Black and white. Won't work.*

"What the hell?" He pushed the giant back against the lockers. "How can you say that to me? You know my family. We're friends."

His friend pushed him back so hard that he almost made it across the room on the force. Tyler felt his muscles tense. Forget being off his game for the match tonight.

“Too ... much ... hate!”

They were the only words Tyler had ever heard Monk utter in the ten years they had been friends. The loud, garbled words were full of compassion. He was trying to protect his friend.

With careful steps, Tyler approached Monk. He put his hand on his tree trunk of a shoulder. “I know what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to come up with excuses to make me hate her, so I don’t hurt so much. Make me think the relationship was doomed from the start.” He attempted to get eye contact with the giant who craftily managed to keep his gaze from him. Tyler caught him.

He stared and said, “But I can’t stop how I feel. I felt it for her.” He turned his gaze away for a brief moment, then stared back into Monk’s eyes. “Hell, I still feel that way. Even after all that’s been said and done. How is that possible?”

Monk shook his head and pulled out his pad and pencil. Tyler grabbed his hand to keep him from scribbling more words of warning. “I know what you’re trying to say. I’ll be okay.”

“You won’t be if you two keep hanging out together like this.” Kevin walked into the dressing room and closed the door behind him. He had a grin that went all the way around his head. Kevin was never happier than when he was making a lot of money. And tonight he would be raking in a bundle.

“What do you want, Kevin?” Tyler disappeared into the shower area. Leaning over the white pedestal sink, he splashed cool water in his face. He had to get his head back into the game. He tapped his foot on the black-white-and-blue tiled floor.

“I wanted to wish you luck on the match tonight. And as soon as you come back out to the locker room, I can tell you two who’s going to win.” Kevin leaned against the doorjamb with his arms folded.

“Okay, I’ll be out in a sec.” He wiped his face with a towel hoping to clear the nagging voices in his head about Soledad. Could she hurt him? Could she be that cruel?

Before letting Kevin leave, Tyler grabbed his arm. “Hey, have you heard from that reporter from that magazine? You know. The Monroe daughter.”

It was a leap. He knew she wouldn’t have called. Her note said it all. He wanted to have the last word on their situation. He wasn’t going to allow her to mess up his reputation without him being able to defend it. Then he would walk away from her. As hard as it would be to do it, he would.

Kevin looked down at his hand on his arm and wriggled it away from his grip. “No. I haven’t heard from her. I’m assuming she got her story, and she’s on her merry little way. Why would she call?”

Tyler let out his breath. “No reason. I had something to say to her. Thought if she was going to come by again I would get my chance.”

Let it go. He should learn to let things go, but he couldn’t. Something made him want to see things through. The same woman who’d spent five months of her life taking care of a sick man because it was his wish to have a family before he died couldn’t have sold Tyler out this way.

“I’m sure she wishes you luck on your match tonight even if she did seem okay with the plan.”

He threw the white terrycloth towel he’d used on the floor. “What plan?”

“You two getting married in the ring tonight. You didn’t know that she knew about it? She seemed to be all for it.”

Tyler started to say something, but then stopped himself. Why would she happy about a

decision like that? It didn't make any sense. Maybe she was going for some sensational angle for the story. She hadn't been too happy with him kissing the women and asking them to marry him. Was that why she said his sexual fantasy would be to have sex in the middle of the ring? Had she known Kevin's plan and was trying to beat him to the punch? That didn't sound like her.

Entering the locker room area, Tyler patted Monk on his wide back. Monk took a space on the bench next to Tyler.

"On behalf of my father, I want to say that it's great to have you two headline this year's *Wrestlebowl*. We feel like we're going into this show with two great winners. But as with anything, there can only be--"

"One winner and one loser." Tyler interrupted. "We've heard this before, Kevin. Just get on with it. Who's going to win?"

"Fine. Monk, I want you to really punish Casanova. Let him have it. Give him four pile drivers."

"Four?" Tyler rubbed the back of his neck where he knew he would be feeling each one of those drives. He didn't even want to think about his already tight back.

"You're right. Make it five. I want it to look like Casanova could never win this match."

"Or walk again. You really want him to drive me down to China, huh?" Tyler said. "So I guess Monk's winning this."

"No, at the end you'll come back. Weary, but still fighting. And while the ref has his back turned, you're going to get a chair from outside of the ring. You know the ones to use, the tan ones that aren't as hard as the dark blue ones. Hit Monk over the head to win the match."

He threw his hands up. "Whoa! Wait a minute. Casanova may not be a heel or 'face but the one thing he doesn't do is cheat. The fans'll hate that. It'll make me a--"

"Heel? That's the idea. Monk will lose, but he'll win in the fans eyes. And when you have your rematch, well we can decide then if Monk will win the belt."

Things started coming together. The picture of him. The marriage rumor. Was he being set up? Was Soledad working with Kevin? She did look awfully chummy with him at the conference. "What the hell are you doing, Kev? Why the big change?"

"Let's just say the company needs to go into a different direction. Pump some new life into the mix."

"And I guess some well-placed rumors about me would help get things going, huh?"

Kevin adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses on his nose. "It wouldn't hurt."

Any man that thought that having stories float around that he was a drug-using womanizer wasn't hurtful was either cold or calculating ... or both. Tyler stood and towered over the thin man.

"So how is this all going to work with my trip to Japan? I can't carry the belt over there. It's a different federation." Tyler put his hands on his hips.

Kevin laughed. "Forget it. You're not going anywhere."

Tyler pumped his chest up and balled his hands into fists, gestures not missed by Kevin the way he took several steps back. This man was trying to kill him. What Soledad did was mental. Kevin was murdering his body and spirit.

Kevin continued. "I know we promised you the trip, but you'll stay here for another couple of years. Then we'll think about sending you to Japan."

If Tyler and Soledad were still together, he would have been happy. It meant he could stay in the country, and most importantly, continue a relationship with Soledad. Kevin was

messing with Tyler's life and money. No one told Tyler what to do, and they damn better not reach into his pocket and steal his money. He needed that for his family and his retirement.

Kevin adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses. "I know you have some medical issues, and trust me, don't think we aren't appreciative about your contributions to the company."

"Contributions? I've given up everything to wrestle for you guys for the past ten years. I don't see my family. I don't have a relationship. I don't have any kids. I want to have a life before I can't enjoy it." He took a step toward Kevin.

"You have a contract with us, Cass."

"Call me Ty. I'm not just a character. And your father feels differently about this. He set up the whole thing in Jap--"

Kevin cut him off. "I'm part owner, too. I know what's best for the company. But I don't want to be difficult about this. How about after the match tonight you take a few weeks off. We'll say that Monk injured you really badly, and you're off recuperating. By the time you come back, we'll have you turn your belt over to Monk and eventually fade your character out. Sound good?"

"What if I don't wrestle? I'll give Monk my belt right now." He put his hands on his hips. Tyler wasn't about to be backed into a corner by some corporate pipsqueak.

"Then I'll see you in court. We'll be there so long that you'll think we're married and the court building is our primary residence. I will bury you in a long drawn-out trial that you'll be a penniless old man before we're done."

Tyler stomped up to Kevin, pinning his back to the door. "Buddy, I come from poverty. Do you really think I'm afraid to go back to it? You think I'm afraid of a little hard work?"

"I'm sure you're not. But your money has helped your family out a lot, hasn't it? You don't want to stop that money train, do you?"

Tyler furrowed his eyebrows. Monk was the only one who'd met his family and knew of his situation with them. Tyler cursed under his breath. Soledad shared all of what he'd done for his family with Kevin. How could she do that to him?

Kevin swallowed hard. "Besides, you don't want to disappoint your fans, right?" His voice shook when he spoke.

Tyler could hear them screaming through the open door of the locker room. They were chanting his name. It wasn't like him not to finish a job, no matter what. Even if his boss was the scum of the earth.

He shook his head and backed away. "Do what you want, Kevin. It's not like I'm ever going to have a relationship or any kids any time soon. Might as well let this job cripple me."

Kevin lowered his voice and leaned toward him. "I got you. Until your legs buckle from under you, I have you. Don't you forget it." He peered over Tyler's shoulder to Monk. "Have a good show."

Tyler slammed his fist into the side of the locker, leaving an impression in the gray metal. "What a little punk-ass weasel! Wayne wouldn't treat me that way. I have to find him. Talk to him. He would understand."

Monk grabbed Tyler's shoulders and turned him around. As he shook his head, he simulated the pile driver move and held his hand up with his fingers and thumb spread.

"No, go ahead and do what he said. Give me the five pile drivers. I don't want you to get in trouble. You still have a career here. I'm the one looking for the out. But space the drives for my sake. We have a whole hour to work in."

Monk nodded his head. He disappeared into the shower area as Tyler slumped back

down onto the creaky, wood bench. He looked over at Monk's locker and saw the magazine sitting on top of his bag. He went over to it. As much as he didn't want to, he picked it up and flipped through the flimsy pages to his article. He'd seen the pictures. Now it was time to read it.

Reading the teaser was laughable. It talked about how he had been seen in popular clubs in all of the cities he had been to and had taken numerous women back to his room.

