

A promotional image for the movie 'Raleigh in Rio'. It features a man in a white shirt embracing a woman from behind. The background is a night sky filled with vibrant purple and pink fireworks. The title 'raleigh in rio' is at the bottom in a stylized font, with a red star over the 'i' and a red swoosh underneath. The name 'CASSIDY KENT' is in the upper right.

CASSIDY
KENT

raleigh in rio

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CASSIDY KENT

also by cassidy kent

Sunset Key

CHAPTER ONE

Revival. Raleigh sensed it in her every breath and movement.

She had been dead to the world for years, but finally, at age thirty, she had come to life. She grinned broadly as the frenetic pulse of the samba buzzed through her veins, invigorating her sedated body. A year ago, she would not have imagined this moment: Raleigh Campbell, dutiful wife and socialite, surrounded by the revelry and spectacle that is the Brazilian Carnival.

She glanced around to the women at her sides, the best friends a girl could have. Robin Jones wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling Raleigh along as she swayed to the music.

After finding her unfaithful ass of a husband in their marital bed with his co-worker, Raleigh had walked out of his life and crawled onto the couch of her ever-supportive best friend. Robin had reacted predictably to the demise of her friend's marriage, her long ebony braids swinging furiously when she heard the gory details, her kind, liquid onyx eyes set into hard lines of jet-black wrath.

In fact, all of her friends had made the whole experience as painless as possible, willing to listen to Raleigh endlessly discuss Richard's betrayal until one morning last week. Robin had made up some ridiculous story about an ex-girlfriend who needed help moving. Known for her kindness toward past loves, Raleigh had believed Robin right up until the moment they pulled up to valet parking at Miami International Airport.

* * * *

"Robin!" Raleigh squealed as her friend ran around to the trunk of her car. "Where are we going? You have to tell me!"

Robin grinned mischievously, her expansive smile revealing a row of straight, pearly teeth. "Hold your horses, girl! You've been moping around my place for six months, and suddenly you're all impatient for action? Uh-uh." She offered Raleigh the handle of her packed luggage.

"You packed for me?" She gave a skeptical glance at the suitcase and then back at Robin. "Did you remember my—"

Robin whirled around from her path to the airport entrance. "You'd better hush. I know your little worrying self likes to be told everything that goes on, but this is a *surprise*, damn it."

Raleigh gave her a sheepish smile, sufficiently chastised. "Lead the way, boss." She trailed Robin through the airport to the check-in counter, thrilled to see her friends Freesia and Diana waiting in line. They waved frantically to her and little goosebumps of excitement covered her arms.

Raleigh giggled with anticipation. "We're almost to check-in, ladies. Come on, give me a hint."

Freesia and Diana exchanged impish looks, and then raised their eyebrows at Robin, as if to ask her permission. "She's going to see it on the ticket in a minute, anyway," Freesia pleaded.

Robin wordlessly pulled out four boarding passes and waved them under Raleigh's nose.

"Rio?!" Raleigh gasped. "We're going to Rio!" The women laughed, jumping up and down and throwing their arms around Raleigh.

"Happy birthday, Raleigh!" Diana cried, her perfectly bobbed auburn hair bouncing with excitement.

"Oh my God, thank you. All of you!" She looked around at the happy faces of her friends. "How long have you been planning this?"

Freesia looked her friend steadily in the eyes. "For only six months," she complained, her well-known reputation as a planner preceding her.

Don't cry, Raleigh told herself. It's only the nicest thing anyone's ever done for you.

"Enough blubbing," Robin interjected, knowing Raleigh to be on the verge of happy tears. "Let's get a drink, girls. I've got a burning thirst that only a Bloody Mary will quench."

After checking their baggage, the women gathered around a table in the airport lounge to await their flight's arrival. Raleigh could only marvel at the varied nature of her inner circle. Freesia Taylor and Robin Jones had been her college roommates, and oil and water got along a hell of a lot better than the two of them. Free couldn't even accept a date before checking her day-planner and making a list of pros and cons, while Robin's Saturday nights would sometimes end up double-booked like some kitschy sitcom episode.

She giggled to herself at the thought. Her eyes flicked from Robin's hot cocoa skin to her rounded cheekbones and flashing smile. A warmer, bolder, more beautiful lesbian had never lived. Raleigh had always counseled Robin on her string of failed relationships, so her turnabout with Richard was only fair play.

A severe clip held Freesia's ponytail of chestnut frizzies at bay. Her well-shaped nose turned up slightly at the end, leading down to her pert, little mouth. A similar story bound the well-starched woman to Raleigh. During her freshman year, she had spent so much time helping Free get over a bad breakup with her boyfriend, Zach, that by the time their wedding rolled around almost nine years later, Raleigh felt as if she had known him all her life. Freesia's natural inclination to plan and worry appealed very much to her, as she had a lot of the same qualities.

A polished redhead with impeccable taste in all things, Diana Simmons had been introduced to Raleigh during a dinner party with Richard's colleagues and their wives. One well-placed witty comment from Diana about the boring conversation and the two had become fast friends.

"This is the beginning," Robin said. "The beginning of a new Raleigh."

"Or the continuation of the old Raleigh," Freesia interrupted. "Before Richard."

"Leigh," Robin continued. "You might not realize it yet, but in a little while, you are going to feel better than you have in years."

"That's right," said Freesia. "All you need is a five-year plan, and you'll be back on track."

Diana hooted out a boisterous laugh, cutting through Freesia's advice with her trademark candor. "I say, all you need is a wild romp with some Brazilian stud to get you feeling right as rain."

Raleigh took a sip of her daiquiri and glanced around hesitantly. "I'm not sure I'm ready for that, Di. I mean, I'm still technically married. And Richard and I hadn't...you know, for a while—"

"Figures!" Robin scoffed. "Leave it to a man to let his woman go unsatisfied while he makes it with some floozy from the office."

"It's not men that's the problem. It's just *this* man," Freesia countered. "Zach would never do anything like that."

"We can't all have perfect marriages with our childhood sweethearts, Free," Diana airily replied. "But it's true. Richard is nothing but a dick." The girls laughed at the pun, used many times during the past six months as they discussed their favorite whipping boy.

Freesia held her margarita aloft, a conservative drink for a conservative girl. "To Raleigh," she said. "May you have the happiest of thirtieth birthdays—"

"And the happiest of divorces!" Robin finished. A gale of laughter greeted her exclamation, and Raleigh surprised herself when she joined them.

* * * *

Happiness was hers for the taking, Raleigh realized. And maybe she could find herself again, here in Rio. She just needed a little affirmation.

The vibrant crowds throbbed with vitality, buzzing their enthusiasm for the next part of the Samba Parade to enter Marquês de Sapucaí Avenue. Raleigh and the girls had learned the drill from yesterday's Carnival Sunday parade. Over the course of two evenings, fourteen groups of dancers and float movers called "samba schools" would each perform their song and dance in extravagant costumes atop and around several large floats, all matching the theme for their school.

The break after the last samba school had ended and the new school, Império Serrano, had arrived. Eighty thousand people did the wave, about half of them costumed in masquerade regalia, and a

deafening roar rolled down from the concrete stadium above all the way down to the standing room closest to the street. Raleigh smiled in remembrance of the free aspirin and condoms they had been given upon entering the Sambadrome.

Brazilians obviously believe in preparation.

During the break, Império Serrano supporters had passed around paper flags in their school colors of green and white and Freesia, Diana, and Robin all waved wildly as the first float came into view. Raleigh gasped at the ostentatious splendor before her.

Spanning nearly the entire width of the avenue, a float holding a massive tree structure crept into view. The tree's trunk had been sculpted from copper wires and bright swaths of emerald material hung from its metallic branches. Each branch held an absolutely gorgeous Brazilian dressed as a bird of paradise, each lovelier than the last.

Robin gave a low whistle. "I've gotta move to Brazil, Leigh. These girls are hot! I want one in every color." Diana laughed and grinned at Raleigh. It was true, she thought. The women of Brazil ranged in skin tone from deep ebony to pale and blonde, and every shade in between. Regal in their outlandish costumes, every woman sported a glittering feathered headdress and wings in bright tropical colors. One or both breasts were left exposed, and only the tiniest scrap of glitter covered them between their thighs. The Brazilian government had outlawed complete nudity, but the samba schools had designed costumes that abided by that rule in only the barest of senses. The women had no compunction about displaying themselves, but in fact, they smiled and glowed, proud of their assets.

I could be like that, Raleigh thought.

Maybe Diana had been correct and she really just needed an affirmation of her sexuality, her desirability. She could find that here. Out of eighty thousand people, the majority of the spectators were male and primed for her by the half naked beauties on the floats.

Raleigh surveyed the crowd, looking for the Brazilian hunk she needed. Her eyes scanned over the colorful crowd and caught on the leering face of an older gentleman with a thick black moustache that obscured his mouth and a definite interest in her body.

