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"You have had the dreams?" he asked.

Another gasp. Her head shook nearly as hard as her body. "No."

"Liar." Her refusal amused him, considering she already knew he could read her thoughts. "Have I pleased you yet?"

Furious and frightened, Elizabeth swung her hand at his face. He caught her wrist, stopping her, then pulled her open hand to his mouth and kissed her palm. "I have missed you, my love."

Her hand trembled within his, though she was already building up her defenses. "Who are you, Roberto San Miguel? How dare you jump into my world and act as if you belong here?"

He frowned, still clasping her hand as they continued to dance. She faltered for a moment, her mind overriding her body, but soon fell in to step.

"I dare easily. Our world has just begun. Again."

Dedicated to:

Roger, who taught me that real life does have a happy ending. Also to: Mark, Jeannie and baby J.T. A special thanks is sent to our parents, who supported me even when it wasn't convenient, and Mary Adamski, my real life cheerleader.

Chapter One

Isla de San Miguel

Silently, Roberto San Miguel swept past the untended, fragrant honeysuckle and mandevilla vines that criss-crossed over the old, crumbling stone walls of the Hernandez *castillo*. Age and lack of interest had taken its toll on the once magnificent structure. The lamps that should have burned brightly at the

entrance were dark, like the two men's hearts Roberto sought within these walls.

Almost invisible in the shadows, a dark-skinned islander stood on guard outside the doorway. Roberto soundlessly edged behind him and twisted the man's neck until he heard it crack. He held the body as it slithered to the ground, then slipped it into the bushes, until not even the man's shoes were visible. Remorse for the islander's death flickered as a flame of a candle, then disappeared, snuffed out by the breeze. The guard had been a part of Eduardo's reign of terror against the residents of *Isla de San Miguel*, those whom Roberto had pledged to protect.

Once, there had been tapestries covering the inner hallways, but now they were gone. The Hernandez family had paid a high price for the war they continued to wage against Roberto San Miguel, the last of the San Miguel lineage. Tonight, if God was with him, Roberto would end this outrage.

Stealthily, he made his way past the various ornate, closed doors toward the Great Hall. A fire crackled within the hearth and lit the large room. The Great Hall was empty except for the guard at the entrance and the Hernandez brothers warming their bodies with the flames, and their gullets with wine. The guard leaned forward, as if to capture some of the heat and warm himself from the whispers of breeze coming through the cracks in the aged walls. In a single movement, Roberto clamped his hand over the sentinel's mouth and slid his blade into the man's back. No sound came forth to alert the Hernandez brothers to Roberto's presence, or to the loss of their last watchman. Roberto carried the man's body to a nearby room and dropped it inside.

Boldly, Roberto marched into the Great Hall. His lips curled as two gasps solidified into one. Stefano Hernandez, the younger brother, rose quickly and his chair crashed behind him.

"Sit, my brother," Eduardo Hernandez ordered. He calmly cracked a walnut in one hand and popped the tasty meat into his mouth with the other. "As I expected, our enemy has delivered himself to our hands. It is only a matter of time before our men return."

"But the guards—" Stefano's voice cracked. Eduardo's stare was as deadly as steel, and had Stefano moving to follow his elder brother's command.

"Dead," Roberto said. He walked closer, confidence and adrenaline racing through his veins. "As you will be before the end of this night."

He glanced around the room alert to every action the brothers took. He knew the moment Eduardo withdrew a pistol from his holster and when Stefano had seated himself again. "Your walls are bare, Hernandez. A pity you've had to sell your heirlooms and allowed the *castillo* to fall into disrepair."

"The price of taking back my island," Eduardo spat. He moved quickly. Roberto was faster. By the time Eduardo held his pistol on Roberto's prior location, Roberto stood behind Stefano, his blade to the young man's throat. Unbidden knowledge flooded his brain and he sensed the innocence within the flesh. The Hernandez name branded the boy, but it had not yet tainted his heart.

"Spare the boy, Eduardo," Roberto said. "I have no wish to take his life, he is just another pawn in your foolish game. You are the one I have come for. *Isla de San Miguel* is not yours to take. You want me and I'm here. Leave those who are innocent out of this."

"And what of the stolen jewels, Roberto? Did you bring them? Are they not mine to seek? Do you hold them in your hands at night, caressing them as you would a woman? I can tell from your face that you have not found this nameless soul mate you seek."

Roberto ignored the ache inside and watched his enemy's fingertip, as it lingered near the trigger.

Reflections of light flickered in Eduardo's eyes, as he glanced toward the entrance of the hall.

Roberto didn't need to look. He had heard the stomping, announcing the arrival of Eduardo's private army. Time was running out. "You speak of mysteries buried under a century of dust," he said. "What of your brother's life?"

"Kill him," Eduardo said, without a trace of regret. "You will follow him shortly."

"No!" Stefano shrieked. He shook beneath Roberto's grip.

Despite his animosity toward the remaining Hernandez family, Roberto could not bring himself to kill this frightened teenager. Unlike Hernandez, he could not kill an innocent. But perhaps he could make Eduardo believe the young man was dead?

Lightly, his knife sliced into Stefano's skin, enough to draw a convincing amount of blood. There was a tiny gasp, then nothing, as he pinched the pressure point in the middle of Stefano's shoulder joint. *Daimon* was a move that could render death or temporary paralysis. Unconscious, the boy slid from the seat and fell to the floor.

Roberto dodged and rolled, narrowly escaping the bullet that whizzed past his right ear. A second blast followed, scant inches from his left shoulder, scattering bits of stone and dust on his clothing. Again, he rolled, pulling out his pistol and aiming it between Eduardo's eyes.

"It seems we may both follow Stefano this evening," Roberto said. "And *Isla de San Miguel* passes to a new leader."

"Yes!" Eduardo's eyes lit with madness as he returned Roberto's stare. Both of them ignored the startled exclamations of the soldiers behind them. "I will lead, as it should be!"

Eduardo called out to his men, telling them to shoot to kill. But none answered. New sounds filled the air as more men piled into the room from the opposite entry. Roberto's troops had arrived. Distracted by the chaos behind him, Eduardo turned slightly as the two small armies met each other in the middle of the room. Roberto fired, a second too late and inches short of his mark. Blood splattered, then poured from the side of Eduardo's head, but Roberto knew it was a flesh wound. Eduardo would survive.

Roberto dodged another bullet, which shattered another piece of stone in the wall, then took aim again. As one furious battle took place under the remnants of a crystal chandelier, a second one continued near the hearth, circling decrepit chairs and Eduardo's seemingly dead brother. The smell of sulphur burned his nostrils as he took another shot. Blood poured from Eduardo's shoulder and he cried out in agony.

Suddenly, events turned, as if a silent call for retreat had been given. Roberto watched in frustration as several of Eduardo's men circled their injured leader and swept him from the hall. Others from his ranks escaped as they could, until Roberto's troops held the remaining captives at gunpoint.

"Take them out of here and lock them up," Roberto ordered. A parade of militants marched from the Great Hall, the greater number in San Miguel colors of red and gold. The remainder wore khaki pants and shirts from the island. Roberto sighed as they left the room. Those in Hernandez's army were desperate men, most of them forced to perform traitorous acts by threats to their families. It was a shame that a deranged fool had such power.

"Do we go after Eduardo?" Raul asked. His first officer was poised for action; his long legs spread, and ready to jump at his leader's command.

"No," Roberto answered. "They will head for the mangroves." Once within the dense trees, men could

disappear and be hidden for days. Eduardo's loyal followers had escaped. "Take care of the prisoners," he ordered. "See that they are fed and their families are notified."

Raul instantly disappeared, and another officer stepped out of the shadows. Roberto had known he was there, waiting until everyone else had gone.

"Juan," Roberto called out. Though the man wore the uniform of Hernandez's army, Roberto knew him as a loyal friend. "Patch the boy's neck and take him to the caves. Stay with him. Tell no one and I will send for you when it's safe."

As Juan carried out his orders, Roberto left the Hernandez *castillo*.

Hours later, Roberto's heart lifted as he neared the entrance to the San Miguel *castillo*. Home. He had spent most of the remaining night consoling the two families whose homes had been lost to Eduardo's terrorist attacks. Though he had offered sanctuary within the San Miguel *castillo*, each family had chosen to take refuge with their relatives.

The image of his home lit by the full moon rejuvenated him. Window boxes, overflowing with vibrant colors and fragrant blossoms, stood guard at every window. The clean, tan mortar walls proudly proclaimed the San Miguel heritage. A rose garden, where his mother had been easily found every evening, was still in perfect condition years after her death.

Weariness fell from him as Roberto walked through the hallway, so different and full of life compared to the halls he'd left earlier at the Hernandez *castillo*. In his private study, anticipation and frustration set in.

Roberto paced the room, his mind focused on the woman who plagued his thoughts. His soul mate. When would she surface? When would his destiny be fulfilled and his heart become whole? All of his life he had been aware of her presence, aware she was a part of him. Her image was always there, drifting about in his spirit, keeping loneliness at bay. True, he did not know her name, but in his mind he had seen her face, had known every curve of her figure, had seen her tremble at his touch. Consistent with the thought, he felt his limbs tighten as his temperature rose with anticipation. She would be found and he would have her.

"Wearing out a hole in the carpet will not bring her to you any faster, *Amigo*." Daniel's entrance into the library had been quiet and unannounced, yet Roberto had instantly known he was there.

"Perhaps not," Roberto admitted. He looked up once he had his emotions under control and gazed directly into the blue eyes of his friend. "But it is more comforting than brooding in an empty bed."

The twist of Daniel's mouth revealed his empathy for his former college roommate. "So, is there any reason you're doing your best to walk the threads off this carpet? Besides the usual, of course." The overhead lights shone on his curly red hair and lines creased Daniel's freckled forehead as the next question formed. "Better yet, care to explain the blood you're wearing?"

"Not mine," Roberto said grimly. "Stefano Hernandez is dead."

Daniel stiffened. "Stefano, huh? By you? I rather expected you'd take matters into your own hands."

Roberto nodded, refusing to meet Daniel's gaze. Lying to his best friend made him extremely uncomfortable, but it was a necessary evil. No one could know Stefano lived.

"And Eduardo? Is this rebellion over?" Daniel sank into the large leather couch and stared intensely at Roberto.

"He is injured, but he will live."

"You've just changed his focus," Daniel said. The crease in his forehead looked as if it intended to take up permanent residence.

"My people cannot continue to bear the burden of Eduardo's foolishness," Roberto answered. He moved to the mahogany desk and perched on its edge. Tired of dealing with matters of state, he had more personal matters in mind. The edges of his mouth curved as he brought a familiar image into focus.

"You're thinking about her again," Daniel murmured, "your mystery woman."

The freckle-faced redhead was more perceptive than most. Roberto had felt a kinship with Daniel the first day they'd met and their relationship had deepened with time. Now, Roberto often wondered what life would be like without Daniel's easy-smile and quick wit. Surely it would be much harder without the levity he brought to every situation.

"I feel her presence."

Roberto San Miguel had always been able to sense when his life or the life of his soul mate was about to change. He was gifted, having been born under a Thunder moon, the island name for the second full moon in July. Those born under a Thunder Moon were believed to be souls reincarnated, returning to complete unfinished business, and reunite with mates lost in previous lives. As leader of *Isla de San Miguel*, he had unfinished business with Eduardo Hernandez. As a man, he longed for her—the other half of his soul. In visions, he'd watched her grow from a child to a beautiful woman, and he knew their paths would cross soon. Very soon.

"It is as if we are nearing a turning point," Roberto said.

Daniel shifted in his seat to focus more clearly on Roberto. "This is an interesting turn of events." His voice bore a mixture of awe and suspicion. "You know I've always had a question about this ... this..."

"This what?"

"This belief of yours," Daniel said, his head shaking slowly with the words. "The history of your family and your belief that the past will be replayed. It just sounds like too much hocus-pocus."

"Truth is always stranger than fiction."

"Aw, don't go all mystical on me," Daniel teased. "You've got that look again. The mysterious smile, the spooky expression a wizard wears. As if you know the particular second the Moon is in orbit and hovers over Pokipsi, Kansas. I don't know which is worse, the way you blink into the 'all-knowing-psychic' or the way you match the mood of this room."

Roberto watched Daniel's gaze wander about the room, his eyes widening at every dark corner. Roberto had done the same thing himself, many times over. As a child he'd imagined seeing light glint off the silver armor of a knight waiting in the shadows. The shiny skeleton had frightened him to the core. He'd refused to come into the room after dark. Now, he found comfort in the brooding intensity of the room.

Roberto's glance lit on the dark curtains. A few feet further stood an antique chair recently recovered. It had been in the library for ten generations. A musty odor lingered in the air. The room surrounding him had the look and feel of eternity, as if time were of no importance. But time was running out.

"Sometimes I look at you," Daniel said, "leaning against that desk and wonder if I've just encountered a pirate or a magician. Should I run or will I be zapped into a toad before I take the first step? Then you

grin, just like you're doing now, and I remember the weird guy I bunked with at UCLA. The one who liked fencing, meditation and carried a 4.0 average without cracking a book. I should be the one with the earring." The cocky grin that followed was typical Daniel.

"Are you trying to change the subject?"

"Busted. But what if it's not truth, Roberto? Have you thought of that? What if it's wishful thinking on your part and not a past life? What if this wonder woman doesn't exist?"

"And if she does?" Roberto asked.

Daniel's pained sigh echoed through the room. "I hope she does, for your sake. At least this stuff with Hernandez would be over and you could relax a little. On the other hand..."

"She exists, my friend. A benevolent God such as our own would not have given me her vision since childhood only to disappoint me."

As always, Roberto's gaze narrowed to the shine of the various knives displayed on a nearby wall. One in particular stood out. The ruby in its handle burned into his soul every time he saw it. It was the knife Lupita had been given, on the night she'd fled from the island. The same night Rafael San Miguel had died. Roberto's persistence had led to finding the weapon. He'd hoped it would lead to her, the woman whose face was nestled in the deepest part of his heart. Where was she? He needed her. Roberto looked away, refusing to allow Daniel to see his frustration.

"Sometimes I worry, Roberto. You've changed since college. This obsession..." A lengthy silence fell, filled in by the quiet creaks of an aged dwelling shifting on its foundation. "You know I wish the best for you."

"And I for you, *compadre*. Rest assured, the time is near. We are at..." Roberto let his words drift, his mind far beyond the walls of the room that confined them. His lips curled as he saw what he was searching for. "Yes, we are definitely at a turning point. It will be very soon now," he said. "Come, Daniel. Let us drink a toast to my new bride. I will find her this trip, I am certain."

Chapter Two

Tampa, Florida

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," Elizabeth said. She stepped awkwardly, her thoughts elsewhere as they walked toward the tattoo parlor.

"Come on, scaredy cat," Lisa teased. She laughed; a full, throaty laugh that held nothing back. "Live dangerously for once in your life. God, you look just like a virgin being delivered to the volcano. Get with the program. We sacrifice you next week."

Lisa was decked out in a fluorescent yellow breast-hugging shirt that brought out every highlight in her flaming red hair. Elizabeth still wore her pumps and typical white blouse with a starched blue skirt, her nearly black hair pinned up in a schoolmarm's bun. There was no doubt in her mind that she looked as out of place as a skinhead on Wall Street.

"I can't believe you talked me into this," Elizabeth protested loudly.

"Who talked who into this?" Lisa smiled. "I may have planted the seed, but you're the one who drew your own tattoo. Let me see that again."

Elizabeth sighed heavily. Lisa was right. She had merely prompted Elizabeth's thoughts of a tattoo, weeks earlier with a carefree and misplaced dare.

"Just once I'd like to see you do something out of character for you, step beyond the lines. Something silly or daring, like wear a dress as sexy as your underwear or get a tattoo. Yeah, I could just see you now daring to do the unthinkable. Elizabeth Sanderson with a tattoo. What a lark."

Those few small words had started what had become a crazy obsession. And it *was* crazy. It was as if some invisible force had driven her to this point, pushing her forward and shaking out the design from childhood dreams. Perhaps what Lisa had said for years was coming true, the "other woman" inside of her was emerging. Elizabeth wasn't certain she wanted to meet this newer version of herself.

Lisa took the picture, laughing gleefully at Elizabeth's glare, and tucked it in the pocket of her bright neon shirt. "Now you can't mysteriously lose it before you get inside," the redhead taunted gaily. "Let's go."

"I'm not sure this is such a good idea." The words might as well have been etched on Elizabeth's forehead; she'd been saying them for so many weeks. Yet there was a lingering voice in the back of her mind, it whispered and taunted her, begged her to take a chance—to let go and let life happen.

"I mean, this is permanent," Elizabeth continued, "I'll see it every day of my life. What if I hate it once he's finished?"

"Then you'll have a memory of the one and only time you threw caution to the wind. The ever-sensible Elizabeth Sanderson will have done one insane and illogical thing during her entire life. Better a tattoo than something else more devastating. Besides, who knows? This could change your life forever. Alter your safe and boring existence."

From anyone else, this description of her life would have ticked off Elizabeth. As it was, she was certainly not pleased. But Lisa always said what she thought regardless of the consequences. So what if it was true? Elizabeth would rather be bored than out of control and up to her neck in disaster.

A little more pushing and pulling and they were through the door and facing the counter. Lisa was still smiling, Elizabeth noticed irritably. They had been there before when the idea was only in abstract form. At least it was one of the less seedy establishments in the Tampa area. It was cleaner than most and had less blinking lights outside, blazing the word TATTOO.

Elizabeth looked around the room once more, taking in the assortment of pictures along the walls. Little markings beside each drawing showed the price for each, the sizes and nature of each drawing varying from the skull and crossbones to the tasteful Native American renderings and then to the mystical imagery of unicorns and beautiful maidens. Everything in the place fascinated her, as if she were on the outside looking in at another way of life.

Did the man behind the counter have to stare so absurdly? Was it so obvious she was a fish out of water or had he never seen a third grade school teacher before? Probably not in this environment.

Lisa took over the situation, much like she always did, talking to the artist and showing him the picture. Another odd look passed from the artist to her, this one even more speculative.

"You drew this?" The overweight and balding man looked bewildered at the prospect.

"Yes," Elizabeth answered. She was faintly perturbed at his disbelief. Her artwork could easily compete with the images covering his walls.

"Interesting. Is it a crest or something?" he asked, looking back at the drawing.

Elizabeth felt a shock wave, clear to her toes. Of course! Why hadn't she thought of that—a family crest. A leafy vine framed the inner image of a lion rising from a fire and jumping forward. If a person looked deeper, they'd notice there was another smaller detail, the head of a lioness within the chest of the leaping lion. The pieces fit when she considered how the images had shown themselves during various stages of her life. Somehow, the idea gave her more courage.

"I—I hadn't thought so." She caught herself and added more 'umph' to her voice. *Be strong, be courageous*. She didn't feel either one. Jeez, this new Elizabeth Sanderson was going to need a lot of work. "It's just a picture."

"It's good," he complimented her. "Can I keep the drawing afterward? I think I know of a few people who would be interested in it."

"No." *Good grief, had she just shouted?* Why? Where did the sudden fear and anxiety come from? "No," Elizabeth repeated, this time calmly. "It's personal."

The man shrugged as if it were no concern of his and relief flooded her body. She ignored the perplexed look Lisa shot in her direction. As a childhood friend, Lisa knew Elizabeth was a "transient," a foster child with no history beyond what was created after the age of four.

She was only supposed to be with her foster parents for a few months, but she'd stayed to adulthood. Lisa could never understand the feelings of worthlessness that overtook Elizabeth in the dark of night.

She had been abandoned by her flesh and blood. Why shouldn't she claim this odd little drawing as a personal family crest? Elizabeth smiled at the thought. It would be hers. She would have something that was hers alone, an intimate connection to her unknown past. Odd to think it still mattered. Lisa had questioned the meaning of the picture, but Elizabeth never explained how the image came to her. How could she explain it when she didn't understand it herself? Maybe that was why this insane idea had taken the form of an obsession? She was too deep inside her thoughts to consider arguing as Lisa pulled her along behind the counter to a nearby table and chair.

Her confidence took a nosedive at the sight of the metal table, covered by a thin mattress, and paper, which rolled out from a spool in the back. It looked like a doctor's examining room. A magnetic strip held ominous looking tools in place. The only thing Elizabeth could pull comfort from was the tiny bucket, similar to those used in hospitals for the disposal of used needles.

"Where ya want it?" the balding man asked.

Elizabeth felt the question bounce off of her and looked once more at the artist. He had tattoos all down his arms, a snake wrapped around a knife, the often laughed about 'mother', and a hint of a suggestive image peeked out from underneath his tee shirt.

"I don't know. I hadn't thought of that," Elizabeth answered.

The man looked her over carefully. The way he surveyed her made her nervous. She chewed her fingernails, moving her weight from one foot to the other while she tried to consider her options.

"You're not the type to want this real visible," he said. "I bet you're even a Sunday School teacher. You won't want this someplace where someone will see it."

He made the comment sound like a sneer. Jeez, it had been years since she'd taught Sunday School. Elizabeth gave him her best glare through her clear glasses. Rebellion flared and she noticed he took a

step backward. The new Elizabeth took over and it felt wonderful!

This was her tattoo. Her life. "My hip," she replied. *Ha, old man. Deal with that!* She didn't miss the shocked look Lisa threw in her direction. The other woman's surprise was quickly hidden by a wink that said *'go for it'*.

"Have your friend help you move your clothes around and then throw this over the rest of you," he said. He tossed her a light, and surprisingly clean, blanket. "For modesty," he added with a knowing wink. "Don't show me anything you don't want me to see."

Fear snaked its way back into her thoughts. That meant all of her body as far as she was concerned. She breathed a sigh of relief as the man left the room. *Oh, God. Am I really going to do this?* She unzipped her skirt and attempted to pull it down, ignoring Lisa's chuckle when this proved impossible. Elizabeth had always had a tiny waist and larger hips, which made purchases from the rack impossible. "Oh, hush," she ordered with a glare. "So I'm not Miss Tiny Hips like some people I know."

"Can I help now?" Lisa asked innocently.

Elizabeth nodded and within seconds, she'd been shoved onto the table, her skirt pushed up to her waist. A small blanket, which should have given Elizabeth a measure of dignity, did little to soothe her discomfort. She cast wary glances in the direction the shop owner had gone. "What have I gotten myself into?"

"Life," Lisa said with a laugh. "Which hip? Right or left?"

More decisions. "I don't know," Elizabeth said. She looked helplessly at her friend then realized she'd better make the decision. Fast. Or Lisa would make the decision for her. Like the time Lisa had convinced her to experiment with makeup and Elizabeth came out looking like a harlot. Or the time when Lisa led them both into the boy's bathroom after Elizabeth had wondered aloud about urinals.

Lisa laughed again. Either she was giggling at Elizabeth's pleas or the fact Elizabeth was glued to the table. Already, her fingers had wound themselves around the sides and held on tight.

"Too late, Sister," Lisa said. "You surprised me when you would even consider it, but I'm convinced it's right, especially since you created the artwork."

At the reminder, Elizabeth felt a strange sense of peace. As if she was turning a corner she'd always known she would reach. *Oh, God. Was this why insane people always smile?*

"Okay," the man said, returning to the table. He wore a brief expression of shock then he coughed. Loudly.

Elizabeth groaned upon seeing the small exposure of silk and lace peeking out from under the blanket. Her garter belt and panties. For heaven's sake, why had she worn red today? She could feel her face burn as she quickly adjusted the blanket.

"No backing out now. Trust me," he added with a wink.

"Famous last words." She gave a loud groan then shut her eyes. Her fingers held on to the table as she felt the first prick of his needle into her skin. *No backing out now...*

Chapter Three

Alone in her bedroom, Elizabeth dreamed.

He was back. Waking from her light sleep, Elizabeth could feel his presence in the room. She fought the strange mixture of desire and fear at knowing he was near. Already, his masculine scent mingled with his cologne and called out to her silently. She didn't wait for her eyes to adjust to the light. Her senses on alert, she could hear the door shut behind him, his footsteps as he came nearer to the bed. He was so close! She had to escape before her traitorous body could react to him.

Once, she'd been called a sandpiper. It was an accurate description. She was very much like the tiny bird that skirts hazardous waves along the beach. Elizabeth felt tiny and vulnerable right now. She was drawn to this man whose name was a mystery, yet frightened by him.

Elizabeth was frightened by the raw power he exuded, his ability to reach that secret place inside of her. He could not have her. She could not let him take her, or as the bird with the sea, she'd be carried away and lost forever. Never to be free, always at someone else's mercy.

He moved with the ease of a cat. The only sound she heard was the rustle of his pant legs rubbing against each other and the lightest of footsteps—and her heartbeat pounding loudly in her chest. She kept a tight rein on her fear as she held her breath. If she moved her hand a little lower, she could grab a portion of the satin sheet to move it out of her way.

"I know you are not asleep, Elizabeth," he whispered in the darkness. His voice intoxicated her, the sultry drawl soaked into her senses like warm brandy.

She froze at the sound, a moment's hesitation that seemed to last a lifetime. 'Go,' she heard her mind speak. 'Run before he catches you. Before you give in.' She yanked aside the bed sheets with the speed of a rabbit intent on evading a hawk, and attempted to jump from the bed.

But he was faster. His hand grabbed her arm, pulling her backward to the bed into a tangle of smooth, satin sheets. She fell with a lurch, but her mysterious visitor caught her and softened the blow before she reached the bed.

"You move swiftly, Querida. But not swift enough." His hand held her under him as he positioned his leg over hers, holding her captive under his weight.

Elizabeth gasped at the feel of his warm breath against her neck. She refused to look at him, searching her mind for a way to break free. Her arm tingled where he held her, her legs and the remainder of her body responded to the heat of his form against hers. She moved slowly under him, an unintentional shift of position, which allowed him to align himself more closely against her softness.

Desire flared. Lust. She moaned in spite of herself. Why this man? Couldn't he see that she was out of her element? She didn't want passion. She wanted control. Or did she? Yes, control! Passion was a tidal wave that could threaten her very existence. It would weaken her and she'd give up everything she'd worked too hard to gain. She was as trapped as a doe caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, not just to his act of captivity but to his sensual presence above her.

"You can scream if you like," he said. She was tempted. But would it have been from fear or her own frustrations?

"My man at the door will not come in."

Elizabeth had known the attempt would be futile. There would be no escape from him or the dangerous feelings he evoked with a touch, a soft whisper. Frustration grew. Was she to live her entire life alone? Could she give in just once and not lose her right to choose?

"Do I frighten you?" he asked. His fingers pulled her chin, turning her head to face him.

"Yes."

He frightened her and so much more. Secret desires arose from within at the question. Was it wrong to want him to take her and eliminate the decision so she would not suffer pangs of regret in daylight? Was it wrong to yearn, to allow the passions he wrought in her to roam where they would? She longed to belong to him, yet hoped there would be enough left of herself to pull together after he was sated. Elizabeth could only hope he would not be able to see the secrets she hid deeply within her soul.

She watched his dark eyes glisten with amusement in the faint light of the room. She was quickly adjusting to the darkness. Already, she could see the outline of his face, the bronze hue of his skin contrasting with even darker brows, one raised in question. His coal black hair was long and he seemed surrounded by an otherworldly aura. Yet he was human and oh, so male. His small hoop earring twinkled and teased her senses.

"Surely you knew I would come for you?"

Elizabeth turned her head away, attempting to shut out the question. He was too near; his intensity and the passion burning in his darkened eyes were too much for her to bear.

"Look at me, Querida." His voice rose as he pulled her back to face him.

Elizabeth obeyed against her will. She opened her eyes to stare into the fathomless depths of his. Her own passions stirred once more. Anticipation danced under her skin.

"Why do you refuse to accept that you are mine? You have always been. I had merely to find you again."

She couldn't respond. If the truth were known, she had no answer for his question. He was right—she was his. He spoke of a past together, but it was impossible. Wasn't it? Elizabeth had sensed a connection to this man from the first moment she'd seen him. But did she belong to him or with him? He declared possession with his words, his touch. No! She would not be a possession! She would not give away her priceless control—not to any man or to destiny.

"A beautiful gown," he said.

His voice seemed to come from far away in her mind even though he was so near. She shivered and felt his fingers at the tie on the front of the black silk gown. The ribbons slipped free at his slight pull. The tic in his jaw gave witness to the struggle he waged for control as he looked down, then his gaze returned to her face once more. Her precious control weakened. Heat built within her body, no longer a response to the fear of his presence, but something deeper. A darker force within her. Passion.

"I bought this gown months ago, knowing I would find you soon. I knew I would see you in it, in this bed. My bed."

Elizabeth shivered in response to his words, her fears regaining strength. He was winning this battle of wills. He had predicted they would be together? No, he couldn't have. Could he?

"The lace is soft, no?" She felt his fingers touch the lace at her collarbone, stroking it with a lover's touch and slowly descending lower. Her eyelids closed, shutting out all but the feel of his caress, the scent of his cologne and the heat of his body on hers. The gentleness of his touch on her gown and the fever he caused within her at the action was too much for her. Her fingers clenched around the soft satin underneath her to prevent her from reaching for him.

“Open your eyes, Elizabeth,” he commanded for a second time. “I need you.”

She had no choice but to obey, she'd known of his need before he spoke of it. She also knew she needed him. But was she responding to his dictates or something else? Was it a simple matter of lust or did he truly need her? She shivered at the desire she saw blazing like a fire in his eyes.

“Yes, that is the way,” he praised. His fingers continued to stroke the material. His fingertip grazed her skin and her breath caught in a sudden gasp. She could see his smile, his enjoyment of her reaction.

She believed he could see directly into her soul and view the forces at work between her physical and emotional natures. He could see her war between wanting his touch and wondering if she was strong enough to survive. No other man had pursued her, pushed her to the point where she wanted to...

“Do I still frighten you, Querida?” His smile remained intact as though he knew the answer. It was as if he knew fear had not been the victor in her private war, he'd known when she'd chosen to accept him. She had agreed to accept her destiny. “Or do you want my touch?” He chuckled when Elizabeth gasped again, his finger making a trail to her breast. Still covered by the material, it pebbled in response to the electric shocks she felt as he stroked her.

She moaned involuntarily as he stretched forth his fingers and cupped her breast, kneading it softly and feeling its fullness in his hand. Of its own volition, her body arched to meet his hand and she trembled to the effect he was having lower in her body. Her eyes shut again, choosing to block away any interference to her enjoyment of his touch.

“Let me see you,” he whispered as he kissed her cheek and eyelid.

Elizabeth looked up to face him again, absorbing the features of his face into her mind as her skin absorbed the warmth of his. He deftly moved the lace aside to slide his fingers underneath and return to her breast. He nursed her fever with his touch for several moments, then moved the remainder of the gown aside so he could look at her.

“Beautiful,” he proclaimed only seconds before his mouth took the place where his hand had been and she arched off the bed. She felt his arousal at her hip and knew she was having the same effect on him that he was causing to her. It was a heady thought. Her free arm whispered lightly against his shoulder and Elizabeth felt the heat of his skin against her own. There was no surprise at touching bare skin. She'd known his intentions when she'd sensed him in the room.

“You are so responsive, Elizabeth. I knew it would be so with us.”

He would kiss her now. Her fear returned, yet she did not move away. His head lowered toward her. He would kiss her and she would lose. She would drown like the sandpiper caught in the sea and she would lose—herself, her life, her freedom of choice. Everything would be his and she would belong to him forever. His will would overtake her own and she was allowing it to happen. As his mouth claimed hers, she felt herself falling, the darkness coming over her as water might come over the land, too deep for her to push herself up to breathe.

* * * *

Elizabeth woke with a stifled scream, the mental images having their usual effects on her senses. Sweat glistened on her skin, causing a chill from the air-conditioned breeze. She moaned in frustration and then buried her head into the pillow, attempting to stifle the trembling within.

The dreams were getting worse, more sensual in nature and much more detailed. They were also more frequent. This was the third night in a row she had seen these visions, felt these emotions. For the past

few months, she had been receiving foggy images, vague exposures like random pictures on a roll of film. This last dream was much more clear than she liked.

Why is this happening? What does it mean? She sat up and stared down at her pillow as if it knew all the answers. Every fantasy included the same man, yet she had never seen him, never met him before. He was Latin. There was no doubt of that from his looks to the accent of his words, the way he always called her "*Querida*." But Elizabeth did not know any Latin men. She'd had some Hispanic students over the years, but she'd always found herself dealing with the mothers. Her only known exposure to the language had been a Spanish class in the seventh grade. Perhaps she was creating a Latin lover in her dreams because it was safer. At least this way it wasn't someone she knew that appeared in her fantasies. She couldn't imagine the horror of facing someone the next day after dreaming about him the prior night.

"Hormones," she declared with a moan. She was having a hormonal rush—that had to be it. Her libido was playing havoc when she gave it free reign, in her sleep. That was the only place where she allowed her passions to exist at all. Some day the right man might come along and when he did, she supposed she would allow that side of herself to exist. But until then it would stay properly locked up, just the way she liked it.

Too much hunger for the wrong things could ruin a person. Her friend Lisa was a prime example. On her third divorce, Lisa would never find the Mr. Right she was seeking. She'd certainly found and married three Mr. Wrongs. Still, she dove from bed to bed. Elizabeth never saw the point in Lisa's search and failures. At least her best friend's search would be put on indefinite hold next week, she thought. Lisa was getting married on the following Saturday—again—to her fourth Mr. Wrong.

In her own mind, Elizabeth considered that Lisa had never gotten over her first love and the passion of her life. Daniel Mabry. Everyone had expected Lisa to marry him after high school. But they didn't and Lisa had never said why. It was one of the few secrets she'd ever known Lisa to keep. Look at where all that love and passion had left her. Lisa's spirit seemed owned by one man, yet her body and mind searched for another to replace him.

"Enough." Elizabeth's fist hit the pillow and caused another dent. "Go to the bathroom, get a glass of water and shake this off. Damn dreams. Go back to sleep," she commanded her body and mind. "And be grateful it's Saturday."

At least she wasn't losing sleep on a work day, she thought and then reminded herself this was Summer. Three weeks left before school started again. "And all the little beasties come back." She chuckled as she made her way to the bathroom, not bothering to turn on the light as she went in. The nightlight in the room gave enough of a glow for her to see where she was going.

She was still unnerved by the dream when she finished and started to her bedroom. Nah. She wasn't going to sleep any time soon and it was a long time until morning. Sleeping aids were out of the question. They would keep her drowsy for half of the next day. Instead, she poured a glass of wine and pulled a magazine from the drawer of the side table in the living room.

"Costa Rica," she read on the cover of the travel magazine and made a connection between the publication and her dream. "Latin country. Latin lover. That's probably where I'm getting this from."

She tossed the journal aside in favor of another one, more subdued. "Computer supplies and software. Nice bedside reading." She flipped open the cover and took a sip of her wine. The magazine and the wine were sufficient to make her drowsy and she was able to sleep the remainder of the night. She found the respite she'd been searching for, but it was short lived. In spite of her efforts to the contrary, the dream came back, the following night and the next few nights after that.

"Bachelorette parties should be outlawed," Elizabeth grouched, watching the group of four schoolteachers giggle over something silly. But here she was, trying to be invisible while salivating over the smell of fresh bread and Mexican food.

"Smile," Lisa whispered, giving Elizabeth a nudge with her elbow. "You won't die from the food or the sight of hard bodies and wet boxers. Now, Sue, here, could make you wish you were dead." Lisa snickered and winked at Elizabeth before she turned back to the rest of the group.

Following the waitress to the table, Sue Johnson announced, "I'm glad we made reservations."

Sue acted as if she was Lisa's best friend. *Not that I wanted to be the leader in tonight's program.* Elizabeth and Lisa exchanged a knowing look.

"I'm sorry, Bethi. She's making this night miserable already. I can't believe I asked her to come along," Lisa whispered.

"What else could you do?" Elizabeth whispered back. "Burn her and you'll be in the doghouse with Principal Davies. He can't see beyond his nose."

"Yeah, unless she's standing near him. Then you can hear him panting for miles." Lisa snickered, then straightened as Sue stopped, turned around and stared haughtily at them.

"Are you two coming or not?" Sue asked. The barbed glare she shot Elizabeth should have drawn blood.

"You'd swear I was the one who put the obscene photo of her and Principal Davies on the bulletin board," Elizabeth muttered under her breath. "When we all know..."

"Who? Moi?" Lisa looked as innocent as a nun on the Sabbath.

Sue turned around again. "Well, *are* you coming or not?"