He stared at the one picture of him at his mama's house. The picture was taken during the reunion. No question. The more he stared, the angrier he got, until something caught his attention. In the colored photo he saw a flowered dress behind Shirley. Squinting his eyes as he stared at the picture, he realized that it was Soledad. She was in the shot. She couldn't have taken the picture. Who else could have been at the house to take it, then? He shook his head. The one who wanted so badly to be in the media business.

Tanya. He felt some tension between her and Soledad. No way they could have been working together. Something wasn't adding up.

And the note. *I can't believe it was all a joke. I can't believe it was all a joke.* What did she mean? Did it mean that she did write the article, but didn't mean for it to hurt him? Did she think he would find it and the plan to get married in the ring funny? Or had she done those things and was so ashamed that she couldn't face him?

He slammed the paper down and pulled out his cell phone. He needed answers. He would be willing to let Soledad go if she admitted that it was true. He had to hear her say it.

Before he punched in the phone number, the display showed he'd missed one call. His pulse quickened just as his eyes widened. He played the message.

Hearing Soledad's voice took his breath away. She said she wanted to talk but the message stopped. Did she change her mind? The message stopped mid-sentence. Maybe something happened to her.

Tyler immediately hit recall on his phone to pull up her cell phone number and dialed it. After only one ring, her voicemail kicked on. Even her recorded voice made his heart thrum.

He took a deep breath before leaving his message. "Hey, it's me. I guess you know that. I got your message. Tell me where you are, and I'll meet you to talk." He had to be open about this. He couldn't shut her out completely. Not until he heard the full truth.

He put on his tights, wrapped a white, sparkly bandanna around his head and threw on his white ruffled shirt without buttoning it. He ran out of the locker room and made his way past a hallway full of other wrestlers, crewmembers, security, and some lucky fans with backstage passes.

"Hey, it's Casanova!" one fan screamed and pointed. He threw the fan a dismissive wave and made his way to the camera room where wrestlers were cutting promo spots for the show. He had to get a message out to her. It wasn't over yet.

"Hey, Cass," the cameraman said as he set up the interview area. "Kevin said you weren't cutting a spot today. He said he would be using the one you made the other day."

His mind raced, but he managed to come up with a pretty cohesive statement. "Are we doing a live feed anywhere before the show?"

"Well, yeah. But it's about to end in five minutes. Why?"

"Where's the live camera? I need to get a message out to someone."

"Another lucky fan, huh? Bill's got the live camera."

Tyler ran out of the room and down to where Bill was doing his wrap-up before starting the *Wrestlebow* show.

“Oh, my goodness, fans! Look who’s here! It’s Casanova himself!” Bill screamed as Tyler ran up to him. “We know you have that special Ironman match tonight against Monk. Anything you want to say to him?”

He grabbed the microphone and looked into the camera. “I have a special message to one woman, and I hope she hears this.”

* * * *

When Lionel dragged Soledad into his hotel room, the last image she expected to see was Casanova’s face filling the TV screen. Her heart pumped like a piston when she saw his eyes.

“Y’all want to hear that I’m going to whup Monk’s butt tonight. That’s obvious.” Tyler began. His hand gripped the microphone so tightly that his knuckles were white where the rest of his hand was still nice and tanned. “There’s someone special in my life, or at least there was.” He looked directly into the camera. “She ran off somewhere.”

Soledad hung on to every word. His eyes seemed to be looking directly into hers through the TV. He still had a hold over her. How could she have walked away?

“I got the envelope. I saw the magazine, and Kevin told me you were down for the plan. I hate to break the news to the fans, but I’m not getting married in the ring tonight. And I’m sorry that I let Kevin talk me into setting you up like that. He gave me this crummy little ring for me to give to you. But I couldn’t do it. So I got you something different. Because, baby, you are different. Sunny, all I want to know is the truth.” He turned his head to the camera and she saw the ring on his earring. He still had the ring.

She choked on the boulder in her throat that she couldn’t swallow or cough up. At least he wanted to talk to her. One thing was obvious. Kevin lied. She should have figured that. If nothing else, she would need to clear her name ... and admit the truth. She loved him. He was the same Tyler she remembered from the cottage. He was willing to talk and listen. And now she was willing to share.

“Come on, Soledad. We have to go if we want to get there before the show starts.” Lionel grabbed the rental car keys and headed to the door.

“Can you take me to a store first?” she asked.

“Store? For what? We’re going to be late.”

“I need to make a sign.”

* * * *

“This is not *The Dating Game*! What do you think you’re doing?” Kevin screamed as soon as the camera went off.

Tyler rolled his eyes and pushed his way past him. Kevin was like a flea to him. So insignificant, but annoying and hard to get rid of. He would be the one person he wouldn’t miss once he retired.

“I’m talking to you.” Kevin called after him as he headed down the hallway painted with ocean waves. Maybe taking some time off would be a good thing. He could spend every waking moment with Soledad while she got adjusted in California and convince her to take him in. His health, this job, they weren’t worth it. Long-lasting love. That was the ticket.

He continued to ignore Kevin. He just wanted to stretch and stand by his cell phone for Soledad’s call--he hoped.

“Turn around, Cass! You punk!” Kevin screamed. “Go ahead. Walk away. You couldn’t keep Tanya, and you wouldn’t have been able to keep Soledad either.”

He stopped in his tracks.

Not even Monk knew about Tanya so how did Kevin? He turned around. With each

determined step he took toward Kevin the pieces were falling into place. Tanya had taken the picture of him at the party. She must have been keeping in contact with Kevin for him to know about his family. And as he stood eye to eye with the weasel, he knew without a shadow of a doubt that he had lied about Soledad.

Kevin stumbled back until he met up against a wall. The Chopper put his hand on Tyler's chest.

"Cass, calm down," Chop said.

He brushed away Chopper's hand and stood inches away from Kevin, nearly nose to nose. "So it was you and Tanya. You got her to take some pictures of me and tried to get Soledad to take the fall."

"N-n-no." He stammered and almost sounded like his father. "It's nothing we haven't done before. It's the same way we got the pirate story out about your Casanova past. I did spread those rumors, but I didn't expect Soledad to get caught in the middle. It made it convenient though."

Tyler's blood bubbled when Kevin talked about Soledad being a convenience. Now he really needed to talk to her.

"What else did you do, Kevin? What else did you tell her?" He tried keeping his voice controlled, but the more he talked to him the more he wanted to pop him in the eye.

"I told her editor about the marriage in the ring tonight. But thanks to you, the fans know that it's not going to happen. But when you turn heel, they'll understand why you lied."

Tyler closed his eyes and sighed. No wonder Soledad had run away. Back at the convenience store, she'd asked him for his cell phone to call Heather. Heather must have told her about the marriage bit, and Soledad must have believed her. Although when he'd first met her, he had been down for a plan to use her, he would have never humiliated her.

She should have never doubted his integrity. Tyler should have known from the start that Soledad would have never betrayed him. Had Soledad truly gone behind his back, stories about his diabetic condition would be circulating as well. And now she was gone and this idiot was the reason.

Tyler planted his hand on the wall beside Kevin's head. He had to keep calm. He wasn't a teenager anymore fighting bullies because they were talking about him. Something inside of him wanted to revert to his old self. Maybe it was the way Kevin looked at him so smugly as if he could treat him any way he wanted.

"Go get Wayne," Chopper told a young stagehand. "And maybe Monk."

"No! There are fans back here. I don't want Casanova and Monk to be seen together. Not until their match," Kevin said over Tyler's shoulder.

"Dude, I was trying to help *you* out. I have a feeling Cass is going to rip your little head off, and I ain't going to be able to stop him," Chopper said as he stood next to the two of them.

"So tell me why you did it. Getting married in the ring? Why the hell would you give them a story like that?" Tyler didn't want an explanation. He wanted to hurt the man.

"It's all leading up to the new storyline. Casanova as a heel. It all works. Fans will see the article and start to see you as a heel. It's perfect." Kevin smiled the whole time and Tyler wanted nothing more than to wipe that self-satisfied smile off.

"I've managed to create an image of Casanova without any outside help. Why start now?"

"Because face it, kid. You're not that exciting anymore. I can't trot you out and have people go crazy for you. You're old news. But thanks to me, you're new news now."

It was the same excuse he'd heard before he was fired from the first wrestling company he was with. He took a deep breath and grabbed Kevin by his collar. He raised him off of the floor several inches and pressed him against the wall. "Listen here, you little prick, somehow, some way, you're going to get yours. You hear me?"

The Chopper as well as other wrestlers attempted to pull him off of Kevin.

"Because of you, I lost Sunny," he said between gritted teeth.

"You would have lost her anyway. Why would she want a dumb hick like you when she could have a sophisticated businessman like myself?" Kevin tried cranking up a nervous smile, but it appeared like a terrified grimace. Big mistake.

Tyler wanted to punch him. He wanted him to feel the pain he made him feel when Soledad had run away with a note as her last words. As he stared at the scared man, he couldn't do it. Something held him back. It wasn't better judgment or the threat of a lawsuit.

Love. It was pure love. He loved Soledad enough to kill this man, but he wasn't going to give in to his basic instincts. Kevin wasn't worth it, and Tyler wasn't that rough and tumble ruffian he used to be.