"And you're not him," she muttered aloud, an amused smile on her face.

She still wore the same look of amusement when she locked eyes with a man of unparalleled beauty. The lights and sounds of Carnival faded away as the man held her gaze. Raleigh couldn't have looked away from him if her life depended on it.

A black satin mask obscured the upper half of his face but could not conceal his piercing coal eyes or the way they had registered surprise, then defiance. Even if she had caught him, he boldly watched her still, his eyes communicating the things he wanted from her.

And he wasn't asking.

The masked man's shoulder-length hair seemed to be spun from the same black satin of his mask. Her palms itched to confirm the strands felt as silky as they looked. His high cheekbones left dusky shadows in the hollows of his clean-shaven cheeks, all covered by tawny, golden skin. Her breath caught as her glance hooked on the sensual beauty of his mouth: smooth, voluptuous lips she wanted to feel on her sensitive neck and in the delicate whorl of her ear. His costume continued the Zorro theme, a midnight black shirt opened to expose a sprinkle of dark, crisp hairs on his broad, muscular chest. The man's expansive upper body tapered to narrow hips, clad in black cloth and moving fluidly to the relentless beat of the samba.

For the first time since she had seen him, Raleigh noticed the two women dancing with him. Their seductive movements seemed to have no effect on him, so intently did he watch her. For a moment, she wished she could move like that, be one of them.

Raleigh wanted to be a seductress, too. And that's when she thought up her opening line.

* * * *

Cristo Santiago couldn't tear himself away from the knockout blonde gazing at him with those big saucer eyes and luscious lips. The very lips he had fantasized about nibbling on for the past three months.

She returned his stare with an erotic intensity that made him hard. He didn't know what surprised him more: the fact that he hadn't been aroused by the two Brazilian women sandwiching him between

their brazen bodies, or his immediate arousal upon watching Raleigh Campbell get an eyeful of his bump and grind session with the two natives. Either way, he liked it.

The bolder her spying, the more daring his moves became with his two party favors, yet he never lost eye contact with the woman. When a wandering hand grabbed hold of his crotch, he quickly extricated himself from the women, encouraging them to fondle each other.

It was time for Cristo to see if Raleigh took the bait. He turned his back on her and feigned interest in the girl-on-girl show. Hell, he wasn't completely unaffected by his observations. He could say he almost enjoyed the exhibition until, on cue, he felt a light tap on his right shoulder.

Bingo! He had her: hook, line, and sinker.

Cristo mastered an expression of surprise as he twisted around, staring straight into the lucid blues of the woman he'd been paid to follow for the past three months. If she had made him breathless from afar, she was simply intoxicating up close and personal. Smooth, creamy skin with high cheekbones, round, deep-set eyes and glossy, straight hair that he could wrap his fist around. He could picture himself taking her from behind, hard and fast. The thought made his heart hammer against his chest and his temperature soar a notch or two.

Raleigh rested a well-manicured hand on his forearm, which pulled him back to reality. Her hot gaze, accompanied by a flash of silky pink tongue flicking across succulent lips caused his groin to tighten in response. If she kept staring at him with those fuck-me eyes he'd definitely find her something else to lick.

God, she was beautiful. A pin-up girl in the flesh, and with her standing in such close proximity, he could tell she was a natural beauty without any surgical enhancements. One hundred percent woman, just the way he liked them.

Cristo took a deep breath to calm his raging hormones and inhaled a lungful of her sweet scent, a mix of hibiscus and mint. Her exotic essence worked him over, made him thirst for her like an ice-cold pitcher of *caipirinha*.

Her lips curved into a sensual smile. "I see your lovely companions are, otherwise occupied," she said, tossing her head in the women's direction. "Care to have a go at it with me?" Her voice sounded even sexier than he had remembered it to be from the phone taps.

"Excuse me?" His wandering thoughts ground to a halt as her question sliced through his muddled head. Had he heard her right?

"How about showing my body a move or two," she purred.

Damned straight.

Cristo gritted his teeth to fight the need that consumed him, burning him up inside ever since he had been assigned to her. He should never have accepted the job if not for his mentor and close friend, James Macmillan, asking him take on the embezzlement case due to the company's extra workload.

He couldn't refuse an opportunity to help the man who had taken him under his wing and practically been a father to him. Fresh out of college, Cristo had shadowed James at Macmillan & Ryder Investigations and earned P.I. status after only two years. When he decided to part ways with the company he had a good six years under his belt and the money kept rolling in. He was proud to say he was at least one of, if not the best in his field and that's why James wanted him.

This particular assignment had started out as 'just a job' to pay the bills, but things had gotten real complicated, real quick. In all his years as a P.I., nothing had unraveled him more than two simple words. *Raleigh Campbell*. In hindsight, he should have turned tail and ran instead of losing a piece of his heart to her during the three months he had observed her. Unfortunately, his interest suddenly appeared to be reciprocated.

Wake up, buddy. It doesn't matter if she likes you.

Cristo was a damn good investigator, had never let a case become personal, so how the hell had he gotten caught up in this mess? One thing was certain; Richard Campbell was a damned fool. How could he have traded in a woman of depth and substance for a cold, hard bed and eventual servitude in the state pen?

For that matter, how could Cristo look at Raleigh and *not* want her for his own?

His gut instinct told him she wasn't the money-grubbing vixen her husband had painted her out to be in company-recorded phone conversations. There was something different about Raleigh, something that made him want to prove she didn't have an agenda of her own. After reading over her dossier a few dozen times, he couldn't believe she had no connection with the missing twelve million dollars her husband had embezzled from Bellemart. As the CFO of one of the biggest international retail chains in the country, that bastard had the *cojones* to fuck the company's auditor for four of the five years he was married to Raleigh.

How could he believe this woman before him had taken part in her husband's dirty schemes when he had watched her crying her heart out against the steering wheel of her car not so long ago. Even after her six-month separation from the *cabrón*, she still carried his betrayal in her heart, and Cristo could never erase that moment of pain from his mind if he tried. That feeling squeezed at his heart to the point that even now he wanted to wrap her up in his arms and keep her safe.

Raleigh squeezed his bicep and he gave her a forced smile, but inside he felt like a raging firestorm that needed serious dousing.

He knew he shouldn't want her, but damnit, he couldn't resist those inviting eyes beneath long, thick lashes, nor could he deny his craving to taste those plump lips. *Mierda!* She was just about to do him in.

"So how about it? You'll show me a few Samba moves?" Raleigh revealed the tip of her tongue as she waited for his response.

She wanted dancing lessons, not him. He was such an idiot to think otherwise.

Words wouldn't come so he pressed a finger against her lips, taking hold of her hand as he twirled her around until his body pressed against her ass. He wrapped himself around her like a cloak, one hand wrapped around her mid-section while the other held hers captive against her heart. Cristo leaned in and nuzzled her neck while his body demonstrated the sultry steps. Her hips soon followed the lead and he immersed himself in her, lost in her touch as they moved in unison to the rhythm of the music that blasted from the floats' speaker system.

Cristo impulsively kissed the expanse of her swan-like neck and his black satin domino mask slipped across the soft flesh there. Raleigh let out a sigh that encouraged him to continue his gentle rain of kisses until his lips connected with her jawline. She trembled in his arms and he drew her closer against him, letting his hands slide to her curvaceous hips. She ground into him in a dance of seduction as his erection pressed snugly against her backside, uncaring if the exploration of their desires was displayed for the entire world to see.

The ardor of his embrace didn't seem to shock her, only spurring her on to lean her head back, giving him better access. No longer able to defy temptation, Cristo let out a low groan before he captured her lips in a kiss that made him wonder if he had tasted heaven or hell. He kissed her with all of his pent-up longing, torched by the need to know her inside and out. He hungered for this opportunity like a man wanting a bite of the forbidden fruit, even knowing the price of the consequences was higher than what he could ever afford. With every kiss his craving increased, wanting to claim her, wanting more than anything to take what he could get from her so he would never yearn for it again. He thrust his tongue between her parted lips, branding her as his.

Cristo knew he should stop his intimate ministrations, but how could he? In fact, he felt he already knew her more intimately than her own husband did. For Christ's sake, he had bugged and surveyed her home...and had paid the price by hearing her spill the most intimate details of her sorrows with her girlfriends. He had seen her completely stripped and vulnerable.

Raleigh Campbell was what he had desired for all these months of tailing her every move. Conscience and protocol be damned! He wanted to satiate both their needs with the one person he could never have.

As if reading his thoughts, she twisted to face him, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him back to her for more bittersweet punishment. She clung to him as if he was a flotation device and he loved the way she felt, tight against him. Needing him just as much as he needed her.

