

# **SHATTERED DECEPTIONS**

**By**

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## SHATTERED DECEPTIONS



### PROLOGUE

Rafe slammed the manila folder down on his desk. “Damn it all to hell!” he swore shoving his chair back. Long angry strides carried him to the window overlooking the street below. He shook his head. “Why did I have to be right? Why couldn’t I have been wrong just this once,” he growled aloud. He ran his hands over his face and sighed. Well, what had he truly expected? He knew what she was when he married her.

But in the last three months he’d come to hope that the reasons he’d married Dani had been unfounded. She’d turned out to be a warm passionate lover as well as an interesting and vivacious companion. She was gentle and funny, exciting and comfortable all at the same time. He’d found himself actually wanting to spend more time at home since their marriage so he could spend it with her.

Rafe turned to glare at the offending folder and the top of the magazine sticking out over the top. Apparently she was also a very talented actress. She’d certainly fooled him all these weeks with an award winning performance...the perfect wife, hostess and marriage partner. And he prided himself on being such a good judge of character! She was after money any way she could get

it, even if it meant bringing the de Corba name into the public eye.

His first opinion about Dani had been right! He'd been a fool to let himself believe otherwise. Hadn't he seen for himself over the years how women were drawn to his power and wealth? No one made a fool of Rafe de Corba. No one! As soon as his brother's wedding was an accomplished fact, he'd see to the dissolution of his own travesty of a marriage.

Rafe realized that his own anger now was partly due to letting his emotions get involved with the physical side of his relationship with Dani. She'd led him on and he'd gone willingly. But no more! Two more days and he could get his lawyers to draw up the papers. Then she would be gone from his life for good.



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This was the first time Dani had been able to catch her breath since the reception began over two hours ago. The past few days had been a whirlwind of activity of last minute details to confirm for both the wedding and the lavish reception. But it had been well worth the extra effort, she thought watching the crowd of happy people, enjoying fine food, good company and romantic music. And everyone could not help but appreciate the obvious happiness of the bride and groom. Dani didn't know if it was pure luck or hard work, or both, but everything had been perfect for her brother-in-law's wedding. She sighed with pleasure as she pictured the church filled with masses of yellow roses, their delicate perfume enhancing the romance of the enchanting candlelight ceremony.

Dani smiled remembering how beautiful Kate looked standing next to Demetrio at the altar as they exchanged their wedding vows and rings. She couldn't have been happier for the newlyweds, or more pleased with Demetrio's choice of a bride. Looking at him now, you would never have guessed that he had been shy of marriage. He hadn't sopped smiling since Kate appeared in the church to walk down the aisle. He was besotted with his new bride and didn't care who knew it. Kate was now officially his and the de Corba men were said to be possessive of their women. From the smile on Kate's face, Dani didn't think she'd mind one bit.

Dani, a bride of only three months herself, had only known Kate for a few months, but they had become fast friends, an immediate rapport established upon their very first meeting. And now they were truly sisters, by marriage.

There was even a slight resemblance in the girl's radiant smiles. Dani's smile produced a delicious dimple on each cheek, earning her the nickname 'Dimples' as a child. Both women were petite with a fragile beauty that instinctively engendered protective emotions in a man. Where Kate's hair was long, dark brown, softened with flecks of gold, Dani's was the color of wheat, soft and long, reaching almost to her waist. Kate's large, dark eye brown eyes were warm, speckled with humor. While Dani's, in contrast, were a startling blue-green, glimmering with merriment when happy, or darkening to stormy sea green when angry or upset.

Dani stood just inside the elegant etched glass doors overlooking the immense patio surrounding the enormous lavender tiled swimming pool. Just beyond lay the immaculately manicured lawns and gardens. It was the perfect backdrop for the reception. Caught up in her own thoughts and pleasure, Dani was completely unaware of her own loveliness. She had never been inclined to spend more time than necessary in front of a mirror, so she was totally ignorant of the impact of her beauty in the floor-length peach dress with its deep cowl collar, a skirt of accordion pleats that whispered softly around her delicate ankles.

Now she looked eagerly about the groups of people, seeking to find only one person in the sea of humanity before her. One man who stood out in any gathering, not only because of his great height, but because his self-assurance, the sheer masculinity of him drew her like a magnet. The power of his stance drew her attention at once. He wore the mantle of power and wealth with ease and comfort, a powerful, influential man who welded his power with fairness and honesty, usually with easy gentle humor.

As she spotted him in a group to the right of the pool, a delicious tingling filled her, radiating from head to toe, creating a wild craving to be close to him. Her delight, warmth in just watching him made her smile a vision of wonder, filling her glowing green eyes as her gaze lingered lovingly on his tall, powerful frame, his head bent in conversation with some of the guests. She smiled as she watched his large hands gesture as he stressed a particular point he was making. His dark, elegant brow arched in question to something he didn't understand or took exception to.

Rafael de Corba! Dani sighed. It still amazed her, filling her with awe that this man was her husband. This big, wonderful man had chosen *her* to be his wife. Never in her twenty-four years had she ever dreamed of marrying anyone as exciting or intriguing as Rafe.

Dani, Danielle Grant, grew up in a small mid-western town, raised by an aunt and uncle after the death of her parents in an automobile accident. Her guardians hadn't really wanted the responsibility of a child, but being concerned about what others would think if they shirked their duty, they took her into their home. Reluctantly, they had given her a place to live, but they had not been able to offer any warmth or encouraged the closeness children crave. Now that Dani thought about it, there had never been any touching or show of affection between her aunt and uncle, at least not in her presence.

Lester Grant, her father's brother, and his wife, Thelma had stressed the value of hard work. Dani had been assigned chores around the house and they had to be done each day or have a good explanation why they hadn't been done. They were strict about her schooling too. Dani was there to learn and her homework was checked every night by her uncle to be sure that it was complete and correct. Because of this, Dani knew they cared about her in their own way. But there had been no hugs or kisses, just a pat on the back for something done especially well.

Dani's own parents had been very demonstrative, so by age nine when she went to live with the older couple, she had already developed into a caring, touching person with a vivacious personality who lavished affection on friends and her pets. She'd also had a childhood friend whose parents had treated her like a daughter, and had reinforced what her parents had begun. Unfortunately, they had moved out of the state when the girls were fifteen. They had corresponded for sometime but after a couple of years the letters had dropped off and they lost contact.

Now, Dani was married to one of the richest, most prominent men in New Mexico, a man sought after by countless women. He had certainly been the object of many a mother's choice as husband for their eligible daughters. But he had chosen her, Dani, to share his life. Her eyes were aglow with love as she adoringly watched her magnificent husband. Her gaze cherished him as she devoured him from afar, tilting her head to one side in concentrated study.

"He's not worth all that adulation, my lovely Dani. Why not direct some of your loving attention to someone who can truly appreciate your delicate beauty and wealth of un-awakened passions?" Rafe's bride had entranced Adrian the first time they met. She was not only lovely, but she was a welcome change from the usual women in their social circle. Position and money didn't impress her. This fascinated Adrian and he intended to get to know her very well in the future.

Dani turned to stare into the gray eyes of one of the guests, most assuredly not one of her favorite people, but a business associate of the de Corba family. She'd developed an immediate aversion to Adrian Bernard upon their first meeting. And he had done nothing in the time since to alter her opinion. Unfortunately, he fancied her. More than fancied, if you could believe the flamboyant words of praise that came so easily to his thin lips. His brazen attentions whenever they were in the same room were now turning offensive. Dani avoided him whenever possible.



The conceited man thought he was the world's gift to women. Well, this was one woman who wasn't impressed. Far from it! Even if she weren't married to Rafe, she would never be drawn to someone like Adrian. He was too shallow and too wrapped up in himself to have anything to give to a serious relationship.

"I'm afraid I'm a one man woman, to quote a well-worn phrase, Adrian."

Her stormy green eyes were as cool as her tone, but the combination only piqued his interest. What appeared out of reach looked that much more attractive and challenging. And Dani de Corba was definitely worth a fight.

"What a pity. Are you sure you're woman enough to hold the magnificent de Corba? My dear, he does have quite a reputation, or appetite if you will, for beautiful women. And going by past behavior, he seems to change women as often as some men change their clothes. I wonder how long before he begins to tire of married life?" A small, satisfied smile lifted the corners of his mouth as he noted the blush of color brought to her cheeks by his inconsiderate words.

Unfortunately, those same words had haunted Dani from time to time during her brief marriage. What could she possibly have to keep Rafe by her side that others, more beautiful, more sophisticated had in abundance and failed? She certainly wasn't tall and well endowed like many of the women she'd met so far. She was barely five foot three inches tall and not much over one hundred pounds. She and Rafe did have some interests in common. Both loved the outdoors, walking and swimming. And he'd introduced her to boating which she took to immediately. Thank goodness he didn't have much interest in hunting, because she would have to draw the line there. There was no way she could kill anything. And books! They both loved reading and drawing.

"I'll just have to make sure he has no reason to regret marrying me, won't I?" Dani chuckled confidently,

more for her sake, mere bravado. But it did make her feel stronger. “Maybe I’m not very big, but I can be a powerhouse when aroused. And that is something you’ll never experience.” If only she felt as confident as she sounded. Adrian’s lack of respect for her wishes only increased her dislike. There was something about his bearing that made her think he felt himself above every one else that turned her off. He was handsome enough, if you liked the perfect, never a hair out of place, perfectly groomed type. But she didn’t. She preferred a people person, someone who could relate to anyone no matter what his or her position in life. And that was Rafe.

Adrian’s loud bark of laughter drew the attention of others in the immediate area. To those watching, he and Dani appeared to be engaged in an intimate conversation. If Adrian was aware of this, he fed the illusion. “With your beauty and sense of humor, you just might hang on to him longer than any of the others. But,” he trailed a long finger down her cheek before she could jerk away, “he will turn his attentions to new interests. And when that time comes, I intend to be there, to console the heartbroken wife.”

Adrian had known Rafe for a long time. He’d seen how Rafe had never had to pursue any woman; they all came to him. Over the years he’d had his pick of any woman he’d wanted. Adrian had promised himself that one-day Rafe de Corba would find himself in a bad relationship, and now he hoped this was the one. Only Adrian planned to be there to console the distraught ex-wife.

“Don’t waste your time, Adrian. If I couldn’t have Rafe, I wouldn’t want anyone. Especially you. I’ve asked you before to leave me alone. Now I’m asking you again. Please stop this nonsense. I’m simply not interested.” The slim thread holding her temper under control was threatening to give way. She didn’t want to make a scene, but if that is what it was going to take to make him leave her alone, it just might be worth it.

Before he could reply, another man quietly joined them, standing close by Dani's side.

"Adrian, I just spoke with Vanessa. She's been looking for you. Why don't you join her out by the pool, hm?" Diego de Corba was Rafe's uncle, tall as his nephew, with a thick head of gorgeous white hair, white as his mustache. He might be seventy-one years old, but he looked ten years younger with a still slim, erect carriage, clear tanned face, and the most wonderful black eyes that shone with merriment whenever he was with Dani.

"Mr. de Corba," Adrian bowed his head in acknowledgment. Even brash Adrian knew better than to antagonize Diego. He nodded to Dani. "I'll see you later," he said before turning to leave. He could not have missed Diego's scowl of disapproval. Adrian might be forced to move on now but he hoped he'd planted some seeds of doubt with Dani about her relationship with Rafe. Much could grow from one little seed.

"That man had better learn not to trespass," Diego growled as he studied Dani's frown.

"I'm fine, Diego," she said trying to underplay the incident.

"What was he saying to you? All I heard was the anger in your last words."

"Just the usual," she sighed. "I've told him repeatedly that I don't want anything to do with him, but he won't listen. But at least our paths don't cross that often. Thank heaven. I'll see to that!"

"Maybe I should have a word with him. Or, better yet, Rafe. You are his responsibility. Have you spoken to him about Adrian?" Diego was well aware of Adrian's female relationships. He didn't care if the woman in question was married or not. If he fancied her, he moved in and it was rumored he'd been the cause of more than one marriage break-up. Of course, his relationships never lasted too long. If the current woman became too clinging, he ended it to move on to his next conquest. Well, Dani wasn't going to be one of them.

“No, I haven’t said anything to Rafe. And please don’t bother him, Diego. I’m a big girl. I can’t go running to him whenever something or someone annoys me.”

“Rafe is your husband and if another man is paying you unwanted attention, he should be the one to deal with it. You may be grown up in years, but you are still an innocent in dealing with the likes of Adrian Bernard. I don’t have much faith in his business abilities, and less in regard to his attentions towards you.”

“Where I grew up, we were taught to handle our own problems. And Rafe is so busy. It would be senseless to expect him to neglect important matters to handle something I’m perfectly capable of dealing with myself. I’ll be just fine.” Dani patted his hand. Diego was from the old school where men protected their women, and while terribly romantic, it was not practical in today’s world. But Dani loved him for his concern.

Diego’s brow arched questioningly in the way she had come to adore. He had taken her under his wing from their first meeting, had in fact become her champion. He’d made her feel like an adored addition to the family.

“We will let the matter rest for now. But, Dani, you are going to have to learn that men in the de Corba family take care of their own, as chauvinistic as that may sound. For all your proclaimed independence, I think you need caring for more than most women.” His large hands cupped her face as he dropped a paternal kiss to her forehead. Diego hadn’t approved of Rafe’s trip to Mexico because he thought he’d been over-reacting at the time. He hadn’t had much information upon which to base his opinion. But after he’d brought Dani home with him, Diego had come to appreciate what a fine, loving young woman she was. He’d disapproved of Rafe’s reasons for marrying Dani but over the last couple of months had seen the way his nephew was coming to love his young wife. Of that he definitely approved.

She wrapped her arms around Diego in a hug, and then stretching up on tiptoe she kissed his cheek. "Oh, I wish I'd had an uncle like you when I was growing up."

"Well, I'm here now. And you are a de Corba, something of which I am extremely proud." Arm in arm they went to join Rafe.

Dani stood facing Rafe, her mind not really focusing on the conversation as she observed her husband as he talked. Just looking at him, his tall, muscular body made her ache to be alone with him. Alone, where he could strip away their clothing and touch her as only he could. Where she could bury her fingers in his thick black hair, only the barest hint of gray at the temples. At first glance, he would never be considered handsome, but he possessed a rugged attractiveness combined with a forceful, dominating personality, and a dynamic projection of self-assurance that made heads turn wherever he went.

That many people perceived Rafe in varied ways had been demonstrated over and over during their brief marriage. With her he was the passionate husband and lover. His sense of humor lifted her spirits; his intelligence kept her fascinated, while his strength was a buffer against...harm? Now why did that word come to mind? She had seen his impatience with incompetence, knew without a doubt his temper would be devastating if fully aroused. She had no desire to witness such a scene.

Rafe's mother had been born in Greece, while his father was raised in Spain. The elder de Corba had moved all his holdings to New Mexico just before Rafe was born. Rafe and his brother were the products of two hot-blooded cultures. Tempers could reign fire down upon those foolish enough to ignite the flame of anger in a de Corba.

Now, it was Rafe's turn to study Dani. She looked so serene standing close to Diego's side. A sudden flare of something flashed in his eyes. A look of distaste flickered over his features before he quickly looked away. How could a woman look so beautifully innocent but be so conniving? And to think he was beginning to believe he'd

been wrong about her. Well, looks could certainly be deceiving and in Dani's case, this was more than true. He'd been lulled into a false sense of security by her natural loveliness and humor. But now he was well aware that there was much more beneath that illusion that she didn't share with the world. He'd almost let himself be played for a fool. But, fortunately, he'd found out just in time.

Dani frowned. Why had Rafe suddenly looked at her as if she'd done something wrong? She had sensed something was bothering him last night, but there had been no time to question his mood. She'd assumed he was preoccupied with the plans for the wedding. He'd been cool in his manner towards her all day. This realization brought Adrian's words back to taunt her. Was Rafe growing tired of her already? Suddenly, Dani felt a moment of panic. Was he regretting their hasty marriage?

Discounting that possibility, Dani quickly whirled into their group. Demetrio held his new wife close by his side as he spoke confidentially to their small gathering. "I hope you won't think we're deserting everyone, but we want to be alone." A lecherous growl brought hoots of knowing laughter from everyone. He'd known Kate since they were children due to their family's long association. And he'd been aware of the desire of his father and her father that they unite the two families through marriage. Kate had always seemed so young to him since she was several years younger. As a teenager she'd been awkward with freckles and braces and seemed to make an argument out of everything that he said in her company. It was no wonder he fought this marriage. That was until he'd met the grown-up Kate. No more braces now.

"Demetrio!" Kate's disapproval was negated by the love as she gazed adoringly into his eyes. He gave her a wide, teasing smile meant for her alone. Kate had been in love with Demetrio forever. But he had been older and always seemed to just tolerate her presence while they were growing up. When he began to date other girls,

she'd be devastated until he moved on to another one. She'd done her share of dating too, but no one had ever measured up to Demetrio de Corba.

"You're going to have your hands full with this de Corba," Rafe said grinning. Everyone knew how fond he was of Kate, and her family. And how much he approved of this union. Their parents had planned for this wedding while Kate and Demetrio were still very young. Rafe thought it sad that his parents couldn't be here to see the happy ending. He'd always been very fond of Kate. She was as charming and delightful, as she was beautiful. He'd been aware of her crush on his brother and had even encouraged it. In one respect it was fortunate that neither Kate nor Demetrio had been in any hurry to get married. Kate had wanted to get her education while his brother had some growing up to do. Rafe was confident that they would make a good marriage now.

Kate laughed. "Fortunately, I was fully aware of that before the ceremony. Life will never be dull with him around." She reached up to kiss her new husband on the chin. Then she turned to Dani. "Will you come upstairs to help me change?" The glow in her eyes mirrored the scope of her happiness.

"Of course." She moved away from Diego's side. Dani glanced up at Rafe, shocked by the coldness reflected in his dark eyes as he looked at her, before quickly turning his attention to the others. Dani wanted to ask him what was wrong. What had she done? But, obviously this was neither the time nor the place to address that issue. But what could she have done to merit such a scathing look? Dani forced a smile as she followed Kate up the stairs. She wouldn't let anything mar Kate's wedding day.

As the two women left the men, Dani heard them discussing the readiness of the waiting car that would take the newlyweds to an undisclosed destination for ten uninterrupted days...and nights. Demetrio was the only one who knew where they were going. Even the bride was not to know until they were on their way.

Upstairs, Kate was changing in the master bedroom, the room Dani shared with Rafe. As she helped Kate out of her gown, they chatted happily. "I'm so happy for you, Kate."

"I can't believe we're finally married. We've been engaged for so long. For some time now, I wasn't sure I even wanted to marry him even though I've loved him forever."

"But why?" Dani couldn't hide her surprise. Kate had never hinted at doubts before. "I know you and Demetrio hadn't seen each other regularly, not until Rafe and I returned from our honeymoon."

"Well, you know our marriage was more or less arranged by my father and Demetrio's, before he died." Dani nodded as she handed Kate the lovely ivory silk dress she'd chosen as her going away outfit. "Oh, they never forced the issue, but it was obvious they wanted a union of our two families."

Arranged marriages were unheard of today, but considering that both fathers were born in Spain and lifelong friends, it was understandable. It was generally the oldest son who had his wife chosen for him, but in this case, Demetrio and Kate were just the right ages for each other. Even as children they made a cute twosome.

"We were so young when it was first brought up, I don't think either one of us gave it serious thought. But as we grew older, it was plain our fathers were hoping we'd get together. And I was attracted to Demetrio. I thought he was the handsomest boy I'd ever seen. He is a few years older and so good-looking. My father wanted us to marry when I left school, but I knew I wasn't ready. Besides, I'd heard stories about him that alarmed me. Guess it was youth, insecurity. How could I compete with the pretty women he seemed to be with all the time?"

Dani was puzzled. "What could be bad about Demetrio? He's a terrific person."

Kate appeared averse to continue. She sighed. "He has quite a reputation with women. I'd seen some of my



school friends marry only to discover their husbands out with other women. I didn't want to be on the receiving end of that kind of treatment. And frankly, I didn't know if I could or wanted to compete. I was training for work that I loved. I just wasn't ready to take on the responsibility of a relationship with someone who is so...," she searched for the right word.

"Fun-loving?" Dani supplied. Demetrio had a sadistic sense of humor that was hilarious and kept everyone in stitches. And he was smart and interesting to talk to on many subjects.

"Yes, I guess that's one way of putting it. But once we spent time together, I knew he wasn't at all like the stores about him. He makes me feel so special. And while he loves to relax and play, he also takes his work seriously. We like doing so many of the same things, read the same books. And he even likes apple pie with chocolate ice cream."

Dani laughed. "You don't have to sell him to me. He's a great guy. And Kate. He loves you very much." She sought to reassure her new sister-in-law. "Admittedly, he was reluctant to see you again after all that time. But when you walked into the room that first night after our return to New Mexico, he was smitten, yours heart and soul from that moment on." Dani laughed delightedly at Kate's shocked expression.

"I guess he did stay by my side most of the evening didn't he?"

"Kate. All he remembered was a young girl with braces on her teeth, kind of skinny with braids. But that night, you were obviously all grown up. You almost knocked him off his feet in that black dress." It had narrow straps, showed a modest amount of cleavage, and was extremely low cut in the back.

"It was pretty daring, wasn't it?" Kate giggled.

"You looked beautiful. And nothing like he expected. He had not been happy about that dinner. But

after one look at you in that dress, we couldn't pry him away from your side."

Dani recalled the argument between the two brothers just before Kate had come to stay with them. Demetrio was furious that he should have this pressure of having a wife chosen for him, while Rafe had been free to marry someone of his own choosing. Even though he'd known about this engagement for years, Rafe was now forcing the issue and insisting on making the marriage a reality.

The heated words between Rafe and Demetrio had bounced off the library walls. As head of the de Corba family, Rafe was adamant their father's last wish be carried out. He had naturally kept in touch with the Montello family since they were almost like family, besides being close business associates. He'd tried to assure Demetrio that Kate was everything he could ever want in a woman.

Kate studied Dani, her head tipped to one side in contemplation. "I'll tell you a secret. When I first met you, I knew you and Demetrio were close. And I thought he might have even been in love with you." Kate watched Dani closely, a small chip of doubt still lingering.

Dani's lips twitched as laughter bubbled up, finally erupting. She reached out, gathering Kate in a reassuring hug. "That's that last thing in the world you have to worry about, Kate. My relationship with Demetrio has been that of brother and sister from our first meeting. Talk about no chemistry! Oh, he tried to kiss me once, but we both couldn't keep from laughing. It was like kissing a family member. When we finally stopped laughing we agreed that our only option was to become pals instead of lovers. And neither of us would want it any other way."

"Oh, I realize that now. Demetrio told me all about your meeting in the hotel in Acapulco, and the time you spent sightseeing together. That is, before Rafe turned up and swept you away into a whirlwind courtship and marriage. I want our marriage to be as happy as yours with

Rafe.” Kate said reaching out to touch Dani on the arm reassuringly.

“As a matter of fact, Demetrio came to my rescue. Some man, who’d had too much to drink, had been pestering me. So, Demetrio gallantly stepped in acting as if we were long lost friends. He sent that bore backing in minutes. It’s amazing, Kate. Any single woman sitting alone has to put up with all kinds of invitations, many of them not very flattering and most by men who you wouldn’t look at twice if you met them on the street.” Dani shivered as she recalled how that drunken, obnoxious man had hovered over her, his breath almost rocking her from the chair. His nearness had been revolting. The acrid smell of cigarette smoke clung to him like a heavy cologne.

“Well, Demetrio and I struck up a bargain. He was tired and sought pure relaxation, while I was frustrated with men who thought an unescorted woman was fair game. By pairing up, we discouraged unwanted attentions. We were free to simply enjoy ourselves. Romance was never an issue.” Dani and Demetrio had laughed, played, and teased each other unmercifully during that time. But it had all been in fun. There was no romantic or physical chemistry to encourage any other type of relationship.

But then Rafe unexpectedly appeared at the hotel. He actually thundered into her life, swept her into a romance that took her by storm, giving her no time to doubt it’s suddenness, or to question their love for one another. After just a few hours in his company and Dani was completely overwhelmed by the sheer masculine power of this fabulous man.

Kate smiled at Dani’s preoccupied, faraway look, sensing her thoughts were on her own husband. “You love Rafe very much, don’t you?”

“Oh, Kate. I can’t tell you what he means to me. How much I love him. He’s made me feel cherished; he’s given me a home and made me a part of his wonderful family.” Dani’s lovely eyes spoke more eloquently than words ever could. No one had ever made her feel so

wanted, so loved. During the years she'd spent living with her aunt and uncle she'd always felt like an unwanted guest, one that had overstayed her welcome. But Rafe had made his home her home with his love. Her cheeks warmed recalling their many nights of loving, his gentleness and the way he could arouse her to a height of passion she'd never known she possessed.

Kate finished dressing, ready now to return downstairs to her new husband. The two women smiled, understanding the love each felt for their respective men. Dani hugged Kate one last time. "Be happy, Kate. And never doubt how much Demetrio loves you. He just had to grow up to become worthy of his woman...you."

"I know we will be. Oh, Dani, it's going to be so wonderful having a sister like you. Our children will grow up together, close like brothers and sisters." Arm in arm they left the bedroom, their laughter echoing down the hall.

But Dani's thoughts returned to her own husband and his odd behavior the past twenty-four hours. It was so confusing. If she'd done something wrong, she couldn't imagine what it was. Rafe had made love to her last night but there had been a strange urgency to it, almost as if he were trying to imprint every inch of her under his hands and in his mind. Afterwards, she'd curled up next to him and he'd automatically put his arm around her, drawing her close to his side, but for some reason, Dani had felt that mentally he'd left their bed. She'd fallen into an uneasy sleep and when she woke in the morning, Rafe was already up and had left the bedroom.



## CHAPTER 2

Later that night, the house seemed unnaturally quiet after the happy laughter and merriment of the reception. Even the housekeeper retired early, having had a full day. Everything had been cleared away and cleaned up from the reception. Outwardly, the house was back to normal.

Dani sat at her dressing table, brushing her long hair, as Rafe stood by a table next to the door, his large hands impatient as he sorted through his briefcase for something. “Wasn’t this just the perfect day for Demetrio and Kate?” Dani looked up to see Rafe’s unsmiling face as he continued to rummage through the folders. She frowned. He had changed into jeans and a soft light blue shirt emphasizing his long legs and broad shoulders. Dani’s heart thudded with love and longing as she watched him. Her frown deepened. She had to find out what, if anything was wrong.

Laying the brush on the dressing table, Dani stood, hesitant in the face of this side of Rafe, one she’d not seen before. Needing to know what was troubling him, she quickly crossed to his side, placing her small hand on his arm.

“Rafe? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is the matter, Dani. It’s just been a long day.” Rafe’s manner was brusque. He ignored her hand on his arm, something he’d never done in the past. Before, he would have covered her hand with his large one, or raised

her hand to his lips. Or put his arm around her. But never ignore her.

“You were very quiet last night, and now you seem far away from me.” He straightened, towering over her. But she didn’t back down. “If I can help, if there’s anything I...”

“All I need right now, Dani, is a little peace and quiet,” he barked. “Go to bed. I have some work to do downstairs.”

“Please, Rafe...” but the door was already closed, his harsh behavior freezing her to the spot. Dani couldn’t believe this was happening. Torn between a desire to comfort him, to be near him and a fear of his rejecting her a second time within minutes kept her rooted to the spot. She didn’t move. There had been no warmth as he’d looked at her just now, just a hard penetrating glare, as if she was something unpleasant in his presence.

Dani was distraught. Rafe had been somewhat remote, cool to her all day, but she’d put it down to the pressure and excitement of the wedding. She stepped towards the bedroom door, and then turned back into the room. She shivered as if the temperature had just dropped twenty degrees. Adrian’s words came surging forward as a tiny doubt began to form. Could Rafe be tired of her already? Was he regretting their hasty marriage? Her movements were automatic, as she disrobed, burrowing under the covers on the big bed, seeking some form of comfort from the chill penetrating the room. A chill that had absolutely nothing to do with the air temperature.

This was the first time she’d gone to bed alone. The first time in their married life when Rafe was not there to hold her close to his big body, naked, warm and safe in his arms.

Tears gathered in her eyes over flowing to run unbidden down her pale cheeks. Suddenly, she felt isolated from the one person who gave purpose to her life. As she’d told Kate, Rafe meant the world to her. He *was* her world now. For the first time in a very long time Dani cried

until exhaustion dried her tears, releasing her to a troublesome sleep.

Rafe went down to his study but he couldn't concentrate on the papers in front of him. He shook his head, reading them a second time. He had an important meeting in the morning and needed to be aware of all the information in this file. But his mind kept wandering to another file, one that had confirmed his suspicions. He'd been right but it brought him no comfort. He'd almost begun to believe that Dani was really the warm, funny, passionate woman she portrayed. How could a woman look so innocent but be so cunning? He had to give her credit for being a fabulous actress. She'd almost had him convinced. Almost.

The next morning both Rafe and Diego had already left the house by the time she'd entered the dining room. This was so unlike him. At least, the Rafe she'd known during their short marriage. He'd never left without saying goodbye either upstairs or at breakfast.

Having had no appetite at breakfast, she'd made due with a glass of orange juice and a cup of tea. Now, at noon, she'd thought herself hungry. But since the waiter had placed the plate in front of her, it was all she could do to pick at the chicken salad, pushing it from one side of the plate to the other. So much for shopping to take her mind off Rafe's odd behavior. She thought getting out of the house, away from those empty rooms would make her feel better. But it hadn't..

Rafe hadn't come to bed last night. Her restless, uneasy sleep caused her to sleep later than usual this morning, a drug like sleep that had taken some time to wear off. But she'd come fully awake, as the haze finally lifted, as her mind registered that the pillow next to her was smooth, no indication where Rafe's head should have been. She'd practically fallen from the bed in her haste to check the adjoining dressing room, which was so large it could actually be used as a small bedroom if needed.

And evidently Rafe had thought there was a need, because the covers were thrown back on the twin bed, the pillow rumpled from use. So he hadn't intended to sleep with her. This realization twisted like a knife in her heart. That spark of doubt grew larger. Was he tired of her already?

Now her lunch looked totally unappetizing. Dani finally pushed the plate away from her, all pretenses at eating gone. Her table was on the terrace of the restaurant overlooking a colorful garden, but she was too tense, too distraught to appreciate the botanical display.

It was true that she and Rafe had married in haste, only a couple of weeks after their first meeting, but it had felt so right. Rafe was everything she had ever thought of or dreamed of in a husband. And more. He'd completely captivated her, surrounding her with his strength, his constant attention, demanding all of her time. In that short time, he'd won her love and devotion.

A faraway haze clouded her lovely eyes as she remembered the beginning of her vacation just over three months ago. She'd actually met Rafe through Demetrio. The luxurious vacation in Acapulco had been the result of cautious spending and an intense desire to do something special. The first day at the hotel, she'd been enjoying a leisurely glass of iced tea by the pool, savoring the splendor of the palatial surroundings, the glamour of the other guests, when a stranger approached, asking to share her table. And of course, he would buy her a drink.

Dani had never been one to make snap judgments about people, but something about this man screamed caution. He reeked of alcohol, the smell instantly repelling. Her response had been polite, but a firm no thanks. But he still wouldn't leave her alone. As annoyance turned to anger, she was ready to leave when another man spoke directly behind her.

"Charlie, old boy, why don't you just take yourself off somewhere and learn a few manners. This lovely lady is



obviously not interested in your drink or your company. And since she is with me, I most certainly do object.”

Dani had had to turn slightly to see the owner of that wonderful deep voice, see who had come to her rescue, only to find she had to tilt her head way back to see him properly. He was well over six feet in height and absolutely gorgeous, with curly black hair, dancing brown eyes, and such a devastating smile it was guaranteed to melt any heart.

Old Charlie uttered an oath, making her blush at his crudeness. “I might have known the prettiest girl here would be with you,” his words had been slurred by drink. “Why is it the de Corba men always have the first pick of the women?” With this parting remark, he’d staggered slightly as he made his way to the upper terrace and the bar.

“Thank you, Mr. de Corba?” Demetrio had taken the chair next to her as she spoke. Still smiling, he raised her hand to his lips.

“It is my pleasure to be of assistance to such a gentle beauty as you my lovely angel. And my name is Demetrio. But you may call me darling, or any endearment that may come to mind. And as we sit here enjoying the beauty of our surroundings, I shall order lunch. Then you can tell me the story of your life.” He’d been so funny with his affected dignity and nobility, she’d burst out laughing. Dani couldn’t help but like this brash knight who had come so boldly to her rescue. It never crossed her mind to decline his luncheon plans.

Over the leisurely lunch, they exchanged family history, likes and dislikes, finding much in common, so by the end of the meal, they had developed a friendly companionship. If, to those who saw them together during the next few days, they looked like lovers, they could not have been more mistaken. As she had assured Kate, there was never any romance involved, just a pleasant, uninvolved relationship, each helping the other to enjoy a carefree, relaxing vacation.

And that was all Dani and Demetrio had wanted. He had been tired and needing a rest, but found himself plagued by every unattached female in the vicinity. Not that you could blame the ladies. Demetrio was heartbreakingly handsome. Dani's comparison of him to a fun loving, big old teddy bear was guaranteed to bring a fierce scowl to his tanned face. All in fun, of course.

The arrangement had been ideal for Dani too. Any unattached, attractive female was fair game, or so it seemed. And Dani, with her golden hair and flawless natural beauty, drew much attention. Demetrio's place by her side kept suitors at bay. He'd been an excellent, amusing guide, his sense of humor keeping them laughing day and night. Those few days had been a marvelous relaxing, tension free time.

There had been some who had tried to intrude upon their time, but Demetrio had been firm as he declined invitations. So for the first three days, they had spent time sight seeing, swimming or taking walks along the sun-kissed beaches.

Then, out of the blue, Rafe de Corba appeared at the hotel, much to the puzzlement of his younger brother. Demetrio had been happy to see Rafe, and it was obvious to see the closeness shared by the brothers. But Demetrio had never known Rafe to do anything on the spur of the moment. Spontaneity was not a word in Rafe's vocabulary, or so his younger brother thought. And Rafe rarely took vacations. He wasn't one to drop everything to take time off. When Demetrio had last seen him, Rafe had indicated he would be tied up for several weeks with important business.