"Wh-wh-what's going on here?" Wayne hobbled up to the group.

Tyler dropped Kevin to the floor. "Ask your son." He broke free from Chopper and Monk.

Wayne turned to Kevin, who had slumped down the wall and curled into a fetal position on the floor. Wayne lowered himself next to his son. "What's g-g-going on?"

Kevin gazed up at his father. "Just some jitters before the match. No problems."

Amazing. Tyler had threatened the creep, and Kevin was still thinking about the business. He shook his head and went back to his dressing room with Monk following close behind. Once they got into the locker room, Monk closed the door and locked it. He turned Tyler around and hunched his shoulders.

He grabbed tabloid off of Monk's bag. "You see this article?" He held up the magazine to Monk. "Kevin helped give them this story. He and some girl I used to date back home. I have a feeling that Sunny doesn't know a thing about this. Man, watch your back with Kevin. He'll sell you down the river." Tyler slammed the magazine onto the floor. He marched around the spacious locker room. He had to think. He had to get Soledad back. It couldn't end like this.

Chapter Nineteen

Soledad followed an usher into the noisy arena, walking by throngs of fans with signs, lights, cameras, hats and large foam fingers. With the flashbulbs going off in her eyes, she could barely see her way down the steps to the area around the ring. She would have thought that going through this one time would make her used to the feeling. She guessed wrong.

Once she got to the front by the ring, where a match was already in progress, she turned and glanced up at the crowd. As her eyes scanned the signs, she noticed one common message on all of the women's signs. They all called themselves Sunny and asked Casanova to marry them. "I'll be your Sunny!" "Marry me, Casanova!" "Kiss me, Casanova!" She was just thankful that she got to be in the front row. No way in the world could he miss her or her sign.

She spotted Lionel and his friends already in their seats, cheering on the action. As she was about to move behind the barricade and take her seat, a vise-like grip clamped around her arm and yanked her back. Relief didn't hit her when she saw it was the security guard who had escorted her backstage when she'd first met Tyler. Maybe because the man scowled like he'd been born with that expression.

"You've got to come with me," he said and attempted to pull her back. "Uh, Cass wants to see you."

"Really?" she asked.

"What's going on?" Lionel asked.

"I get to go backstage," she said to Lionel.

"You lucky dog! Be sure to get The Chopper's autograph."

"Here." She handed the rolled poster board to Lionel. "Take my sign. Be sure to show it to Casanova when he comes out."

He read the sign and brought it down. "I can't hold this up. Are you crazy?" He turned the poster around which read, "I love you, Tyler. Marry me!"

"If you're seeing him now, why would I still need to hold up the sign? Tell him yourself." Lionel didn't have one romantic bone in his body.

Soledad gritted her teeth. "Just do it! I'll see you after the show."

The guard pulled her through the crowd and down a private hallway.

"You can let me go now." She tried hard to release herself from his hold, but his short, thick fingers pinched her arm. If he was taking her to see Tyler, she was willing to go. He didn't have to grab her like this.

"The boss don't want you around the ring." The guard turned around and sneered. "Says you're a distraction."

"Excuse me?" She really tried to break from his hold. Something wasn't right here and she smelled Kevin all over it. "I'm going to return to my seat now. Let me go."

The guard chuckled as continued dragging her backstage through an empty hallway. Adrenaline coursed through her body as she grabbed the concrete wall. How could she have been so foolish to think that anyone in this company besides Monk could have been honest?

"Let go of me!" She saw Monk at the end of the hallway, bent over drinking from a water fountain. "Monk! Monk, help me! Get Tyler! Monk!" She screamed, but he kept his

head down and continued drinking. She would have thrown her purse at him to get his attention, but she had a feeling her cell phone might come in handy in a minute or two--if it could hold out that long.

With a not-so-gentle shove, the security guard threw her into an empty locker room. "Make yourself comfortable. We'll let you go once the show is over." The guard folded his arms, his short but thick frame filling up the doorway.

She couldn't be this close to Tyler and not get to talk to him. For all she knew he could have been in the dressing room next to this one.

"You can't keep me in here like some animal. This is kidnapping. You had better let me go or--"

"Or what?" Kevin came around the security guard. He must have noticed the disgusted look on her face, because he quickly commented, "I hope that look is more confusion than disgust. I have agreed to sit with you the entire time. We can have that nice conversation we had talked about before."

The definition of crazy--Kevin Lucas. She started feeling that same, confined feeling. Suffocating. Trapped. Cornered. She balled her hands into fists. Fear would be her motivation for getting her out of this entrapment.

The muscles tensed in her arms. "So is the big guy staying?"

Kevin must have misunderstood her tone and gesture, because he smiled and stepped up closer to her, adjusted his collar, and smoothed his hand over his short hair. "No. He's leaving. It'll be just us. Alone." He closed the door once the security guard walked out.

"Good. I know I can kick your skinny ass!" The definition of angry--Soledad Monroe.

He scrambled for the doorknob and opened it again. "But he's outside the door, so I don't think you should do anything hasty, Ms. Monroe."

She stopped. The whole situation was like a story made up for Casanova's character. Kidnapping, running away, pirates. Was Kevin actually starting to believe he was like his wrestlers?

"What are you doing, Kevin?"

"Sit down. Let's talk."

"Okay. You can talk." She reached into her bag and pulled out her cell phone. "The police would love to hear how you pulled an innocent woman into a back room and kept her there against her will. Especially someone like me." It was a toss-up between calling Tyler or the police. The short time she got to charge her phone in the rental car on the way to the arena, it wouldn't hold out for very long.

Then she thought that no matter what, she was going to call the police regardless, so might as well get them first. As she dialed, she noticed how calm Kevin was. Did he think she was bluffing? Did he think what she was holding in her hand was a prop? He really was living in a fantasy world.

She hit "send" on the phone and waited ... and waited ... and waited. She glanced at the phone's display.

"I don't know about you, Ms. Monroe, but I find that my cell phone has a hard time getting any reception in this concrete and steel structure, especially so many feet down below the main arena."

Damn. She'd forgotten how hard it was for her to use her phone before when she was backstage. Did he plan all of this? How did he know she would have tried using her cell phone, and it wouldn't work? Damn psycho. The hell she would let him have the satisfaction of

beating her. Stalking the room, she waved her phone searching for good reception.

Struggling to hold back his laughter, Kevin watched her as if she was some circus sideshow as he covered his mouth.

In the doorway leading to the bathroom the call went through. Soledad peered up and saw a window over a bathroom stall. So they weren't completely below ground.

"What is your emergency?" the operator asked.

She kept her back to Kevin when she spoke. "My name is Soledad Monroe. I'm being held against my will."

"Very cute, Ms. Monroe. But I'm not falling for it." Kevin sauntered toward her.

"Is this a joke, ma'am?"

"No. I'm very serious. Please help me." She gave the operator her contact information to verify her story as the phone beeped to signal its impending demise. Then she turned to Kevin. "The man who's kidnapped me is Kevin Lucas. He's about thirty years old."

"Twenty-eight." He smirked.

"He has on a white, buttoned-up shirt, tan pants and Oxford shoes. He's black, light complexion, no facial hair and wears glasses. He's about six feet tall and is of slight to medium build." She remembered her self-defense training to always give a description of the attacker to the police. She knew she had limited time before Kevin got wise and found out that she was actually telling the truth.

"Ma'am, are you hurt? We're sending units right now."

"I'm not hurt yet. But I think he's going to do something." She took a step back. "I can't tell you how to get to me, but I'm in a dressing room down a long hallway and it had 'Locker 3B' on the door."

At that point, Kevin's eyes widened, and he snatched the phone from her hand as the operator said, "Okay, ma'am, we'll get police out there. Just hang on the line."

He threw the phone onto the floor and stomped on it until it was nothing but shiny shards of black and silver pieces. Her heart pounded, witnessing his fit of anger. In a swift move, she stepped around to the main locker room, instead of the ultra-confining bathroom.

Although it hurt her to her core that she'd lost her beloved cell phone again, Soledad was a little relieved that he'd gotten so violent. Now the police would know she was in real jeopardy. But she couldn't call Tyler now. And he couldn't reach her.

As though reading her thoughts, Kevin shook his head and responded, "That was a big mistake."

* * * *

Tyler gave Monk a high five as they stood behind the curtain awaiting Monk's introduction.

"You know what to do, right?" Tyler said to Monk. Monk nodded and jumped up and down with hardly anything on his large, but tight body moving. As soon as the announcer called Monk's name, Tyler slapped him on his back to signal him to go out to the ring.

"Cass," Wayne began, "tonight you'll kiss--"

"I'm not kissing anyone," Tyler interrupted. "I can't do it. And I'm not doing the proposal thing anymore. It's not right." After getting his own ring back, Tyler knew Soledad was right. His whole act went beyond demeaning and cruel.

He adjusted his bandanna and kneepads and flung his championship belt over his shoulder before taking a deep breath and emerging from the back curtain.

The flashbulbs going off temporarily blinded him, but he loved the adoration. A mass of

fifty thousand fans chanted his name in unison. His heart pumped in the beat of their claps and chants. And now his knees didn't hurt. His back was fine. He was on top of the world again where he was king and these were his royal subjects.