She shivered as he deepened the kiss and eagerly explored more of her womanly curves. Cristo ran his hands over the arch of her back, sliding down to her perfectly rounded behind and still, she hung onto

him for dear life. He never ceased his exploration of her mouth, freely allowing his tongue to seek out all the sweet secrets within. He kissed her until his mind reeled from dizziness and his legs grew unstable from wanting to drag her to some dark corner and love her with his body until she loved him back in every way possible. He'd never lusted for anything more than one night of love with Raleigh Campbell.

If he had to sell his soul to the devil, he'd gladly pay that price.

"Get a room." A rich, feminine voice purred next to his ear and he was certain the devil had heard his request.

Cristo grudgingly tore his lips away from Raleigh to acknowledge the face that belonged to the voice. To his displeasure, Raleigh took a step away from him and turned to face a gorgeous black woman and her varied companions.

"C'mon, Raleigh. Let's go dancing," she said.

"Oh, h-hey there," Raleigh stuttered. "I was—sure. I'll go wherever you want." Raleigh stumbled on her words and Cristo got the impression she was uncomfortable at having been caught with him. *Ouch!* His pride was wounded. He didn't let her reaction disrupt the heady elation he still felt after kissing her. Not to be dismissed, he stepped next to Raleigh and slid a protective arm around her waist. When she didn't break away from his hold, his lips curled into a half smile.

The sleek redhead gave Raleigh a knowing look. "Us old, married girls are going to take a rain check. Freesia and I are going to check out the beach before we head to bed."

The brunette with the mortified look on her face expressed an obvious concern for her amorous friends. "I think we should go—"

"Now? Okay, let's leave the *singles* alone." The redhead gave them a bright smile and practically dragged the woman away.

Robin laughed at their sudden departure. "How about it, guys? Up for dancing with me and Izabel?"

Robin's present hookup tugged on her hand and beamed, "I've got the perfect place."

Raleigh crooked her neck at the women and scrunched her nose. "Honestly, I'm famished. Is there somewhere we can all go to get a bite to eat?"

Izabel's eyes lit up as she gushed, "Got just the place for you. The rooftop restaurant may be closed, but I'll hook you up." She gave Raleigh a quick wink.

Robin placed a hand on her hip and gave Cristo a favorable once over. "Your boytoy gets my stamp of approval, Leigh. You can bring him along."

CHAPTER TWO

One of Rio's hottest nightspots, Vista do Oceano boasted a crowd of glittering patrons. The swarming mass of designer-clad lookers ranged from American models to Brazilian television celebrities and everything in between. Located on the twenty-fifth floor of the Praia Arenosa Hotel, the aptly named club dazzled Raleigh's eyes with panoramic views of the darkened Atlantic Ocean. The color spectrum of the contemporary retro interior easily got one's heart racing with excitement. Tangerine, aqua, and hot pink all served to illuminate the wild curves of Rio painted on the walls and floors.

Izabel indicated an empty space on a sofa the color of raspberry sorbet. Raleigh sat gingerly on the edge, suddenly nervous about where she was headed with this man whose name she still didn't know. He must have seen her abrupt reticence, because he slipped into the space between her and the other couple sharing their spot, close enough to quicken her breath and heartbeat.

Raleigh tapped her foot to the beat and searched for something to discuss while they waited. "I like this music. Sounds a little like the parade, but different." She met his gaze at this last and noticed his eyes on her mouth.

"*Samba-canção*," he murmured. "It's a little more radio-friendly. Romantic." The man slid his hand down from her knee to ankle, guiding her anxiously tapping foot into a smoother pattern to match the music. "It's a slower variation of the rhythm."

If Izabel didn't come back soon, he would melt this frozen dessert of a couch with his fiery touch. His fingers had already branded her ankle.

"*Olá crianças!*" Izabel smiled widely and extended a hand to Raleigh. "You're going to love this," she said, as she dragged her captive through the crowd. With a wave to Cristo over the swarm of dancing patrons, she yelled, "You come, too, stranger!"

The energetic Izabel zipped up a flight of roped-off stairs, leading them to a black curtain across their path. "I leave you here." She winked suggestively at Raleigh and gave Cristo a solid punch in the arm before disappearing down the darkened staircase. A disembodied "*Adeus!*" floated up to them and then the girl was gone.

"After you," the man intoned, his speech the barest of whispers.

An inexplicable bit of fear came over Raleigh. The unknown had always done that to her. She longed for adventure, but didn't want take the plunge when it came down to it. And yet...

Here was this man, this *stranger* standing with her in front of this curtain that separated them from something nameless. Would it lead to happiness or heartbreak?

Only one way to find out.

She pushed the curtain aside and gasped. The open-air restaurant had walls but no ceiling; it had windows without glass. A three-hundred and sixty degree view of Rio de Janeiro dazzled her eyes. Even under cover of darkness, the vibrant city pulsed with visible activity. To their right, the ocean yawned, a pale stripe of the moon's reflection rippling across its surface. The Two Brothers Mountain of Leblon behind them kept watch over the white sands of Ipanema Beach, its rounded peaks shrouded in mist. The statue atop Corcovado Mountain provided the crowning glory for it all.

Raleigh walked across the rooftop to the northern wall, drawn to the open arms of Christ, blessing visitors and residents from on high. She felt him before she even knew he was there.

"Cristo Redentor," he said, a quirky smile upon his lips as he looked on the statue.

"Something funny about that?" she asked.

His smile widened as he turned to her. "I was just thinking, we still haven't been introduced."

"I can remedy that." She extended a hand. "Raleigh Campbell. Nice to meet you."

"Raleigh..." He shook her hand slowly, his fingertips brushing over her palm. "Don't laugh, now."

She winked. "I never would."

"I'm Cristo."

Raleigh looked from Corcovado to him. She allowed herself a smirk, but that was all. "See? No laughing."

Cristo. The devil's looks with a holy name. He looked more likely to commit a few of his own sins than redeem someone else's. He had ditched the mask and she could finally explore the depths of his eyes. She had likened them to coal, at first, but now that she looked closer, Raleigh could see that they more closely resembled mahogany obsidian. A black sea spotted with golden driftwood.

Had he said something?

"Have you?"

Oh, no. Had she what?

"Have I?" she echoed.

Cristo smiled indulgently. "Have you ever been to Brazil before?"

"Can't you tell I'm a first-timer?" she laughed throatily. "I don't suppose the regulars gape at statues like I do."

"I've never been here before, either. Or at least, not to this place, anyway." Cristo laughed. "Which is why I truly believe we should sample their food. Just to get the full experience." He indicated a table by the plunge pool, lit by a single votive candle and covered with steaming Brazilian food.

"I had no idea that was there! I'm starving..."

Raleigh sat with haste, eager to speed through the small talk so she could feel more comfortable. Richard had always berated her for her lack of a "hostess" gene. Why couldn't she mingle easily with new people at a party? Why was it so difficult for her to organize a dinner with his colleagues? Not everyone had those skills, she had replied, but that hadn't been the correct answer. In fact, she had never done anything right in his eyes, but Cristo's eyes said differently. He seemed to hang on her every word, watching her intently while she sipped her *caipirinha*, its sweet lime taste cooling her parched throat.

Lick your lips, a small voice told her. Raleigh obeyed and the effect was magical. She saw his swarthy jaw twitch, as though he were trying to restrain some wild emotion, all while the hard lines of his midnight eyes softened and blurred. It couldn't be wrong to want to see that same look on his face while he watched her naked body writhe with pleasure under his touch. She trembled at the idea of taking him back to her hotel room and making love all night and day until her trip ended.

"Where were you just now?" he asked, cutting into her fantasy.

You remember how to flirt, Raleigh. Give him a sassy little answer.

"I was..." *Come on, be bold.* "Going back to my hotel room."

"Oh, really?"

He looked surprised by the bravado of her insinuation, and she couldn't understand why that displeased her. Unwilling to walk down the path she had led them to, Raleigh blushed and changed the subject. "This food is wonderful. Nothing like this back home." She dug into the simmered bean and meat dish with gusto.

"Where's that?"

"I have a house in Miami," she said without thinking. She realized too late that that was no longer the case. She could backtrack and correct herself, but did it really matter? She would never see Cristo again after tonight.

He gave her a genuine smile. "I'm in Miami quite frequently."

She looked at the open, interested expression on his face, and decided not to hide the truth. After all, she hated small talk for the very reason that people could not be their true selves if they only discussed things that weren't interesting...or true.

"Actually," she began. "I'm currently living on my friend's couch while my divorce is finalized." It felt damned good to say it, too. The weighty burden of her façade floated away on a Brazilian breeze.

"Sad for you, happy for me." He grinned wider, a bright white smile on his tanned, piratical face. He swigged his *caipirinha*, and then conversationally asked, "So what happened?"

"I caught him in bed with someone from the office." She had become addicted to the truth. Liberated!