"Absolutely," Elizabeth said, sarcasm oozing within every syllable. "I wouldn't miss this for the world." She coughed, but it didn't cover the sound of Lisa's giggle.

A delicious scent filled the air. Spicy odors of chili, together with freshly baked breads and a soft aroma of chicken mingled in the breeze. Walking past the various tables and booths, she could also smell the mixture of various colognes and aftershave worn by the patrons. The restaurant was crowded, which was typical for a Friday.

Everyone in Tampa seemed to go out on Friday nights. They had arrived late, thanks again to Lisa who was notorious for being late while Elizabeth was normally prompt or early. The two friends were a regular odd couple.

Another Latin influence to keep me up at nights, Elizabeth thought with a groan. Orders placed, their waiter set glasses of rich, red Sangria around the table.

"Hey, she drinks," Sue commented dryly to the rest of the group as Elizabeth sipped from her glass. "I didn't know our little sparrow drank anything but bottled water."

Was there more venom in Sue's tone than normal? Apparently, Lisa had noticed it as well. Elizabeth tried to get Lisa's attention to let the comment slide; she was used to it.

"There's a lot more to Elizabeth than meets the eye," Lisa countered angrily. She gave Sue a sharp and

corrective glare. Elizabeth was not certain she appreciated the vote of confidence. It only served to spur some of the others on. Choosing to focus on the ambience of the restaurant, she ignored the round of criticism and jokes at her expense.

The Sangria cooled her throat as it went down. It would go well with the meal she had ordered, chicken and yellow rice. She looked around, in appreciation for her surroundings, as she took another sip.

Conversation went on around her as the women debated the issue of a red negligee for the wedding night, versus white or black, for a couple that had already been sleeping together. Elizabeth wisely chose to stay out of the debate. What did she know about the subject anyway?

The brass pots displayed along the walls were a nice touch and garlands of ivy separated each booth. A realist to the end, Elizabeth felt empathy for the person responsible for polishing the pots. Multi-colored rugs also decorated the walls, creating a festive appearance.

She chanced to look at some of the patrons at neighboring tables and then turned back to her friends. Seconds later, there was a burning sensation in her side, as though she was being watched, which caused her to turn away from them once more. It seemed to center at her tattoo and crept upward to her face. She could feel heat travel the same path and couldn't help but wonder what could cause such a reaction. She turned, holding her fork in her hand, not really noticing she still held it.

She moved slightly in her seat in the direction of the sensation. Shock waves burst through her as she caught the eyes of another patron.

Chapter Four

"Querida." His lips never moved, but the single word echoed through Elizabeth's brain and she froze.

The voice was the same as in her dreams, a cultured, sultry invitation to dance with the devil.

Oh, God. It's him. The fork fell from her hand, caught the edge of her plate and flicked beyond her view, clattering the whole way. She caught her wineglass before it dropped to its side. Had she heard what she thought she had?

"Querida, I have found you."

His words rang in her ears, whispered in her mind. This couldn't be happening. She clamped her hands over her ears, trying to drown it out. She'd lost it, she really had.

"You can't shut me out."

Lisa and the others turned to look at her as though she had screamed. Perhaps she had? She thought the whole restaurant had heard the noise since she appeared to be the focus of attention for a brief second and then the other patrons returned to their meals.

"Elizabeth." Lisa's voice sounded far away. "What's with the ear thing? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"What?" *Well, duh. Take your hands from your ears and you could hear, dummy.* Slowly, she listened to her own voice of reason. "Oh, nothing," she answered casually, too casually, as she bent to pick up her fork from the floor.

"She's finally done it," Sue exclaimed, "crossed over to the Twilight Zone. Must be all those books she reads. We all knew it had to happen sooner or later."

Elizabeth listened to Sue's cackle, actually grateful for the woman's distraction. She could deal with sarcasm and putdowns. What she couldn't deal with, were voices in her head coming from a man she'd never met before. How was he doing it?

Once she had the fork in hand, Elizabeth ventured to look in the direction of the man again. Was he the mysterious man of her fantasies? Yes. She was shocked once more when he raised two fingers to his forehead in a salute to her. She swallowed convulsively then noticed the amused twinkle in his eyes. His intense scrutiny and her intuition that he recognized her as well frightened her down to her toes.

This was the man who had invaded her dreams. The cozily dimmed lights glistened on his bronze skin. There was more texture to his face, evidence that despite his regal manner, he worked hard and spent a great deal of time in the sun. His roman nose perched elegantly between high cheekbones, and appeared more elevated by his wide, knowing smile. As in her fantasies, his smile had the effect of sparklers fizzing and popping within her stomach. Long, dark lashes could not conceal the desire burning within the depth of his onyx eyes.

"I have missed you." He was speaking to her, the message echoed in her mind. Was it possible? She questioned herself and everything she'd ever believed in. She questioned her sanity.

The burning sensation as if she was being watched continued while she tried to enjoy her meal. She emptied her glass of Sangria in record time. Her nerves still tingled. If any of her friends noticed her behavior as odd, they kept quiet about it. Only Lisa looked at her questioningly, her raised eyebrows asking what she could not voice aloud without embarrassing Elizabeth.

"I need to go to the restroom," Lisa announced shortly, turning toward Elizabeth. "Would you be a dear and come with me?" The sensuous redhead looked pointedly at her and somehow made the question sound as though it was a common request.

Elizabeth nodded and rose, grateful for the escape from a gaze that still bore into her from behind and followed her from the room. His voice came with her.

"You cannot run. Face our destiny," he said.

"What's wrong with you?" Lisa demanded once they were alone.

"I ... Nothing." Elizabeth didn't know how to answer without sounding like an utter fool.

"Bull." Lisa would take nothing less than a full explanation and Elizabeth decided they had been companions for too many years to expect less. Though it was usually Lisa who was doing the explaining while Elizabeth listened.

"There's a guy who's been watching me through dinner," Elizabeth said. She absolutely could not admit she recognized the man from her dreams. And how could she explain the voices in her head?

"That's it?" Lisa choked.

"That's enough for me." Elizabeth felt like an idiot. This was probably commonplace for Lisa. She had the kind of beauty every man noticed unless he was blind. "He makes me nervous."

"Obviously. Where is he?" If there had been a window facing the dining room, Lisa would be on one side of it, looking out.

"Three tables behind ours, to the left." Elizabeth knew her friend would look for the man once they left the restroom. "You'll know him when you see him, especially if he's still watching."

“So, let's go.” Lisa started to pull her out of the room.

“Wait a minute,” Elizabeth countered, equally as determined. “I need to use the restroom.” She fled to the safety of a stall, despite the fact she really didn't need to use the facilities. She hoped it would give her the time to get herself together to walk back to the table. If she took long enough, maybe the man would finish eating and leave.

“You cannot avoid our destiny, *Querida*,” he reminded her.

Her hands shook and she bent forward, unable to bear the intrusive voice. “Aagh!” she cried, covering her ears again.

“Elizabeth! What's going on in there? Are you okay?”

Lisa pounded on the door of the stall, adding to Elizabeth's discomfort. Great, now there would be witnesses to her mental breakdown. Elizabeth slipped out of her sanctuary, her head hung sheepishly as she moved to the sink and washed her hands.

“I—I can't explain it, Lisa.” Water dripped from her fingers as she flipped her hands back and forth helplessly.

“Honestly, Bethi. I wish I understood you. I've known you for years and yet I still don't understand how you could be so frightened of the male species. A man stares at you and you go to pieces. It's like there are two women living inside of you. One of them will get a tattoo—of her own design no less. And wear lingerie designed to make a monk drool, while the other one hides whenever a man looks at her. Which one of you is real?”

Elizabeth shrugged. What could she say? The passion she fought in her dreams could not be a good thing. It implied ownership. She would never live the kind of life she'd seen her foster mother live. Mr. Sanderson, her foster father, barked orders and his wife jumped. “Keep the child quiet,” he'd order, and Elizabeth would be hushed or taken out of the room. Later, as her body had developed, she had learned to avoid Mr. Sanderson whenever possible. He'd stared at her the same way he did at his wife, leaving her feeling unclean. More than once, she'd heard him say he could do whatever he wished with either of them. Were all men alike? Was her mystery man any different than her foster father?

“Come on. Let's go. I've gotta see this guy who's got your garters in a twist,” Lisa said.

“Oh my God, he's still there,” she whispered as they came out of the restroom. She felt like a fool, the flustered teenager that she had never been.

“Nice,” Lisa commented as they walked together. “Definitely still interested.”

Elizabeth ducked her eyes and walked quickly to the table. She scooted her chair closer to the table with a noise that unnerved her further. Once she was seated, she smoothed her skirt with her hands, more to dry her sweaty palms than to put her skirt in proper order. She could feel the gaze of her mystery man once more, centered along the side of her body.

Her glass had been refilled in her absence and she chanced a sip, to seem normal. Maybe it would even calm her trembling hands. Heaven only knew that the first glass had done little to relax her. Lisa looked over and gave her a knowing smile.

“Relax,” Lisa mouthed silently while the other women continued talking.

Relax? It was impossible. Elizabeth didn't rejoin the conversation, but this wasn't unusual. She was

typically the quiet one of the group. Though she hadn't seen her fantasy man stand, she felt his presence as he walked toward her. She knew exactly when he would reach her chair and was trembling with anticipation by the time his fingers brushed the back of her neck as he walked by her. The jolt of electricity that went through her had nothing to do with shock, but everything to do with the fact he was the one who touched her.

She had no doubt her face had paled again. Lisa's eyebrow rose and she rapidly glanced between Elizabeth and the man.

"Wow." Sue breathed aloud and made a point to fan herself with her hand. "Did you see that? What a hunk. His eyes never left you, Elizabeth. And that hand thing—hot!"

The woman was a menace. The last thing Elizabeth needed right now was the full attention of four wide-eyed women, all of them hungry for something she had no desire to taste. He'd stroked her as if he knew her, had intimate knowledge of her or had caressed her a million times in the past. Every second of his contact was intentional, as though he knew where to touch her and how long, how softly to caress her to get the most response from her.

She looked up to follow his path. He and his companions stood at the register. Elizabeth noticed he turned to look back at her once more. She wanted to drop her gaze, but there was a silent command in his to maintain contact. She couldn't resist him. Wide-eyed, she watched him, noticed his eyes looked almost black as midnight. His companions paid the bill and light fell briefly on his hoop earring. He saluted her again and left.

"Who was that, Elizabeth?" Sue asked. She looked at her as if she was zeroing in for the kill.

Elizabeth had no doubt Sue would, if she could. She shrugged. "It doesn't matter." But it did. He was hers, her fantasy man. She wasn't going to share him with Sue or any other woman. Her face heated as visions popped relentlessly within her mind.

Sue stared speculatively, her mouth twisted to a frown. "Could have fooled me."

"Leave her alone, Sue," Lisa ordered from the other side of the table. Her glare left no room for misunderstanding. "There's still half the male population of Tampa you haven't sampled yet. No reason for you to set your cap for Elizabeth's man."

Elizabeth frowned. Was he her man? Was there more to their connection than the dreams conjured up by her subconscious? Had she imagined him speaking to her?

The remainder of the meal was spent in a haze. In truth, the group was almost finished when her mystery man left. Elizabeth felt a cloud surround her as she recalled every nuance of the contact with him.

A half-hour later, she was disconcerted to realize they were on the second stage of the evening. She hadn't realized she'd been out of things for so long. But here they were, at The Cheetah Club, a singles bar known for risque contests. Dear God, was she doomed to humiliate herself? Could she survive a parade of men being hosed down in their boxers just after seeing the object of her own erotic dreams?

"Well, Elizabeth, if you have your car, you better make a run for the library. Things are going to get a little hot." Sue laughed at her discomfort at the comment, pointing out Elizabeth's blush to the others.

Since when had she become Sue's personal punching bag? *What a stupid witch.* Besides, Lisa had refused to let Elizabeth drive, knowing she'd purposely miss a turn and avoid the rest of the night.

"Life means risk," Lisa reminded her. "Open up, have a little fun."

Lisa had a warped mind, she decided. Since when did watching half-naked men dance on stage constitute fun?

Sue raised her fingers as if testing the atmosphere. “Zzt.” She gave voice to the electricity in the air. “Have fun on the sidelines,” she taunted as she pulled a man from the ranks and led him to the dance floor. Her shapely silhouette was immediately hidden as she dragged her happy victim through the crowds.

Elizabeth shot her a sarcastic smile and watched as the others followed suit. From where she stood, the sidelines looked just fine.

“Jeez, the woman's on a roll tonight. Are you all right?” Lisa asked.

“I'll be fine. Go,” she ordered when Lisa seemed split between loyalty and the man who had approached her with an offer to dance.

Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief as the rest of the world rotated around her. There were times it felt wonderful to be lost in a crowd. She was the sandpiper surrounded by waves, yet never getting wet. As usual, she would be the last to be chosen to dance. If she was asked at all—which was just fine with her. Her dancing skills were no better than her looks, so she was relieved to stand and watch the others enjoy the night.

Her relief was short lived, joined quickly by an annoying intuition that she was missing something. She felt the whisper of a dare as it floated in the breeze of cologne from the couple beside her. A dare to do what? She thought back to the man at the restaurant. He was responsible for this—he had to be.

The lights in the club had been dimmed for the night's festivities. Together with the music, it gave the place an ambience of mystery and excitement. She felt a presence of danger in the atmosphere, not certain where that element had come from until...

“It's him,” she breathed. He stood no more than six feet within the front door, yet she'd become instantly aware of him. The long, coal black hair she knew in her dreams was pulled back, exposing every inch of the face she'd memorized. The rest of the male patrons paled to his aristocratic presence. His head turned from side to side, searching the crowds. He was looking for her. She knew it. Directly beside him, his dinner companions seemed to be scanning the dance floor, the area surrounding the bar, the walls flashing with what resembled multi-colored fireflies.

Was he real or had she conjured him up from her mind? If she came out alive after this night, she was definitely going to find herself a good shrink. Fear mingled with unbidden excitement, as if a challenge had been issued and she was responding.

She debated leaving, but she'd have to slip past him to escape. She could have gone to the ladies' room, but he was in the way of that too. If she had the nerve, she would grab a man and pull him to the dance floor. But she had the feeling he would find her and the result would be worse. Perhaps not for her—definitely worse for the man she chose. Why did she know that about him? Where did all this inner knowledge come from?

She continued to look for a means of escape even as he focused on her and walked in her direction. Dizzy with fear, she soon realized his companions had taken different routes to ensure she did not evade him. They walked in a larger circle forming into a smaller one until at last he was beside her. These same colleagues positioned themselves at a reasonable distance, focused intently on her.

“Elizabeth,” her mystery man said, his voice slightly elevated over the music that enveloped them.

How did he know her name? His accent was heavy, yet she understood him. She had never met him, yet she knew him. She knew the scent he wore, a musky male cologne with a touch of spice. She could smell the lingering odor of a recent cigar. If he kissed her, she would feel the slight bite of tobacco on his tongue. How could this be? She'd never seen him before except in her dreams, yet she knew how he would taste, feel, make love. The thought caused her to shiver, which did not go unnoticed by her mysterious companion. She watched passion unfold in his intense gaze.

"Who are you?" she whispered. It was the best voice she could muster and she sounded lame, even to her ears.

"You know who I am. You bear my mark," he replied.

His slow perusal of her body caused a shudder and he paused. *Right about there.* Her tattoo. Her hip burned as if he had hit her with a laser. How could he possibly know about her tattoo?

Chapter Five

The design for her tattoo, the oddly medieval rendering, had come from her mind. It had a special significance to her, why would he claim it as his mark? He looked amused.

"You belong to me as I belong to you," he said.

His statement made no sense, but chills spiked up and down her spine. Her insides shook like a bowl of gelatin. A rainbow of emotions burst forth—confusion, fear ... anticipation. She clenched her fists to stifle the trembling of her fingers.

"What is your name?"

"Roberto San Miguel. I am from *Isla de San Miguel*," he informed her crisply.

She was struck by his accent. She imagined him snapping his heels for effect, but when she looked down at his feet, she realized it was only in her imagination.

"Your friends are coming back. We shall dance." He pulled her toward the dance floor, neatly aligning her at his side before Lisa could pull her away. A distinct look of envy crossed Sue's face and then all the women disappeared from her view.

Elizabeth noticed their 'protectors' also changed their positions, stationing themselves closer to the dance floor, enclosing her and Roberto in a protective circle. Why? And why was he so bent on keeping her from her friends?

"I do not wish to share you now that I have found you, *Querida*."

"How do I know you?" she asked.

Roberto heard the fear in her voice and sensed the moment she began to wonder whether she'd actually voiced the questions in her head. He debated how to answer. How much did she know?

"You know me as one half knows the other," he said. "See, your body knows mine, just as mine knows yours. Each anticipates the other's next wish."

He glanced down between them and found what he was looking for. She was aroused. Despite the confusion and concern of her mind, her nipples beaded and pushed against his chest. Their dance steps matched perfectly, each movement echoed by another. Elizabeth was the woman of his dreams, yet she

buried her inner beauty so well, he considered it a miracle to have found her.

"You hide yourself from the world. So oddly dressed." He glanced downward again, and felt her unspoken objection. "You do not fit with your friends."

There, he thought. This was the reaction he sought—she wished for a single moment that she'd been more adventurous in her clothing. Her spirit longed to be free, but there was a dark, closed off part of her mind that refused to allow it.

"I do not mean you are less than beautiful, *Querida*," he leaned down to whisper in her ear. "I do not understand why you think of libraries while you are out for a party."

When he lifted his head, her dark eyes were wide with shock as she stared at him. She had sensed his intrusion in her thoughts. The lights from the club reflected in her glasses. She was so innocent, utterly delightful. He couldn't resist lightly kissing her exposed neck and was thrilled by the shudder she couldn't control. Desire blazed through him and he could bear it no more. He had to see her, the Elizabeth he'd dreamed of for years. He pulled the clip from her hair, releasing the silky strands to fall loosely about her shoulders.

It was not enough. "So beautiful," he repeated. Roberto kissed the side of her mouth and then raised his head to look at her. Her glasses were next to go. He pocketed them before she could utter a word.

"I want them back," she whispered.

He felt his lips unfold to a smile, reading her thoughts as she inhaled his essence. How strange and wonderful it was to see into his woman's mind, to know she still felt the sensation of his kiss lingering on her skin. He'd never expected their connection to be so clear, or so consuming. He almost forgot what she'd said.

"Why? You do not need them. The glass is clear."

Elizabeth gasped and struggled in his arms. Roberto tightened his hold, knowing she'd bolt if given the chance. Her fear worried him. He hadn't expected her to be afraid of him. "You have had the dreams?" he asked.

Another gasp. Her head shook nearly as hard as her body. "No."

"Liar." Her refusal amused him, considering she had already guessed he could read her thoughts. "Have I pleased you yet?"

Furious and frightened, Elizabeth swung her hand at his face. He caught her wrist, stopping her, then pulled her open hand to his mouth and kissed her palm. "I have missed you, my love."

Her hand trembled within his, though she was already building up her defenses.

"Who are you, Roberto San Miguel? How dare you jump into my world and act as if you belong here?"

He frowned, still clasping her hand as they continued to dance. She faltered for a moment, her mind overriding her body, but soon fell in to step.

"I dare easily. Our world has just begun. Again."

He leaned to kiss the other side of her mouth. She backed away, trying to avoid him as he leaned toward her. Roberto released her arm and gently eased her head back so he could kiss her as he wished. He felt the electricity between them, crackling with tension. She stiffened in his arms, fear rampant and tangible.

Still, he tasted her passion—as it yielded and grew—the wonder within her as she began to kiss him back. He held her fast, swallowing her gasp of recognition when she tasted the bite of tobacco on his tongue. Again, she struggled then yielded, coming back to him for more. He caught the image of a sandpiper in her mind, daring the waves. Roberto understood the simile. She was drawn to the danger he represented. But didn't she realize there was more to their relationship than passion?

He released her as the music stopped. She staggered and he pulled her to his side. Enough, he decided. He needed answers, and moved with her through the crowd until they were next to Lisa and the other women. “Elizabeth is leaving with me,” he told the small group.

She stood there with her mouth open. He sensed the protest lodged in her throat and silenced her with a look. “Say yes, Elizabeth,” he urged.

“Yes.” The word came out as if croaked by an old frog. Relief flashed through Roberto and he released the breath he'd been holding.

The redhead, Lisa, was shocked, but she didn't appear nearly as astonished as Elizabeth did. None of the remaining women voiced an objection. Lisa nodded and Roberto wished his mind-reading skills extended beyond those he shared with Elizabeth. Lisa's eyes narrowed and her hand clamped around Roberto's arm before he could lead Elizabeth away. Lisa's touch allowed him to feel her emotions. She was frightened for her friend, and prepared to brutalize him if he hurt Elizabeth in any way.

“She'll be safe with me,” he offered.

Lisa's hold relaxed and he sensed she was satisfied, accepting his statement as a promise. There was another emotion mixed in, fluttering about like a butterfly in a field. Loneliness. Roberto wished he could tell Lisa she'd see Elizabeth again, but to say that would raise more questions than he had time to answer.

“Don't forget the wedding tomorrow,” Lisa called out behind their backs as they turned to go.

Elizabeth found her own voice as they walked out of the doors to the club. “I can't believe you did that. They'll think all kinds of things about me.”

He continued moving them forward, releasing her from his side, but keeping a firm hold on her hand.

“Stop!” Elizabeth cried.

Roberto came to such an immediate stop that she would have fallen forward if he hadn't caught her.

“In the first place,” she said, “I am not a rag doll. In the second place, I want to know where we're going.”

“We are going to your home, Elizabeth. I assume you live alone?”

“You're making a lot of assumptions based on one dance and a kiss.” She backed away as he turned her to face him.

“Perhaps it requires a second kiss?” he asked.

His head lowered and she could feel his breath on her lips. He smiled, knowing she was tempted to reach forward and complete the union. Something, a part of the darkened corner of her mind he couldn't access, stopped her.

“I think an explanation would be better,” she said.

She shivered, but Roberto knew it wasn't due to the cold. He sensed her unease, the fear within her as her back straightened and her 5' 3" stature met his breast bone. He had a sudden image of a small child, waiting for the striking blow that would bring her to her knees.

"I will not hurt you, Elizabeth. I do not understand your fears." He sighed. He didn't have time to explain, but he could offer her the truth. "I do not understand many things, but we need to go somewhere private to talk."

She stared speculatively at him. Her curiosity was piqued. Roberto understood her reasoning, even as she formed the thought in her mind. If he didn't understand things that were happening, at least they were equal on one score.

"Okay," she agreed.

He nodded to Raul then gazed back at her. She was concerned about her image. He almost laughed. As if the impressions of her so-called friends really mattered.

"Lisa understands," he said.

Her dark eyes widened once more and he could sense the turmoil within.

"I have to be at Lisa's wedding tomorrow."

Though she'd used her best classroom voice, Roberto felt her hand tremble within his. He elected not to answer. What could he say to ease her mind? Everything depended on when Eduardo surfaced. Her fears stung as if sharp, tiny needles poked into his heart. He had not expected her to be frightened. Not once in his dreams had she ever shown alarm—only the passion that matched his own. Her reaction didn't make sense. Was it possible for her to block the knowledge hidden in the dreams?

She blinked as his limousine and a smaller vehicle pulled up alongside them. Roberto noticed her momentary hesitation when he tugged her softly forward. Questions were racing through her mind again—who was he, what did he do for a living, was she safe to leave with him?

"I make no apologies for my wealth, Elizabeth. It is not earned at the expense of others. And you will be safe with me." He sighed heavily as she still held back.

"I'm supposed to just roll over and believe you?"

"For the moment, you must trust me. Trust in the dreams which connect us to each other," he said. He watched as she paled, her body stiff, then she pulled away. Damn.

She didn't know him. He was certain Elizabeth had seen his face, felt the intimate connection between them. But, unlike him, she'd taken no comfort from the visions. She had no idea what they had been to each other in generations past. What they still were. Worse yet, he'd created a fantasy person to go along with the vision. He could see that now. He didn't know her either.

"Give the driver your address, Elizabeth," he said. The driver pulled open the door to the limousine for them.

She stopped short and glared at him. "If you know my name and you know me as you say you do, you should know where I live." She looked ready to bolt and probably would have if he hadn't kept hold of her arm.

"We have no time for this, Elizabeth. Get in the car." Already, Eduardo could have found him. She could be in danger. He made a choice between her safety and her dignity, pulling her purse from her trembling

hands.

“No,” she argued.

He admired her in spite of her resistance. Her legs quivered beneath her and caused her skirt to ruffle, but she stood her ground. This was his Elizabeth, Rafael's Lupita, able to rise above her alarm and hold her own against him.

“Please, *mi amada*.” Her frightened, confused, brown eyes met his own. “It means my beloved.”

“I know,” she whispered. “But I don't speak Spanish. Why do I know what it means?”

“You will understand in time,” he promised. “I will not hurt you. Please, get in the car?” He stroked her cheek, unable to resist touching her, hoping to reassure her. How could he convince her that he would do everything within his power to keep her safe? She was his, a precious gift to treasure and love for as long as they had in this lifetime. She balked again then did as he asked. Roberto exhaled. He could not reach her heart, but the rest of her responded to him with womanly charm. It was a start, he consoled himself. Now he needed some answers.

Once inside the car, Roberto opened her purse, took out her billfold and read her address aloud to the driver. The window rolled up immediately between his compartment and theirs.

“Give me back my purse,” she demanded.

“Not yet,” he said. She grabbed for it, but he kept it just out of her reach. He shot her a quick, amused smile. “I have waited a long time for answers.”

“Well, get yours quickly because I have a few of my own. Like why you think you can order me around and I'll ask how high.”

“La rosa tiene algunas espinas.”

She frowned and silky, dark hair fell over the lines creasing her forehead. Her mind was already opening, questioning the language of her birth, wondering why she recognized some words, but not others.

“The rose has a few thorns,” he translated. “I heard your friend call you Elizabeth at the restaurant,” he said. “It was an easy matter to follow you from there to the dance club.” He pulled her billfold up and flipped it open with a single action.

“Elizabeth Sanderson,” he read, while she reached again to retrieve her purse from his grasp.

“It is an odd name for someone of your heritage.” Her skin-tone was several shades lighter than his, her cheekbones high and proud, her nose small and pert. The glorious, long, dark hair he'd seen in his visions was not as curly as he remembered. Roberto wondered about that.

“I changed my name legally when I was eighteen.” She stared out the darkened window, as if the conversation held no interest for her.

“And your birth name?” he asked.

“Santiago.”

Roberto nodded. He would never have found her if God had not seen fit to intervene. His investigators were looking for a woman with the wrong surname. He handed her back her purse. It made no difference now. He had what he wanted, needed—her.

"You could have asked me all of that." There was venom in her voice and her stubborn glare amused him, and he was not a man easily amused. She was more like Lupita than she knew.

"Would you have told me if I had asked?"

"If you'd given me half a reason to trust you," she said.

He wondered how best to respond. How much would she accept? "I know your face from my dreams."

Elizabeth's face showed every emotion as she processed the information. Silently, he waited, watching her lower lip tremble, her eyes glow with fascination. Then they flashed with fear. More wrinkles appeared on her forehead, and Roberto's lips curled as her curiosity took over.

"What kind of dreams?" she asked.

"The same as yours. Some have been quite innocent. Others were more detailed. More passionate," he said, repositioning himself in the seat. Already, desire coursed through his veins and he ached to touch her, stroke her as intimately as he had in visions. Roberto heard her thoughts. He knew she saw images of their joining in her mind and they unnerved her.

"You did hear me when I said I have to be at a wedding tomorrow?"

"Yes," he said. He smiled at her diversion. She obviously shared a characteristic with Daniel, the need to change subjects when she was uncomfortable. "What time is the wedding?"

"Why?" Elizabeth's hackles went back up as quickly as they had fallen.

He heard the panic in her voice, read her awareness of him and knew she was frustrated at the war raging within her. She wanted to know what she was missing by her solitary existence, but she recognized desire came with a price. She was counting on his leaving tonight and never seeing him again.

"So I can get you there on time, *Querida*."

"I'll be going by myself." The schoolmarm voice was back in place. He saw past the facade. "The wedding's at three," she said. "Three o'clock."

Elizabeth took a moment to study him, really scrutinize him, hoping her fears about his intentions were unfounded. His smile held the intimacy of a warm, rumpled bed with silk sheets scattered about. Her temperature went up several degrees just by looking at him. What she knew of designer clothes could fill a thimble, but she'd bet a month's wages he was wearing an Armani suit. His suit and meticulously shined shoes spoke of a man who knew how to get what he wanted and usually did. The length of his black hair was tied back, and the shiny gold hoop earring in his ear lent him the appearance of a rogue.

Roberto San Miguel clearly did not care what others thought of his actions. Elizabeth had spent her life fearing disapproval, and he fascinated her. When he removed his tie, unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and loosened his hair, he looked even more dangerous to her way of thinking.

"Do not be frightened, Elizabeth. I will not bite you—yet."

Roberto watched as her body shivered in response. He was delighted by her awareness of him. She was frightened, yet she wanted him as badly as he wanted her. She didn't like knowing it either.

Should he explain the connection between them? He considered it for a moment then decided against telling her anything. Already, she was entertaining thoughts of destiny and fighting it and his place in her life. He captured a glimpse of a disturbing thought, a vague reference to owning her own life.

They moved through traffic, the minutes seeming like hours. She shifted her legs about nervously, exposing intoxicating skin to his view. His fingers burned with the desire to touch her.

"Champagne?" Roberto made the suggestion even as he reached for the bottle and began to open it. As lord of his own island, he was accustomed to compliance. It didn't occur to him that she'd refuse. But she did. This had to end. He pierced her with a glance and she recanted.

"Come here, *Querida*." He patted the seat next to him. He watched her hesitate, sensing her frustration. "I need you beside me. We have been apart much too long." He groaned at the conflict of her thoughts as she wiped her moist hands on her skirt and pulled it down as if it was a chastity belt. "Who frightens you? Me or you?"

Her eyes widened and she stiffened in her seat. She must understand, he must help her to understand. Their destiny was written, out of their control. She wavered, searching for a means to escape. But in her brown eyes, he saw how much she wanted to trust, to be close to him. She'd been alone for far too long. Acceptance would be hard for her.

"If you do not come here, I will go over there, Elizabeth."

She hesitated and glared at him, then moved to the other seat, taking a place beside him. "I don't like being ordered about."

"Did I order you?" Roberto asked. "I said please." She reminded him of a cat, its back up, hair bristling with wariness.

"A request with no alternative is an order."

His lips twisted as he tried not to grin.

Angrily, she folded her arms over each other and crossed her legs, clasping them tightly together. "I fail to see why you find this so amusing."

"A kitten with a string is amusing. You are a rose, unfolding to the light of the morning sun. An intoxicating mystery."

As he'd intended, her anger slipped away. He pulled her closer to his side and lifted her hand up to kiss her knuckles. The temptation was too great and he lowered her hand, placing his own on her freshly exposed knee. Her trembling began anew.

"Beautiful, soft petals," he said, sliding her skirt a little higher and stroking her thigh. The silk stockings beneath his fingers inflamed him. Her blush intoxicated him. He could feel her shudder, the jolt passing through his hand and permeating his soul. Her hand closed over his, squeezing it in an attempt to stop him from journeying farther up her leg.

"I wish you would stop that," she whispered.

He heard the plea in her voice, how near she was to recanting the statement. Her beautiful body, hidden to the world, was begging to be touched. Her mind was the barrier, but it was as unstable as a leaky dam. Lust was making a mockery of her words. He frowned. Sexual attraction was a good start, but they would need more than that to endure what would come.

"I am sorry, Elizabeth. I have searched for you for so long that I touch you freely. I have forgotten that you might not be ready for me." Reluctantly, he removed his hand from her leg and slipped it around her shoulders.

Elizabeth breathed a ragged sigh of relief. Her traitorous body hungered for him, but she stubbornly forced it into submission. She tried to focus on the slight tossing of the car, but found herself entirely too aware of the warm arm surrounding her. Was she imagining his need to be close? He'd spoken of needing her, but was it a physical thing or something more? His actions baffled her. Not that her own response made any more sense. When he touched her, there was recognition, disturbing in that she felt reunited to something she'd never known was lost.

The disconcerting rumble underneath them indicated they were crossing one of Tampa's downtown bridges. Were they that close to her home? When the vehicle pulled to a stop, she looked out the smoky windows to see they were in her driveway. He lifted her chin until their eyes met.

"Do you have champagne glasses or should we take the ones we have?" he asked.

His mouth was inches from hers. She could feel his breath against her cheek, the flavor of the champagne mingling with the tobacco she had sensed earlier.

"I have glasses inside," she offered breathlessly.

"Drink up then and I will bring the bottle with us." She watched him gulp down the remains of his glass and then place it on the side tray. He didn't move until she had finished her own. A small amount pooled on her lower lip, and she watched with trepidation as his finger grazed her lip, he caught the liquid and then sipped it off his finger. Goose bumps ran up her spine and he smiled.

With deft motions, he pulled the glass from her stiffened fingers and placed it along with his own on the side tray. He followed her out of the limousine and handed the bottle of champagne to one of his men with an order to bring a second one.

"Very nice," he commented, stopping for a moment once they'd walked up the stairs to her front door. His voice surprised her; she thought he'd gone absent on her during the walk, perhaps noticing the view of Bayshore Avenue and the overlook across the street.

"It's mine." Somehow, it seemed important for him to know she was capable of supporting herself, even if it was through an inheritance. When her foster parents had died, Elizabeth had been shocked to learn she'd received the house in the estate. She'd thought once or twice of selling it, but couldn't bring herself to do it. Given her present situation, it was ironic that the house was built with a Spanish flavor typical of most homes in Tampa.

"You live near the water," he observed.

"I couldn't live without it." She'd always loved the sound of Tampa Bay as it lapped against the cement colonnade, which provided a walkway for joggers and sightseers alike. "That and the flowers," she added. A strong aroma of gardenias mingled with a lesser scent of honeysuckle, and surrounded the entrance to her home. The honeysuckle vine had been her imprint on the house. It wandered up a designed metal trellis in front of a bay window. Toward the center of her yard, there was a small, well-tended rose garden, lit by tiny torch lights.

"Allow me, *Querida*," he requested, pulling the key from her and unlocking the door before she could voice a protest. If she had heard correctly, it was a Latin male's preference to treat the female as a woman at all times. She wondered if this was just another subtle way for a man to maintain control of a woman. Whatever the case, he was in complete control of the scenario unfolding and she did not like it. She did not like it at all. And yet, in another, more deeply hidden part of herself, she was thrilled. She'd never felt more feminine.

So this is the edge. If she went through this door and allowed him to enter with her, she was crossing over an invisible boundary, much like Alice into Wonderland. Was she ready to take the leap? Could she find her way back to the real world later? A moment of thought held a wealth of memories for her. Within an instant, she saw the obsession which had built and led to her getting the tattoo, the nightly visions that followed and her own realization that she was following an unknown path to an uncertain future. It made her pause as he stood waiting at the open door.

"I don't know about this," she said softly, then saw the irritation in Roberto's eyes. It mingled with something else. Concern? Fear? She watched him look around them as if he was expecting something to break out of the shadows.

"Elizabeth, it is not safe for us to remain like this. We should go in," he urged.

She had a suspicion he could see the emotional turmoil going through her mind.

"We can deal with your fears inside."

Not safe for them to remain outside? She believed him. But why? She wondered if she would ever know safety again as she allowed him to usher her into the foyer. After all, wasn't this a bit like the lion inviting himself into Daniel's home?

Chapter Six

Once inside, Roberto seemed to take in every little detail of the room, as if memorizing the number of books on her shelves, or the choice of colors she'd used to decorate the room. An hour from now, he could probably tell someone that the couch was in the center of the room, facing west, the television set was a SONY, and the rug on the floor was a cream-colored, nylon Berber. She wondered whether she should take offense or be intrigued.

He slipped off his shoes once he was inside the door. Was it in an effort to keep her light-colored carpet clean? He wore black socks, a perfectly stitched red line across his toes. *A man intending to do harm wouldn't take off his shoes, would he?* Of course, she'd taken off her own, but not for the same reason. Her shoes were relatively new and not yet broken in. Despite her discomfort, she was amused to see he'd placed his shoes carefully against the wall while she had flipped hers wherever they landed in the vicinity of the front door. Was he always so neat?

"Where are the champagne glasses, Elizabeth?" He was already on his way toward the kitchen. *The man certainly knows how to make himself at home in a hurry.* Having a man, any man, in her living quarters was a new occurrence for her. All of her other dates had ended at her front door.