He walked slowly down the ramp, his fists raised in the air as he scanned the audience. He hadn't expect to see so many signs held up by women saying that they were Sunny and that they wanted to kiss him. He concentrated his attention, though, on the fans seated around the ring, looking for Soledad. If she were here, that would be where she would be since the show had been sold out for months and her brothers had prime seating.

He decided to do something different in his ring entry. He walked all the way around the ring, slapping everyone's hand and looking into each of the fans' faces. He continued the trek until he found one of Soledad's brothers. Tyler didn't see her.

Damn. She couldn't leave him hanging like that. If she wasn't here, then she must be on her way back home. She hadn't gotten his message that the marriage idea wasn't his. She didn't want to talk to him.

With a heavy heart, he jumped into the ring and climbed up the ropes at each ring corner. The flashes from the cameras lit up the night sky. It was like a fireworks show. At the last corner, Tyler jumped down and faced Monk who had to be a good half foot over him. He looked up into his eyes very intensely. The crowd loved it.

Tyler mouthed the words "I'm going to kiss your ass." He knew Monk could read his lips perfectly, but the crowd would think he said "kick" instead. Wanting a little levity, Tyler always tried to get Monk to laugh in the ring. Monk was good. His face remained stoic, stilling even the sweat beads on his forehead. The mammoth man responded by pushing him back onto the mat with one hand. With that and the sound of the bell, the match started.

* * * *

"You owe me a phone. That's destruction of property." Soledad paced the gray-carpeted floor. "The police will add that charge along with kidnapping."

Kevin sat on the bench and crossed his legs. "Please shut up. I suppose you think I should be scared because you're America's Daughter, right? You're no Patty Hearst. The police won't find you. I'll make sure of that." He snickered. "You and your family are nothing but jokes to hard-working black people. You were supposed to write a story. One piece. I should be kicking myself over this."

"Please allow me to do that." She kicked the empty section of the bench next to him causing him to jump. Power surged through her body when she saw him react. And thank goodness he wasn't clever enough to change rooms. She'd given the police the locker room number. Despite what he thought, she knew police would be sent. If Kevin kept her in there, they would surely find her.

"Cute. What I was saying is that all of this is my fault. I wanted Cass to do an interview, and he didn't want to do it. He said he didn't trust journalists." He stood up and lowered his face to her level. "Imagine that. *He* didn't trust journalists, and *I* pushed him to do an interview." He put his finger right at the hollow of her neck.

She swallowed hard, but held her ground. Her trembling hands signaled her increasing fear every second she stood in the room with him. Her self-defense training tumbled through her mind, but she wasn't going to use it yet. At some point this whacko had to realize what he was doing was crazy, not just wrong. Or maybe the police would show up by then.

"As much as I want to stay in this locker room and verbally spar with you, I think you should let me go. The police are on their way. They have enough information to arrest you, and

trust me, I will testify at any hearing where there's a possibility that you could go to prison and rot." Stomping triumphantly to the door after her declaration, Soledad never expected him to grab her arm.

"Don't make me get physical with you. I will if I have to."

The hairs on her arm stood at attention, and her knees nearly buckled. "Have you lost your mind? Let me go!" She attempted to free her arm by twisting it. The more she moved it, the worse the wrenching felt. He wasn't as strong as the security guard, but he was tenacious.

"Scream all you like. With all the noise going on in the arena, do you think anyone will hear you?" He pulled her close to him and wrapped his arm around her.

This was what it all boiled down to? Physical attraction? "All this for a date?"

"Don't flatter yourself. Sure, I was attracted to you when I first met you. You seemed intelligent. Little did I know all you wanted was a cheap thrill. What else should I have suspected from a slut who's been married a billion times?"

"You son-of-a--"

He cut in. "Don't say something you'll regret."

"I have no regrets. No. That's not true. I should have never left Tyler."

"His name is Casanova!" He threw her across the room. Soledad slammed against a wall of lockers and had to hold onto one of the doors to keep from crumpling to the floor. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her in any sort of pain. No matter what, she would die defending Tyler's name. Kevin couldn't do anything to break her spirit. The more he tried, the angrier she got.

She straightened herself and faced him. "His name is Tyler..."

"Stop." He held his hand up.

"... Bertram..."

"Don't." He put his hands over his eyes.

"... Randolph..."

"I don't want to hear it." His hands slipped over his ears.

"... the Third."

"You bitch!" He spat. "Couldn't you leave well enough alone? I picked you to do the article, but not because I thought you were particularly talented. I could have gone to a more reputable magazine than *Vestige*. But to have your name attached to anything XTCWF-related would have been a boon to my business. If America's Daughter could stand a match, so could other highbrow viewers."

Soledad would grind her teeth down to a fine powder if she had to stay confined in this room with Kevin for much longer. As it was, every muscle in her body tensed up knowing that even Kevin had used her family name to get ahead.

"I guess it would really piss you off if I didn't turn in that article, huh?" She smirked. "It's not like I need the money." Thank God, Kevin didn't know the deal between Soledad and her parents. "And I'll be damned if I do anything to promote your company."

He stepped up to her. "Too bad the kiss keeps you forever associated with XTCWF." Kevin laughed. "And it was so easy, too. Right before Cass ran out to his match, I told him to kiss you instead. Said there had been a change, and he believed me. God, I'm a genius."

The definition of a genius had changed to a deranged asshole in cheap, knockoff suits? So Tyler hadn't made a mistake. Kevin set him up as much as he had set her up, too. They'd both been used.

If Soledad was going to get out of this, she would have to play up to his business sense.

“Ty--I mean, Casanova has been wrestling a long time. It’s time for some of the newer guys to step up, don’t you think?”

Kevin thought for while, his gaze down to the floor, a hand on his hip and the other hand scratching his head. “Cortisone shots. He could get the shots and keep going for another five years. It’s possible.”

She’d done some research on the shots and knew some of the long-term affects of getting them, like loss of bone density, although she was sure Tyler wouldn’t subject himself to something that would jeopardize his health, even for a job he loved. “It might affect his diabetes.” She still wanted to appeal to his business sense.

“It wouldn’t kill him.” He looked at her. “Will it?”

“I don’t know. And I don’t think you would want to find out, do you?” She stepped closer to him slowly and cautiously. Her shoulder throbbed and once she got her bearings she would make him pay for throwing her against the lockers.

“No. A death would be bad for the company.”

“Yes, the company.” She rolled her eyes. How could Tyler have worked for this man for so long? Kevin gave worms a bad name.

“We’re having the best years we’ve ever had. The marriage rumor was good. I can’t let Casanova go.”

Soledad left Tyler because of a publicity story trumped up by a madman. Now she wanted to hurt Kevin.

She continued. “He has brought you in a lot of money. And fans, too. But you can let him go. A smart businessman like yourself can make anyone a star, right?” She stood next to him and put her hand on his shoulder. Although touching him made her stomach lurch, she needed his defenses lowered. “Why not let me do this. I’ll talk to Casanova after the match. I’ll tell him that I won’t date him anymore.” Technically, she was telling the truth. She wouldn’t be dating him anymore. If she had her way, she would be married to him as soon as she could. And this wouldn’t be like any of her other seven marriages. She wouldn’t be marrying out of rebelliousness or to fulfill someone else’s needs. She wanted Tyler.

Kevin looked into her eyes as though he was searching for some answer. Without warning he put his hand around her neck and pushed her against the wall. “It’s a trick! You don’t mean it!”

* * * *

At the two-minute mark remaining in the match, Tyler picked up a chair from the outside of the ring while the referee was down, and approached Monk who had his back to him.

Monk helped the referee into the ring, and turned to Tyler. Tyler raised the chair in the air and tossed it over the top ring rope. His career was the one aspect of his life that he wasn’t going to leave in Kevin’s hands.

With a wink, Monk nodded and grabbed him around his neck. He raised Tyler in the air, his feet dangling. In one swift movement, Monk slammed him onto his back in the middle of the ring. Winded, but certainly not out of it, Tyler closed his eyes and remained on the mat, waiting for the cover. The crowd counted down from twenty, and still Monk hadn’t covered him. At ten, Tyler squinted one eye as Monk gave him an elbow drop across his chest. Now he was winded. Over his head, he heard Dougie, the referee, slam his hand to the canvas mat. One. Two. Three. It was over. The end of an era, and it was all in Tyler’s hands. He fought hard not to smile.

The decision to give up his belt, and essentially, walk away from the business he’d devoted his life to didn’t come easy. When he’d been in the locker room, Tyler felt sick

knowing that the people he'd trusted had betrayed him for money. He would have rather walked away with nothing, than to compromise his dignity. He was worth more than that, as his mama had assured him after he'd talked to her. She'd let him know that all the money he'd sent home, she'd kept in an account for Tyler and never spent it.

So what was Tyler working so hard for? He'd made his name in the business. It was time for guys like Monk to make their way.