"Wow," he replied, his words indicating astonishment, but his expression saying something else entirely. "That must have hurt."

The sympathy he gave her threatened to cause a lump in her throat, but she didn't allow it. "You know, I really thought the pain would last longer." She downed her drink and poured another from the pitcher. "The only pain that won't go away is this feeling of...I can't explain, it's just that I'm like a husk. He scraped out what and who I was before we met, filled me with his expectations of who I should be, and then took it all with him now that it's over."

He watched her now, frank concern written all over his face. She could drown in the black pools of his eyes. "Who were you before this man?"

She laughed, the buzz from the drinks starting its slow caress of her limbs and veins. "A weathergirl."

He gave her a smile, but not one of indulgence.

She continued, bolstered by the fact that he had not ridiculed her. "It wasn't my life's goal, or anything. I planned to become an anchorwoman one day. It was just a pit-stop along the way." She stared dreamily across the ocean. "When Richard came on the scene, that all changed. No wife of his would work for a living. He was already on his way up through Bellemart's corporate food chain at that time and..."

Raleigh suddenly realized that her rotten husband was about to ruin a perfect date with the devastatingly handsome man in front of her. "I'm completely monopolizing this conversation, aren't I?"

"Not at all. I love to comfort beautiful women in their time of need." He grinned and stood to extend a hand to her. "Would you like to dance?"

Raleigh rose to accept. All hesitation had disappeared with her third drink. She slipped into his warm, waiting embrace, thrilled to dance with Cristo to the beat of the samba-canção beneath the starry Rio sky.

* * * *

There were two types of people Cristo could read like an open book.

One, a liar.

He spun her around and pulled her back into his arms.

Two, a woman oblivious to her own seductive power.

He brushed his knuckles across her cheek, caressing her soft skin as he memorized her face beneath the dim glow of the moon. *Perfection*.

Raleigh needn't work too hard to seduce him anyway. All she needed to do was look at him and he could see the longing in her eyes. Could feel her need to be touched and be held, to fill the loneliness that she hid from the world. A flash of memories seized him. Images of her balled up on the floor in tears while he watched on helplessly through a damn monitor. He hated those days, hated not being able to console her, reach for her or wipe the tears away.

He felt the same way, too.

Cristo expelled a ragged breath as a familiar scent filled the air. *Brufelsia grandiflora*, known as *Kiss-me-quick*. An ironic chuckle escaped his lips over the appropriate name of the purple and white plants. Even if he were to get what he wanted, it would have to be brief.

Sadness washed through him. How long must he push his wants and needs aside until he had nothing left to offer any woman? Hell, he had spent so many years devoting his life to his work that he hid from relationships when his lovers demanded more. Instead of a warm body lying next to him at night, he clung to cold case files, buried in the lives of others who sought to hurt and destroy one another. With his ability to uncover the truth, he had finally discovered what he had been missing through uncovering Raleigh.

As the sensual love song floated to a leisurely halt, Cristo grazed his lips across her brow. He had to end the night before he compromised his mission, or worse, allowed her further into his heart. His stomach knotted when she smiled up, licking her lips in anticipation of another kiss.

That settled it. Time for him to walk the guileless seductress to her hotel room, kiss her chastely on the cheek and finish his evening in his boxers, curled up next to a case of Brahma and the remote control. The thought of spending another night alone definitely didn't appeal to him as much as seizing a few extra minutes in the company of his midnight fantasy.

Dinner had been polished off eons ago and he couldn't recall a time when he had a more refreshing conversation with a woman. The more he learned about Raleigh, the more he wanted his fill of her, to learn a lifetime of details about her in the span of a night. He had to take something of her with him for those long, chilly nights. Yes, he wanted to know if her reality truly compared to the profile he had memorized from her files.

Cristo tightened his hold on Raleigh. His only regret was finding the woman of his dreams now, under these circumstances. He wished they had come together during any of the dozens of times in his life when he could have committed to someone and hadn't.

How would Raleigh react when she found out the truth about him? Would she give him a chance to show her another life outside of the prison of her failed marriage? Or would she walk away more wounded and broken than when she started? Could he risk it all and gamble on one night?

Like two teenagers at a forbidden prom, they continued dancing skin-to-skin and a sudden wave of warmth spread through him as Raleigh threw her arms around his neck.

Not wanting the night to end, he grasped for any reason to be with her. "Care for a walk along the beach?"

Raleigh slipped out of his arms to gift him with a smile that made his chest constrict. "Excellent idea. However, I'd rather prop up my feet after walking in these heels for ten hours. A nightcap at my place, instead?" She ended the question in a smoky voice that lured him like a siren.

Staring at him through the thick lashes of her hooded eyes, she waited expectantly. Had it been a figment of his imagination, or had he seen a flash of slow mounting fire within the ocean depths?

Cristo's head gave him a hundred and one reasons to say no, but his heart urged him to take what she offered. He'd be a fool to walk away from her, for he might never have the opportunity again and regret was a bitter road he didn't want to revisit. Time to take action before he lost the nerve.

He took a step forward and reached out for her, cradling her head with his palm as he drew her to him for a kiss brewing with fervent desire. When he finally tore his lips away from hers, he was anxious to finish where they had left off in more comfortable surroundings.

"What was that for?" she asked in a husky, satisfied voice.

"I wanted to make sure this wasn't a dream."

She slid her arms around his neck. "Let me show you that you are fully awake."

On the half hour cab ride back to Raleigh's hotel, they sat in awkward silence, barely touching during the entire trip. Once they entered Raleigh's suite, Cristo couldn't hold back any longer. He pressed her back against the door and kissed her with the urgency of a wolf devouring his prey. His hands skimmed across her arms and down to her waist, drawing her closer, still.

Raleigh returned his kisses with a spirit that matched his own. She figured it was time to introduce the new Raleigh Campbell to the world. A woman who took what she wanted without apology, a woman who expressed her sexuality without inhibitions. Cristo excited her in ways that had been dormant long enough. Now she would seek her own pleasures and worry about consequences later.

A look of surprise crossed his face as she ground her hips against his. Her tongue was bold in its exploration and the sweet taste of lime and *cachaça* lingered on his lips, making her more aroused than she had been in a long while. Within seconds he had her stripped down to her red-laced bra and underwear while she fumbled with the buttons on his shirt.

Being with him now made her feel almost as powerful as the Brazilian women who floated by on the samba parade like queens on their thrones. He worshipped her body with kisses that were at once reverent

and profane. At this moment, she shed the vulnerable Raleigh who had been abandoned and betrayed. No longer a victim, she felt free to revel in the mutual enjoyment of sex with a man who desired her.

Cristo halted her actions when he scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bedroom. He laid her gently on the white, cotton sheets and watched the angelic vision staring up at him. Her long hair spread out around her head like a decorative fan. Her beauty left him breathless and weak-kneed and his stomach tightened with an unfamiliar longing. The realization dawned on him that she was everything he had read about in her dossier and so much more.

He hastily discarded his clothing and covered her body with the length of his. Cristo entwined their fingers together and bent his head to give her a gentle kiss. He continued a trail of wet kisses from her lips to the area below her ear and she moaned her pleasure. Cocking his head, he drank in her features so he could capture the memory like a photograph.

Cristo had loved many women before, but he had never truly been in love until now. It sounded clichéd and ridiculous to feel this way about a person he barely knew, but being with her, like this, felt damned right. His gut instincts screamed out that she was the one for him. Unfortunately, there was nothing for him to do about it except love her tonight.

Her speed underestimated, Raleigh managed to push him off and rolled over him until she straddled him with her legs. Her delighted laughter warmed his all the way to his toes and he couldn't help smiling up at her.

"Now that I have you exactly where I want you, I'm going to have my way with you." She batted her eyelashes in exaggeration and he let out a throaty laugh.

"It would be an interesting experiment to surrender my control to you," he teased.

The smile died on his lips when she unsnapped her bra and threw it carelessly on the floor. Cristo's eyes locked onto her perfectly rounded breasts, parched for a taste of the pale fruit. He tried to reach out to cup those plump mounds and she wagged her finger in his face.

"Tsk. Tsk. No touching. It's my call," she reprimanded good-naturedly.

He licked his lips, but dropped his hands to his sides, garnering a wink and approving nod. Desperately, he tried not to flip the minx over and beat her at her own game. Raleigh kissed the tip of her finger as a reward, then placed it on his lips before she slid down his body. Her breasts grazed across his chest and down his stomach and he closed his eyes, trying to refrain from taking what he wanted and ending the torture. He gnashed his teeth together, as his cock responded to her seduction.

"Whatever shall I do with you?" Her voice lilted in a Marilyn Monroe-like impression and he held his breath.