So, was he the lion coming to chew her up, or just a man? No. He could never be 'just a man'. Instantly, she remembered her caution in the dreams. Whom was she kidding? She had plenty of reasons to feel endangered—Roberto touched her as if he owned her. One look, one touch and she was putty. She could still feel heat where his hand had been on her thigh. The reminder did wonders to clear her head after champagne and the mystery of his arrival had left her in a clouded haze.

The knock on the door shook her back into the real world. She was surprised when his man handed her the opened bottle of champagne and a second unopened bottle, then turned to go. He wore the blank expression of a mannequin. She stomped into the kitchen.

"Who are those men?" she demanded. "And why weren't we safe outside the door?" Roberto had found the glasses on his own. "Jeez, do you always plunder through a woman's kitchen without asking?"

He reached for the champagne bottle and poured two glasses. "I am accustomed to doing for myself," he said. "When one starts out a servant in his own home, the habit is not easily broken when he becomes a lord."

Another mystery to solve, she thought. He led her neatly out of the kitchen, bringing the bottle with them to the living room couch.

"What do you think those men are?" he asked.

He nestled into the couch sideways so that he still faced her. She perched, facing forward, ready to spring off the cushions at the slightest cause. She was torn between her training and frustration. *Southern women are allowed to think what we will, but we never call a donkey an ass, even if the proof is right in front of us.* How many times had her foster mother said that line?

"Isn't it rude to answer one question with another?"

"Is it?" He smiled innocently.

"Are they bodyguards?" He showed no inclination to answer her, causing her to draw her own conclusion. She didn't like the answer.

"They are, aren't they? Why do you need them?"

"Drink your champagne," he evaded, taking a sip of his own. "I have been saving this bottle for the day I found you. You cannot believe how fortunate I feel that our paths have finally become entwined."

She had questions, too many to feel comfortable sipping champagne with him, yet she brought the glass to her lips as he had instructed her. Once again, she was struck by the power he held over her by mere words, his will manipulating hers. Was she reliving her childhood compulsion to please others? She hadn't experienced that in years. Yet this man had the capability of reaching inside her and pulling forth a response.

"They are my men," he said. "They work for me, protect me when I need it, obey my commands."

He'd given an answer, but it was no help toward understanding his life. Or how she came to be in it.

"How long have you been having the dreams?" His onyx eyes probed hers, causing her to shift uncomfortably on the couch.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her gaze bounced in every direction but his. She focused on the books on the shelf, looking at titles yet not reading them.

"Elizabeth, we will not play games. Look at me."

"You're doing it again," she snapped. "Ordering me around."

"I'm sorry," he said. "Please look at me. I need to see your face."

She thought there was a strange note in his voice, yet when she looked at him, she saw nothing particularly different. Except for the way his jaw twitched as if he was pulling from a well of control slowly going dry. This must be harder on him than she realized. Something melted inside of her, because of his apology and the strained, hungry look in his eyes. She glanced away, frightened by the need she saw within. In the end, she turned toward him, toward his piercing gaze. He was the magnet to her steel. So what if her steel actually felt more like a lump of clay right now?

His arm lay across the couch, his leg posed in a carelessly comfortable position. He appeared deceptively calm, she thought. Give him one loud noise and he'd be on his feet, ready for action. Where had that knowledge come from? Her intuition had served her well, but never this well. He smiled at her, and she had the image of sweet, summer rain. Coming home.

"How long have the dreams been going on?" he asked.

Here it is again, the moment of truth. She allowed a lengthy pause and then finally answered him.

"A couple of months." Her face burned from an internal heat.

"And I have not pleased you yet?" He seemed genuinely surprised. "Do you fight the dreams? What are you frightened of? Me? Or the part of you that responds to me?"

"I don't think it's any of your business," she said. Inside her mind, his words flew back at her, taunting her with a life of their own. *It's me*, they whispered. *My attraction to you frightens me.*

"You knew me tonight. You have seen me in these dreams."

"I felt you staring at me," she said. Elizabeth prayed he'd leave the matter alone. He didn't.

"Liar. You felt me staring, yes. A beautiful woman always senses when a man is staring at her. But you tell only part of the truth. You knew me at that place, that bar."

"The Cheetah Club," she supplied, then groaned at the admission.

"Do you go there often?"

"No! Lisa wanted to go there for her bachelorette party."

"Ah, Lisa," he said. "The red-haired one."

He appeared to ponder the thought as his gaze coursed down her feminine frame. It was enough to set her to movement once more. Her crossed leg swung like the pendulum of a clock wound too tight.

"I am frightening you again," he said, then stood and walked about the room.

He was concerned about her being frightened? She was shocked by his compassion. Roberto picked up pictures from various locations, turned to look at her, then placed the photos back where he'd found them. What was he learning about her now?

"You have a cat?" Roberto asked, holding up a picture for her to see. It was a recent snapshot of her and Ghillie. Lisa had called it a mini-portrait.

Elizabeth nodded. "Ghillie. She's a Siamese. Apparently, she's hiding tonight." Elizabeth frowned, wishing she could do the same thing. "Usually, she's right at the door and bawling like a baby."

He placed the picture back on the mantle and picked up another. "A boyfriend?" he asked.

She marveled at the way he scrutinized the image, the restrained anger she felt emanating from him. She wondered what he was thinking. Was he jealous?

"No," she answered. "Just an old friend. Lisa's in it too," she pointed out. The grim face remained, leaving her extremely uncomfortable. Her leg swung feverishly, barely missing the coffee table. She was strangely relieved when he placed the photo back down on the mantle.

“How many of these people are family members?”

“Just my parents,” she said. Her chest felt as hollow as her words. Regardless of how she felt about her foster father, Mrs. Sanderson had tried to be a mother to her. But there were two others out in this world, biological parents who had discarded her and never looked back. “I mean my foster parents. The Sandersons.”

He touched the fern in the stand as though it were fragile, leaving her to wonder what he was thinking—again. Why was she interested?

“This room smells like you.” He smiled slowly. “A light scent of ... lavender?”

Elizabeth nodded. What kind of information was he gleaning about her? She'd never considered what someone could conjure up about her or her home. Then again, why think of something so revealing when Lisa had been the only person invited inside her domain? The pauses in their conversation were driving Elizabeth crazy.

“You must be an avid reader,” he said, glancing at the books on the coffee table.

He was looking at—*Oh, mercy, please tell me he's not looking at that one!* But he was, and the gleam in his eye spoke volumes.

“That's Lisa's.” She nearly jumped off the couch and the frog-like croak was back in her throat.

His brow rose and he chuckled. She never could lie worth a nickel.

Well, part of it was true! She had bought the book for Lisa, but she'd been too intrigued with it to give it to Lisa before reading it herself. How many times had she secretly wished to be carried off, overwhelmed by passion and unable to resist the dark, intense hero? How many times had she kicked herself in the morning, promising herself she'd toss the book in the trash bin? But she never had. Relief flooded her as he gently returned the zesty pirate romance novel back to the coffee table. When he looked away, she jammed it under the cushion of the couch.

As Roberto walked behind the couch, she felt him touch her hair, his hand finding its way underneath to caress her neck. A single bolt of lightning flashed under her closed eyelids, her body already responding to his hands on her shoulders. He gently rubbed the aching muscles, one hand moving her hair aside so he could nuzzle her neck.

“You smell wonderful.”

A heartbeat later, she heard his groan of frustration as she shivered to his caress. What would it cost her to live her fantasies for one night? Her head fell backward as he touched a sensitive spot between her neck and shoulders. She could feel the warmth of his breath through her blouse.

The feel of his lips to her bare neck and shoulder blades jolted Elizabeth all the way down to her toes. A quick glance down showed he'd undone the top buttons of her blouse and pulled it off her shoulders. When?

She gasped and her glass of champagne nearly fell from her fingers. His free hand closed upon hers, holding it steady so none of the liquid slipped from the glass.

“Do you want to finish your champagne?” he whispered, slowly withdrawing from his attack on her nerves and her flesh. Cold air mingled with the warmth of his breath. He was above her again, had moved away from her yet he had not. Her efforts to compose herself were useless. “Yes? No?” he asked.

A serene smile played on his lips as he watched her gulp down the liquid. The champagne did little to soothe her shattered nerves, especially when she looked into his midnight eyes. He was daring her to dance with the devil. And God help her, she wanted to.

The glass empty, Roberto gently tugged it from her hands and placed it on the end table. He leaned down, his hand lightly cupping her neck, and brought her closer for his kiss. He took possession of her mouth, a soft play on her lips turned into a hard demand, burning her with his intensity. Elizabeth was drawn to him, he pulled the strings and she moved to his every wish. She felt weightless as he lifted her, turned her, and perched her on the back edge of the couch. He stepped in between her legs and pulled her against him. She accepted him without a second thought.

He conquered her with a kiss and she whimpered in defeat. He stole her next breath as his tongue gained full access into the open cavern that he sought. Never had she been kissed like this. Every other kiss she'd received in her life might as well have come from timid schoolboys. Roberto's hungry mouth on hers embodied much power yet tenderness. His need overwhelmed her. A rush of warmth flooded from her head to her lower feminine regions, settling in the part of herself that she'd always sought to avoid nurturing.

He held her against him as his free hand completed the task of unbuttoning her blouse. His hand touched her camisole and then her bare midriff. She opened her eyes, gazing at him as shock rippled through her. She sensed his delight at her response. Then, he beamed, a broad smile. He knew, she thought. He'd been reading her mind and knew exactly how lost she was. She heard him chuckle, and she shut her eyes, embarrassed to the core. His hand caressed her bare skin and she sensed his wonder. He was touching her, awed by the fact they were together—fantasy had become reality.

Inside her mind, reality and fantasy twisted into each other. She felt his hand cover her breast, the warmth of his skin soaked through the light material of her bra. Her hips moved with his as he pulled her more tightly against him. She could feel his strength, the hardness of his manhood as it pressed against her, seeking a release yet finding none. Elizabeth trembled against him, pulling his head down for a deep kiss. She wanted more. She wanted to taste the forbidden fruit.

"No," he whispered. "We cannot do this." Roberto begged her to understand, the thoughts flowing freely into her mind. Her head dropped in shame. "I must stop, but you make it so difficult. I should be taking you out of here, arranging for your safety, not giving in to the passion between us."

"So beautiful." He lifted her chin to look into her eyes. "I want you, but it is not time." Elizabeth swallowed painfully. She felt lost, scattered in the breeze. One minute she'd been in heaven and the next—she watched while Roberto absorbed the view of her disarray, only then did she notice her blouse lay open and her undergarments were pulled down, her breasts exposed for his view. He stopped her as she attempted to pull her clothes together.

"No, don't," he said. "I like to see you." His eyes gleamed brighter than the stars on a cloudless night. His hands shook then tightened on her shoulders.

Her head lowered and embarrassment flooded her mind as she remembered all she had allowed this virtual stranger to do to her in the last—what had it been? Minutes? An hour? Was it eternity or seconds? Did it matter?

Roberto pulled her chin back up, forcing her to face him. "Do not avoid me, *Querida*. Do not become embarrassed. I find you beautiful."

He must think I'm a tramp. Her eyes squeezed shut and she turned her head away to avoid the pain.

"I do not," he whispered as he caressed the side of her head with his chin. "You are mine, therefore you respond to me. I have no reason to believe you would do the same with anyone else."

Had she voiced the words? Then she remembered what he'd said. *I feel your thoughts*. How could this be? Did this capability really exist? What else could he learn from her when she wasn't ready to tell him? "Just how much of my mind can you read?" she asked.

"Everything," he admitted. "We are connected as one. Since we have found each other, I can see your thoughts, your dreams, feel your frustration. But you are strong, there is a part of your mind which you have buried deep. I cannot see it until you do."

He frowned as she groaned with relief. At least one part of her was still hers alone. There were memories she refused to allow into the light. Strange visions which made no sense.

"Elizabeth, you must trust yourself. You must trust me."

"We just met," she said. "Give me one good reason why I should trust you."

"We have just exchanged names. Our hearts have known each other forever."

Her heart ached to believe him, but the idea of destiny or past lives was not something she could live with.

"I will do nothing to hurt you. I would give my life for you. I have already, and I would do it again," he said. His words were a mystery. He spoke in the past tense yet he was here in her living room. It was too much for her and she wondered if she had lost her sanity. "You are very much sane. We should be leaving," he declared.

Roberto glanced about the room suspiciously and she wondered why. Had he heard something? Seconds later, she realized he'd probed her mind again and had included her in the statement. *We should be leaving*. Fury and humiliation took control.

"*We*? You mean *you* should be going," she corrected him. "You've come, you've taken what you wanted. Leave!"

"*Querida*, I wish things were as easy as you believe. Such a beautiful combination of innocence and fire." She trembled as his thumb lovingly caressed her cheek. "They will have been watching me," he murmured. "If I have found you, they will find you as well."

"I said leave! I'm tired and I want to be alone." She would not give in to whatever magic he wove with a touch. She could not fall apart in his arms again. While he'd had the presence of mind to stop their lovemaking, she'd drowned in new sensations and allowed the reckless side of herself to rule. It could not happen again.

Her defiance ended instantly. A man in a ski mask charged through her bay window, as shards of glass flew in all directions. Elizabeth screamed, too frightened to move, even as Roberto sprang to action.

"Button your blouse," he ordered. "Raul," he shouted. The front door slammed to the floor and Roberto's man raced toward them, followed by a second man wearing a ski mask.

"Paco, get the car," Roberto shouted out the broken window.

Elizabeth watched in stunned silence, as her living room became the scene of an action movie. Roberto's man, Raul, wielded the longest, sharpest knife she'd ever seen. He swung around and lunged at the man who'd come in behind him, who unleashed a knife of his own. The air was filled with the sound of

grunts and steel clashing against steel.

She turned, just in time to see the first intruder charge toward her. Light glinted off the chrome barrel of a pistol. Her heart stopped and fear squeezed at her throat as the masked man aimed the gun at her.

With movements faster than she could comprehend, Roberto shoved her behind him, turning them both as a shot rang forth. Afterward, she saw Roberto's arm thrust forward, punching the invader hard enough to knock him to the floor. Roberto pulled her toward the door, but they didn't get far.

A hard, gloved hand clamped about her ankle and yanked her downward. She was falling—and Roberto, the fight—everything flew from her mind as she scrambled for a softer landing. All efforts failed as she crashed into the coffee table. Darkness approached rapidly. Her last thought was that she needed to eliminate champagne from her diet. The pain in her skull wasn't as pleasurable as the bubbly taste.

Chapter Seven

He'd failed her, Roberto thought, laying his head in his hands. He should have protected her, no matter what. Even if he'd had to do it against her will. But he'd lost precious time satisfying his own physical urges. Every time he looked at her, he felt haunted by the fact he'd failed miserably and she'd been hurt as a result.

"You should rest," the doctor advised quietly in the language Roberto had heard since birth. "She is out of danger and will sleep for a couple of hours. You should do the same."

Roberto raised his head to glance once more at Elizabeth. "I cannot. She should have been kept safe. It's my fault." His balled fists shook at his sides with impotent fury.

"Hernandez did not win," the elder man argued. "She is safe, here on this boat. He has not taken her from you. You will have the final victory."

"He will pay for this." The conviction in Roberto's voice confirmed it. He would see Hernandez in Hell for Elizabeth's injuries. His own did not matter. It was the price of love everlasting, the price he'd pay. He unclenched his fist and his fingers stung as blood raced through the tiny veins.

"I must see to your bandage, then you must rest," the doctor said. "It will do you little good to be tired when she wakes up. There will be questions. She will be angry."

"She will understand," Roberto said, hoping he was right. "I will make her understand."

"Then you will need strength to argue with. This one is strong. She has the image of frailty, but it is misleading. You will need more than pretty words to win her heart."

Roberto took a last look at Elizabeth before he turned himself over to the doctor's care. *Her heart is already mine. She just needs to be reminded, prodded until her mind accepts what her heart and body already know.*

* * * *

The room was well lit and there was a pleasant sway beneath her, ever so slight, but Elizabeth felt it just the same. Her eyes not yet focused as she struggled to come out of the haze of sleep, she heard Roberto's voice in the distance. She recognized Spanish. He and several others spoke too rapidly for her to follow the words.

Roberto dismissed the two men at the door with a wave. "You are awake, *Querida*."

He walked through the room and over to the bed. His demeanor was a facade. She didn't know how she knew this; she just sensed there was more going on inside him than the quiet calm he portrayed. It was in his eyes, the shadows concealed thoughts she was certain he'd like to share but held back. His voice fell like a caress over her senses but Elizabeth would not allow it to lull her into a false sense of security.

"I didn't dream your being here last night, did I?" Vague images surfaced in her mind. He'd been there, she was certain. With another man. A doctor? She glanced around the room and realized she didn't know where "here" was. Abruptly, she sat up and wished she hadn't. "Where are we?"

He seemed to choose his words carefully. "You were concussed. Your head hit the coffee table. It was my fault. Take these," he instructed with an apologetic frown and held out aspirin and a glass of water.

She gladly took what he offered and drank some of the water to chase the pills down her throat.

"The pain should be subsiding," he said.

He gently pulled the light blanket up around her. She noticed his gaze rested for a moment on the swell of her breasts before they returned to her face. Elizabeth took a moment to look down and realized she'd never seen the gown she was wearing before. She absently stroked the soft white silk.

"I wanted you to be comfortable," Roberto said softly. He watched the path of her hands with a hungry gaze. "It is my pleasure to dress you." His answer to her question came just as she formed the question in her mind. "And undress you."

Her face burned and she watched him smile in response. "A perfect rose," he whispered as his finger touched her cheek.

He moved away and she sensed he was distancing himself. *From her? No, from temptation.* God, she hated this, these abstract thoughts that appeared out of nowhere. It felt almost as if she could pick up on his thoughts? The possibility petrified her. The concept, however, of reading his thoughts as easily as he read hers, fascinated her. Then she thought of the night before.

"There was gunfire. Why?" Her gaze raced around the room, leaving her dizzy and made everything in front of her a blur. "Ghillie!"

"She is safe," he said. "Hernandez apparently decided that last night was an acceptable means to get what he wants."

"What is it he wants?" she asked, ignoring the feeling of impending disaster.

"Me," he answered. "Dead. You are the—shall I say—the icing on the cake? He knew I would find you. He knows I will do whatever I must to keep you safe."

"Wouldn't I have been safer if you'd never found me?" Elizabeth couldn't believe she was having this discussion. They sounded like two people discussing their day at work. Here she was, accepting the fact that two madmen roamed the world—both of whom wanted her—but for different reasons.

He hesitated, taking much longer to answer than she would have preferred. "Would you have been?" he asked.

A vague image rustled through her mind, like leaves in a fall breeze, slipping by too quickly for her to capture it. But she recognized the sensation it left behind. Danger. She met his gaze and knew he'd felt it too.

"Our coming together was ordained," he murmured. "We will discuss this later."

"I want to talk about it now."

"No." He said the words as a parent answered a child's unreasonable demands. Even more irritating, he turned and walked away from her.

"How dare you!" How could he come into her life and take over like this?

"Later, *Querida*. You do not understand what's at stake."

"What's at stake?" Her voice shook with fury. "You show up in my dreams. You're taking my world apart piece by piece. Dammit, there was gunfire at my house! And you say I don't understand what's at stake? For all practical purposes I've been kidnapped. I'm missing Lisa's wedding—Oh, my God. Lisa's wedding."

"You have missed your friend's wedding. I am sorry." He leaned forward on the counter across the room, his shoulders slumped as if he carried the weight of the world on them.

"I was Maid of Honor, for cripes sake!" The same as she'd been for Lisa's three other marriages. Hmm. All factors considered, she was disappointed but not devastated. There were other, more critical matters she needed to think about.

"I took the liberty of sending two dozen roses to her. And two tickets to Paris," Roberto said. Seconds later, he faced her again with two cups of coffee and handed one of them to her.

"I suppose that would help her get over it," she mused dryly, then remembered why she'd missed the wedding. *What is wrong with her?* A man kidnaps her, changes her clothing while she sleeps and all she can do is make glib conversation? She refused to think about all of the other events between them.

"It is my fault you were injured. I promised not to hurt you."

He appeared crushed and her heart went out to him. Dark circles heavily outlined his eyes and his face was a mask of despair. She felt his pain and reeled with shock. How strange. She shoved emotions aside and struggled to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

"But you were expecting those men last night. You kept saying—"

"You were to be out of the house before they arrived. Forgive me."

She didn't like the way the statement sounded. "Just how exactly had you expected to do that?" she asked.

"You were supposed to know who I was, why I was there." He looked perplexed, as if everything he'd believed in had been turned upside down. She could appreciate the sensation. "Of course, the visions could work differently from one person to another."

"And if that didn't work?"

"I intended to get you drunk," he said.

The admission came easily to his lips and she saw no remorse in his eyes. Who was this guy? No wonder he was so adamant about her finishing each glass.

"I can't believe you," she muttered. "You don't want to hurt me, but you'll kidnap me?"

“Are you kidnapped? You are free to go.” He waved his hand toward the door.

She considered the possibility, pulling the linens back to get out of the bed. The dark look in his eyes startled her—desire? *Get real, Elizabeth*, she reminded herself. *You date once every five years and you think he's falling over with anticipation over you?* The silk fluttered down her exposed legs when she stood. Unfortunately, the spaghetti strap on one shoulder fell down with her movement and the fabric did little to cover her bosom. She hastily pulled it up and looked over at him again. The sight lit a flame in his eyes. He wanted her. An unexpected thrill shot through her. Then she remembered her situation. What liberties had he taken while undressing her?

She looked away. The door to the room was shut. She suspected he had someone standing outside, so she wasn't surprised when he spoke again, causing her to focus on him.

“I would suggest a robe.” He held out a matching silk robe. “My men are not eunuchs and I do not like them looking at what is mine alone.”

There it was again. Possession. This time he'd actually spoken the words. Mine alone, he'd said. He owned her. She shuddered at the thought.

“I am not yours, Roberto. I belong to no man.” His rhetoric about possession irritated her. She immediately thought of her dreams, the way he'd claimed her. The same way he was claiming her now.

“You are mine,” he responded casually, “just as I am yours.” He raised his cup to take another drink of coffee. “You will see this in time.”

“Never,” she swore. The man was a menace, but she was compelled to stare at him. He was a fascinating man, as magnificent in his light tan pants and buttoned shirt as he'd been in his black suit the night before. Elizabeth could feel the pull of his presence from across the room. He tossed her the robe, apparently aware she would not move toward him to take it from him directly. She caught it in midair and felt his intense stare as she wrapped it around herself. Her hands trembled as she tied the belt at her waist and the ground tilted beneath her feet. It was either her wayward mind or else...

The window behind him caught her attention, as her senses struggled to move from him to her surroundings. She could see only blue, but was it sky or water? Or both? “Where are we?”

“My boat.”

“You bastard. You knew I wouldn't get far.” She regretted the outburst immediately. Suddenly afraid, she backed away from the undisguised violence in his look. But there was also something else in his eyes. Pain? The cup rattled in his grip, drops of the dark liquid spilled over the rim. Seconds later, he'd banked all signs of emotions, and Elizabeth wondered if she'd imagined the entire episode.

“You will never call me that again, Elizabeth.” Roberto's warning did not go unheeded. The steel undercurrent pierced her as though he had cut through her with a sword. Never again would she make the mistake of using *that* word.

“I'm sorry.”

There she went again, apologizing. Accepting him as lord and master while she was the humble slave. *What is going on here?* She should be throwing things at him, clawing at him with her minimal nails. Yet she stood there, frozen and in pain. For him. He appeared hurt—and something else. What? Why did it matter? Why should she be sorry for her reaction? Had an alien come and taken her mind away? She expected any moment to see a flying saucer with a laughing faceless extra-terrestrial waving her mind

like a limp cloth in front of her. The idiocy of the thought caused her to smile.

"I don't understand any of this," she said.

His head tilted and he frowned, as if he found her puzzling. His lack of remorse at her situation intrigued her. He believed he was right. Everything he'd done, he would do again. How did she know this? She should have been angry, but instead she was fascinated.

"Yet you smile," he observed.

"I know. It's crazy. You'd have to be there," she commented and then realized he probably had been. She wondered where his mind reading skills were at that moment.

"Our connection still works. You have very perplexing thoughts. I think you need coffee."

Elizabeth actually thought she needed a stiff drink or some Valium, but she took the cup he handed to her. He crossed nearer to her. His masculine scent mingled with his cologne, enticing her to let her guard down. Calm pervaded her senses. Was he now projecting emotions into her mind?

"Where are we going?" It seemed the safest avenue to take rather than focusing on his presence at her side. The coffee helped to clear her mind but she knew the havoc he could create in her if he wanted to.

"My island."

"Of course, your limousine, your boat—a yacht, I suppose? And your island."

"It is a yacht," he said. "As I told you last night, I make no apologies for my wealth. I have accumulated a modest income while awaiting your arrival."

She wondered if his version of modest matched hers. "My arrival," she repeated. "Why have you been looking for me? Why the dreams? How can you see into my mind?"

"I cannot explain. You will know when it is time."

"You're doing it again! You speak in riddles, like there's some puzzle going on here. All the pieces have to be put into specific places before you'll answer." She pounded on the bar beside them. The noise echoed painfully in her head, but it felt good to get the emotions out.

"You have a perceptive mind, *Querida*," he praised. His hand came up to stroke her shoulder. He'd done it again, drained her will by a simple touch of his hand. How did he do that? One touch and she became putty. A simple caress and her mind snapped; her body took over on its own, waiting for the next caress with eager anticipation.

"We do that together," he murmured, pulling her closer to him. He placed his cup on the bar then moved her to face him. "You have the same powers over me. I see you and I must touch you. It has always been this way with us."

His eyes darkened; the muscle in his jaw twitched and she believed him. Deep inside, she knew he was right. Whatever their past had been, it had been passionate and all-consuming. To say he was a beautiful man would be an understatement. He was elegant. His mannerisms spoke of power and privilege, yet he defied tradition in a way that intrigued her. She'd always been the one to resist making waves. Elizabeth had lived in a household where she knew she wasn't welcome and had quickly learned the art of sliding into the woodwork, amidst the furniture, the crowds.

She watched the light play against his earring and noticed his hair hung freely today. Primal need

swelled within her, too strong for her to ignore. Roberto's breath caught and held as she reached up to stroke his hair. Strands of black coal, they felt as silky as they looked. If it were possible, his eyes gleamed even brighter when she touched the small hoop of his earring, turning it about with her fingertips in fascination. His grip on her shoulders tightened, yet he stood still for her perusal. His control fascinated her, given how she'd fallen apart in his arms last night. But control was fickle, and he was quickly losing the battle. That much was obvious to her, as she felt his hands knead her shoulders and slowly start to move down her arms.

The knock on the door shocked them both. The intensity of the moment was broken as if by a flash flood of cold water. Roberto recovered faster than she did. She watched him release her with visible regret and walk over to the closed door. He exchanged a few words in Spanish with whoever was beyond the door then he turned to her again.

"Stay here. I will be back."

She watched in silence as he pulled the door closed and nearly missed the sound of a key entering a lock on the other side. The sound was so slight, she wondered if she had imagined the sound and she walked toward the door and turned the knob.

Chapter Eight

"He locked me in!"

Elizabeth tried the door a second time. "Dammit!" She kicked the door and it rattled on its hinges. After all of Roberto's statements that she was free to go, he had locked her in! Where could she go, for Heaven's sake? They were on the water! So why would he lock the door? Anger, solid and strong, flooded her bloodstream. The small statue of a man and woman entwined in passion was the first to hit the wall. The white porcelain shattered and formed a dusty pile on the Berber carpet, followed by two coffee cups and matching saucers, which she wiped off the counter with a swipe of her arm.

Mixed with relief from venting her rage, she also found her logic. Now was not the time to wallow about in hostility. There was work to be done. There would be no one else to rescue her. She would have to do it for herself.

Gazing through the windows in the room, she saw nothing but the decks that surrounded the outer walls. Even the water was difficult to see, only a brief outline of it appearing in the distance.

Elizabeth turned, taking a moment to study her prison. Small maroon curtains adorned the sides of the windows on two walls. The color combination and decor of the room shouted testosterone, from the gray walls to the maroon curtains on the windows. Given that the walls of the massive room weren't wedged, she guessed it was in the middle of the yacht. But only one door led to the outside. One firmly locked door, she confirmed, with another tug on the handle. She opened the mirrored closet doors, exposing various men's suits and casual wear. Next in line were several gowns and matching robes similar to the type she wore, then a multitude of skirts and blouses, each more colorful than the last. Everything was in her size.

The closet featured a small, built-in dresser. She pulled open the first drawer, saw men's underwear and slammed it shut. "Better keep a lid on that subject," she said. She certainly didn't need any answers to the question of boxers or briefs, but now she had one. Briefs.

"Apparently, his visions were pretty detailed as well," she mused, opening and studying the second drawer which was filled with ladies undergarments. Were they from a prior captive? An unexplainable

stabbing pain went through her heart at the thought.

"It is you I have been searching for, Elizabeth. You have no reason to feel jealous." Roberto's voice slipped into her mind as softly as a raindrop. She slammed the drawer shut and checked the bedroom door, but he wasn't there. Had he invaded her mind again? How? Unnerved, but refusing to give in to the feeling, she opened the drawer again. The tiny satin panties in her hand left very little to the imagination. Sure, it was the same quality she'd buy for herself, but they were much more daring. A strange feeling of excitement crept through her. What would it feel like to be so scantily dressed? She'd worn sexy lingerie, she bought it all the time for herself, but this was decadent, pagan, and entirely too enticing. Lately, she'd done a lousy job of avoiding temptation, so why should she stop now? She slipped the panties on.

Afterward, she closed the closet doors and paced the room. This was getting her nowhere. Besides, she needed to find the bathroom. Or was it 'the head'? She was on a boat after all.

"Big hairy deal, Elizabeth. Head, bathroom. What difference does semantics make now?" She found an adjoining bathroom, so she completed her business while she looked about that room as well. The fixtures were lavish. The mirror was etched with images of ivy garlands. Roberto San Miguel had an eye for quality. The furnishings in both rooms reminded her of the way the Sandersons had lived. They reminded her of her childhood fears of leaving a mark, or a trace of her existence on the carefully polished furniture.

Irritated that her situation was out of her control, she glanced about the bathroom for a possible weapon. She refused to be at someone else's mercy again. She found nothing unusual as she searched through the drawers. First aid supplies, an electric razor, apparently Roberto's toothbrush, and an unopened one she had to assume he had placed there for her. She seized the opportunity to brush her hair, stared longingly at the toothbrush, then gave in and brushed her teeth while she waited. One look in the mirror left her thankful for the brush she located on the counter. The only available weapons were the hairbrush and the toothbrush.

"Sure, idiot. You can't even breathe right when he's around. Will you bang him over the head with the hairbrush, or will you maim him with a toothbrush?" She cast both clattering against the wall.

Ten o'clock. He'd been gone for about an hour, perhaps longer. The clock by the bed had escaped her wrath and Elizabeth wondered what he'd say when he saw the piles of broken debris scattered around the room. Would he be furious or would he understand her hostility? Where was he? Another half-hour passed, and she didn't know whether to be worried or grateful. Since her inspection of the room had turned up several clothing options, she considered taking a shower. Did she dare? It was too much to resist.

"Ohhh," she groaned in pleasure. The hot water did wonders to restore her sanity. The shampoo she'd found had a delicious tropical aroma, leaving her hair feeling like soft, wet silk. She gently worked around the bump on the head. It felt the size of a bird egg and stung slightly, reminding her that she hadn't come here of her own accord. Roberto had a lot to account for, but later, after her shower.

She allowed the water to stream down her back, easing the slight ache she'd felt since she awakened. Sufficiently cleaned and refreshed, she pulled back the glass door to the shower and made a grab for the towel she'd left hanging on the door. Her eyes closed from the streaming water and remaining soap, she grabbed again and decided the cloth must have fallen to the floor. She felt around for it while she wrung out her hair with her other hand.

Elizabeth cried out in shock as Roberto wrapped a towel around her head. She stiffened, but oddly enough didn't feel any pain from her injuries from last night. Why not? When had he come in? Her cry of surprise was stifled within the thick cloth.

"Relax, *Querida*. I came in to help, not frighten you," he said.

Her heart jolted in fright, but she quickly realized she felt no danger from him. His touch was gentle. Still, what right did he have to just show up while she was so vulnerable? She pulled away and ducked, crossing her arms over herself to cover what she could. It didn't matter that he'd already seen her naked once. At least then, she'd been unconscious. She wasn't in to offering peep shows.

"I locked that door. How did you get in? Get out!" Elizabeth attempted to slam the glass shower door. His hand caught it before it crashed to the wall and possibly broke.

"I have a key," he said. "Come here," he instructed as he held out the second towel. "I will dry you." He held out the towel as a parent might hold it for a child, but his glazed expression was pure male admiration.

"I've been drying myself for years," she said with a poisonous glare. "I don't need your help, I need a towel."

Roberto smiled broadly and tossed her the large, fluffy, maroon cloth. His eyes glittered as she pounced on it and wound it around herself. Her fingers hurt, clamped tightly around the edges of the cloth.

"Leave, Roberto."

He stayed, leaning against the sink and counter. He picked up her underwear and spread it forth in his hands, as if he was envisioning her in them. The aroma of a recently smoked cigar lingered in the air, leaving her dizzy with longing and fright. *Since when did she like cigar smoke? Was this another of the mysteries of her past?* Even now, she could feel herself leaning toward him. This had to stop.

"I said leave!"

Her knees knocked and she shivered, standing there wrapped in the maroon bathsheet like a geisha, watching him. She silently damned him to perdition.

"You are not drying, *Querida*. As Americans say, perhaps you choose to drip dry?"

She wished he would quit ogling her, the intensity of his stare a stark contrast to the eyebrow he had raised in question.

"I'm waiting for you to leave." Her self-control had limitations and he was exceeding them. "You know the way out."

"There is no reason for shyness, Elizabeth. I have already seen every part of you at least once. Much more, if you consider the visions I've had while waiting to find you. I must say reality far exceeds the fantasy."

"Does the expression 'peeping tom' ring any bells? What part of *get the hell out of here* don't you understand?"

"I will go," he agreed with a frown. "The time will come, Elizabeth, when you will ask me to stay. Perhaps even ask me to join you."

"In your dreams," she muttered as the door closed, and then realized the irony of the words and shivered. If her own dreams were an indication, he was right.

The panties still felt warm from his touch. No, she had to be imagining things. She put them on, sliding the soft silk up her skin. The bra had the weight of a feather and teased her nipples with ticklish lace.

Decadence was enticing, she decided. She felt vibrantly and deliciously sensual, gazing at herself in the mirror, at the vision of her figure in the bra and panties. She remembered his desire. For her? Impossible. Or was it? She had never considered herself as attractive, but she exercised and took care of her health. The reflection in the mirror proved she was more of a woman than she cared to admit, even if she did try to hide it.

Her tattoo sat brazenly on her hip, a reminder that her life had changed with a dare. Roberto had mentioned it last night. Surely he'd seen it when he'd undressed her and put on her nightgown. What had he felt when he'd discovered it? Was it really 'his mark' as he'd said? Elizabeth looked at the clothing left on the counter, realizing only then that they were not the clothes she'd chosen. He'd obviously replaced them with his own preference. The delicate shoulder straps of the bra would show, given the off-the-shoulder style of the new blouse. She could either wear the straps lower on her arms or leave off the bra.

"Dammit," she cursed and then caught the reflection of her frown in the mirror—it lacked strength. In fact, she had to wonder if it was a frown or a wry grin. Was she angry or amused? There were times Roberto acted worse than one of her students, pulling whatever trick was necessary to get his way. But he wasn't a student or a boy. This man simply went by his own rules. And whether she wanted to admit it or not, she was attracted to him. The attraction went beyond his gorgeous looks and great body. She gravitated to the man within.

"Oh, grow up, Elizabeth." She glanced between the image and the blouse. "If they burned bras on city streets as a protest, you can go a day without one. Quit being such a wimp." Still, it felt odd. Removing the lacy contraption, she pulled on the peasant blouse and skirt. Seconds later, she laughed at herself, crossing and then uncrossing her arms in front of herself repeatedly. She looked as if she was warding off evil spirits.

The vibrant red of the off-the-shoulder peasant blouse made her face shine radiantly in the mirror. Why hadn't she tried changing colors before? The full, ruffled skirt was wonderful. She swished it around her legs playfully. She had never seen herself like this. Dismissing Mrs. Sanderson's doctrines on vanity, Elizabeth felt confident, beautiful ... until it came to opening the bathroom door.