Dani had seen nothing strange in Rafe's appearance, but then she didn't know him. "Perhaps he just needs to relax for a while. You did say how hard he works, didn't you?"

"That's what has me puzzled. We have three important deals requiring his constant attention. And there is no way he could have taken care of all that in such a

short time. Even my powerful, all knowing, all seeing brother can't work miracles like that."

"Could be a lull in the negotiations, or something. You said he has his own plane, so he can be anywhere he wants in a short time." Dani sipped a soft drink watching the frown crease Demetrio's brow.

"Could be, I suppose. But if you knew big brother as I do, you'd have some doubts too. Then again, maybe one of his constant admirers has become a little too persistent, and this is his way of cooling her off." Demetrio shrugged off any remaining qualms as the conversation once again became general, as they awaited the appearance of the formidable brother. His description of Rafe was that of such a hard, calculating man, Dani wasn't sure she even wanted to meet this particular de Corba.

Dani's momentary mental reflections were interrupted by a sultry voice calling her name. "Darling, Dani. Are you all right? You seemed so far away just now." The stunning redhead eased into the chair across the table, a well-manicured hand patting her hair, not doubt checking to be sure that every strand was in place. Dani sighed. It was just her luck to run into the one woman who could make her day even worse.

"Hello, Vanessa." Dani couldn't control her lack of enthusiasm as she blinked back to reality. Vanessa was not one of her favorite people and she was sure the feeling was mutual. They had only met twice previously. But it was more than obvious to each of them there was no basis for a friendship. Oh. Vanessa had been warm and friendly, too much so in front of others. But when the two women were alone, Vanessa's true antagonism toward Dani surfaced. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why. Rafe.

"What's wrong, dear? Is Rafe turning out to be more than *you* can handle? Or," she made no attempt to hide the hostility, "is he bored with your already?"

This question hit so close to the target, Dani was momentarily lost for a retort, color draining from her already pale face. First Adrian and now Vanessa hinting

about her lack of ability to keep Rafe interested. Dani felt a small fracture appear in her composure. Rafe had slept in another room last night and he'd been barely civil to her all day except in front of their guests. Taking a deep breath, Dana folded the napkin placing it on the table. "Rafe is just fine, Vanessa. And our marriage couldn't be better," Dani lied. This was the last person she would ever confide in. Even so, lying did not come easy to Dani. She'd always believed that if you told the truth it was much easier to remember than a string of lies.

A perfectly penciled eyebrow raised in doubtful arrogance. "Shall I tell you something that I'm sure your husband has failed to mention?"

"I really don't think you can tell me anything of any great importance concerning Rafe, but I'm sure you're going to try." Dani tried to appear more relaxed. If she could project confidence, maybe Vanessa would go bother someone else when she failed to rattle her current prey. If she realized just how upsetting this conversation was becoming, Vanessa would never leave Dani alone.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll find this interesting to say the least." When Dani remained silent, Vanessa's dark, cold eyes dared her to argue. "Rafe and I have known each other for many years, and have been extremely close during most of that time. He is such a fantastic lover, isn't he?" Vanessa had her sights on Rafe for over three years now and she wasn't about to let this little nobody step in and ruin her plans. She was going to be the next Mrs. Rafe de Corba or go down trying. Not only was Rafe wealthy, he was also young and handsome. Her former two husbands had been rich but they'd been older by at least thirty years. So, not only would her third husband been able to cater to her expensive tastes, he would also be so good to look at.

"I hate to disappoint you, Van, but the relationships Rafe had before our marriage do not interest me. The only issue that does concern me is that he chose *me* for his wife. Evidently, you failed him in some way or he might have married you instead." Inside Dani was crying, *please just*

*leave me alone.* But she had to retain her cool, calm exterior, anything to prevent a look of satisfaction she knew Vanessa would assume if the older woman thought she was succeeding in her attempt to upset Rafe's wife.

Van's lips thinned in anger. "You little bitch. Well, I'll let you in on an aspect of your relationship with Rafe that just might surprise you. The only reason he turned to you was to get even with me."

At this Dani couldn't control a tremor of mental pain.

"That's right, Dani. We had a disagreement and he stormed out of *our* apartment. The next thing I knew he was back with a little wife in tow. You. Oh, he's trying to make the best of an uncomfortable situation, but it's only a matter of time."

"I don't believe you." But the seed of doubt had been sewn, fertilized by Rafe's unexplainable attitude since yesterday and by Adrian's hints at the reception yesterday about her husband losing interest.

"Why don't you ask him then? Or are you afraid of the answer? Normally, he might lie to avoid hurting your feelings, but I sense his displeasure in this hasty marriage, so he'll undoubtedly tell you the truth now."

Dani's hands began to shake. She pulled them from the table clenching them together in her lap. She longed to get up and walk away from Vanessa and her cruel words but her legs wouldn't have supported her if she'd tried to stand.

Realizing she now had the upper hand, Van's hands were sure and steady as she confidently lit a cigarette, blowing the smoke across the table. Vanessa smiled. Rafe had certainly picked himself an innocent in this little twit. And she was so easily rattled. This was going to be so easy that it almost took the fun out of it.

Dani waved away the offending haze with a trembling hand. Ignoring Van's questions, she asked, "What do you hope to gain by this revealing conversation? Rafe is my husband, and I'm sure you're quite familiar

with his beliefs concerning divorce? I fail to see any reason to continue this discussion.” She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt as that one little seed of suspicion took root threatening to branch out, stripping her of what little composure that she had remaining.

“Oh, grow up Dani. This is the twenty first century. A man and woman can live together without marriage and be accepted in society.”

Dani was taken aback. “You’d be satisfied with just being his mistress? I find that hard to believe.” But did she really? Rafe would be a very generous lover.

“Oh, but it wouldn’t be just that. I mean to have him, my dear. And he’ll belong to me and only me. His name would be nice, but not necessary. Rafe’s a generous man, as I’m sure you know.” Vanessa openly assessed Dani’s suit, noting the expensive cut and the large diamond engagement ring she wore. The look was as insulting as her words. “He’s also the most marvelous lover I’ve ever had. We do share that in common whether you want to admit it or not.” And she would just live with him if that was the only way, but if events proceeded as Vanessa hoped, she would have the name too.

Dani grabbed her handbag, standing on legs shaking so badly she prayed no one could hear the noise. Dani found it difficult to breathe. “I don’t think we have anything else to say to each other, Vanessa.”

“Have I hit a nerve, darling?” Vanessa sneered. “Go ahead and run away like a scared little rabbit. Rafe and I belong together. He knows it and now, so do you.” Her laughter was a slap, a painful mental cut. It was all Dani could do to calmly turn around and walk away.

Dani couldn’t think of one thing to say in retaliation even if words could have gotten past the constriction in her throat. She hurried out of the restaurant, all but running to her car. But Van’s abominable words, her apparent self-assurance remained with Dani all the way home. Growing up with her aunt and uncle she’d never gotten over the feeling of being a burden. They’d made it plain that the

only reason she had been allowed to come and live with them was because of what people would say if they'd farmed her out to foster care. They'd never been mean to her, but they just hadn't truly cared about her. Then she met Rafe and for the first time in her life she had someone to love and who loved her in return. Or so she'd thought until yesterday.

Now her thoughts were centered on Rafe, on his gentleness, his strength...his love during the night, both fierce and gentle. She needed him so much, needed his affirmation of love to reassure her. She breathed a silent prayer that he would be waiting for her at home, so they could talk. Really talk about what has been bothering him.

Suddenly Dani felt so alone, wanting, needing the reassurance of Rafe's love. Vanessa had shaken her more than she would have believed possible. This wasn't easy or comfortable to admit but she had never been one to avoid the truth, or to face up to responsibility. But what if Vanessa was right? What if Rafe didn't really love her?

As it turned out, her prayers were not answered as she quickly learned upon entering the house. It seemed Rafe was having a dinner meeting and wouldn't be returning until quite late. Her self-confidence plummeted; the fear of losing Rafe wouldn't be delegated to the back of her mind. Was he really at a meeting? Or was this just a ruse to avoid her? Or was he with Vanessa? He had only been late one night during their three months of marriage. He had made it up to her in the most wonderful way possible. Her cheeks flushed at the memory of his passion that night, taking her not once but twice to the pinnacle of ecstasy, afterwards, holding her close against his big, hard body. Oh, if only he would come home tonight and make love to her like that again.

Diego was quick to note her despondency during dinner. He knew something was troubling her, suspecting it was more than Rafe's absence from the dinner table. There was a strain beginning to show on her lovely face, a slight shadowing under her eyes, a slight tremor of her lips from

time to time as if her thoughts were not pleasant ones. And Diego knew the reason. Sometimes, not very often, but Rafe could be such a fool!

Diego studied her across the rim of his wineglass. "You will get much more nourishment from that food if you actually put it into your mouth. Pushing it around the plate only uses up energy, not supplies it."

Dani smiled. "I'm sorry. Guess I'm just not very hungry tonight."

"Would I be right in assuming that Rafe's dinner meeting has something to do with your lack of appetite?" his tone invited confidence. Not that he could tell her what he knew about Rafe, but it might help her to just talk.

Her lower lip trembled as she fought to retain composure. "I...I wanted to talk to him. I'm just being foolish, Diego. Just ignore me."

"Perhaps you could talk to me, Dani. I'm a very good listener. Sometimes saying the words aloud puts them in proper perspective, and things don't seem as bleak as you first thought."

His kindness was almost her undoing. But Rafe was her husband, the one she needed to confess her insecurities to and her anxiety at disappointing him in any way. He was the only one who could put an end to her fears. She couldn't start running to Diego every time she and Rafe had a disagreement. She was a grown woman, not a child as Diego seemed fond of calling her. No. She had come to love and admire Rafe's uncle, but she would not use his fondness for her to manipulate her husband.

Reaching across the table, she placed her small hand on his arm. He placed his larger one over hers. "Thank you for caring, Diego. But...this is something I have to work out myself. Rafe has had a lot on his mind the last few days, and I haven't been as patient as I could have been, I guess. We'll get it all sorted out as soon as he comes home."

"As long as you know I am here whenever you need me." Diego wished he could say more, but it was not his



place no matter how fond he was of Dani. It took a great deal of restraint to keep his own counsel.

Dani smiled at his words, her first real smile of the day. "Thank you, Diego. Has anyone ever told you what a very dear man you are?"

"Listen my dear, I have an engagement tonight, but it can be canceled if you would like me to stay until that wayward husband of your puts in an appearance," Diego offered with genuine concern.

Dani was deeply touched by his gesture. "No, please don't upset your plans just for me. I'll be fine. Really." Diego was such a thoughtful person and she adored him.

The talk was general for the rest of the meal. Diego's support gave her hopes a much-needed boost. After coffee in the library, Diego left the house around nine o'clock. But still no Rafe and no phone call.

Dani wandered into the library, sat on the sofa, staring into the fireplace, listening to the crackle of the flames, the ticking of the clock on the wall behind Rafe's desk. She abandoned her book after reading the same page three times. It was no use, she couldn't concentrate on the words. Finally, she put the book on the coffee table.

It was well after ten when this inactivity became unbearable. She couldn't just sit there waiting to hear Rafe's car or the slam of the front door to alert her to his return. A walk out by the pool beckoned. Her walk carried her around the pool out to the gardens, the scent of flowers reminding her of the bouquets Rafe had had delivered to their honeymoon suite.

She sighed as memories of the night he proposed filled her with longing, seeing with her mind's eye their dancing as he expertly swirled her out of the noisy ballroom onto the deserted terrace. Rafe whirled her into a secluded corner where he took her into his arms, crushing her to the long, hard length of his masculine body. His lips had covered hers with such swiftness, such crushing force, she'd been speechless, powerless to withdraw, even if any

such desire had been present. For the first time in her life, Dani was captivated with a man, this man, willing to go where he led, her mind urging her to go slower, but her heart overriding all common sense.

Rafe had relinquished his hold on her slender body just enough to study her bemused expression in the dim light from the moon, the confidential whisper of the wind in the surrounding trees, the only sound heard above the rapid thudding her Dani's heart.

Rafe's voice thick with unleashed passion, "Marry me, Dani. Marry me tonight."

Dani hadn't known what to expect that evening, but certainly not a marriage proposal. Not from a man as magnificent, as powerful as Rafe de Corba. She'd stared mouth agape, her eyes wide in wonderment.

He'd held her molded to the hard muscled length of his big body, his lips tracing a blistering path down the sensitive column of her throat as he fought to maintain control, murmuring thickly, "need you, Dani...such softness, such beauty. And you're mine!"

Dani loved him. It was as simple as that. And she had since their first evening together when they'd talked long into the night, all sense of time forgotten. As his mouth slanted over hers again, all thought of denying his wish to be married immediately drowned in her mounting need, in the awareness of his masculine body so close to hers. She fitted to the contours of his strong body as if hers had been made just for him.

So, they had been married within the hour, returning to his hotel suite, the scent of dozens of roses filling the air with romance. Dani had been a shy, but eager student during the long hours of the night. Rafe, impatient to taste all the delights her body had to offer, delights that were now all his, restrained his eagerness, sensing her timidity. His hands were gentle as he undressed her, delighting in the creamy, flawless touch of her satin flesh against the roughness of his own large hands. His desire kindled a flame in Dani she hadn't known existed,

sensation burst into wonder as his large hands and mouth explored every curve, every inch of her trembling, eager body. Her heart filled with love for her husband as he guided her, led her to a never imagined pinnacle, promising a sweet fulfilled surrender.

Dani came back to the present with a start, realizing her late stroll had taken her all around the grounds back to the pool area. She'd been so preoccupied, so lost in thought, she'd walked around as if in a daze.

She hurried back to the house, entering the library, quietly closing the door as she came face to face with Rafe. But this was a Rafe she had never seen before. This man looked as if he despised her.

"Rafe?" his name a whispered question from her trembling lips.

His tone was harsh. "I thought you were in bed." He didn't make any move to come closer, to touch her in any way. Her natural beauty and innocence had taken him in, but no longer. He was a hell of a lot wiser than a few days ago.

Dani was completely taken aback. What was going on here? Now that he was here, in this mood, uncertainty engulfed her. But she had to discover what could possibly be wrong. What had she done to upset him like this?

"I've been waiting up for you, Rafe." She took several halting steps toward him. Her lips were suddenly dry. "We have to talk. Please, tell me what's troubling you." The love she felt for Rafe compelled Dani to reach out to place her hand on his arm. She had to touch him to be sure he was real.

"You're right about one thing, Dani dear," he laughed, an unpleasant sound that froze her to the spot. "We do have to talk. Or should I say, you have some explaining to do. And it had better be good."

"Me? I don't understand. What have I done?" What on earth was he referring to? He had never talked to her in this manner before. It was frightening. With her marriage

so new, insecurities could seem magnified. *Please let this be the case now*, she pleaded silently.

Rafe stood his ground, simply glaring down at her from his superior height. “Going to play the innocent right to the end, hmm?” He had to give her credit for her acting ability. Surely she must realize he was on to her little scheme now but she continued to look so innocent.

Rafe had become a stranger. He was no longer the man she’d married; the man who had promised to love and cherish her. She’d known something was bothering him, but nothing had prepared her for this hostile attack. *Please don’t let Vanessa be right*, her mind cried in torment.

“Rafe, I...,” as she started to speak, he turned away from her, reaching for something on his desk.

Now more baffled than ever, she jumped as he slammed something down on the front of the desk. “Would you mind explaining this?” he snarled. His attack, his seething rage governing his behavior shocked her, rendering her speechless as she stared at the magazine.

“What? I don’t...”, Dani fumbled toward him, her hand outstretched, a plea for understanding, some sign of compassion as confusion engulfed her. What did a magazine have to do with them?

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten your little expose of my family, dear wife?” For the first time since they met, Rafe backed away from her as if her touch, her very nearness was distasteful.

Dani stared at the unrelenting, harsh lines on either side of his mouth. The same mouth that had given her such delight. Now, his tightly controlled temper threatened to explode as he took her silence as an admission of guilt.

“I take it you really thought I wouldn’t get wind of this article since your particular choice of magazine is not one I would normally buy or read?” His eyes were glacier cold. “But you forget, my dear, I have friends and business associates all over the country. Some who thought it their duty to let me know they had read and been enlightened by

an article about my family. Myself in particular. An article written and submitted by my own loving wife.”

The words unleashed his wrath, as he covered the small distance separating them in two giant strides, his determination, the thundering expression on his face forcing her to back away. Her retreat seemed to incense him further. Rafe grabbed her by the shoulders, his hard long fingers like steel spikes as they bore into her soft flesh, shaking her, her slender neck arched from the onslaught.

Dani was dizzy from the force of his anger when he finally threw her from him. Breathing deeply, he stalked across the room to stand by the fireplace.

It took her several seconds to regain some sense of composure, before she could speak. “I have never seen that magazine before in my life. I’ve never even heard of it.”

He snorted in disbelief. It seemed she wouldn’t even own up to the truth when it was put right in front of her.

“I’ve certainly never written an article about you or anyone. I’m not a writer and never have been. You’ve got to believe me, Rafe!” She took a few halting steps to his side. He stood so rigid, so unyielding as she placed her small hand on his arm, pleading again for him to accept what she said as the truth. She didn’t lie and certainly not to him. Couldn’t he see that?

Rafe looked down at the small hand resting against the darkness of his jacket, and as if it was something repulsive, picked it up and threw it away from him. His black eyes scorched her with contempt, hatred reflected in their depth.

Tears filled her eyes, overflowed to run unheeded down her ashen cheeks. Her voice was barely a whisper, “I swear to you, I did not write that story. Please, you must believe me. There is no...”, the rest of her plea, her defense was lost as he roughly pushed her aside, heading for the door.

“You’re an accomplished liar, Dani. Why should I believe anything you tell me?” This just went to show how right he had been to protect Demetrio from her greedy clutches. He’d known women like Dani before and knew how to handle them. Offer her a sizeable settlement, and she’d be gone in a heartbeat.

Dani had never lied to him. She hated lies and subterfuge of any kind. It was much easier to tell the truth. That was easier to remember than a string of lies. How could he call her a liar?

“You should believe me because I don’t lie. And I’m your wife.” As the first shock of his attack began to subside, an anger took life within her. How dare he attack her like this? She hadn’t done anything wrong and she most certainly had not written that article.

He laughed, but there was nothing pleasant in the sound. “You can play the injured party all you like, Dani. But you see, I have all the proof I need...proof so concrete it would stand up in a court of law. You wrote that material,” pointing to the offending magazine. “And nothing you can say will change my mind.” He’d felt a little guilty about moving in on Demetrio’s relationship with Dani only because he thought his brother truly cared about her. But that guilt had been erased by her deceit.

She was thoroughly confused. “What proof? If I didn’t write it, and I didn’t, there cannot be anything to say I did.”

“It’s all on paper, Mrs. de Corba. I’ve seen it and nothing will convince me otherwise.”

“Well, I’d like to see it too. After all,” she had to take a deep breath to check the painful sob of pain waiting to erupt, “I’ve been falsely accused...”

“Falsely accused? Caught in the act is more to the point. And you still can’t admit your culpability, can you? Well, you go right on pleading your innocence if it will make you feel better, but nothing you can say will ever convince me otherwise.”

“I’m in the right, damn you. So why should I back down? You come in here accusing me of something I didn’t do. What can I do to make you believe me?” This couldn’t be happening. She had done nothing but love Rafe, wanted nothing more than to share his life, have his children. She’d thought he’d wanted the same things. But now?

His look of cold contempt froze her from head to toe. “If you’ll check your bank account, you’ll find the check you received for that article was deposited on the fourth of this month. That wasn’t a very wise move on your part, darling. You’d have been better off to have just cashed the check and hid the money.

Rafe vented anger on the library door as he slammed it behind him, the force rattling everything in the vicinity that wasn’t nailed in place. He had to get out of the house, away from Dani and her lies. Rafe took some deep breaths as he slid behind the wheel of his car. After several minutes he started the engine and drove away from his home and wife.

His parting words had the sound of finality, rooting Dani to the floor. She stood frozen in place for several minutes before falling into a chair. She stared into the fireplace for some time trying to understand what had just happened. The tears came then, long racking sobs shaking her body as she curled up in the chair. Long after her tears ran dry, she lay staring, wondering what to do. She was innocent and surely Rafe would come to realize that when he’d had time to give it more thought. At this point Dani didn’t know if that was true or not but she was suddenly so tired, it was hard to think straight. Over an hour after Rafe slammed out of the house, Dani pulled herself up and plodded her way upstairs to their lonely bedroom.

## CHAPTER 3

Not even a liberal application of makeup could hide the shadows under Dani's eyes, shadows brought on by over a week of restless nights and tension filled days. She contemplated her reflection in the mirror as she attempted to brush the gloss back into her hair, but no matter what physical activity she did, it was impossible to rid herself of this lethargy.

Also, painfully reflected in mirror was the huge king sized bed. One meant for two people. But Dani had slept alone, lost in its great expanse since Rafe had stormed out that night over a week ago, after accusing her of writing that article about his family. Or more to the point, about him. The morning after he'd left, she'd read the article. There were items of information about him she hadn't known. Nothing critical or damning, just background material about his schooling and early business accomplishments. Rafe began working in the family firm when he was sixteen years old, learning the business from every aspect. Diego had taken over the business when



Rafe's father, Rodrigo de Corba, died. His mother, Thalia de Corba had died several years prior. Then Diego had retired six years ago putting Rafe in the presidents chair. Dani had realized Rafe was well off but after reading the article, she'd been amazed to learn just how wealthy and powerful he truly was.

After Rafe had slammed out of the library that night, he'd not returned until the following evening, still so cold, so distant that any attempt on her part to approach him had been met with hostility. Considering she had been falsely accused, Dani was determined not to take any more measures to talk to him. At least, that's what she thought when her anger surged forth. Let him make the first move at reconciliation. But where had he been? What tortured her more was wondering if he'd been alone.

But this cold war couldn't go on much longer. She didn't know what to do, but she had to take some action. And soon. She knew how this tension was affecting her, and it must be having some reaction on Rafe too, even if he endeavored to hide it.

Dani recalled the scene last night after dinner. Her slender body shuddering as she relived the terrible argument Rafe and Diego had had over her, pitting uncle against nephew. The thought of the two people she loved most in the world at odds because of her only added to her unhappiness.

Diego was outraged over the accusation made against Dani and made no bones about that fact to Rafe. Was Rafe out of his mind to think Dani could do something this underhanded? But even Diego's common sense failed to make Rafe see the events in a different light. They'd reached a stalemate that nothing seemed able to bridge.

Last night, she'd heard her name as she approached the library. Diego sat in one of the large chairs beside the massive fireplace as Rafe had paced the floor, agitated and restless like a caged animal. Rafe was the first to sense her presence in the open doorway, his head snapping up, and his expression anything but inviting.

It was Diego who spoke. "Come in, Dani. We were just talking about this unhealthy situation between you and my stubborn nephew."

Choking back the lump in her throat, she acknowledged his invitation to enter. "Diego," hesitant as she took a seat across from the older man, not quite sure what to expect or what to say. She looked at Rafe, searching for some softening in his attitude towards her. There was none.

Diego took it upon himself to initiate conversation. "Rafe, this whole episode concerning that damned magazine article is preposterous as you should well know. Just what did this child have to gain by such a deception if...and I say if, she was even capable of such duplicity? The whole idea is totally ridiculous."

Rafe's laugh was harsh, totally without humor. "Oh, Diego. You have always been susceptible where a beautiful face was involved. Can't you see beneath the innocent face she presents to the world? She's smart, Diego. A hell of a lot more cunning than even I gave her credit for."

Dani gasped at his harsh words. How could he believe this of her? Cunning was the last word she would ever associate with herself. And here Rafe was implying he'd thought this of her all along? Only now he thought he'd underestimated the extent of her deceitfulness.

"That is enough, Rafe! Dani is your wife and deserves a certain amount of your respect and consideration. I will not have you degrading her in my presence." Diego was angry, his large hands grasping the arms of the chair in an attempt to control his temper. How dare Rafe talk to Dani in this manner? He knew the true circumstances of their marriage, but he'd begun to think Rafe was coming to feeling strongly for his bride. Now this! Diego hadn't approved of Rafe interfering in whatever relationship that had developed between Demetrio and Dani, but once he'd gotten to know Dani, he was sure she was as nice and genuine as she appeared. He

hadn't lived to be seventy years old without becoming a pretty good judge of people.

"Unfortunately, as you say, she is my wife. But what of her consideration for me, her husband? How many wives do you imagine have knowingly, with mercenary intent, set out to expose their husbands and their families to public ridicule? I have all the proof I..."

"I did not write that article, Rafe." Dani stood. She couldn't listen passively to anymore of this arguing, these hateful accusations. "I don't care how much so called evidence you have that says I was involved. I was not! I knew nothing about that magazine article until you threw it in my face."

Rafe glowered menacingly, towering over her. "What am I suppose to do, Dani? Just disregard all the incriminating evidence against you? Evidence gathered by the best people money can buy. Disregard all that simply because I have in my possession a piece of paper that makes you my wife? That piece of paper is not a license to drag the de Corba name through the press. And a questionable bit of literary work too." Rafe realized there was nothing really damaging in the article itself. It was the fact that his own wife had written it that brought shame to the de Corba name. If truth were told, Rafe was in as much torment as Dani but for different reasons. He had felt himself coming to care for her, more than he'd planned or thought possible. Then this article appeared proving that his first instincts had been right after all.

Dani thrust out her chin. "Don't forget, my name is now de Corba too."

"That is something that now prays on my mind, wife. What do you suppose can be done to rectify that little matter?" What did she expect him to do? Over the years he'd had his fill of women who had more regard for his bank account and position than for him. Oh, they had been loving as long as the gifts kept coming. But if his wealth had ever dried up, so would their so-called devotion. And Dani was no different. He'd thought so at the beginning,

but he'd almost, just almost come to believe differently. But no more.

A shaft of ice pierced Dani's heart at his cruel words. *This can't be happening*, her mind screamed. Holding her head high, she looked Rafe in the eye. "You could have a little faith in me. Instead of...", her voice broke on a sob as she fought to keep tears at bay. "Instead of making assumptions about my guilt, of accusing me on the spot, you could have asked me about the article. Discussed it with me. But no. You had your mind made up before you ever spoke to me. If things were reversed, I'd..."

"Yes, what would you do, Dani? Naturally, you'd be in a forgiving mood since I hold the purse strings. You wouldn't dare risk losing a good meal ticket, would you? I have no doubt, no matter what I were to do in our marriage, as long as you had security and plenty of spending money, you would be forgiveness personified."

Dani felt sure at that moment that if Diego hadn't been in there in the room with them, Rafe would have been capable of physical violence. His whole body strained against the dark gray suit he wore, straining to release the powerful buildup of emotional energy as his face darkened, his hands clenched at his sides.

Dani gasped at his vicious attack. "I think you're hateful. I look at you now and I wonder how I ever thought you could be gentle and kind", her words dying on a sob as anguish overcame anger.

"And I believe you to be a little..."

"Basta!" Diego roared, stopping them from tearing each other apart verbally. He shoved his chair back as he pushed to his feet, facing Rafe. "I will have no more of this insulting talk in this house. It is nonsense. Rafe, you must apologize to Dani. Now."

Rafe's breathing was ragged as he stared down at his wife, his eyes blazing with indignation. His expression didn't soften. If anything, the lines around his eyes and mouth deepened, only adding to his already harsh expression. *Diego was such a fool for a pretty face*, Rafe

thought. And that's all she was, a pretty exterior, like all the other women in his life.

"Forgive me Diego, that I cannot do," nodding to Diego he quickly left the room. And the house.

That had been last night. Today, Dani felt no lifting of her depression, could see no way to make Rafe see her side of this terrible misunderstanding. This was a barrier that she had to overcome. But how?

Listlessly, she moved to the door. She couldn't hide in the bedroom all day like a wounded animal. For starters, she had to make an attempt at eating something, although lately, food had lost most of its appeal. And she was so tired. But then she wasn't sleeping very well either.

Diego was in the dinning room when she entered. Rafe was conspicuous by his absence. Dani had heard him return very late, somewhere around three in the morning. She'd spent the rest of the early morning hours tormented with thoughts of where he could have been all that time. And with whom. The one answer that prevailed brought a new pain. Was there another woman?

Dani knew with absolute certainty Vanessa would love to devote her time to consoling Rafe. Had he gone to the older woman last night, losing himself in her arms? Anguish filled Dani as a picture played out before her, Vanessa, with her red manicured hands, caressing the lines of hurt and pain from Rafe's face, making him forget all anger as she adored him with her body. Dani shook her head to dislodge the bitter image.

Diego stood as she took her place next to him at the table. His shrewd appraisal missed nothing. "You did not sleep well again, Dani." It was a statement of fact.

She tried to smile, but it did not reach her shadowed eyes. "Does it show all that much?"

"It is beginning to, yes," he replied with his usual honesty. He'd lived too long to waste time on beating around the bush or with false compliments. And Dani did look paler this morning with dark circles under her eyes.

He was becoming truly concerned about her physical condition.

She didn't want to talk about herself, not now. "Has Rafe already left for the office?" He couldn't have gotten much sleep either. The rumpled bed in the dressing room had been empty when she'd checked before leaving their room

Diego's hesitancy, his apparent reluctance to answer her question made her start. He placed a hand over hers, a comforting gesture that confirmed her worst fears. Her heart began to race. It could only be bad news.

"He has gone away for a while, Dani." As she gasped in startled surprise, he quickly continued. "There is business he must deal with, and perhaps, this time apart will give him time to put things into proper perspective. He needs some breathing space, Dani."

Her whole world was crashing down around her and there didn't seem to be anything she could do to stop it. "How long will he be gone?" Funny, but inside she was becoming numb. What more could he do to hurt her? And could anything hurt as much as his actions the past week?

"I really don't know how long his business will take. A few days, maybe a week. It is vital business, Dani. He would have had to go in any case. It is just too bad it had to be now. But things will be better, you'll see." Diego ached with concern as he watched the myriad expressions flash across her face, the notable sadness in her beautiful eyes. He felt a bit ashamed because he suspected he was offering her false hopes.

"I see," she said her appetite completely gone now. In its place a growing nausea was choking her. "Where did he go?"

"I am sorry, Dani, I am not at liberty to say." His expression was one of pity when he saw her lips start to tremble. "No matter how much I disagree with him, he is still my nephew, my flesh and blood, and I must respect his request that you not be told where he has gone. If it were

up to me...,” he let his words fade. What more could he say? Damn Rafe and his pride!

“What did he think I would do? Run to his side, pleading for understanding. Maybe embarrass him in front of his business associates?” Anger was now replacing hurt, or maybe it was easier to handle anger than it was to acknowledge the possible end to her brief marriage. How could she love a man who apparently was so insensitive to her feelings, who could walk away from her like this. But she did love him. And the thought of never seeing him again, of never living and loving with him was too much to contemplate.

“Well, he need not be concerned. I will never go to him now. He must come to me. I haven’t done anything wrong. All I’m guilty of is loving him. And he,” to her dismay she burst into tears with no warning. She cried for the wonderful memories, for the hopes she’d held for their future and for the disillusionment about her ability to hold the interest and trust of someone like Rafe. Maybe Adrian and Vanessa had been right. Maybe she was in way over her head with him. All these thoughts and more washed over her as she cried.

Diego wisely let her sobs run their course, holding her hand for comfort as he waited for the storm to pass. When all that remained here painful gasps, he pressed a water goblet into her hand.

“Sip some water, child. It will help.”

She did as he bid, finally wiping her swollen eyes while trying to compose herself. “I don’t usually fall apart like this.” She hiccuped. “I don’t know what’s the matter with me.”

“You have been under a great strain. It’s only natural for you to release the pressure. I have seen tears before; so do not be concerned. Now you must have something to eat.”

“Diego, I,” she protested. The very thought of putting food into her mouth made her sick.

But he was adamant. “No. You must eat something, even if it is only a piece of toast and some juice. You are much too thin as it is, child. If you insist on abstaining from food, you will disappear altogether. Do it for an old man who cares, Dani.” So saying, he carefully poured a small glass of cool orange juice, placing two freshly buttered pieces of toast in front of her.

Dani sighed as she fought a battle with nausea. Maybe a little bit of food would make her feel better. She couldn’t feel much worse. “I’ll try.”

Diego settled back to finish his coffee satisfied she would get some nourishment. He studied the expressions flitting across her face, wondering at her thoughts, wishing he could do something to set the present situation right.

Dani ate in silence, thinking. She knew she couldn’t sit back and do nothing about Rafe’s accusations. But at the same time, she had been serious about his being the one to apologize. She hadn’t done anything wrong. But what about the money in the bank account Rafe had opened for her just after their marriage a little over three months ago? She had been reluctant to use much of the money. Never having had much to spend in the past, she tended to be very careful about money and finances. The original amount had taken her breath away, and he hadn’t said anything about adding to that balance.

So where could that substantial deposit have come from? Who had put it there? Why was obvious. Someone had wanted to drive a wedge between her and Rafe. And it had worked, at least in Rafe’s eyes.

“Diego?” Maybe he could think of something. She toyed with the fork by her plate. “Who would want to hurt Rafe by using me like this?”

“Who? It would be difficult to say, Dani. He is a powerful, important man. And in business it is impossible to keep from stepping on someone’s toes once in a while. Hmmm. How better to add to the humiliation but to implicate a man’s own young wife? Whoever is behind this is very clever.” He sighed, weary at his inability to



comfort, his anger at the other aspects of the situation. Of these other matters, he could not speak. His loyalty to Rafe came before all else, no matter how dear Dani had become to him in this short time.

"I just don't understand. Everything was so wonderful but now," she couldn't finish as fresh tears filled her throat.

"It will be wonderful again, Dani. Rafe just needs time to sort everything out in his mind. Trust an old man, hmm?" Diego prayed that Rafe hadn't done irreparable damage to Dani's trust in him. Even if he did apologize to her, would she be able to trust him again?

She smiled at his encouragement but her eyes were still bright with unshed tears. How much time would he need? How much more of his insults, his hostility could she bear? Dani loved Rafe, had come to rely on his strength, his loving since their marriage. Now she felt adrift, so very alone without his nearness. She ached to be held in his arms again, to have his love surrounding her, sustaining her. But he had to make the first move. He had to apologize.