Taking him by surprise, her hands glided across his thighs, skimming across the bristled hairs of his legs before she latched onto his thick phallus. His eyes snapped open when he felt the warmth of her mouth around him, taking him in an inch at a time. The sensation had his head reeling, but he couldn't wait to be inside her, to meld with her until they were one.

She stroked the length of him with her hands as she ran her silky tongue along the same path, reaching to a spot just beneath the very tip before teasing his head. He clutched the bed sheets, bunching the material in his palms with every...

Single.

Torturous.

Stroke.

"Raleigh..." He croaked out her name, unable to think clearly when he felt submerged in a pool of clouded lust by her amazing skills.

Mustering up all the strength in him, he placed his hands on her head to stop her movements before he exploded from the ecstasy. Oh, he wanted to come, but not this way and sure as hell, not without her. He wanted to be the one to fulfill her dreams and desires, not the other way around.

"You don't like what I'm doing?" She gave him a confused and hurt expression.

"No, darling. I want to be the one to please you."

Her eyes widened. "Oh."

"Oh, is right." Cristo expertly flipped her onto her back and kissed her.

He slid his hands into her hair and allowed his tongue to explore the inner recesses of her mouth, slowly gaining her trust as he felt her give in. Their tongues danced to the rhythm of the samba, dipping and twirling and enjoying every dance step.

Cristo deepened the kiss, speaking to her in a language he reserved only for her. He nipped and licked her lips, teasing her between kisses while her response gave him power. Elation.

His hands slid to her face and he fought back the desire to tell her the truth. The guilt he harbored tore him apart. He feared that she would despise him when she learned how deeply embedded he already was in her life.

"I want you to know," he began, searching for the right words. "You are not a passing conquest. I've connected with you on a level that I can't quite explain and ..."

"I know—" She tried to speak, but he shook his head to quiet her.

"I need to say this and I want you to remember these words well, because I might not be able to tell you if you keep looking at me like that."

Raleigh nodded, remaining silent.

"Just for tonight, let's pretend that we're already lovers. That we've already realized we belong together. Let me be the man who mends that wounded heart of yours. You deserve this: a night where your man shows you exactly how you should be loved. Will you let me do that, Raleigh Campbell? Will you let me be your man tonight?"

He watched a tear roll down her cheek and she turned her face away. Cristo didn't know what possessed him as he bent down and licked the liquid. He let its saline texture coat his tongue as if he was taking in all the broken pain she carried and replacing it with something beautiful and whole.

"Let me love you tonight," he whispered before he re-captured her lips and fulfilled the promise.

Cristo nudged her legs apart and eased into her, taking his time to fill her to the hilt. She wrapped her arms around his neck and he kissed her with a gentleness he didn't know he possessed. Sliding in and out of her with a slow tenderness, he clung onto sanity, grappling with his desire to take her with quick, fierce passion.

He hung onto the last vestige of his control until he finally crumbled when he heard her mounting moans and felt her hips grind into him with a need that overwhelmed him. Something inside him cracked and his strokes quickened until he pounded into her, desperate to break through her shield until she surrendered all of herself to him.

In and out, in and out, his pace increased until the coil wound so tightly he could no longer control his body. Nearing the brink, he felt Raleigh give into him as she screamed out in release, a sweet sound of music like a philharmonic orchestra playing only for him. His elation overflowed and he could no longer hold out as he exploded with a force similar to the ocean tide outside. He would cling to her throughout the crashing waves of their night of passion, vowing that the love they had uncovered would survive the brutal onslaught. At that moment, he swore that when all was said and done, he would have her.

Raleigh: his lifeboat, his future.

CHAPTER THREE

Raleigh awoke, shocked for a moment to find a tanned male forearm across her bare breasts. Memories of their night together came rushing back and a blush crept over her pale skin. She turned to her companion, a wistful smile playing upon her lips.

"Can I keep you?" she whispered, moved by the peacefulness of his quiescent expression. The dark crescents of his lashes cast a soft, sleepy shadow across his cheeks. She had never seen a more beautiful man.

That beauty went beyond his the softness of his loving mouth, or the soulful profundity that filled his eyes when they were upon her. It radiated outward from him in the sweet way he touched her body and in his unbelievable generosity when they made love. He gave her all of himself and asked nothing in return.

All her life, Raleigh had wanted to experience sex like that. Wholehearted, bone-deep physical love that wrapped itself around her soul and refused to let go. She lay back on the pillows and stared at the ceiling. There was more to this than one night with a handsome stranger. They had both felt the bond.

Hadn't they?

And he had listened to her! He had watched her intently, taking in every detail of each sentence. After Richard, she had almost forgotten that men still did that. But Cristo, he wanted to hear what she had to say, wanted to know her heart and mind.

Not to mention body...

She stretched and looked at him again, wearing a satiated smile of love. Love? Oh, God. She didn't want to be naïve, but...it could happen in one night, couldn't it? *Enough with safe choices and protecting myself*, she thought. Raleigh refused to allow one bad relationship to ruin her ability to be open. If she couldn't risk putting her emotions on the line, she would never be worthy of a man like Cristo.

To hell with playing it cool.

Raleigh gingerly lifted his arm, slipping away from the warmth of his embrace. She pulled on a long, beige linen skirt and sky-blue camisole. Grabbing a pair of sunglasses and her purse, she flitted out the door.

On the street outside, Raleigh realized what she wanted. Purposefully, she asked the concierge for directions to the nearest bank. She walked the five blocks to Nosso Banco with a bounce in her step, bolstered by her night of passion. Stopping at the ATM, she searched for her bankcard in her oversized purse.

A man of small proportions popped his head around the front door. His salt and pepper hair waved in the breeze as he called to her. "*Senhorita? A máquina é quebrada.*"

"*Você fala o inglês?*" Raleigh asked hesitantly. She had learned to say at least that on the plane ride to Brazil.

"Yes, *senhorita.*" He gave her a warm smile. "Our machine is broken. I can help you inside."

She walked through the door he held open for her. The man gestured for her to take a seat in front of the lone desk opposite the teller windows, which were closed for the most part, probably due to the festivities of Carnival. "How can I help you today?"

Don't hesitate, she told herself. "I would like to take the maximum cash advance on a few credit cards." She expanded a strip of a dozen cards encased in a transparent wallet insert.

The man laughed, tickled by her actions. "Let's get started then," he said. He processed each card, one by one, allowing her to sign for the cash he provided her after each transaction. "You're not a gambler, are you?" he asked playfully.

Her mouth quirked. "Something like that." The man didn't know how right he was.

He smiled in return, then frowned at something that appeared on his computer screen. "Excuse me." He retreated to the room behind the teller windows. Raleigh watched him discuss something with a woman, casting frequent covert glances in her direction. After several minutes, he returned wearing a large, although professional, smile on his face.

"Can I get you any refreshment, *Senhorita* Campbell?"

She raised a quizzical brow at the sudden question, but shook her head. "No, thank you."

He sat back down. "You're quite welcome. Where were we, then..." He typed a few characters, verified something in a file and then folded his hands together, giving her a smile and his complete attention. "On this card," he said, indicating her multi-national card, "you have access to your main account, as well as your line of credit. Would you prefer to withdraw cash from the main account?"

"There must be some mistake. It's just a credit card."

"Oh, no, *Senhorita* Campbell. No mistake. It's quite a large account." He printed a statement for her to examine.

Richard, she thought. She wasn't vindictive, and would never have normally taken his money, but... She looked at the balance again, the zeroes boggling her mind.

Raleigh slipped between those zeroes and into a fantasy world. In her mind, she could see Cristo and herself traveling the world, making love on foreign beaches, traipsing through exotic cities hand in hand...

"Twenty-five thousand, please?"

He smiled. "How would you like that?"

For once, Raleigh knew exactly how she wanted it.

When she returned to the hotel, she could barely stop herself from humming a happy tune. She didn't even know she had been holding her breath until she gratefully exhaled upon seeing Cristo's still sleeping form in her bed. She knelt beside the bed, and kissed his forehead.

"Wanna see the world with me?" she whispered, brushing a lock of dark hair from his face.

She stood and stripped, tossing clothes here and there on her way to the shower.

* * * *

Cristo opened his eyes as soon as he heard the soft click of the bathroom door. Had he imagined it all, or did Raleigh's proposition sound much too tempting? Already, he had made the biggest faux pas possible by giving in to his physical urges and losing his heart in the process. Even with a guilty conscience he knew all too well he wouldn't trade the evening spent with Raleigh for anything in the world.

He slid out from under the covers into a sitting position. Cristo gripped his head in his hands, cursing himself for letting the alcohol and his emotions override all rational thought. His head swam with a heaviness attributed to heavy drinking and Raleigh's heady feminine wiles. She was his drug and he wanted to stay addicted to her.

Damnit, don't fuck up now.