* * *

Roberto watched as she slipped shyly out of the bathroom, and felt as if someone had stuffed his mouth with cotton. His dove had turned into a glorious, colorful macaw. The blood in his veins raced hot with anticipation. His lips curved as he watched her conceal the bra in her hands and quickly open the closet doors, burying it in a drawer.

"No longer the shy virgin," he murmured. Her nipples peaked and he shifted in his seat, trying to relieve the discomfort of his suddenly tight pants. "You did leave the brassiere off. I like that."

"It's obvious?"

He sensed her desire to hide in the closet, as well as her newfound awareness of herself as a woman. His rose had definitely emerged from the snow.

"Do I get to keep any of my secrets?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. "Do I get to learn any of yours? Like how you pull things out of my mind as easily as someone grabs a book off a shelf?"

"What secrets should soul mates keep from each other?" He leaned forward in the stuffed chair.

"Soul mates," she repeated. He could hear the doubt in her voice. "You really believe this, don't you?"

"Look within, Elizabeth. You know it is true."

It was true, and she knew it. He listened to her thoughts as she tried to deny it and then felt her acceptance. But destiny ... destiny was a different matter. He felt her discomfort. She turned away, staring at the stranger reflected in the mirrored closet doors. Alice—she thought she was Alice in the looking glass.

"It bothers you that I can read your mind. I can feel your turmoil," he said. She blinked. "What if we were on even ground? What if I could show you that you have the same power? You have already heard my thoughts at times, but you weren't ready to accept the truth. Look at me, Elizabeth," he commanded in his silky-steel voice. "What am I thinking?"

She stared back at him, her brown eyes wide and frightened.

"You must relax, *mi amada*." Gently, he channeled his thoughts to hers, ushering calm where panic had been. Her arms lowered and he knew she was ready. "Look into my mind. Try."

A lengthy pause followed. She stared at him and then turned away. Roberto understood. Even after years of training, there were times he could not read her thoughts. Lust got in the way. He concentrated on the message he was trying to send.

"It's a presence," she murmured. "Like voices whispering in the dark, only I can't make out the words. Is this how it was for you?"

"At first," he admitted. "With practice, you tune out the other noises, like static in a radio. Try again."

Silence filled the room and creases coursed across her forehead. "You find me attractive."

He sighed. "An understatement. Look deeper."

Her awareness of him as a man pleased him, but it was not what he was looking for. "Dig deeper, Elizabeth."

"Don't disturb me," she snapped.

He chuckled. She was determined. It was a very good sign. His Elizabeth was truly up to the tasks that lay ahead.

"Your other half. You consider me your other half." Her eyes gleamed with excitement.

"Much better, *Querida*. In time, you will know my thoughts as quickly as they occur." He sensed something else then, something dark and disturbing. "You think it best to know your enemy. This is smart, but I am not your enemy, Elizabeth. There is no need to escape."

Her eyes narrowed and his hopes plummeted. Frustrated, he cursed Eduardo Hernandez. The man had given him precious little time to court her as she needed. The need for her protection outweighed her need for freedom, stealing the time to accept what was between them. He watched as she shifted on her feet and gazed longingly at the locked door.

Perhaps he could distract her. "Your hair is curly," he observed. "Dark and long, with loose wavy curls, as in my dreams. How is that?"

"It's naturally that way. I hate it. I normally blow-dry it straight."

Her hands moved to her hair and she held up a strand in contempt. Roberto could stand it no longer. She

was as skittish as a mare in heat and looking for a means to escape. He moved from his position in the chair to come to her side, reaching for the same strand as she released it to his care.

"I find you breathtaking, Elizabeth. Absolutely intoxicating."

He sensed her melting, but she drew back. Her eyes wide, he could see the reflection of his own passion within. It was the same every time he came near her. A portion of her mind held her back. She wanted him, but she was afraid to make love. Afraid he would steal her soul? He was stunned. What was that all about? He could answer one fear, but he would have to think on the other.

"Elizabeth, please do not move away. We will not make love here, I only wish to touch you."

Elizabeth wondered how Roberto could be so certain, given their powerful attraction to each other. His kiss was gentle, a light breeze to a flower. He demanded nothing, yet gave everything. Fears were pushed aside as her more sensual nature took over. Her arms came up around his neck as if by their own will. Her fingers wandered between his soft, smooth hair and the roughness of the leather band holding it in one place. She felt such a variance in textures at her fingertips. After a moment's hesitation, she gave in to temptation and removed the band, loosening the silky strands to her touch.

Roberto moved her hair to one side as he reached to nuzzle her neck, inhaling the scent of her hair. Elizabeth's mind stopped where her passion began. They backed into the closet door together, and he pulled her away from cold metal. Her knees buckled as his kiss deepened. He was lost, as desperate for her as she was for him. She could sense the urgency of his thoughts and feel his struggle for control.

He picked her up in his arms, carried her like a feather to the stuffed seat near the bed and sat, with her in his lap. He caught her whimper in his mouth, kissing her hard as his hand climbed up her leg, stroking her thigh and moved the material of her skirt aside. Where he touched, she burned. She moved closer to him, a silent request for more. He made her hungry, ravenous for his touch.

Her arms tightened around his neck, pulling him closer to her, or her closer to him, she didn't know which.

"Open to me, Elizabeth," he said, his voice hoarse with desire. His tongue playfully enticed her lips to obey and she opened her mouth for his deeper kiss. He moaned at her submission, and his hand cupped her bottom as he pulled her against him. Hard met soft and she could tell it was not enough for him, but he would not allow himself to relieve the torture he endured.

"Do not move," he coaxed her, as his hands stroked her thighs again, moving between them with no complaint from her. She no longer asked why she allowed him such liberties. Her mind could only react to the shared thoughts moving freely from his brain to hers, his thrill at stroking her soft, warm skin. A vision of naked bodies entwined in passion, his tongue pulsing in and out, an imitation of what they would share in an intimate act of ultimate trust. There was power in his touch, yet he was gentle. She felt the feather soft grazing of his hand as it moved nearer to the center point of her heat.

The feel of his mouth on her skin electrified her. His hands worked magic on her legs, coaxing them apart bit by bit. Her breath caught as she felt his finger caress her panties, the very core of her femininity. She tensed in shock.

"So hot." He groaned. "Too much, Elizabeth. It is too much."

She thought she read his mind as he determined that he dared go no further or he would be unable to stop. His hand moved once again down her thighs and he shifted her skirt, stroking her outer thigh. His finger stroked the side of her hip nearing the mark she knew he would find if he lifted her skirt. A bolt of searing heat blazed through her as his fingertip touched her tattoo. *I have found you—we are one.* His

awe as he traced the pattern shook every fiber of her being.

His hand reached under her blouse as she pulled his mouth to hers for another kiss. His bare hand against her midriff lay still for only a moment.

"So soft. You want me as much as I want you," he whispered. He captured her mouth again, a pirate plundering treasure. She was going under for a third time and she had no thought to struggle. He weighed her breast in his hand, plying its fullness before tantalizing its tip with his fingers.

Roberto lifted her higher in his lap and covered her breast with his mouth, dampening the thin fabric of her blouse. She felt the connection from her breast to her womanhood, a direct line from one to the other as he continued his assault on her senses.

"I must see you," he murmured. He lowered the shoulders of her blouse to expose her breasts.

Elizabeth never thought to object. He pulled her down farther in his lap and his warm hand covered her breast. She shut her eyes and bent her head so he would not see her feelings of self-doubt, but he would have no part of it.

"Open your eyes, Elizabeth. I want to see what you feel when I touch you." He clasped her chin and turned her to face him. She was immediately reminded of her dreams, his constant desire to see what effect he had on her. His words brought a split second message that she should be afraid of something. *But what am I supposed to fear?* When she managed to focus on him, he was smiling down at her.

"So breathtaking," he murmured. His fingers whispered against her breasts, bringing each to an erect point. As he gazed down at her, she was unable to stop trembling.

His thoughts converged once more with hers. He couldn't believe he was finally touching her, feeling her respond to his caress. For a brief moment, she knew his pain, the loneliness he'd endured until he'd found her. The frustration of her erotic dreams was nothing compared to what he'd endured. She saw a fleeting image of a small, lonely, dark-haired child gazing out over the ocean, looking for answers and knowing they lay across the watery boundary of his island.

The knock on the door nearly stopped her heart. Intelligence returned and the shock wave penetrating her body matched her frustrations. Had she truly seen what she thought she had, or was it an illusion? She glanced down and panicked at the sight of her exposed breasts, her skirt nearly up to her waist. Good heavens, what had she allowed him to do now? Her blush went farther than her face. She could feel it envelop her entire body.

"Yes, Raul," Roberto called out.

She started to cover herself up, but he stopped her. Roberto pushed her hands aside as she reached for the sleeves of her blouse to pull it up. Thankfully, the door didn't open. Elizabeth began to struggle in earnest against the strong arms that held her in place.

"No," he whispered huskily. "Do not run away again. Your thoughts and your body are safe with me."

Her efforts ceased as she stared into the midnight black of his eyes. He was reaching inside her mind again, projecting calm reassurances. She wondered if she'd ever get used to his magic.

"He will not come in," Roberto reassured her.

"Your meals are ready," Raul called through the closed door.

Roberto continued to palm her breast. "*Uno momento*. One moment," he called back. His gaze never

strayed from her face. "A shame. I am hungry, but it is not for food."

A thrill spiraled through her. Was it possible to be turned on and embarrassed at the same time? Several minutes passed before he released her and she wondered what Raul was thinking as he stood outside waiting for them. Roberto seemed in no hurry as he adjusted her blouse and pulled her skirt down. He smiled contentedly at her, but there was an undercurrent of another emotion still present.

"Don't get up," he said, one arm firmly wrapped around her middle to ensure she stayed put. "I need you close to me."

She was still on Roberto's lap when he called out to Raul, informing the man that he could bring the meals inside. She barely heard the key turn in the lock, her attention focused on Roberto's hand slipping discreetly under her skirt. Her face heated as she wondered if Raul would notice the wandering of Roberto's hand.

She clamped hard on his fingers and hissed, "Stop it!"

Raul placed the food on the counter and left the room as quietly and unobtrusively as he had come in, locking the door once more behind him.

"Good God," she cried. "How could you touch me like that, with Raul in the room? How could you embarrass me like that? Your men will think—"

"That we are lovers?" he asked. His calm in spite of her distress irritated her. "We are," he said. "I correct myself—we have been. We will be again."

She slammed her elbow into his chest as she scrambled out of his grasp. Standing took more strength than normal. Her body still reeled from the effects of their lovemaking. She felt naked though she was fully clothed.

She paced the room on wobbly legs. "Look, I'm tired of this charade. You speak of the past like it was yesterday. Yesterday, I was with my friends and having a good time. I don't know about your past, but my past started at my birth, which I don't even remember. I've had one life, this one. One," she repeated adamantly. "And up until yesterday, you were not a part of it." She pointed her finger at him, wishing there were a dagger in her hand that she could throw at him. "I want my life back," she demanded. "I don't want to be kidnapped. And quit playing with my mind. I don't want you to touch me again so I'll forget who I am and where I belong. I want to go home."

She felt as if she was standing on the edge of a cliff, one footstep away from hysteria.

"I am taking you home. Our home," he responded calmly. He rose and walked toward her even as she backed away. "You cannot deny what is to be."

"Your home!" She turned away, blinking back tears. "Your boat, your island. You just don't get it, Roberto. I can't do this. Can't you see? I can't be what you want me to be, some part of a handpicked harem on an unknown island. Who will I be then?" A single tear breached its captivity and slipped down her cheek.

"I'm Elizabeth Sanderson," she shouted. "A third grade schoolteacher from Tampa, Florida. I am not a sex-starved female, just waiting for a pirate to carry her away!" She kicked the counter with her foot, instantly regretting it as pain seared up her leg and the sound of dishes clattering echoed about the room.

Roberto groaned. She could feel his frustration, just as great as her own, which added to her pain.

"I have no harem, Elizabeth. I have waited for you since childhood. While I have enjoyed the physical

pleasures women have to offer, I have never given one of them reason to believe it was more than sex, until you. You are my soul mate. You are to be the mother of our children and stand by me as we both grow old."

The dam broke and the remainder of her tears spilled forth, drenching his shirt as he held her close. He believed every word he'd spoken. And she knew he was right.

Chapter Nine

Elizabeth became ugly when she cried. There wasn't a ladylike bone in her body as far as she was concerned. When tears flowed, she puffed up like a blowfish and looked worse than a cat thrown in a full bathtub. How many times had her foster mother said it?

"Stop believing the words of fools," Roberto commanded. He clasped her chin and raised her face to meet his gaze. "You are charming, even with these tears. This Sanderson woman was an ignorant fool." His grip tightened on her chin and she could feel his rage. Then his hold softened and he gently kissed away the drops remaining on her cheek.

Softness flooded through her. Other than Lisa, she'd never had anyone take her side before. She'd never cried in front of anyone else before either, except as a child in the Sanderson's house. Elizabeth had cried only twice before she'd learned that sympathy was handed out in very small doses.

"A woman should cry from happiness," he said. "It is my fault that you fear me. I lose control and you see a man who wants physical pleasure. You do not see how much I love you, how long I have waited for us to be together." He sighed and loosened his arms about her. "You do not know the dangers that await us, the challenges we must meet to have the love we lost generations ago."

"Tell me of the challenges, Roberto. The dangers," she urged. A hiccup escaped, followed by others. They were another reason why she refused to cry. "Tell me why you lock the door behind you, why you keep me a prisoner."

"First, we should eat," he encouraged softly.

He placed his arm about her shoulders and moved them toward the counter. Within seconds, she was sitting on a barstool with a plate of eggs, bacon and toast in front of her, together with a separate plate of various fruits. Her stomach growled. How long had it been since her last meal?

"You were unconscious a long time, Elizabeth. After the danger was over, you continued to sleep. It was as if you were making up for lost time," he said with a wink.

Roberto prayed that his teasing would help ease her mind. He wasn't ready to discuss Eduardo Hernandez. How was he to tell her what she must endure until the nightmare ended? He watched gratefully as she began to eat, savoring each bite and reaching for the next. His own appetite grew and he ate as well.

"It's not like you had anything to do with my not sleeping," she answered.

A small smile played about her mouth and she blushed sweetly.

"Such a shame," he said. "I had hoped you received as much pleasure from the dreams as I did."

She turned a darker shade of red and Roberto chuckled. Despite what she'd originally led him to believe, she had enjoyed the intimate visions. Yet she had never allowed them to affect her heart. That part of her mind was still closed to him, locked up as safe as the American Fort Knox. He teased her mercilessly as

they both filled their bellies.

"Enough," she announced, pushing her plate away. "You promised me answers."

Roberto's lips twitched. The schoolmarm was back and his time was up. "Would you prefer to sit on the bed or come back to my lap?"

"Right here is fine," she said. Her mouth tightened and he knew she was afraid he'd pick up where they'd left off earlier.

"What if I promise not to ravish you? You can tie my hands if you like," he offered.

Her eyes narrowed and he sensed the moment she'd decided to trust him. His heart skipped a beat as she nodded in agreement. "Do I look for rope?"

"There isn't any in the room," she said. "I searched earlier."

"Yes," he murmured. "I noticed you'd been busy. I won't tell you from which dynasty the shattered vase came."

There was no remorse in her expression and she offered no condolences. He deserved neither. Roberto seated himself comfortably back in the stuffed chair and extended a hand to welcome her. She lingered at a distance for several moments, then perched herself cautiously on his lap. Another victory, he thought. Hope grew, pushing aside some of his earlier concerns.

"Answers," she reminded him.

"I am working on it," he said. Where should he begin? "The Hernandez family has been at odds with the San Miguels for more than fifteen generations. However, ten generations ago, Rafael San Miguel stole something from Esteban Hernandez which brought the families to war."

"What? Jewels? Land?" she interrupted.

He smiled at her intense interest. He'd learned something new about her. His Elizabeth loved a mystery.

"Worse," he said. "A slave girl. Esteban's favorite."

"Two families went to war over a woman? It's unbelievable!" Her mouth opened and closed without saying a word during a lengthy pause. "Even if it's true, why would Rafael San Miguel steal Esteban's favorite slave? Why not another one?"

"Rafael loved Lupita. She was the lost part of his soul, the air he breathed. He could not leave her in the clutches of Esteban." *Would she make the connection?*

"Ten generations," she mused. "In the past. You're talking past lives and you believe you're Rafael reincarnated." She backed up and studied him closely. "You're serious, aren't you? And I'm supposedly Lupita?"

She slipped off his lap and edged away. Roberto watched her grimace as she backed into a wall across the room.

"Okay, let me get this straight," she began, "You're Rafael and I'm Lupita. So this Eduardo Hernandez must be Esteban?" He nodded, irritated at her smirk. She didn't believe him. "And you've recently escaped from—" She paused, her hands flipping open, fingers extended with an air of exaggeration. "What kind of mental institutions exist where you come from?"

"Elizabeth," he ground out from clenched teeth. "This is not a joke. If you do not believe me, then tell me what you think could cause everything that has occurred. Your tattoo, for example? Our dreams? Why did you recognize me in the restaurant? And what about Eduardo's men breaking in your house?"

Her eyes widened and she stood, frozen to the wall. He was certain the partition was the only thing holding her up. He stared at her for a long time, wondering what he could do to convince her, but her mind was closed to him. How could she ignore so many things that had happened? Fury filled him. If he remained in this room, he would devastate the fragile relationship they were developing.

"*Madre de Dios!* Such a stubborn woman!" He pounced out of the chair and stalked to the door. Jamming the key from his pocket into the lock, he quickly opened the door and slammed it behind him.

Elizabeth leaned against the wall shocked at the rage she'd seen on his face. His cheeks had gone rock hard and his eyes had become chiseled pieces of black ice. She stood—numb—nearly missing the sound of a key turning on the other side.

"Dammit!" Not only was he a crazed lunatic, but he'd locked her in again! She searched the room, looking for something to throw. Nothing. She'd broken it all earlier this morning. Angry and confused, she did the only thing she could do. She paced.

Hours later, she knew it took twelve paces to clear the room in one direction, fifteen in the other. And she was no closer to answers. Her mind raced round and round, trying to put reasonable explanations to events. She tried to get some information from Raul when he came in to pick up their dishes. Her efforts at the Spanish language were no help. He merely stared at her stonily, picked up the dishes and left within seconds, locking the door behind him.

Was it possible Roberto was right? No. She refused to believe it. There had to be more to this story than he was telling her. Entire families did not go to war and wait generations for reincarnation, just so they could settle the score. Her mind whirled until she was dizzy and too tired to stand.

Finally, she napped, exhaustion taking its toll. If she had no control over her imprisonment, she could at least choose how she would spend it. Sleep seemed as good an option as any.

* * *

Roberto silently entered the room. He'd known before he'd come in that she was asleep. Tenderly, he slipped Lupita's delicate gold bracelet around Elizabeth's ankle. His breath caught as he noticed how right it looked, the aged yellow against her skin. Another piece of the puzzle fell into place.

Elizabeth didn't awaken as he kissed her forehead and pulled the light covering over her. He eased himself into the stuffed chair and laid his head in his hands. He hated the deception, the need to cause her pain. But it was a required evil, as necessary as his invasion of her thoughts. In her sleep, he watched as she dreamed.

Lupita's body moved, her dance steps in perfect time with the music of the flutes and stringed instruments. Men smiled as they watched her hips sway to the provocative beat of the drum. Women scurried to place food on the tables and avoid the eager hands of the men who waited to be served. She was in a great dining hall and while there were other women dancing with her, the man seated at the center of the head table seemed to have eyes only for her. His beard gave no indication of having been cleaned since breakfast and his lewd grin spoke words she had no interest in hearing. Her skirt swished as her pelvis continued to move, suggestive motions, a part of the dance she did not want to be dancing. But she had no choice in the matter. Such was the way of life, a slave had no choice in the orders she was to follow. She felt no joy when she was allowed a brief reprieve from her required dance. He

wanted her. He called her forward, motioning for her to come to him. She would rather have danced. At least performing, she had distance from his greed and unpleasant hands.

“Lupita,” he called. His smile widened as he watched her discomfort. His clapping hands made the call more like the command it was.

She neared the front of the table, further dismayed as he motioned for her to come to his side. She avoided the hands of other men that sought to touch her as she made her way. Their actions only seemed to please Esteban more. It was normal for her master. He lived for power, to have something that someone else desired. Her bare feet moved quickly to fulfill his order. The marks of the whip, hidden beneath her skimpy clothing, were enough to remind her that she should not disobey him.

As she neared his side, she attempted to stand far enough away that he could not grab her. But he would have no part of it. His hand clamped around her small arm and he pulled her across his lap. Her skirt unwrapped enough that a large portion of her legs were exposed.

Esteban took full advantage. His hand reached between her thighs and squeezed, the darker skin of his hand a contrast to the lighter color of her flesh. She wished for a dagger to stop his greedy explorations, but she knew better. He was the master. Instead, she sought refuge in her mind. His other hand pulled her closer and clamped around her breast. He laughed at her closed eyes, her only escape from the leers and lascivious remarks of others at the table. She opened her eyes at his command.

She saw only one man who appeared to be uncomfortable by the entertainment Esteban provided at her expense. She recognized Rafael San Miguel and she knew instinctively that the anger reflected in his face was not directed at her. In the many occasions she had seen Rafael in this house, she had noticed his compassion for her predicament. His fists were clenched on top of the table and though he smiled in response to a remark Esteban made, the smile did not reach his eyes.

“Lupita.” Esteban spoke loud enough for all the men to hear. “You will go to my room and wait for me there.” He shoved her off of his lap and swatted her backside as she hastily left the room.

* * *

Roberto felt pain as Elizabeth whimpered in her sleep, restlessly turning about and looking to escape the torment of the dream. He rose, approaching the bed and wished he could take the visions from her.

But it was impossible. The secrets she gleaned from the metal bracelet were too important. After all, she was Lupita, returned to the earth just as he had been. Elizabeth did not know it, but she had the strength necessary to meet the tasks ahead.

Her blouse had ridden up from her waist to expose a small portion of her midriff. His hand stretched out, he stifled the urge to feel the tantalizing softness of her skin. Her skirt lay haphazardly across her legs, the linens kicked aside during her sleep. He hungrily absorbed the view of her exposed legs.

She grew increasingly restless, moaning in response to the vision, her emotions, as Rafael squeezed Lupita's breast in her dream. Impotent fury consumed him. How he wished there was another way. It pained him to see her torment. He agonized over seeing the images she was forced to endure. Lupita's life. It would take time for Elizabeth to understand, but she must learn Lupita's secrets in order to gain freedom. He stifled a groan, Elizabeth's mind as exposed to him as parts of her body.

Instead, he focused on the future. Roberto's body temperature rose at his memory of undressing Elizabeth two nights before. He recalled his thrilled shock at seeing the silk and lace she wore under her prim and proper disguise. His hands had shook as he'd removed the feminine layers of material, and though he had known to expect it, he'd struggled for breath at the sight of the crest on her hip. To see

proof of that which bound them together had sent him to his knees, a grateful prayer on his lips for a gift he would never believe he deserved. He shuddered as he remembered it and stared at her as she lay before him now. She would be his once more, just as he was hers.

Elizabeth woke to his smug smile. He stood with his back against the wall, watching her. He knew she had sensed his presence and awakened as a result.

"You were dreaming." He sat down beside her on the bed. "It was not a pleasant experience."

"I don't dream."

He chose to ignore her lie. There would come a time when she would accept her destiny. He could see her efforts to sort through the visions and come to a conclusion. He did not like the direction her thoughts were taking, nor did he like the way she backed away from him after she'd sat up. She sought to explain the episode as a figment of her imagination. They had spoken of a slave girl named Lupita, therefore, she'd dreamt of her.

"Dreams are as visions," he said. "They are windows we can look through to see truths." Roberto stood, afraid he'd shake her from frustration. Somehow, he had to make her see that their situation was real, all of it.

He knew he had an unfair advantage. She was still an infant in her abilities, while he'd had years of practice and specialized training. She didn't appreciate his reading her thoughts, but right now it was necessary. It was pointless to put her through the pain of seeing her past life if she was incapable of processing the information she'd learn.

"Well, you can label them visions or windows, it doesn't matter to me. I see them as a valuable waste of sleeping time," she said, lacing every word with fire. "So leave me alone on this and stay out of my mind!"

Elizabeth wanted no part of the truths she'd witnessed in her sleep. Lupita was unreal, a result of being kidnapped, locked in this room for hours on end, and that crazy story he'd told her before he'd stormed out. That she had seen Roberto in this same dream and given him a different name was merely a coincidence. The good Rafael and the evil Esteban were probably her own interpretations of the man who inspired lust with a glance, yet locked her in a room. It was stupid to feel lust. She needed to escape.

He was grinning like a cat after downing a bird. Now what? She longed to wipe that stupid look right off his face. Already, she could feel her arm itching to swing at him. *Why does he have to look so good?*

"I hate this room, and I'm pretty sure I hate you. How long have I been committed here?"

Her sarcasm should have bitten him like a snake. The boat shifted lightly, reminding her they were at sea. She envied the fact he could enjoy the salty air while she was locked away in her beautifully decorated jail. She grimaced as he shot her another grin.

"You are right, I have not been hospitable." He walked away, unlocked and opened the door to the room. "Raul. We will dine on deck this evening. Take care of the arrangements." After locking the door again, he walked back to her in silence.

"Don't you think it's rude to enter someone's mind uninvited?" she growled. "I wouldn't do that to you. You'd think there would be rules about this."

"There are some rules handed down," he answered. "And as I explained earlier, this ability to read minds is limited. I can read your thoughts and your dreams, but I cannot compel you to act according to my

wishes. With others, we can merely sense emotions.” He stared at her speculatively. “With you, I have every reason to enter your mind. Your safety is my first concern. You may need my guidance as you progress with your own powers.”

“Powers, huh? It's too late for me to turn into a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. I'm too old. Maybe I can become something else?”

Humor had been her safety net since childhood, particularly the self-deprecating kind. Oh, she knew the dangers of it. She knew it lowered self-esteem, but look how far taking herself seriously had gotten her, especially now. Her attempts at humor rendered a smile on his face. “Right now, I feel more like Barney.”

“Barney? What is a Barney?” he asked. Perplexed, his forehead lined with creases.

It was her turn to smile. “You're a lucky man if you have to ask that question.” She wondered if he'd read her mind or let her ask the next logical question. “How am I to get these powers? And why? Why me?”

“You are my soul mate,” he answered simply. “The explanations are long.”

She sensed the evasion in his mind and lost her short-lived good humor.

“It is best we discuss it over dinner. We will dine in one hour,” he said. “Would you like to prepare in any way? Perhaps a shower? Or would you like to freshen up, and change your clothing?”

She shook her head, got up from the bed and adjusted her clothing as she went. The glimmer in his eyes dimmed. She didn't need to read beyond his expression to know he'd been envisioning a repeat performance of this morning.

“Well, I could do with a shower and a change of clothes,” he said. He turned away and went to the closet, opening it and pulling fresh clothing out.

She panicked as he swung back toward the bathroom and opened the door. “You're going to shower here?” she shrieked. Her hands trembled and she thrust them behind her back. *Now what is she supposed to do?*

“Of course.” He winked. “You're free to join me if you like,” he said then shut the door behind him.

Elizabeth saw a white football marked with the letters UCLA standing out in blue and gold. She hadn't noticed it before. Angrily, she plucked it off its holder and hurled it at the closed door. Even with the door closed, she could hear his laughter. “Jerk. Twerp. Your lordship,” she spat, pacing in a circle.

She had never had a man shower at her house since her foster father had died. She'd never had a lover spend the night. Then again, she'd never had a lover. All sorts of concerns beset her as she debated what to do while he was in the bathroom. She heard the shower turn on, and her imagination went wild as she thought of the water running over his skin. Her body raced between hot and cold in response to the thought.

Elizabeth made up the bed then returned to pacing. She heard odd little noises coming from the bathroom, the buzz of the electric razor, running water from the sink, a bump against the cabinetry. All of it was an erotic reminder of what she'd missed in her life. For the first time, she felt the absence.

The bathroom door opened again. One look at Roberto clad only in a towel left her feeling as if a two-ton safe had been dropped on her head. She glanced down, to ensure she wasn't on her knees. Had he come out like that on purpose? Whatever the case, her heart raced and her stomach felt as if it had fallen to her feet. Dark curly hair swirled around his nipples and then formed a V down his flattened

stomach and ducked beneath the gray cloth. He had a slight belly, which caused her to smile. Her dark Adonis wasn't perfect. Warmth spread through her as if she'd sunk into a heated pool. She gazed downward, skipping the toweled area.

His legs were like magnificent trees, the visible portion of thighs to calves, covered in the same dark fur. She'd never imagined a man so beautifully constructed. True, she'd seen underwear layouts in catalogs, but this was real. He stood right in front of her, not on a glossy page. Her gaze was drawn lower. Feet had never seemed so interesting. She noticed the length of his toes, fascinated by the curly little hairs projected from each toe. Then her eyes rose upward once more and stopped. What she saw next left her feeling like she'd taken a sucker punch to the stomach from a boxer.

"Elizabeth," Roberto warned. The ridge in the towel was too visible to be ignored. "Elizabeth," he hissed, "it would do us both well if you were to find something else to stare at."

"Oh. Oh," she stammered, then her face burned. Anger followed swiftly. Her gaze finally rose above his belly button and met his glittering eyes. "Why are you yelling at me? I'm not the one who came out here nearly naked, expecting to get a rise out of the new roomie."

Her head turned at his loud guffaw. The door to the bathroom slammed behind him, and she replayed the events in her mind. *Oops! I used the wrong words there.* Anger dissipated quickly, replaced by girlish giggles. Her body wobbled, as out of control as her mind. The last two days had been like a roller coaster, zigging from side to side, then up and down. The calm part of her nature warred against the reckless side. Many times already, she'd caught herself liking the chaos, liking the way her life was out of order. She was alive—and it felt good.

She shuddered, thinking of how much her world had changed. How much had she changed as a result? If she was beginning to enjoy the chaos, what did that say about her? A glimpse of herself in the mirrored closet doors sent chills down her spine. She didn't recognize the woman staring back. Inside the strange clothes, was she still Elizabeth Sanderson? Or was she beginning to believe his tall tales?

Chapter Ten

Roberto came out of the bathroom three-quarters dressed and wearing a sheepish grin. His all black clothing made him look dangerous and extremely sexy. One look at his eyes and Elizabeth knew he was fully aware of the way he caused her hands to tremble and her stomach to flutter.

"I am sorry, *Querida*. You are right. I should have thought before I walked out here like that."

His smile was out of place for his confession. Lip service. He was testing her, testing her attraction to him. This *connection* as he called it, was working on both ends. Elizabeth watched as he buttoned the remainder of his shirt, minuscule portions of skin revealed and then covered. His smile broadened as he lowered the zipper to his pants and tucked the shirt in.

"You're playing with me again. Aren't you?"

He was teasing her, drawing out each step as he moved the black fabric into his pants. She watched him zip back up and buckle his belt, unable to look away. His every move fascinated her, and he knew it. She'd never seen a man dress before. Forget male strippers, she decided. It's more erotic to see a man put clothes on than take them off.

"There are all forms of play between a man and a woman," he said.

She'd bet he knew every blasted one of them and was itching to try them out on her. She blinked, a vocal

response impossible.

"A man dreams of seeing his woman look at him the way you are doing right now. Your lids are heavy, and your pupils are wide, as bright as the stars. The passion is there for me to see it. It thrills me to know it is for me alone, *Querida*." His fingers traced down her cheek and she shivered in response. "We must leave this room at once," he murmured, "or I will have you on your back." She felt the pressure of his hand on the small of her back, propelling her toward the door. It seemed not to matter whether she'd intended to prepare herself for dinner after all. "We will not need shoes."

His announcement made perfect sense to her, but she had no idea why. She didn't notice his bare feet until later, the oddity of his dressed up appearance combined with an absence of shoes. An aristocratic man with a twist of peasant mixed in. Interesting.

The splendor of the boat disarmed her, and she absorbed every detail into her senses. Her thoughts of escape slipped temporarily to the side.

"Your boat is beautiful, Roberto. Everything is so crisp and white. I feel like I'm staring at a magazine page."

Her excitement dimmed when she noticed the flotation devices. They bore the name of the boat. *Lupita*.

"It was the only name I knew until I found you," he explained hastily.

Great, she thought. They were back to that. Why was it that the only man she was interested in, was in love with a woman dead for ten generations?

"Elizabeth, the past is behind us," he said. She heard the urgency in his voice and sensed it within him. "I know you believe this is all a hoax, but I promise you it is real. Rafael and Lupita's love was true. We are not Rafael and Lupita. They are dead. Only their past haunts us. You and I have been given a precious chance to build our own dreams. It is up to you to reach out and take it." He sighed heavily and rubbed his chin in frustration. "Come, there is more."

He led her to the deck where a table was laid in preparation for them. Candles flickered against the soft breeze and a bucket of ice housed a bottle of what she suspected was champagne, waiting to be opened. Classical music filled the air, the perfect level for them to hear the music in the background yet not overpower any conversation.

"Raul worked overtime preparing this for you," she said softly.

Even the outdoor chairs seemed to be set out for an evening of quiet relaxation and romance. The candles on the end tables beckoned, the small flames flickered in the light breeze as the boat moved along the water. The sun hung far to the west, brilliant splashes of orange, pink and blue complimented each other in perfect harmony. How she wished she could paint, and do the image justice.

"That's where you're wrong, Elizabeth. He prepared it for you. He wanted to impress you. Even the sky wants to impress you. Your beauty only makes it have to try harder."

She started to laugh at his comment but held back, startled by the intensity of his onyx gaze. A thousand butterflies fluttered in her stomach and she glanced away then nervously looked back. Compliments were rare in her world, and she'd never taken them well. His study of her features was an act of worship. What should she do with her hands? His attention made her tremble with anxiety. Was he real or an illusion? No man had ever looked at her with such stark hunger. Men rarely looked at her at all, and yet Roberto seemed to search every pore and was pleased with what he saw. For the first time in her life, she felt beautiful.

"*Querida*, you are very much so. Your face shines with life, laughter yet to come. And your eyes speak like jewels yet to be uncovered."

"Roberto, please quit this." Her voice sounded weak, even to her. She had to stop listening to his flattery. His words were like water to a desert, but she couldn't depend on sweet nothings from a man who kept her a prisoner. "Why don't you open the champagne?"

"It is not a sparkling wine," he corrected her. "I hope you do not mind and that you like this vintage. The grapes are grown in our own vineyards."

"You have a vineyard? On your island?"

"Of course."

The unspoken words seemed to hang in the air. Didn't everyone? She had to wonder about that.

"There are very few things that must be imported," he explained. "If you are fond of American jeans, we will have to import them."

She ignored the implication she would remain on his island, under his dominion as if she was one of his belongings. Somehow, she would find a way out from under his control. Was his flattery a part of the plan? Why did she feel as if she was losing something by leaving him?

He opened the bottle of wine with the ease of someone who had done so all his life. It furthered her suspicions that he'd lived an aristocratic life. He didn't offer a smaller portion of the wine for her to taste and then fill her glass. Perhaps he knew she was too much of a novice to know how to evaluate the flavor and texture of a wine?

"Delicious," she said. She'd never tasted better wine, but then again, she wasn't overly familiar with alcoholic beverages. She noted his delight at her approval, only then taking a sip of the beverage himself.

"Where is your island?"

"Our island, *Querida*," he corrected her. "It is not far. We will be there in the morning. Are you eager, Elizabeth?"

Eager was not the word she would have chosen. Try nervous, scared, excited. Excited? No! She had no place for excitement in her life. Look at where it had taken her so far—she thrilled to his voice, his touch, his silent stares. This mysterious man captivated her, kindled thoughts of adventure and passion. Yet he'd admitted he had tried to get her drunk, he'd kidnapped her and was taking her—where?

"You still choose to consider this a kidnap, *Querida*. It is not," he crooned, suddenly beside her. "I am returning you to your rightful home. Protecting you from others, who would harm you."

"Because of a war started ten generations ago," she mused dryly. "And in case you've forgotten, I have a home. In Tampa, Florida." She stared somberly out over the water and ignored the fact he hadn't answered her. "Exactly where are these people who would harm me? Close enough to give you a reason to lock me in a parrot cage?"