Demetrio and Kate were due back from their honeymoon sometime later this evening. Now, as she arranged the flowers for their homecoming, she shelved her troubles as she worked. It would be good to see them again, to see a friendly face. They had only had a week since Demetrio was needed at a series of important meetings that began tomorrow. Kate had understood when her new husband promised her they would get away for a longer holiday as soon as possible.

The newlyweds were living not far from Rafe's family home, actually within walking distance if you didn't mind a two-mile walk. But today, she drove her car over to see to the preparations for their return. There really wasn't much to do except add the touch of fresh cut flowers, but she needed an excuse to get out on her own, away from the brooding silence of her own home.

The last of the flowers arranged to her satisfaction, Dani stood back to admire her handy work. She had a knack with flower arrangements and the vivid colors with the wonderful smells added to the warmth of the room.

As Dani slowly made her way out of the house, she looked up at the bright, clear sky, the warmth of the sun in contrast to the bleakness of her spirits. She dreaded going home. Rafe was out of town and Diego was out for the afternoon, so there was no one there to miss her. Not that Rafe would miss her anyway in his present frame of mind.

She would go to the beach; to the isolated cove Rafe had introduced her to a short time ago. It was secluded, making you feel like you were on a deserted island. She didn't have a swimsuit, but the shorts and ribbed shirt would do nicely if the water were truly inviting.

Rafe had explained to her that you had to know where the cove was located or you would never find it on your own. He had come across it quite by accident himself. It was a small cove, a narrow beach with a lone tree, the only shade. And after a short time in the scorching sun, it would be truly welcome. Dani blinked back tears as she recalled the night Rafe had made love to her under the approving watchfulness of the full moon.

The cove was just as she remembered it, the seclusion a balm to her sagging spirits. Eagerly, she got a blue and white blanket from the trunk of the car, kicking off her sandals to walk barefoot across the warm sand to the tree. After spreading the blanket, she ran across the small beach to the quiet, clear blue water. It felt like silk against her skin as she dived and surfaced, and dived again. Dani was a good swimmer but not a strong one, so she prudently stayed close to shore, content to play within sight of the small beach.

She treaded water, scanning the beach and surrounding rocks, berating herself for lacking the courage to swim in the nude. "Coward!" she laughingly chided herself. It would have felt so marvelous, but being alone,

she was too nervous to attempt it. Maybe some other time when Rafe...”

Suddenly the joy went out of her swim. Would she and Rafe ever come here again? Would he ever make love to her under their tree, as she had come to think of it.

The swim had tired her more than she thought as heavy, labored steps carried her onto the shore. She stood on the dry sand, drinking in the beauty of her surroundings, completely unaware of how beautiful she looked with her wet clothing clinging lovingly to her feminine curves, her long hair whipped by the gentle breeze. Oh, how she missed Rafe! A painful gasp passed her lips as she turned to take shelter under her tree.

She had almost reached the blanket when her attention was drawn to the rocks near the entrance of her hidden cove. What she saw froze her to the spot. Leaning with casual indifference against the largest boulder was Adrian.

“What are you doing here?” she challenged him.

Heaving away from the rock, he sauntered across the sand, covering the distance them in long, panther-like strides. “I’ve been enjoying the grace and beauty of a water nymph. A beautiful, alluring creature.” He tried to take her hand to his lips, but she jerked free, her aversion to his touch more than obvious. Her actions ignited an angry glint in his gray eyes.

“You have no right be to here!” Even as Dani said the words, she knew how ridiculous they must sound. This was public property, or at least it wasn’t private property. Anyone could use this cove. But how dare he spy on her? He’d obviously followed her and she’d been so caught up in her private misery that she hadn’t even noticed.

He chose not to answer, instead unashamedly concentrating on the soft curves revealed by the wet, clinging shorts and top. “You’re not very big, my lovely Dani, but what there is of you is perfection. I’ll say this for Rafe, he certainly has marvelous taste in women.” Adrian was aware that Rafe was well above him in the business

world and that he would never even come close to equaling Rafe de Corba in wealth. But women were something else. And he'd been fascinated by Dani since the first time he'd seen her. He might not have the power to fight Rafe over the boardroom table but he thought he could hold his own with women. And he wanted Dani.

His brooding stare was making her uncomfortable, making her glaringly aware of their isolation. Adrian had made his interest very plain upon their first meeting and since then, nothing she said or did appeared to convince him that his feelings were not returned. She hadn't worried about it before because Rafe had always been there. But now she was alone with him. Oh, so alone and not a little frightened. But she wouldn't let him see her discomfort or fear.

She moved away from him on the pretense of retrieving the towel lying on the blanket. "If you're done with your spying, I would really like to be alone. I don't feel very well, and plan to rest before returning home." And it was true. Suddenly, she felt very weak with mounting nausea threatening to overcome her.

"You've got to be kidding," he jeered, eliciting a tingle of real fear down her spine. "This is the first time I've had you all to myself and you expect me to walk away from such an opportunity? Rafe's not the only man in the world, Dani. I intend to prove it to you." Throwing his jacket to the ground, he took two quick menacing steps in her direction, his fingers impatiently undoing the button of his soft blue shirt.

Dani stepped back. "No! I don't want you near me, Adrian. I love Rafe. He's the only man I want."

"Rafe's always gotten everything he's ever wanted. Good old Rafe, everyone's friend. Well, I'm going to take something from him. He's going to find out what it's like to go without...or share."

An all-consuming panic gave impetus to leaden feet as she tried to run, into the water, anywhere as long as it was away from Adrian. But her movements were too slow,

too late. Just as she turned to flee, her upper left arm was caught in a vice like grip. He whirled her around, crushing her against his long lean body.

Adrian wasn't as tall nor as broad as Rafe, but he still towered over Dani's diminutive form, his strength holding her easily within his arms. His mouth swooped to cover hers, his lips punishing as they ground against hers. She lashed out with her small bare feet, kicking at his legs frantically trying to get away. But she was caught, unable to twist away from him, or free her hands as he held her easily within the circle of his arms.

She felt nothing but revulsion as he finally released her lips from the hateful kiss. His mouth trailed from her chin down the delicate cords of her throat. "Adrian! No! Let me go!" she gasped.

"Oh no, my lovely Dani. The women in my life have been the entrees. But you are my dessert!" His breathing was labored as his passion ran unchecked. With surprising swiftness, he tilted her back until she was lying on the blanket, his weight pressing her down, the warm sand searing against her back in its intimacy.

"Please, Adrian. I don't want you to touch me!" This was wrong...so wrong. Only Rafe was suppose to touch her. What could she do? He had her pinned with one hand, leaving his other free to wander, marveling at the softness of her skin as he pulled her top up exposing her waist to his searing exploration.

He laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "You don't think so now, but once I've had you, you'll learn to enjoy it." His lips sought hers once more, just hovering above. "I'm not some inexperienced oaf who doesn't know how to please a woman." But again his kiss was a punishment, the taste of blood in her mouth made her head spin.

Dani couldn't breath. The hammering in her head made it impossible to think. Everything started to spin as she was quickly whisked down a dark tunnel, whirling

round and round toward total darkness. Finally the darkness overcame and all was quiet.

Dani slowly became aware of something cool on her forehead. She tried to open her eyes, but the bright light brought a moan to her bruised lips. Instantly, someone was kneeling over her. But she would deal with that later. Right now all that matter was the nausea.

Her hand fanned the air pleadingly. "I'm going to be sick," was all she managed to say as strong hands helped her to her feet, away from the blanket as she gave way to the sickness engulfing her. A cool hand pressed against her forehead, an arm about her waist for support.

"Are you all right now?" Adrian asked softly, now full of urgent concern.

Dani nodded, unable to speak. She would have fallen if he hadn't retained his hold, gently guiding her back to the blanket. She slid to her knees, than sank down resting her head on her knees. Tears formed, slipped from behind her closed eyes to pour down her pale cheeks as she kept her face hidden, utterly dejected.

Adrian didn't come near her, didn't try to touch her again. He paced back and forth in front of her, running a shaky hand through his hair in an angry gesture.

"I'm sorry, Dani." When she didn't look up he continued. "I know that's not much after the way I just manhandled you, but...damn! You're so beautiful, so cool and distant. It's been hell wanting you, not being able to touch you." Right now Adrian wasn't sure if his anger was at himself for almost forcing himself on Dani or because evidently his touch made her sick. He'd never had to go after a woman before since they all flocked to his side so he'd only had to take his pick. This was a novel experience and he didn't like it one bit.

Still Dani remained unmoving, silent.

"I just happened to pass you on the road. Turned around to follow you. I watched you in the water and something just snapped. I've never forced myself on a woman before." His laugh was full of self-loathing. "I

don't think I've ever made a woman sick either. That was a sobering experience, believe me."

She looked up then, her face damp, her eyes overflowing with misery. "Sobering is not the word I would apply to what almost happened here. I'm a human being with feelings, Adrian. Likes and dislikes." Her voice caught on a sob. "But you didn't take my feelings into consideration, did you?"

Adrian had the good grace to look embarrassed. "I've said I'm sorry. What more can I say?"

"Your assurance that nothing like this will ever happen again would be comforting." She could see her fainting had shaken him. The spell had been broken, so she didn't think he would feel inclined to force his attentions anymore this afternoon. Or, hopefully, ever again.

He stood several feet away from her, studying her upturned face. "You really love that husband of yours, don't you?" It was more statement than question.

"Yes. I do." Her heart filled with love, longing for Rafe. She wasn't to know it, but all this shone from her eyes.

His heavy sigh was one of defeat. "I should have known better than to think I could take something away from Rafael de Corba. He's a hard man, Dani. I could be more gentle." he stated as last hesitant try to bring her to his side. He truly was attracted to her but as he'd said, he would never try to force her again.

"I belong to Rafe. He's all I want or need." But would he be in her future or would she be living alone?

"Well, I tried. I can't promise not to see you again because we do travel in the same circle. But there won't be a repeat of this afternoon. All in all, you're too hard on a man's ego. I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything about this experience. If it got around that my love making had made a woman sick, my reputation would be in shreds." He wanted to lighten the mood, to at least see her smile once more.

Apparently, this was as close to a promise as she was going to get, but it didn't really matter. She would see to it that they were never alone. The opportunity for this type of confrontation would never present itself again. She would see to it.

Dani didn't realize how weak she was until she tried to stand, her legs trembling, threatening to send her sprawling on the sand. It took all her strength to remain upright. "I think I'd better get home. I still don't feel too well." Which was an understatement. She felt like hell. And probably looked like it too.

Adrian picked up her blanket and towel. "Are you sure you can drive? You still don't have much color. You're as pale as a ghost."

"I'll be fine. Really." She just wanted to get home, have a bath and lay down for a while. She only hoped Diego wasn't there when she returned so she could run upstairs undetected. He saw entirely too much and she didn't want to talk about this afternoon with anyone.

It wasn't until they reached their cars that Adrian spoke again, a note of doubt in his voice. "Are you ...going to mention any of this to Rafe?"

Had she actually seen flecks of fear flash in his eyes? Rafe was an extremely powerful man in the business community, a man who could do interminable damage to Adrian's holdings, anywhere in the world.

But Dani was not vindictive. "No, I think not." *Especially not in Rafe's present mood*, she thought in dismay. There was no way to tell how he would react.

Apparent relief eased the tension from Adrian's face.

Dani realized he wasn't as sure of himself with Rafe as she'd been led to believe. "Nothing really happened and it's all over. Bringing Rafe into it would only cause me more distress." If only Adrian knew how much more stress it would undoubtedly add to her life. Rafe probably wouldn't even believe her in his present frame of mind.



Adrian looked at her questioningly at her choice of phrase, but was too relieved to press the issue. After her assurance that she was truly capable of driving, he sped away leaving Dani sitting in her car.

She looked back to the entrance to the cove. It would never be the same for her again. Being here would never hold the anticipation of being with Rafe under the stars. Adrian had spoiled that for her too.

Exhaustion engulfed her, leaving her weak and tired. It was an effort to reach forward to start the engine. She would feel much better after a bath and a rest. She had to be. Demetrio and Kate would be there for dinner. How was she ever going to get through the evening? Sighing, she didn't know if Rafe's absence tonight was going to be a blessing after all. At least she wouldn't have to sit and watch him, long for him to look at her the way he did before this horrible nightmare began. Or worse, have him either treat her nice for appearance sake or with the same indifference he had over the last week.

Something had to be done, and soon. She sat up straighter as an idea sprang into her mind. Yes, she knew what she had to do. And she would see to it first thing in the morning. Dani wouldn't go down without a good fight. If she lost Rafe, at least she'd know that she'd done her best to save her marriage. And if she failed, well...she'd just have to deal with it. She'd been alone before and she would survive alone again. But the thought left a hollow feeling in her heart.

## CHAPTER 4

Dani took special care with her make-up that evening hoping no one would notice the heavier application. Even a two-hour nap had not erased the deepening circles under her eyes. Thankfully, when she returned from her disastrous trip to the cove, she'd managed to get to her room unseen. After a quick shower she'd collapsed into bed.

Now she chose a long full-skirted dress of back and white checks. The vee neckline and short cap sleeves showed off her golden tan, while the empire waistline somehow emphasized her fragility. Giving herself a last look in the mirror, she shrugged her slender shoulders.

Well, it would have to do. She just prayed Diego would be so engrossed in Demetrio and Kate at dinner, he wouldn't question her about anything.

She shivered as she envisioned Diego's reaction if he ever discovered Adrian's treatment of her that afternoon. He was a nonviolent man, but he was extremely protective of Dani. The knowledge that Adrian had attempted to possess her would be met with stern retribution.

And what of Rafe? Considering the way he felt about her now, there was no way to gauge his reaction. She halted halfway down the stairs. Would he even believe her? Would he believe she had no interest in Adrian? Or would he assume she had deliberately aroused his interest, had intentionally asked for what had almost taken place in the cove? No, she didn't want to think about Rafe's reaction. He would probably blame her for the entire horrendous event.

If her mind had not already been set to keep this afternoon's horrid ordeal to herself, these questions had convinced her to keep her lips sealed. She had no fear of Adrian saying anything about it. He would be sure to keep silent to protect himself. And now there could be no doubt about her silence as well.

Demetrio and Kate were already in the library with Diego when Dani entered the room. It was obvious that they had been discussing her situation with Rafe if she could go by the solemn expressions on their faces, the look of compassion on his face as Demetrio stood to greet her.

Dani resolved not to let this spoil their homecoming. Forcing a bright welcoming smile to her lips, she hugged her brother-in-law. "Welcome home you two." Turning to Kate, she gave her a warm hug. "You look positively radiant." This she directed at both of them. And they did look wonderful.

To Dani's dismay, Demetrio didn't hesitate to get to the point. "Diego has been telling us about the difficulty between you and that stubborn brother of mine. If he were here now, I would tell him a thing or two. He has no right

to treat you this way. I can't think what could have gotten into him."

"I can't imagine what could make Rafe behave like this," Kate said, her eyes lingering on her own husband trying to imagine the torment Dani must be suffering. Her heart went out to Dani, knowing how much she loved Demetrio. "Rafe's always been so fair in his dealings with people...so sensible."

"And," Diego spoke reluctantly, "Rafe is proud of our family and the family name." Demetrio and Kate of all people must never learn why Rafe married Dani. There was no doubt in his mind that it would drive a wedge between the two brothers and divide the family.

"But surely you don't condone his treatment of Dani? Why it's ridiculous to believe she's capable of any devious acts." Demetrio was angry with his brother and vowed to have a good long talk with him as soon as possible.

Dani now worried about Rafe's reaction when he learned she had another champion within his own family. The closeness and love between Diego and his two nephews was amazing to Dani who had not grown up with such outward demonstrations of love. She did not want to be the cause of any hard feelings between them or a rift in their relationships.

"I believe in her innocence as much as you, Demetrio. But I also feel for family and can understand why Rafe has acted the way he has. Not that I understand why he chose not to believe his own wife. If this had been anyone else, I could see his reaction as logical. I've tried to reason with him, but..." Diego spread his large hands showing the lack of cooperation he'd received. Actually, he did understand but was torn in two directions. No matter how this ended, he had no doubt someone was going to be hurt.

Dani listened in silence, grateful for their concern, for their support, but at the same time wishing the conversation would take a different turn. It was becoming apparent that loyalty to her was dividing the family. This made her feel like an unhealthy influence upon the entire family unit,

even though she had done nothing but love Rafe. And Rafe, in his present frame of mind, would undoubtedly resent anyone in his family defending her, as had already been demonstrated with Diego. Now with Demetrio and Kate, the situation could become more uncomfortable for everyone.

Dani's mind raced as the murmur of voices washed over her, barely penetrating her consciousness as she fought a silent battle with herself. This mess could escalate into a serious division of the de Corba family if something was not done, and done soon.

She didn't have any time to lose. Dani had stopped believing in fairy tales with their happy endings where help miraculously appeared out of the blue a long time ago. She would have to take the initiative to prove her innocence. And her love for Rafe.

A private detective was what she needed. First thing in the morning she would find someone to help her. The sooner she had help, the sooner everything could be resolved. Rafe would be home again, where he belonged. The Rafe she loved would hold her in his arms again. She refused to believe things would not work out for her and her husband.

For a moment, Dani felt dizzy with a longing so intense everything around became blurred as an ache radiated from her abdomen throughout the rest of her body. She gripped the arms of her chair to keep from falling forward as miniature lights danced before her eyes. She'd had a similar spell after her nap this afternoon. But it was no wonder. She'd been sleeping little and food, well, it held no appeal lately. Some nourishment and a good rest that what she needed. She'd be fine. She had to be. There was much for her to do, too much at stake for her to fail.

The next morning she awoke before seven, anxious to put her plans into action. The first item on her agenda was to find someone to help her search for the person or persons responsible for that magazine article. For this she scanned

the telephone directory. Since she felt this was something she must do alone, she told no one in the house, not even Diego. She couldn't ask anyone in the family for help. That would only add to the friction between them and Rafe. She finally settled on three names in an area of the city she knew well.

She decided to choose more than one name just to be on the safe side, because if she had any misgivings about the first person, she would have options open to her. Whoever she dealt with had to have trust in her, to believe her side of the story. The rest of her life was in the balance. It was vital she obtain this information as soon as possible.

As luck would have it, the first stop on her list a couple of hours later turned out to be her only stop. Maybe her luck was on the upswing. The detective was an older man, balding, a hefty build threatening to thicken his middle if he wasn't very careful. But he was kind and cheerful, and seemingly impressed with the lovely young lady who had chosen to grace his sparse office with her presence.

He sat in silence, his dark eyes intent as he studied her as she related her story in short, direct sentences, trying not to color the situation in any way. She tried to give Mr. Sanchez all the details, as she knew them, letting him put it all together in his own mind. Somehow Dani sensed he was hearing more than her words, his trained ear attuned to any changes a lie would bring. He sat very still, his hands folded in front of him, the short broad fingers neatly manicured. Why that should make an impression, Dani didn't know, but somehow it instilled confidence.

Her voice wobbled slightly as she finished her story. Just having told her problem to a disinterested third party seemed to act as a release. Dani had been unconsciously sitting military straight in the brown leather chair, hands clasped tightly in her lap. But now, as tension seeped from every pore, she sank back waiting for him to speak.

Seconds ticked by as he reached for a legal pad, quickly jotting down some notes before, he too, sat back in his chair.

“Mrs. de Corba, do you have any idea, however remote it may seem to you at the present, who would want to discredit you in the eyes of your husband?”

His question took her by surprise. “Mr. Sanchez, I assumed it was someone out to hurt my husband, not me. I don’t know anyone here except his family and some of his friends. And none of them would hurt me. I’m sure of that.”

“Your husband could be the target, but I think not in this case. No, let me finish,” he held up a hand when she would have interrupted. “I am not acquainted with your husband personally, but I know of the de Corba family and am familiar with their status in the financial world. They are a very powerful family of men, ones that would not be damaged to any great degree by some unsavory publicity. No, if someone wished to hurt them, any one of them, it would be through different channels.

“You are the one who is apparently suffering the greatest damage as the result of that article, and your self esteem, due to your husband’s reaction to this magazine article.” He studied Dani’s expressions as she digested this new idea.

“But I don’t know anyone who would want to harm me. I’ve only been in New Mexico a little over three months. And to my knowledge, I’ve not offended anyone to that extent,” she added ruefully.

“Perhaps you should ask yourself, what would someone gain by the break up of your marriage? Then we will be able to find a starting point in this muddle, hmm?” Mr. Sanchez had always been one to appreciate a pretty face and this young woman was more beautiful than any he’d seen in a very long time, excluding his wonderful wife, of course.

It was plain Dani de Corba was suffering a tremendous loss by her husband’s reaction to this article. How could any husband walk away from such a wife? Not only was Sanchez a man, who appreciated beauty, he was also an astute man, something that lent him well in his chosen profession. If Dani de Corba had been simply trying to

cover her tracks by hiring him, he would have seen through her act immediately. But her genuine sense of right and wrong and her natural warmth were evident as she entered his office.

Dani's mind raced as she mentally listed everyone she had met since her marriage to Rafe. Everyone in his family she immediately dismissed. All his business associates she'd met at dinners had been kind and appeared genuinely happy for her and Rafe.

She frowned. But there were two people who certainly were not pleased by her marriage to Rafe. Vanessa and Adrian! She slumped in the chair as she recalled the meeting with Vanessa at the restaurant the other day. The older woman's hostility was still clear and fresh in her memory. She would never forget the hatred smoldering in her green eyes. But would Vanessa be capable of such a deceitful act?

Sanchez was quick to note the change in his new client. The unpleasantness of her thoughts was painfully obvious on her expressive face. "You have thought of someone, Mrs. de Corba?"

"Well," Dani was hesitant to implicate anyone, even Vanessa. Mr. Sanchez seemed to sense her indecision and the reason behind it.

"Please trust me, Mrs. de Corba. No one will know of our conversations. And if the people we discuss are innocent, this will be proven during my investigation. No one will ever realize they were suspects in the case."

"This is all new to me. It doesn't seem right to accuse someone just on mere feeling."

"But someone has used your good name without your consent, have they not?"

Dani nodded.

"We must find out who this person is, then we will have the motive. And your husband will know the truth."

"You're right, of course. I'm just being overly cautious. Well," she then went on to describe in detail Vanessa's possessive attitude towards Rafe, including the incident in



the restaurant. When it came to relating Adrian's actions in the cove, she felt a warm flush fanning her cheeks. In slow, halting words, she told him what had happened on the beach yesterday. It was more difficult to talk about than she would have thought possible.

He listened intently as she related her impressions, jotting down notes in quick bold strokes.

The seconds ticked by after she'd finished, drained by the ordeal. Mr. Sanchez sat back in his chair, appearing to study the ceiling tiles as Dani waited for him to speak. She felt exhausted, but more relaxed now that she had taken some action to rectify the situation between her and Rafe.

Mr. Sanchez's authoritative tone broke into the silence, his words shattering whatever peace she'd thought she'd gained. "I'm sorry to have to ask this question, Mrs. de Corba, but it is important and must be addressed. Is your husband having an affair with this Vanessa Hume?"

"No!" Dani croaked.

"You can be so sure?" his voice became gentler.

"I...I guess I wouldn't have had any doubts before all this came about. But now? I just don't know for sure." He had to strain to hear her answer. She was close to tears.

He asked a few more, less painful questions, then sent her home, telling her not to worry. He would be in touch when he had something concrete to report.

This whole business concerning the article, Rafe's hostility and apparent lack of belief in her innocence, and now the detective had such an unreal quality to them. It was like living on the edge of a precipice, never knowing from which direction the next act of her life would come.

Returning home, she wandered listlessly into the library. There on a table stood the largest, most beautiful arrangement of red roses Dani had ever seen. Her spirits soared as she thought of Rafe. This must be his way of apologizing. She fairly floated across the carpet, eagerly searching for a card. *Please let them be from Rafe. Oh, please!* she prayed.

There was a small silver card, but not in Rafe's handwriting. *Please forgive me for yesterday. All my love. Adrian.* Instantly the beauty of the flowers faded into oblivion just as the light of anticipation went out of her eyes. She tore the card into tiny bits with jerky, heated movements, throwing them into the fireplace. How dare he send her flowers? And to her home of all places.

Against her will, tears formed as she berated herself for believing Adrian's words when he assured her he would leave her alone. Maybe it would be better if she took everyone at face value, refusing to take anyone seriously, especially words of love. It seems the words were easy to say, but couldn't really be trusted.

"Your lover appears to be very generous." The unexpected sound of Rafe's voice made her spin around, almost losing her balance. He leaned against the door, the expression on his face one of triumph, as if he had caught her at some forbidden act.

"He's not my lover!" Dani quickly denied. Damn Adrian and his flowers.

"That's not the impression I received from his adoring note. 'All my love' implies more than just a casual relationship. How long has this been going on, my loyal devoted wife? Did you know Adrian before we met, or did love blossom after you married me?" Rafe asked softly, too softly.

"He and I do not have a relationship, casual or otherwise. And I resent the very idea. You insult me with your implications." How could he even think she could be interested in anyone, let alone someone like Adrian? But she had to admit in all fairness, this did look suspicious.

"Then what is he asking forgiveness for, if I may ask?" Rafe heaved away from the door his long strides bringing him close to her side.

Rafe looked so handsome, filling the room with his virility. Dani could only stare; drinking in the sight of the man she loved like a person adrift for days without water.

Her mind raced to find words to fill the silence, to undo the damage done by Adrian's note. But all she could do was stare hungrily at her husband. The black corduroy pants emphasized the length of his powerful legs while the black turtleneck sweater accentuated the width of his broad shoulders. Dani suddenly felt as if her legs would give out, such was the longing engulfing her.

She couldn't tell him the truth. It was plain he wouldn't believe her. Or would he? Did she dare take the chance? *No, I can't*, she thought in dismay. Instead she heard herself say, "We met accidentally and had some unkind words. In other words, an argument. He can be quite annoying and to tell the truth, I don't even like that man," which was at least the truth. But even to her ears the explanation sounded contrived. But it was the best she could do. Dani didn't lie and apparently was not a good actress.

Rafe's arched brow indicated that he didn't accept her explanation. Dani was tired of these unfair accusations. Anger flared, igniting a blaze of indignation she had never before experienced. She was tired of defending herself, of explaining over and over to someone who constantly refused to believe her. Everything she said or did seemed to be suspect in Rafe's eyes.

And now, challenging her with a lover, and not just anyone, but Adrian Bernard, was more than she could stand. Maybe if she'd confided in Rafe earlier about Adrian's advances, this might not be taking place. But it was obviously too late now. Rafe wouldn't believe her if she told him the time of day.

Dani was beyond caring if she sounded like a shrew. "I don't care what you believe anymore. If it suits you to think of Adrian as my lover, then you go right ahead." She stood facing him, back straight, her head thrown back.

Her attack took him by surprise, but she could see a matching anger in his eyes as he slowly stretched to his full height, towering above her, looking down at her through

half closed eyes, assessing, then dismissing in the blink of an eye.

“You will not talk to me in such a manner. This is my home, something I should not have to remind you.”

“Why shouldn’t I speak to you any way I choose? What am I supposed to do? Stand by and let you verbally rake me over the coals, and do nothing in my own defense? Well, before, you accuse me of having an affair; you had better take a good look at yourself. ”As soon as the words left her lips, Dani regretted them. She didn’t really want to hear him talk about Vanessa.

“And just what is that meant to imply?” Rafe was tensed, coiled, ready to spring, but Dani paid no attention to the warning signs.

“I’m not blind to the time you spend with Vanessa. And it wouldn’t surprise me if she follows you on your business trips.” Since her confrontation with Vanessa, this doubt had been festering. Now each word said aloud was a well-honed blade stabbing into her heart. *Please deny it*, she begged silently.

“Be very careful in your accusations, my dear wife. I will not have Vanessa’s name dragged into our marital problems. She has done nothing to deserve this charge. All she has tried to do is be your friend. And what have to done but cut her short at every opportunity.”

“My friend?” Dani’s voice was shrill. Didn’t he realize that women like Vanessa didn’t have women friends? Rafe’s immediate defense of the older woman was like a physical blow. Her heart ached with bitter longing. How much more would be lost to her? Had she already lost Rafe to Vanessa? Had she ever really had him, his mind, his heart? Her spirits sank to an all time low.

She couldn’t stop now. She had to know. “Do you deny sharing her company during your latest business trip? Vanessa told me herself; made it more than plain she would not miss an opportunity to get back into your life again. What better time, than get you alone, without the little wife along to get in the way?”

Rafe's eyes were dark pools, his fists clenched at his sides. "Since you are so informed of my business and private life, I deny nothing," he sneered. Let her think what she liked. After all, apparently she had Adrian dangling behind the scenes.

To Dani, this was the confirmation of her worst fears. Jealously sprang into full bloom as she pictured Vanessa in his arms, flowering under the warm, driving attention she herself had been receiving from Rafe such a short time ago. She had never even felt the urge to slap anyone before, but now she wanted to hit at something to relieve the agony building inside of her.

"I...I wouldn't believe you if you did deny it." Dani squared her slender shoulders, held her head high in an effort to keep some sort of self-control, self-respect. Rafe must not realize how much power he held over her, how much he could hurt her. "Vanessa must be very elated with this change in your relationship. She'd just the type to seek her own gain at someone else's expense." Even as the words left Dani's lips, she realized it wasn't like her to be so condemning. But the hurt inside her over came all common sense.

"One last warning, Dani. Do not continue or I'll not be responsible for the consequences. Leave Vanessa out of this!"

"What can be worse than what you've put me through these last few weeks? I just don't care anymore." Prudence lay buried under a blanket of heartfelt pain, a desperate longing for Rafe. "That woman," she spat out the words like poison, "has never liked me. Oh, in front of you, she's all sweetness, but when we're alone, she's a real bitch. Vanessa is determined to get you back, has left no doubt that you're her main objective in life. She," the rest of her tirade strangled in her throat at the murderous look on Rafe's face.

"I warned you, Dani By God I..." with a curse that reddened her cheeks he crushed her to his big, hard body. Those long lean fingers bit into her slender arms as she he

held her captive. His dark head descended, but as his mouth covered hers, this was not the kiss of a lover. His kiss was meant as a punishment, demanding, rough, bruising her tender lips. She could taste blood. But the days and nights of being deprived of his nearness left her starving for his physical contact, even this brutal kiss was welcome as she strained closer to the volcanic, long length of his virile body.

Just as abruptly as the kiss began she found herself flung from him. "Rafe?" her bemused whisper a question of hope, her right hand extended out to him in supplication.

Ignoring her outstretched hand, he strode to the door, anger emanating from every muscle, seething from every pore. "That's just a sample of what you'll *not* be receiving from me. Ever again! Maybe your lover will be more obliging than your husband."

Rafe shook his head. *How could she kiss me like that, and still be with another man?* he thought in disgust. But a small part of his rational self wondered if he could be wrong. Which was the real Dani? The loving Dani who had shared his bed, his life the last three months, or this other Dani who contrived to gain monetarily by using his family, his name? Well, if he was right about her, he had misjudged her underhanded designs where the de Corba family was concerned.

At least he'd saved Demetrio from her unsavory clutches. He knew how to handle women like her. He'd certainly had enough practice. But she wouldn't get nearly as much money out of him as she'd probably assumed. He'd see to that!

After Rafe left the room, Dani groped for a chair. She sat down before her legs gave out from under her. She felt lightheaded, almost faint as tiny specks of light danced before her eyes. But she wouldn't faint. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

If Rafe could be cold and distant, so could she. At least until she could prove her innocence. Somehow she had to cloak herself in indifference, maintain a cool outer facade.

Her survival now depended on upholding her self-respect, her dignity.

After several minutes, the dizzy sensation cleared. Now all she felt was numbness. And she was oh, so tired. This entire situation was having an adverse effect on her physically. It was getting more difficult each day to get out of bed in the morning. Finally, forcing herself to slowly climb the stairs to her room, she silently prayed that Mr. Sanchez would be speedy with his investigation.

That night, Rafe had dinner out and didn't return until after two in the morning. Dani lay awake listening for his footsteps. It was one thing to tell herself that she was detached from all feeling for him, another to put it into action. She simply could not stop loving him, remembering the first three months they had shared. When she heard him climbing the stairs, she held her breath, but his footsteps didn't hesitate as he passed their bedroom, but quickly passed to the next room. Once again, he'd slept in the dressing room.

But then, why should he bother coming to his wife when he had undoubtedly spent the first part of the evening in the arms of another woman? With this thought to torment her, Dani cried into her pillow until exhaustion drove her into an uneasy sleep.

The next morning, by the time she went down for breakfast, Rafe had already left for the day. But then, lately, he was usually gone before she could put in appearance. She wondered if he even ate breakfast at home in an effort to avoid her company. So this morning, she was not surprised by his absence. Maybe she was even a little relieved to be spared another confrontation. She'd felt queasy when she first got out of bed this morning. Now, she felt in no condition to argue with him or anyone again. Or face the dark, cold look in his eyes.

She had to talk to someone. It wasn't wise to keep everything bottled up inside. Mr. Sanchez had been patient and understanding, but she needed someone closer to talk with. Maybe help sort out this mess. She needed Kate.

After a hasty breakfast of toast and juice, Dani left to visit her sister-in-law.

Kate met her at the door before Dani had time to ring the bell. "Dani! I was just on my way to see you." The two young women, so much alike they could be mistaken for sisters, hugged warmly.

"Has Demetrio left for the office?"

"He left about fifteen minutes ago." Kate led the way into the bright, sunny living room. "I had this wonderful idea that since you and I haven't had much time together since we returned from our honeymoon, we might spend the day together. Go shopping and lunch?"

Kate's happiness at seeing Dani, her delight at the prospect of sharing her company began to ease Dani's mood. She began to relax for the first time in days.

"That sounds just wonderful. I could really use the distraction right now."

Kate was too shrewd to miss the attempted camouflage of the dark circles under Dani's eyes. "Is Rafe still being stubborn about that ridiculous magazine article? I would have given him more credit for common sense. Ooh, I'd like to just shake some sense into him."

"Oh, Kate," she struggled to maintain her composure. "I don't know where I stand anymore. I mean, he's so cold and distant. It's as if he really hates me."

"You must not even think such a thing, Dani. Rafe does love you, I know he does. He used to light up when you walked into a room. It was so obvious how much he adored you." But Kate was beginning to have doubts about Rafe's true feelings for Dani.