A part of him didn't want to take this next course of action, but hadn't he rehearsed the scenario a thousand times before in his head? Of course, it didn't include the part about meeting and making love to the woman he had obsessed over for months. Now was not the time for him to kick himself. Now was the time to be rational. He had a job to do and if it killed him, he would see it through. There was too much riding on the line.

Frankly, he wasn't in his right frame of mind last night with the two bottles of wine and several hard drinks that made his body and mind cloudy with romantic notions. *Damned fool*. Could he blame himself for the moon hanging so low below the heavens that their pairing felt like a matchmaking by the gods? Could he dismiss the seductive scent of the kiss-me-quicks or the way the stream of lights cast a soft glow across Raleigh's beautiful face?

C'mon, Santiago, don't blame it on the booze. You've held your liquor many a time before and not lost your head.

Hell, his own conscience betrayed him at this crucial moment. There was no time to waste, so he got up and quickly dressed. The shower was still running and he needed to get the hell out before she caught him in the midst of destroying her romantic daydream.

When Raleigh had gone out earlier, he had woken up in momentary panic, assuming she had regretted their lovemaking and fled. Yet, after being with her for twenty-four hours, he knew without a doubt she wouldn't leave him like this. He had felt the bond when they made love and he whole-heartedly believed she had, too.

That's when he scoured the place to look for any evidence that would tie her to Richard and his sneaky deeds. Unfortunately, he came up empty handed and that pissed him off. There was no evidence of her withdrawing or transferring funds within the last few days. Of course, she had a few credit slips from gift shops, restaurants and bars, but nothing out of the ordinary.

Cristo had hoped to find some kind of lead that would seal the deal for Dick. The sooner he nailed the guy, the sooner he hoped to get *his* girl. If she would have him after this ordeal. His heart weighed heavily in his chest at the thought of losing her and he turned his thoughts to the task at hand.

Now that Raleigh was preoccupied in the shower for at least fifteen minutes, he planned on seeing what she had been up to. Cristo had a suspicion the missing link would be kept in her purse.

His heart pounded loudly against his chest while he took the few steps to the dresser. His eyes kept returning to the bathroom door with every slight bump from within. Cristo grabbed the leather handbag and rummaged through the contents. For an organized individual, the woman sure had a lot of shit.

He pulled out an item at a time and tossed it back in the purse. Lipstick, compact, tampons....his mask. He smiled in remembrance of their night together and placed it back inside.

Damn, she had a lot of compartments in that neverending bag of hers. Cristo dug deeper and found what he had been looking for. Pulling out a folded slip of paper with the Nosso Banco watermark, he unfolded the document and discovered the items that made all those torturous months worthwhile. He scanned the details of the account that Richard had skillfully covered up with an alias. In addition to the evidence he had been searching for, he also found a hefty stack of cashier's checks, an excellent way to keep Raleigh in Rio for a tad bit longer.

He entertained the thought for a moment while Raleigh's words echoed through his mind. *Wanna see the world with me?*

For a fleeting moment, it all made sense. He finally understood what she had asked him when she thought he had been asleep. His sweet Raleigh must have assumed Richard had stowed the money away from her to be with his mistress. He was a bit surprised that she had withdrawn such a huge amount in order to proposition him. It was so unlike her, so unlike the woman he had surveyed for the last three months who had drowned her true self in her sorrow.

Raleigh's actions now confirmed to him that she was healing, that she wanted to start anew...*with him!* The realization of her love spread through his body like the flames of a wildfire, filling the emptiness he had carried inside for so long.

Cristo lips curled into a half-smile as he turned in the direction of the closed door. God, he wanted to hold her in his arms right now. He could envision her delicate features and kind eyes, as she stood completely naked and ready for the taking. He grew hard at the thought of making love to her just one more time.

Fuck, she would be done with her shower any minute now and Cristo had no choice except to gather the evidence and go before she caught him red-handed without an explanation.

He'd have to tell her everything later. Cristo searched the wallet once more for any remaining information and stumbled across a few photographs. One photo in particular caught his eye, a candid shot of Raleigh at the beach in a floral print summer dress, laughing as she stood barefoot in the sand with the ocean as a backdrop. She looked young, refreshed, and happy. He didn't think she'd miss the picture so he shoved it in his back pocket.

Cristo continued sifting through the contents of her wallet and pulled out the stack of bills. He counted up the cash, a thousand dollars in hundreds, along with a stash of credit cards and several bankcards. He gathered up the money and cards and placed the wallet back in her handbag. Changing his

mind about wiping her clean, Cristo decided to leave her five hundred dollars for the rest of her trip before he shoved everything into his pocket, including the transaction slip he found.

Straightening up, he took a deep breath to steady his nerves. Cristo walked over to the dresser and scrawled a few words on the courtesy notepad. With his last sweep of the room, he locked eyes on the bed and sorrow sunk down into the very pit of his soul like a two-ton rock.

"I love you, Raleigh. Never forget that," he said to the empty room. He hoped to God she would somehow remember the words he had spoken to her as he made love to her until the early morning hours.

* * * *

The jumbo jet soared to high altitudes, but Raleigh had sunk to an all-time low.

"Can I tell you something about Zach?" Freesia asked from her seat beside Raleigh, breaking her away from her morbid reverie.

Freesia chose this moment to reveal yet another detail about her husband, the shining example of love and romance for men everywhere? The timing couldn't get any worse, but she managed to suppress a groan, ever the attentive friend.

"Sure, Free," Raleigh indulgently replied.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to tell you how great he is for the *millionth* time in a row." But Freesia's eyes softened as she spoke the words and Raleigh knew even if her friend wasn't saying it, she sure was thinking it. "What I wanted to say," she continued, "is that you and Zach are a lot alike."

The unexpected bent of the conversation made Raleigh pause. "How so?"

"The man is impulsive. Before you take offense to that, just listen. I didn't fall in love with him at first sight. Granted, we were kids." She smiled, a dreamy lovesick curve of her lips that made the green-eyed monster kick alive in Raleigh. "Still, he maintains he loved me from the moment we met." Freesia must have caught a glimpse of Raleigh's narrowed eyes. "Okay, so you're wondering how this is relevant to Latin Loverboy stealing your shit and leaving you high and dry."

The thought of it still stung, but Raleigh tried to smile. "I'm dying to know."

"Well, if I were you right now, I would be kicking myself for having taken a chance. You allowed yourself to be open and vulnerable, made an impetuous decision and now you feel like you're being punished for it. I always used to feel there would be some retribution for spontaneity, and now look at me."

Diana leaned across the aisle to pluck at Freesia's starched shirt and flat-ironed hair. "Oh, yeah, you're a real whirlwind of impropriety."

At Freesia's warning look, Diana shrugged and slid a black silk mask back over her face and reclined in her chair to let her continue speaking. "Anyway, Zach probably felt exactly that way the day I left him for school and Boston. He took a chance with his heart and I stomped on it. The important part, though, is what happened *after* that."

Raleigh turned to face Freesia, suddenly desperate to hear someone else's experience. After all, she was dealing with not one, but *two* consecutive rejections now. She could use all the advice she could get. "What happened?"

Freesia leaned in close, her glossy chestnut ponytail bobbing. "At first, he moped around, just like me during that first year of college when you barely passed you spent so much time consoling me. But eventually, he began to take this painful experience as an opportunity. A chance to do the things he might not have otherwise."

Raleigh pondered this for a moment and Freesia laid a hand on her arm. "Put it this way, let's say your marriage had worked out or you were traipsing around the globe with this Cristo guy. What would it keep you from doing?"

Freesia reclined her airline seat the two inches it allowed for and primly tucked the scrap of blanket around herself. "You don't have to know the answer right now or anything." She shrugged. "I just think it's good to have a plan."

"We know," Robin piped up. "And I don't see what good it does to have Mrs. Happily-Ever-After console you." She turned to cup Raleigh's face in her hands. "I know, baby," Robin purred. "You spend one hot night with a beautiful stranger and expect it to last forever. Welcome to the single life. It sucks."

Raleigh would have shot her a deadly glance, if she had the will. "I'm not that naïve, Robin. I didn't think it would last. I just can't believe he'd rip me off."

So much for my new start, she thought.

Every time Raleigh recalled her thoughts of that morning after, she shuddered with embarrassment. Cristo must have thought her a first-class fool. He had probably worked this con game with dozens of others. Cuddle up to a woman with a lonely look in her eye, get her drunk and horny, and then slip out with her cash the morning after.

Except he had left the cash. Why?

She brushed the thought away. Raleigh had canceled the stolen cards and cashier's checks and swept aside the world-traveling dreams she had briefly entertained. Nothing remained of the mind-blowing night of passion she had spent with Cristo. Nothing except her memories. His warm hands on her breasts, the weight of his body nestled between her thighs... She couldn't escape those recollections and so she stopped trying, preferring to lose herself in the fleeting clouds covering the earth below.