Initially Tyler heard a mixture of cheers and boos for Monk. Playing up that he had been dazed by the two finishing moves, Tyler struggled to his feet. Monk had the belt raised over his head as he looked out into the crowds. Like a proud papa, Tyler's chest swelled as he tapped Monk on his shoulder. When his friend turned around, they faced each other, nose to nose again. This time a smile crept up at the corner of Tyler's mouth, and he grabbed Monk's wrist. He raised his friend's hand in victory, showing support.

It didn't matter that he had gone against Kevin's wishes. Screw him. He and Monk gave the audience a show they would never forget. They had made history, and when it came down to it, that was all Tyler really wanted. He wanted to leave a lasting impression in the sport, on his fans. Monk would be the first deaf African-American heavyweight champion in pro-wrestling history. XTCWF would have to respect that.

He stepped back and allowed Monk to receive the full glory he deserved from the fans. It was his time now. Tyler wiped the back of his hand over his eyes and caught how much blood covered his face. The excitement of the match and the love he got from his fans eased the pain in Tyler's back. However he knew that as soon as he settled down, the ache would return.

"Come on, Cass. You need to have Doc look at that cut." Dougie pulled him out of the ring and toward the backstage area. He was feeling pretty weak and would be in no mood to fight with Kevin. If a fight was what he wanted, then a second fight would be in the cards.

As he walked by the front row fans, he caught a glimpse of an unusual sign. "I love you, Tyler. Marry me." It was rare for fans to know his real name and address him that way. He grabbed the sign and pulled it from whoever was holding it.

Lionel.

He couldn't stop the happy laughter that erupted. She loved him. He felt renewed like he could wrestle for another hour. Soledad couldn't be far. Why would she let Lionel hold the sign if she was there?

"Where's Sunny?" Several women offered themselves up as his new Sunny and covered Lionel before he could answer.

"Come on to the back, Cass. You're losing too much blood." Another referee draped his arm over his shoulders and guided him to the back. He broke from their hold and stumbled back to Lionel, diving into the audience.

As he held onto Lionel's shirt collar, he asked, "Where is she?"

"You don't know?" Lionel shook his head. "Backstage. She was supposed to see you."

Tyler's knees gave way under his exhausted body, and he nearly fell to the floor. He braced himself on the barricade. Dougie pulled him to his feet, and the other ref escorted him to the backstage. He had to find her. If she was in the locker room area, he would find her.

Backstage, Tyler received more applause from other wrestlers, the crew, even Wayne.

"You did good, son." It was the first time Wayne hadn't stuttered. "Both you and Monk."

"Are you okay with the outcome?" Tyler shook off the men helping him and stood on his own.

“Yes. Th-th-that was how *I* wanted it to end. M-m-m-monk deserves it.” Wayne smiled. “No chairs?” Wayne asked as Tyler made the slow trek to his locker room.

“I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t go out like that,” he said from his locker room door. He watched a police officer walked by him, looking at each door she passed. It wasn’t unusual for the company to use off-duty police officers for security. Tyler wondered why this one was obsessed with doors.

“Something going on here? What’s with all the security tonight?” Tyler asked.

Wayne pointed. “One’s h-h-heading this way. They might w-w-want an autograph or something. Go get yourself cleaned up.” He gazed at Tyler’s forehead. “And s-s-sewn up.”

Tyler nodded and sauntered toward the first aid area.

Wayne called after him. “Y-y-you know Kevin will be pissed.”

He turned and hunched his shoulders. “I don’t care. Where’s the little prick anyway?”

* * * *

Kevin pressed Soledad against the wall, his hand around her neck. She clawed his arm and face trying to get away.

“Casanova is mine. You can’t take him away from this company.” Kevin shouted. He brought his hands up, raising her off of the ground slightly. She thrashed her legs trying hard to make a direct hit. Realizing very quickly that her random motions were not helping her situation, she exhaled, deciding that she needed to think, because the more she moved, the tighter his hands got around her neck.

She remembered her self-defense training from college. Be a NAG. Nose, abdomen, groin. It was her last resort. Bringing her hand back, with the heel she jammed it into his nose until she heard a snap.

With a quick release, Kevin let go of her, and she fell to the floor. “Bitch! You broke my nose!” With both hands covering his face, he suppressed the bleeding just as it started to trickle.

Soledad didn’t waste time savoring that accomplishment. She was on a mission to get herself out of the room and into Tyler’s arms. Full of momentum from the first strike, she balled her hands into a fist and punched Kevin in his stomach. And while he was bent over, she drew her foot back and kicked him squarely between his legs. With that, he was down on the floor, curled up, bleeding and cursing.

She scrambled to the door, unlocked it and darted out of the room. Sweet salvation!

“Whoa!” The security guard at the door caught her around her waist. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Put me down! Let me go!” She struggled to get out of his hold. The security guard looked in the room where Kevin laid sprawled on the floor.

“Get her out of here!” Kevin commanded. “I don’t want anyone finding her! I’ll deal with her after the show.” Kevin screamed. The guard carried her through the hallway like she was a towel to be discarded. The whole time she kicked and screamed.

“Put me down!”

The guard opened a backdoor and deposited her onto the asphalt.

“There’s no way you’re coming back in here.” Soledad stood and brushed off her backside. At least she was away from Kevin. That was the only bright spot in her exile.

She reached her hands out for the closing door, but was too late. Sliding her hands down the smooth door with no doorknobs, she felt hopeless again.

She had no idea where she was other than outside of the arena. It couldn’t be hard to find

her way around to the parking lot. She started walking until she saw a group of young women walking toward her.

"I think the limos come out over here," one of the women said.

"He's got to notice me in this outfit," a petite blond said and hiked up her yellow tube top. "I look like the sun in this, don't you think?"

"Totally!" the third woman said.

She decided to follow these women to wherever they were going to go. It was apparent they were trying to get Casanova's attention. She would do the same.

* * * *

Tyler sat on the edge of the bathroom sink as Doc tended to his cut on his head. Doc carefully cleaned the wound with some sterilized gauze. The soothing silence relieved Tyler until Kevin stormed into the bathroom area where he and Doc were. Kevin held gauze under his nose and the areas around his eyes were black.

"Who were you fighting?" Tyler winced as Doc applied some iodine to his wound.

"You did this!" Kevin held a bloodied handkerchief to his nose.

"I never touched your face. Looks like you took a--"

"Forget it!" Kevin exclaimed. "So did you do what I asked you to do in the ring?"

"Didn't you watch the match? Isn't that what you're supposed to do?" He was the co-owner of the company, and he didn't watch the match? Where was he if he wasn't glued to the monitor?

Kevin flailed his arms in the air. "Forget that. What happened?"

Tyler took a deep breath. "The important thing is that the fans get their money's worth, right?"

"So you got the pile driver?"

He pointed to his open head wound. "Five times like you wanted."

"And did you use the chair?"

He turned his head to Doc and kept silent.

"You didn't, did you? The fans still love you."

"And I lost the match and turned my belt over to Monk." If he was going to go out, might as well do it with a bang.

Kevin picked up a water bottle and threw it against the wall, causing it to burst in a dramatic splash. Then he overturned a chair. "Why can't you do anything I ask you to? I can take you to court and sue you. I'll leave you so broke you won't have a pot to piss in."

And Tyler didn't care. He would rather dig ditches again to help support his family, than continue killing his body this way. The most important thing in his life was somewhere in the building. As soon as he got stitched up, he would find her.

"Fine. Besides, your father didn't seem to mind how I ran the match. How would that look in court if one owner says one thing, but the other is on my side?" He smiled. "I may not be as smart as you, but if I were a betting man, I don't think you would win a case like that."

Kevin stomped his foot onto the floor and stormed out of the dressing room. Doc shook his head and continued working on Tyler's wound. His nimble fingers spackled Tyler's wound with a creamy ointment. Tyler closed his eyes and tried not to giggle like a lovesick schoolboy.

Sunny. His Sunny. She loved him. He had proof. He looked down at the sign he'd taken from Lionel. It sat next to him with splatters of his blood over the white poster board. "I love you, Tyler. Marry me." Tyler chuckled anyway.

"Hold still." Doc paused with the surgical needle and thread in hand. "A bad stitch job

will make you have a bad scar.”

* * * *

Soledad didn't know which was more important. Talking to the police about Kevin and filing charges or getting to Tyler. She decided as she stood with the crowd in the back of the arena that she would get to Tyler first, then the police. If Kevin got violent with her again, Soledad would have some muscle power behind her.

She knew she couldn't get access to Tyler any other way. Kevin made sure of that. She wanted to make sure to never cross Kevin's path again unless it was in a courtroom. She'd proven she wasn't afraid of him. Far from it. She could handle herself, and she'd shown him that by breaking his nose and hopefully halting his chances of ever reproducing. She wouldn't be truly satisfied until she was able to testify against him and see him rot in prison.

The crowd lurched forward, pushing her. A hand on her shoulder pulled her back and she quickly turned to make sure the hand wasn't the security guard or worse, Kevin.

“There you are!” Lionel made his way through the crowd to get to her. “Why are you out here if you were backstage? Didn't you see Casanova?”

“Long story. Did he see the sign?” she asked.

“Yeah. He took it. I told him you were backstage. They carried him off, and I thought you would have hooked up with him.”