"I noticed you used the past tense. Well, it's getting more difficult each day to accept that he cares for me at all. Or that he ever really did care. And I love him so much," Dani choked as her throat began to close with emotion. She took a deep breath. "If the situation were reversed, I would have asked, not automatically condemned. Kate, I don't understand why he accepts my guilt out of hand. He won't even consider that I could be innocent."



“Demetrio is awfully upset with Rafe. He said it’s difficult for him to even be civil to his brother. We just can’t understand this change in him. We’ve naturally discussed the subject between us and can’t come up with any answer. And Demetrio said Rafe simply refused to discuss the matter with him anymore, period.”

Demetrio had voiced a reason last night that could explain some of his brother’s new attitude, but Kate didn’t want to add to Dani’s distress. So, she was dismayed when Dani approached the subject herself.

“Kate, I...I think I understand more than anyone else in the family.”

Kate looked sharply at Dani, dreading what she sensed was coming.

“I don’t know if you are aware of it, but Rafe has been very close to Vanessa Hume, in the past.”

“Yes, but that was some time ago,” Kate reminded Dani. “She’s not the type he could truly be serious about. Rafe knows what she’s really like. Vanessa likes men but not women. All women are competition in her eyes and to be ignored if possible. If she can’t do that then she puts on a good show while in front of the men.”

“Are you positive their relationship was or is completely over?” Dani asked quietly.

Kate didn’t know what to say. If Dani had the same suspicions as Demetrio, the situation between her brother and sister-in-law must be much more serious than any of them had realized. But why? She could have sworn Rafe loved Dani. And possessive! She’d seen the hard black spikes of jealousy darken his eyes whenever a man made any form of advances in Dani’s direction or looked at her longer than he thought proper.

“Dani...”

“You’ve thought about it too, haven’t you?” Dani felt numb. Kate’s expression was answer enough.

“Well, Demetrio and I...we. Look, it did occur to us, but then the whole idea seemed too absurd, so we dismissed it as impossible. And you should too. His affair with that

witch was over long before he met you. And it wasn't of long duration either. Guess it didn't take him long to get tired of her."

Kate had never liked Vanessa; not many women did, if any.

Dani blurted, "I saw a private detective yesterday," and watched closely for Kate's reaction. It was instantaneous.

"A detective?" Kate echoed. The news both shocked and surprised her, mainly because it was not something she would have thought to do herself. Dani must be more worried than they had realized and the situation between her and Rafe more serious.

"Yes a detective. Try to understand. I have to do something, Kate. I can't just sit back any longer and wait for a miracle. Right now, I don't believe in them. And with this tension escalating with every passing day, I had to do something." She went on to relate the details of her meeting with Sanchez.

"Do you think he'll be able to help? I can't imagine where you'd start to look for the person who really wrote that article. How would you know what to look for?"

"Mr. Sanchez seemed to have a few possibilities to check first." Dani anticipated Kate's next question and went on before she could speak. "I really can't discuss that part of our conversation. If what he suspects is true, then, it will all come out in the open eventually."

Kate grimaced. "I would hate to be in that person's shoes when Rafe finds out. You can bet his revenge will be subtle but devastating. No one crosses the de Corba family if they know what's good for them. My family has known them for years, since before I was born, so I know about their hot-blooded tempers. Believe me, they're not ones to ignore an offense against their family, especially an intended assault. Tell you what; if the fool responsible is ruled by wealth and social standing, that greed will give the de Corba family a special weapon. A substantial monetary loss could prove extremely painful to those who would dare to interfere in the lives of a de Corba."

Dani shuddered recalling her own first hand encounter with Rafe's wrath. What would he be like when the truth came out? Kate was right. She could almost feel sorry for the offender. Almost. But would Rafe still want her as his wife when this was over?

"I'll just have to hold a good thought to get through the next week or so. I don't know how long it will take Mr. Sanchez to work his miracle."

"Good. Now how shall we spend our day?" Kate asked wanting to take Dani's mind off her problems for a few hours at least.

Dani did manage to relax somewhat and actually enjoyed herself, the first time in many days. She and Kate spend the entire day in and out of shops before having a quiet, leisurely lunch.

Neither ended up buying much, but Dani did purchase a new gown for the dinner party tonight. Rafe's terse note to her that morning had reminded her to have something appropriate to wear. Since there was no way she could gracefully avoid the festivities, she would at least look her best. If she ever needed a morale booster, now was that time.

Kate had declared the gown had been made for Dani. It was a soft pale yellow, very plain with long sleeves, a high neck, and wide belt at the waist with a full skirt that swirled around her ankles as she moved. It needed only a broach or gold chain to make it complete.

Later that evening, she was ready before the eight o'clock deadline, but reluctant to hurry downstairs sooner than was necessary. Rafe would be there. Rafe dressed in his evening clothes, so tall, broad shouldered and looking magnificent, as he did no matter what he wore. No, she would wait up here a little longer. It was easier to maintain her composure in private.

Lately it seemed whenever she was in the same room with Rafe, all her carefully erected barriers would begin to crumble as a colossal longing to be in his arms, to feel their strength would manifest itself. And that's all she had to do,

let him see how much she needed and missed him. He already had the power to hurt her without giving him more ammunition.

Dani looked at her watch. No more time for stalling. She had to go. One last look in the mirror assured her every hair was in place. She'd decided to wear it in a Grecian upsweep emphasizing her slender neck. Descending the stairs a minute later, she experienced a queasy sensation in her stomach again, attributing it to nerves. But a tiny seed of doubt as to the actual cause made her thoughtful. This feeling was happening more often, especially mornings. She couldn't ignore the signs much longer.

Rafe turned as she entered the library. "You look very nice," was his only comment. He wasn't just saying that either. Actually, she looked lovely. And he still wanted her, ached to hold her in his arms again. How could he still want a woman who had shown herself to be greedy and untrustworthy? And there was Adrian. His hands clenched by his sides as he thought of Dani with the other man.

For her part, Dani drank in his tall commanding masculine form, dressed in a black suit, crisp white shirt and black tie. Her stomach was in knots before they had even pulled away from the house. Dani tried to initiate conversation, telling him about her day with Kate, but his only acknowledgment was a disinterested grunt.

"Rafe, this may prove to be a long evening. The least you can do is try to be polite. How will it look at the party if we ignore each other?"

He took his eyes off the road for an instant to look at her. "I've had a long day, not to say trying week, Dani. I'm not in the mood for polite but senseless conversation. And I don't give a damn what other people think."

"Well, I've had a hell of a week also, thanks to you. But I do care what these people think of us. They're your friends and business associates." So now he doesn't care what other people think but yet he's furious about a magazine article. He couldn't have it both ways but she

was prudent enough to realize this was not the time to broach that subject.

“Give it a rest, Dani. I’m just not interested now.”

She stared at him in the darkness of the car, then lapsed into silence. If that was what he wanted, she would give it to him. This was the first time they had really been together as a couple since that dreadful day he’d thrown the article in her face. She speculated on how he would treat her in front of the others at the party. Somehow, she knew he would be polite and courteous, if nothing else.

Casually turning to look at him, she studied the man by her side, his concentration absorbed by the road. It was sweet torment to be able to look at him like this. If only she could reach over, touch him without rejection. Someday soon she would. It just had to be for several reasons.

There were six other couples at the party. Dani had met them all at least once. Everyone made her feel at ease with their genuine warmth. She and Rafe had become separated almost at once, each chatting to different groups. Dani glanced up to see the last couple make their entrance. Vanessa and Adrian, arm in arm.

Dani felt all color leave her face as her mind raced, wondering how in the world she was going to face the entire evening with both of them in the same room. This was turning into a living nightmare.

To her horror, she watched as Rafe threaded his way through the room, watched as he took Vanessa’s hand to his lips. Dani’s heart thudded against her ribs, as he seemed to have eyes only for Vanessa, who returned his rapt look as she smiled up into his face.

They were standing about ten feet away but Dani heard every word as if it has been screamed into her ear. She felt the questioning looks from the others in the room. Rafe’s voice seemed to boom across the room, although the rational part of her knew he spoke in a normal tone. “Van, you look stunning as usual.” He ignored Adrian who didn’t seem to mind in the least.

Vanessa's voice held a breathless quality, as if she'd been running. "Darling, I'm so happy to see you again. And we do seem to meet a lot lately, don't we?" The way she was devouring Rafe with her eyes made Dani want to stalk over and stake her claim on Rafe. He was, after all, *her* husband.

But she couldn't make a scene. If it were just the three of them, even if Adrian were present, she'd have a lot to say. But not in front of all these other people who must now be extremely curious about the state of the de Corba marriage. If she could have been beamed out of the room, it would have been a relief. But she stretched her lips into a semblance of a smile and hoped her face wouldn't crack.

Rafe tucked Van's jeweled hand possessively under his arm before nodding to Adrian. "Dani's just across the room. I'm sure you have much to say to each other. By the way, your flowers were beautiful." With this parting shot, Rafe led Van across the room to join a small group, one pretending not to notice something amiss in the room.

Dani couldn't move, her smile had frozen in place. How could Rafe do this to her? If all she had before were doubts about his relationship with Vanessa Hume, the confirmation was right in front of her, right in this room. *God, how he must hate me to humiliate me like this?* Dani thought in silent agony.

Dani turned away from the tall, commanding couple standing arm in arm across the room, their backs to her. She looked directly at Adrian who had silently come to stand close by her side. What was it she saw reflected in his eyes? Pity. Whatever it was, it was quickly replaced by something she had seen before on the beach. A chill of alarm snaked along her spine.

Adrian greeted the other two in her small corner before they excused themselves to wander off, leaving her alone with him. "You look beautiful tonight, Dani. And vulnerable." He didn't know what was wrong with Rafe de Corba but he wasn't about to question his desertion of his lovely young wife. The man must have lost a few critical

brain cells somewhere along the line. Who would ever choose Vanessa over Dani? In his mind there was no question.

His smooth silky voice was meant to caress, but it grated on her nerves. "Adrian." Her voice was as cold as the ice blue spikes flashing from her eyes, and a chilling tone that would have discouraged most people. But apparently Adrian was not one to back away from a challenge, especially when the prize was as enticing as Dani.

"As I recall, I did try to warn you about Vanessa and your husband. I'm just surprised he's so open about it. But then, Rafe de Corba always does what he wants, where he wants and when he wants. And as long as he wields the power, makes money for people in his business, they turn a blind eye to his private life. I'm sorry you had to discover this the hard way."

"Adrian, you've tried several things since our acquaintance," she replied coolly, while inside she was quaking with resentment. "And I hope you're not about to replay the beach scene?" She had the satisfaction to see color come and go in his face. If he could be embarrassed about his actions on the beach, maybe he wasn't a real threat to her anymore.

"Do you know what name some people have for our friend, Vanessa?" Adrian asked as he glanced across the room.

"I could think of a few." Dani replied caustically. "Actually, more than a few," if she were honest with herself.

"A *man eater* she's called, my darling Dani. She sees a man who appeals to her. It doesn't matter if he's attached or not. She launches an all out campaign to win his adoration. But, and this is the crucial point. Once she has him completely under the influence of her many charms, the challenge is gone. And with it her interest."

"So you're saying that Rafe is once again the object of her campaign?"

“That about sums it up, darling. Rafe is the only man I can think of who can sustain her interest for...” he paused as Dani looked up at him. “For a lifetime. Let’s face it. Rafe isn’t the type of man to be ruled by a woman, no matter how delicious her charms. And Van knows exactly what she’s doing. Rafe will always have the upper hand in their relationship, so she’ll have to remain on her toes to hold him. So be warned, she let him slip away once. But she’s a determined lady who won’t make that mistake again.”

“You seem to forget that it’s my husband she’s after. You may think I’m out of my league with Mrs. Hume, but I sure as hell won’t go down without a fight.” Dani was tired of being treated like a criminal, like someone of no consequence. She was going to prove that she had nothing to do with that article or with Adrian, and win back her husband. Any lingering spark of doubt she delegated to the back of her mind.

“I hate to be the voice of doom, but you don’t stand a chance, my lovely. Why don’t you give up gracefully now while you’re still young and beautiful? If Van has her way, she’ll strip you of everything and leave you defenseless,” Adrian stated emphatically.

“You make her sound completely without mercy, Adrian. I don’t believe anyone is that heartless.” But did she? She knew in her heart that her words were pure bravado. Dani also realized that Adrian’s words had a ring of truth to them.

“Don’t underestimate your opponent, darling. She really is quite something when she’s on the campaign trail.”

“Oh, I’m not taking anything for granted, don’t worry. Maybe you should warn Vanessa not to be too complacent about me.”

Dani’s assertion startled Adrian into reassessing the situation. He studied Dani, his eyes narrowed in speculation. This might not be as easy as he had first hoped. Apparently Rafe was turning to Vanessa, but Dani was not running to him for the support and comfort as he’d



planned. Dani was definitely stronger than she appeared or that he'd first thought possible.

Dinner was a nightmare for Dani, a strained affair with Rafe on her right and Adrian on her left. Even seated between the two men, there was no opportunity to divide her attention. Vanessa saw to that. With Rafe seated between the two women, it was Vanessa who commanded Rafe's undivided attention. Not once did he turn to his wife.

Dani was in pain. She could not get more than a few bites of the delicious food past the lump in her throat. The prime rib was like heaven on her plate, but still she couldn't force much down. At least Adrian kept the conversation flowing through the endless meal, accepting her subdued responses for what they were. She was sure she saw pity in his eyes each time she looked over at him. That alone was enough to stir her self doubts into action. Adrian did know Vanessa and Rafe much better than she did, and certainly for a much longer period of time.

Shortly after the dinner guests adjourned to the living room for coffee, Vanessa suddenly or conveniently developed a crushing headache. She turned to Rafe. "Darling, would you please take me home." She smiled at Dani and Adrian, "There's no reason to spoil the rest of the evening for the others."

Rafe looked at Vanessa then over at Dani. It was on the tip of Dani's tongue to suggest she accompany them, when the hard glint in his eyes warned her against any offer to leave.

"Van's right," he said. "I have some paperwork to get ready for an important meeting tomorrow. There's no point in ruining the rest of the night for you and Adrian. I'll drop her off on my way home. I'm sure Adrian can be persuaded to see you home safely, Dani." He nodded to Adrian. Rafe was furious and needed to get away from the party. Vanessa had offered him a way out and he was quick to take her up on the offer. Dani had given Adrian her undivided attention all evening. Granted, he hadn't been in

the best of moods and had said little if anything to her since they'd arrived. But Dani could have made an effort to stand by his side sometime during the evening.

"I'll see she gets home later. No need to worry, Rafe."

Several people were taking in the conversation, speculation obvious in their expressions. Dani couldn't have uttered a word if her life depended upon it. *How could Rafe do this to her?* She knew what the other guests must be thinking. She could protest and insist on accompanying them, but that would only make a scene, make things much worse because at this point Dani wasn't sure what Rafe's reaction would be.

Of course, everyone was solicitous of Vanessa and hoped she would be feeling better soon. And if they thought it odd that Rafe left his wife of a few months to be escorted home by Adrian, they were too well mannered to say anything, at least to her. But Dani could just imagine the conversation shortly after she did leave with Adrian about half an hour behind Rafe and Vanessa.

Dani was loath to leave with Adrian after what had happened on the beach, but her in present befuddled state, and a need to be away from the party, she would have walked out with anyone who showed concern. Besides she didn't think Adrian would try to force himself on her again. He might try romancing her, but she was pretty sure he wouldn't use force.

"Why don't we go somewhere for a drink? Just to unwind for a while. I know this evening must have been very trying for you," Adrian suggested once they were settled in his car.

Dani just looked at him, not surprised by his suggestion. "No Adrian. I just want to go home. Please!" He pulled out onto the highway without saying a word.

"Just one drink wouldn't hurt anything, Dani. It's a hell of a lot less than Rafe and Van will undoubtedly be having," Adrian said with callous disregard for her feelings.

“A drink is the last thing I want or need right now, Adrian,” Dani snapped. He wasn’t right about Vanessa and Rafe. If he weren’t home when she got there, he would be shortly. Rafe had said he had work to do and she believed him. Or she told herself she needed to believe him.

Adrian was about to argue the point with her when, without warning, Dani became carsick for the first time in her life. The motion of the vehicle added to her already distraught condition that made her stomach roil. It was too much for her to handle.

Her anguished, “please stop the car!” was met with a string of expletives that at any other time would have brought color to her cheeks. In seconds, Adrian had her by the side of the road, an arm about her for support as she gave way to her nausea.

“This seems to be habit forming,” he teased with uncommon humility. “I’m beginning to believe you’re allergic to me. This definitely is not the response I desire from a woman,” he said shaking his head.

Dani acknowledged his attempt at humor with a wan smile, her face pale in the moonlight. “I really don’t feel well, Adrian. Please take me home.” She needed to lie down and soon. She felt a little lightheaded along with the nausea. She hadn’t eaten much that day and practically nothing at dinner.

Adrian finally relented, driving her straight home, leaving her at the door. “Are you sure you don’t need me to come in for a while?” he asked just before she got out of the car.

“No, Adrian. I’ll be fine. I simply need to lie down for a while.”

“I did try to warn you about Vanessa. Even I’m surprised at her outlandish tactics tonight. But then, she doesn’t particularly care what people think as long as she gets what she wants. And she wants Rafe. Even you can’t dispute that after their little show this evening.”

“I’m not going to argue with you, Adrian. I’m too tired. You have your view and I have mine. Good night, and

thank you for bringing me home.” What more could she say? She had been warned. Rafe’s world was new to her and how people in his circle conduct themselves. What did she do now? What could she do?

Alone in her room, she cried, giving in to the loneliness, the insecurities. She couldn’t get the picture of Rafe and Vanessa out of her mind, their heads together, planning this little evening’s closure. She would never have credited Rafe with such deviousness, but after tonight, she just didn’t know anymore.

Dani sat staring into the darkness. She must never let Rafe know how much this evening hurt her. Oh, she would let him know that she didn’t like being treated like this, but she would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her crawl to him. Dani sat up straighter, her shoulders thrown back as this new resolution took hold. If he thought he could get back at her with this type of conduct, he might try a repeat performance. But she couldn’t, and would not, go through an ordeal like this again.

A small smile curved her lips as she thought of another matter, one occupying her mind more and more this last week. Even though she hadn’t seen a doctor yet, it was almost a certainty she was pregnant. She should have recognized the symptoms sooner, but it wasn’t surprising that she hadn’t with her marriage in such an upheaval. She couldn’t put off consulting with a doctor much longer. At least once her pregnancy was confirmed, it would give her something good to hope for. There would be something positive in her life once again.

Rafe’s baby. A baby with black hair and dark eyes like his father. With this image filling her mind, Dani finally drifted off into a restless sleep. Her dreams were tormenting images of Rafe and Vanessa, images of them smiling at each other, holding each other. Dani’s quiet anguished sobs filled the long empty night with no witness but her tear stained pillow.



## CHAPTER 5

Dani left the doctor's office three days later happier than she'd been in weeks. She was pregnant with Rafe's child. Not that there had been any doubt in her mind, especially the last day or two. But now it was confirmed; it was official. She was going to have Rafe's baby and she knew in her heart it was going to be a boy, a son who would have the dark hair and eyes just like his father. The knowledge of this tiny emblem of love growing under her heart lit Dani's face with a special glow.

She was so thrilled she wanted to shout this miraculous news to the world, but she couldn't say a word to anyone. Not yet. She sighed as she opened the door of the office building where her doctor's office was located. No, she couldn't tell anyone. Not until her name had been

completely cleared. Her left hand brushed against her still flat stomach. She loved this child with a mother's fierce protection, so this situation between her and Rafe had to be settled before she could tell him. And she did want him to be the first to know about their baby. He would be a wonderful father; strict but loving and caring.

And Diego! He would be so pleased. She smiled as she pictured his guarding her welfare throughout the pregnancy. But all that would have to wait. For now, she could only dwell silently on the happiness her news would finally bring to the family.

Since both Rafe and Diego were away on business, she had no desire to go back to the empty house. Diego should be home later that evening, but Rafe had left on a business trip the morning after the dinner party. He'd left before she'd had the opportunity to confront him about his callous treatment the evening before at the dinner party. Picturing him leaving the room with Vanessa hanging on his arm brought pain to her chest. Still, she missed Rafe dreadfully, missed the closeness they'd shared prior to this whole sordid business.

But his absence was also a blessing. At least with Rafe out of town, there was no chance of her being put in any other embarrassing positions. And it made it easier to keep her news about the pregnancy secret. In a weak moment she might be tempted to blurt out the news before she'd gotten all this magazine business cleared up. And Dani didn't want anything to spoil the moment when she could finally tell Rafe about the baby.

Dani refused to dwell on who might be with him on this business trip. But a painful uncertainty hovered very close to the surface. A battle raged in her mind each day, which was worse? having him there with his eyes raking her with dislike whenever they were in the same room, or having him away, not being able to see him, and being tortured by suspicion?

Shopping would keep her occupied for a little while. And the shops along the street were calling to her.

Especially she shops with the baby displays, infant clothes and accessories. Well, she couldn't buy anything for their son yet, but she could look. And she could get a new dress to wear when she made her grand announcement to Rafe about the baby.

Dani was in the fitting room trying on a yellow and green hostess gown of satin and lace when the full implication of her pregnancy hit her. She wouldn't be able to keep it from everyone much longer. Turning sideways, she viewed her figure relieved there were no outward signs of the baby she carried. She ran her small hand over her stomach. It wouldn't be long. Her body might look the same now, but she felt fuller somehow. And her breasts were already straining the lacy scrap of material she wore. No, it wouldn't be too long before it would be obvious to everyone.

This realization made it imperative she prove her innocence before anyone, especially Rafe, suspected her pregnancy. Dani had no idea how Rafe would react if he found out about the baby before her name was cleared.

Mr. Sanchez hadn't called her yet, but she would take a chance and stop by his office. Even an encouraging word would give her something to cling to.

Surprisingly, she was immediately ushered into his office upon her arrival. He came from behind the desk, a look of pleasure lighting his weather worn face. "Mrs. de Corba, this is a pleasant surprise. And a very convenient one for each of us."

Hope fluttered on fragile wings. "You've found something already?"

"More than I had hoped for. Amateur or overconfident, the trail was extremely easy to read and follow. And the people I've had to contact have been more than willing to give descriptions or help in any way." This was the type of case he liked to handle, easy and to the point.

Dani was almost afraid to ask. "Does this mean you have a report I can give to my husband?"

Smiling broadly, Mr. Sanchez picked up a sizable manila folder from his desk. “Here is the report of the situation accompanied by copies of the original manuscript, the canceled check made out in your name and various other documents that will be sure to interest your husband.” Sanchez was pleased he could wrap up this case so quickly. Now maybe life could get back to normal for this lovely young woman.

Dani could hardly breath. “This is wonderful! You have no idea how much I’ve looked forward to being able to clear my name.” Her eyes shone with the threat of tears. The smile of relief and happiness she bestowed on him brought a matching smile from the detective.

Dani hesitated, then quickly began to read, turning page after page, digesting all this information Mr. Sanchez had been able to uncover. He had been thorough. And someone had been very busy indeed.

Dani was speechless. She had truly underestimated Adrian and Vanessa. The other woman had made no secret of her dislike for Dani, but to stoop to this deception? It was mind-boggling.

Dani shook her head in bewilderment. She had never met anyone like Vanessa before in her life since her normal circle of friends did not include the wealthy elite. She had had no inkling of this kind of danger or sabotage to her character. But she knew now. Oh, she knew and understood that people like Adrian and Vanessa went after what they wanted no matter what the cost to others involved.

That Adrian was involved to this extent did not surprise her. He’d been such a nuisance since their first encounter. No wonder he’d been so confident that day at the beach! He’d known all along how well he and Vanessa had done their groundwork in discrediting her. He’d been so sure she would fall gratefully into his arms. If she’d disliked him before, this eye opening information intensified the feeling.



How many times had she asked or told Adrian to leave her alone or she would go to Rafe? But she had never said anything to her husband. If only she had. She'd been so sure she could handle the situation herself. What a fool she had been! Why hadn't she confided in Rafe the first time Adrian had come on to her? Maybe Vanessa and Adrian wouldn't have been able to hurt her marriage; their scheming would have been for nothing. Dani sighed. But then what you should have done wouldn't wipe out the past, nor change the present. She could only go forward.

There was too much information to absorb at one sitting...Vanessa and Adrian as masterminds of this vicious plot to undermine Dani in Rafe's eyes; the involvement of a third party to actually write the magazine article; the article's immediate acceptance, and the check so easily deposited into her checking account.

Her head was spinning as she turned the page, almost dropping the folder as she stared at the copy of a hotel register with her signature. "What?" she exclaimed. "What is this?"

"These people have been very thorough, Mrs. de Corba. If your husband refused to believe in your authorship of that article, they had this incriminating evidence of your infidelity awaiting him."

"I don't think they waited for that. He has already accused me of having a lover. Adrian." Dani's throat contracted, aching with unshed tears.

The fool, Sanchez thought to himself, but aloud he said; "now all of that is behind you. When your husband reads this information, I would hate to be in the shoes of those who have dared to influence his life and discredit his wife. And to have you hurt so deeply in the process." This was one of the cases he enjoyed. It would bring happiness to his client, such a beautiful engaging creature. Unlike many of his cases, this one would have a happy ending.

"I can't thank you enough, Mr. Sanchez. I had prepared myself to wait weeks. And...and here it is in a much shorter time." Her happiness and pleasure would almost

have been payment enough, so it was with some guilt he accepted her generous check before she dashed from his office in her haste to return home.

Dani actually sang in the car on the drive home. She had not felt this elated in what seemed a long time; it was almost as if her feet never touched the ground. Finally, she had the proof of her innocence. And now her pregnancy had been confirmed. All of this coming together in one day was wonderful. All she needed now for her world to be complete was Rafe. And she was anxious to tell him about the baby.

She knew just what she would do. She would be as patient as possible as Rafe read the material in the folder. She frowned as she thought of his anger at Vanessa and Adrian. But then, they deserved his fury. If not for them, their life would not have been turned upside down. She wouldn't allow anything to disturb Rafe as he digested the contents of her folder. She wouldn't even let her presence interfere, as difficult as it would be. The weeks of being deprived of his closeness, his warmth had her starving for his touch, his loving embrace. But she would not rush matters. Yes. He would have to make the first move after reading the folder.

Diego was just about to enter the library as she burst through the front door. Laying her purse and folder on the hall table, she ran to him, wrapping her slender arms around his neck. "I have my proof, Diego. Tonight when Rafe gets home, we'll be able to have a long talk and get this entire mess cleared up once and for all. I'm so happy, I could scream it to the world."

Instead of sharing her joy, his expression changed to one of concern. Suddenly, her spirits nose-dived.

"Ah, nina. He has phoned to say he will be delayed a few more days." Seeing the tears forming in her eyes, he quickly explained. "But what is a couple of days out of a lifetime ahead of you, hmm?" He drew her gently into the library with him. Diego took her downcast face between

his large hands. “You love this wayward nephew of mine very much, don’t you?”

“Oh, Diego! I’ve been so miserable without him. It’s as if part of me is lost. I can’t wait to talk to him.” But she knew Diego was right. She had waited this long, a few more days couldn’t hurt. She would keep busy and the time would fly. For the first time in several weeks, her eyes held the sparkle of the sea as solar rays reflect back towards their beginnings, her laughter bubbled up like the waters from a cool, crisp stream.

“You don’t know how good it is to see you smile again, little one. And what is this proof you have found?” Diego was confused and concerned. He’d seen the paperwork Rafe had concerning Dani and that magazine article and it had appeared authentic. But now Dani claimed to have proof to the contrary.

“Diego, I...” her hesitation spoke more than words. His concern was very real, but she wanted to show the contents of that file to Rafe first. Then let him decide what to do about the information. This was between Dani and her husband.

“You wish to speak with your husband first, hmm? I understand and will put my curiosity to rest until he returns.”

“Thank you for understanding, Diego. This information is for Rafe and he must decide what, if anything he needs to do about it.”

“Well, I’m sure he’ll take care of everything. I would not want to be on the receiving end of his wrath, and whoever is responsible for this invasion into his personal life will have to face him with their reasons. Someone is in for a hard time.” Diego had no doubt that Rafe would take whatever legal action available to see the guilty party paid for this deception.

The remainder of the week dragged by, even though Dani worked around the house and even out in the gardens. And she jumped every time the phone rang. She must have

broken several track records in a dash for the door if a car pulled up to the house. But still no Rafe.

Oh, he had finally called, but while she was out to lunch with Diego and Kate. He would be arriving home late sometime Friday night. If the past week seemed long, Friday seemed endless.

Diego couldn't resist the urge to tease her. "You are like a little girl about ready to go on her first date, Nina. If you don't slow down, you will be too tired and overwrought to talk to Rafe."

"I can't help it, Diego. Rafe will really be home tonight. Everything will be straightened out, and this entire mess will be behind us." She wasn't sure how they would pick up the pieces of their marriage but she was sure it would happen. It would be a new beginning for them. Maybe they could get away for a while, just the two of them? Dani smiled at the thought of having Rafe all to herself for an entire week somewhere.

Diego stood, coming from behind the desk where he'd been working. He took Dani by the hand. "Come, let us go for a walk to occupy your time."

It was relaxing, walking arm in arm through the gardens. She and Diego talked a great deal, with Dani doing most of the talking, answering questions about her childhood, revealing much about her, things she had never confided to anyone before. Diego was so easy to talk to. A number of times during their walk, she'd been tempted to tell him about the baby. But Rafe had to be the first to hear such wonderful news.

Upon returning to the house, she went straight to her room to get ready for the evening. Dani added extra crystals to her bath, relaxing in the warmth as she soaked away every ounce of tension. Rafe had always been fascinated with her hair, so she chose to leave it hanging loose, a golden waterfall that hung almost to her still tiny waist.

By the time Diego knocked on her door to escort her down to dinner, she had changed her clothes four times.

Deciding against the gown she'd bought recently, she chose instead a floor length dress of emerald green and white checks, the empire waistline made her waist look impossibly small, the vee-neck with wide sleeves emphasized the delicacy of her neck and arms. Her only jewelry consisted of small emerald earrings to match her dress and the delicate gold watch Rafe had given her on their honeymoon.

As they went into dinner, Diego couldn't help but reflect on how lovely Dani truly was, or how very young and vulnerable she appeared. He sincerely hoped this situation between Rafe and Dani could be resolved quickly once his nephew returned home.

Diego had an engagement after dinner, but graciously offered to cancel his plans to remain with her. She smiled at his thoughtful offer. "No, Diego. You go and have a good time. I'll be fine. Besides, when Rafe gets home, I want him all to myself." She had so much to tell him and not just about the information Mr. Sanchez had uncovered.

"If you're sure, nina. I'll see you both in the morning then." After kissing her good night, he drove away from the house, leaving Dani feeling somewhat abandoned. Idiot, she thought. You told him to go. Besides, you're too old for a baby-sitter.

Dani wandered into the library. How many times during the past days had she daydreamed about this moment? Of Rafe's expression when she told him about the baby.

As it turned out, she missed his arrival, having gone to the kitchen to fix a glass of iced tea after falling asleep on the sofa for over an hour. It was almost eleven o'clock and she was beginning to fear he would not be coming home at all.

Her soft-soled sandals made no sound on the thick green carpet as she entered the library. Rafe was standing by his large desk. He was looking over the pile of mail that had accumulated during his absence. Dani held her breath, drinking in the sight of his tall, powerful masculine form,

noted the jacket he'd casually thrown over the back of a chair, the black turtleneck shirt that emphasized broad shoulders and powerful arms.

Her heart swelled with love. Oh, she loved him so much. She uttered a silent prayer, *please let everything be right again.*

Rafe must have sensed her presence. He slowly turned to face her, the haunted expression in his eyes, the cold look on his face caused her to falter as she moved toward him. It was plain time had done nothing to soften his opinion of her.

"Welcome home, Rafe." Her mouth was suddenly dry as the desert.

"I could have done without the welcoming committee, if that's what you are. I've had a long week and am in desperate need of sleep." He hadn't even looked at her as he spoke. Placing the mail back on the desk, he reached for his coat. He took a deep steadying breath. Dani looked so fragile, so beautiful she took his breath away. Why did it have to be this woman who aroused him to passion and to such anger so easily? But she wasn't to be trusted. He had proof of that. More than enough.

It was now or never. Dani took a deep breath for courage as she picked up the folder from the table by her side. "Please hear me out, Rafe." As she spoke she thrust the folder into his reluctant hands. "You said you had proof that I wrote the article. Well, I've found the evidence that proves I didn't. It was all an elaborate plan...."

Before she could utter anything more, without so much as opening the folder, Rafe tore it in half before tossing it into the fireplace, where orange flames danced in anticipation of this new fuel. Struck speechless for several seconds, Dani sprang forward to retrieve the precious documents from the flames that were curling the paper at the edges before they began to devour them one by one.

Rafe cruelly grasped her by the arms, swinging her around to face him. She fought against the painful hold, straining around watching in horror as her dreams turned to

ashes. “Why? Why didn’t you read it?” she cried, hurt beyond measure by his thoughtless act.

“You didn’t really believe I’d fall for any more of your lies, did you? I’ve no doubt you spent the entire time I’ve been gone quickly putting together this so-called proof of yours. This is a pretty lame attempt to get back into my good graces again. Save your time. Nothing will do that, Dani. I’m not the least bit interested.” He wouldn’t let her make a fool of him again. But as much as he tried, he found he wasn’t immune to the pain in her eyes. How could she look so innocent, so beautiful, and yet be so cunning? He had been justified in protecting Demetrio from the likes of Dani. Even he, as hardened as he was to women like her, could be moved by her beautiful face and act of innocent deception. Well, it would end here and now.

Dani could barely breath. This couldn’t be happening to them. This was not a dream, but a nightmare. Tears shone in her eyes. “It was real! The evidence...it was real.” She choked back a sob. “Please, I really did find the proof I needed to prove to you that I was not lying. I had to find the proof so you would love me again and...”

“I’ve *never* loved you!” he shouted. Suddenly Rafe was so tired to this deception. It would be best to get it all out in the open so they could move on with their separate lives.

Dani cringed at the icy expression of disgust in his eyes. The emphasis on the word *never*, made her stagger back from this man who had become a stranger to her.