CHAPTER FOUR

Riding the tide of exiting students, Raleigh burst through the doors of the meteorology lab of the University of Miami with books in hand and confidence intact. After her five-year hiatus from her career path, she had registered for the fall semester at school and the choice suited her perfectly. The whole weather girl thing was the wrong approach, anyway.

A true meteorologist garnered more respect, and was definitely a lot more interesting. That one talk with Freesia about what she really wanted in life put it all into perspective. Not that Raleigh hadn't enjoyed displaying the weather like a prize on *The Price is Right*. She smiled at the thought. She would have much more fun forecasting it. Might be nice to know the future.

Freesia would appreciate that sentiment.

Just as she crossed the courtyard on her way to the parking lot, Raleigh caught sight of a man with a briefcase headed toward her. A pleasantly attractive man, wearing a tie and a seemingly *very* interested expression. She smiled cautiously.

This is the first step, she thought. Just smile. Not every man in the world is out to screw you over.

He closed the distance between them and blocked her path, returning her gaze with warmth. "Raleigh Campbell?" he asked.

Uh-oh. "Yes...?"

The man produced an envelope from the briefcase. "This is for you." She took it from his outstretched hand. He turned and walked away and Raleigh was left to stare at his retreating back. After recovering from her surprise, she opened the envelope and skimmed its contents to confirm her suspicions.

Raleigh Campbell, you are commanded to appear in court to testify in the case of Bellemart vs. Campbell—

She groaned. Ever since the news broke about Richard's arrest she'd been expecting this. But with her new resolve, she vowed not to let it get to her. She would simply get on the witness stand and tell the truth. She knew nothing about the embezzlement. For the love of God, she hadn't even suspected anything back at that Brazilian bank. Not at the time, anyway. It was only much later that she'd had her suspicions.

The subpoena didn't give her much notice: her court appearance was scheduled for the next morning at nine o'clock. Raleigh trudged to her car and tossed her new books on the front seat. Everyone had berated her for not cashing in on the divorce, but now there would be no question of her own innocence. Five years with Richard and she didn't have a dime to show for it.

She turned her key in the ignition and thrust her chin in the air. There were different ways of asserting her independence. At least this one had allowed her to keep her dignity. And tomorrow, she would finally let Richard know what she thought of him. If the question came up, of course.

* * * *

A horde of lawyers and reporters swarmed through the main entrance of the courthouse, all surrounding some defendant with a jacket over his or her head. Raleigh nearly turned tail and ran back down the steps but then paused. If she were to have a truly new beginning, she would need to close the door on her past. She whirled around and followed the swarm back into the courthouse.

Let's finish this.

She entered the courtroom and headed for the back row. One look at the defendant had her reeling in shock.

Richard.

She sat down with a thud.

He looked much the same as he always had: handsome, aloof, and unreadable. The perfect white-collar criminal, according to the bailiff's announcement of Campbell versus Bellemart Industries. Raleigh's shock and anger grew as she listened to the evidence the prosecution had mounted against him.

They called witness after witness to the stand, almost all of whom had been in her inner circle at one time or another. Diana's husband from the vendor accounts department, whom Raleigh had known from all those boring dinner parties, made statements about Richard's misappropriation of funds. Even Jim Williams, the CEO of Bellemart and Richard's golfing partner, for crying out loud, had discrediting things to say about the man.

"The prosecution calls Ms. Jane Marsh to the stand."

The final, crushing blow. A striking brunette with disproportionately long legs strode down the aisle and Raleigh struggled to keep away the memory of those legs wrapped around her husband's waist while they screwed in her bed.

Damn her, anyway. Damn both of them.

She listened stoically to the story of her own sorrow: four years of a torrid affair between Richard, the CFO, and Janey, the auditor. A sad cliché. At least he hadn't made it with the secretary. He hadn't only cheated his wife with the affair; he had used his enigmatic hold over Janey to convince her to help him screw the company as well. Richard created false vendors and Janey overlooked the discrepancy.

To the tune of twelve million.

Janey stepped down from the stand with a scornful glance in Richard's direction. It seemed to be the only way to look at the scumbag. Every one of his personal acquaintances and associates had given him the same stricken glance. After all, he had screwed every last one of them.

But none more than her. When her turn on the stand came, she answered their questions with perfect truth. One question in particular, a final, damning question, had her locking eyes with the pleading face of her former husband.

"In your opinion, is Richard Campbell worthy of trust?"

Raleigh looked at him, the man she had slept beside for years, the man who had used and discarded her. She looked at him and she told the truth.

"Not if my life depended on it."

With their client's credibility seriously diminished, his defense team's efforts seemed to wane. Their questions to her were few and hardly pointed. Raleigh breathed a sigh of relief when she was allowed down and avoided Richard's angry, red face on the way to her seat. She could have just left, but she felt compelled to watch.

"The prosecution calls Mr. Cristo Santiago to the stand."

Had she imagined that? Six months of daydreams and nightmares had her hearing things.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I do."

That would be a first, she thought viciously. He looked even better than he had in Rio, she realized. With his Carnival ensemble replaced by a crisp navy suit and hair slicked neatly away from his face, he looked dashing, but professional. She slunk down in her seat, desperate to hear what he might say, but terrified to find out. Why on Earth was he here?

"What is your relationship to this man?" the prosecutor asked.

"Let the record show that the prosecution has indicated the defendant, Mr. Richard Campbell," the judge stated.

"I was hired by James Macmillan of the private investigation firm Macmillan and Ryder to follow Mr. Campbell in hopes of finding the missing twelve million dollars he allegedly embezzled from Bellemart Industries."

"And did you find the funds?" the prosecutor inquired.

"Yes."

"Please give us a detailed account of how you found the missing Bellemart money."

"I watched Campbell for six months, and the guy never once did anything out of the ordinary. He stuck to the same routine, never withdrew large amounts of money, never went anywhere he hadn't been before. I knew he would be playing it safe when it came to the alleged embezzlement, and that even if the money existed in one of his bank accounts, he wouldn't move it until he felt completely safe.

"Around this time, Richard Campbell's marriage to his wife, Raleigh Campbell, finally dissolved due to her unfortunate discovery of Campbell and Jane Marsh in bed together. She moved in with a friend, but I continued to follow her."

"Why did you continue to follow Mrs. Campbell, Mr. Santiago?"

"Can I be blunt here?" Cristo asked

"Please speak freely, sir."

Cristo folded his hands and addressed the prosecutor with confidence. *Or arrogance*, Raleigh thought. "I thought only one person would want to find Richard Campbell's money more than I did, and that was his soon-to-be ex-wife. So, when she went to Brazil for a birthday trip with her friends, I followed her there."

"And what did you find?" the prosecutor inquired.

"Twelve million dollars in a joint checking account from Nosso Banco, an exclusive Brazilian bank."

"Whose account was it, Mr. Santiago?"

"The account belonged to Raleigh Campbell and Richie Carsons, a known alias of Richard Campbell."

"No further questions."

After a lengthy session with the defense attorney, Cristo was excused from the stand and the judge called a one-hour recess. Raleigh stood up, rage shooting through her veins. How had she found herself a pawn in another man's game?

She locked eyes with Cristo over the rows of benches and spectators. The regret on his face burned into her consciousness and she bolted out of the courtroom.

* * * *

No sooner had the gavel hit the desk before Cristo dashed out, pushing through the endless crowds to follow Raleigh. He caught up with her at the foot of the steps of the courthouse and grabbed onto her hand.

"Raleigh. Raleigh, please. I need to talk to you."

She stopped and turned to him. His body tensed up at the sight of the tears streaming down her lovely face.

Raleigh yanked her hand away. "Why? Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't compromise my work."

"Compromise...?" She lowered her voice as others passed them. "You...you compromised me when you took my trust and tore my heart out in one fell swoop. Tell me, Mr. Santiago, how was I to feel when you left with all the possessions in my wallet?"

He reached for her shoulders and pulled her to him. She tried to push from him but gave up and slumped against him, sobbing against his shoulder.

"Damn it, Raleigh! I never meant to hurt you," he said against her temple as he stroked her back.

She pulled away just enough to look at him. "You did hurt me. I felt so used. I didn't give a damn that you were a thief out to rip me off, all I wanted was to be with you."

"Shh, baby. Let's go somewhere so we can talk. There are things I need to say."

Raleigh took the opportunity to push him away. "No, I can't. I don't know if I could trust that what you say is true."

Cristo frowned, a sharp pain shot through his heart at the hurt he had caused her.

"Don't make me beg. Five minutes is all I'm asking. Just five minutes and if after I explain everything you still aren't convinced, I'll let you walk away from me and I swear I'll never bother you again."

She bit her bottom lip and the silence stretched on for what seemed like an eternity before she agreed to his terms. "Alright. Five minutes."