"Look." He pointed in the distance, toward a smaller boat than the one they were on. It appeared several miles behind them. "That is Eduardo Hernandez's vessel. He followed me from *Isla de San Miguel*, and he follows us now. A small motor boat could cover the distance within a very short time. Or he could have a spy among my crew, capable of carrying you to Eduardo or killing you on any one of these decks." His bold stare singed her with intensity. "You have thought of escape, but I can assure you the

effort is not worth it. You would be in Eduardo's clutches within an hour."

"So you lock me in," she began, wetting her lips to fight her terror. "To protect me. Just as you say?"

"Yes, *mi amada*."

"But this makes no sense, given your gift of sensing emotions," she said. "Surely you'd know if you had a traitor on board?"

"What makes a traitor, Elizabeth? Is a man a traitor because he saves the lives of his family, but sacrifices an innocent soul in the process?"

He took a swallow of his wine and leaned beside her on the railing. As she admired the multi-colored light from above reflecting on the water's surface, she felt his inner turmoil. Silently, she slid her hand over his, accepting his pain as her own. He lifted it to kiss her palm then clasped her hand once again within his own.

"Eduardo gains his private army through fear. Many families have already lost their homes. Children have died so that Eduardo can have what he wants. If I cannot defeat him, my people will continue to suffer." Lines etched his face and her eyes blurred with unshed tears as his guilt and concern transferred through his mind to hers.

"And where do I fit in?" she asked.

"Lupita," he answered.

"Lupita," Elizabeth repeated unconsciously, her voice a whisper as though the name itself would draw forth an image. It did, shocking her further as she saw the young slave girl in her mind. "This doesn't make sense, Roberto. None of it."

"The pieces of the puzzle," he reminded her. "You have the answers within you. I cannot give them to you. You must find them within and solve the puzzle."

She sighed. "So I'm a key to a mystery set in action generations ago. Lovely," she said. Sarcasm dripped from every word. She pulled her hand away from Roberto and looked back at the boat in the distance. Would Roberto lie to her to get what he wanted? What if she solved the mystery, what then? Would she be sent back to her empty life, left with a broken heart and a memory of adventure on the high seas?

"Come and sit with me," he urged, "while my man sets our dinner out."

He couldn't stand to listen to her questions, the fear in her heart. Nor could he answer her, since her doubts were about him. She would have to come to trust him, but to trust him she'd have to know him. He directed their paths to the oversized chaise lounge, which he'd told Raul to set out for them tonight. Roberto settled all the way to the back of the chair, then motioned for her to sit down beside him. Relief flowed through him as she took a seat, scooting close to his legs. His benevolent God was blessing him once more.

"Are there no women on this boat?" she asked, glancing over her shoulders. "I've heard the men as they worked today, but I haven't heard a single female voice."

"Not at this time, no," he said. "I felt I would find you this trip, so it was necessary to protect them and leave them at home. On the island, you will find many women with whom to become friends."

He could read the question forming in her mind, but he decided to allow her to ask it instead. Now was not the time to lose ground by upsetting her with his telepathy skills.

"You're protecting the island women by not bringing them along? How's that?"

"Imagine you are Eduardo's man," he suggested. "You find a woman on board the yacht, but you don't look closely at her. So you snatch her, take her to Eduardo. He recognizes the woman from the island and kills her. Now, I am responsible for the death of one of my own, an innocent pawn in a relentless battle."

"You care about these people," she realized. Perhaps she could trust him as well?

A gentle breeze blew strands of her long hair across her face and Roberto could not stop himself from reaching forward and tucking it behind her ear. He smiled at the shudder that went through her at his touch. She turned away, but not before he heard the tenderness in her sigh.

"*Isla de San Miguel* is more than my home," he said. "It is the home of my people, those who trust me to provide for them. I ensure their safety. I am a San Miguel, it is what we do." Pride puffed up his chest and he was amazed that the heaviness on his shoulders had eased. She was responsible for this. Just by being with him, she'd lifted his burden. "Eduardo Hernandez has run out of time. His money is running out, as well as his patience."

Her touch on his foot was light as a feather, a wisp of a breeze, as her fingertip traced the tiny bones of his toes.

"You have a foot fetish, Elizabeth?"

He read her thoughts and knew she was contemplating the differences between them. She hadn't realized she'd been touching him. His blood heated at her blush. He instantly regretted the loss as she plucked her hand away and jammed it into her lap. Thinking more about her actions, Roberto rejoiced. She had touched him of her own accord. He'd enjoyed every one of their intimacies, but he'd give the world for her to trust him, touch him of her free will.

"I'm sorry. I had no right," she stammered. She gazed up at him and shyly focused on his face.

"You have every right. You may touch me as you wish." With the announcement, Roberto leaned back and placed his hands behind his head, inviting her to partake as she would. He recognized her temptation, the way her fingers itched with anticipation. It would take a single heartbeat to cover the distance between where she sat in the front of the lounge chair to where he lay farther back. He made no apologies for the ridge beneath his zipper, evidence of his heated state.

"Coward," he teased. He rose up, fully aware of her interest as well as her hesitancy to follow through on her desires. "Dinner is served, *Querida*." He pointed to the table, laden with food that beckoned both by smell and by sight. "Thank you, Raul," he said, escorting her to the table and pulling out her chair.

Elizabeth hesitated before sitting down. She'd never known a man to be so chivalrous.

"What manner of men are there in Tampa that you have been neglected so? Surely there are still gentlemen who believe in treating a woman as she should be," he said. Her perplexed look spoke volumes. "A woman should always be regarded as a gift from above; she is someone to be cherished and nurtured. Men can accomplish great things if they remember the benevolence of God," he said.

"I don't date much," she murmured. She nudged the food on her plate with her fork.

He sensed her evasion. "Of your own choice," he said, holding up a hand to stop the tirade he knew was coming. "You dressed yourself to be unseen. You hid behind clear glasses and you cower at every advance I make. A woman makes choices, or sometimes they are made for her. Which is it for you,

Elizabeth?"

"Women should be recognized for their minds, before their bodies. We're intelligent beings. Yet men—even you—look at the package first," she snapped.

"My love, you weren't just hiding your body. You were hiding your soul."

"What could you possibly know about my soul? Besides, of course, what you've stolen from my thoughts," she demanded. She slammed her fork to the table and pierced him with a glare.

"Souls are exposed in various ways. You are a caring person. You thought to ease my pain only moments ago. There is passion buried deep within you, which frightens you to the core," he continued. "You seek romance and mystery, yet you hide at the very hint of both. A pirate novel, an empty house, and a cat you seem to have forgotten about. It is a sanitary existence, Elizabeth. Love and destiny, on your own terms."

"Look, Romeo." She pinned him with a glare as she stood up then leaned down to face him. "When you're held in a locked room and searching for escape, there's very little reason to consider the cat that was left behind. Survival comes first, which means getting the hell off of this boat before I'm captive on an island in the middle of nowhere." She sizzled with fury. "As for romance, show me one that works and I'll bite. And destiny? Ha! You're going to try to tell me that I've lived twenty-eight years, just to be kidnapped and solve the mystery of another woman's lifetime?"

Her hands circled her waist and he knew she was debating throwing her glass of wine in his face. He braced himself for the sticky liquid. It never came. Elizabeth just stood there, her chest heaving and her stance gloriously defiant. Roberto had another image of Lupita, standing the same way in defiance to her future mother-in-law.

"Have you never thought of destiny, my sweet Elizabeth?"

"Destiny," she muttered. "Man is born, man dies. What someone does during the course of his or her lifetime is a personal matter. To think otherwise would be to believe there's some giant being up there, yanking our strings. I can't believe God wanted puppets when He created the Earth. Wouldn't that be like reading the last page to see how the story turns out? If you know the ending, why read the story?"

"Please sit back down, *mi amada*."

The way she huffed and then plopped back in her seat amused him. He knew better than to show it.

"So, the path people choose within the course of their life cannot lead to an ultimate end? Destiny cannot coexist with free choice?"

"What would be the point of it?" she asked. "Destiny, by definition, is a predetermined course of events."

"So were you not, by your choices, creating your own destiny? The isolated life, the choice of teaching, the single friend you accept into your intimate circle?"

She did not like the way this was going. He could see it by the way she shuffled the food across her plate. He tried another tack. "My mother was a servant in the San Miguel household," he said. "My father saw her and wanted her. I was born as a result. My father's wife refused to accept me in the *castillo*, so my mother and I were sent to live in a smaller village. She was given work away from the *castillo* until my father's wife died. We were brought back as servants, but on my father's deathbed, he acknowledged me as his son and heir. I became a San Miguel that day."

Roberto watched her reactions, the emotions which flickered on her face then disappeared. "When I asked him why he'd forsaken me as a child, he declared that I needed to live the life of the people to understand their hopes and dreams. His choice was my mother. My choice was to accept the responsibilities he handed down to his son. *Isla de San Miguel*. Was it destiny or coincidence?"

A lengthy silence followed Roberto's revelation. He saw Elizabeth's uncertainty, her mind working to fit all the pieces together. He was illegitimate, which explained his vehement reaction to her curse earlier, and the pain she'd seen in his eyes. He knew the moment she'd realized they had a lot in common, each a part of this world yet they were castaways. Elizabeth fought the urge to agree with him, that destiny could exist. Then, he watched her discomfort and was not surprised when she changed the subject.

"So, that's your take on destiny. What's your belief on romance?"

"Ahh, romance," he murmured. "A delicate flower to be nurtured until it reaches its full potential. Love." He looked around, pointing out their surroundings. "Candlelight, flowers, wonderful food, a sky so beautiful that no artist could do it justice. A man, a woman, and a quiet place to talk or touch, whichever suits you."

Elizabeth shifted in her seat and rubbed her damp hands on her new skirt.

"But love," he paused. "That is something more. It goes deeper than the staged efforts of either a man or a woman, and far beyond the passion we share. Those who are lucky enough to have all three—romance, love, and passion—are the blessed ones. We shall have the three."

"I think you're mistaken," she lied. "We have chemistry and you have very good employees, who are working overtime to build the romance. But your plan is not going to work." She picked up her fork and placed it back down. "Even if you are an artist with pretty words."

"Ah, *Querida*. You wish me to believe that you have no romance in your soul," he said. "I know this is not true."

"You don't know me at all." She nervously thumped her finger against the table, while her other hand lightly shook. "You have this vision in your mind, somehow connected to this Lupita. And you're trying to change me until I fit the mold. Do I remind you of a dancing slave girl?"

"You remind me of the woman I have loved over many lifetimes," he said. "Yes," he corrected her as she shook her head in disbelief. "I love you for your soul, not for your dancing skills. Although it is an erotic memory."

"I don't understand you at all. To me, I have dreams. You have memories. There's a big difference between a dream and a memory, Roberto."

"Then can you explain why we both have the same dreams?"

He had her there. He read her mind as she searched for an explanation, but none of them proved logical. She couldn't explain things to him any better than she could to herself. She looked down and shook her head in frustration. The colors on her plate did little to soothe her shattered nerves. Vibrant hues of red, small pieces of tomato, mingled with the yellow of her rice and the green of her fresh broccoli. She would have to remember to compliment whoever cooked the meal on his ability to make it look so appetizing.

"Do not try to change the subject. Yes, the dinner is most appealing. We were discussing much more important things."

"Don't do that," she growled and slammed her hand against the table. He'd read her mind like he was reading her diary. Drops of red wine splashed from her glass, leaving an eerie image on the white tablecloth, which unnerved Elizabeth. "I don't like having my mind gone through like someone's file cabinet." She glared at him, irritated by his amusement. "What will you do when I'm PMS'ing?"

Roberto saw the shock in her eyes. She couldn't believe she had actually voiced the words.

"I will do what men have done through the ages. I will bring you flowers and stand patiently while you throw them at me." Roberto chuckled cheerfully. "I will bring you daisies and not roses so I will not be cut by the thorns when they land on my head. And I will wrap them in paper, not in a glass vase, so it will not hurt as badly when you try to break my head as though it were an object of wrath."

She paused again, her mouth opening and closing without a sound.

He'd done it again, taken her by surprise with his little boy charm. She smiled. "You're not going to do it, you know. You are not going to make me like you."

"I don't have to," he replied with a satisfied smile of his own. "You already do."

"You have an incredible ego!" She frowned and looked away. The trouble was, she did like him—far too much for comfort.

"Tell me of your childhood," he urged. A change of subject would help. He'd already given her enough food for thought.

"What's to tell?" she asked. "I was a foster kid. Mrs. Sanderson was nice enough. I think she was the real reason I was there. I wasn't beaten or neglected, just—"

"Ignored?" he supplied.

"Not really," she said. "I just knew I was in the way. I wasn't a part of Mr. Sanderson's plan. So I rebelled, pulled stupid, childish stunts. Every time I did, he stared at me as if he was wondering why he bothered with me."

"You were expecting them to send you away?"

That got her attention. She hadn't even formed the thought, yet he'd seen through her emotions. "How do you do that?" she asked.

"It's a gift," he said. "Sometimes it's an affliction." He shrugged. "We can discuss it later. Please continue."

"I didn't belong. Oh, they never said as much, but I knew it. They argued at night. He didn't want me around, she did. Sometimes, I'd hear them whispering in the dark. I couldn't understand the words, but I knew they were talking about me."

Elizabeth turned her head and she was whisked back in time. Now that she thought about it, the voices she'd heard from her foster parents had sounded a lot like those she'd experienced in her experiment with Roberto. Was it possible...?

"They said I was strange," she said. "My birth parents disappeared when I was three, maybe four. I don't remember them." An image bounced in her mind then disappeared. She was finger-painting. It made no sense, Grace Sanderson wouldn't have allowed her to finger-paint any more than she'd have let Elizabeth construct a bomb. Unconsciously, her fingers traced over the red stain on the tablecloth. She'd had a

devastating experience with finger painting in kindergarten. Red paint. How strange to remember it now.

"You remember nothing about your birth parents?"

She shook her head sadly wishing things were different. It must be wonderful to have some piece, a tiny residue of the couple who'd conceived her and brought her into the world. Had they loved her? Hated her? Enough to abandon her while she slept? Her stomach twisted, making it difficult for her to swallow her dinner. "I couldn't be adopted for some reason. Either it was citizenship or something else. I'm not even sure how the Sandersons managed to keep me over the years. It doesn't usually happen that way." A lengthy silence followed, the kind that usually set her on edge, as if she was waiting for a verdict of guilt. "Let's change the subject," she said. "Tell me about your life."

"Well, you know that I was raised on the island." She watched in fascination as an odd expression lit his face. "I knew who my father was. I have always known of my family's beginnings and my heritage. I cannot imagine your loss."

"It's not devastating if you don't know what you're missing. A working knowledge of your ancestors isn't required for a person to survive."

"But you still feel the pain," Roberto countered.

He'd hit too close to home. He knew her too well and she was only beginning to understand him.

"You spent some time in the States," she urged. There had been another lapse in the conversation. It was either talk or play with her food. His eyebrow rose in question. "Unless I'm mistaken, you've said several things more American than island. Plus, there was a UCLA football in the stateroom."

"You are most observant." He chuckled and reached for his wineglass, toasting her before placing it to his lips. I spent my college years off of the island. UCLA was my alma mater. I am educated in the laws of Mexico and of the United States, learning much of the American culture as well as my home country. The island is under the jurisdiction of Mexico. Since I did not know if Lupita ventured to the United States, it was in my best interest to learn American laws as well."

She did not pretend to understand his words. "So you were chasing after a dead woman?" She took a sip of her wine and felt it cool her throat.

"My search was for a dead woman's possible descendant," he corrected her. "It was and is my hope that Lupita may have remarried and had children by another man. There was no evidence she carried Rafael's child when she left the island, but I do not rule out the possibility. As I said, you are most observant." He winked and a shudder went through Elizabeth. "A past life is more comfortable than having an intimate memory of your grandmother, eight times removed?"

"Most people prefer to think of their grandmother as the type who baked cookies. Not dancing erotically for their master. I find this conversation very uncomfortable," she responded cautiously. "You do realize that if she was pregnant with Rafael's child, we could be related?"

He dismissed the thought with a wave of his hand. "The possibility is there, I agree, but it has no legal or personal bearing. The generations that have passed and the marriages in between would have thinned the bloodline. To be honest, I was not looking for you because you may carry San Miguel blood. I was looking for you because I know you are my soul mate, just as Rafael recognized Lupita as the woman he was destined to love."

Her appetite floundered, then disappeared and she pushed her plate away. "So we're back at destiny, past lives and all that other bull. It all goes around in circles for you, doesn't it?"

"We can ignore it for now, *Querida*. Sooner or later, you will discover the truth for yourself."

"So, other than studying the laws of particular countries, what else did you do in the States and in Mexico?"

He smiled at her change in subject and she was relieved that he let the matter slide. He pushed his own plate aside and rose to leave the table, coming behind her to pull out her chair as well. "Come. Let's go over to the lounge chairs." He ushered her toward them.

She watched in silent appreciation as he pulled out a cigar from a box on the nearby table, quickly lighting it with a match from the same box. She was struck with a sudden image of having seen this same scene before in her mind, though where or when she did not know. *Deja vu*? Even the scent was familiar and comforting to her. Another image flickered—Rafael San Miguel? Roberto was smiling. He reminded her of Ghillie when she'd captured a lizard and held it under her paw.

"Don't even say it," she warned. Already, she felt the errant thought transfer from his mind to her own, ignoring his soft chuckle in response. She sank into the neighboring chair stonily.

"Better than a telephone, eh?" His laugh permeated coiled muscles, ready to spring like a clock wound too tight. She watched in fascination as he turned the cigar about in his fingers. "What were we discussing?" he asked. He took another puff. The burning edges formed a perfect circle about it, and she found herself enjoying the resulting scent. "Ah, yes. My time in America. The San MIGUELS have always been what you would call financially secure. It made my stay in America much more pleasant than it could have been otherwise. I was on a mission, yes."

He was searching for her. She knew it and was caught between fascination and fear. What if he was right about their destiny?

His lips curved and she stared into his blinding smile. "It is a small step from question to belief. One has only to open her eyes and the truth is known."

She choked. "America? I believe you were saying—"

"Coward," he said with a chuckle. "Very well. On the more entertaining side, I've studied the various forms of martial arts, marksmanship, archery and I've dabbled in swordplay. Fencing is a growing sport in America."

"That explains the muscles you've built," she commented dryly.

She thought it also explained his ability to force his way into her consciousness. Everything he had mentioned so far indicated his determination to act as the aggressor.

"You flatter me, *Querida*. I do choose to act pro-actively rather than to react to situations."

She studied him again, admiring the smooth way in which he handled himself. He knew what he wanted from life and took the necessary steps. If she weren't careful, he would add her to his collection. She was quickly getting used to being around him, though she would never use the word comfortable where he was concerned. Then again—he had a way of getting under her skin with just a look. He could heat up her senses without even trying.

"*Querida*, you have that look about you again. It is fortunate that Raul has come to clear the table."

His voice held all the passion of silk sheets, candlelight and sensual whispers in the dark. He reached up and touched her hair, sending a shiver down her spine. She would have liked to look away toward Raul

to thank him for dinner, but she was held in the trance of Roberto's eyes.

"It is difficult to determine if I have been transported to Heaven or to Hell when I look at you. Heaven because of your beauty, and Hell because I want to touch you in ways I cannot. When you are ready..."

Had he meant it as a reminder to himself or a warning to her? His eyes grew dark, twin flames of desire. Sex. That's what this was about. Or was it? If it was, he could certainly have sated himself before now. She hadn't offered any real resistance, had she? Would she, if things came down to the nitty-gritty?

Raul made quick work of emptying the table and placed fresh glasses and a new bottle of wine at the table once it was cleared. She could hear him in the distance, while Roberto's smoke rings mingled with the breeze, then floated beyond them as the yacht made its way in the water.

Roberto's baritone voice broke into her quiet observations. "Are you familiar with chess?"

She was surprised to realize how long they'd spent in companionable silence. "Some," she admitted shyly.

"I thought you might be," he teased. He pointed toward the board that had been set up on the table where they had eaten dinner. "I believe it is best to remain out here rather than to chance temptation in our room." Her face burned with embarrassment. "Okay, so I was thinking of myself, trying to ensure I would not be driven wild with more primal pursuits."

She turned her head away and prayed he couldn't read her thoughts. He wasn't the only one who fought sexual frustration.

"We have until tomorrow morning to reach the island," he said.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow they would be at the island where, if the future held true, he would make love to her as he had in her dreams. Heat burned from within, even as she lied, telling herself she didn't want him. She could not want him. He was wrong for her. His beliefs were not her own. He was too certain of himself—too potent.

"Destiny works through a path of its own," he said. "I am aware of your hesitation, but I assure you that when the time arrives, you will come to me."

Without another word, he rose and towered over her with his hand outstretched. She put her hand in his and followed him to the prepared table. With an air of someone who had substantial knowledge of the game, he placed a different colored pawn in each hand and passed the pieces back and forth. Finally, he extended his closed fists toward her so she could choose her color. She was light. He was dark. How fitting, given his mysterious arrival and perplexing behavior.

He indicated she should go first and she moved a pawn two spaces forward. Roberto quickly made his move and smiled as she placed a second piece in position, this time only one space forward. He returned, this time more aggressively. She would play this game on the defensive, much as she had to do with him in real life. Would he always be the aggressor?

His perfectly aligned white teeth glistened as he smiled. She forgot her next move and nearly forgot the game entirely. "Do you mean to be so distracting or is that just an unfair advantage?" she asked.

"You forget that you pose the same difficulties for me." He grinned, making a counter move to her change in position. "The queen of this board game is certainly not as beautiful as you are."

"Oh, but she's so stately." Elizabeth couldn't believe the way she sounded. She was a tart, dangling a dare before him like a steak before a wolf. "And if she's not beautiful than why is every other piece in

the game after her?" Another move, this time, a bishop moved forward in the field.

"She has an assumed air of power," he said. "I make no assumptions about you. Was there someone I needed to defeat in order to claim you?" As if to prove his point, he claimed one of her pawns.

"A subtle way of asking if I had a boyfriend back in Tampa?"

"Yes. I suppose it's my way of asking if I needed to challenge someone to a duel," he said. He waited for her to move again.

"Where have you been, Roberto? Duels are out of date. Nowadays, a man just takes the woman by the hair and throws her on his yacht."

Good God, she was flirting with him! He seemed as surprised by her words as she did. He nearly knocked over some chess pieces and sent her a dark, steamy glance.

"My mistake," he murmured.

For several minutes, he responded absently as if his mind were more on the game. But she could hear rumblings from his mind, vague erotic images and softly spoken words in Spanish.

"At what point do we make love until we are both speechless and can't remember our own names?" he asked.

That stopped her cold and she narrowly missed knocking over the board. Okay, rule number two, she counted, never flirt with this man. But she loved seeing him smile. He chuckled, but only briefly.

"Check." Elizabeth moved her piece into position. She giggled at his look of shock, and knew she'd caught him off guard. He'd been more focused on her than the game. Excitement danced under her skin and newfound confidence zoomed through her. Maybe she could hold her own with him.

"Very interesting." He looked again at the board, then over at her. "You will be an excellent challenge. I would prefer to be in our state room and speechless, but we have time."

He moved easily out of check and the game was off to a more heated pace. *So much for my fifteen minutes of fame.*

"Don't you think this is a little unfair? You can, after all, read my mind."

"A gentleman never presses the advantage. Better to lose graciously than to win by cheating."

"Hmm. Spoken like a true diplomat. Rather like the politician who says he prefers plaid." She wondered if she was ready for answers. The night was so pleasant, she was afraid of spoiling it. *Carpe Diem*. Seize the day, or the hour in this case. "Tell me about this gift of yours," she said. "How did you learn of it? How old were you?"

"I was five when I saw my first vision of Rafael and Lupita. At ten, I saw you. You were posed outside your house, wearing a pink ballerina outfit, with long white strips of lace. I remember thinking it should have been a grass skirt, considering your flowery headpiece. A thin, pale man was preparing to take your picture."

"My God. The Spring recital." Her breath came in gasps as she struggled to deal with the implications. "I was dancing the part of Raina, Princess of the Snow Flowers." She looked at him through the mist covering her eyes. "You saw that?" Did she dare to admit that she'd spent most of the day dreaming of how love would find her and she'd be carried away to live happily ever after? "How? This isn't real, is it?"

Maybe you saw a picture like that on my mantle," she suggested. It couldn't be real! But, didn't it make sense? Like the fact she'd seen his face in her own dreams?

"Who can explain? Should we even try?" His finger caressed her cheek in the same way she'd come to identify with him alone. "I can offer you this, though I'm certain you'll find some fault in the explanation. I was born under a Blue Moon. Where—"

"I'm familiar with the occurrence, two full moons in a single month. It happens rather frequently according to the calendars."

"Ah, I forgot I was dealing with an educator," he said. They had already discussed her being a teacher and the perks of summers off compared to the hours of stress the rest of the year. "Specifically, I was born under a Thunder Moon, the second full moon in July. The island legend is that those born on these nights are gifted. They are the souls of those whose losses were so great, they must be granted a second chance. At life—at love."

"And this is supposed to explain it? Everything?" She was astonished. He was an educated man. He'd studied at UCLA. He even held a degree in law. For heaven's sake, according to his own words earlier, he was running an entire island as governor and caretaker! A person didn't need a science degree to know what he was proposing was preposterous.

"So that's the secret," she murmured. "Be born under a Blue Moon and voila, you're headed for a life of mystery and excitement. Kismet." Her hands rose in a pose of awestruck admiration. She paused, staring speculatively at him. "I don't buy it," she said numbly. "I was born under a blue moon, but not in July. That doesn't make me destined for a life in the stars. I can't read minds and I haven't had any mystical visions to guide my path in life."

"But you have read my thoughts," he reminded her. "Can you deny the vision was of you?"

She couldn't answer him, her vocal chords seemed to be frozen. Her silence egged him on. He went on to describe other times he'd seen her. Her first co-ed dance, graduation day at high school, the time she'd felt an odd presence around her in her bedroom. He had the details down, as if he'd made a photograph and studied it endlessly.

"Enough!" Her hand pounded the table and chess pieces bounced up in a minuscule dance, then returned to their places. "You," she said, shaking her finger at him. "You are responsible for this. I have never been this violent in my whole life." She sighed, pulling her emotions back under control. "This is impossible," she muttered. "I don't want to hear any more. Let's talk about something else. Anything else."

"Passion takes all forms," he replied. "It is like Pandora's box. Once opened, passion expresses itself in many ways beyond sex. And you, Elizabeth Sanderson, are a very passionate woman." He reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, holding on to the dark silk much longer than necessary. Reluctantly, he directed their attention back to the board and changed the topic of their conversation.

"I have enjoyed this evening very much," he said later. The bottle of wine was empty and he'd won several games of chess, although she'd won a few of her own. "We are as good together out of bed as I believe we will be in it. Somehow I knew I would like you as much as I love you."

There he goes again. He'd kept her emotions in turmoil for the last few hours bouncing from red, hot lust to intense curiosity about the man himself. A heated look, a touch of his hand against hers as he made a move on the board. Revelations about his life, intimate references to their past and the loneliness he'd endured while waiting for her to surface.

Had he really said he loved her? Even more surprising, had he said he liked her? She'd never heard a man say he liked her before, let alone say that he loved her. The words he'd said earlier taunted her. "I don't have to. You already do." She liked him too. He was fun, even playful. During the last few hours, he'd kept her guessing, uncertain as to his next move, either in the board game or toward her. He was powerful, yet he was kind and gentle, almost reverent. He asked questions like he meant them and caused her to tell him things she'd never told anyone before, including Lisa. When she spoke, he seemed to truly listen to her, not just the words she spoke but looking for the meanings behind the words.

"You are tired," he said. "I shall take you to our room now."

Elizabeth froze. Sexual awareness shot through her like a bullet through flesh.

"Relax, *Querida*. I will be staying on deck with my men tonight. You will be quite alone in the bed."

She was oddly disappointed. Was he playing with her? First, he steals her away and then he seduces her. Now he attempts to gain her trust perhaps? She was confused, uncertain of what she wanted. He could seize her, bend her to his will with a simple kiss and they both knew it. In accepting his will as her own, she'd be lost, unsure of what she would be sacrificing in the process. So why did it appeal to her?

"I am pleased to see you are not sure which you would prefer," Roberto mused. He'd evidently taken a stroll through her mind as they physically walked below deck to their shared room.

"You are a dangerous man." It irritated her that he'd managed to throw her off balance—again. She needed to remember that and not give in to temptations.

"Only to those who would hurt you. Never to you," he murmured, stopping to caress her cheek with his finger. "Someday you will see that giving in is not the same thing as giving up."

They arrived at the door to the room and she suddenly realized she didn't remember getting there. She waited as he unlocked the door for her to go in. A moment's hesitation was all it took for him to turn her in his arms.

"I have waited a lifetime for you. One night should not bother me, but I find myself hesitant to let you go. I will miss you tonight," he breathed into her hair as he pulled her close.

She could feel the strength of his arms, the tension that strummed through his body as he fought his own needs and desires to see to hers.

"Sleep well," he instructed, then kissed her slowly on her cheek.

She wanted desperately to turn her head so his lips would meet hers, willing him to use his special magic on her. She was disappointed when he drew himself up tightly and turned her to face the door. He gave her a slight nudge, to move her into the room, then closed and locked the door behind her.

Roberto exhaled slowly, the efforts he expended to keep himself from becoming more intimate with Elizabeth had been costly, both on his mind and his body.

"Soon," he chanted quietly to himself with a heavy sigh. Soon she would accept the truth about their past and their future. It was only a matter of time before she asked him into her heart, her life—her bed. Destiny and his heart were not meant to be denied.

Chapter Eleven

"Roberto, I'm not certain I understand what you're asking," Daniel said.

Roberto sighed. "I'm asking why you didn't tell me you knew my Elizabeth." He wished, for the third time, he'd waited to have this conversation in person, rather than by telephone. Face-to-face, he'd be able to discern the truth from Daniel's expressions. This way, there was a large margin for error. He couldn't afford mistakes where Elizabeth was concerned. Impatience was a poor substitute for common sense.

"I've never lied to you, Roberto. Not once in the ten years I've known you. Why should I, when I'm busted every time I try to avoid uncomfortable subjects? If you can read that, you could certainly read when I'm stretching the truth," Daniel said. There was a lengthy silence, fraught with tension and frustration. "You're asking about high school, man. I was covered in pimples, wishing I could get a date and panicking that some girl would take me up on the offer!" Daniel sighed loudly. "And they said those were the best days of our life," he mused.

"But you knew a Lisa in high school. Right?"

"Hell, yes. Lisa Porter, a drop-dead gorgeous redhead. I was crazy about her. And she did have a friend named Beth." Daniel's voice trailed off and he paused again. "But this can't be the same girl, Roberto. I've seen the portrait you made. This woman's beautiful. Beth was—Oh, God. How do I put this? She was a fixture, like a piece of furniture in a room. Not ugly, but..."

Roberto could tell he was searching for the appropriate words, so as not to offend him. "You are saying she was plain?"

"Thank God," Daniel said, exhaling loudly. "You understand. Yes, Roberto. The girl I knew as Beth was plain. Heck, the only time I ever saw any life from her was when Lisa zapped it into her. Even then, she was only mildly pretty. Not beautiful, like this woman you drew. She can't be the same woman. She just can't be. What are the odds?"

Daniel was right, Roberto thought heavily. Elizabeth was camouflaged when he saw her first, so it made sense she'd have made herself invisible in high school. If only he could think logically instead of with his heart. He would not know the truth until Elizabeth and Daniel met. Long after his talk with Daniel was over, Roberto continued to suffer surges of jealousy and concern.

Despite Daniel's words, the odds were irrelevant in this situation. The God he knew did nothing without a purpose. There must be some reason why his best friend since college would also have a history with Elizabeth. The same woman he'd been searching for since his youth, and yet, Daniel hadn't recognized her. Was Roberto acting like a jealous fool or was Daniel lying? He would know. All things are revealed in due time. Until then, he'd be watching. Waiting.

* * * *

Elizabeth hoped the hot, bubbly bath water would comfort her so she could sleep. She kept one ear open, listening for the knob to turn. Would she be alarmed or grateful to hear Roberto walk in? Hadn't she read somewhere that captives, under the right conditions, could become attracted to the captor? Dependency, she thought. When she'd first seen the article, she thought it was ridiculous. Was it possible?

Was she starting the process or was she just drawn to Roberto by physical attraction? Either way, she wasn't comfortable with the results. To this point, her life had been stable, clear-cut, even predictable. So what if it had been a little boring? A little boredom sounded good right now.

At the same time, she felt alive—excited. She was still afraid of making love with Roberto. Given the chance, he'd consume her.

“Knock it off.” She shoved her sensual thoughts aside, fingering the light gold ankle bracelet she'd just discovered. *Where has it come from?* Roberto. It made sense. Her fingers burned as she gently traced the connecting loops. It looked old and frail, but it was still shiny. She tugged at it to see if it would break easily. No way, she decided. The delicate design was an illusion. The links were stronger than they appeared. An image of ringed hands stroking the metal came to mind. Lupita! Deja vu? No way—it was too eerie to consider.

Should she leave it on or take it off? What would it hurt? She'd never had an ankle bracelet before and she felt very feminine. She pulled her wet leg out of the water and watched the gold glitter in the light. Why would Roberto put it on her? Irritated and curious, Elizabeth wondered how he would explain what he had done if she asked him. Sadly, she realized he'd probably give her a vague reflection of the truth. She left the bracelet on and it drew her attention several times as she lay down and drifted off to sleep. If she were a fanciful thinker, she'd probably have blamed her fitful dreams on a connection to the jewelry. But destiny reeked of paranormal and Elizabeth refused to believe in something she couldn't see, smell, hear, taste or touch.

Still, she dreamed...

Esteban loomed before her and bile rose in Lupita's throat. Every instinct screamed to run. Escape. Yet she kept her chin held high as though daring him to come closer. She felt strengthened by the knife she concealed in her scant and revealing garment. She badly wanted to dig the blade into his black soul. She could free herself of the torment he dealt out just by the way his eyes covered her. But it was not time.

Soon. The guards outside the door prevented immediate action. Lupita knew they would eventually lose interest in the noise and smells coming from their master's bedroom. They were the same guards who made lewd insinuations about Esteban's plans for her as they'd marched her to his room and locked her in.

Even the older female slaves had shown little pity for Lupita's situation. They had clucked as they poured scented water for her bath, preparing her for their master's pleasure. She hated them as much as she hated the man standing in front of her. Esteban rubbed his hands together, a gleam of anticipation in his eyes before he reached for her.

Lupita forced herself to stand still under his gaze, though her mind was already receding to its safe place. Then his beefy fingers touched her soft skin. The gauzy material of her clothing fell away from her shoulder with the briefest of actions. A cool breeze whispered against her skin while her soul remained safely hidden in the cocoon she had constructed through years of torment.

He could touch her body. It was his right. He was the master and she was the slave. But he would never touch her heart or her soul. This knowledge had been her salvation throughout the previous year, since she had become Esteban's property. This, and her plan to gain her revenge and her freedom. The knife remained safely clasped in her hand as she stood still, in spite of his lewd grin and the bulge that grew below his waist.

Esteban Hernandez could have been considered a beautiful man, but the evil in his soul never left his eyes. Esteban owned her, but he was possessed by the darkness of the Devil. A little more time, she considered, fully aware he would take his time before he claimed her body. He enjoyed her displeasure, foolishly assuming she spent horrendous moments anticipating the events to come.

“You think you have control over me,” Esteban said. “This is not so, Lupita. I am the master. I take what I will from you, when I want it. Put your head down and stop looking so disrespectful,” he commanded. He struck her and she reeled from the force of his blow.

He frowned as she returned to her stubborn position, her back straightening in spite of a year of his abuse. She was the proverbial willow in the wind, consistently bending to the strain of abuse and returning equally as strong when the forces of nature had died down. Esteban had worked hard to break her spirit, but he'd been unsuccessful so far.

He shifted the material around her, exposing more of her skin to his view. Normally, Lupita would have lost awareness of her surroundings by now, but tonight would be different. Tonight, she would condemn him to Hell. By morning, his followers would find his dead body and they would bury him. And she would bury her memories of Esteban, cleansing herself from his filth.

Another breeze, another touch. The feel of his hands on her body left her cold. How could a man take such pleasure in tormenting a woman who obviously hated him to the soles of his feet? A feeble woman would have broken under his taunts and forms of torture. She had seen more than one female slave emotionally die under the strain. Time passed and he grew more insistent, shoving her to the bed.