Rafe advanced as she retreated until she was pinned against the back of the sofa. “I married you for one reason and one reason only. And that was to keep you away from Demetrio. He was betrothed to Katherine, a marriage arranged by our fathers’ years ago. And no cheap little hustler was going to interfere. If you had denied my advances, I would have considered your affection for Demetrio to be real. But you lost no time choosing me over my brother didn’t you Dani? Was it because I control

the purse strings for the de Corba family? Go right to the source of the money? Is that what you envisioned?"

Dani shook her head in denial. Rafe couldn't believe what he was saying. He couldn't! "Demetrio and I were never romantically involved. We were just friends." *My God, he was like a bother to her. Couldn't Rafe see that?*

"That wasn't what I was told. Nor was that what I witnessed upon my arrival at the hotel. You spent almost a week alone with Demetrio and you say it wasn't serious. Well, certainly, not on your part, especially after I appeared on the scene. It didn't take much to lure you into my arms, did it my lovely wife?"

Dani stared at Rafe, disbelief clouding her eyes. He really was saying these hateful things to her. Suddenly, the meaning of his tirade burst inside her head in painful array. "It was all an illusion!" her words a whisper in the tension filled room. In just these few minutes her whole world had shattered. The past few glorious months they had shared had all been a lie.

Dani turned her back to him, not wanting him to see the tears cascading down her face. He was now a stranger she couldn't face. What a fool she had been! Boy, had Adrian ever been right! She had been living in a fool's paradise, and everyone had known it but her.

"Since Demetrio and Katherine are now safely married, I see no reason for you and I to continue with this farce of a marriage any longer. I'll see you receive a substantial settlement, so you won't go uncompensated for your time. This will leave you free to join your lover. I'm sure Adrian must be getting anxious. From what I hear, you two have been having quite a time lately. And none too discretely either." He'd been furious when he'd been presented with the copy of the hotel register. That was one of the reasons he'd taken on this business trip. He had to get away for a while before he did something he might regret. But all the time he was gone, he pictured Dani and Adrian together, her small silky body in bed with another man. Well as far as he was concerned now, Adrian could have her. A small



voice in the back of his mind called him a liar but he chose to ignore it.

Dani whirled to confront Rafe. “Adrian is not my lover and never has been! And he never will be!” She couldn’t have him believing this of her. Not on top of everything else he thought be to true. Maybe if she told him about the baby? But the words she was about to utter died before they had a chance to pass her trembling lips.

“You’re a liar, Dani!” The withering look directed at her, the dark forbidding anger in his eyes, silenced any discussion about her baby. Those lips that had once caressed hers were drawn into a thin line.

Rafe was trembling inside. He’d almost come to believe Dani was as she appeared, loving, truthful, a genuinely warm person. Almost. He’d been led down this same road by a woman once before and vowed never to be made a fool of a second time. Thank goodness, he’d learned about Dani when he did. He’d been so close to keeping the marriage intact. But not now. She was no better than most of the women who sought his company, or should he say his money.

Dani’s tears made no impression on Rafe. She looked at this stranger before her, searching for some softening, for some sign of the man she’d married. There was none. “Everything between us has been unreal. You’ve never cared about me at all,” she accused softly, all fight drained out of her. The anguish piercing her shone from eyes like an extinguished light as her normal sparkle dimmed then vanished.

Dani stumbled blindly from the library, fleeing upstairs to the isolation of her room, quickly locking the door behind her. Not that Rafe would follow her. No. After what he had told her, he would not come to seek her out. Time passed as she stood in the middle of the darkened room, staring at the window as the drapes swayed in gentle rhythm with the night breeze. From below came the sound of a car engine springing into life, growing fainter and

fainter as it drove down the long tree lined drive, away from the house. Away from Dani.

That sound of Rafe driving away snapped her into action. She tossed clothes haphazardly into a suitcase. She would take only those things she had brought with her, things she had before she'd ever met Rafe de Corba. Except for one thing. Her baby.

Her child was her world now. He was all she had of Rafe, all she would ever have. Since Diego was away for the evening and the servants had retired to their quarters, she had no trouble slipping out of the side entrance unnoticed. Once the door closed behind her, there was no turning back. She'd left her house keys on Rafe's dresser along with her wedding rings. She had no further use for either. She also left behind the watch and other jewelry Rafe had bought for her. Knowing what she did now about Rafe's opinion of her, they seemed like gifts for services rendered. In just a few words he'd reduced what she'd thought of as a loving relationship to a short lurid time of lust. When all she'd ever wanted was love.

Thankfully, when she reached the airport, there had been a cancellation for a flight to Dallas at the very last minute, which left her no time to mope around the terminal. No time to question her headlong flight from the man she'd loved above all else. But he was a man who had not loved her in return. By the time she'd made arrangements for her car to be returned to Rafe, they were announcing her flight departure. It was time for her to leave. Holding her handbag close to her side, she walked stiffly to the waiting plane.

Quickly the plane reached the height and angle that gives the impression of being suspended in midair. But none of this made much impression on Dani, sitting next to the window, her hands clenched tightly on the armrests. The dark, nighttime sky was dotted with myriad stars, but she stared intently at the lights below. She would never return to them. The door on that part of her life had just closed...forever.



The lights blended together to form a radiant blur. The lights were filmy images she watched as the tears she could no longer contain ran unheeded down her ashen cheeks.

## CHAPTER 6

Rafe was about as angry as he'd ever been in his life as he drove away from the house. He knew he had to get away before he did something he might regret. How dare Dani try to deceive him with those false papers? Just how gullible did she think he was? He had the proof of her devious actions in the safe in his office. There was the contract from the magazine with her signature and a copy of the cancelled check along with the bank statement showing the deposit into her account. What could she

possibly have come up with to refute that evidence? Rafe shook his head trying to calm himself.

Dani had proven herself quite resourceful and he'd left her on her own for several weeks. She'd had plenty of free time to come up with some scheme to supposedly clear her name. Rafe laughed but it had a hollow ring to it. He didn't understand why he should be so upset over this whole mess. He'd known what Dani was when he married her. But she had seemed so real, so loving, so genuine.

Rafe drove around for over an hour before heading for his office. He didn't want company right now and his office would be empty. He had to think about his next step. He'd have to see his attorney first thing in the morning to get divorce proceedings started. The building was deserted this time of night so his footsteps sounded unusually loud as he made his way to his office. The only person he'd seen had been the night guard who had waved as Rafe entered the elevator.

His office was dark but rather than turn on the main lights Rafe just turned on the small desk light before shrugging out of his jacket. He went to look out the window behind his desk, at the small amount of traffic on the street below. It was late and most people were at home or in clubs or with friends. Rafe sighed running his large hands through his hair.

Dani...she had almost fooled him with her false air of innocence and act of being the loving devoted wife. All the time with Adrian in the background enjoying the same benefits as Rafe had in his marriage but without having to pay any price for it. Rafe's hands clenched into fists. The thought of Dani with Adrian or any other man made him want to hit something.

Damn, but she had been his and his alone. Or so he'd thought. What a fool he'd been! Well, he wasn't the only one. Diego had been taken in as well and Rafe didn't know how his uncle would take the news that he'd been wrong about Dani. That was another battle he wasn't looking forward to. And then there was Kate and Demetrio. But

first he had to take care of Dani and get the state of their marriage rectified. But still, a small voice in the back of his mind cautioned that what if Dani is exactly what she appears to be? What if she didn't write that article? *Yeah, right!* he thought without humor. But that spark of doubt wouldn't be extinguished.

Rafe kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the leather sofa on the far side of his office. He wouldn't be used again. Lenore had almost taken him for a complete fool and he'd vowed no woman would ever do that to him again. Not Dani. Not anyone. He was mentally listing the calls he would have to make tomorrow when he drifted off into a restless sleep.

It felt like he'd only been asleep for a few minutes but a quick look at his watch showed him that he'd been asleep for over three hours. It was three in the morning. Rafe quickly dressed and left for home. Without the usual traffic he made it back to the house in record time. He quietly entered the house, not wanting to wake anyone at this time of the morning. As he made his way up the stairs, he hoped Dani wouldn't be waiting for him. He needed to make some phone calls before he confronted her again.

As he climbed the stairs, a strange empty feeling seemed to engulf him. He halted halfway up and looked around. Something just didn't feel right. The only sound he could hear was the grandfather clock in the foyer.

When he reached the top of the stairs he noticed that the door to the master suite was standing ajar. Well, if Dani was in there waiting for him she would just have to wait. He was too tired and in no mood for another confrontation. But when he stepped into the room it was quiet, too quiet. Rafe turned on the light. The room was immaculate, the bed empty and not turned down. He turned towards the large walk-in closet, that empty feeling getting stronger with each step he took across the carpet. His momentary relief was short lived when he realized that most of Dani's clothes were gone. He was quick to note that all that remained was what she'd bought since their marriage. Her

old suitcase she'd stored in the back of the closet was also missing.

Rafe retraced his steps to the center of the room looking for some sign that she was still there. Then he saw something lying on the dresser where he usually put his watch at night. There was a house key and Dani's wedding rings. He just stared at them for several minutes. Maybe this was just her way of making him squirm. She'd call tomorrow to let him know where she was expecting him to demand that she return home. Or maybe she was with Adrian. This thought made him almost sick to his stomach. He grabbed up the rings and the key thrusting them into the case with his cuff links. He wouldn't play her game. Now that Dani was out of his home, he could get her out of his life completely.

With this thought he lay down on the bed but sleep was a long time coming. Memories of Dani naked under him in this very bed tormented him. He'd been her first lover, of that he had no doubt. And she'd been an eager student as they'd made love to night after night. She'd even gotten over her shyness and joined him in the shower on occasion much to their mutual delight. The last thing Rafe thought about before he drifted off to sleep for the second time that night was the feel of Dani's hair draped over his chest when she'd curl up next to him to sleep.

As luck would have it, Kate and Demetrio returned one day early from a short spur of the moment holiday showing up at the house early the next evening. Diego was in the library to greet them. "Well, hello you two lovebirds. What are you doing back today? I didn't think you were due back until sometime tomorrow." He gave both a warm hug.

"The weather was turning bad so we decided to get home before we were stranded. A hurricane is nothing so take chances with," Demetrio said slapping his uncle on the back. If it had just been rain, there wouldn't have been any problem. He and Kate could have simply stayed in their

room. He'd been hoping that that's all it was going to be...any excuse to keep his new wife in bed. Just the thought made him grin down at her.

"What?" Kate asked wondering what he found so humorous. Then she recalled an earlier conversation and blushed. "Would you stop that?" she hissed in a whisper.

Diego had no trouble following the conversation and just smiled.

Then Kate looked around the room. "Where's Dani? I can't wait to talk to her?"

Diego looked decidedly uncomfortable. He sighed. "She's not here."

Demetrio read something in his tone and saw something he didn't like in his uncle's eyes. "When will she be back?" he asked cautiously.

The older man took a deep breath. "She won't. She's left Rafe."

"She what?" Kate all but bellowed. "I don't believe it." She sank down onto the nearest chair before her legs gave out from under her. This was incredible.

"I'm afraid it's true, my dear. She left last night."

"But she loves Rafe. I can't see her leaving him just like that. Any fool could see how much she adores him," Kate stated resolutely. Kate was completely taken aback by this news. Her new brother-in-law and his wife had been so much in love. How could everything have fallen apart in such a short time? There had to be much more to this than met the eye. Surely Rafe must have come to his senses about that article by now?

"Where's Rafe? Is he going to try to get her to come back?" Demetrio asked eyeing his uncle.

"Of course he must," Kate interjected. "He can't just let her walk away from him."

Diego cleared his throat. "To my knowledge, Rafe is doing nothing to locate her. Apparently Rafe *is* the fool who doesn't realize that she loves him."

"What do you mean locate her? Doesn't he know where she is?" Demetrio snapped. Had his brother lost his mind?

If Kate just disappeared out of his life, he'd have an army of people out searching for her. If nothing else to assure him that she was safe. Rafe hadn't been acting rational about Dani since that article but this was going too far. He was being too callous.

"She left while we were both out for the evening."

"Well, didn't she leave a note or something to say where so was going?" Kate prodded. Now she was truly becoming concerned about her sister-in-law.

"No note. All she left behind were her house key, wedding rings and clothing that had been purchased since her marriage to Rafe. That's a pretty fair indication that she has no intention of coming back," Diego said harshly.

"You said that Rafe hasn't made any attempt to find her. Why do I have the feeling that my big bossy brother has a great deal to do with her disappearance? And where is he now?" He'd have a few words to say to him whenever he put in an appearance.

"He had a meeting but I expect him home anytime now," Diego explained. This was not going to be a pleasant evening. It wasn't his place to explain the reason behind Dani's leaving and he didn't know how much Rafe would reveal. No matter what, it was going to be uncomfortable. He was soon to discover just how much so because Rafe chose that moment to arrive home.

Rafe strode into the library and froze at the unexpected appearance of his brother and sister-in-law. He'd had a hell of a day and now this. "You're back early," was all he said.

"Not early enough from what we've just learned," Demetrio stated glaring at Rafe.

"You've told them?" he asked Diego.

"That she's gone, yes. It's up to you to answer any more of their questions," Diego said sitting in his favorite chair. He had no intention of standing through this confrontation.

"Rafe, she loves you," Kate said emotion coloring her tone. "She must be miserable without you! I know that



she's been very unhappy with the way you've been acting these last weeks."

Rafe sighed. "Kate, there's a great deal that you don't know about Dani. Things that I learned about just before you left for your honeymoon. And more sordid details after you left."

"Sordid?" Demetrio scoffed. "You've got to be kidding? Dani is one of the most honest straightforward people I've ever met."

"Let's just say that she certainly put on a good show for all of you," Rafe snapped. He didn't like defending his actions to his family like this.

"That was no show!" Kate snapped right back. "She was exactly as she appeared. I'm shocked that you would even consider believing anything else."

"Suppose you tell us what this is all about, big brother so we can make an intelligent decision on this turn of events?" Demetrio asked softly. Kate looked at her new husband recognizing just how angry he was by the soft timber of his voice.

Rafe went to his desk to retrieve the magazine with the article Dani had written. He opened it to the correct page before handing it to his brother. "Dani was paid five thousand dollars for writing this article on our family. Without my consent or knowledge, I might add. How's that for honesty and trust?"

Demetrio quickly scanned that article before handing the magazine to Kate who did the same. "We've been over this before and I don't believe she wrote that. Why would she even consider such a thing? She didn't have anything to gain by doing it."

"Oh, she had five thousand reasons for doing it," Rafe replied in disgust.

"That's ridiculous!" Kate all but snorted. "For one thing, Dani is not obsessed with money or position. And being married to one of the wealthiest men in New Mexico, five thousand dollars is a drop in the bucket. No, I don't

for one minute believe that she wrote this,” Kate said flapping the magazine in Rafe’s direction.

“Nor do I,” Demetrio said backing up his wife’s opinion.

“Well, how about her relationship with Adrian Bernard? How do you explain that away? I have proof that they’re lovers,” Rafe spat out the words as if they burned his mouth.

Kate looked at Rafe as if he’d grown another head. Then she looked at Demetrio who was as stunned as she was before she looked over at Diego. He shrugged his broad shoulders as if to say, don’t ask me. “That is even more absurd than this magazine article. I happen to know that she can’t stand to be in the same room with him,” Kate snapped angrily. “The man’s a bore and thinks he’s God’s gift to women. And Dani couldn’t tolerate him.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell him,” Diego finally said. “But he won’t believe me. He prefers to wallow in self-pity. She’s nothing like Lenore, not in any way, shape or form.”

Demetrio studied his brother for a minute, his eyes narrowed in contemplation. “Why did you marry her?” he finally asked. He’d always been a little concerned about Rafe’s sudden marriage to Dani, not because of anything Dana did or said, but because it was so out of character for Rafe. Apparently his concerns had been justified.

“For love, of course,” Rafe said in all honesty. He just didn’t say love for whom.

“Why do I get the feeling that there’s no ‘of course’ about it? If you loved Dani you wouldn’t have blindly accepted this pack of lies to condemn her. But that’s just what you did, isn’t it? So if you didn’t love her, why did you marry her?” Demetrio pushed. He had a sinking feeling he wasn’t going to like the answer but he realized that the truth had to be brought out into the open. An idea was slowly forming in his mind as he relived Rafe’s sudden appearance in Mexico. Then Demetrio gets called

home on urgent business that turned out to be nothing of any great importance.

"I don't have to defend my relationship with Dani to you or to anyone else," Rafe growled not wanting to admit the truth to his brother.

"As I recall, I was sent home rather quickly once you showed up at the hotel." Suddenly the light bulb began flashing in Demetrio's mind. "You knew about Dani before you got to Mexico, didn't you? Your arrival and my being called home were all arranged by you!"

"Oh, to hell with it," Rafe snapped. "Yes, I knew about her. Word had gotten back to me about your growing relationship with her. I was concerned and came to check up on the situation. You were engaged to Kate and I couldn't let you go back on the arrangements made by our father and Kate's father all those years ago."

"So you set out to seduce her away from me," Demetrio guessed correctly. "It so happens that our relationship was purely platonic. But what if I had been in love with her. Would you still have tried to take her away from me, big brother? Regardless of my feeling or my intentions towards the lady?"

"Yes! Dani was out to get herself a rich husband and I wasn't about to let her make a fool out of you!" Rafe roared.

"You mean like Lenore?" Kate asked icily. "Dani is no more like Lenore than I am. Apparently we know your wife better than you do, Rafe. My heart aches to think what Dani has gone through while we've been away...the hell you must have put her through."

Rafe rubbed his hands over his face. "Look, I lived with the woman. I have physical proof to back up all charges against her." His words sounded hollow even to his ears at this point.

"You might have lived with her, but you sure as hell don't know a thing about her," Demetrio shouted. "And you had no right to interfere in my life like that! I'm not a

child! I don't need my big brother watching so I don't stub my toe or get into trouble!"

"Rafe, if Demetrio had fallen in love with someone else, I wouldn't have wanted to marry him under any circumstances. It would be miserable being married to a man who loved someone else. In this instance, your actions were not justified. And the one who gets hurt is Dani. And all she ever did was love you."

"Maybe if you take a look at the evidence, you might not be so sure about her character," Rafe tried once more to win Kate over to his side. He had proof on paper in black and white. It was more than enough to convict Dani...or was it?

"You can stack up your so-called proof to the ceiling but I won't buy it," Kate said staring coldly at her brother-in-law. "Dani didn't do a thing to merit this treatment."

"I agree," Demetrio said with a chill in his voice. "Come on, Kate. It's time for us to go home. How dare you interfere in my life like that? Rafe, just don't do me any more favors. Okay? And stay out of my private life unless you're asked."

Kate stood to follow her husband from the library. She turned just before leaving the room. "I have a feeling that you're going to be very sorry if and when the truth come out, Rafe." Then she and Demetrio left the house.

"Well, that went very well," Diego said looking at the empty doorway.

"I need a drink," Rafe barked as he headed for the bar.

"Make it a stiff one. I think you're going to need it," Diego said quietly. "By the way, why didn't you mention that Dani had found evidence to prove her innocence? Did that little item just slip your memory?"

"I don't think I have to share every facet of my life with anyone, Diego. Not even family."

"No, I guess you feel you don't. But that didn't stop you from butting into your brother's personal life though, did it? Whether you like it or not, Dani came to mean a great

deal to me, to Kate and to Demetrio. And that's something you're going to have to learn to live with."

Rafe watched as his uncle walked from the room. Suddenly he felt very alone and it wasn't just because of the empty room.

It had been three days and there had been no phone call or any form of communication from Dani. Her car had been returned to the house early the next morning from the airport. The man who had returned it knew nothing about the driver. It was only his job to get the vehicle from one point to another. Who the owners were was not his concern.

Everyone was furious with Rafe. Diego had been avoiding him like the plague since learning about Dani's leaving three days ago. Opinions and tempers were too high for any coherent discussion as yet. It wasn't much better with Demetrio and Kate. His new sister-in-law looked daggers at him every time they were in the same room. Even the housekeeper and the cook were giving him the cold shoulder.

Rafe was staring at the papers in his hand when the door to the den opened as Diego stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. Instead of taking the chair by the desk, the older man leaned against the table by the wall. Rafe noted the lines of strain around Diego's eyes and mouth.

"It has been three days since Dani walked out of this house, Rafe. I don't know about you, but the rest of the de Corba family is worried sick about her and where she could be. And why she thought it was necessary for her to leave without saying anything to anyone." Diego had held his peace as long as he could. "She had been so excited about you coming home that night, Rafe. She had the proof of her innocence. Surely she gave it to you."

Rafe leaned back in his chair. He hated to argue with Diego. He had been like a second father to him and he

loved him dearly. “You read the information? You know for certain it was legitimate?”

“Well, no, I didn’t read it. Dani wanted you to have it first. She did give it to you didn’t she?” Diego frowned. Something wasn’t right here.

“Oh, she gave me a folder claiming it contained the information to prove that she wasn’t involved in writing that magazine article.”

“And?”

“Diego, she had plenty of time to come up with all kinds of bogus paperwork while I was away. She had to so she wouldn’t miss out on the money and position being my wife would bring. She’s a lot more like Lenore than I ever imagined,” Rafe snorted.

“She is nothing like that tramp as we keep telling you! Now did you or did you not read that file? I can’t believe you could be this narrow minded,” Diego shouted.

“No, I did not read that load of garbage. I tossed it in the fireplace where it belonged. I have no doubt it was manufactured just to appease my anger. Well, it didn’t work. I can’t believe you of all people have been taken in by her act. First she comes on to Demetrio. But when I arrive on the scene she directs all her attention to me. Why? Because as head of the family business I control the money,” Rafe stood to pace behind his desk.

Diego studied his nephew. He could tell Rafe hadn’t been sleeping well from the dark circle beginning to make themselves known under his eyes. “Rafe, I know why you went to Mexico and why you married Dani. And now so do Kate and Demetrio.”

“We’ve been through this before, Diego...”

“And we’re going to go over it again. I didn’t approve of your interfering in Demetrio’s life then and I most certainly was not happy when you first informed me that you had married Dani. But after getting to know her, I realized she was nothing like the woman you’d thought her to be. And she is *nothing* like Lenore. That woman was a schemer and played you for a fool. But you’re in fine

company because from what I heard later, there were quite a few men she'd used, a couple she'd actually married later, much to their hard luck. She took them for as much as she could."

Rafe had only been twenty-six and bowled over by Lenore's exotic beauty. She'd been a year older and much more experienced in every way. It hadn't taken her long to get a proposal of marriage out of Rafe. But then two months before the wedding, he'd found her in bed with her first husband. He hadn't even known she'd been married before. Diego's heart had gone out to his nephew and they'd had long talks when Rafe had been ready to discuss the subject.

"The fact remains that Dani gave an article to a magazine about our family and profited by it. She betrayed the de Corba family name," Rafe stated adamantly. "How can you keep defending her when all the proof proves her guilt?"

"And how can you not even consider for one moment that she is innocent? Maybe because believing her guilty relieves you of any guilt you may feel over your behavior in coming between Demetrio and Dani. And before you say anymore on that subject, let me assure you that there was nothing between them. He has talked about their time together and admitted that what he feels for her is brotherly. It is not nor ever could have been romantic. There was never any need for you to go to Mexico to *save* your brother from Dani's greedy clutches. She never had any designs on Demetrio or the de Corba fortunes. Hell, he told you that himself just the other day. If you won't believe your own brother, who will you believe?"

Rafe paled as his uncle finished speaking. "But the reports I received indicated that they were inseparable, spending every day and evening together."

"Of course they did. They enjoyed each others company and did some sightseeing. That's all there was to the relationship. They were friends! What you received were reports built upon speculation and nothing more. I

warned you when to left for Mexico to just look into the situation and not to get yourself involved.” Diego was now pacing in front of the desk. “Rafe, ask yourself this question. What did Dani have to gain by that magazine article except the five thousand dollars? Why that amount is a drop in the bucket compared to what she would have as your wife! Dani may be naïve in some ways but stupid she is not. That’s something that Kate tried to point out to you too. By the way, have you checked with the bank to see if Dani took that five thousand dollars with her? My guess is that the account is untouched.”

Rafe stopped short. He hadn’t thought to check that. But he wasn’t about to back down from his stand against her yet. “Well what about Adrian?” Rafe asked quietly. Had he made a tragic mistake in not trusting Dani? What if he’d been wrong?

“Don’t be a bigger fool than you’ve been, Rafe. Dani loves you. Adrian had been pestering her from the moment they met.” Diego shook his head in disgust. “She told me about it and I told her to tell you, but she didn’t want to bother you. She said she could take care of herself. I should have said something. If I had you would never have believed that ridiculous story about them having an affair. I must shoulder some of the guilt about Adrian by not going to you in the first place,” Diego admitted sadly. If he had gone to Rafe, maybe Dani would still be with them.

“You should have told me,” Rafe roared. “A man was pestering my wife. I should have been told. If not by her, then by you.”

Diego studied Rafe for a full minute. “You’re right, I should have informed you. You know for a while there I thought you were actually coming to care for Dani. Then the bottom fell out of your relationship and I began to have my doubts. But your reaction just now is that of a jealous husband. To be jealous you have to care. Is it so hard to acknowledge, Rafe?”

Rafe rubbed his face with the palms of his hands then ran them through his hair leaving it disheveled. “I don’t



know what to think right now.” Rafe sank down into the chair behind his desk. “When I walked into the house the night she left, I immediately felt something was wrong but I couldn’t put my finger on it.” He looked up at Diego. “She turned this big old house into a home but when she left, it became a house again. Does that make any sense?”

“More than you know, Rafe. More than you know. So, what are you going to do about it?”

Rafe took a deep breath then exhaled loudly. “Her car was returned from the airport so we can assume she flew out. I’ll get my people on tracing her. When I find her, we’re going to have a long talk and hopefully she’ll be able to forgive me for being such an ass.” So saying, he picked up the phone and began dialing.

Diego chuckled for the first time in weeks. “You might be slow sometimes, Rafe, but once you catch on you race on full speed ahead. Bring her back to us safe and sound.”

“As soon as I can,” Rafe assured his uncle.

But things don’t always work out the way you want them no matter how much money or position a person has. It had been a week since Rafe had hired an army of detectives to trace Dani and they’d all run into a dead-end. They had traced her flight to Dallas and then on to Chicago where the trail ended. It was as if she’d fallen off the planet. As far as they could tell she hadn’t left the city by plane, bus or train. And so far they hadn’t located her living or working in or around Chicago.

It was late, around midnight, as Rafe stood looking out the bedroom window. Where could she be? If there had ever been a bigger fool in this world he’d have to go some to beat Rafe for the title. He’d found the one woman he loved and he’d let her slip away from him. No, he’d driven her away with his unfounded accusations and harsh treatment. If he ever found her, make that *when* he found her, would she want anything to do with him again? He wouldn’t blame her if she told him to take a hike. He wouldn’t like it but at least he’d know she was safe. He’d

checked with the bank and she hadn't touched a penny of the money in the account, not even the money he'd put in it. So how was she living and on what?

It was the not knowing where she was or how she was surviving that was tormenting him. He allowed that it was no less than he deserved. Maybe tomorrow would bring some good news. He said that to himself each night as he got into that big bed that they used to share. Dani wasn't very big but her absence made the bed feel lonely and empty. Some nights he was haunted by the memory of the anguish and tears on her face when he'd told her he didn't love her. Rafe didn't have to worry about anyone making a fool of him. He'd done a fine job all on his own.

## CHAPTER 7

It had been a full three weeks since Rafe had begun his search for Dani. He had an army of professional people

attempting to come up with a lead to where she could have gone. The first place they'd checked, and were still looking into, was Los Angeles where she'd lived before her marriage to Rafe. So far they'd found nothing. Apparently she had not returned there because they had located a number of her previous co-workers and they had not heard a word from her nor had anyone seen her. *God, how she must hate me now*, Rafe thought discussed with his behavior. If he hadn't been such a high-handed ass, such a patriarchal demigod, none of this would be happening now. He'd called himself these names and more over the past weeks, not that it made him feel better about the situation.

If only he had accepted Dani for what and who she was; had truly paid heed to the obvious lack of romantic tension between Dani and Demetrio, he wanted to believe that he wouldn't have acted so rashly.

Now it was too late to tell her how very sorry he was. And more importantly, it was too late to tell her how much he loved her, missed her. Even if he found her, would she want anything more to do with him? Probably not. And he wouldn't blame her. He'd been a bastard towards her and any rejection from her was only what he truly deserved.

Rafe sighed as he stepped into the elevator that would take him to his office and a meeting with a private detective and one of his attorneys. He'd located Dani's Mr. Sanchez, the detective she'd hired, and retrieved another copy of the file that he'd ruthlessly refused to read when she'd given it to him. Rafe had gotten mind-blowing drunk that night. The next day everyone had tiptoed around him as if he would explode upon contact. And that's exactly how his head had felt at the time.

Now they were meeting because Sanchez had come up with more information concerning Vanessa and Adrian. Rafe was running a little late so Sanchez and Steve Goodings, his attorney, were already waiting in his office. Nellie, his secretary of long standing, had scrounged up

coffee and some Danish pastries but Rafe waved aside the food wanted only the coffee.

Rafe got directly to the point after he settled into the leather chair by the sofa where the other two men sat. “Well, what have you found, Mr. Sanchez?”

“For starters it seems that Vanessa Hume is one busy lady. She’s dropping non-too-subtle hints at anyone and everyone that you kicked your young wife out of your home because of her affair with Adrian Bernard. She’s also hinted that there was another man involved and that he’s the one she’s run away with,” Sanchez said angrily. “Apparently most people are not buying into her story which is frustrating her. She’s lost her temper with several individuals and from what I’ve learned, has made herself unwelcome in certain circles.”

“What does Adrian have to say about all of this?” Rafe asked coldly.

“To my knowledge, he hasn’t made *any* attempt to either confirm or deny Vanessa’s story. I think that he’s letting her do all the dirty work while he just stands by waiting to reap his rewards, if any,” Steve said offering his opinion after reading all of the various reports.

“Well, in my eyes, that makes him just as guilty as that bitch Vanessa,” Rafe snapped. Then he shook his head as if trying to rid himself of an unwelcome thought. “If Van’s been using Adrian, she’s used me too! And I fell right into her trap by believing all the little remarks she made about Dani and her apparent attraction to Adrian. How could I have been so blind? So damned stupid?” Rafe stood going to stand to look out of the window behind his desk. *Where was she? Was she all right?*

“Rafe, legally you can’t take any action against Adrian. He wasn’t personally involved in that magazine article and there is no law against a man going after another man’s wife. But Vanessa Hume is another matter. Even though that article is in no way libelous, she did forge Dani’s name to the article and all the legal papers involved including the endorsement on the check that she managed

to get into Dani's checking account," Steve told Rafe who had turned to resume his seat.

Rafe shook his head. "No! I do not want to take any legal action. Vanessa would get off too easy. No doubt her attorneys would offer a settlement so there's a good possibility that the case would never get to court anyway."

"But don't underestimate what money means to her, Rafe," Steve said smiling wickedly. "Position and money are the all important issues to someone like Mrs. Hume. A good stiff settlement would hurt her pocketbook and that's something she would hate."

"I don't need the money," Rafe said waving aside the idea.

"I know you don't. But you could always give it to charity. That would make it twice as hard for Vanessa to swallow."

Mr. Sanchez grinned. "Get her where she'd the most vulnerable."

Rafe looked from one man to the other. He took a deep breath as he came to his decision. "Do it, Steve. But make sure that the settlement amount is a very large one."

"Oh, I think once we let it be known that if we bring in the publishing company, things could get very nasty. Vanessa is going to find that she won't have much choice in the matter. The publishing company might want to file their own suit in order to protect themselves. And she would not want to get herself embroiled in a dispute like that," Steve said grinning.

"Mr. Sanchez, please continue your search for my wife. Money is no object so if you must take on other contacts in any part of the country, don't hesitate," Rafe said with determination.

"At this point, we don't have a clue where she could be, Mr. de Corba. But we'll keep looking. It may take some time before anything turns up, but something usually does," he said with conviction. "We know that she hasn't filed for divorce yet or we'd locate her that way. And that

is still a possibility in the future.” He stood extending his hand out to Rafe. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Thank you again for your efforts,” Rafe said showing him out. After the detective had gone, Rafe turned to Steve. “I need to confront Vanessa with this.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that, Rafe. From now on, the less contact you have with her the better,” Steve said coming to stand by his client’s side. “But if you’re set on seeing her, at least wait until we’ve served the legal papers. She can’t very well run off then. If she did, you could really take her for all she’s worth. And her attorneys will tell her this also.”

Rafe smiled but it wasn’t pleasant or warm. “How long until you can get the papers filed?”

“This is Tuesday. I can have them ready to serve Thursday morning,” Steve replied relieved that Rafe was taking this legal action. Vanessa deserved whatever they could do legally...and more.

It was late Friday afternoon as Rafe sat in his car outside the plush apartment complex. Steve had had the legal papers served to Vanessa the afternoon before. Rafe had wanted to see her immediately after the papers had been served but Steve had warned him to wait until now. Steve said that he wanted to be sure Vanessa had time to talk with her lawyers and discuss this matter with them before Rafe put in an appearance. Rafe hadn’t liked this waiting but when he paid good money for advice, he was usually smart enough to heed it.

Rafe got out of his car to cross the street to the front entrance. The doorman simply nodded as Rafe entered having seen him before when Rafe had visited Vanessa. He rode the elevator to the fourth floor. The thickly carpeted corridor was silent as he made his way down the hall. When Vanessa opened the door a short time later the shocked expression on her face was priceless. But then she caught herself schooling her expression to one of hurt and betrayal.

“Rafe, I was just going to call you. Darling, what is this horrible misunderstanding?” Inside Van was seething. How dare Rafe de Corba put her in this position? And all because of that little twit of a wife! It was all Dani’s fault!

“That’s why I’m here, Van. We need to talk.” Without waiting for an invitation, he pushed past her.

“Rafe...wait,” Vanessa said as he strode past her into the living room. The gall of the man!

Rafe stopped just inside the room. Sitting on the sofa, looking very much at home, was Adrian Bernard. Rafe smiled but his eyes were cold. “Well, well! This saves me from having to make a second stop.”

Adrian had the good graces to look totally uncomfortable and was more than a little intimidated by Rafe’s cold manner. He knew very well why he was here to see Vanessa.