He let out a sigh of relief and reached for her hand. His fingers entwined with hers, almost like the night they'd made love in Rio. It seemed so long ago, almost like it had been a dream. Neither spoke as they walked away from her past, one that had belonged to a man who didn't deserve her and never had.

They walked through the thick Miami heat to a local diner several blocks from the courthouse and took a seat across from each other in a cozy booth in the back. Cristo ordered coffee for them and after it was delivered, he leaned forward, elbows on the table. He didn't want to sugarcoat anything and if he couldn't convince her of the truth, he was going to stop at nothing to break down her barriers until she did.

"Six months ago, my previous employer called me in to collect on a favor. He asked me to take on this case regarding an embezzlement scheme, which included surveying the wife of the suspect. It came as a bit of a shock to me when I was asked to observe you around the clock to gather enough evidence to indict Richard. They were hesitant about your involvement, thus they needed me to bug and do an audio feed on your home, your car, and whatever else I could get my hands on."

He wanted to allow Raleigh time to soak in his words. Her intent stare masked her face with a flaccid expression that he couldn't read. Cristo took a gulp of the dark liquid and felt the strength of the hot stimulant running its course through him, giving him courage to resume.

"Macmillan and Ryder rented the house two doors down from you as my new home for the duration of my observations. I would catalog my findings in a daily log, which included tapping your phones, watching your whereabouts and making certain I wouldn't miss a thing if you were actually hiding something. At the end of each week I would turn in the data and if I came up with nothing after three months we'd revert to Plan B."

Raleigh sputtered the words, "Y...you invaded my privacy, my personal life? I feel sick..."

Cristo reached out to cover her hands, holding her firmly when she tried to pull away.

"It's not what you think. I was doing my job, working in conjunction with the Feds. Your husband—"

"Ex-husband," she interrupted.

"Ex-husband," he continued, "committed a criminal offense and Bellemart was going to stop at nothing to bring in someone to cover their loss. Don't you see, it didn't take more than twenty-four hours for me to know you were innocent in all this? The only thing left for me to do was hope you would stumble across the money and I'd have the proof I needed to satisfy everyone."

Raleigh face paled as she contemplated his words. Minutes passed before she raised her chin, her eyes challenging him with a look. "You heard and saw everything then?"

He nodded, never wavering from her stare down. "Yes."

"So you watched and listened to every facet of my life? You were there during the hell I called an existence after my sonofabitch husband screwed around on me for years, like some sick test of my tolerance to pain."

He released her hands and straightened up in his seat. "I won't lie to you. I got to know you pretty well and I hated every moment of it because I couldn't have you." He leaned back in and said, "There were times I wanted to kick down your door and hold you in my arms while you wept. I wanted to tear off your clothes and make love to you the way you deserved. It's the truth. I was obsessed with you."

Two crimson splotches stained her cheeks and she whispered, "Does that mean you saw everything?"

A hint of a smile touched his lips. "Everything. Everything and more."

Her eyes flashed with desire and that did it for him. The recollections of the intimate parts of her life that no one else was privy to spurred a restless desire to have her again. Without a word, he scooted out of the booth, threw a wad of bills on the table and practically hauled Raleigh out of the diner.

Going well above speed limit, Cristo finally made it to his house and pulled into the driveway. He glanced over at Raleigh and something tugged at his insides. They hadn't spoken a word from the time they left the diner until they reached his home, yet the sexual undercurrents sizzled around them, begging for a resolution so they could be sated.

Raleigh knew she should feel appalled and betrayed by Cristo's confession. He now had intimate knowledge of her and had seen private moments of her life that she had hidden even from her own

husband. Why then did that truth excite her? Why did the thought of his prying eyes watching her every movement make her wet with desire?

Palm trees and haciendas blurred to the right and left of them as he inexorably drove them to their erotic destination. If she were to allow it, their reconciliation would be undeniably torrid and passionate. Then again, she would permit yet another man to have control over her fate.

No, if she forgave him, it would be on her terms. She didn't want to call all the shots, but if this relationship were to work, he would have to value her wants and needs.

How could she be sure that her feelings wouldn't once again come second to those of the man in her life? She had her suspicions that Cristo would be more than willing to accept her choices in and out of the bedroom, but Raleigh knew a way to make sure on at least one of those counts. Cristo was in for the ride of his life the second his front door closed behind him.

He wouldn't know what hit him.

Powerful desire ran through Cristo like the build-up of an electrical current, pushing him to the brink of blowing a fuse. As he followed her up the walkway to his front door, he was so impatient to enter the house that he grabbed hold of her waist and swung her up into his arms to carry her. It took a bit of maneuvering, but he unlocked the door and carried her across the threshold.

Cristo kicked the door shut with the heel of his dress shoes before letting her slide out of his arms. As if a dam had burst, Raleigh twisted around to face him. Without warning, she slapped him across the face and he grinned before he pulled her roughly against him. "Feel better?"

"Hell, yes. Now kiss me, Santiago, before I die from missing you."

One moment the world had been an uncontrollable storm raging out of control and the next the clouds parted to let the sun peer out and heat up his world. Like reunited lovers after a lifetime separation, they couldn't undress quickly enough. Raleigh fumbled at the buttons on his shirt and groaned in frustration until she grabbed handfuls of the fabric instead. Cristo raised his arms as she jerked the material over his head, tossing the encumbrance away. In a flurry of motion they disposed of their clothing, all while laughing in between kisses at the absurdity of the situation.

Cristo cupped her face with his hands and grazed his lips across hers; slowly kissing her with a tenderness that told her he would take his time in pleasuring her. Forcing his tongue between her parted lips to explore her very soul, he deepened the kiss and drank from her like an overflowing fountain of wonder, refreshing and rejuvenating his spirit.

They finally pulled apart and he rested his forehead against hers. "God, I've missed you. I swear I'm going to make every effort to make you understand that we belong together. No matter how long it takes, *you will be mine.*"

Raleigh slid her arms around his neck, a serious expression on her face.

"Let's end this chapter of my past. I want a new beginning. I want to recapture that night in Rio when everything was perfect. Magical. I'm willing to trust you because I can see you, Cristo. I could see you even through the wrong end of a two-way mirror. You can hold me now. You can touch me now, and I'm not going to let another minute of my life pass by in regret."

She peered into his eyes. "You know, I fell in love with you in that one night. I've never believed in love at first sight, but I do now."

Cristo's throat constricted and happiness bubbled over. He choked up when he finally spoke. "Yes."

"Yes?" She narrowed her brows in confusion. "Yes, to what?"

"Yes, I want to see the world with you," he said firmly.

Her eyes teared. "You heard me?"

He planted a kiss on her lips, and then nuzzled her neck. "Woman, I've heard everything you've ever told me and now I'm going to have to make love to you before I die from pent-up sexual aggression," Cristo growled.

Raleigh let out a squeal when he wrapped his arms around her knees and threw her over his shoulder. He swatted her butt as he took quick, long strides to reach the bedroom. He tossed her onto the bed and jumped on top of her like a pro wrestler.

Her playful struggles only turned him on further, making his cock as hard as steel at the skin-on-skin contact.

The world seemed to fade around them as he kissed, nipped, and licked her in all her tender spots until she cried out for him to stop. Raleigh didn't waste a moment in her revenge. She managed to flip him over onto his back with a quick maneuver; straddling him like the first night they made love.

This time, she entwined her fingers in his and leaned down to kiss him. She ran her tongue across his lips and suddenly paused. "Hey, so who did you say contracted you to observe me?"

He quirked a brow in interest. "James Macmillan. Macmillan and Ryder."

She laughed, that siren's laugh of hers. "He's my godfather."

Cristo's eyes widened in curiosity. "You don't say. Do you think he...?"

They looked each other for several seconds, until finally they blurted out in unison, "Nah."

Their laughter died down and he saw the softness of her expression. Happiness radiated from him. This was exactly what he had wanted to see from her on the monitor of his surveillance equipment. This was the Raleigh Campbell he wanted to know.

The woman he loved was right where he wanted her to be.

It was time to show Raleigh he meant every word of what he'd said to her in Rio. No more thoughts hindered him as he pulled her down against his chest and kissed her until words weren't necessary.

about the author

As the daughter of an ambassador, Cassidy Kent is no stranger to overstuffed luggage and airport lounge cocktails. She has traveled the world in search of gorgeous men, scandalous situations, and beautiful backdrops and uses all of these as inspiration for the diverse story webs she weaves.

As she does every year, Cassidy made a New Year's Resolution to try something new: 2006 would be the year of the author. Between latte sips and spa trips, she holes up in her loft apartment to spin her tales of love.

Cassidy resides in the City of Angels for now. Her true identity is a mystery that only she and Thaddeus Brighton (her personal assistant extraordinaire) knows...