Beneath him, she bore his weight and his lusty demands, secreting the knife beneath the sheets. The guards at the door would no doubt be bored with their fantasies of rape and abuse. Her escape felt so close, she could taste it, smell it in the foul stench of the room. Esteban would never know the end was coming. She heard his grunts of pleasure as if they came from a faraway place, her separation complete from the acts occurring around her.

Now, she thought to herself. His cry of completion would be her cry of victory. His weakest moment would be her strength, and the guards would never know the difference. His blood would spill, as would his evil seed. She fingered the blade, disregarding the feel of her own pain as drops of her blood spilled onto the shiny metal. Anticipation fueled her; impatience filled her soul. He was too involved in his own pleasure to notice she'd pulled the knife from beneath the folds of the sheets. As though she was some distance away, she heard his cry of release and felt as if she'd been infused with lightning.

She plunged the dagger into his chest. His scream of surprise mingled with his roar of completion. Damn! The blade had missed its mark! Blood spewed from the wound she'd inflicted, but he'd moved and surprised her. Her breath caught and held in her throat. She'd aimed for his black heart and missed! She would remember his look of surprise for the rest of her life. She frantically hoped her life would last beyond this night. Her own death had not been a part of her plan.

Her pulse raced as he raised his arm and swung at her. With strength born from fright, she shoved him off of her before his hand could connect with her head. She was off the bed before he could recover from her attack and his prior exertion. She saw the faint glimmer of her ankle bracelet as it caught the moonlight, her eyes already searching the floor for the knife she had dropped.

Streams of sweat beaded on her skin as she grabbed a lewd statue from a nearby table, hoping to smash it against his head. Quickly. The need for urgency reverberated within her. Her hand clamped around the cold stone piece and she put every ounce of her strength behind the blow.

Esteban wobbled, his mouth open and his arm reaching out for her. He went down with a heavy thud. Grabbing her clothes, Lupita raced for the window, her heart banging against her chest, in time with the sound of the guards pounding on the door. With heaven's help, she could still make good on her escape.

* * * *

Raw fear snaked its way through Elizabeth's body. She awoke and bolted up, her pulse racing. She felt an eerie chill in the air. Sweat glistened on her trembling skin.

"Relax, *Querida*," Roberto said. "The effects of the dream will not last long."

"How long have you been here?" she demanded.

"Since Lupita was ushered to Esteban's room. I felt your turmoil and wanted to be here if you needed me."

Lupita. Everything revolved around Lupita, Elizabeth thought miserably. Her gaze fell upon the ankle bracelet that lay by her foot. The clasp had come apart and it had slipped from her leg. She picked it up and stared at it. The metal was still warm from contact with her skin. Should she put it back on? Fear mingled with curiosity as she slipped it back into place, closing the clasp once more about her ankle.

"I think I'm losing my mind," Elizabeth murmured. "What happens to our *connection* if I lose all my marbles?"

"You won't lose your mind. You have only to open it and things will begin to make sense."

"Easy for you to say," she muttered. "Just open my subconscious and I'll know why I'm dreaming of dancing slaves and evil owners. And maybe, I'll even understand why the lord of *Isla de San Miguel* wants me, Elizabeth Sanderson!"

"Make no mistake, *Querida*," he began, "the mysteries are in the past. There is no reason to wonder why I want you. You are intelligent, perceptive, caring, sexy—"

"Okay, enough!" She refused to accept any more of his deceptive flattery. He was so easy to believe, too easy. One slip and she would believe everything he'd said, everything she'd seen.

Dawn's rays shone through the portholes and Roberto's eyes glimmered with expectation. He knew, dammit. He knew how close she was to accepting these fantasies as real.

"I thought you were going to stay away," she reminded him.

"Plans change," he replied. "When you need me, I will be there. This is a difficult time for you, you should not have to suffer it alone."

"I wouldn't have to suffer anything, if you'd just left me alone in Tampa."

"Let me ask you this," he said. "Was I there when you drew the image for your tattoo? Was I there when the dreams began?"

She refused to answer. What could she say?

"If I wasn't there to begin the change, what makes you think it would have stopped? My arrival in your life was as ordained as the day you placed my mark upon your body." Elizabeth shivered and her tattoo burned beneath his gaze. "I will leave you alone now. We will be home within the next couple of hours." Roberto turned and walked to the door, then glanced back at her. "My people will love you, just as I do."

The door clicked behind him and then came the familiar sound of a key turning on the other side. Escape, she thought. Home. Fear battled with curiosity and Elizabeth couldn't tell which was the victor. She paced and came to stand at the bookshelves, perusing the titles. She was no longer surprised to find classic literature as well as books relating to mythology and folklore. She remembered Roberto saying the night before that he was interested in these subjects. He had even quoted some of the more interesting tales, pointing out particular formations in the sky that had some relation to Greek mythology.

Looking further on the shelves, she noticed some journals. They looked well used, the binding crinkled as if they had been read numerous times. Or more likely, they showed the consistency of the writer,

entering pieces of a personal life onto paper. Dignified letters stood out, portions of the lettering chipped away from the binding, logging dates of start to finish for each volume.

Fascinated, she picked up each one and carried them to the bed. The earliest journal began with an entry by Enrique San Miguel, Rafael's brother in what looked like June, 1788. The writing looked to be no more than a few years old. Why? She quickly glanced over a few more of the journals. Two others looked to be written more recently than the rest. The remainder of the writings looked older, the pages more ragged, the ink more aged. Why would those three journals be different?

How odd that it would be in English! Some of it was more decipherable than others. It was clear that the authors were struggling between Spanish and English. Where they could not seem to find the right word in English, they would insert the Spanish word instead. Given their heritage, why had they gone to all the trouble? She settled in for the duration, intent on learning what she could about Roberto's mysterious origins. She was in the process of reading the third journal much later when he walked into the room.

"You have found something interesting?" he asked, his gaze speculative, encompassing her and the books beside her. "The journals of my forefathers." He smiled.

"I'm surprised to see they are in English."

"They were originally in Spanish. When I first stepped on American soil, I knew I would find you there. I felt it was important for you to understand the history written in these books, so I had them translated and rewritten so you could read. As to the others, as time passed, my forefathers recognized the need to teach those we serve how to speak in both languages. It is important that our people are capable of functioning in both countries."

Elizabeth winced. Unable to deal with the impact of his explanation, she focused on the journals. "But the rest of this ... This is amazing, Roberto. There was so much hostility between the Hernandez and San Miguel families. Enrique writes that your great-great ... Oh, heck. You get the idea. However far back it was, your female ancestor hated Lupita, despised her almost to a death wish. It's probably a good thing Lupita was dead when these were written."

"I'm certain she had her reasons," Roberto said. "Because of Lupita, she lost her husband, her son and control of the *castillo*. It's not surprising she would hate Lupita as a result."

"So what of Enrique? According to this, he was Rafael's brother. How did he escape whatever it was that killed Lupita, Rafael and his father?"

"Enrique was the child of Jose San Miguel, Rafael's father. He was a product of Jose's first marriage. Because the child's mother died in childbirth and Jose remarried, Enrique was raised away from the *castillo*. Rafael's mother refused to raise Enrique. She would not acknowledge the child. It was the way," he said. Then he shrugged. "But she could no longer keep Enrique away after Jose and Rafael were killed. Tradition required that he inherit the San Miguel fortune and its responsibilities."

She blinked. "Rather harsh, wouldn't you say? To think a man's child could be discarded because he remarried." She hoped Enrique threw Rafael's mother out when he took over. What kind of woman refused to raise a stepchild, especially the firstborn male heir? What kind of father allowed it?

Elizabeth remembered what Roberto had said last night about his own childhood. How much harder was life for a bastard? Could people really live like that, casting a child aside because it was a stepchild or illegitimate?

"It happens."

Pain emanated from him. She instinctively reached for him and felt warmed by his touch, intrigued by the way his sorrow melted away like snow on a sunny day. He would not allow his child to endure the same hardships he'd faced. Roberto was a man of honor. While he respected what his own father had chosen to do, he would not do the same. She knew it deep inside and another piece of the wall around her heart slipped away.

"I have missed you, *Querida*. I knew to stay away, but it has taken a toll on me," he said, as his fingers worked magic on her skin. "We will be at the island within the hour. I am anxious for you to see your new home."

She froze. She should have expected it, but it didn't soften the blow. In spite of her fears, she was curious about the place—as curious as she was about the man himself. Everything about him breathed confidence and a strong will. Would he share his throne with a woman or wield it over her head? At times last night, he had shown as much contradiction as a fierce lion and a puppy. Could this man be both?

"Do not fear, Elizabeth. Everything within your new home is within your power to change, to remake as you see fit."

Beware the man who says 'do not fear' or 'trust me.' A shudder ran down her spine. "I don't see a reason to change things either here or at the island," she said. "I won't be around long enough to have a big impact."

The pain of his fingers tightening on her shoulders was nothing compared to the sinking feeling in her heart. Was she reacting to his frustration or her own?

"*Querida*, do you expect it will be so bad to be my wife?"

For the second time in a space of minutes, she froze. *Wife?* He was expecting marriage, as in forever? She must have been silent for a long time, she heard him repeat the question. He wanted to marry her?

"Elizabeth, *mi amada*. I have searched for you over half my life. Did you not expect I would marry you once I found you? I have no wish for us to live separately."

She looked deep into his eyes as he moved to be in front of her, seating himself on the bed and facing her, his hands still on her shoulders.

"I did not anticipate that you would think otherwise, or I would have told you sooner. Surely you know I respect you too much to be so free in touching you? You would think that I could touch you as a man touches his wife, his beloved, yet not give you the respect of the title? You think so little of me?"

"Roberto, I just met you. I don't even know what I think of you yet. Don't condemn me for having natural thoughts."

He had expected last night to change things between them. She felt it. Things had changed, but marriage? How soon?

"You are right. We need more time. My body aches to join with yours but our minds and souls must join first."

The heat within his eyes made her question her own resolve. Already her body grew moist, her breathing erratic and he had only looked at her. It's lust, pure and simple lust, she reminded herself angrily. Her hormones were in overdrive.

"Elizabeth, your soul speaks to mine and I can see the same needs reflected in your eyes. We will wait to join. I will give you one week to make up your mind on our marriage, whether it is to be or not. Be certain, *Querida*, that you know I will use every power within me to ensure you choose *for* me and not *against* me."

"One week? Will I need a whole week?" she joked.

"I sincerely hope not," he said with a loud groan.

He was serious. She thought he was delirious.

"I have one week to decide whether I will marry you or not? Jeez, Roberto, it takes me longer than that to choose a pair of shoes. I even read the labels of cereal boxes to decide if I want them or not." A tiny acrobat did back-flips in her stomach and her mind reeled.

"*Querida*, I could back you against this bed right now and you would accept my body into yours. I know it as well as I know every breath you take."

She couldn't argue with his statement, not when she knew it to be the truth. She wished she could deny it, or at the very least, that he could not read her so well.

"While it would be exquisite for both of us, it would not be enough. We may join before our vows are taken, but we will know when we make love that marriage vows will be said in the future. I will leave it for you to come to me when you are ready. May God have mercy on me that it will happen soon."

She watched in astonishment as he shuddered with frustration. God, how she wished he'd seduce her and relieve her of the responsibility for her own actions. He backed away from her and she felt the loss as acutely as if the sun was hidden behind a cloud. "Roberto, none of this makes sense. This attraction between us, the locked doors." She paused. "Okay, that makes a little sense, but a week to decide if I'll marry you? In my dreams, you're a threat, and you say I'll come to you? And you're saying I'll fall in love with you and want to marry you within one week? How can that be?"

I'm already half in love with you. She shuddered and tried to stifle her shock. It was impossible; it had to be. Three days, or was it four that she'd spent with him? People don't fall in love that quickly. It was frustration—it had to be.

"To love someone is merely another step from liking them. Marriage is another leap of faith," he said. "*Querida*, you ask me to explain things that are as inexplicable as the creation and twinkle of a new star. Do I need to understand the dreams to know they are real? No." He paused, inching closer to her. "I only know that the vision in my dreams is you, and I have been blessed with the knowledge of your coming for many years, preventing me from making a mistake in choosing the wrong partner for my life. They have helped me to wait for you."

He took another step toward her. "Is a week too short a time to fall in love? Is a minute? A lifetime? Who is to say, who controls the mysteries of falling in love or determining who shall mate with whom? I only know it is so with us. I know that within the week your decision will be made. You knew me at the restaurant and you came with me from the club. You will come to my bed just as willingly."

Elizabeth took a long look at the man before her, breathing in his scent and the sincerity of his words. He believed in everything he said and compelled her to do the same by the strength of his conviction. How could a man such as Roberto, who exhibited so much self-control, be so willing to accept that his own path of life was out of his control? To have a dream and accept his dream lover was his future wife was incomprehensible to her.

"Maybe the dreams mean something else." She was pulling at straws and she knew it. "Maybe it's just sexual chemistry between us. Weird sexual chemistry. Maybe all those silly childhood sayings are right. There's a guy on the fifteenth star who's doing a science experiment. You know, give them erotic dreams then put them together. See what happens? Like the sayings that thunder meant the gods were bowling?"

He turned to face her, his head tilted in amusement. Perhaps he'd never heard that one? He seemed to consider it longer than she liked. His expression changed, passion blazed in his eyes and the tell-tale tic in his jaw returned. She panicked at the hot look he sent in her direction. Mistake. Run!

Chapter Twelve

"Then I would no longer need to exercise restraint," Roberto said. "We could begin to enjoy each other now. Would you prefer that, Elizabeth?"

She was not aware she had edged off of the bed during their conversation, but, at that moment, she was glad. He would have had her flat on the mattress within seconds if she hadn't moved. And with her permission! She backed away as he strode toward her, and soon found herself cornered against the closet doors, his strong arms preventing her escape.

"It was just a thought," she whispered, his breath warm against her lips. One kiss and the decision would be out of her hands.

"You should not test me on the strength of my convictions," he warned. He kissed her. Once. Twice. "A man is not a statue you can look at and enjoy. The blood that runs through my veins is as heated as yours. Push me too far and I will crumble in my resolve, just like any other man."

She felt his mouth on her neck. His breath burned her skin as though it were a brand. Her knees felt weak. His teeth nipped at her skin then his tongue soothed the same spot.

"Is this your wish, Elizabeth? For me to take the decision from your hands?" *Yes*, she cried mutely. His hand clasped her chin and turned her face to meet his. "I had thought it necessary for you to have control over your own actions, your choice to make when and how you came to me," he said thickly.

"You forgot to say *if* I came to you."

"There is no *if*. Not for you or me," he replied. "We have control over when we accept the path, but we do not control the inevitable."

Losing herself in the depth of his gaze, she saw the truth reflected in his eyes. Images of their physical joining flashed in front of her. She felt their shared desire to mate. Elizabeth looked away from him in desperation, choosing instead to focus on the texture and coolness of the closet doors behind her. *This is lust. It has to be. What happens when the lust fades? What will I do then?*

"What we share goes beyond sexual desire. You are an innocent, you will not understand. There is a vast difference between lust and love."

She turned her head unable to face the fact he could know the truth. She was a twenty-eight-year-old virgin, an old maid by today's standards. He clasped her chin with his hand and tipped her head up to face him, then kissed her. Fire coursed through her blood.

"I am pleased by your inexperience," he said, nudging her head with his own. The husky timbre of his voice bewitched her. "It will please me more to teach you the joys of making love." He rolled his hips against hers, and she ached for more.

"Having sex, you mean," she corrected him.

"I mean making love," he said. "When the feelings are true between two people, it will always be making love. They can act with haste or in leisure. They can act crudely or with intense intimacy. It does not matter. The *souls* know they are making love."

She briefly pondered the depths of the man before her. She reveled in the feel of his touch on her skin. His words stirred her heart. She marveled at his ability to see the world in such a mystical manner, yet portray himself as a realist. How did he do it?

"I look forward to explaining this to you in great detail," he murmured. He nuzzled her neck and kissed her beneath her ear. "Later."

She didn't know whether he was talking about making love or his mystical connection. She moaned and his mouth closed over hers. If he wasn't holding her, she was sure she'd already be on the floor.

He was like an oven, everywhere he touched her he scorched her with his heat. She could feel her breasts swell against his chest, and she clung to Roberto for strength. He pulled their hips together and Elizabeth could feel his hardness against her belly. Breathing was forgotten. Everything was forgotten save the splendor of his mouth and body as it mated with hers in a timeless dance.

"Ah, *Querida*, you make me burn."

He could have taken her then. She knew it. He knew it. He'd seduced her with his wicked smile, the touch of his hands, and the sensation of his hardness against her. Frustration mounted as he softly nudged her away, and quietly withdrew. Why?

"Tell me you want me, Elizabeth," he urged. "Say yes. Marry me."

Marry? She jerked back to reality with the swiftness of a freight train at full speed. Raul knocked on the door, but neither Roberto nor Elizabeth reacted to the sound for several seconds. Roberto continued to hold her tightly against him, and Elizabeth sensed he needed the contact as much as she did.

"Yes, Raul," Roberto called out.

From a distance, she heard Raul announce that they had arrived at the island. She staggered backward. The island. Time had run out.

"*Querida*, we are home," he said. Excitement rang through every word and she glanced up and met his gaze. "My people will be thrilled to see that wanton look in your eyes, but I would wish you to save it for me alone. If you would like, I will stay to help you prepare."

He grinned as she backed away. "Someday you will be happy I understand you so well," he promised. He released his tight grasp of her waist then grabbed her arms to keep her standing. "We have a couple of minutes left to ourselves before we must leave the boat. Would you like a shower before you dress?" She nodded, still unable to get words beyond her throat. "Go, then," he said, and gave her a slight push toward the bathroom.

"Where will you be?" she asked.

He chuckled, a raspy sound. Goose bumps erupted on her arms. "Where do you want me to be?"

Elizabeth blinked. She couldn't answer. *Don't leave me. Stay here. No! Go away!*

His eyes glittered and his chicken-eating grin jumped into place. "I will bathe in another room," he said.

“Unless you'd prefer I stay?” The sound of her knocking knees under her nightgown filled a lengthy pause. “You have twenty minutes,” he said hoarsely. “Please be ready. Do not tempt me beyond my control. If you are not dressed, my people may be left waiting for several hours. I will not be quickly satisfied.”

She shivered and shot him a dark look. He'd been in her mind. He knew she was scared and uncertain. After he'd closed the door behind him, she pushed herself into action and plunged under the spray of the shower. And she worried. She had to find a way off of his island. The past few minutes had shown that her mind was in meltdown. Already, his way of thinking controlled her own. That could not be a good thing.

Elizabeth was ready when he returned fifteen minutes later. His glorious dark hair was damp from his shower. He'd tied the black strands with a leather strap and had changed into khaki pants with a sexy black shirt with small strings that hung loosely in front. Was he a pirate or Lord of the Manor? Either way, he exuded power and commanded attention.

“You are radiant,” he murmured. “My people will love you.”

Her fear rose at his words, as did her color. Would she measure up to the expectations of others? She suddenly missed her armor—her old uniform of starched skirt and blouse. She'd always felt it sent a message to the rest of the world, saying, “I don't give a damn. I'm Elizabeth Sanderson and I don't need you.” But Roberto San Miguel brought need to a whole new level.

“You make me very proud.” He turned her around in a circle and whistled softly.

Something was wrong. She could sense his tension in the air. He was different, too solicitous, almost as if she frightened him. He was in control, and had been from the start. This was his home turf, not hers. Why would he be so nervous? She studied him as he walked her toward the extension between the boat and the pier. He had one hand at the small of her back, while the other skimmed the rail, then bounced off. Then he would shove his hand into his pocket as if he didn't know what to do with it. This nervous side of him intrigued her.

“Only a few people know to expect you,” he said. “I will introduce you to each of them. Do not worry about remembering their names immediately. They understand the transition you must make.”

She slammed to a stop. *Home*. The word sprang into her mind, lingered in the air and circled around her. Home. A simple phrase yet it said so much. Too much! The impact was overwhelming. She felt his presence in her mind, but she knew the thoughts had come from inside her. *I've been here before*. How? When? It was all she could do to stop staring at the lush paradise before her as palm trees swayed in the light breeze, and pearly waves crested against the shore. The sounds were incredible, as the water swelled and crashed beside her. Childish laughter drifted in the salty mist.

The image before her, the beauty of the beach and the surrounding woods that ran along the distance, might as well have been an advertisement for a tropical suntan lotion. Children frolicked in the waves while their mothers watched patiently, and their bright colored skirts occasionally shifted in the slight breeze as they conversed with each other. Elizabeth's fingers strayed across her belly as if she could feel life beneath. Very strange, she thought. Roberto's quizzical expression made her aware of the peculiar reaction and her hands nervously fluttered to her sides.

Farther in the distance she could see houses with a strong Spanish architectural influence. Tan adobe walls gleamed in the sun pierced by wooden beams extending outward, each bearing a basket of colorful, tropical flowers. She immediately thought of the beams as fingers with string tied on the end. Bright flowerpots surrounded the front porches and large tropical trees created shade for the small children to

play.

"This is beautiful, Roberto." It was the truth, and she was touched once more by his response. Joy coursed from his brain to her own and she had the sensation he'd been holding his breath, his life on hold, waiting for her approval.

"Welcome home, Elizabeth," he said.

The statement was like a cup of sugar to a diabetic. Sweet and deadly. She couldn't be home. She had to remember that. She couldn't stay, even though she desperately wanted to become a part of this paradise. There was magic in this place, a feeling that all things came full circle.

A man of Roberto's age called out, walking toward them. She missed what he'd said and glanced in his direction. He looked familiar as well. *Is this another case of deja vu?* She wondered if her mind was playing tricks on her again. She felt the tightening of Roberto's grip on her arm and turned. The transformation that took place on Roberto's face was fascinating. One moment he was tender, misty-eyed and adoring. The next, he seemed frozen in place. His mouth was a tense line, his darkened eyes hard and unfocused. She blinked, and he changed again.

The Lord-of-the-Manor expression was back in place. Roberto's pasted smile didn't reach his eyes and he was at attention, poised for action. Was the man approaching a friend or foe? Sunlight bounced off the stranger's strawberry colored hair, giving him an angelic appearance.

She remembered someone with hair like that. It seemed a lifetime away and she studied him closely as he came nearer. Elizabeth didn't like the way he was examining her. She felt like a bug under a microscope.

"My God, it *is* you!" the new arrival exclaimed.

She'd never seen a man blink so fast, staring as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Beth. My God, you are that Beth," his voice cracked with wonder and confusion. He was obviously bewildered. His gaze flicked from her to and Roberto. "I see it, but I don't believe it."

The man shook his head while she wished he'd just introduce himself and be done with things. Instead, he took another long look at her and winked. A memory flickered in her mind and recognition dawned.

Roberto's hand tightened around her arm. She looked up at him and felt his tension. He'd been observing her with as much interest as she had bestowed upon the new arrival. This freckle-faced redhead had called her Beth. No one had called her Beth but...

"Daniel. Daniel Mabry?" Why was he here? What kind of strange game was going on now?

"In the flesh," Daniel said with a grin. He sobered immediately. "Although that could change if Roberto gets a knife in his hand." The two men stared at each other like they were sizing each other up as adversaries. "So do I live or die?" he asked Roberto.

For a fraction of a second, Elizabeth's mind went back to Roberto's actions at her house, the picture she thought he'd spent too much time studying. The Lord of the Manor kept silent, adding to her nervousness. Was Daniel serious about this live or die business?

"What's it been, ten years?" she asked. The silence between the three of them seemed deafening. "You haven't changed much at all," she commented before turning her gaze in the same direction Daniel kept looking.

Roberto's hand had stiffened and the tic in his jaw was more pronounced. She'd swear his thoughts were swirling like a tornado. Why? He'd obviously seen the picture and had known the two would recognize each other.

"Don't you think it's time you let us," she gestured to Daniel, then to herself, "in on the game? Whom were you testing, Roberto? Daniel? Or me?"

"You obviously know each other," Roberto answered, looking grimly back at her. "He wasn't certain the last time we spoke."

"You look so different from what I remember," Daniel said. "You were always pretty, but—Wow. There's no way I would have thought the girl I knew was the same one from Roberto's dreams."

"You're still a lousy liar, Danny. I was about as pretty as a tree stump." Elizabeth pierced Roberto with a glare. "Oh, Romeo. May I have a word with you?" She paused then crooked her finger at him. "Over here."

Roberto's eyes glistened with fascination, yet she was surprised he obeyed her command as they distanced themselves from Daniel. "What's going on with you?" she demanded. "You saw the picture, you knew it was coming and yet you're angry. Who are you angry with? Danny or me?"

"You have a glow about you when you get angry. It is quite attractive," he whispered.

"Don't patronize me, you—you pirate!" she shrieked. "I want answers. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were jealous." She studied him for a moment and wondered if it could be. Could it be possible?

"I needed to be certain, *Querida*. Daniel has seen a painting of you, yet he denied knowing who you were. I had to know if he was lying."

She sneered. "Daniel? That's rich. He can't lie any better than I can. His fingers tap and he squirms worse than one of my students." She paused and stared speculatively at Roberto. "So what is he to you? Why's he here?"

"Daniel is my best friend. He lives on the island."

Elizabeth choked, which brought on a brief coughing fit. The whole situation was unbelievable. First, there was Danny lying through his teeth about her having always been pretty. How could Roberto read her mind and still be left questioning Danny's integrity? What kind of magical gift was this he'd been telling her about? Was it all hogwash?

"Our gift is not hogwash," Roberto said through clenched teeth. "My response to the situation was reasonable."

"Maybe when North Dakota becomes oceanfront property." She snickered. "But your best friend? I don't buy it. Danny's your best friend and you thought he might be lying to you," she mused. "About me."

"You did not mention he belonged to Lisa." He seemed to contemplate the matter a moment longer than necessary. "It wasn't obvious from the picture who he was involved with."

"You never asked," she reminded him with a voice as sweet as artificial sugar.

"I am sorry, *Querida*."

She heard Daniel mutter in the distance, something about the great Roberto making apologies. She watched an apologetic smile lighten Roberto's tense stance.

"You were jealous," she repeated. In spite of her prior anger, a grin broke free. No one had ever been jealous over her before, it felt strange. It felt—good.

"I would never deny the truth, *Querida*," he said. He smiled as his hand came up to touch her cheek. "To think of you in someone else's arms, even that of a friend—"

The remainder of the sentence dangled in the air, while heat surged between them.

"Roberto." She was silenced by his quick kiss.

"Say nothing," he whispered. His eyes were dark with passion that threatened to explode, and a new excitement. "Let me show you your new home." He glanced over at Daniel. "I am sorry, Daniel. I should have trusted you."

"Wow," Daniel breathed. "I was right, the great Roberto really does apologize. I don't think I've ever heard one before."

"Keep pushing and it will be the last thing you hear," Roberto warned, but there was no heat in the threat.

His arm slipped around Elizabeth as if they'd been together a lifetime. She was so pleased, she sighed. What seemed to be a long-standing friendship was restored. Odd, how it mattered to her. Both men turned in her direction and studied her, long enough to make her uncomfortable.

"Now what did I do?" she asked.

"Nothing," Daniel said with a husky laugh then winked at Roberto. "Come on, come on. We must get you to the castle before all of the men become your slaves and the women become jealous."

"When donkeys fly," she scoffed. He dodged Elizabeth's playful swat, and a reminder of years past instantly floated through her mind.

Between this crack and the other one about her having always been pretty, whose leg did he think he was pulling? Roberto's arm around her tightened considerably then loosened at her raised eyebrows. This jealousy thing was very interesting indeed. It was all she could do to stop herself from strutting majestically.

What was it about this place that made her feel as if she had come home? She tasted it in the salty breeze. She felt in the way others welcomed her, and heard it in the sound of the waves meeting the shore. After three more introductions, she was whisked into a waiting jeep where Roberto pulled her possessively to his side. She had a vision of him puffing out his chest and crying out in victory. The gleam in his eyes told her that he'd taken another journey through her mind and found the vision amusing. Fireworks burst inside her stomach. For once, she was glad he could read her thoughts. She liked his smile, the one meant for her alone.

They passed more houses than she could count. Fields overflowed with thriving corn stalks and assorted vegetables. The children playing outside looked to be well fed, happy. Seconds later, she was dumbfounded. Was that a real castle? She replayed what Daniel had said earlier. *Castillo*, castle—the proof was in front of her. Tan textured walls stood proudly with exacting spaces where she expected to find a cannon perched and a guard prepared for attack. She couldn't help looking for a moat. She grinned when they passed a stream just before entering the tall gates. As a moat, it would do. The gates themselves were two stories high and mechanized.

This was a good thing, she decided. Otherwise, it would take three or four heaving giants to pry them

open. As with the outer gate and walls, the house itself was two stories high, all textured in that tan shade, which made her think of fiestas and fabulous music that could free the hardest of souls. Each window was open and bright sashes flowed freely to the light breeze. Under each window, flower boxes stood guard, full of bright, fragrant blossoms.

Her heart skipped a beat as she caught sight of the rose garden, full of beautiful, delicate rosebuds. In the very center, there was a small pond with a fountain. Water burst upward, then dropped in a perfectly symmetrical circle, the drops shimmering in the sunshine. More flowers and delicate tropical plants filled a smaller garden surrounding the front door of the home, and a brightly colored rug stood in front of the regal double doors. She hadn't noticed that the jeep had come to a stop and she was the only one left in the vehicle.

She glanced over at Roberto, then realized he was no longer beside her, but standing outside the jeep and holding out his hand to her. She felt like Cinderella, being escorted from the carriage for the ball. "This is so beautiful, Roberto." What simple words to describe the indescribable, she thought.

"Thank you, *Querida*. I have waited many lifetimes to bring you home." He helped her from the vehicle then held her within the circle of his arms.

Elizabeth didn't think. She acted instead. She kissed him, packing every ounce of her swirling emotions into the kiss. She felt the nudge of his presence in her mind and she invited him in. He pulled her to him and deepened the kiss. A second one followed, and reality ceased to exist. Their companions disappeared from thought and view.

Chapter Thirteen

Daniel cleared his throat, loudly enough to get Roberto's attention. Reluctantly, Roberto ended the kiss and held Elizabeth until she was ready to focus on reality. She'd told him more within the last minute than she'd said since the first time they met. His Elizabeth was home. They still had some distance to cover, but she'd taken the first step. He smiled at her embarrassment and pecked her on the forehead.

"I can't believe it, Roberto," Daniel said later. "Beth Santiago like this. She practically sparkles with life. So much more than the Beth I remember."

Elizabeth took the lead in walking through the corridors of the house. Roberto's heart leapt at her explorations. She was like a child, checking out every corner for a new toy.

"Elizabeth Sanderson," Roberto corrected Daniel. "My Elizabeth."

When Daniel backed away, Roberto realized how threatening he must have sounded.

"Hey, *Amigo*, it's me, Daniel. I don't poach, I don't even hunt." Daniel chuckled nervously. "But you've gotta see it, don't you? I mean she sparkles. Wow."

Roberto watched his friend glance at her again, an odd expression on his face: a mixture of fascination and remorse.

"Odd how things work out," Daniel said. "I've never had anyone look at me quite the way she looks at you." He sighed and then frowned. "I might even have to rethink my philosophy on destiny. Did she recognize you as well? It would seem she did, to react to you like this."

"She concedes there is a greater force at work, rather like you do. Reluctantly," Roberto added with a grin. It wasn't necessary to state the obvious. She responded to him on a physical level. He caught a glimpse of the San Miguel crest and frowned. The tests had begun. "She has dreams of us together. She

dreams of Lupita now that she wears the bracelet."

Elizabeth whimpered, her eyes wide with fright, her body as frozen as the statute to her left. She'd seen the crest. She glanced over at him, wild-eyed and shaking with fear. Her hand went to the tattoo on her hip as she turned back to stare at the crest. Roberto conveyed his thoughts to her. This was a private moment, meant for the two of them alone.

"It is as I told you, *Querida*. You bear my mark. That is the crest of the San Miguel family. The same mark you bear on your hip."

"No," she whispered. "It can't be true."

Roberto was instantly beside her, catching her before she hit the ground. He carefully laid her down and barked orders to servants to bring water and smelling salts.

"What the..." Daniel stood there, his jaw gaping open. "What happened?"

"The San Miguel crest," Roberto explained impatiently. "It is the same as her tattoo. She has only begun to realize I've been speaking the truth."

Daniel paled. "Tattoo? The crest?" Roberto didn't need his mind-reading skills to know he was searching for logical explanations where none existed. "How?"

"Later, Daniel!"

Water was brought, as well as smelling salts and a cool, damp cloth. Offers were made to help, but Roberto ordered everyone away. Sweat beaded on Elizabeth's forehead and she whimpered in pain, her body shivering uncontrollably. She knew. She saw. Roberto pulled her head into his lap and laid the dampened cloth on her forehead. Placing his hand over both, he ushered in thoughts of calm and peace and received the turbulent, terrifying images coursing through Elizabeth's mind.

Elizabeth fought the vision, caught in Lupita's past. She was bound as Lupita had been, tied naked to a dark stone table by thick, strong cords. A pock-faced man with a hardened expression on his face approached, a steel tool in his hand, the San Miguel crest glowing red at the end. He said nothing as he studied Lupita's nude body, but his eyes gleamed with an unholy light. Beside him, stood Rafael's mother, evil emanating from her like a beacon on a starless night.

Elizabeth tried to scream, but Lupita had been gagged, and no sound rang forth except a sob. Tears coursed down Elizabeth's face as she saw the branding iron reach Lupita's writhing body, smelled the stench of burning skin and heard the cackles of laughter from Rafael's mother.

"Now, he will never marry her," the dark-haired spawn of Satan cried. "He will see her as she is, a pitiful slave to be passed from one man to another."

Heat seared Lupita's skin, and Elizabeth convulsed in agony with her. Fever seized Elizabeth's body, and she twisted from Roberto's grasp, breathing in gulps and whimpering in pain. Roberto whispered to her, pulling her into his arms, gently conveying thoughts of soothing relief.

"It is done, Elizabeth. Let the vision go. Come back to me." Elizabeth fought him, her arms flailing as she battled the forces keeping her tied to the table. Tied to the past. "Let go, *mi amada*. Accept the darkness and I will protect you," he urged. "Lean on me and it will pass. Trust in me."

The connection between them was strong, forged stronger than the iron that had branded Lupita's bronze skin. Roberto felt Elizabeth's trust, as she wrapped her arms around his neck and sought refuge in his lap, her chin against his chest. Her confidence in him deepened, the uncontrollable shivering ceased and

her breathing became more regular. Roberto uttered a sigh of relief.

"Estamos limitados con eternidad. Le amare por siempre," he said.

Minutes later, Elizabeth's eyes opened and she gazed up at Roberto. "We are bound through eternity. I will love you forever," she translated in a whisper.

Silence followed, cleansing their souls as they clung to each other on the hallway floor. Roberto tenderly slipped a stray strand of Elizabeth's hair behind her ear. What had just passed confirmed his suspicions. Rafael's mother had ordered and witnessed Lupita being wrongfully branded as a slave. His stomach twisted with rage, before acceptance crept in. The older woman's actions had sealed his and Elizabeth's fate. In a strange and convoluted sort of way, he should be grateful. His beloved was in his arms, just as she should be.

Sorrow filled him as Elizabeth began to pull away. True, they could not remain on the floor forever, but every second she remained healed his soul and eliminated a small portion of the loneliness he'd borne while waiting for her.

"Roberto," she breathed. "I was branded." Fear glistened in her eyes and her voice shook with disbelief. "Branded like a side of beef. And your mother—I mean, Rafael's mother was there. She was laughing at me."

She clamped her eyelids shut, then swiped at a tear that escaped. The schoolmarm was struggling for control. "It's not real, Elizabeth. It can't be," she chanted.

"The vision was real. I was there, I saw," Roberto challenged her. "I felt your pain and fear. I smelled the burning flesh."

"I fainted," she argued. "People hallucinate under stranger situations."

"Are you hallucinating that?" he demanded, turning her face until she could not help but see the crest on the wall. "Or this?" He placed a hard hand on her hip and felt as if he'd been burned.

"Neither of them makes sense," she agreed with a sigh. "Nothing makes sense."

She was still shaky when he helped her to stand. Frustration ate at him. She still didn't want to believe. Her refusal cut him to the core. Disappointed, he let her go and watched her head move in confusion as she walked alone through the corridor.

Daniel's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Roberto?"