“You have no right to just barge into my home like this, Rafe, no matter how close our relationship,” Vanessa snapped.

“And you had the right to intrude into my private life?”

“Yes I did! You were going to marry me until you met that little goody-two-shoes. She ruined everything for us!” Vanessa said raising her chin defiantly.

Rafe stared at her in astonishment. “We were never going to be married! Where in the hell did you ever get that idea? We haven’t been an item in years and even then it was short lived, if you recall. And never in our acquaintance have I ever mentioned a permanent relationship. Just the opposite as I recall.”

“Darling, we were making a new beginning,” Vanessa said stepping to his side laying her hand on his arm. “You know I’m the only woman who can be the perfect wife to someone in your position. The only one who can meet all your needs,” she cooed up at him.

Rafe could hardly believe what he was hearing. He threw his head back and laughed. Van stepped back as if he’d slapped her. “Vanessa, the main reason that our

relationship was so short was because you *couldn't* satisfy my needs. What you offered then was stale and contrived and would be in the future. Dani might not be an amazon of a woman, but honey, she's more woman than you could ever aspire to be!"

Van's hand flew through that air but was stopped short of Rafe's face by a strong hand clasping around her wrist. "You bastard! How dare you talk to me like this? I'll..."

"You'll what, Van? I'm sure your lawyers have warned you about causing any more trouble. As far as I'm concerned you're getting off too easy, but there's only so much that can be done through the courts in a case like this."

"Get out!" she spat at him pointing to the door.

"When I'm good an ready."

Adrian came to his feet. "Rafe I think you'd better do as Van says or..." he stopped in mid sentence at the thunderous look Rafe directed at him.

"You stay out of this, Bernard," Rafe glared. "And stay away from my wife! When I get her back I don't want you in the same building as her. Hell, make that the same city. You're just lucky that you were not directly involved Vanessa's little scheme or you'd have been served with the same papers. I don't think your father would approve of that type of publicity, do you?"

Adrian raised his hands, palms out signaling his backing off.

Rafe turned back to face Van. "Don't worry, Van. I'm leaving. But just a word of caution. If any more of your venomous lies get back to me, you won't be welcome anywhere in descent society. You'll never be in a position to get yourself another rich husband. You'd better hope that Dani is all right wherever she's living. I intend to find her and bring her home if it takes the rest of my life. Just stay far away from my family and I mean far away!" With that, Rafe slammed out of the apartment.





Vanessa walked over to the door giving it a good hard thump, her face contorted in anger. She thought of the letter that she'd taken from the hall table at Rafe's last week when she'd gone to get him to take her to a charity function and to console the deserted husband. He'd been cool to her then but she'd put it down to business worries or something of that nature. But then he'd gotten nasty so she'd retreated until another opportunity presented itself. Well she had the information he was so frantically looking for, but damned if she'd give him the information. He could go to hell! She'd had no idea at that meeting that he knew about what she'd done. Her eyes were cold and thoughtful. *Well, you'll never find her now, Rafe. Her or the brat of a child she's carrying,* she thought hatefully. *Who will have the last laugh now?*

## CHAPTER 8

With a contented sigh, Dani laid the book on the side table next to the box of tissues. She had really enjoyed the story, but now, it was getting late and her son, Dominic, was an early riser as were most babies. She stood stretching to ease cramped muscles. *That will teach me to sit in one position for so long*, she thought ruefully. Dani was even thinner than before her pregnancy, this was the result of a combination of hard work and the appetite of a bird. And now, this cold that had come on yesterday was not helping. She could barely breathe, let alone eat. Everything tasted like cardboard. And every time she swallowed, her throat felt like it had been shredded.

Thankfully, Dominic had only a runny nose, so maybe he would be spared any illness. Dani's face lit with pleasure as her thoughts centered on her son. He would be one-year-old next month. It didn't seem possible this much time had passed. Her pregnancy had been easy, uncomplicated, and Dom's birth was something she would always remember. When the doctor placed him in her arms, her heart had swelled with love. He had been larger than expected, weighing in at an even nine pounds and had been twenty-three inches long. The nurses had teased her about giving birth to a toddler. The only element missing from that wonderful experience had been someone to share it with. But that was all in the past. She and Dom had each other. And Dani loved him more than she could express in words.

She'd made her way from Texas to New York City, losing herself in the concrete fortress teeming with people. She had quickly made friends in the area, but except for Pop, she was not really close to anyone. If her acquaintances found her aloof, they respected her desire for privacy. They were good people who wouldn't pry, who accepted only what Dani was comfortable about revealing about herself.

Deciding that a hot cup of cocoa might soothe her throat, she'd just put the kettle on when a staccato rapping on her

apartment door threatened to wake everyone in the building. Dani glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall, noting the lateness of the hour.

Who could possibly be coming to see her at this time of night? Frowning, she cautiously made her way to the door, making certain the safety chain was in place. “Who is it?” she croaked, her throat making itself manifest.

“Dani? It’s Rafe?”

She froze, motionless on the bare floor. The tiny hallway suddenly became claustrophobic. She would have recognized that deep cultured voice anywhere. And it was on the other side of her door. She shivered and it had nothing to do with the temperature.

Her cold hands shook as she tried to slide the safety chain from its track and release the bolt from the second lock. Steady, she told herself. He can’t hurt you anymore. She took a deep breath, squared her narrow shoulders and opened the door. For the first time in almost a year and a half, she looked into the dark, and in her memory, forbidding eyes of her husband, Rafe de Corba.

Neither of them spoke for several seconds as he stood in the doorway, filling it with his height, the width of his broad shoulders, towering over her petite form. He seemed even bigger than she remembered. The harsh expression on his face did nothing to relieve the formidable impression he made at this moment. If only she could close the door and pretend he wasn’t there. His unexpected arrival, the shock of seeing the one person she was sure she would never see again, robbed her of speech.

He was the first to break the awkward silence. “Are you going to ask me in, or are we going to conduct our reunion in the presence of anyone who should happen to wander by?”

“I’m sorry. Come in.” She couldn’t control the slight trembling in her voice anymore than she could her hands. “It’s just that it’s so late. And to be frank, you’re the last person I ever expected to see.” Now that the first shock was receding, she could think more clearly. The defenses

she'd erected over the past months were being re-enforced. He would not be given the chance to hurt her again.

"I apologize for the lateness of the hour, but my plane was late in landing and I didn't want to wait until tomorrow to see you." He removed his overcoat as he spoke. The garment was expensive, as was everything about Rafe de Corba. When Dani didn't offer to take it from him, he draped it over the back of one of the overstuffed chairs in the living room. She could see his eyes as they scanned the room, noting the years of service the furniture had seen, the worn flowered carpet on the floor and the old radiator under the faded curtains at the window.

Damned if she would apologize for her home. "I can't imagine what could be so important that it couldn't wait until morning. To my knowledge we have nothing to say to each other. If you're here about a divorce, you have my word I'll do nothing to stand in your way. If you have the papers with you, I'll gladly sign them now."

Her lack of emotion made him frown; his eyes looked questioningly into hers. He knew he'd hurt her, had acted like a bastard. But now, seeing her lack of concern was like a knife to the heart. Not that he didn't deserve it he was quick to concede to himself. But he would move heaven and earth to mend the breach he'd made in their relationship. God, but she was so thin. And she was so pale. She needed him as much as he needed her. It was going to be an up hill battle all the way from here.

"There will be no divorce, Dani. The marriage will remain in tact and any attempt on your part to alter this arrangement will be fought. And make no mistake, I can fight harder and with more force than you could ever imagine." Damn, this wasn't how he wanted their meeting to go. Rafe longed to take her in his arms, not scare her away. But her talk of divorce threw him off balance.

"I am not the least concerned about you divorcing me now, or ever. I just thought it was what you would want. If all you came here to do is to throw more insults at me, you can take your opinions and leave. Now." Dani seldom

lost her temper, but life had not been easy since she'd left Rafe, and the last thing she needed was his presence stirring up memories. She picked up his coat, pointedly handing it to him as she spoke. She started to walk past him to show him the door when he threw the coat back down, reaching out to take hold of her arm, preventing her from moving out of his reach. Dani jerked away from his touch as if scalded. Before either could say another word, a loud shrill whistle sounded from the kitchen.

Dani sighed. "I was just about to fix a hot cup of cocoa. If you're set on staying to say your piece, perhaps you'd like to join me." She knew she didn't sound very inviting, but Rafe quickly accepted and followed her into the kitchen.

The room was small, just room for one person to move from cupboards to stove to refrigerator to sink. Rafe's large powerful body seemed to fill the small space. He seemed out of place as he sat down at the wooden table just inside the doorway. As Dani busied herself at the apartment size range, she eyed Dom's highchair on the far side, between the cupboard and the range. In this position, it was out of sight to anyone sitting at the table.

She'd become lost in thought and Rafe had to repeat his question. "I asked you where you were working, Dani? Surely a secretary could manage a larger apartment than this."

Stiffening her back, she carried the steaming mugs to the table, sitting in the only other chair, opposite Rafe. "I am not working as a secretary. Not that it's really any of your concern. I work in a pawnshop, keeping books and helping at the counter. And I see nothing wrong with this place," she lied. "It may be small and not filled with expensive furniture, but it's clean. And it's my home!" Her eyes were shining, partly from temper and partly from fever. She really didn't feel well. And this confrontation was not helping.

Looking at him, she recognized the signs of disapproval, the thin line of his mouth and the small furrows that

appeared on either side of his eyes. She suffered the strangest urge to reach up with her fingers to smooth them away. She was sicker than she thought. She did not want to touch him or have anything to do with this man.

“I was not aware of degrading your living quarters. It is just that as my wife you are entitled to a substantial income which would allow you be to more comfortable.” He took a deep breath. This was more difficult than conducting board meetings or elaborate business deals.

“Maybe what you really mean is that it would not be acceptable to your associates or friends to know that the wife of the great de Corba was living in a shabby little hole in the wall? Money was the last thing I ever wanted from you. So you keep your money, Rafe. This might not be much to you, but I’d starve before I’d touch a cent of your money.”

Dani tried to stand up but he covered her wrist in a vice like grip, stopping circulation in her hand as he stared into her lovely blue eyes; eyes that once held love and laughter, but now seemed so tired and dull. Rafe’s chest ached with regret. This was all due to his temper and jealousy. His temper subsided just as quickly as it rose as he released the bone crushing hold on her wrist. But he didn’t relinquish his hold completely.

Sighing, he spoke sounding as tired as she did. “I did not come here to argue with you, little one. I came here to apologize for my harsh behavior, and to assure myself that you are all right.”

Dani was outraged. “Apologize? Do you really expect me to believe that? After all those horrible things you said to me, you expect me to just forget and go on from there? I’ve spent the last eighteen months making a new life for myself, Rafe. While I appreciate your coming all this way just to say you’re sorry, I’ll never be able to forget the hateful things you said to me. How you used me.” She felt tears forming, but if it took every ounce of her self-control, she would not let Rafe see her cry. Not again! She’d cried

before she left him, and her tears had left him unmoved. Why should she expect anything different now?

Rafe paled at the anger and the agony in her voice. “I don’t expect this to be easy for either of us Dani. If it will make you feel better, I haven’t been able to erase the memory of that last evening from my mind. The memory of the pain I saw in your face. That I was the cause of that pain has been a heavy burden to bear since you left. So help me, I never want to see you suffering like that again.” He shook his head as if ridding himself of the picture of her pain.

Dani stared at him in silence. This couldn’t be the same Rafe, the arrogant, menacing man from her past. He hadn’t shown any remorse that evening. He hadn’t blinked an eye at her pain then. When she remained silent, Rafe continued more quietly, but equally as forceful.

“You were the only innocent one in that whole affair, Dani. You were made to bear the brunt of my anger, to suffer for something you didn’t do. Diego, Demetrio and Kate were the ones who stood by declaring your innocence, while I closed my mind and wouldn’t listen to anyone or anything. Especially my heart.”

“Oh, you listened to someone all right. Vanessa and Adrian’s word carried more weight with you than mine. You didn’t even question their stories, while anything I said or did was automatically a lie.” Her voice cracked on the last word. “I guess this means I’ve been acquitted of all charges against me?” She should feel elated that he finally knew the truth. But all she felt was tired. And her head hurt. She didn’t feel up to this meeting, not feeling as sick as she did.

“That’s putting it in rather harsh terms, but yes, I know you had nothing to do with that magazine article. And Adrian never meant anything to you. Except, as Diego told me, he was a pest.” Rafe combed long fingers through his thick black hair, leaving it disheveled.

Dani stared at the remains of her cocoa turning cold in the bottom of her purple flowered mug as she searched for

the right words. Rafe had been in her apartment for almost half an hour now, and not once had he asked about the baby. Their baby. No! Dom was her son. Rafe could ask forgiveness for everything but for his denial of their son. That she could never forgive.

“When did you find out I wasn’t responsible for that unsolicited article?”

“Shortly after you left New Mexico. Diego finally managed to pound some sense into this thick skull of mine. I also located your Mr. Sanchez who gave me another copy of that file. Then a few weeks later I was at a business luncheon. After the others had left the table, I accidentally overheard a conversation between Vanessa and Adrian. We were on the hotel terrace with a divider of plants between us. Oblivious to my presence, they spoke openly of their involvement in the plans to break up our marriage. But then you had all that evidence on paper, so you’re aware of the intricate schemes those two implemented to discredit you in my eyes. And I played along, like a damned fool!” Now wasn’t the time to tell her about how he’d played a waiting game to get his revenge on the two people who had dared to interfere in his life.

“So you’ve known all about this for almost eighteen months!” Dani whispered in disbelief, but Rafe heard her.

“It’s taken me this long to find you.” He saw her raised eyebrow, but went on. “I traced you as far as Chicago. From there, it was as if you had simply vanished into thin air. I’ve kept private detectives on payroll all this time. By chance, one agent was in New York on another case and recognized you. He followed you here, got your address and called me.”

“And then you summoned your private jet to fly to my side.” Dani felt no emotion, just flat disbelief. “Do you really expect me to accept that story? I wrote to you a month after I’d left the ranch. You had my address then. Or had you conveniently forgotten that little item?” How dare he come in here and try to make a fool of her again? He’d trampled on her feelings before, but she wouldn’t let



him do it to her again. He had definitely overstayed his welcome. Dani abruptly pushed back her chair and stood up, her intention was to show him to the door.

But Rafe stood blocking her way. He was standing so close she couldn't help but be aware of his familiar masculine scent, his towering strength. Her heart began to hammer in her chest. How could he still affect her like this? After all that had happened? She felt ashamed of her reaction to his nearness, angry with herself at this betrayal of her senses. She would not let him see her vulnerability.

Rafe's large hands gripped her slender shoulders, giving her a slight shake, forcing her to look up into his face. "I know nothing of a letter from you, Dani. I swear I have never received any correspondence from you." Her shoulders felt so small in his hands. The urge to haul her into his arms was overwhelming, but he knew it would be the wrong thing to do at this point. There was more talking to be done. "If I had known where you were, I would have been here immediately. This long separation would never have taken place."

The feel of his hands brought back forbidden memories of other times when those hands had caressed her body in passion. She felt her body flush with shame. She raised her face to look at him again. "Then how do you account for the reply I received within a couple of weeks of mailing my letter? And in your handwriting?" Her eyes clouded with pain as she sought not to remember his cruel words in that letter.

"I received no letter, Dani. I swear!" Rafe's mind raced as the implications of this news about a letter registered. Resentment built at this other intrusion into his personal life as he looked at Dani's ashen face, the single tear trailing down her right cheek.

"The one you received in return was not written by me. I would not have written, Dani. I would have come in person. Come to take you home where you belong. Just as I have tonight."

She looked up at him, noting his pallor, more pronounced than she'd ever seen him. He sounded sincere, his face mirroring the uncertainty he felt. The verbal wounds he had inflicted on her had gone too deep. To have them reopened would be unbearable. Her reluctance to believe him was written on her face.

"Dani," his hands rubbed up and down her arms. "Knowing the character of the people in our past and the lengths they were prepared to go to destroy our marriage, I could make an educated guess as to who is responsible for intercepting my personal mail. How it was accomplished, I don't know. But I will find out! And someone is going to pay and pay dearly for their intervention." Neither Adrian nor Vanessa had access to his mail, but someone who did must have acted on his or her behalf. And he would find out. Then heads would roll!

Dani couldn't move. She stood with Rafe's hands resting possessively on her shoulders. But before she could push past him to go into the small living room, she heard the soft but undeniable cry from the bedroom. Dominic had been restless lately. This past week it was not unusual for him to wake once during the night for a drink of water and a little cuddling from his mama. Being only eleven months old, he could not understand why he felt uncomfortable when he had the sniffles. Only the comfort of Dani's arms could make him feel better.

Rafe put his hand under her chin, turning her pale face up to his, his expression one of complete astonishment. "We have a child?" he questioned.

Dani couldn't bring forth words to answer him. The contents of his letter were still fresh even after all this time, so fresh she could recite it from memory. A distraught cry "mama" galvanized her into action. Breaking away from Rafe, she hurried from the kitchen across the living room and into the bedroom.

She quickly turned on the small blue and gold table lamp on the dresser just inside the door, the soft light dimly illuminating the crowded room. Standing at the foot of his

crib was Dominic. As usual whenever Dani looked at her son, her heart filled to overflowing with love. He was so beautiful with his black hair and great big brown eyes, so like his father. Everyone who saw Dom never failed to comment on the length of his eyelashes, so long they cast shadows on his soft cheeks. How many times had she been told it was a shame to waste such eyes on a boy; only girls should have lashes like those. Now as she entered the room, he stood waiting for her. He looked adorable in a heavy one-piece blue sleeper, his cheeks rosy from sleep. Seeing his mama, he held out little arms indicating his desire to be held.

Dani was unaware of Rafe directly behind her until she heard his painful gasp. She spun to see his reaction to Dom. But she was totally unprepared for the anguish she saw on his face. All color had receded from beneath his dark complexion. The expression in his dark eyes she could not or was afraid to define.

Dom called to her again, but upon seeing a big stranger with her, he quieted. As Dani reached over the side of the crib to gather him to her, he immediately buried his face in her neck. But curiosity soon won out as he raised his head just enough to see this new person. He wasn't afraid because mama was holding him. He knew instinctively no harm would come to him.

Rafe had to swallow several times before he could speak. His son! He was a father and Dani hadn't told him. He watched in stunned silence as she cooed soothingly to *their* son. "He's so beautiful," Rafe whispered in awe. But the eyes he turned on Dani were anything but kind. She saw accusation and anger. "How dare you keep the knowledge of our son from me? When was I to learn we had a son, Dani?" Rafe knew if she hadn't been holding the baby in her arms, he could easily have taken her in his hands and shaken her senseless. This scared him as much as the sudden feeling of not being able to breath. The room seemed to have closed in on him. He had to leave!

As Rafe stalked from the room, Dani remained by the crib, soothing Dominic with her voice and the soft gentleness of her hands. She expected to hear Rafe slam out of the apartment. Dani frowned at the silence from the other room. By the time she'd changed Dom's diaper and gotten him a drink of water, he was almost asleep when she put him back to bed. A smile lifted her lips as she pulled the soft white blanket around his shoulders. Dom was her life. She couldn't resist the invitation of his little rosy warm cheek as she kissed him one more time.

Taking a deep breath for courage, she made her way to the door to see if Rafe had left. The first thing she saw was Rafe's coat still draped over the back of the chair. Then the air was filled with sound of cupboard doors opening and closing, angry curses coming from the kitchen. She stood in the doorway as Rafe slammed another cupboard door with such force that even Dani, in her mounting anger, gave a start at the unleashed violence she now realized was being held under tight control.

Rafe glared at her as she stepped into the room. "Do you have anything to drink around here but water and coffee?" he demanded harshly. He'd taken off his suit coat; the fine cut of his white shirt outlining his big body, his strongly muscled shoulders and arms. Slowly he folded his arms across his massive chest and leaned back against the sink waiting for an answer. Dani felt sure it was not really concerning his thirst.

"I think you had better leave now, Rafe. If a good stiff drink is what you need, you won't find it here. Nor is there anything else here for you. You accuse me of keeping Dom's existence from you, but you were the one who denied paternity. I was left in no doubt as to what I could do, my baby and I. So don't come in here now pretending to be the injured party. It just won't work." The hurt, the struggle of the past eighteen months shone in her eyes, tears formed and wouldn't be contained. "I got out of your home and stayed out of your life, just as you wanted. Now I expect you to do the same for me."

“Dani, how could I have denied my own son when I wasn’t even aware there was going to be a child? I swear I didn’t know until a few minutes ago. Can you imagine the shock of discovering I’m a father?” He stood in front of her, close enough to see the dark circles under her eyes, the paleness of her face. He frowned. She had to tilt her head back to look into his face. He wanted more than anything to be able to take her in his arms, to feel her soft curves against him again. But knew this was not the time, not yet. There was too much to clear up between them before they could go on into a new future...together?

Rafe was close enough for Dani to feel the heat from his big body, the special scent that was Rafe filling her with unwanted memories, longings. She wouldn’t be used again. No. Never again. Determination darkened her eyes. “You forget, Rafe. I know just what a great actor you are. I gained my knowledge of your abilities first hand. I foolishly thought I was your loved wife, when all along it was nothing but a plot to protect your brother from my greedy clutches. You certainly had me fooled those first couple of months!” She would never be able to erase the memory of her total gullibility. She’d made a fool of herself over a man who had no love for her and never would. She’d been used, misjudged. His brutal unveiling of his true feelings would haunt her forever.

Rafe felt a gut wrenching pain in his mid section. She was right. He had been unfair to her, but if he’d loved her less, maybe he wouldn’t have been so cruel. He ran a large hand wearily through his hair. “We’re getting nowhere throwing accusation at each other, little one.” Her back stiffened at the endearment, her soft lips drew into a thin line. “You say you received a letter from me,” raising a hand to silence her when she would have spoken. “No, I believe you about a letter. I don’t doubt *your* word. It’s just that I have to convince you that I didn’t write any damned letter in return.”

Not trusting herself to speak, Dani edged away from Rafe to stand by the sink. She couldn’t let him know how

much he still had the power to weaken her defenses. God, he drew her like a magnet. And like a fool with no mind of her own, she felt herself drawn to him. He was as big and powerfully handsome as she'd remembered. He'd have a good laugh if he knew how much she wanted to reach up with her hand to touch his face, the rough angles once so dear to her. Oh, how she would like to believe him, if not for herself, at least for Dom. No, she was still too raw from their last encounter to invite more pain.

Momentarily lost in thought, she wasn't aware of Rafe silently moving to stand immediately behind her, his deep voice bringing her back to the kitchen. "What was in that letter, Dani? Other than my unforgivable treatment of you those last weeks we were together, what has made you so distrustful?"

Against her will, the sound of sincere concern in his voice drew her around to face him. She noted the color drain from his face, the tiredness in his dark eyes. He couldn't fake that.

"I still have the letter. I keep it in the bedroom." She continued whispering memories more to herself than to him, "there were times I wanted to write to you again. I actually did complete a letter several times, but threw them in the trash. I'd take out your letter, reread it, then keep all the little antidotes about Dom to myself knowing you wouldn't appreciate the news." When she looked up at him, there was such sadness in her eyes that he had to fight the urge to pull her into his arms, protecting her against all further pain.

Dani quickly left the room to retrieve the hated letter. Rafe could have it now. She had no more use for it. Rafe followed her and as she turned to hand him the envelope, her breathing almost halted as she saw the look on his face as he stared at the small figure sleeping soundly in the crib on the far side of the room. As usual, Dom had drawn up his legs under him; his round little bottom pointed at the ceiling as the soft sound of his breathing filled the room.

When Rafe turned to her, his dark eyes held a hunger that rooted her to the spot for several seconds.

Taking a deep breath, she thrust the envelope into Rafe's hand, quickly returning to the living room. She stood at the window over looking the street below, but not seeing the outside world but the past, soon after she'd moved into this apartment. Everyone from her new friends to Pop, her employer, had encouraged her to write to her husband and tell him about the baby. After all, Pop had said, "it's his child too and he should at least help with the medical bills. He should be told, Dani."

Knowing Pop was right, she'd written the letter. It had taken several days to compose the letter to her satisfaction, for it was as if she was writing to a stranger to tell him that he was going to be a father. After the letter had been mailed, she'd allowed herself the luxury, was foolish enough to indulge in daydreams where Rafe would fly to her side to care for her. Everything in the past had been a mistake and he truly loved her. But that's all they had been, foolish dreams.

She'd been on edge for days, waiting for a reply, desperately yearning to share the joy of her pregnancy with the baby's father. For a short time she became the old Dani, her eyes laughing with joy as her bubbly laughter spawned smiles in all those around her.

Unfortunately, that all faded too quickly once she'd received Rafe's reply. She sighed as she recalled returning from work to find the letter with its familiar return address in the left-hand corner. Suddenly afraid to read it, she opted for delay tactics, making a cup of tea, tidying up the already neat living room. Finally running out of excuses, she'd opened the letter.

If her hands shook as she opened the envelope, it was nothing compared to the trembling of her body as she read, words she now knew by heart. *"Dani, I had thought we'd settled everything between us the last night you were here. If I have failed to make myself clear, I will do so now. You deceit leaves me cold. There was no love involved in our*

*marriage. It was only a means to an end, one that worked out quite well for my family. As for this child you carry, perhaps it would be more appropriate for you to contact Adrian. As the prospective father, I am sure he would be far more interested than I. Since there seems nothing left to say, I hope I can assume you will not bother me again."* He'd simply signed it, R. de Corba.

She'd curled up on the sofa and cried. If anyone had been witness to her distress, it would have appeared as if there was no end to her grief. Daylight had long faded into night before her racking sobs began to subside. Finally, she lay there as the remaining tears made their way down her swollen face. It was after her tears had long dried on her cheeks that some inner defense mechanism began to erect walls to protect her. No one would ever hurt her again, because no one would ever touch her heart. No one except her child.

The next day, upon returning to work, Pop was quick to notice a distinct change in her. All she'd told him was she'd received a reply. Rafe was not interested in her or the baby so they were all on their own. Since she was not going to discuss it with him, Pop only assured her he was there if she needed anything.

From then on, Dani determined the baby would be hers to love and care for. And when her son, Dominic James de Corba, was born a few months later, he was all she could have ever hoped for. Her lips turned up in a smile as she recalled the nurses and the fuss they had made over him. He was a big baby and amazed even the nurses with his appetite so soon after his birth.

Since Pop lived in the back of his pawnshop, Dani went right back to work after having the baby. She could have Dom with her at all times which was a big plus since she didn't have money to pay a sitter, even if she'd wanted to. And she did want to be the one to care for Dom, not some stranger.

"Dani?" Rafe's voice interrupted her reverie. Turning from the window, she was shocked by the pain she saw on



his face and in his eyes. For several seconds Rafe stared at her speechless, lines of strain around his eyes and mouth. Licking his lips, he asked harshly, "You really believe I wrote this abomination?"

"Why should I think otherwise? It's in your handwriting. And most of it reemphasizes your opinion of me. The opinion you so cruelly made plain the last night before I left your home. Don't forget, you were the one who thought I was having an affair with Adrian, of all people!"

"Dani, I admit this looks like my writing. But I swear to you, it is not! Let me take this letter to a handwriting expert to have it analyzed. You must see how important it is to prove to you I didn't write this, this rubbish." As if the weight of the evening had become too much for him, Rafe wearily sat down on the end of the sofa, leaning forward his head in his hands. "God, but that sounds exactly like the past, but now with the roles reversed. I guess it's no more than I deserve."

Dani stopped short of stepping forward to comfort him. What was the matter with her? From behind her wall of defenses where a small fissure was forming there emerged a desire to put her hands to his face to ease the lines of stress. Realizing what she was almost about to do, she stubbornly turned away facing the window and the darkness outside, trying to ignore the darkness within.

"The letter is yours to do with as you wish, Rafe. I don't care if I ever see it again." Dani kept her back to him, not wanting him to see what she could no longer deny, what was still in her heart. "If what you say is true and you really didn't know about Dominic until tonight, I'm sorry. It must have come as a shock to you."

Dani sensed Rafe move across the distance separating them, standing directly behind her, so close she could feel the heat from his body, smell the scent that was distinctly Rafe. "I intend to find out who is responsible for this, Dani. A man of some wealth also has a certain amount of power at his disposal, most of which I have never used

until now. But now, I will call in some favors.” Their bodies weren’t touching, but she could feel the tension in the big man behind her. “I have been denied the privilege of caring for my wife during a time when she truly needed me. And I have missed out on almost a year of my son’s life. Someone will pay for this, my little one. And pay dearly!”

The ferocity in Rafe’s voice drew her around to face him. “Why would anyone do something like this? Our marriage was over. I’m sure almost everyone was aware of that.” *Especially after you walked out of that party with Vanessa*, she wanted to remind him but couldn’t bring herself to relive that painful night.

“Perhaps whoever did this knew me better than I knew myself. If I had gotten your letter, you would have come home and had our son with me at your side! Undoubtedly, it was done to keep us apart. And it worked very well, didn’t it?”

What could she say? If Rafe was telling the truth, the letter in his hand had manipulated events very well. After reading it, she’d made a solemn promise never to bother him again. And she hadn’t. Money had been a problem, babies were expensive, but Dani had managed to pay her own way. She would do anything to avoid asking for help from a man who didn’t want her or their son.

Rafe turned slowly, silently walking back into the bedroom. In a couple of long strides he was beside the crib, staring down in wonder at the small sleeping baby. He appeared mesmerized by this tiny person. One large hand gently touched the dark head resting so peacefully in sleep, unaware of the turmoil going on around him. Ever so gently he leaned over to place a kiss on the thick dark curls. “My son!” he sighed in wonder. Just two words spoken softly, but loud enough for Dani to hear.

A lump formed in Dani’s throat as a sense of doom began to settle on her shoulders. Rafe was of Spanish and Greek background and, she knew only too well, very family oriented. He would naturally want, no, expect to

have a say in the rearing of his son. But just how much involvement made her turn, fleeing back to the living room. What if he wanted to take Dom from her? Well, he was *her* son and nothing would make her give him up. Sure, as far as material things were concerned, Rafe had the means to give him everything. But she loved Dominic. And that mattered more than a lavish home or piles of toys and clothes.

“Dani, we have to talk.”

She turned to see him standing in the doorway, leaning against the door jam as if exhausted. He looked more weary than she could ever remember, his usual vitality depleted, arrogance replaced by fatigue. But she couldn’t let herself be swayed by appearances. She’d learned the hard way, Rafe was a manipulator and this could just be another act. The loss of her innocence and self respect was nothing compared to what was at stake now.

“You’re right, Rafe. But not tonight. Seeing you again has been upsetting,” she freely admitted. “And I’m so tired I can hardly think straight. Perhaps you could come to dinner tomorrow night. We can discuss everything then. And you can spend some time with Dom before he goes to bed.”

Even though she was being generous, this wasn’t what he preferred as he straightened ready to argue the point. But he could see how tired she was and he wasn’t in much better condition. Putting his impatience aside, he nodded his head in agreement.

“Perhaps that would be best. But don’t even think of running out on me again, Dani. I went to great lengths to find you, and I would do so again. Especially now that I know about Dominic,” he rasped.

“Have no fear, Rafe. I’m not going anywhere. This is my home now and no one is going to drive me away.” Besides, she thought, *I don’t have enough money to get out of the state, heck I couldn’t afford to get out of the city. There’s nowhere to go. I’ll just have to face the situation and be firm in how we will handle visitations.*

Rafe frowned at the weariness in her eyes, the dullness in her voice. She really was tired. And she'd lost weight, so much that she looked as if a strong breeze would knock her off her feet. Why hadn't she asked for his help in spite of that damn letter? She was obviously killing herself with work to make ends meet. There was no need for that. He could take care of everything. If she would let him, that is.

After locking the door behind Rafe, Dani was totally exhausted. It was all she could do to walk to the bedroom and crawl beneath the covers. But once there, her mind wouldn't rest. Memories and feelings long ago delegated to the back recesses of her mind kept her staring at the shadows dancing on the ceiling for several hours. No matter how hard she tried to block them out, they would no longer stay buried.

If only Rafe had loved her, just a little at one time. Maybe this loneliness would be easier to endure. She sighed, turning over burying her face in the pillow. Besides having Rafe to contend with tomorrow, her cold was getting worse. Her throat was so sore now she could barely swallow. Great! This was a perfect time to be sick. Right when she needed all her wits about her and all faculties running at one hundred per cent efficiency.

Early the next morning, Dani woke from a restless sleep with more than a sore throat. Her head throbbed and her chest was tight with congestion. She didn't have to look in the mirror to know she looked a wreck. "Just great!" she grumbled turning off the offending alarm clock. Now she would truly be in terrific shape to confront Rafe tonight.

But her mood altered as soon as she looked across the room at Dom's crib. He was sitting up in bed, a big grin on his face, cheeks rosy from sleep. That beautiful smile brought a lightness to her movements as she threw back the covers, padding barefoot across the worn blue carpet to lift him from his bed. As she carried him back to her bed, his arms locked around her neck in a giant hug.

Lying down with him on the bed, she tickled and kissed him as he giggled. His baby laughter made her laugh. He was such a good baby, such a delight.

The light in her eyes dimmed, her smile waned as thoughts of Rafe returned. Would he want to take Dom back to New Mexico? She clasped his small body close to her slender body. No one was going to separate her from her son. Not Rafe. Not anyone!

The minute Dani entered the shop later with Dom held high in her arms, Pop could tell something was terribly wrong. But he waited until she had settled Dom in his playpen with his toys and books.

“All right, Dani girl, let’s have it. What has you looking like you’ve been dragged through a knothole?”

“You sure know how to flatter a girl, Pop! Do I really look that bad?” she questioned jokingly. If they didn’t keep the conversation in a light vein, she would conceivably break down and cry. But she sneezed instead.

“Don’t try to change the subject on me. You look tired as if you didn’t sleep much last night. Your face looks flushed and that raspy croak you call a voice tells me you are not feeling too good. Right?”

“So, I have a little sore throat. And, as a matter of fact, I did have a late evening. Rafe turned up about eleven. Needless to say, his appearance was something of a shock. I don’t feel like going into everything right now Pop. But Rafe claims he didn’t write that letter to me. He says he had no idea we had a child until last night.” Dani looked over her shoulder at Dom, turning the pages of a book just like he was reading. He was the image of his papa, black hair, dark eyes and Rafe’s darker skin color. She would bet he was going to have Rafe’s build too. He was off the charts for babies his age already. No, looking at him, there was nothing of Dani to be seen. But he did have her ready smile and a trusting nature like she used to have. She sighed. I hope it doesn’t get him into trouble like his mama’s did.