“Carried him? He was hurt?” She put her hand to her chest and thought about how she should be with him to comfort him. His poor body must be aching from an hour's worth of work. This wifely feeling suited her.

Lionel pulled his shirt taut. “Look at this. This is your boy's blood all over me.”

Soledad's stomach compressed into a tight ball. Lionel shouldn't be bragging about someone else's blood being spilled on him, especially not Tyler's. She put her hand to his shirt as a way to be somewhat closer to the essence of Tyler. She had to see him.

Lionel pointed to a large, battleship-gray garage door that creaked open. The crowd buzzed with excitement and went into a frenzy of waving their signs and pictures.

Soledad had to stop that car any way she could. He wasn't going to leave the arena without her.

* * * *

“I swear the crowds get wilder and wilder each time,” Tyler said from the backseat of the black, stretch limousine he and Monk shared.

Monk nodded.

Tyler stared at the LCD screen on his cell phone. No new messages. No new calls. He slid the phone into his holster and unrolled the sign he'd taken from Lionel. This didn't figure up. Why would she give a sign to Lionel, but not show? Why did Lionel say she was backstage, yet no one had seen her? And he'd looked everywhere for her, and in every dressing room.

“Whatever you do, Jones, don't stop the car.” If he couldn't talk to Soledad, then he really wasn't in the mood to talk to his fans, even if this was the last night he would wrestle professionally. He leaned his head back and covered his eyes with his hand.

As they were about to pull through the crowd, Monk tapped his leg.

“What, man? What's going on?” Tyler lifted his head and removed his hand. Monk pointed out the back tinted window at the crowd. He looked, but didn't see anyone familiar or anything unusual.

“What did you see? What am I supposed to be looking for?”

Monk put his fist to his chest and made a circular motion.

“Sunny? You saw Sunny? Where?” He pressed his face in the back window and looked at all of the faces chasing the steadily speeding limo. He thought about telling Jones to stop. He would wade through fans to get to her. He didn’t see her. Too many faces, but he would know hers.

“Are you sure you saw her? I don’t see her.” He turned to Monk. Monk looked out of the window at the crowd and shook his head. He shrugged his shoulders.

“I think you’re getting like me. You’re starting to see her everywhere.” He turned around and eased his head back. He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then released it slowly. He put his hand to his ear and twirled the engagement ring around his finger. Someday.

* * * *

When she grabbed the trunk of the slow-moving limousine, Soledad thought it was a good idea. Everyone else in the crowd thought it was a great idea also and grabbed the limo. She was pushed, pulled, poked and eventually knocked from the car and onto the ground where the fans trampled her, stepping on her hand, leg and head. She was caught in the undertow of the crowd wave.

In their wake, she laid on the ground, dazed, defeated, crushed and hurting. She couldn’t keep up with the car. She couldn’t even see into it. What was she thinking? Did she actually think that if Tyler did see her that he would have stopped the car, run out and embraced her like some sappy romantic movie? This was Tyler. He would have done it.

“Are you okay?” Lionel asked, genuinely concerned.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.” She lifted herself up onto her hands and felt a sharp sting through her right wrist, enough pain to cause her to fall back to the ground. “Oh, that hurts!”

He crouched down next to her and looked at her hand. “You think it’s broken?” He attempted to touch it, but she waved him away.

“I don’t know, but it feels like it.”

He helped her up to her feet. “Let’s get you to a hospital.”

“Great. What a way to top off my evening. A possible broken wrist. And it’s my writing hand, too.”

“It may not be all that bad. Don’t sweat it.”

“Easy for you to say.” She cradled her arm with her other hand. When Soledad saw a police officer she was determined to do one thing before going to the hospital.

“Lionel, get the rental. I have to do something first before we go.” No one assaulted her and got away with it. Kevin wouldn’t be treating anyone else as he’d treated her tonight. Ever.

Chapter Twenty

Soledad stirred groggily. It was a new day, and she would find Tyler. There were only so many hotels in Virginia Beach. He would probably be in the best one. All she would need was a local phone book and some time.

Love has its own instinct. It knows how to find the road to the heart just as the weakest insect moves toward its flower by an irresistible will which fears nothing.

When she opened her eyes for what it seemed like the twentieth time in the last five minutes, she saw her mother sitting across from her reading a book. Once her eyes strained to focus, her mouth dropped when she saw it was the copy of *Beloved* that Tyler had given her.

Soledad fluttered her eyes several times before realizing that her mother wasn't a dream. She didn't remember getting on the plane. She must have, to end up back in her parents' house in Connecticut, propped up on their living room couch with her bandaged wrist on top of a tower of pillows and a soft, tan-colored throw over her legs.

She struggled to her feet and stumbled toward her bedroom.

"You should stay in bed. You shouldn't be moving around so much," Anita said.

"Too many things to do." Soledad crept to her room.

"Dinner is at six!" Anita called after her.

Soledad flopped down on her bed and positioned her head on the pillows. A whole day and not a word from Tyler. He'd definitely seen the sign. Did that mean he didn't believe her or trusted her? Only one way to find out.

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.

She started packing her bag with her good hand just as Justin strolled by.

"Leaving so soon?" he asked as he entered her room. "This is the thanks I get for getting your butt on a plane back home?"

"I have to go, Justin." She looked at her brother and without another word, he knew. He understood. He nodded his head in approval.

"What's going on?" Anita, her mommy radar intact, stood next to Soledad as she packed.

"I have to go. I have to find him." She closed her bag, then she searched the floor for her shoes.

"Don't be foolish. It's late. Your wrist is broken."

"It has a chipped bone." Soledad corrected. That was the one thing she could remember of the four-hour wait at the hospital with her bandages being her souvenir.

"Same thing. If it's chipped, it's broken. Besides, a Monroe never chases after anyone."

She took Anita's hands and looked into her eyes. "Mom, I'm more than just a Monroe. I'm Soledad, and I'm in love with Tyler." And suddenly she felt like the boulder that had been pressing on her shoulders had been blown to bits. "I appreciate your concern. But if I don't do this, I will never be truly happy in my life. You're always telling me how I don't see things through. Well, I'm seeing this through until the end." She took her mother's hand. "Mom, he told me he knew in one night when we were together. He knew."

Anita gasped and tears welled in her eyes. Soledad had never seen her mother cry. Her eyes itched, and her throat tightened just from the sight. Anita hugged Soledad so hard, sharp

pain shot from her wrist, up her arm and over her body. Since Anita wasn't a big hugger, Soledad was going to savor this tender, if painful moment.

"Be careful," Anita said. Soledad, too choked up to speak, nodded. Her mother let her go and left the room in the same flurry she came in with.

Justin patted her on her shoulder and left her alone. Tyler was what she needed. If she could get him back, then she would be happy.

* * * *

Soledad's month-long search, or what she had dubbed as the Tyler Excursion, ended without one lead or sighting. Geraldo Rivera had an easier time in Al Capone's vault.

Her first stop had her venturing to Japan. Remembering some of the language she'd studied in high school, she spoke with the local manager of the Japanese XTCWF affiliate about Tyler. The manager said he hadn't seen Casanova and no word came down from the head office in America. So where was he? Tyler had given up the job he'd longed to do in order to do ... what?

With a photo of her and Tyler kissing that had been taken at his family's cookout, Soledad had then traveled down to Elizabeth City, North Carolina and flashed it like he was a lost child. Without direction, she wandered through the rural area, hoping some divine force would involve itself in her search and miraculously reunite them. No such luck. Every stretch of land with a house slammed down in the middle looked like Shirley's.

She'd flown into town, gotten a rental car and grazed through the local phonebooks for any and all Collinses, Randolphs or Blythes. All numbers for the immediate family were unlisted. Since she had arrived on the property while she was asleep and left the home at night, she couldn't remember how to get to Tyler's mother's home. It also didn't help that the roads were private and not listed on the map.

Her last resort was to go to the Outer Banks, but as in Elizabeth City, she'd arrived there at night and couldn't quite remember how to get to Tyler's property.

What was more distressing was that Casanova was truly lying low. No TV appearances. No matches. It was as though he had fallen off the face of the earth. It didn't help that Lionel had told her about his injury during his last match. And all of that blood on his shirt. Maybe he was injured worse than she'd thought. Tyler could be in a hospital trying to recover from a sport many people called fake.

Her search became frantic. And when she found him, not if, she would make him proud by telling him how she'd quit her job, stood up to her parents and was going to branch out on her own.

Something about Tyler sticking to his guns when he decided to continue his career in Japan gave her the strength to follow her own dreams and that was to start her own magazine.

With a more than generous loan from her mother and stellar business connections, Soledad planned on starting her own publication, *Fresh Start* magazine. But that would not get underway until she'd found Tyler.

A couple of weeks of searching, Soledad started to get discouraged. Maybe Tyler didn't want to be found. Maybe he wanted to be as far away from her as possible. She hoped it wasn't true. She couldn't stop living. Soledad had to move on.

"You are getting to be such a big boy." She watered Spike. The aloe plant had gotten bigger in the short time she'd had it. She ran her fingers up its spiky leaves, being careful of the thorns. "If you get too big, your father won't be able to recognize you." She gazed down at the plant and with a sigh said, "I can't believe I'm talking to a plant." She adjusted the framed

picture of her and Tyler closer to Spike. "I'm really pathetic."