Roberto stared at the man in shock. He'd forgotten they weren't alone. Although the rest of the servants had disappeared, Daniel remained, his freckled forehead creased with concern. Odd, how Roberto had failed to sense his presence.

"I won't ask for details, but is she all right? Are you okay?"

"We will be fine," Roberto answered. His mouth contorted painfully. There was so much he wished he could say, but how? *When would she realize how much they meant to each other?*

Elizabeth reached the end of the hallway, which led into another. She could go left or right. Left for the library, kitchen and dining rooms, or she could turn right to go to their bedroom. He smiled as she turned right, and walked past various ornate doors, fingering the patterns in each as she passed by. She came to a stop and stared at the dark mahogany entrance in front of her. Roberto's smile widened. She refused to believe yet she allowed herself to be led by instinct. He knew the moment she realized what she'd done.

"I knew to turn," she said. Her eyes widened with the admission, her pupils darkened to the color of midnight. "I know what's in this room."

Elizabeth resembled a child, perplexed at seeing her first snowflake as it landed, then melted in her hand. Her forehead wrinkled and he sensed her bewilderment as she traced the pattern in the aged wood.

"Open the door, Elizabeth," he urged.

She hesitated, her gaze jumping from the closed door to him and then back again. "I can't." She shook her head wildly, spreading cascades of curls about her shoulders. The ends of several strands lay against her breast, silently inviting Roberto closer. He caught himself before he made a grave error. Elizabeth needed to make her own way from disbelief to acceptance.

"You can," he answered vehemently.

Tentatively, she touched the knob and jerked her hand back as if she'd been scorched. He eased into her mind as she pushed beyond the barriers of fear. She reached for the knob again, then twisted it in her hand and held her breath as the door opened.

"Our room, *Querida*. The room we will share as man and wife," he conveyed to her silently. "Go in. See for yourself that everything is as it should be."

She glanced over at him, still wide-eyed, but fascination had taken the lead in her emotions. He nearly chuckled as she propelled herself forward and stepped inside, refusing to give in to trepidation. She exhaled loudly. Everything in the room was exactly as it had been in both of their dreams. He saw her thoughts, reveled in her memories of the dark maroon curtains with tiny strands of gold filament embroidered in an ivy pattern and the delicate way she caressed them. The fireplace stood in readiness, several pieces of aged wood lined up on an iron grate, waiting for someone to light a match. If lit, the flames of the fire would cause the gold embroidery in the curtains to shimmer in the light.

Elizabeth swayed from shock at the sight of the bed, a huge four-poster that sat against the western wall. She wrapped her arms around a bedpost to steady herself. Once again, the past mingled with the present and she looked to Roberto for an explanation.

"I removed the tapestry when I completed the portrait," he said. He came to stand beside her. "Do you still wish to believe we were not destined to be together?"

"I've seen both in my dreams," she admitted. "The tapestry, with Rafael and Lupita. The portrait..." *The portrait was there when we made love.* She shivered and he knew she'd hidden the vision deep inside because it disturbed her. "It doesn't look like me."

"Ahh, but it does. You haven't looked in the mirror lately." She zeroed in on the mirror in a far corner, but he seized her arm, jerking her to a stop. "Not yet, *Querida*. You have yet to say if the room meets your expectations."

He was being cruel and he knew it. But she wasn't leaving this room until she gave him something, a verbal acknowledgment that she accepted the fact she'd been here before.

"It's fine," she mumbled and moved to slide past him.

He held her fast. "Fine?" he demanded.

"What do you want from me, Roberto? You want confirmation? Okay! Fine! This is the bedroom in my dreams. This is where Rafael and Lupita—you and I—Oh, hell. You know damn well what I'm saying."

She was shaking with fear. A drop of sweat glistened on her upper lip. Why? Her mind reeled with images of their making love, but she felt terror. What was it about their making love that instilled such fear?

He tried to read deeper into her mind, but it was impossible to get beyond the icy wall she'd created. Time. He would have to be patient.

"This connecting door leads to the room you will stay in," he said. "Until you decide it is time, and come to me."

"Stop pushing, Roberto. I can feel you checking out every crevice in my brain. It's overwhelming. It's also rude. If you want a peep show, take a look at your own dreams."

Roberto chuckled. "You are right, *mi amada*. I have overstepped my bounds."

"Damn right."

"I would ask that you leave the connecting door open so I can hear if you need help. I will not come in without warning you first," he said. He shot her an amused grin. "You do not need to warn me if you are coming to me. I will know."

"It stays closed," she answered firmly. Everything boiled down to sex, she decided irritably. Well, he had a few surprises headed in his direction—regardless if he could read her mind or not.

"It stays open, and it is more than sex."

So much for democracy, she thought. Elizabeth gasped at the sound near her feet, seconds later feeling soft fur as it stroked against her leg. Mee-oww. She was too stunned to respond, but that could not be said about the animal who seemed very much at home in her new bedroom.

"Ghillie," she cried. She reached for the contented Siamese who began to purr louder than a diesel engine. The cat securely in her arms, she began to notice other personal effects throughout the room. He would dare to have moved her belongings without asking first? *Don't be stupid, Elizabeth*. Of course he would dare. He'd kidnapped her, why would he have stopped at that?

"It is not as you suspect, Elizabeth. I wished to make you feel more at home."

Home. The word brought a sudden onset of tears. She was home, in spite of the events leading to her arrival. "How did you get Ghillie here? You didn't even see her that night."

"Once you were on the boat, it was a simple matter for my men to go back to your home and pack a few things. I am grateful they found her. She's obviously very special to you."

"Ghillie and I go back a long way," she said. She smiled as she stroked the chocolate brown fur and scratched behind the even darker ears of her beloved, and loudly purring, cat. It felt wonderful to hold something she owned. The teeter-totter she'd been on seemed a bit more level at the moment. *Home at last*. The unwanted thought came without notice. So did the resounding meow that seemed to reverberate throughout the room. She was surprised to realize that she no longer felt an urgent pull to return to Tampa.

"I hope your household can deal with her loud voice." Elizabeth smiled again, unaware of how telling her remark was until she noticed Roberto's pleasure at the comment.

"Our household," he reminded her casually. He reached out to stroke the feline. "I understand from Daniel there have already been some questions about litter pans. The dogs have also gained a certain

respect for her."

She laughed. Ghillie had been well known for holding her own with the neighborhood dogs.

"As I understand it, she does not like to fly either." Roberto chuckled. "There is a normal quarantine for animals coming to Mexico, but we were able to circumvent the authorities since we used our own plane. When it became evident she would not leave quietly, my men were forced to sedate her so she would not be found in an inspection. She seems to have recuperated quite well from the ordeal."

"Poor Ghillie," Elizabeth crooned as she held the cat's face up to her own. She glanced over at Roberto again, surprised at the sensation of envy she felt. What a curious man. He was jealous—of a cat! The knowledge softened her resolve against him. "You know, Roberto," she started, "I don't agree that I'm home to stay. But I do appreciate your thinking of Ghillie." She gazed about the room. "And I won't feel like such a pod-head with my things around."

"A pod-head?" he asked.

"Yeah, a mind stuck in the wrong body. Nothing quite fits."

He brushed a stray curl from her face and tucked it behind her ear, rewarded by her quick intake of breath and visible response to his touch. Ghillie made a loud protest at the way Elizabeth's hands tightened around her, and the cat seemed pleased when she was placed on the ground between them.

"I will do anything in my power to make our home most pleasant for you, Elizabeth," Roberto promised solemnly. His hand returned to her hair when she rose back up. "This is your home," he repeated, "for as long as you wish."

He enveloped her with an intense look. His long dark hair was bound so she saw the muscles of his throat working as he swallowed. Her breathing quickened in response and matched his. He leaned forward and she felt his need to hold her. Kiss her. Fear of the unknown slipped away. She wanted his kiss. She needed it. Their lips joined and Elizabeth knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she was fighting a losing battle. He had already found a place in her heart. He was merely extending the space and moving in completely.

The knock on the bedroom door was like a sudden cold wind. The door swept open, revealing the two of them locked in a heated embrace. Elizabeth was intrigued with the sight of Daniel's blush. She'd never seen a man's face turn red before except in anger or heat. She looked from one man to the other, stopping to stare at Roberto. The tic in his jaw was pronounced and her mischievous side took over.

What did it take for Roberto to lose control? She reined in her thoughts as he reacted to them, his gaze blistering with lust. She'd forgotten about his ability to see through the fogged up layers of her mind. *You're losing it, girl. You don't want to go there.* But she did want to. Badly.

"It would do you well to knock, Daniel." Roberto's gaze never left Elizabeth.

Daniel coughed. "I did."

Elizabeth couldn't help it, she giggled as Roberto's ears turned blood red. A glance at Daniel indicated he was enjoying the moment as much as she was. Then she was on the hot seat.

"If I hadn't seen and heard it with my own ears, I would never have believed it," Daniel said. His shocked expression gave way to a grin. "Elizabeth Santiago—er—Sanderson giggles."

"I don't giggle." She cringed at the thought. "You must be mistaken. Giggles are for little girls and

perhaps teenagers. I am neither," she said. She sounded haughty, even to her own ears.

Neither of the men appeared to want to let the matter slide. Roberto's lengthy perusal of her figure said he didn't think she was a child either.

"There may be hope for you yet, kiddo." Daniel grinned and dodged as she poked at him like a boxer.

"Jet lag?" She hoped they would buy the lame explanation. Roberto's mouth twitched at the suggestion, and finally gave way to a smile. It warmed her down to her toes.

"We came by boat, *Querida*."

The growling of her stomach was almost as loud as her quiet "Oh" in response. She giggled again and then frowned when she realized what she'd done.

"Hunger then," Roberto said.

His mouth twitched again, and he slipped into the same smile she'd seen Ghillie wear after capturing a bird. She knew exactly how the bird felt, held down as it fluttered helplessly in the grasp of a creature larger than itself.

"My cue," Daniel interrupted. "I came to tell you both. Breakfast is ready."

Daniel sent a curious look in Roberto's direction. She wondered if she read it right. All of a sudden, he seemed nervous, just like he'd been when he first walked in. "I'll leave you two be and meet you in the dining room."

"Daniel," Roberto called to Daniel's retreating back. "You did do us a favor."

Daniel's relief was evident. "Yes, uh, well. I can see you're hungry."

She had the definite feeling her old friend was taunting them both. Roberto had the look of a hungry bear faced with a pocket of honey.

"He does seem to know you well," she teased after Daniel turned the corner.

"Too well, sometimes," Roberto agreed with a sigh. "We were roommates in college." He led her out of the bedroom, his hand on the small of her back as they walked down the hall to the dining room. "He has been here at the island for over seven years now," Roberto continued, "Other than you, he is the only person on this island with the capability of hurting me."

She pondered his statement for a long time, through the walk to the dining room and for the majority of breakfast. It was a wonderful assortment of pastries, fruit and routine breakfast entrees. She could feel her waistline grow just sitting at the table. She wondered at Roberto's ability to eat so much, and yet maintain an athletic build. Even Daniel seemed to pile the food in and he looked as healthy as Roberto. If she continued to eat like this, she'd be wearing tents for clothing.

"That is not so, *Querida*. Soon you will be involved in activities which will keep you as slim as you are now."

"Quit that," she warned, receiving an erotic image transmitted silently. Her face burned, and her threatening glare had no effect on the man. His eyes twinkled with mischief, which fascinated her. Roberto did have a playful side.

"There are—"

“Various forms of play between a man and a woman.” She finished the sentence with him. His voice sounded humorous, while hers was filled with a mixture of anticipation and frustration.

“My God, you're already finishing each other's sentences.” Daniel shuddered, as if the very thought panicked him.

“If you only knew, Danny,” Elizabeth murmured.

Roberto's soft chuckle irritated her, especially when she couldn't stop herself from yawning. Her lack of rest from the prior night was catching up with her. She glared again, not bothering to conceal her emotions from Daniel. If he didn't understand, he wasn't the same person she knew ten years ago, or Roberto's best friend. Daniel had to know how exasperating Roberto could be.

“Beth, perhaps you'd like a short rest? It's a couple of hours until *siesta*, but you look exhausted,” Daniel mentioned casually.

“That is a good idea, Elizabeth,” Roberto agreed solemnly. “You did not sleep well last night. She has dreams and is quite restless in bed.”

She would have happily smacked that “all knowing” look right off his face. Judging from Daniel's pleased expression, he made his own interpretation on how his hot-blooded friend knew of her sleeplessness. She waited for a piercing, judgmental stare, but it never came. Daniel looked more curious than critical.

When she agreed a nap was in order, Roberto rose and pulled her chair out to walk her to her room. She objected and told him to stay with Daniel, but his dominance won. Again. He and Daniel agreed that they would catch up with each other either at the table or on the patio, depending on how long Roberto was gone. *How long Roberto was gone?* She didn't know whether to be angry or amused at Daniel's easy acceptance of their presumed relationship. She did know she was irritated at their attitudes toward her ability to take care of herself.

“Why do you do that?” she demanded once they were in the hall. She kept her voice deceptively quiet, while inside a storm raged. “You always make it seem like we're lovers. Mr. All-Knowing about how restless I was last night.”

“You were restless. And you spent the morning reading the journals.”

“That's beside the point,” she hissed. “You made it sound like you were right there in my bed with me.”

Roberto gave her a placating smile, irritating her further. He pulled them to a stop in the middle of the hallway, never bothering to look if there were others present. “You are the mistress of this house and this island. No one will condemn our relationship, whether we are technically lovers or not, married or unmarried. In my mind's eye, I have made love to you in every way imaginable. Say the word and I'll make every one of those visions a reality. I will not hide the fact that I desire you physically, any more than I can hide the fact that I love you. It is impossible to hide unless I am wearing a tent. Look for yourself.”

She made a mistake. She looked. “Jeez, Roberto.” She moved in front of him as the maid walked by.

Roberto cursed. “I am hard and ready for you, Elizabeth. We are not school children and neither are my servants. If I took you right here in this hallway, not a word would be said. And I am tempted, my beautiful innocent.” He sighed. “You have only to look at me and my blood boils.” His voice was rough, his breath was hot against her skin as he backed her against the wall. “It is the same with you. You try to conceal your thoughts, but your body, your eyes give you away. I find no shame in wanting you, or this

arousal that fascinates and frightens you. Let the world know,” he said loudly, “that I want you, Elizabeth. Right here, right now. Tonight, all night. I want you naked in my bed. In time, perhaps fifty years or so, I will be sated by you and these occurrences will not happen as often.”

She shook her head in disbelief, her long curls bouncing wildly. Fire raged within and she tried to douse the flames. He moved a stray curl that remained over her face before she could shake it out of the way. She had never met a man more secure with his emotions and his sexuality than Roberto. He was everything she was not when it came to physical matters. *Fifty years or so, give me a break.* She wanted to laugh. It never failed, just when she was ready to thrash him, he dropped a killer remark and brought her to her knees. She wondered if it would change with time.

“All things change with time, Elizabeth. Love deepens when it is nurtured. You yourself have changed since we have met, have you not felt it?”

She looked into his eyes and saw her reflection within them. Once again, she was touched with the feeling that she was as beautiful as he kept repeating.

“Come,” he ordered, even as he pulled her along in the hallway to their adjoining bedrooms. He stopped inside his room in front of the full-length mirror he'd kept her from earlier. Holding her in front of him, he commanded her to look.

For a long time, she just stared, unable to believe she was the person in the mirror. Her hair flowed freely past her shoulders, cascading in a riot of curls. Sensual abandon. The awareness didn't stop there. Her sexuality reflected from within her dark eyes, the curve of her smile, the way her blouse hugged her body as if it was a present yet to be unwrapped. Even her colorful skirt spoke of promises to come, the ruffles evidence of the femininity she'd kept hidden for too long. *Who is this woman?*

“What is hidden inside will eventually make itself known outside.” He turned her around to face him. “The woman inside you has broken free, Elizabeth. She is there in your eyes now. You look in the glass and you see your life flow, your awareness as a woman. It blossoms like a flower with sunlight and water. I am not embarrassed by the fact that I desire you. Every man on this island will, once he looks at you.” She heard a growl behind the words. “But I expect them to be smart and know you are mine alone.”

Tears rose, threatening to burst forth. “I don't understand this. I've never cried so much in my entire life.”

She felt strange, exhilarated and miserable, both at the same time. Her self-control was falling away, her armor on the field of battle. “It's all your fault,” she condemned him. “I didn't ask for all this—this—passion! Why didn't you leave me alone?”

Elizabeth glared at him, throwing fire and brimstone at him with both barrels. She looked for something to toss at him, but he rushed her out of his room and into her own. Nothing to throw here, she realized. Everything was hers, and too precious to lose.

“Damn you!” The lock to the connecting door clicked behind him. “Why didn't you leave me alone?”

“To do what, *Querida*? Spend the rest of your life as a virgin, waiting for a man strong enough to see past the facade? To hide yourself away from life?”

“Aaagh!” Frustration boiled within. She wanted to scream, pummel him into unconsciousness. He was right, dammit! But she was a newborn, helpless in a tidal wave. Suddenly, it was too much for her and she crumpled. Her body went limp with exhaustion. She did not fight him as he maneuvered her to the bed and pulled the sheet and coverlet aside.

“Rest, *Querida*. The last few days are taking their toll on you. You need time and rest to adjust. I will check in on you to see that you are well.” He kissed her on the forehead and once she was in the bed, he covered her with the sheet and light blanket.

Elizabeth closed her eyes, afraid she would expose too much. She wanted escape, yet she wanted to remain here on the island. She wanted peace, yet life—the very essence of chaos—called out to her, daring her to jump in. She wanted him, but she'd already given so much of herself away. Did she dare?

He slipped out of the room quietly. Elizabeth never knew he was gone, until she heard a surprising click from the other side of the door. Instantly, her eyes flicked open. Had he locked her in? Getting up from the bed, she moved toward the door. He wouldn't have locked her in, would he? The sound of his footsteps grew quieter then disappeared. She twisted the door handle and nothing happened. *God, how stupid am I?* In the haze of discovery, she had forgotten the events that led to her coming to this place. Apparently, he had not. So here she was, in a new place, a new prison. Why? He'd wanted her on his island and here she was. Trusted servants manned the *castillo*. He'd talked of marriage, but was she to be a wife or a sex slave?

It didn't make sense. Wouldn't he put his most trusted people within his own home? She twisted the knob again. Frustrated, she kicked the door then reeled from the pain of a smashed toe.

Chapter Fourteen

"I feel like a damn hamster in a rolling ball." Her teeth chattered with the anger that rose like bile in her throat. She tried the knob on the adjoining door to his suite, but it was locked as well. "I can't believe this."

Her anger rose with every step she took, pacing the floor in a circle. How could he profess to love her, ask her to marry him and then jail her? She was on the island, for God's sake! Ghillie meowed loudly, staring longingly at the window and Elizabeth cursed her as well. The window.

"Good kitty," she praised. "Wonderful kitty," Elizabeth said as she rushed over and patted Ghillie on the head. Then she studied her potential escape hatch. "All the comforts of home," she mused, eyeing the modern features. "A screen." She grinned as she tested the resilience of the screen. "One slight push and I'm out of here."

She looked down at the ground as the metal landed within the rose garden below. Falling amidst the rose bushes mixed with the other tropical array of flowers in the garden, the screen reminded her of a human intrusion into Paradise. "But the average person doesn't need to be locked in Paradise. I certainly don't."

Now, how did she get down? From window to garden was a straight drop. If she didn't break her neck, she'd at least break a leg and be digging thorns out of her backside for a week. She considered her situation hopeless, until she noticed the man standing beyond the garden fence. *What is he doing there?*

"Does it matter?" she asked Ghillie, and received a thunderous meow in reply. "Keep it down, cat." She peeked outside again. "Hey, you," she called out. The guy gazed up in surprise and frowned. Goose bumps exploded on her arm, but she forced her nervousness aside. She wasn't going psychic, no matter how crazy things seemed. "I'm locked in. I need help."

He didn't understand her and she didn't speak Spanish. "Now what?" she whispered into the sultry breeze. "I need your help," she yelled.

Why did he suddenly look frightened? The answer made itself known all too soon. Raul blasted into the scene below and her mystery man disappeared. At the same moment, the door to the bedroom burst open

and Roberto stormed in. She inched backward, wishing there was a way she could blend with the plastered wall.

"What are you doing? I thought you were going to rest."

The sparks in his eyes dared her to answer even though she knew he didn't expect one. Jeez, had she come to know him that well? Daniel was right behind him, seemingly uncertain of how to approach Roberto without being caught in the crossfire.

"What am I doing?" she countered. "What were *you* doing? You locked me in."

"Of course."

"Of course?" She stared at him as her heart hammered against her ribs. "Why? I'm on your island, Romeo. Is this the way it's going to be with us?"

Roberto's look pierced her like a sword. She took an involuntary step back and almost fell out of the window. He reached her side just as the instinct to panic set in.

"*Querida*," he cried out, his voice a mixture of relief and frustration. "You still don't understand." He sighed, pulling her into his arms.

"What's to understand? You put me in a room, see the door, and you're compelled to lock it?"

"We have had this conversation before, *mi amada*. The issue is your safety."

"Safety from what, Roberto? Who is going to get to me here? The man by the fence? The man in the moon?" The goose bumps, which had faded, came back in full force.

"There was a man in the garden?" He must have forced the words between his teeth. His features were so tight she could only imagine that he spoke the words. A warrior stood where a mortal man had been. His deadly expression frightened her to her core and she was certain there would be bruises on her arm from the way he gripped them. She nodded, hesitant to make him worse.

"Raul," Roberto called out. His gaze remained steady on Elizabeth.

Raul answered from behind, a rapid fire of Spanish. He sounded out of breath as if he had been running for quite a distance.

"In English, Raul."

"He was not one of ours, Senor Miguel. Once beyond the walls of the *castillo*, he disappeared into the woods."

Roberto's head fell forward in despair. "Leave us," he commanded Daniel and Raul. She heard their footsteps as they retreated and closed the door behind them.

Now it was her turn. Elizabeth cringed. His intense stare scorched a hole in her armor.

"He wasn't your man," she said. "Was he from Hernandez?"

He nodded grimly. "You must not do anything this foolish again, *Querida*." He slid her into his arms with a single move. "Until Hernandez is brought to justice, you are not safe. Trust me on this." Her chin quivered as he raised it so he could look deeply into her eyes. "I lock the door for your protection."

She felt her resolve melt with every stroke of his hand along her back. He was tapping into her

weakness, planting suggestions in her mind. "Oh, no," she argued. "You're not going to do this to me. I am not going to fall into a puddle at your feet. Being Lord of *Castillo de San Miguel* does not make you Lord of me. I am not buying this. I'm not," she said. Though her voice had been strong at first, it wavered and threatened to stop entirely as he continued stroking her. "Will I ever understand you?"

"You will," he whispered hoarsely. His lips caressed her cheek.

Roberto knew she was past the point of fighting him. Already, she had succumbed to the liquid fire that gained more strength every time they touched. He knew she did not feel his movements as he maneuvered them to the bed and slid them into a more intimate position. She whimpered in defeat, wrapping herself around his strength. His arms ached to pull her against him more tightly. His hands throbbed with a need to caress her more intimately. As always, her response delighted him, feeding the passionate flames that burned between them. She would go anywhere he led, and willingly follow the path he chose. But she had not chosen the course herself.

Roberto froze. She had not come to him. In fact, she'd been in the process of running away from him when he felt the sensation and warning to come and check on her. If he'd lost her ... The agony of the thought was unbearable.

"You must come to me, my love. I cannot lose you this time." His body quaked from within as he cushioned himself against her softness. The faint essence of her perfume beckoned him as he lightly kissed her neck. Soon. It was not right for him to seduce her and pull her into his will. She must come to him by her own wish. His groan was filled with agony. He must wait until she was ready ... until she offered herself to him without fear and uncertainty.

"Sleep," he commanded with a whisper. Her eyes flickered shut as his thoughts of sleep transferred to her. He pulled away, slipped free of her seeking hands and left her alone in the mist they had created. He reluctantly stepped away from the bed, and walked to the window. He locked it again, cast a longing look in Elizabeth's direction and then disappeared out of the bedroom. She would dream, but he would know if she needed him.

* * * *

Elizabeth's subconscious took control in her sleep, and she dreamed. In her mind, she slipped back to Lupita's world.

Lupita crept slowly through the hallways. She was certain that at any moment Esteban's men would appear to capture her. Just a little farther and she would be near the front door. Her escape would be complete. She would be outside the castle walls. Hearing voices ahead of her, she sank into the darkened corner. Her hand tightened on the satchel she carried to stifle any noises from the metals and jewels touching as they were moved about.

One more second, she told herself, hearing the voices move farther down the hallway. Until they were so faint, she barely heard them at all. So intent on listening to the voices, she almost missed the sound of footsteps approaching her at a fast pace. She sank back into the darkness once more, until they passed her and disappeared in a different direction as well. She held her breath, approached the front door, and opened it slowly to look around for any further dangers.

Already, Esteban's booming voice echoed throughout the halls. His guards were scurrying about, avoiding his wrath and obeying his orders for her capture and return. She shivered, then stifled the sound as she considered what his revenge on her would be if she were captured.

Her path clear, she slipped silently out the front door of the castle into the neighboring bushes to hide

herself. The lingering scent of tropical fruit blossoms from the trees held no interest for her this evening. She crouched low and contemplated the steps and time necessary to get to the next clump of bushes, listening for noises of footsteps or voices around her. She inhaled the clean air for any hint of tobacco or liquor in case one of Esteban's men might be enjoying a brief moment's treat. A giggle and a hushed whisper from farther away told her of a dalliance between one of the slave girls and a guard or groundskeeper.

Stealthily, she crept to the next clump of bushes, certain she had avoided the attention of the couple, engaged in rough foreplay several feet away. They were too noisy to have noticed the sounds she made as she searched for and then made her way toward another assortment of bushes. She could smell the stables now. The warm summer breeze carried the odor of fresh hay as well as the various other odors that permeated the barn.

Once again, she offered a silent prayer of thanks to her father for teaching her to ride as a youngster, before she had been taken as a slave and sold to the highest bidder. She knew a moment of pain as she remembered that there was no home for her to run back to. It had been burned, her parents killed by the slave traders who had stolen her and her younger brother. It had been three years since she had seen Tomas. She doubted he was still alive. He was only seven when they were taken, and young boys did not live long in slavery. They were used as frequently as the young female slaves.

The stables were dark and damp, the animals put up for the night. Lupita was not expecting there to be any activity in the barn. There had been heavy drinking going on inside the Great Hall tonight. For a short moment, she wondered if Rafael San Miguel was still in the Great Hall. Or had he chosen a female and bedded her? He had not appeared interested in the prospect when she last saw him, but men were likely to change their minds at a moment's notice when it came to sex.

She heard the sounds of footsteps and prayed it was a horse and not a man.

"She came in here, I tell you," one man said. He sounded angry at the others for not listening to him.

Damn, she had not been careful enough. She looked around for a darker place to hide, then panicked when the horse next to her snorted and became nervous.

"Find her," another voice commanded. "Make sure you find her before they do."

She pondered the statement for a second and then dismissed it. They were probably guards who would like a chance at her before she was turned over to Esteban. It no longer mattered if another man used her before Esteban caught up with her. Either way, Esteban would see to it she paid for her crimes and she would be just as dead.

She spotted a dark corner only a few feet away. She would have to distract the men in the barn to get there, and she searched for something to throw in the distance to create a diversion. Lacking much else, she decided upon a piece of dried feces. She begged God for good luck as she held her breath at the odor. Two men, she determined and threw her object while their backs were turned in another direction. It had the desired reaction. The two men turned and looked that way. She had time enough to make her way to the darker corner without being seen, or so she thought.

Despite her best intentions, she screamed as she felt the hands grab her from behind and then one hand clapped over her mouth to stop the noise.

"Stop screaming or Esteban's men will come in here," the voice behind her said. His hand remained clamped on her jaw and the second arm held her fast against him. He smelled of alcohol and the permeating smoke from the Great Hall. Esteban's men? If this man was talking about Esteban's men,

then where was he from? A thousand thoughts ran through her mind in a single second. There were several groups represented at the feast tonight, including at least five who had arrived by boat. The voice was vaguely familiar and the man holding her used care so as not to hurt her. That had to count for something, she decided.

“Tie her and cover her with that blanket,” the man behind her ordered the other two. She felt herself being maneuvered so his orders could be followed. “I’m putting you down, do not run or the next person to capture you will be Esteban himself.”

It was too dark for her to see his face, but it was enough to make her do as she was told. She had, after all, survived a year with Esteban, she would survive more somewhere else if she could only get away from Esteban before he could find her and kill her.

“She’s got something in her hand,” one of her captors announced. She did not think it was the voice of the man who held her earlier. “A bag or something. It’s bloody.”

“Keep it in her hand. It will keep the bleeding down. Make sure the ties are strong, but don’t make it painful so that she can continue to hold on to whatever it is she’s carrying.”

The ties were in place and when the blanket went around her, she panicked, but she held herself still until she was picked up and placed on top of a horse. The saddle horn hurt her belly, but there was no way she could avoid it. The bruise would merely match those left by Esteban earlier.

“Let’s go,” the leader commanded. She felt the saddle give under her captor’s weight. “I am sorry, Lupita. I’m also thankful that you’re as small as you are. It will be easier to get you out of here.”

She heard the remorse in her captor’s voice and was puzzled by it. If she did not know better, she would have sworn she was being rescued and not taken captive by another man perhaps no better than Esteban. She knew a moment of regret that she would probably not see Rafael San Miguel again after this night.

A long time passed as they continued to ride and the saddle horn dug into her ribs and belly, which made every breath painful. She waited for sounds to indicate they were near the shore or preparing to board a ship, but heard nothing as she focused on breathing. The smell of the blanket was making her queasy and she prayed she would not lose control and vomit. She would gladly have given in to sleep or fainting if she were blessed with the opportunity. But she needed to remain alert to have some idea of where she was being taken.

She had no idea how much time had passed since they had started to ride. She only knew she was grateful when it appeared their ride was over and she was lowered from the saddle and placed on the ground. Hands grabbed at some parts of the blanket and she felt herself being rolled out like a tablecloth, tumbling over and over while the blanket unfurled. Then she was on her stomach several feet away from her captor’s feet.

He did not wear the boots of a sailor, she noted instantly and then she felt herself being pulled up to stand. Her knees were water. Her stomach roiled and she was grateful there was nothing in her mouth to restrict her from vomiting, since there was no way she could stop it.

“Move,” she said bluntly, just before the contents of her scanty dinner fell to the ground. She never bothered to wonder why she was so concerned about getting vomit on her captor, she was just grateful he caught her before she fell face first to the ground.

“Get water and a cloth,” the leader ordered. One of the men with him hastened to carry out the command.

"What about the cloth in her hand?"

The leader considered it briefly and then said no. She could feel his eyes on her as he debated the issue. Perhaps he didn't want to know what she was carrying with her for her escape? What was it about his eyes that seemed so familiar?

She closed her eyes and kept them sealed while he cleaned up her face and used the cloth to cool her brow. "I suspect you were escaping," the leader commented as he continued his ministrations. "If I take these ties off, will you not run?"

She nodded her agreement tiredly, still not able to use her voice given the multiple abuses of the last several hours. Her captor removed the ties. She gasped as blood rushed through her veins.

"I thought I told you to make sure the ties would not hurt her?" he growled.

He was concerned for her? She opened her eyes; the mystery of her captor's identity was too much to resist. He was still behind her, and she wished he would move to face her.

"Can you stand or sit? I need to tend to your hands."

"Stand," she answered dully and was grateful when he turned her loose and appeared to move to stand in front of her. He had no sooner released her than she was on her way to the ground. His quick catch stopped her from reaching the dirt.

"Sit." He chuckled. But she found no humor in her situation. She felt him move her to the blanket and settle her down on her bottom. Once again, she tried to get a glimpse of the man who was doing his best to take care of her, only to be upset once more by the darkness that hid his identity. "I don't have much light to work with here," he apologized. "I can perhaps clean your hands with water or just put water on the cloth and have you hold it while we continue our ride. I smelled blood on you earlier. What happened to your hands?"

"Knife," she answered quietly. "Let me hold the cloth. The wounds aren't deep."

He completed the task in silence and handed the cloth to her. She moved her satchel to the uninjured hand and palmed the cool, damp cloth in the other. The moist cloth felt surprisingly good against her torn skin.

"We need to ride," one of the men announced even as her captor picked her up to put her in the saddle. He slipped onto the horse behind her before she could act on an escape. "Agreed. Get the blanket and ties so we don't leave a trail."

He did not wait to see if his order was obeyed, he simply adjusted himself in the saddle and kicked the horse into action. Exhausted and faint from loss of blood and vomiting, she longed for sleep. A presence lingered on the edge of her consciousness. Rafael San Miguel. Would she ever see him again?

"Sleep, mi amada."

Rafael placed a hand over her forehead and Lupita jerked back, startled into awareness. The presence she'd felt intensified, and she stared through the darkness. Finally, she gave in to the persuasive commands she could hear in her mind. Peace filtered through her limbs and her conscious mind merged with his, allowing for sleep. Rafael lifted her carefully from the horse, placing his hand to her forehead once more to ensure she slept. He cursed, his eyes coursing over the bruises covering her body as he removed her clothing. She sighed with relief as he treated each wound with a salve, murmuring his name as if it was a prayer.

“Yes, mi amada. You are home,” he whispered, placing a lingering kiss on her forehead.

He cursed Esteban Hernandez, noticing Lupita's smile as he uncurled her fingers and pried free the satchel from her hand. He whistled softly at the contents. No wonder she'd guarded it within an inch of her life. Jewels glittered in the light from the torches. He covered them back up and slipped them into his secret hiding place.

Lupita whimpered at the pounding on the heavy door. With a longing glance in her direction, Rafael opened the door and slipped outside.

“No,” he argued with his mother. “I will tend her injuries. She is mine to care for. I do not leave the care of my future wife to others.” Rafael's mother shrieked with indignation, her piercing cry capable of cracking stone. “Go to your husband, woman. Make your arguments with him. I have no time to soothe your temper.” He slammed the door behind him.

“Estamos limitados con eternidad. Le amar por siempre,” Rafael whispered to Lupita.

“We are bound through eternity. I will love you forever,” Lupita translated. Her eyes remained closed, but their connection lingered while she slept.

The first thing Lupita noticed upon waking was the sound of light snoring. Her eyes opened to the sight of a man's head and long, straight black hair that was tied back in a leather thong. Her breath was labored as she considered the room she occupied, the plush multi-colored tapestries on the walls. Her body was a rack of pain, both as a result of Esteban's abuse as well as the long ride to get to wherever she was.

“Rafael San Miguel,” she whispered longingly. She would miss him, yet strangely she felt his presence surround her. She wondered how long she had been asleep, even as she stared at the very male body curled up in sleep while in a sitting position. Once again, she was struck with the question of whether she had been stolen or was rescued.

Her breath caught as she heard the man beside her cough, the answer to the majority of her questions would come soon as he struggled to wake up.

“Rafael San Miguel,” she whispered in wonder, staring in to coal black eyes that she'd know anywhere.

Rafael's joy melted. He watched in horror as she fainted from the shock.

Chapter Fifteen

“Roberto,” Daniel said with a sigh. “Try to see things from her perspective. She's an American. You have been away from the mainland too long, my friend. An American man who says ‘I love you’ and then locks a woman in a room is considered a lunatic. People go to prison for that on the mainland. Besides, it's no way to convince Elizabeth that you love her. Tell her what she needs to know and let her work with you, not against you.”

“I have already spent too much time looking at things from her viewpoint. I find myself second-guessing my every action. It weakens me. I can't act to protect her and bend to her wishes as well. Can you not see this, Daniel?” Judging from the bewildered look on his friend's face, Roberto could tell he did not understand. He tried again. “These emotions, they blind me. I thought I understood before, but I didn't. I see her and I am overcome with needs. Jealousy. Hell, even the damn cat provokes a reaction.”

He remembered the look of joy on her face when she'd seen the Siamese. Less than an hour later, she was trying to escape—from him. His mouth contorted with the pain he felt inside. “I do not want to hurt her, but she does not know the dangers. I have had a lifetime to acknowledge the threat Eduardo

Hernandez poses to us. She has had three days. Three days to fight whatever it is that keeps her from me. I cannot control her affections, but I can ensure her safety."

"You're in love with her." Daniel sounded as amazed as he looked.

"Of course I am in love with her! I have loved her my entire life. She is beauty and innocence, with a backbone of steel. She could ask for the moon and I would gladly give it to her."