“Do you believe him?” Pop asked.

“Oh, I want to. It wouldn’t hurt so much if he really hadn’t written that letter. I...Pop I really don’t want to talk about this now. I want you to let me know if you start feeling tired this morning. There’s no reason I can’t take over the counter while you get a little rest.” Pop wasn’t a young man, and she could see him begin to tire by early afternoon. If she tended to mother him, he said nothing, but took it in stride with only a moderate amount of complaining.

“Hmm, from the looks of you, you should be the one resting, not me.” Seeing her raised eyebrow and her hand resting indignantly on her hip, he grinned. “Okay, okay. Go to work. I won’t say another word.”

Dani smiled at him as she turned, but spoiled the effect with another huge sneeze.

The morning passed very quietly, but all the same, around eleven, Dani insisted that Pop go sit for a while and rest with his feet up. For once he didn’t protest and was asleep in his recliner in a matter of minutes.

Since Dom was also asleep, Dani took her books to the front counter where she could work and cover the store at the same time. Ten minutes later, she threw her pencil down on the counter. It was no use pretending she was going to get any work done. Everywhere she looked, she saw Rafe’s face when he’d first seen Dom. Shock, pain and then...joy? Tonight he would really get to spend some time with his son, hold him and play with him. Dani knew it wouldn’t take much for Rafe to become possessive of the baby. Dom was such a darling, so loving and happy. No, she couldn’t blame Rafe for loving Dom. But where would that leave her?

There was something else she had to face before tonight. All Rafe had to do was be in the same room with her for all her senses to go into overdrive. Why? After all that had happened between them, she should feel indifference or anger. Anything but this intense attraction. If she weren’t careful, she would find herself hurt far more than ever before.

When she had opened the door last night and saw Rafe literally filling the doorway, it was almost as if the past eighteen months had never happened. He stood so tall and magnificently male. His rich black hair was in need of a trim, but so thick Dani longed to rake her fingers through its softness. Her heart had thudded in her chest just looking at the rugged masculine aura seething around his large frame.

But then, all the de Corba men seemed to have this effect on women. Rafe's uncle and brother were well over six feet as was Rafe. While Diego and Demetrio were handsome in the conventional sense, Rafe was too rough looking to be called that. His was a rugged attractiveness that said, here is someone who can be relied upon in an emergency, someone who only has to look at a woman to make her feel feminine and cherished. He radiated a confidence, a kind of magnetism that drew people to him. Women were drawn to him without him lifting a finger of encouragement.

Dani was brought back to the present by the arrival of a customer who took the better part of the next twenty minutes wrangling over the amount he thought reasonable for a used microwave oven. The rest of the day turned out to be extremely busy, allowing her to put all thoughts of her next meeting with Rafe from her mind until closing time at six o'clock.

Each evening, before she left the store, she made sure Pop had his dinner in the oven or on the stove to be sure he was settled for the night. Since it was not unusual for her to make a quick stop at the corner market on her way home, it was almost seven o'clock when she wearily climbed the stairs to her second floor apartment, Dominic held tightly in one arm and pulling the stroller behind her. Her small bag of groceries was precariously balanced on the stroller seat.

As she plodded up the last few steps to the second floor of her apartment building, a tall figure, leaning against the wall, pushed away and stepped forward. "Here, let me take

the stroller.” Rafe said removing it from her hands without waiting for a reply. Dani was so tired she didn’t know whether to be grateful for angry at his presumptuous attitude.

She frowned up at him. “Either I’m later than I thought, or you’re early.” During the day, she’d been able to thrust aside her concerns about the evening, but now seeing Rafe actually here again brought all her anxieties back in full force.

“I’m a little early. I’ve been looking forward to this evening all day. I found myself climbing those stairs about fifteen minutes ago.” As he spoke, Rafe’s dark eyes searched her face looking for some sign she cared. There was nothing.

Dani swallowed hard then concentrated on locating her keys, fumbling in her purse. Settling Dom more securely on her hip, she tried to unlock the door, which on a good day tended to be somewhat obstinate. And tonight was no exception.

Seeing her difficulty, Rafe place his large hand over hers, “let me do that for you. I’ll be glad to get out of this hallway. Your neighbor across the hall has been peeking out through the crack in the door every few minutes since I arrived. I have a feeling she thinks I’m up to no good or something of that nature.” The door seemed to know you don’t go against the wishes of a de Corba. It opened on Rafe’s first try, much to her chagrin.

Dani grinned as she pictured Rafe loitering in the hallway. “That would be Mrs. Weekes. She’s lived in that apartment for years and even though she hardly ever leaves the building, she can tell you everything that goes on around the entire block. But she’s a darling and takes care of Dom for me once in a while. She’s probably never seen anyone quite like you before and couldn’t take her eyes off you.”

“I do believe that might be taken as a compliment, little one. I’ll take that as a sign toward our reconciliation.” Once inside the apartment, Rafe stood watching Dani as



she stood Dominic on the floor to remove his heavy coat, hat and mittens. He stared at the two heads close together, one dark like his, the other fair. His dark eyes flashed with longing, devouring the beautiful picture they made. A smile curved his hard mouth. *My wife and my child*, he thought in wonder.

Dani chose to ignore his ridiculous statement, after all, how could they resume their marriage after all the pain and distrust? She wasn't sure what game he was playing, but she would be on the alert where this de Corba was concerned.

"You can leave the stroller here in the hall but put the grocery bag on the kitchen table."

Rafe was back in seconds, stripping off his overcoat, placing it over the back of a chair. Instead of sitting on the sofa, he sat cross-legged on the floor in front of Dom. Now that this huge dark stranger was on his level, Dominic was curious to make his acquaintance. His chubby little legs propelled him to the small wood toy box by the bookcase. He took out one of his favorite toys. Carrying the white and blue airplane, he wobbled back to Rafe. Dom's small fingers played over the wheels and wings, his face rapt in concentration. Then, having reached a decision, he held out his treasure to Rafe. "Prane," he announced proudly. Or at least that's what it sounded like to Rafe, his heart filling with love for this beautiful little boy.

Rafe solemnly took the toy in his large hands. He examined it very carefully as if it were the most important thing in the world, much to Dom's delight. Seeing that this man liked his plane, Dom moved forward without reservation and promptly sat on his papa's knee and began to talk. Not many of the words were understandable, but for father and son, it didn't seem to make any difference.

## CHAPTER 9



Dani hadn't had time to think during dinner. Since Rafe eagerly volunteered to give Dom his bath, she now had time to reflect on the changes taking place in her life...and Dom's life. She worked on automatic pilot as she cleaned up the kitchen. Her simple meal of lasagna and salad had gone over very well. Dom, who did very well feeding himself, still seemed to get as much on his face as he spooned into his mouth. All through the meal he had been delighted to have two people to talk to and show off for.

Dani frowned as she realized she was going to have to share her son with his father. He had been hers and hers alone since he was born. It was not going to be an easy adjustment. Especially when it was time for Rafe to discipline Dom. She knew he would do it with love and in Dom's best interest. But being protective of her son, it was not going to be easy to allow someone else into his life. But then, she didn't really know how much time Rafe planned to spend with them, with Dom she amended. Maybe once the novelty wore off, he wouldn't feel compelled to intrude into their lives to any great extent.

Right! Who was she kidding? There was no way Rafe was going to leave them alone. He took family responsibility seriously. Lord, she should know that for a fact! Hadn't he married her solely to protect his brother from her greedily clutches? No, Rafe would make a wonderful father. He would be strict when called for, but it would be cloaked with love and concern, so that, as Dom grew into a young man, there would be no resentment. Just a strong, binding father and son relationship.

She sighed. She knew what Rafe felt for Dom was love and an intense pride in his newfound son. Rafe may have lied to her about his reasons for marrying her, deceived her

with his smooth talk, but he could not fake the look of pride on his face nor the joy lighting his eyes as he watched Dom at play or in sleep.

Dani was hanging up the dishtowel on the rack above the sink when the objects of her thoughts strolled into the kitchen. Dom, all dressed warm and dry in a heavy one piece green sleeper was help high, held lovingly in his fathers strong arms. She couldn't help but laugh at Rafe's sodden clothing.

"If you had wanted to take a bath yourself, you could have removed your clothes first, you know?"

"If I had been warned that Dominic liked to play submarine and initiate tidal waves, I certainly would have dressed to fit the occasion. But I enjoyed every dripping minute of it! Isn't that right, my son?" Dom showed his agreement with a sleepy smile, revealing small even white teeth. His head dipped to rest on Rafe's shoulder as his small arms circled around his papa's neck.

The sight of Dom so at ease in Rafe's arms, his complete acceptance of this stranger made Dani want to cry. Her chest was so tight she could hardly breath. But what did she expect? She'd had Dom all to herself for the past year with no thought of ever sharing him. Especially with Rafe. Now he was here. Now, she had to face the reality. But it still hurt to see Dom so accepting... and so quickly.

Feeling sicker by the minute, this cold was not helping the situation. And her blasted cold was getting worse, causing her to over react, to harbor fears that may not hold any validity in their future. Keeping this in mind, she pasted a smile on her face to hide the turmoil of emotions swamping her since Rafe's unexpected appearance.

Lovingly she rubbed Dom's back. "I think it's about time one little boy was in bed. It's past his normal bedtime already."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Dom. Papa loves you." Rafe pressed a gentle kiss to Dom's forehead before reluctantly handing him over to Dani.

A grim faced Rafe was standing by the sofa when Dani returned to the living room. “As I said last night, we have to talk, Dani.”

*Well, here we go*, she groaned inwardly as she sat on the far end of the sofa as far away from him as she could. “Look, Rafe, I can see how much Dom has come to mean to you in just a few hours. And I know how important for him that your relationship be permitted to grow.” This was more difficult than expected. She had to find the right words so he wouldn’t feel she was attempting to keep him out of the picture. But at the same time, she didn’t want to encourage his constant interference into their lives.

“I want you to feel free to visit as often as you like. Dom should know his father, have a masculine influence in his life. But I would like us to be able to work up a schedule of some sort so our lives won’t be upset by unexpected visits.” No. That didn’t sound right. But once the words were out of her mouth, she couldn’t retrieve them.

Rafe’s dark eyes pinned her to the sofa. “You can be sure I want to see my son, Dani. I want to be there to see him grow into a man, to be a shoulder to lean on, to see that he has a stable, loving home.”

“No!” *Oh my God! He wants to take Dom from me*, she thought in panic. She could hardly breath; the pain of not being with Dom everyday was unbearable. Dani sat frozen after her one word outburst. She stared at her hands in her lap. Felt the sofa shift as Rafe’s much heavier weight settled next to her. She felt his hard muscled thigh pressing against hers, memories of those long powerful legs tangled with hers in their big bed soared out from behind her carefully erected mental barrier. She would not think of that, not now. Not ever again!

“Dani, there is something else that I want, need, just as badly. And that, little one is my wife. Our son needs a mother and a father. How can I possibly take proper care of the two of you if you remain here? Your place is with me, in my home. Our home, Dani.”

Quick as lighting a match, her fear turned to anger. Now she knew to what lengths he would go, what sacrifices he would make to ensure Dom would be raised in New Mexico. Surely even he must realize that two people with no love between them could not possibly create the loving, proper atmosphere to raise a happy, well-adjusted child!

Dani jumped to her feet, crossing the room to put distance between them. For her sake and Dom's she had to keep a clear head. She was no longer a young, naive love-struck girl. No, now she knew the score where Rafe de Corba was concerned. She wouldn't be tricked with smiles or loving words of family and togetherness. Dani controlled her future and her son's. There was no place for Rafe, except as a visiting father. Visiting in her home. Not living in his.

Anger and fever combined in her eyes to emit shining shards of blue. "There is no way you will ever get me to return to New Mexico with you, Rafe. Surely you must see that too much as happened between us? There is no way we could pick up the threads of our marriage, if that's what you want to call it. I call it a lie, from beginning to end."

"I'm not saying we wouldn't have some obstacles to overcome, but we have a good foundation for a chance at working out any problems," he growled. Damn, but he didn't want to talk. He wanted to haul her into his arms and make love to her. He wanted to make her see how much he had missed her and how much regretted his callous behavior.

"Foundation? What are you talking about? Our marriage was based on a lie, Rafe. What kind of a foundation is that to build on?" She knew he was referring to their sexual compatibility. The mere thought made her stomach tense in memory of those long nights, her softer, whiter body tangled with his much larger, harder male form in that big bed, all her senses soaring with each touch of his hands and mouth. Don't think about that now. He doesn't love you, and never did. You learned a hard lesson before

you left his home. *And don't ever forget it,* Dani admonished herself mentally.

“Little one, listen to me.” Rafe’s long legs reached her in a few strides. He reached out to caress her slight shoulders, his touch igniting shivers of delight by his masculine touch. Those hands had touched every part of her body, touched until she’d cried out for his possession.

“Dani, unfortunately, it is not possible to take back words once they have been spoken. I cannot erase what I so cruelly said to you that last night. But I’ve had eighteen months to think about my actions, what I was thinking, feeling. I didn’t tell you the truth that night because I was ignorant of the real truth until you disappeared from my life.”

Dani tried to close her heart to anything he was going to say. But she had to hear him out. “I’m listening now. So what is the truth?” Rafe was a man used to getting his own way, no matter what the cost. He spoke and people jumped to do his bidding. Well, she would not let herself be swayed by words, not this time. To fall for another of his lies would demand too high a price to pay.

“I told you that night my reason for marrying you had nothing to do with love. But I was wrong, little one. I was so very wrong. How else could I justify my interference into Demetrio’s life? I had deliberately set out to take you away from my own brother. A woman I truly believed he had come to care for a great deal.” Rafe’s hands caressed her shoulders as he spoke. God, but she felt thin, much too fragile. A strong wind could break her in two.

“The first time I saw you sitting in the lounge with Demetrio my plan had been to just break up your cozy twosome. But then we came face to face. I couldn’t believe one woman could be so lovely, delicate as a flower, warm as the sun after a summer shower. Without conscious thought, a new plan went into operation. I would take you from Demetrio by any means. But I would take you for me. My woman!”

“You make me sound as if I were a piece of sculpture or something at an auction. I was a person, Rafe, with feelings. You didn’t take that into consideration, did you?” *Don’t listen to him*, her mind cautioned. But her traitorous body refused to move away, as if seeking his male warmth and strength from his body.

His next words astonished her. “In a sense you are a treasure of tremendous value, little one. You’re someone who should be protected, lavished with loving care, cherished as something priceless. Dani, as far as Demetrio was concerned, there never was any contest between us. Regrettably, this is something I was unaware of until you had been mercifully dragged over the coals, accused of a crime you didn’t and couldn’t commit, driven from our home by my unforgivable behavior. If that wasn’t enough, my uncontrollable jealousy led me to accuse you of having an affair with Adrian, of all people. Diego told me about Adrian pestering you whenever he was around. I wish you would have confided in me when that first started.”

Dani stared into his dark eyes, seeking truth in his words. Oh how she wanted to believe. But could she? Or more to the point, should she? No. Slowly, deliberately Dani pulled away from the bewitching caress of his hands on her shoulders. She backed away to sit on the sofa. Her mind was reeling. Rafe was a master with words. He knew what to say and when to get what he wanted. It simply wasn’t in her to believe anymore. She didn’t have the strength to trust, to believe in his sincerity.

“Rafe, I’m relieved my name has been cleared concerning that dreadful magazine article. And about Adrian’s non-involvement in my life. But don’t you see? There should not have been any need for me to prove anything. When you love someone, really love him or her you trust them. And that’s what this is about. Love. If you had had any real love for me, you would have trusted me. Or at least given me a chance to defend myself.”

“I did ask you about that article, Dani,” Rafe growled, his deep voice echoing in the quiet room. Rafe sighed,



anger darkening his eyes to black ebony pools. In his arrogance, he had envisioned Dani falling gratefully into his waiting arms. He realized he had hurt her. But until this moment, he hadn't realized just how deep that pain must have gone. Until this moment, he didn't realize how much damage his jealousy had done.

"Oh, my. Yes Rafe, you asked me about it. But only after you had looked at the evidence, found me guilty and sentenced me to the full-scale force of your wrath. And you wouldn't listen when I said that I didn't know anything about it." Tears threatened to overwhelm her as she choked back a sob. Oh God! She really didn't feel like arguing with him. Not now. Her throat was so sore she could hardly swallow and the congestion in her chest was making it hard to breathe.

Rafe said nothing for several seconds. He turned his back to stand in front of the window, feet slightly apart, his large hands resting on the windowsill. His very presence dominated the room with his phenomenal potency. When he finally turned to face her, the taut lines around his eyes and mouth, the harsh expression on his face drove her deeper into the corner of the sofa.

"I take this to mean you have no intention of returning to New Mexico with me?"

This was the Rafe of eighteen months ago, the same arrogance, and the same brutal disregard for her feelings.

"It simply wouldn't work, Rafe. Look. I won't do anything to keep you from seeing Dominic. You're welcome to come and spend as much time with him as you like."

Rafe studied her upturned face, seeing the shine in her eyes, her skin so pale. And an overlying flush that worried him. He could hear the hoarseness in her voice. She needed rest. And she needed him to care for her. And damned if he'd go home alone.

"We're not getting anywhere tonight, Dani. All we're doing is throwing words back and forth at each other. I

don't suppose you'd allow me to spend the night here? So I can be close to you and Dominic?"

His request both surprised and angered her. *She must be ill*, she thought. She no longer knew what she wanted. Being so vulnerable, she couldn't risk having him this close. "I'd rather you didn't. I need time to think. And you're being here, well..." she trailed off into silence.

He combed his long lean fingers through his hair, leaving it disheveled. After eyeing her for several long seconds he spoke wearily. "Very well then. I can understand that. But just remember this, Dani. When I return home, my son will accompany me. With or without his mother. Give that some thought before you give me your final answer."

Angry strides carried him to the door after stopping to pick up his overcoat.

As he shrugged into the expensive garment, Dani's paralyzing numbness vanished as she jumped to her feet, grabbing at his coat sleeve. "That's blackmail! You know I can't give up my baby!"

"Call it what you will, Dani. I want Dominic. And I want you." He smiled, but with no humor or warmth. "A desperate man will go to any lengths to achieve his most precious desires. I'll be back at six tomorrow night. Don't bother cooking. I'll bring something myself so you won't have to spend time in the kitchen." Before she knew what was happening he leaned down to press his hard mouth against her soft one. As a kiss it was tame. But she sensed the unleashed passion he was holding in check. Then he was out the door and she stood alone in her small hallway.

Rafe's parting words froze Dani to the floor, shocked by his vow of possession before he abandoned her to consider her fate. And Dom. "He can't take Dom from me. He can't," she muttered, leaning against the wall before slumping to the floor as her trembling legs gave out from under her. My God, what options did she have? The rational part of her mind screamed *none*. And it was a sure

thing she would lose Dom. With Rafe's wealth and influence, he could do anything.

## CHAPTER 10

The next morning, Dani was sure she was going to die. Or at least she felt she would have to get better to die. Her restless night had not helped her cold. If anything, it was much worse. It took an enormous amount of determination to force her body out of the nice warm bed, into the bathroom to take some tablets for the fever she knew was responsible for her pounding head. It took even more effort to dress.

To add to her distress, she was no closer to a solution to the problem created by Rafe's reappearance into their life than she had been last night. Dani looked at her reflection in the mirror. The quality of sleep, or lack of, added to the dark circles under her eyes and the frightening pallor of her face. Winding her long blond hair into a tight bun, securing it on top of her head, she studied the results. She grimaced at her reflection. Well it would have to do. Dressing in a pair of dark brown slacks coupled with a heavy beige knit sweater, she quickly dabbed coral lipstick to her colorless lips to give her face a touch of color. She sighed, "I look like Dracula's daughter."

And Rafe was the vampire. He was draining all life from her with his threat to take Dom back to New Mexico with him. She'd sensed his impatience last night, so she shouldn't have been so surprised when he forced the issue. Decisions of this magnitude should be settled slowly, carefully after protracted consideration of all the issues involved. Whatever she decided to do was going to affect all of their lives. It wasn't something to be done in haste or under pressure. Dani shuddered remembering the last time

she'd rushed into action with little or no thought. It had been just pure feeling and lust. And look how her marriage had turned out. A disaster in capital letters.

At least she was much smarter now. There would be no more illusions for her. The wall of ice encasing her heart must remain frozen and impenetrable to any words of caring or love from Rafe. Only Dominic allowed her the freedom of loving. Love between mother and son. A warm gentle caring between two human beings.

It began to snow just as Dani set off on the short walk to work, Dom dressed to ward of the cold in a dark blue snowsuit. He was tucked snugly in his stroller, a blanket wrapped around his adorable bulky figure for added warmth. As they entered the shop, the fine layer of snow on their clothes and hair began to melt.

Pop was there to greet them as usual. "Kind of early in the year for a blizzard, but all the signs point to just such a thing before the night is out." His gnarled hands took the stroller from Dani to push it to the back of the store where Pop had his living quarters. "And you young Dom, I suppose you would love to get out there and play in all that white stuff?"

Dom grinned up at Pop, lifting his arms up asking to be held. Dani smiled at the beauty of her son's smile, the warmth it brought to the room. "So far, he hasn't shown much interest except trying to catch it on his tongue. We'll see how he feels about it later, near Christmas when we have an over abundance of the white stuff." But would they be here for the holidays? A spark of fear flashed in her over-bright eyes.

Pop might be well into his seventies, but he didn't miss much. "How did your dinner go last night? And don't tell me to mind my own business, because I'm an old man. And that gives me the right to poke this big nose in anywhere I want." He helped her take off Dom's heavy clothing before sitting him on the floor with his toys. Then he sat Dani down at the table with a cup of hot chocolate and coffee for himself.

"The first part went just fine, Pop. But..." A fit of coughing halted her in mid sentence.

Pop frowned at the sound of her congestion. "But," he finished for her. "Rafe wants you and Dom to go home with him." Pop made the statement as calmly as if it were the most natural request in the world. He chuckled at her astonished expression.

"How did you know? And how can you see any humor in this?" she stammered.

"I'm an old man, Dani. I've lived and seen a lot of people, experienced more than most probably. If I had a wife and child, and especially a background like your husband, I'd do the same thing. He has a lot to offer."

"You're not taking his side are you? Telling me I should go back to New Mexico with him? Not after all this time?" Pop's defense of Rafe seemed like an act of desertion.

"I'm not telling you what to do, child. Just advising you to give it a lot of careful thought before you make a final decision."

"But Pop..."

"No!" Pop said waving a large hand of impatience. "You listen to me and listen good. You won't admit it to me or anyone else, let alone yourself. But you still love Dom's father." Dani snorted in disagreement, but he went on. "You were hurt and hurt bad, so now you've sealed yourself up in an emotional cocoon. Only a chosen few are allowed to get close. Well, if what he says is true about all that mess surrounding your separating, then he's paid his dues. Probably more than you have, Dani. So you had better give that some thought too." Pop stood walking over to the sink with his empty cup.

"You're right about giving this a great deal of thought, Pop. But Rafe isn't prepared to wait. He wants an answer now." Anguish and indecision were apparent in her raspy voice. The right to choose the direction of her life was being wrenched out of her hands. Suddenly, she felt helpless. How could she fight Rafe? She was losing, no,

had already lost control over the events in her life to a man who could destroy her.

“Can’t blame him for being in such a hurry, Dani. After all, he’s been without his wife for a long time now. And he’s missed out on eleven months of his son’s life. Pretty important ones too. Just think Dani. He will never hold Dom as a newborn baby. Never see him change day-by-day, week-by-week. See him grow bigger and stronger. You think about those things. You’ve had Dom, seen all these things. But what has this husband of yours had the past year and a half?” With this parting shot, Pop left a very confused Dani to her thoughts as he went to open the store for business.

Thankfully, it was an especially busy day that kept her on the move almost continually, especially when both Pop and Dom were down for a nap, leaving her in complete charge of the store. But no matter how preoccupied her mind, Rafe’s face would appear in her minds eye, reminding her of the enormous decision yet to be made.

As the day progressed, so did the course of her cold. By closing time, she felt chilled and was sure she was running a higher fever than earlier this afternoon. Well, at least this would be a good excuse to cut the evening short. Maybe she could prolong giving Rafe an answer after all.

By the time she and Dom were bundled up and ready to leave, the streets were almost obliterated by falling snow. The glistening spirals were coming down so thick and fast it was difficult to see more than twenty feet in any direction.

Pop pushed the stroller to the door, ready to lock up behind her. “Dani, if this storm keeps up and the streets are knee deep in snow in the morning, I don’t want you to even try to come in. Business will be slow and with that cold of yours getting worse, all you need is to get wet. And a day in bed wouldn’t do you any harm either, young lady.”

“I do feel lousy right now, Pop. I just might take you up on your suggestion. But we’ll see what it’s like tomorrow.”

Before she could turn to go, a deep voice spoke directly behind her. “If you are not well, little one, you most definitely will not be going anywhere until you are much better.”

Rafe’s appearance so surprised her that she would have lost her balance on the slippery sidewalk if his strong arm had not reached out to grasp her around the waist.

“What are you doing here?” she croaked, backing away from his supporting arm.

“This weather is not the best for taking an early evening stroll. So, I came to take you home,” indicating the waiting taxi at the curb. Ignoring her disgruntled expression, Rafe extended a hand to Pop.

“Since my wife seems to have lost the power of speech, for the present anyway, I’m Rafe de Corba.

Pop hesitated only an instant before taking the strong hand offered, clasping it in his equally large one. “Everyone around here just calls me Pop. And I appreciate your coming here to get these two. Dani’s not feeling well and shouldn’t be out in this mess.” Pop had quickly sized up the large man and decided he liked what he saw.

Dani’s voice returned, cracking, but audible. “I am perfectly all right. Or at least I will be when I get home, which is only a few blocks away and won’t hurt me in the least to walk.” She was being peevish and ungrateful, but couldn’t seem to stop. Rafe wouldn’t even let her make the decision on how to get home!

“Tonight, you will ride. And that’s final,” Rafe’s deep voice announced arrogantly. To illustrate his intention, he took the stroller handle and headed for the cab after uttering a friendly good evening to Pop. He left Dani with no option but to follow.

The last thing she heard before Rafe closed the car door was Pop’s delighted laugh as he turned to lock up for the night. *Traitor*, she thought close to tears.

The ride took only minutes, with Dani sulking the entire time. What she had to say to Rafe about his presumptuous attitude toward her was something best left said in private.



If Rafe noticed her lack of conversation, he made up for it with Dom. He had taken to his father completely. Dom sat proudly on his papa's lap, jabbering and waving his little arms in excitement, pointing at the curtain of snow as it danced in the lights from the streetlights.

True to his word from the night before, Rafe had brought dinner with him, having picked it up just prior to abducting them from Pops. The food simply required a little heating before being served. Rafe left a too quiet Dani to get the food ready while he tended to Dom.

His son! Rafe was still reeling from the reality of fatherhood. And when he'd phoned Diego to tell him how things were going, his uncle was astonished to learn he had a great nephew and was now anxious to make his acquaintance. Rafe watched Dom with his toys. His son needed him. And so did Dom's mother even if she wouldn't admit it. He knew he had a difficult time ahead convincing Dani they belonged together, but he would move heaven and earth to make her his wife again. Yes, he took responsibility seriously, especially where his wife and child were concerned.

The meal of fried chicken, potatoes and gravy and a fresh tossed salad was almost as silent as the ride to the apartment. Rafe appeared content to watch Dom as he ate with obvious hunger, making a comment from time to time. Dani made the appropriate responses, but was in not mood to initiate conversation. She knew the food must be good. Dom ate as if he was starving and Rafe wasn't far behind. But she could neither smell nor taste anything. For all she could tell, she could be eating the cartons that the food came in. And she was beginning to feel very peculiar. After managing to swallow a couple of bites, she finally gave up. Her throat was just too sore. She knew Rafe had not missed her lack of appetite, but aside from a questionable look, he said nothing.

After tucking Dom in bed for the night, Dani was in the kitchen making coffee for Rafe when he silently entered the small room. Before she was even aware of his approach,

one powerful arm snaked around her from behind as his other arm lifted, his large hand pressing against her forehead.

“Just as I thought. You little idiot! You should be in bed.”

Anger stirred her to action, as she twisted in his grasp, trying to break his hold on her. But all she managed to do was find herself held in a bone-crushing embrace against his broad, hard chest.

This was the last place she wanted or needed to be; this close to him, hearing the rapid thudding of his heart beneath her ear. Or was it her heart beating, the blood pounding in her ears? No! This could not be happening. Not after all this time, not after all the lies and distrust between them. She should not be affected by his big, powerful body, by the familiar scent that was Rafe. She should be repulsed. But quite against what her mind silently lectured, her traitorous body leaned closer against his hard strength, finding comfort in strong arms, where once, she had found peace, security and happiness.

Some tiny shred of sanity prevailed as she raised hands to push away from him. Dani tilted her head back to deliver, what she hoped would be a withering tirade. But she was shocked speechless by the dark, blazing hunger shining in Rafe’s savage eyes. As his head descended, Dani closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable. Rafe’s lips moved slowly, lingeringly over her softer, pliant ones, unsure of her response. As she sighed her pleasure into his mouth, his composure snapped. He crushed her to his long, hard length, his arousal a pressing promise against her stomach.

Whether it was the fever or her own passionate nature put in hiding for so long, Dani found herself immersed in a turbulent sea of passion as waves of pleasure cascaded over and around her.

Rafe tore his mouth from hers as she slowly forced heavy lids to open. Sighing his own pleasure he once again lost himself in the softness of her body pressed against him.

His gasp of wonder was the only sound in the room as his mouth took hers again and again, slaking an almost two year thirst. The thunderous assault on Dani's senses drained all thought of resistance from her.

Rafe savored the taste of her lips as a man crazed, his mouth demanding the sweetness from her lips in his need to quench this maddening thirst for the taste of Dani, his wife. The maddening pain of need to feel her soft, fragile feminine body beneath him once again pushed him beyond reason.

Dani sought strength to keep her body stiff, unyielding in his arms, tried to douse the flames of desire searing the core of her womanhood with the ice encasing her heart. As if sensing the battle raging inside Dani, Rafe's assault on her mouth increased. Every nerve ending in her body was screaming. For what? No! Not that her mind screamed in rebuttal. When his lips moved to the sensitive side of her throat, his mouth savored the taste, the smoothness of her delicate skin. As his large hand covered her breast, gently kneading as he growled against her skin, Dani knew she was drowning. But she had drowned before, the pain of the betrayal still raw.

Dani summoned up what little strength she could muster, her small fists pounding at the great wall of his chest. "Please! Let me go!"

"Dani?" Her was name a harsh cry as one of Rafe's big hands subdued her two small ones as his arm circled her small waist. He stifled a groan, his hot eyes boring into hers, the smoldering desire consuming him evident, ready to erupt into passionate flames. Flames she acknowledged she couldn't fight.

Fear became her ruling emotion, fear at her physical helplessness, but more so the fear at her emotional helplessness. She still loved Rafe. After all that had happened, she still loved him. With this as a weapon, she would truly be at his mercy. She could not, would not reveal how love still burned intently for her husband.

Suddenly, Dani felt so strange, watched as the passion in Rafe's dark eyes turned to one of concern as her slight body began to tremble against his. She couldn't control the tremors as a raging fever took hold. Even as Rafe swept her up in his arms, holding her tightly against his chest, her mind was becoming sluggish, reality and fantasy blending as she slid down a long, dark tunnel.

She was so weak; there was no strength to protest as Rafe began to remove her clothes, his hands sure and swift, almost impersonal as he tucked her naked body into the warmth of the bed. Almost as soon as her fevered head hit the pillow, she slid into a restless, uneasy sleep.

Many sensations filled that private world for sometime, the warmth being one of the nicest. There were troubled dreams too. She was at a party with Rafe. He was so big, so handsome in his dinner clothes. He'd stayed by her side all evening, devouring her with his eyes, promising a night of love and passion. Then there was someone else there. In her fever induced sleep Dani tried to find Rafe again. This new person wore white. If only they would go away, maybe Rafe would come back.



## CHAPTER 11

A grim faced Rafe stood just outside the bedroom door watching closely as the doctor examined Dani..

“I’ll be very frank about your wife’s condition, Mr. de Corba. Right now I would consider her case borderline pneumonia. It is imperative we get her fever down.” Dr. Frank had been recommended by the hotel manager where Rafe had been staying. An extra large fee had persuaded the kind doctor to come to the apartment.

Rafe’s deep concern made his voice hoarse. “I want the best possible care for my wife, Dr. Frank. If her condition warrants it, I want her taken to the hospital.”

“She seems to be resting a little easier now. I’ve given her a shot of antibiotics and will have a prescription sent over for her to take four times daily. With your permission, I’ll have a nurse sent over to look in on her twice daily.” The doctor mentally shook his head. Why the wife of a man of such obvious means should be living in this neighborhood, he had no idea. And of course, it was not his place to ask.

“Dani’s health is of prime importance to me. Whatever it will take to make her well again.” Rafe ran a huge estate, managed several diversified business enterprises, but couldn’t seem to find the words to say just how important this woman was to him.

“As you say, her health is important, so I’ll arrange for the nurse to report to you first thing in the morning. But I feel it my duty to caution you, even after her fever has subsided and the congestion eliminated, it is going to take some time, and I’m taking about a couple of months,

for her to regain her strength. Her general health is not very good. She is run down, bordering on exhaustion.”

Pain etched lines on either side of Rafe’s mouth. “My home is in New Mexico. I would like to return with Dani and our son as soon as possible. We will be traveling by private plane, so there will be no question about my wife’s comfort. Under these circumstances, how soon will she be able to travel?”

Dr. Frank studied this tall, rugged man, lines of fatigue and strain lining his face. He noted the fine cut of his clothes. He remained silent, preoccupied as he dragged on his overcoat. “I’m afraid I cannot give you a definite date, Mr. de Corba. I’ll be back tomorrow evening to see how your wife is progressing. And I’ll be talking to the nurse during the day. Perhaps by then, I’ll be able to answer your question.” With this, Dr. Frank pulled on his gloves and walked toward the door. “You have my number if there is any change for the worse during the night.”