Anita, of all people, supplied Soledad with her first story lead. Strange, but true. A teacher making a difference at an inner city school in Washington, DC. How her mother had found this man, Soledad would never know. One thing was for sure. Anita must have talked to Harwood to know what type of stories Soledad was interested in covering. It was great to have Anita in her life as not only a great mother, but also a friend, and now, business partner. Their relationship was stronger now than ever.

After a short flight, Soledad walked up the steps of the school with her bag on her shoulder and a handful of questions. From what she'd read in the folder, this sixth-grade teacher was not only educating children, but he was motivating them to be productive members of society. The children had started a neighborhood clean-up program and many of them volunteered at retirement homes. She could see why this teacher was a big deal. And he had only been at the school for a couple of weeks.

"Are you Ms. Monroe?" a short, round man asked as she came into the office, escorted by a security guard.

She extended her hand to him. "Yes, sir. And you must be--"

"Theodore Dongle. You can call me Teddy." He shook her hand heartily and had the widest grin.

"It's nice being here, uh, Teddy. I was reading up on this teacher of yours. Funny thing. I don't have his name in any of my papers."

"Yes, that's right."

"I hear the students call him TR. Isn't that unusual for a traditional school system to do that?" She pulled out her pad and pen.

"Yes, but for him, we've made an exception." Teddy put his hands on his round stomach and reared back on his heels.

"Why is that?"

"He's somewhat of a celebrity, and he doesn't want it get out because he wants the focus on the children. He wanted them to call him by his first name, but I don't approve of that. So we came to a happy medium."

"So what's his first name?" She positioned her pen on the pad, prepared to scribble his name.

"Why don't you ask him?" He patted her on the back.

Her mind raced with who the celebrity could be. With initials TR it could have been Tony Robbins, the motivational speaker, or Tony Roberts, the actor, or maybe Teddy Riley, the singer. No, it couldn't be him. Now she was really excited to see who it was.

"If he wants all of this anonymity, Teddy, then why did he agree to do an interview? He'll get publicity that way. He understands that, right?"

"We're hoping you can bypass his celebrity and write more about the education system, the school and the community."

She really didn't need to talk about her ideas for the article with him. She would gather her information and write a fitting story, one she would be proud of.

"When can I meet him?"

Teddy looked at his watch. "It's recess, and I believe he's in his office doing some lesson plans. Walk with me."

She followed the rotund man down the hall. He had freckles all over his sweet face and a bald head. Even if his name had been something other than Theodore, he was as cute as a teddy

bear. And he talked the entire way to the classroom, asking her about her job and if she liked it. Even asked if she thought about teaching English and offered her a position, which she respectfully declined. Relief swept over her that finally no one brought up her famous family or her marriages or her money.

"Uh, would you mind waiting out here for a minute? I want to make sure I have him prepared for you." Teddy peeked into the door.

"What do you mean, prepared? Doesn't he want to do the interview?" She already felt the nagging feeling at the pit of her stomach in thinking about having to deal with another hostile interview subject. It reminded her of Tyler the first time they met. She hoped this guy wouldn't act the way Tyler had on their first day together. One thing was certain. This teacher wouldn't be getting undressed in front of her.

"He's not into being interviewed. We had to do some gentle persuasion. But he's all for the story. Wait right here."

She smiled and nodded. A nice interview subject was better than a hostile one any time.

She leaned against a wall of lockers and glanced at her watch. She could interview this guy, go to dinner in DC and be home before the first question was asked on *Jeopardy*. A nice, quiet life wasn't so bad.

Soledad had lost her friendship with the Gucci Girls when they realized she didn't want to continue going out to parties every night like she had before. She'd grown up. Being out of the tabloids suited her fine.

Clearing her throat, she strolled over to a short, boxy water fountain. As she sipped the cold water, icy enough to chill her teeth all the way down to her gums, she heard the classroom door opening behind her.

"If you're going to send her in, just do it," a familiar voice said from the room. The voice was low with a southern drawl she hadn't heard since--No, it couldn't be him. He had a successful career. He had money. Why would he teach? And in Washington, DC? But the teacher's initials were TR. And Tyler had said he always wanted to teach. Could it be him?

She righted herself slowly, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and pivoted. Teddy emerged from the room a little flustered, but still with a smile on his face.

"Uh, he's ready for you," Teddy said.

She peered into the room over his head to see if she could see her subject. She saw the man's back as he stomped to the other side of the classroom. When she sauntered past Teddy, he whispered the words 'good luck' before returning to his office.

She crept into the room and scanned it. "Um, TR?"

"Yeah," he said from behind a mobile bulletin board. All she could see of him was his feet. He had on some loafers and cream-colored khakis. Definitely not Tyler's style. She'd never seen him out of either his wrestling gear or sweats and tee shirts. She hoped that he wasn't going to be this tight-lipped during the interview.

She sat at the edge of his desk, then thought better of it and stood again. "Did you want me to come back there?" she called to him.

"Say that again?" he asked.

"What?"

"Your voice sounded familiar." He rustled some papers, then she watched his feet turn and go to the side of the bulletin board. "What magazine are you with again?"

She set her bag on the desk. Or at least she thought she did. "I'm with--" She heard the slow hiss of the leather bag sliding off the desk and with her snail-like reflexes, the only thing

she was able to catch was the sound of her bag with her laptop and digital recorder inside crashing onto the ceramic floor.

“Perfect!” She crouched down with her back to TR. She lifted the bag and like castanets, pieces of her laptop or maybe from her recorder or maybe both, clicked together. “What a way to get back into work,” she mumbled.

“Here. Let me help.”

She felt a large presence move down next to her. A familiar musky scent swarmed around her that overpowered the familiar chalky smell. “I feel so foolish. I don’t usually drop things like this.” She turned her head and fell on her backside with a yelp.

Tyler Randolph. TR.

“Oh, my--my--” Each word he said came out softer and softer. It was the first time she had seen him speechless. It was also the first time she had seen him with hair. Short sprigs of brown hair peppered with gray that she couldn’t wait to touch, to feel the softness. If it wasn’t for his hazel eyes and goatee, she wouldn’t have recognized him.

In all of the scenarios she ran through her mind of how she would meet Tyler again, she’d never thought of this one. Tyler as a teacher and her being sent to interview him--again. She put her hand to her chest to contain or even try to slow her racing heart. She smiled and reached her hand out.

When he touched her and helped her to her feet, she scrambled to do the one thing she’d wanted to do since that day she’d walked away. She wanted to hold him and never let him go. As she reached out to him, he held her arms so that she couldn’t touch him. After all this time and all the lies Kevin told, why did it seem like he was mad at her?

“I’ve been wanting to tell you this for weeks.” He gazed at her, his eyes as steely as ever. She swallowed hard, afraid of what he might say.

“If you think you can just waltz back into my life, then you’re absolutely ... right.”

She blinked and covered her mouth with her hand, which he promptly removed.

“You’re going to be needing those in a minute.” He laughed. “I love you so much. And I’m not sure exactly what happened the night we parted, but it doesn’t matter now. What matters is that you’re here, with me.”

Her eyes filled up with tears as he let her arms go.

“So what do you have to say for yourself?” he asked.

She smiled. She didn’t mind him baiting her now. “The only thing I can say. I love you.”

In one swift motion, Tyler enveloped her in his arms. She held him so tightly she knew she would break his ribs, but she couldn’t let him go. Not again. Her heart pounded through her chest and bounced off his.

It was heavenly to feel his hard body again, smell his familiar musky scent, and to feel his goatee scratching her face. She missed it all. Her body trembled from being in his arms and if he hadn’t held her, she was sure her legs wouldn’t have been able to support her body. She had dreamed of this moment, but it was so much better. It was real.

For what seemed like eternity, they didn’t speak. He stared at her. She took him all in. She put her hand on his head, stroking his hair. As she suspected, his soft hair tickled her hand with each pass. He was still fine as hell. She let her hand travel slowly down his face to his neck and onto his chest. It was all coming back to her.

He ran his fingers through her hair. “Oh, Sunny. Sunny, Sunny, Sunny.” It was all he could say. “I can’t believe you’re here. Your hair is dark.”

That was the first thing she changed when she decided to move on. She had to be real. Having her hair dyed its natural dark brown color was the first step.

“Had I known you were the one interviewing me, I would have come to you.” His hand slid down to the side of her face, and he ran his thumb over her bottom lip. She held that hand and turned it to her mouth, kissing the palm.

“I never thought I would see you again,” she said as he held her tightly. He kissed her hard, his hand behind her head, his fingers entangled in her hair. It was like when he kissed her for the first time, but this time it was full of love and passion.

He stopped kissing her, but held her face in his hands. He stared at her. If she hadn’t have known better, she could have sworn he had tears in his eyes. She put her hands to his face again, but this time it wasn’t to get him to listen to her. She wanted to touch him.

“I just want to look at you. You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to look at you.” He nuzzled his nose into her hair. “I miss the way you smell.”

“I love you so much, Tyler. I can’t believe you’ve been in DC all of this time.”