“Thank you for coming out in such weather, doctor. And please see to the arrangements for a nurse as soon as possible.”

The doctor nodded as he left the small apartment.

As the door closed behind the good doctor, Rafe shuddered as he remembered the way Dani had trembled in his arms, the whiteness of her face as he’d carried her to the bedroom. She was so small, with a waist his hands could almost span. When he’d removed her clothes, all passion died as concern for her welfare over ruled all other emotions. Dani had always been small, but now she was far too thin, her arms painfully so, while her neck was as slender and graceful as a swan. A fierce, possessive desire blazed into flame. He was taking his small family home with him. And heaven help anyone who tried to come between him and his woman again! Or tried to keep him from his son!

Dani snuggled down into the warmth, unwilling to leave this delicious haven. Bit of dreams replayed as her mind sought consciousness; dreams of strong arms holding

her close. Dreams of a big warm body next to her, protecting her, making her feel secure.

Slowly her sluggish mind began to resurface. Dominic! Barely able to lift her arm, she made a feeble attempt to push the covers aside. But they wouldn't budge. Her hand met an immovable force, an arm of steel anchoring her to the bed. The arm was covered with dark hair, the weight of this mass of muscle securing her firmly next to the owner.

Slowly, Dani eased over onto her back. Her startled blue eyes locked with Rafe's dark eyes. His face wore a mask of dark stubble as if he hadn't shaved in some time. "What are you doing here?" she croaked between lips as dry as cracked earth. Her throat still hurt, but not quite as much. But she was very thirsty.

Rafe heaved up, an arm on either side of her face with a look of such concern, of such frightening hunger that it pinned her to the bed. "I should think that was obvious, little one. When my wife collapses at my feet, I take it as my solemn duty to see that she has the proper care. Especially when she is so precious to me. A wife's bed should not be out of bounds to her husband, Dani."

"You take an awful lot for granted, Rafe!" Her fever had finally broken. But it had drained all her strength, both physical and mental. She realized she should make a stand, or attempt one, or he would take control of her life. If only she could think what to do but her mind felt full of wool. She tried again to get out of bed only to be halted by Rafe's hands as he pushed her effortlessly back down onto the pillow.

She might be helpless to defy him physically, but she managed the strength to summon a glare of such scorn, it would have withered a lesser man. She watched, fascinated by the sight of his big muscled body as he rose from the bed to pull on his pants.

If he saw her wide-eyed look of appreciation, he didn't comment. "Perhaps I do take some things for granted, little one. People I've dealt with in the past have

called me all sorts of names and will no doubt continue to do so in the future. More than likely you will manage to come up with a few of your own very soon.”

“Sooner than you think if you don’t go away and leave me alone,” she snapped. Turning her face away from the magnificent sight of his male body, she missed the slight curving of his lips as he appreciated her urge to argue as a sign of recovery.

“I have no intention of leaving you alone, Mrs. de Corba.”

Her head snapped around as she stared open mouthed as every ounce of color drained from her face as she anticipated what would come next. And she wasn’t wrong.

“As soon as the doctor says you are fit to travel, we will be taking our son home to New Mexico where I can look after you properly. Where you will not have to work yourself into such a state of exhaustion and ill health.” Ignoring her shocked expression he continued. “I had hoped to give you more time to adjust to the idea of our reconciliation, but your health has necessitated my taking command of the situation. I’ve made the necessary arrangements for us to return home.”

“You can’t force me to go back there with you. I won’t go!” Even to her ears, the words lacked conviction. If only she wasn’t so weak. The last eighteen months had taken their toll on her physical condition, first working all through her pregnancy, and then going back to work within a week of Dom’s birth.

Rafe ignored her outburst as he quickly left the room, only to return seconds later with a glass of water and two capsules. Setting the glass on the nightstand, he encircled her slender shoulders with a powerful arm, raising her to a sitting position, feeling her tense at his touch.

“Stop fighting me for the present, Dani. Get well. Then you can argue with me all you want. Now take these and no back talk!”



Glaringly, she did as she was told, upset with herself because her hand shook so much, Rafe had to steady the glass to keep the water from spilling over onto the bedding.

“Dom should be waking soon. I have to get up, Rafe.” She would go to her son if she had to drag herself over to his bed.

“You are going to stay right where you are. I’ll look after Dom.”

“You?” Dani’s look of utter astonishment brought a weary smile to his full mouth.

“I might be a man. But I am not above caring for my son. Feeding, bathing and all that goes with his care. As a matter of fact, it has been a joy getting to know my son the past two days.”

“Two days?” Dani squeaked. “I’ve been asleep all that time?” Her mind reeled at the thought of all the work to be done. Dominic demanded so much time and attention. And this had left Pop alone in the store. But Dom was her first, her main priority. “I want to see my baby!” A very determined Dani threw back the covers intent on getting out of bed. But Rafe was there before she could move more than one of the blankets. His strong hands, gentle on her shoulders, pushed her back down against the pillows.

“You will stay right where you are. I will bring him to you as soon as he is dressed. If you remain quiet, I’ll bring a tray and you can have breakfast in bed. We will all eat in here together.”

True to his word, he brought Dom to her ten, long minutes later. Her son had never looked more precious, more beautiful to her. Rafe had dressed him in blue bib overalls with a white long sleeve shirt. Dom was as glad to see her as she was to see him. Dom literally threw himself into her waiting arms. Never in his young life had he been separated from his mother for more than a few hours. Now he clung to her, his small arms locked around her neck, his face buried against her shoulder. This silent plea never to

leave him determined her future with Rafe. She could never leave her baby again.

A week later, it was a solemn Dani who walked reluctantly and somewhat unsteadily down the aisle of Rafe's luxurious private plane. Her strength was returning but much too slowly for her peace of mind. Rafe, holding a glowing Dominic high against his chest, seated her in one of the plush wide seats by a window. He then strapped Dom into a child's seat on the seat next to her.

Kneeling down in the aisle, his huge frame blocking the entire walkway, Rafe's eyes were level with hers. "You can hate me all you want, little one. But, even you must admit, I can look after you, provide for you, do more for our son than you ever could on your own."

She stared back at him. Her ears must be deceiving her, and her eyes. She could swear there was a pleading tone in his voice, in the fierce possessiveness in his dark eyes. But no! She knew only too well how persuasive Rafe could be. He was the ultimate actor. She would do well to remember that.

Turning to look out the window, she watched two men load the last of their belongings, hers and Dom's, onto the plane. "You can force me to go back to New Mexico with you, Rafe. You're so much bigger and stronger, more powerful in every way. You can force yourself on me as well. But don't expect me to thank you for it!"

Now she turned to look directly at him, tears in her eyes.

"That apartment might not have come up to your standards. It wasn't plush or new, but it was our home. I would probably never be able to give Dom elegant clothes or fine material things. But I can give him love. That's something I grew up without. But my son will not be denied."

Rafe stood. He towered over her like some omnipotent deity. If she had imagined any softness in his eyes, it vanished to be replaced with something she

couldn't, or was afraid, to define. Taut lines drew his mouth down at the corners, his eyes narrowed in contemplation.

"I agree that our son will not go without love. Nor will he grow up in a home where his parents are at each other night and day. I, too, am capable of giving love! Give that some thought during the trip home, little one." He quickly turned to walk back up the aisle, leaving Dani with a feeling of dread.

If only she could get off the plane. Physically, she was much too weak to do something that foolish. Besides, where would she go? She had given up her apartment. She had no money. And Rafe was sure to find her no matter where she tried to hide. Sighing, she had to admit the truth, if only to herself.

She had known when she opened her door to Rafe that first night, her future was in his hands. Part of her anger, her distrust had dissolved after he'd convinced her he knew nothing about their baby until that night in her apartment. She no longer doubted his involvement about that hated letter. His anger and outrage after reading it was too real to be contrived. Heaven help whoever was responsible for writing it. Rafe was furious, determined to find out the person who had written such a letter in his name. Someone was going to pay dearly, she was sure of that. But where did all this leave her? She knew Rafe's family would love Dom, but all she could see ahead for herself was loneliness and emptiness as a woman.

Dom sat contentedly in his seat as they lifted off, not understanding what he was seeing outside the window, but fascinated all the same. The past week he would become impatient if she were out of his sight for very long. It wasn't because he wanted her undivided attention. He just felt safe and secure when he could see her. They hadn't been in the air ten minutes when his eyes grew heavy. In sleep his long dark lashes cast shadows on his rounded cheeks. Dani caressed the soft skin in wonder;

still amazed she had carried this precious baby inside her body.

Rafe was unusually quiet. He politely asked if she needed anything before leaving her to work at a table covered with folders and papers. He was a few feet up the aisle from her, sitting so she could see his profile. She watched him unobserved.

He was heart wrenchingly handsome in her eyes. Oh, not the movie star type, but rugged, masculine with power and self-assurance in his tall straight carriage. Even dressed in jeans and a simple pull over shirt he emanated an aura of forceful energy. He was a man in command. How could she have ever believed a man with Rafe's potent charisma, his position of power in business could be seriously interested in her? No. Men like him usually went for women like Vanessa, beautiful, sexy who knew how to keep a man's interest.

Turning to stare out the window, she saw the clouds below, an endless sea of puffed white mountain peaks, dotted here and there with tall columns of mushroom shaped crags. They say time heals all wounds. But hers seemed as deep and real as during her flight from New Mexico.

Rafe had been extremely kind to her this past week, making sure she took her medication, saw to her meals. He'd allowed her to do nothing but play with Dom. He'd also moved out of his hotel into her apartment. He said he wanted her well, but for himself or for Dom? She would never be sure?

"Dani?"

The sound of her name brought her attention to where she was. And why. Rafe knelt by her seat, a look of concern on his face.

"Are you all right? Perhaps you should lie down for a while?"

"No, I'm fine. I was just lost in thought. I'm not the least tired. As a matter of fact, I've done enough sleeping this past week for three people." She pulled her

gaze away from his dark penetrating eyes. They both looked down at Dom, sleeping soundly. Automatically her small hand reached out to straighten the blanket around his shoulders. Rafe stilled her movement by grasping her wrist. Slowly, he drew her hand to his lips, lovingly pressing his lips to her palm, then to her wrist where a pulse beat wildly. His touch sent flames of desire searing along every nerve in her body.

“Where did you get this?” he asked touching the thin gold band she wore on her third finger.

“I bought it. People are more likely to believe you are married if they can see a ring. So...” She let the sentence drop. It didn’t matter anymore.

Rafe said more harshly than intended, “when we get home, I will exchange it for the one that rightfully belongs on your finger. The one I put there on our wedding day.”

“The one I’m wearing has more meaning for me, Rafe. It might not be as impressive but it does just fine.” She had been so pliable in the past, ready to submit to his every wish during their short marriage. Well, this time, she would think for herself. Most importantly, she would not let herself be deluded by his magnetism, by a charming manner or words of love. Brave words. She just hoped her body would follow her minds lead.

## CHAPTER 12

It didn't seem possible that she and Dom had been back in New Mexico for two whole weeks. The time had flown by. It hadn't taken Rafe long to discover who had written that letter. Apparently Vanessa had been at the house when the mail arrived and had managed to steal the letter without anyone seeing her. Rafe remembered that day because they'd had words. She'd come to comfort the deserted husband while he'd been in no mood for her cloying tactics. So he'd ended up telling her to get out of his life and his home because he loved only Dani. And if he couldn't have her, then he didn't want anyone else, especially Vanessa.

A handwriting expert confirmed that it was Van who had written that hateful letter. Dani didn't know what, if anything, Rafe was going to do about Vanessa and she didn't really care. All that mattered to her was that Rafe had not been the one to write it. That information had eased some of the pain of the past. She wasn't aware that Rafe had already taken action to get his revenge on Vanessa for being the cause of his missing out on his son's birth. Just a word here and there in the right ear and Vanessa Hume was being excluded from most influential guest lists. She was going to have to leave New Mexico to find a new group of potential husband material. Time would tell if her reputation would follow close on her heels. Adrian was now living in New York and had no intention of venturing west again.

Dani had to admit that she hadn't felt this rested in a very long time. But then, no one would let her lift a finger except to look after Dom. So each day she played with her son and swam in the pool and rested. She and Rafe had

drifted into the habit of taking a long walk every evening after dinner. He made sure she took it slowly, thus her strength was returning. She was also developing a beautiful golden tan.

She'd had to take the sun in small doses because of her fair complexion. But with so many people around to cater to her needs, a severe burn was impossibility. If it wasn't Rafe at her side, it was Diego. Or one of the servants would come to remind her of the sun. Even Kate had come to spend many an afternoon with her.

They would sit around the pool, talking about anything and everything. Kate was ecstatic about Dani's return, so sure that she and Rafe had at last settled all their differences. And, of course, Dominic took up a great deal of their time. That is, if they could get him away from his father or great uncle. Diego was already talking of buying a pony of all things.

Demetrio and Kate were delighted with their nephew, offering to baby-sit if she and Rafe wanted to get away for a while. Since Kate was expecting their first child, Demetrio reasoned that impending fatherhood required some hands on practice. But Dani suspected it was more to encourage her and Rafe to spend more time alone. But she wasn't ready for that just yet. And she had serious doubts about Rafe's desire for her company.

All this had happened much too quickly for her. Within a couple of weeks of Rafe's reentry into her life, she had been whisked away from what had been her home, her security for the past year and a half. Upon their return to Rafe's home, she'd discovered the dressing room off the master suite had been transformed into a nursery. A single bed remained in the room, but a beautiful maple crib had been added along with a dresser and changing table. There was a huge stuffed panda in one corner and several smaller animals on the twin bed. The room was beautifully done in pale green and yellow, with lovable dinosaurs romping on one wall. The window seat had been converted into a padded toy chest.

After settling Dom down for a nap, she'd discovered her luggage in the master suite along with Rafe's.

"What are my things doing here? Rafe, I can't and won't stay in this room." She'd been tired and close to tears as she surveyed the room they had once shared. It was a painful reminder of her past foolishness.

"You are my wife, Dani. Your place is at my side, day and night. I intend for this to be a real marriage, and that means sharing a room and a bed."

"I may be your wife, but it's strictly a technicality. After all this time, you can't really expect me to share a room, a...a bed." What would she do if he touched her? Loving him as she did, would she be able to keep her feelings hidden.

"Give me credit for having some understanding, will you Dani? I simply want you near me, so we can become reacquainted, so I can be there if you need me. You have my word that I won't force myself on you. But I've waited a long time to have you home, and damned if I'll have you sleeping down the hall in another room." Shrugging out of his jacket, he crossed the room to open the long sliding mirrored doors to the closet. There beside Rafe's many suits and shirts hung hanger after hanger of dresses, slacks and blouses.

Dani stood motionless in the center of the room, shocked at the sight of all those clothes. Too shocked to speak, she tilted her head, her eyes questioning as she glared at him.

"I thought you would be pleased. Since shopping would be a strain for you for a while, I had Kate pick out some clothes to tide you over until you can do some shopping on your own," he explained, plainly confused by her attitude.

"Why won't you listen to me?" she pleaded. "You seem to think all you have to do is spend money on me and it will make everything all right. But it won't work Rafe. You didn't love me before I left and I don't believe you



love me now. I know I'm here because of Dom. And I understand why you want him here. But you don't have to spend a fortune on me just to get him." Looking at those clothes made her feel like a kept woman.

In three angry strides, he was at her side. His large hands captured her shoulders as he crushed her against his broad chest. One arm held her captive along the rock hard length of his body, while the fingers of his other hand threaded into her hair, pulling her head back. "You belonged to me when we first married! And you belong to me now and forever, Dani. Make no mistake about that," he growled as his mouth swooped to trap hers. The pressure of his lips forced her lips apart, his tongue touching, tasting the velvet sweetness of her mouth. The pressure eased and became gentler as he sensed her response.

And respond she did. Her mind might have been sending off alarms, but her body was remembering the passion, the pleasure of his touch, the melting heat of his arousal pressed against her stomach. She was a fool, but her body didn't care. Her hands clutched at his broad shoulders before curling around his neck in an effort to arch her body closer to his.

With a growl of satisfaction, his tongue stroked a path from her swollen lips down the soft column of her throat. "Don't try me too far, little one. I'm prepared to wait for you to lie beneath me again. I ache with desire to make you mine again, so it won't take much to push me over the edge," his voice was deep, husky with barely controlled emotion.

*You idiot*, Dani thought in panic. What had she been thinking of? She pushed against his chest, but his arms held her fast. So she tried another attack. "What if after a time, I decide I don't want to remain your wife? Do I have any say in the matter? Or is this decision all up to you?" It was difficult to think coherently with the feel of his body cradling hers. The warmth of his body was like a furnace against hers.

“We’ll deal with that if and when it arises. For now, you will share this room and this bed with me.”

So she had remained in the master suite. True to his word, he had not tried to make love to her, sometimes waiting until she was asleep before coming to bed. Perversely, she was disappointed when he did not even kiss her good night. He remained the perfect gentleman inside the bedroom and out. And it was driving her crazy. She didn’t know what she wanted anymore.

She could never tell him, but there was something reassuring about his being next to her during the night. Once her sleep was disturbed by a bad dream. He’d held her, comforted her with soothing words and gentle hands until she’d fallen asleep again. The next morning, she awoke curled against his large sleeping form, his strength and warmth a snug haven.

As the days melted away, so did Dani’s resolve to hold Rafe at a distance. It became more and more difficult to maintain the barriers around her heart and keep her emotions intact. And with the passing of time, it was becoming more difficult to deny the longing for Rafe’s possession. She was becoming weary fighting to hide the treacherous response of her body whenever he was near. She knew the time was coming when all it would take was one sign, a subtle signal from her to change the status of their relationship. Where once again she would revel in the passionate, demanding side of her husband. She was by nature a loving, touching person and longed to be able to express her love again. But, in the past, she’d given her love only to have it crushed by rejection. How much longer could she go on like this?

## CHAPTER 13

Dani sat at her dressing table putting on the finishing touches to her hair and make up. She both dreaded and looked forward to this evening. She and Rafe were dining out for the first time since her return. There had been family gatherings but nothing formal until now. Dani had met most of the people at this evening's dinner, but hadn't seen them since her return to New Mexico.

Now, as she studied her reflection in the mirror, she saw a frightened young woman who would much prefer to stay at home, away from questioning eyes, away from the silent speculation she knew would accompany this dinner. How many of them had been at that last dinner party where Rafe had left with Vanessa leaving her to Adrian's care?

Rafe quietly stepped up behind her as he finished knotting his tie. He felt his body harden as he looked at his wife, his dark hungry eyes devouring her loveliness. While she could still gain a little more weight, her skin was softly golden, her hair a shimmering halo. Her eyes were blue-green shinning pools in which a man could happily drown. *She is so beautiful*, he thought. The image of eternal beauty in a long azure blue dress, the square neckline and accordion pleated skirt soft and feminine. She wore her hair up, revealing the enticing column of her throat. In her ears she was wearing the pearl earrings he had given her the night before.

His gaze slid to her left hand where that thin gold band had been exchanged for the one he had put on her finger the evening they were married. The large diamond engagement ring caught, played with the light rays. He realized she wasn't happy when he insisted she get rid of the other ring. She finally complied, but not after some argument. She belonged to him and those rings announced

to the world she was a de Corba. Mrs. Rafael de Corba. He might be somewhat prehistoric in his thinking, but that was just too bad.

“You look lovely tonight, little one.” His lips gently brushed the nape of her neck sending shivers of desire raging through her.

The delicate scent of her perfume ignited a flame of longing he couldn’t resist. He reached out to pull her to her feet, turning her to face him. His large hands cupped her upturned face.

“Rafe, I...” she got no further as his mouth descended, claiming her mouth in a mind-shattering kiss. He didn’t force her. His mouth slanted over hers tenderly, questioningly. If he had been demanding she could have fought him. But this quiet promise touched her ragged emotions as nothing else could. Her hands clutched at his arms as she arched closer to him. He smelled clean and fresh, his cologne enticing but not overwhelming. She could live two life times and never get enough of this man.

He was the one to call a halt. His ragged breathing was the only sound in the room as he stared down at her bewildered expression. “Oh, Dani. You do pick the damndest time to respond to me. If you keep looking at me like that, I’ll say to hell with this dinner and take you to bed now.”

His words were like a splash of cold water. What had she been thinking? Oh, she knew exactly what she’d been thinking. And wanting. She had never wanted to rip off a man’s clothes before, but that was exactly what had been going through her mind. *Dani, girl, you are in big trouble*, she thought in disgust. You had better get yourself under control fast or you’ll end up doing something you might not be able to face in the morning.

Her smile as she pulled out of his arms was as sheepish. Hopefully what she’d been thinking wasn’t plastered all over her face like a neon sign. “I think we had better go, don’t you? After all, this is our first dinner since our...reunion.”

“Can’t talk you into staying home then?” he asked softly.

“No. I don’t think that would be a good idea.” The way she was feeling right now, there was no way she could fight the attraction she was feeling for her husband. And fight she would have to do to not succumb to her desire for him. It seemed that the more time she spent in his company, the more she wanted to be with him. The more she wanted to be closer to him. She wasn’t ready for that yet. But Dani had accepted that eventually she and Rafe might...No. She wouldn’t think about that now.

Rafe noticed her hesitation but said nothing. He smiled to himself as he led her from the bedroom.

The two other couples were waiting for them as they entered the restaurant, having just arrived minutes ahead of Dani and Rafe. The older couple, Steven and Sara Montoya, Rafe’s family had known for years. They were proud parents of four grown children and seven glorious grandchildren. One had arrived during Dani’s absence from New Mexico. The younger couple was from Los Angeles, Rob and Maggie Fleming. They had no family as yet, but were so in love it was obvious to all around them. They didn’t merely look at each other; they seemed to merge as one, their happiness emanating from the glow surrounding them. The way they touched each other as they talked, the way they leaned into each other spoke volumes.

Dani couldn’t help but feel a twinge of envy. If only she could feel at ease with Rafe this way. Feel free to touch his arm or his hand from time to time. But now was not the time to dwell on that. She made a vow to have a wonderful night out and wouldn’t let thoughts of what might have been get in her way.

Conversation during the long meal centered on business, but as the evening progressed and the subjects of the men’s concerns were put to rest, the women were able to infuse a more personal note to the talk.

Sara Montoya treated Rafe as one of her own children. Apparently she was one woman who was not in the least intimidated by him. She spoke her mind and he had to listen respectfully like the rest of the world.

“You know, my dear,” speaking to the group but looking directly at Dani. “Rafe was an absolute bear to be around during your separation. He would have worked twenty four hours a day if possible. And when he wasn’t driving himself to exhaustion, he sulked around, hiding himself away in that big house of yours like an outcast mushroom.”

Rafe choked on his coffee. The scandalized expression on his face was priceless.

Dani looked at Rafe and grinned. Rafe a mushroom? A big sturdy oak maybe, but surely not a mushroom?

Sara continued before Rafe could manage a word in his behalf. “Dani, you don’t know how good it is to see him alive again. And almost bearable to be around. Why, I’ve even seen him smile from time to time.” She cocked her head, tapping her perfectly manicured fingers on the table, daring him to voice a rebuttal.

“Sara, you have an weird way of flattering a man.” A warm smile took any sting out of his words.

“Flattery has nothing to do with it. I’m just stating the facts. And,” she said wagging a finger in his direction, “if you know what’s good for you and your whole family, you’ll see to it that this young woman doesn’t have any reason to run off and leave you again.”

Dani felt her face flush with embarrassment. What must Rafe be thinking? These were his friends. These people should be angry with her for deserting her husband instead of branding him the villain. Not only that, but for keeping the knowledge of their son from him. But instead, they were defending her.

Rafe looked deep into her eyes, his hand covering hers as it rested on the table. “There will be no chance of

her ever leaving me again, I assure you. I have learned my lesson well.”

Dani smiled. Now was not the time to speak of private matters. But just wait. Just wait until they were alone.

The conversation became general after that. But Dani saw the searing promise of sexual hunger in Rafe’s eyes every time he looked at her. He really intended to keep her with him, no matter what her wishes, regardless of her feelings on the matter. What would he say if she asked to move to another house? Would he accept her decision not to share his home? No. After tonight, she knew that answer to that.

But what *did* she want? Damned if she knew. Each day she looked forward to their time together with dread and a burning excitement, her body trembling whenever he was near. He made the blood sing in her veins, flames of delight surged through every pore, every atom of her being just by watching his tall, muscled body walk across the room. She wasn’t aware of the love pouring out of her lovely eyes as she watched him playing with Dom. Others saw, but Dani remained ignorant of the fact that she had become a walking billboard of her deep love for her husband.

This uncertainty, her tormenting indecision influenced her dreams that night. Rafe was going away in her dream. He was leaving her and taking Dom. She pleaded with him to stay. Everything was in slow motion. She couldn’t catch up to him. Repeatedly, she called his name, desperate to have him come back. But he continued walking away from her, Dom held high in his arms.

“Rafe! Don’t go! Please! Rafe?” the Dani in her dream shrieked in anguish.

Strong, warm arms cradled her close to a big hard body, her soft feminine curves melting into the hard masculine muscles as lips gently brushed against her forehead, down her cheeks, finally slanting over her trembling lips.



“I’m here, little one. I’m not going anywhere.” Rafe’s hands stroked the enticing curve of her back and arms as he held her protectively close, the presence of his greater strength calming as nothing else could.

Dani rested her head against his bare shoulder, the scent of his cologne still lingering. What would he do if she kissed the skin so close to her lips? As full awareness returned she thought to herself, *this is crazy*. I shouldn’t be having these longings, not when she knew where it could lead. Did she care? Did it really matter in the long run? She loved him. She always had and always would. *Admit it, Dani*, she admonished herself. This is exactly where you want to be. You want to be in his arms, a part of his life in every way. She tipped her head back to look at him, wondering if he knew how much she wanted him. How much she wanted to feel him inside her, to possess her, make her his wife again.

“I was dreaming,” she confessed ruefully.”

“So I gather,” his large hand smoothed an errant lock of hair from her face. “And it was not a pleasant one, hmm.”

“No,” she whispered as his hands continued their enticing caress on her back and shoulders. “You were taking Dom away from me!” she confessed breathlessly.

Rafe’s large hand cupped the side of her head, holding her captive to his dark brooding stare. “I would never take our son from you, Dani. I swear it! Dominic loves you. He needs you in his life to guide him, to teach him, to help him grow into a strong healthy, well adjusted man.”

“But you forced me to come back here with you. If I didn’t, you said you would take Dom with you. You didn’t give me any choice, Rafe.” Tears filled her eyes. The weeks of doubt and anxiety had taken their toll.

“You’re damn right I didn’t give you a choice,” he grated. “I wanted *you*, Dani. You. Oh, I wanted my son too. But it was you who were my first concern. And this seemed the only way to get you here. I wasn’t prepared to

wait. Not when you were so sick and obviously needed me, even if you wouldn't admit it," he growled in painful yearning, the skin drawing taut over his face, his eyes dilated to ebony reservoirs of unleashed sexual longing. "I've tried to be patient, but Dani, my little one...I want my wife!"

Dani was seconds too slow to interpret the blazing purpose behind his words. His hard mouth swooped to capture her softly parted lips, bruising in hungry longing as he drank from their sweetness. The last of her barriers melted under the onslaught of his lips. Her lips parted as his tongue forced entrance as he savored the feel and taste of her. Her head reeled with long buried desires, her body responding visibly, arching into his, needing the feel of his hard muscled body closer to her.

He kissed the tears from her eyes, her nose before slanting voraciously over her mouth once again. His hand cupped the side of her head, staking his claim. There was no desire, no strength to fight him. She wanted this. His lips scorched a nerve-shattering path to the valley between her pale, firm breasts, igniting each nerve ending along the way. The peaks of her breasts hardened in anticipation.

She loved him. She had always loved him, even when he'd hurt her so deeply. That love had gone into hiding for a while buried where it couldn't hurt her. But it still burned, just waiting for Rafe to rekindle the flame into burning desire. She arched her body closer, her legs soft and teasing against his. She ran her bare foot down the back of his leg.

His in drawn breath was her reward, as was his barely controlled hoarse cry. "Let me love you, my darling Dani," he groaned into the side of her throat.

"Yes. Oh, yes!" Dani was just as eager to touch him, renew the feel of his much bigger, harder masculine body. Her hands stroked his back and she was rewarded with a moan of pleasure. Rafe pushed her back against the bed, her nightgown somehow hastily discarded in a heap on the floor. The weight of his body as he lowered himself on

top of her was what she had been anticipating since he appeared at her door those months ago. She sighed into his mouth as he claimed her again, his own growl of pleasure echoing in the darkness.

His hands caressed her body, her nipples hard inviting buds of temptation. Spirals of pleasure coursed through her as his mouth claimed one rosy bud, suckling at her breast. His mouth followed a leisurely path down her over heated body.

No woman had ever tasted so good, felt so soft, so desirable as his Dani. It had been so long, but he wanted it to be special for her. His lips possessed hers once again, his tongue dueled with hers in a battle of delight.

He released her mouth to press his lips to the curve of her breast, sending ripples of sensation surging through her. He tasted the underside of each breast before taking one inviting bud into his mouth.

"I love you, little one," he groaned, his lips against her throat, his hands firm, masterful as they played over her fevered body.

Hope swelled in Dani as those three words shattered the last of the barrier around her heart. In loving wonder, she kneaded the strong muscles of Rafe's shoulders; her nails trailing teasingly down his back wringing a groan of pleasure from him.

"Rafe!" she called out as waves of pleasure and desire threatened to consume her.

The plea in her voice drove Rafe as he suckled first once succulent breast before turning his attention to its twin. "You're so lovely, my little one," he groaned against the curve of her breast. "Please believe in my love."

"Oh, Rafe. I want to, so much." Dani no longer wanted conversation. She needed, longed for his male dominance of her body. Pressed to the bed, her body curved against his, chest to chest, thigh to thigh, feeling the evidence of his arousal, the virility of him against her, had her aching for the fulfillment only this man could offer. She writhed beneath him, rocking her hips in a ritual of

blatant invitation. The sensual woman in her thrilled when she felt him tumble over the edge of control.

Facial muscles taut with desire he couldn't hide, breathing labored in the throes of shared passion, he pushed her legs apart with one of his. Rafe lowered himself into the wondrous cradle of her thighs. With one powerful thrust, he was deep inside her, engulfed by her moist silkiness, her marvelous warmth. The feel of coming home tore a hoarse groan of pleasure from his lips. His large hands arched her hips even closer, melding their two bodies into one as the primitive dance erupted into uncontrollable passion.

Dani was oblivious now to everything except the waves of pleasure radiating from every nerve from head to toe. She knew only the hungry mindless abandon of Rafe's body as he used his mouth, his hands and body to pleasure her. His rapid breathing, as labored, as his body was rigid, spoke to her, as words could not. He loved her. He needed her...Dani.

They peaked as one; both bodies taut on shafts of rapture as it engulfed them, spiraling, soaring them to another dimension where feeling was all consuming. As he lay spent on her sated body, his face pillowed against her breast, Dani thought of another night just as this when Dom had been conceived. She smiled at the thought of another baby. A pregnancy that Rafe would share from the beginning though the delivery and all the years after.

Rafe rolled part way off her, his strong arms holding her close to his heated body. He pressed her head close to his heart. She marveled at the wild thudding of his heart as it beat frantically in his chest. She had the power to do this to him! Just as he could arouse her as she'd never thought possible.

"Please don't ever leave me again, Dani. I couldn't endure being without you again."

This was not the arrogant, powerful man he presented to the world. Rafe never pleaded for anything. He ordered. He demanded. But he never begged.

“Rafe, I...” his lips covered hers, his mouth swallowing her words.

“We can’t go on living together like this. I can’t stand being together but apart like this, little one. It’s been a living hell having you so close but not being able to touch you, hold you as I so desperately long to do. But I can’t take my happiness at your expense. If you can’t bear to live here with me, I’ll buy you a home wherever you choose. Preferably close by, so I can be near to take care of you and Dom. Close enough so I can get to you in an emergency.” The words were torn from his as if each one were ripping him apart.

He really loved her! Dani’s eyes, still lustrous from the onslaught of his lovemaking, shown up at him in the dim light of the full moon, all her love for him shining there for him to see. “I love you, Rafe,” she vowed committing herself once again to this man forever.

His gasp of relief whispered in the quiet of the room. “After all I’ve put you through, you can still say that to me? I know I can make you respond to me. It’s been that way for us since the first time we met. Are you sure you’re not confusing...”

Dani gently covered his lips with her fingers to halt his words of doubt. That time was past and should remain there.

“I married you because I loved you. And that’s never changed, even while we were apart. Oh, I was hurt and angry. And I buried my feelings so nothing could ever touch me again. But my love for you was still there, hidden, but intact.” Happiness quickly began to peel back the months of hurt and uncertainty she had endured since returning with Rafe.

His dark eyes bore into hers. He’d been holding his breath as he listened to her. Now he expelled it on a question. “I take it you’ll stay here with me. Even though I don’t deserve you?”

“This is exactly where I want to be.” Dani smiled at this new humble side of her husband, nestling closer to him, loving the feel of his strong body, luxuriating in her newly discovered power. Power to affect Rafe on a level she’d never dreamed possible. But that was only fair. He had the same affect on her.

Rafe grinned down at her, lines of strain around his mouth and eyes disappearing as happiness radiated from his dark eyes. “I love you, little one. I can’t seem to stop saying it.”

“Say it as much as you like,” she teased, confident now in his feelings for her.

“Don’t worry. I plan to tell you over and over every day. You belong to me. And I won’t allow anyone to come between us again. I’ll give you whatever you need to make you happy, Dani. I mean that. What I have, I hold.”

This was the domineering, arrogant husband she’d married. But she wouldn’t have him any other way.

Dani peered up at him from her long lashes, reveling in their newfound closeness. A teasing smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “There is something I would really like, Rafe. Something only you can give me.”

When he frowned in question, she reached up to whisper in his ear.

His soft laugh of delight whispered against her slightly parted lips as he positioned his weight on top of her once again. “I’ll do everything in my power to give you anything you wish, my love. Do you think Dom would prefer a brother or sister?”

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Autumn McCullah lives in Orlando, Florida with her husband Ron and their mischievous cats, Squeaky and Boots. She is the mother of three children...Patrick,

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