“I thought you fell off the face of the earth.” He let his fingertips smooth down the side of her face again. “I called Heather, but she said you no longer worked there and hung up on me. I even went by the *One* office building in California. They said you turned down the job. The editor almost messed himself when he saw me.” Tyler laughed. It was so refreshing to hear him laugh again.

“Then I went to your parents’ house.”

Soledad wrinkled her nose and bit her lower lip before responding sheepishly. “My family summers in Greece. The house, except for the house manager, was empty.”

“No wonder. And why didn’t you answer your cell?”

“I, uh, lost my first cell phone. I got to order my own phone, shop for the right rates. I felt like a responsible adult for once.”

Tyler smiled. “When you took care of Maurice, you proved your adulthood.”

Her heart pumped electricity through her body. He understood her. From all of her relationships, being taken seriously was what she had ever wanted.

“I saw that teaser *One* printed with my name.” Her expression became serious. “Baby, you know I didn’t tell them any of that, and I didn’t take that picture.”

He nodded. “I know it now. Tanya confessed to the picture. I thought Mama was going to kill her.”

Soledad laughed. Good ol’ Shirley. “Then I got tied up getting Kevin arrested. My attorney said it was better for me if I didn’t associate myself with anything XTCWF until after the trial, but I had to find you.”

“So the rumors were true?” He stopped and cradled her face. “I never believe anything I hear in the news, especially about you. Did he hurt you? Tell me the truth. I heard some awful things about what he’d done, but I didn’t know it was you. Had I known, I would have--”

“I’m fine. Believe me. Now that he’s in jail until the trial, I’m better than fine. He’s being held without bail.”

He pulled her onto his lap as he sat. “I guess I have you to thank, then. That jerk planned on suing me for changing the ending of the match. With your case, he knew he wouldn’t have won. Plus he didn’t care at that point.”

She gave him a quick peck. “Should we be doing this in a classroom? I mean, me sitting on your lap.” Hoping he would still embody the same wild Tyler side, she hoped he wouldn’t let her get up.

"I don't care. I'm not letting you go again." He wrapped his arms around her waist. "So you did show up to my match."

"Yes, my brother let me use his ticket. But before I could sit down a security guard took me to a back locker room, and Kevin wouldn't let me leave. He's a little obsessed about you."

"I know. That's why I quit." He smiled. "I walked away from it all. The money, the fame, the fans. Kevin started talking about giving me these shots to keep me wrestling. I told him what he could do with his shots, then I left."

"Are you okay?" She wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"Oh, yeah. I'll still get money from all the XTCWF videos, and I invested well. My family made me realize that the lifestyle I wanted them to have was not the one that they wanted. Mama told me what a great financial planner her husband was. He'd invested in a great stock that just kept growing and growing. If Mama wanted a new house, she could buy it on her own. That's what she told me in a nutshell."

"That's not what I meant. Wrestling was your life. And to walk away like--"

"You're my life. Besides, even if I had continued, I wouldn't have been happy without you. I missed the hell out of you, woman." He kissed her neck.

"I missed you, too." She kissed the side of his head and laughed. "Why couldn't you tell me all this before?"

Tyler shook his head. "Stupid macho pride."

"You almost lost me." She interlaced her fingers with his.

"Almost." He lifted their union of hands and kissed hers.

"So are you okay?" she asked, scanning over his face. "Lionel said you talked to him after the match. His shirt was covered in your blood." She shook her head even thinking about it now.

"You tell me. Do I look okay?" He cocked up a smile.

He looked better than fine. She kissed him lovingly. "And your back?"

Although he'd never admitted a problem with it, he nodded. "Better. Doing some physical therapy now. We'll see how that goes. I may be able to avoid surgery." He kissed the side of her neck again. "By the way, loved the article. You did a great job."

"You really liked it?" she asked. She had to admit that she was even proud of the article. She'd painted an accurate and flattering portrayal of a special man.

"I read it every day. I even sent letters to your office, even though you were gone by then. I think you got me down pretty good and talked about diabetes without mentioning that I have it." He gave her a pat on her behind and a gentle squeeze. "But I felt ashamed and stupid for asking you not to write about it. It was my own vanity that made me not want to read about my condition in print. But when kids kept coming up to me afterward and thanking me for donating so much of my time and money for the research, I knew I had to come clean. So now I speak at schools and youth clubs about living with diabetes."

"Really? I'm so proud of you." She hugged him hard around his neck. She pulled back from him and took him all in. "So, a teacher, huh? You're living your dream. Are you doing this temporarily?" she asked.

"I did at first. Then I went on ahead and signed on for a year. I read about this school having a hard time keeping teachers, so I decided to take on the challenge."

"And how is it that you've managed to keep all of this a secret? The kids haven't told anyone?" she asked.

"I'm sure they have. But I told them and the administration that I wasn't doing this for

publicity and that I wanted to be treated like the rest of the teachers here. Administration has been cool about it. I told the kids that if they wanted me as a teacher that they needed to keep it a secret about me. I've met all of their parents before classes started, and they know I'm serious. It's been good so far. I had a couple of newspapers sniffing around here, but nothing major. Once you're out of the spotlight, you're old news."

Soledad knew about the paparazzi avoiding celebrities with no heat. Her star had cooled considerably since she'd stopped partying.

She saw that teaching made Tyler happy, and she was happy for him. He looked so different now, too, and it wasn't just the hair. He looked ... content.

"Let's promise we will always talk to each other about all of our problems. Always." She held his hand tighter.

"I promise. And promise me that you will never, ever run away from me again. I'm an old man. I can't keep running after you."

"I promise. I will never leave you again." She kissed the area above his eyebrow where his scar was. "I'm willing to stay and fight any battles with you. I'm not scared anymore. And I don't care what people think."

"Does that mean you want to--"

"Wait, let me do this right." She climbed off of his lap and lowered herself onto both knees.

He laughed out loud at the sight. "You're not supposed to be doing this. That's my job." He reached into the neck of his shirt and pulled out his necklace. At the end dangled a ring. Her ring. He unhooked his necklace and removed the ring.

"In one week, you made me the happiest I have ever been in my life." She held his hands. "I can't imagine my life without you because I lived it, and I hated it."

"You can't be asking me to marry you." He got down on his knees.

"Weren't you the one at the very beginning who said that at the end I would be the one asking you to marry me?"

"That was more Casanova talking than Tyler." He smiled.

"Casanova is you with the volume turned up. You told me that." She winked at him. "Tyler Bertram Randolph III, I love you. I want to spend my life getting to know more about you, loving you, supporting you and your dreams, as you support mine. Tyler, will you marry me?"

"Hell, yeah!" He slipped the ring onto her finger and hugged her tightly. "So I'll be Husband Number Eight?" Staring at her, he seemed as if he was mulling over the prospect.

Soledad took a deep breath and answered, "Yes. But I'm not marrying you for publicity or some rebellious act. It's you I want." She meant that. He would always be the strong, smart, beautiful protector she fell in love with from just one kiss.

Tyler asked, "How is it that you found me?"

She thought for a while and smiled. "Believe it or not, my mother found you and set up the interview with, what she told me, was an amazing teacher."

"Maybe she does like me." He beamed.

"I have to remember to thank her the next time I see her." She kissed him again. It was as though he had never stopped kissing her.

She suddenly pulled back from him and placed her hands on the sides of his face. "I'm still going to be my own person."

"That's understood."

“I don’t want to just be your wife.”

His face went serious. His mouth pulled down, drawing deep lines in his face. “I know you’re a strong, independent woman who can take care of yourself.”

“Right.”

“That’s what I love about you. You don’t need me, and yet you still want me. Makes me feel pretty damn special.”

She gave him another kiss while they remained on their knees.

Tyler’s students filtered back into the classroom and hooted and hollered when they saw him on the floor kissing her.

“TR, you can’t do that in school!” a young girl screamed.

“He’s an adult. He can do what he wants,” another boy countered.

Tyler helped Soledad to her feet. “Okay, y’all get to your seats.”

The students sat in their chairs as Tyler rolled a chair over for her. She picked up her bag and moved back the chair so it sat next to the door. She sat down and crossed her legs.

The students all looked at Tyler like he was a god. Wherever he moved, their eyes followed him. It was as though he was in the ring again about to wrestle an opponent. He had them mesmerized. Without a word, he oozed a power and a command over this classroom of thirty as he had with a stadium of twenty thousand screaming fans.

“Time to get down to some history.” Tyler picked up his lesson plan book as the class moaned loudly. “I know. I love it, too.” He went over to Soledad, leaned down and stopped. He looked over at his classroom. “What do y’all think? Can I give my future wife a kiss before we go on with class?” he asked.

“Yes!” they screamed.

He gave her a sweet kiss on her lips. “After class, under the bleachers,” he said in a whisper and winked playfully.

She smiled and winked at him. “I’ll be there.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.” She kissed his lower lip and tugged it between her lips. “Now go teach your class, and I’ll teach you something else, later.”

“I love you so much.” He gave her a quick peck.

The class applauded. He was still as captivating as his alter ego, Casanova, and still got applause for his kissing. Nothing had changed from the first time she’d met him. And that suited Soledad just fine.

The End