"But you just met her," Daniel protested. "Before, she was just an image in your mind. She's only been flesh and blood to you for a couple of days. How do you know you love Elizabeth Sanderson, not this Lupita?"

"Is there a difference? The situation has changed—not the person. The same fire runs through both. My Elizabeth laughs and I feel it here." He placed his palm over his heart and felt it flutter beneath his fingertips. "She smiles at me and I have to see if I am still standing."

"Then why can't you give her the benefit of the doubt? She's a reasonable person. She's come this far with you, I doubt seriously that she'll run off now. From the looks she gives you, I'd say she feels the same way about you."

"I wish I could believe you," Roberto said, shaking his head to expunge his doubts. "I frighten her. Or she frightens herself. I do not know which. She needs to be in control."

"Being in control means no locks on the door, *Amigo*. She can't come to you if you seal the entrance." Daniel walked over and patted his friend on the shoulder. "Women don't love men they can't trust. And she won't trust you until you show some confidence in her. It's a vicious circle. Believe me—love bites."

"How can a man who avoids love with such agility understand it so?" The two men faced each other and their gazes met. "It is not Elizabeth whom I mistrust," Roberto admitted. "I don't trust myself. I have already failed her in a past life. She was injured in Tampa because I lost control. I cannot afford to do it again, by not taking the proper precautions. She is a kitten without claws."

Daniel laughed. "Believe me, Roberto. She's no kitten. The little girl I knew has definitely grown up. She took you on at the pier, remember?"

Roberto remembered the moment fondly. Perhaps Elizabeth did have claws, but were they strong enough to face the demon, Eduardo Hernandez?

"She dreams, Daniel. I can feel her. I must go, she may need me." It was true that she might awaken and be disturbed by the visions. He was honest enough with himself, however, to admit he needed to see her. She was a weakness in his blood, but he would have it no other way. He walked from the room, leaving Daniel standing alone in the library with a perplexed frown and a sigh that echoed against the walls.

* * * *

Elizabeth stirred in her sleep, twisting the bed sheets hopelessly about her, her mind filled with restless visions. Roberto watched from afar, helpless. He couldn't calm her, or she would sense his presence. Her gift was getting stronger. But he could watch the visions unfold with her. If she could not deal with the images of Lupita's history, he would wake her. She would be stronger next time.

Watching Elizabeth suffer was agony in itself, but he knew there was no other choice. It was the only way to secure her safety and their future together as a couple. He felt her pain as she moaned and he saw the images causing the reaction in his own mind. God, he wished he could hold her while she slept. He settled for placing a kiss on her forehead, aware she would not awaken to the touch. He placed the

covers more comfortably around her and settled into the easy chair in the corner. As if knowing he was miserable and wished for company, Ghillie jumped up and offered her services for the price of a good stroking.

* * * *

Lupita's skin felt moist from the salty sea air. The scent, the sound of the crashing waves in the distance energized her. Her already curly hair bunched up and looked shorter than it was due to the humidity, but it was worth it. She relished the memory of Rafael's fingers playing through her hair, an act of worship she had never experienced from a man before. Drawn like rain to the ground, she gravitated naturally toward him. His dark looks made him look sinister, but he had a kind heart.

As if her very thoughts could conjure him up, he appeared on the balcony beside her, his eyes beckoning her to come near.

"You should be resting, Querida," he murmured, even as he drew her to his arms. "Your wounds still need time to heal."

"Ah, Rafael. You worry about me too much. The bruises are nearly gone. I worry more about whether Esteban has discovered my whereabouts," she admitted frankly, enjoying the shelter of his arms.

He always knew the right amount of pressure to exert when he held her, enough so she felt secure yet not trapped. How could one man know these things and another be so foolish?

"My men are ready if he comes for you. We had little time to rescue you, but we managed to leave a trail leading to the ships rather than to this home."

Rafael closed his thoughts to her. He did not add that he'd already had one run-in with Esteban. He also did not tell her that his men were on a heightened alert as a result. No doubt she would become aware of this soon enough. But she would not hear about it from him and certainly not on this night or the next day.

"Was that a rescue, my love? I thought I was making a successful escape." Her expression was mischievous, daring him to contradict her. "If tying my hands and throwing a filthy blanket around me is your idea of a rescue, I wish not to be rescued again."

"It pained me to do so, but it was necessary so we could secure your cooperation." He held her face in his two hands, his thumbs caressing her skin. Having changed the subject, he allowed their thoughts to merge once more.

"You had only to ask. I mourned that I was being stolen once more and would never see you again. You saw my relief when I realized I was with you the next morning."

"I saw my woman faint with fear. You are lucky I did not react on my first impulse while you slept."

"If you had given me any indication of this ability to communicate as one, I would not have been so shocked or afraid."

Several weeks had passed, but she had no trouble remembering her arrival or the days that followed. Now she knew heaven did exist, and mortal men and women could occasionally glimpse it while still on earth.

"What was your first impulse, darling?" she asked.

"To scream the walls down," he said.

She trembled at the raw pain that still lingered in the edge of his mind. He loved her so much, and she knew it. She could feel it in his touch, hear it in the sound of his voice. Lupita prayed he was able to sense how much she loved him.

"It would have killed me to have lost you once you were mine," he continued. "My second impulse occurred when you awoke again. I wished only to crawl into bed with you. Hold you, touch you until we both died from pleasure."

"You say you love me and yet all you can talk about is bedding me," she said. "There are times I wonder whether you are led by lust or love." Lupita winked, a slow sultry invitation that she knew he would not ignore.

She slipped away from him, knowing he would pull her back into his arms. Within seconds, she was securely in his arms, her back firmly against his chest. She could already feel the strength of his manhood against her backside, yet it did not cause revulsion. Those traces of her time with Esteban had passed away. She marveled that Rafael had accomplished the task in a matter of weeks. She had expected to live with the memories and the pain for the remainder of her life.

"Know, Querida, that my love for you is as real as my desire. Tomorrow it shall be proven. You will be my wife, the mistress of this house."

She prayed she was not dreaming, that it would be so. Surely she had not been saved from hell, only to be tossed back there once more? She could not bear the thought of losing Rafael now that they had found each other.

"I thought when I woke up in your bed that you only wished to keep me as a slave. You cannot know how wonderful it is to hear you call me your wife."

She felt him nudge her hair away and place a soft kiss on her exposed shoulder. Her nightdress had slipped down again and he did not ignore the bared skin. Already her body was preparing for the night ahead, exalting in the fact she would share his bed once more. Just as she had since the first night she arrived in the San Miguel household.

"I am sorry you were treated as a slave when you first came here. Dominic will pay a long time for his sins in having you marked as a slave."

She could hear the anger resonate in his voice. She did not wish to know what price Dominic was paying for branding her with the San Miguel crest, as was the custom for all slaves. Lupita would never tell Rafael that his own mother had stood by and watched. She had learned to close her thoughts to him as well as he could. She turned to face him, soothing him with a kiss. Anger had no place between the two of them.

"My wonderful man, my future husband. Surely you know I will always be your slave, eager to fulfill your desires, a slave to your love. I do not need a mark on my body to show you own my heart, but I accept the San Miguel crest gladly as proof I belong to you. Love me as I love you."

"There is no reason to ask for what is already yours," he whispered. His head lowered toward her, his eyes catching the light of the evening stars and reflecting into hers. His dark beard was scratchy, as was his equally dark mustache, but she didn't mind. She loved everything about this man.

Passion sprang between them as it always did. She felt his kiss overtake her. Her legs felt limp and she would have fallen had he not held her up. She no longer felt fear or regret about what a man could do to a woman when he chose to. Lupita felt only joy. She knew he would soon be beside her, inside her.

Their bodies would join as their breath mingled and their tongues mated. Heat rose from them both, and neither of the two noticed the warm, moist night air. She planted wet kisses on his neck as he carried her to their bed, then felt the sheets beneath her as his weight settled above her.

"I am too heavy for you. I will bruise you with my strength," he whispered. He stole another kiss, moving to her side, but still remained close enough that nothing would come between them.

"No, not too heavy. Until a babe is in the way, I wish to always have your weight above mine."

Rafael took her mouth once more, hungrily absorbing every nuance he tasted. It always thrilled him to hear her speak of bearing his child. They had spoken often of the subject. Both had been grateful there was no child as a result of her time with Esteban. Rafael would have accepted it as he accepted her. But as a man, he was still grateful it would be his child to live and grow in her belly and not Esteban's.

"I think I like it best with your weight above me," he teased. He rolled them over and thrust her on top. Her long hair brushed against his stomach and he smiled, knowing she could feel his manhood jump in response. "Undress for me," he requested, his voice hoarse with anticipation.

There was no hesitation as she responded to his request. She was off of the bed instantly and already, he missed her.

"I think I should take care of your clothing first," she said softly.

She smiled, her hands going toward his pants, deftly undoing them and sliding them down his legs. Once they were off, she ran her fingers through the darker, curly hair on his legs. Her fingernails made a trail from his feet to a close proximity of his manhood and then stopped.

"If you touch me, I will have a difficult time not pulling you under me. Each day I expect to want you less, yet it is not so. I find myself thinking of you during the day and getting hard at the thought. Today has been extremely long and I am very much in need of you."

"Very well then." She looked down at him and grinned. "One touch and I will move away." She placed her fingertip in her mouth and then drew it out, lightly touching the edge of his hard length with her wet finger. Then she quickly jumped out of his reach.

"Vixen," he taunted as he rose up to grab at her playfully. She was already standing a good distance away. His mouth watered with anticipation as he watched her slowly run her tongue across her lips.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she fingered and then opened each button on her shift. She made it a special point to look over at him as she went from one to the next. With a grin of the devil, she spread the shift open to expose tiny portions of her flesh as each button came undone. The flashes of light in his eyes reflected back at him through hers. The cloth dropped to the floor and she stood before him naked, watching his eyes as they took in each curve, every shadowed crevice. Her breasts filled and pebbled to his gaze, and he imagined the moisture filling her lower regions.

His eyes stopped at the one feature that caused him pain and pleasure at the same time. It was the mark of the San Miguel family slaves. That Lupita wore it so proudly baffled him, yet caused his manhood to surge. He heard her giggle before he saw her smile.

"You laugh at me, woman?"

"Never at you, my love," she swore. She walked closer to the bed, her hips swaying provocatively. "You were right when you said this day has been exceptionally long."

Rafael merely grunted in reply, his mind was already full of the ways he intended to love this woman. It

was going to be a long night and he intended to enjoy every moment of it.

"You must stay still if you wish to feel my weight above you."

Lupita was thrilled with his eagerness, gracefully dodging his attempts to grab her. "It is difficult to know the best way to proceed," she teased.

She walked to his head and then back to his feet, as though deciding which way to enter the bed. She chose the furthest route, climbing slowly enough so her hair tickled his feet, and her breasts slowly crept across every part of him. She kissed her way up his body, inch by inch, until she reached his waist and straddled him.

"I've never done this before, so you will have to give me instructions," Lupita warned. She fell forward against his chest, unable to maintain a pose above him for very long. He seemed to have trouble keeping his hands still before he lifted her above him once more.

"It's a bit like mounting a horse," he said. Air hissed through his clenched teeth along with the words.

"I am unaccustomed to this end of the horse. You must have a strange way of riding."

She laughed, and slowly lowered herself onto him. Her shorter legs did not make the attempt easy, but she had a great deal of cooperation as he held her steady above him. She heard his groan even as she made the same sounds, the pleasure too great for either of them to remain silent. She allowed him to guide her further, expanding for his fullness and taking his lead on the motions. Such a position and feeling of power, she mused, as another wave of pleasure went through her. His thoughts were open to her, freely sharing his wonder and joy, and she was the cause of it. She pleased him, which overjoyed her.

"I feel you all the way to my womb." She gasped. "I suppose this makes it easier for you to place a child in me?"

"Querida, I do not love you each night to make a child. I would happily make love to you every night for the rest of my life, whether you are with child or not. It is the practice I love."

He proved his point with a loud moan. She had no doubt he was enjoying himself as much as she was.

* * * *

Elizabeth moaned into the silence of the room, her body heaving in time with the dream. She was twisted into a cocoon, but she slept on. Roberto heard her cry out, but he kept his distance. His initial concerns that she was enduring more pain in her dreams were washed away as he felt his way through the caverns of her mind. He groaned. God, how he wished he could go to her and touch her as Rafael was caressing Lupita. Instead, he closed his eyes and his mind to the presence of her thoughts. He was tired and frustrated enough without adding more suffering. In no time at all, the loss of sleep since their lives had merged began to take its due.

* * * *

"Mmm." Elizabeth licked her lips as her eyes flickered open and then shut once more. She wasn't ready to give up the rapture of sleep. Her body hummed with pleasure, hungry with a need that no food could satisfy. The sheets were softly wrapped against her skin and the mattress too giving against her back. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes again and knew her nap was over.

Roberto was in the room. She sensed his presence then sought him out. His eyes were closed and she tried to read his thoughts. Nothing. Obviously, she hadn't progressed as far as she'd like in her gift for

mind-reading. Getting out of bed, she found Roberto in the stuffed chair with Ghillie asleep on his lap.

"He really is a beautiful man." The words slipped out before she could catch them. She imagined him with Rafael's beard and mustache, and knew he would look just like his ancestor. She gasped. Add the beard and mustache and they could have been the same person. Elizabeth wondered for a moment if she looked anything like Lupita.

"No way," she said. There was no way she could be mistaken for the vibrant and sexy Lupita. She caught a glimpse of herself in a small, nearby mirror and twisted her hair to the side. Maybe? *Good grief, I'm in over my head. I'm comparing my relationship to Roberto with the one Rafael and Lupita shared. Bad enough that it feels like there is a link between the lives, but do we have to look alike as well?*

There was obviously a link between Rafael and Lupita's romance and the bond she shared with Roberto. She gazed back at Roberto, unable to look away. In sleep, his face seemed softer, less intimidating. But there was something else there. She sensed a feeling of heaviness within him. Elizabeth stretched out her hand and unconsciously smoothed the wrinkles in his forehead. The lines fled and he sleepily turned his head into her hand.

She stood there, dumbfounded that she could have such an effect on him. Elizabeth yielded to the tenderness that welled up inside her. Was it compassion she felt for him, or something more? When she pulled her hand away, he backed farther into the cushions. She was tempted to touch him again as the creases returned. But what would she say if he woke up and found her standing there with her hand on his head? How could she explain it, when she didn't understand it herself?

The bond between them baffled her. Even Ghillie seemed to like him! She'd never seen Ghillie curled up in anyone's lap besides her own. The cat didn't even grant that privilege to Lisa. Yet she looked up at Elizabeth with a large yawn and gave what appeared to be a cat's wink of approval before she lowered her head back down and stretched a leg out over Roberto's thigh.

The man really was gorgeous. He didn't even snore, what more could a woman ask for? Try understanding, trust, even friendship. She frowned, realizing he had already shown her a great deal of friendship. Hadn't he understood her stand on several issues that night on the yacht? Trust was the last remaining issue. Memories wrestled with emotions. She felt she could trust him, but could she really? Did he feel he could trust her? He wouldn't bring home a woman he couldn't trust, would he? She walked back to the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

"All this nonsense about trust and friendship. You're sitting in a room with a man who's locked you both in. He's probably got the damned key in his pocket. What's wrong with this picture, Elizabeth?"

The image in the mirror looked back at her with an expression of disbelief. "How could you get so soft?" she asked. There was still no answer forthcoming from the reflection. *"Enough. March your butt out of this room and get that key,"* she ordered herself. "Don't look at him, don't drool. Just do it."

Just do it, she thought, creeping toward the chair once more. *Just do it.* Her hand was inches away from his pocket.

"Don't do it." His hand clamped down around her wrist and the next thing Elizabeth knew, she was in his lap. Ghillie uttered a loud cry of feline indignation from the floor. She promptly sniffed at them in dismissal, and sashayed to the bed. "You are awake."

Elizabeth gazed upward and watched in fascination as he yawned. "So are you," she said, managing a fragile smile.

"I am a light sleeper. Thank you for your compassion, *Querida*." He stared at her a long time, as if

studying every feature on her face. "Daniel has reminded me that I am not helping my cause by keeping you locked up. He has suggested I post a guard outside instead. Would that make you more comfortable?"

What kind of game was he playing now? His cause?

"No games, *mi amada*. A man does not show his woman that he loves her by locking her inside rooms," he said.

She blinked. Twice. "Remind me to thank Danny some time, will you?"

"We both will," he promised. "I trust you have learned more from Lupita?"

Her face exploded with heat as she thought of the latest dream. Riding lessons from Lupita were the last things she needed.

"One never knows when she will need to learn a thing or two about horses," he said, chuckling softly.

"A polite man would refrain from pointing out something he learned by clandestine methods. Is there nothing sacred around you?" She struggled against the arm holding her in place.

"You are sacred to me." He brushed away a strand of hair that had fallen over her face.

"I can't come to you if you never let me free," she countered breathlessly. His expression held her in a way that far surpassed his physical strength. She felt his arms loosen around her instantly and then he held her as if to support her, not hold her in position.

"Something else Daniel pointed out," he said. "It is no wonder that you are friends." His arms dropped from her. "You are free."

Suddenly, she felt lost, adrift in a lonely sea. She wished he'd pull her to him and finish the war that seemed to engulf them.

"There is no war, *Querida*. Neither of us will ever be truly free from the other. There will always be a part of ourselves we will leave behind. A part of me has always belonged to you, just as a part of you has always been mine. We should not be fighting this. Lupita knew this, as did Rafael."

Lupita. Things always came back to her. At the mention of the name, Elizabeth found the strength to rise and move away. Was he in love with Lupita? Was she, herself, just a part of the package? Was he just playing a part, as if they were repeating a piece of history? Where would that leave her when her portion of this mystery was over? She looked over at him from her new position. She was afraid to voice the words, and wished he would answer as he had in the past, without her having to ask. He remained silent, yet his look spoke of understanding at the question.

"I cannot give you an answer to something you are afraid to know. My love is not bound to limits of time."

Great. So now she knew, she was a substitute for Lupita. The words caused an ache where there had been emptiness. Whoever said it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all—they were wrong. Dead wrong.

"Let's go to the library. Daniel is probably still here," Roberto offered quietly. A glance in his direction revealed he was in as much pain as she was.

She found Daniel in what appeared to be the study, books filling the shelves from the floor to the ceiling.

What an interesting room, she thought. She recognized it as if she'd been in it before. If this was another case of *deja vu*, she was going to scream. She knew if she examined the titles, they would vary on every subject known to man.

"Ah, you're awake. I wondered if you would sleep through the siesta hours," Daniel teased lightly as she walked further into the room. "Where's Roberto? I'm surprised he let you out of his sight."

Chapter Sixteen

"He was behind me," Elizabeth answered. She twisted around so fast she was dizzy. Where was he? She poked her head outside the door, but the hallway was empty. "Does he always disappear like this?"

"Sometimes," Daniel murmured. "He usually has a good reason."

"Well, I'd love to hear the answer for this one." She sighed. "He woke up just after I did and we came to see if you were still here." Her face burned, in spite of her efforts to control the blush. "It wasn't like that, Daniel."

His eyes lit at the comment and she watched the silent flutter of his lips. He didn't believe her. She tried a different subject. "Is there a clock around here?" she asked. "I realized when I woke up that I haven't seen one since we arrived at the island. You don't even wear a watch. What kind of place is this that can survive without the rest of the real world?"

"Makes you expect a bustling white rabbit to rush by, rambling about being late, eh?" Elizabeth nodded. "You get used to it," Daniel said. "Once you're accustomed to the pace of life on this island, you won't be able to imagine yourself in another world. Ruled by the face of a clock, uggh, what a gruesome thought." He shuddered dramatically. "Here, people get up when the sun rises and sleep when it goes down. Or whenever they get sleepy. We doze during the hottest time of the day, hence, the siesta hours. It's probably two o'clock to four o'clock on an American schedule. People sleep or spend the hours enjoying themselves in other ways." He wrinkled his brow and shot her a lewd grin. "It makes for a wonderful way to live."

"Yeah, well, it obviously agrees with you." She laughed, not buying his lascivious leer in the least. She remembered his being much more pale. Now he sported a healthy, tanned glow. "Is everyone here as happy as you?" She took a cup from the tray beside him and poured herself a cup of tea from the porcelain teapot. She spotted a seat relatively near him and sat to talk further.

Perhaps he could unveil some of the mysteries she'd been facing recently.

"Roberto's a good leader," he answered. "He listens to people, learns their problems and finds solutions. Much the same as his father did before him."

"Spoken like a salesman." Sarcasm oozed from her like syrup. "So you knew his father then? What was he like?"

"Honey, I don't have to sell Roberto. You've already signed the credit card receipt. You're in—hook, line, and sinker."

He playfully cast out an invisible fishing pole and reeled in an invisible fish. Elizabeth had the sinking feeling he was right.

"Too bad you don't look too pleased about it," he observed. "As for Roberto's father, I knew of him. But the people here talk. I've heard how the island was ruled, or in actuality, led by Roberto's father, and then Roberto. If they dictated to the people, they did so in a way the islanders felt comfortable with. I

understand you've read the journals, so you know *Isla de San Miguel* has always been led by a member of either the San Miguel family or the Hernandez family. The Hernandez family dropped out of rule about three generations ago."

She contemplated in silent annoyance. Apparently, Roberto had told Daniel about finding her with the journals. Would all her actions be common knowledge? She shoved aside her irritation; other thoughts seemed more significant. Hernandez family. Perhaps Esteban Hernandez?

Three generations. Much later than Lupita's generation so she couldn't have succeeded in killing Esteban.

"Your mind works yet your face remains silent. You've acquired some interesting skills, Beth. Your expressions aren't as open as they used to be. I can read most women's faces as easily as I can read a playing card. You've even learned to shield your eyes. How does Roberto read you as clearly as he does?"

"I'm not certain," she admitted candidly. Briefly, she turned her head away, unable to face Daniel's gaze head-on. "He says it works both ways, but with me it comes and goes. It hasn't worked to my advantage."

"Roberto always seems to have the upper hand," he agreed. "Things work better that way. Trust me." He smiled.

"Somebody ought to patent that line. They'd make a fortune."

She jerked out of her seat, and immediately set to pacing the room and studying every wall. Everything seemed hauntingly familiar. Her gaze lit on a display of knives, then singled out one in particular. On wobbly legs, she walked over to stand near it, extending her finger to touch the blade. She jerked her hand back as a jolt of electricity sprang between steel and flesh. Her hand shook as she reached out again, tracing the pattern in the handle, and gazed into the large, red ruby. Jewels? The thought made no sense until ... Lupita.

"No!" Daniel appeared as shocked by her outburst as she was. "Jeez, Daniel. Don't ask me to explain," she said then watched him settle back in his chair. "I'd swear I'm becoming a Stepford Wife, and I'm not even married. What is it about this place that reeks of mystery and intrigue? It's like I'm in a foreign movie and the subtitle reads 'trust me.'" She shivered, but the air in the room was still.

"I can't answer that one, kiddo. I don't have an answer," he said. He raised his hands in a gesture of defeat at her glare. "I can tell you this, though. I'd trust Roberto with my life."

How about your heart? Or better yet, your soul? Elizabeth glanced at the ruby and backed away, scooting to the chair she'd recently vacated.

"You look like me after an hour alone with the suit," Daniel said with a grin. He pointed at the unmanned suit of armor in the corner. She shuddered and crept further into the cushions. "Seeing you came as a surprise," he murmured, after a lengthy silence. "You're a surprise. Roberto said you're a teacher. I thought I remembered your being interested in something else. What was it? A marine biologist, something like that? You don't look like either one."

Elizabeth gave a sigh of relief. She was grateful for a more comfortable subject. "I'm surprised you remember. As I recall things, your days began and ended with Lisa. Besides, you wouldn't say that if you'd seen me before Roberto got hold of me."

"She was a rose under a cover of snow," Roberto finished for both of them.

He walked into the room and Elizabeth felt the entire atmosphere change. Warmth enveloped her where she'd just been cold. The room surrounding her suddenly became more tolerable, perhaps even comfortable.

"Elizabeth is the only woman I have ever known who tried so hard to disguise the beauty within."

She inhaled the scent of his tobacco as it lingered on his clothing when he came over and kissed her forehead. He seemed different from the man she had left just moments earlier. He was more assured, gentle and serene, where minutes earlier he'd been tense and passionate. Meditation? The thought seemed to amble through her mind like a breeze through a window.

"I missed you," he said. One finger raised her chin to kiss her more fully. She tried to turn her head so his kiss would land on her cheek. "You are concerned about propriety. I am concerned about kissing you. Daniel will understand."

Thank heavens she was sitting down! She'd have fallen at his feet. His kiss, as always, held the power to make her weak. When he released her and walked the few feet away to pour a cup of tea, she helplessly watched his every move. Yep, she was a Stepford Wife.

"You're such a contradiction," Daniel said with a wry smile. "I remember you so differently and yet the same." He looked as if she were a puzzle he couldn't piece together. "You've said you were so much different before Roberto's intrusion in your life, yet I can't imagine you any different then you are in front of me now. It's like I have to toss out the old image and look at you as if brand new." He sighed quietly.

"Okay, truth or dare?" Daniel sat forward, a determined gleam in his eyes. "How did you come to wear the San Miguel crest? You were never the type to get a tattoo. At least I never thought you were. Hard to imagine the odds of it being that particular image."

Elizabeth's heart flipped in her chest and she nearly dropped her cup of tea. Roberto reached from behind her and retrieved the cup from her hand, placing it on the small table beside them. She turned to face him and then looked from one man to the other. "You told him?"

"I keep few secrets from my friend, Daniel," he said. He offered no apologies for the fact. "You do not need to either. Any secrets he holds for you or me, he will take to the grave."

"It's the truth," Daniel confirmed solemnly. His voice reflected his hesitation in pursuing the subject. "Roberto mentioned it when you fainted earlier. I'm sorry if I embarrass you, but it fascinates me. I have to ask."

"I think I'd prefer the dare," she muttered and Daniel grinned again.

Elizabeth saw the boyish grin of her youth. Between Daniel and Roberto, if her heart melted any further, she could serve it as soup. She steeled herself in light of Daniel's candor. He seemed as embarrassed about asking as she felt. She wished she could explain it, but there was no explanation other than the mystical connection that seemed to remain between her and Roberto.

"Lisa dared me. Until a couple of days ago, it's been that '*one moment of craziness*' in my life. Or at least the biggest moment, considering everything else Lisa has talked me in to doing." She watched Daniel closely to see his response to the name, knowing her explanation of a dare was enough for him to understand. He nodded briefly and then indicated she should continue.

"I just couldn't find the right one. Something I felt I could wear for the rest of my life, you know? I wanted something medieval, something with a sense of timelessness." She stole a look at Roberto while

he considered her words. Truth be told, her answers were directed to him rather than Daniel.

"Anyway, I kept thinking about some dreams I'd had as a kid, piecing parts of it together. Until now, I'd always considered them to be from a movie I'd seen. You know the kind I'm talking about, the kid's childhood is the basis for a smash-hit thriller? The image just kept popping into my mind, a little piece at a time. Lisa dragged me into the tattoo parlor with my drawing a couple of months ago. The rest, I guess, is history. In more ways than one, I suppose." She stared at Roberto, wondering what he thought of all of this. It felt good to have shared the story with him—with both of them. A weight lifted off of her shoulders.

"Then you dreamed of us together," Roberto said.

He was so matter-of-fact about things she felt a tingle up her spine. Then, she thought back and realized he was right. *How had he known?* He smiled broadly at her nod of agreement.

"I can't say I've heard of such a thing happening," Daniel said. "But it all seems so cryptic, doesn't it?" He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and withdrew one, lit it and inhaled its essence before he glanced in her direction again. "I'm sorry, Elizabeth. Do you mind?"

"Elizabeth?" She tilted her head at the name. It seemed strange, coming from Daniel.

"Sorry, it just didn't seem right to call you Beth. You're no longer the Beth I knew. The name doesn't fit. I don't know what to think about you." He glanced over at Roberto and shook his head. "About any of this."

She wondered what Daniel would think if he saw things from her perspective! It was too much for her. Hearing Daniel's words only made it worse. The facts swirled about in her head, too many strange circumstances to be considered coincidence. She wished she had something to do with her hands while she turned the puzzle around in her head. Roberto must have read her mind. He handed her the teacup, then took it back when it shook noisily in her hands. The look he gave her said he understood completely. So why weren't his hands shaking as if he was having a seizure?

"I suppose this doesn't even surprise you?" Daniel had once again spoken into the silence, but this time the question was directed to Roberto.

"Surprise me?" Roberto chuckled and she wondered what to make of him. "No. If you are asking if I understand it any more than either of you, I do not. As I have said to both of you before, it is not always necessary to understand something to accept it. Can I tell you why the water rushes to the shore or why a certain place is chosen for mountains to rise up?"

Elizabeth felt a tug on her last nerve. "Okay, that's enough. If I'm staying, Roberto, you're going to have to lose the tendency to wax philosophical. I am not Socrates or Plato. All the pretty words just give me a headache."

Daniel snickered, then shushed at Roberto's glare.

Elizabeth turned in her seat until she was in a position to see both of their faces clearly. "Okay, fellas. It's my turn for some questions. Lupita and Rafael are a part of this island's history, are they not?" She watched the men look at each other. "Dammit, Roberto. Quit giving him directions. I want answers. It's only fair," she reminded them. "You two know so much about me, and turnabout is fair play. Besides, it's not like I'm asking about my part in this mystical play. I only want to know the history, what's known. Perhaps it will save me from having to look into my crystal ball?" She glanced over at Daniel. "Trust me, it's not always a pretty picture."

She was being hostile, but she was beyond the point of caring. There were secrets in this place and she wanted them out in the open. Daniel cast an I-told-you-so look at Roberto.

"Very well," Roberto conceded with an amused look. He looked so calm Elizabeth wanted to smack him. "Lupita, as you have come to know, was already the slave of Esteban Hernandez. The Hernandez family ruled the island for several generations, having stolen the rights from the San Miguel family in a war. They were harsh rulers, using fear and force to run the island."

She glanced over at Daniel. He listened as closely as she did.

"Rafael San Miguel saw Lupita and knew her as she was. She was to be his wife. He tried to purchase her from Esteban Hernandez, but he refused time and time again. Rafael was forced to steal Lupita from the Hernandez castle and bring her home so they could be wed."

Elizabeth was instantly reminded of the dream from only hours before. Lupita had teased Rafael about being rescued and the manner of her escape.

"You grin," Daniel observed. "You have some other information for us?"

"Who me? No." She shook her head wildly, then schooled her expression and watched Roberto stifle a chuckle before he continued.

"The wedding took place as it was supposed to, but Esteban arrived during the party that followed. There was fighting and neither Esteban nor Rafael survived. Lupita disappeared during this time."

Elizabeth snapped her fingers. "The jewels. It makes sense now. They went to war over the diamonds and stuff."

Roberto nodded stiffly and she wondered what was up. He was waiting, his hands tight on his thighs. He started talking again, but she couldn't shake the undercurrent she felt in the room.

"Yes," Roberto confirmed. "Lupita left, taking the jewels she had stolen from the Hernandez castle. They and the San Miguel families have been at war ever since. Enrique San Miguel assumed the leadership of the island and it has been under the San Miguel leadership ever since." He hesitated and her suspicions grew. "In the years since her disappearance, we tracked Lupita and what must have been her children with a new husband to America. The whereabouts of the jewels are still unknown. The Hernandez family still searches for them."

Elizabeth huffed impatiently as Daniel tapped his fingers against the side of his chair. This was not a good sign, she decided.

"How do you know Lupita took the jewels with her?" she asked Roberto. "Rafael hid them, remember? Maybe he never gave them back?"

"We don't know. Nothing was recorded in the journals," Daniel said. It was the first he'd offered to the history lesson. Elizabeth and Roberto looked at each other silently.

"What about you? What do you know?" she asked quietly. She watched for any clue he might offer.

"They were in Lupita's possession when she disappeared. Rafael told her where to find them when he directed her escape."

"Escaping from Esteban. And Rafael's mother," she murmured.

For a split second, she felt a part of a team, all the members searching for the same answers. The

sensation didn't last. Suddenly, the undercurrents made sense. Elizabeth gazed down at the bracelet circling her ankle. The strong gold band was Lupita's. Elizabeth knew it, just as she knew Roberto was manipulating her. But why? She looked from it to Roberto, who probably saw every thought in her head. She was beyond caring.

Her eyes closed as images flowed by, like rushing water. Noises filled her mind, each in sequence with a picture. She saw a child alone at night in a strange bedroom and heard the sound of fighting in a nearby room. She felt the strange obsession she'd had over the tattoo. Then she saw glimpses of the erotic dreams, both titillating and frightening in their intensity. She began to understand Roberto's odd appearance in her life and the subsequent events that took her from Tampa to *Isla de San Miguel*. She bristled, thinking of the way the bracelet simply appeared on her leg while she slept.

"You're using me, aren't you?" From a distance, she heard Daniel's gasp of shock as she rose from her seat. She focused on Roberto's closed, blank expression. "I'm like a K-9, sniffing for drugs. You don't want me, you're using me to find the jewels."

He didn't deny her accusation. In fact, he said nothing at all. God, it hurt. She felt more pain than she'd ever felt before in her life. He didn't just want her because she reminded him of Lupita, he wanted the jewels as well. Common sense was coming to her at last. She had been a fool.

No wonder he had pursued her, pretending to want her so badly when no other man had. She might wear the feminine clothing he'd chosen, but she was still a plain Jane underneath. How could she have ever believed such a stunning man would want a woman like her? Acute disappointment filled her senses. Her throat threatened to close from the sorrow welling within. Roberto inched toward her.

"Don't," she warned. "I don't want you to touch me. Not now, not ever." Her voice cracked and broke, much the same as her heart was doing. She reached down and pulled the ankle bracelet off, throwing it at him as she made her way out of the room. "Take this thing."

Tears flowed furiously once she was outside the library, and she made her way blindly down the hallway. She heard footsteps behind her, but she was too heartsick to turn and see who followed her. She was overwhelmed by the situation. Everywhere she turned was a reminder that her life was not her own. The plastered stone walls surrounding her mocked her very existence. Several days ago, she was in her own home. Now, she was in *Castillo de San Miguel*. Where had one line crossed the other?

She swept into her bedroom and immediately felt worse. Pieces of her life were scattered about the room. The porcelain doll she'd received from her foster mother abruptly struck her as ironic. It was a Spanish dancer. Odd, how she'd never noticed. The small music box Lisa had given her as a graduation present from college. *Her* things were in *his* room. Where had her old life gone? The small trinkets seemed engulfed by larger, more significant signs of her new reality. When had she accepted that her existence had changed by one fateful encounter with Roberto? Or had it changed when she got her tattoo? Had any of it been real at all?

She sank to the floor, a wasted heap of tears and frustration. She had no idea how long she sat there weeping before the knocks on the door started. It was Daniel. Knowing Roberto had chosen to stay away only added to her grief. It was silly, she knew. She'd told him to stay away. Now that he had, she was angry he'd listened and not barged in with his usual persistence.

"Elizabeth." Daniel continued to call out from beyond the closed door. "Open the door so we can talk."

"Dammit, stop crying." She jerked the door open and demanded, "I suppose he sent you?"

Cautiously, he crept into the room, his eyes darting back and forth, from her angry stare to the door. "Are

you here to plead his case for him?" Daniel didn't answer. His mouth opened and closed as if he was debating the right words to use. "If he did send you," she began, her voice wobbly and pitifully weak, "you can turn right around and leave. I'm on his island at *his* will. In *his* room, in clothes *he* chose for me. I don't need any more of his influence."

She turned her back on Daniel for a minute and stomped over to the dresser. Several seconds passed as she rifled through the drawers of her own clothing, which Roberto had brought to the island for her. She searched for something within that reminded her of herself, something she could wear that would bring back the woman she had known only a couple of days ago.

"Are you still here?" Elizabeth shifted momentarily to see Daniel still standing behind her. He hadn't moved from the position he'd been in the last time she looked at him.

"I'm not here for Roberto," he said. "Well, that's not exactly accurate. I'm here for him, but I'm also here for you."

"You can't be here for both of us," she argued. "We're on opposite sides. We're from different worlds, and I'm not talking Mars and Venus." Elizabeth swung back to the dresser, jerking open another drawer.

"You will never be on opposite sides, no matter how hard you want to believe it," he said. "And you *were* from different worlds, but it seems they've merged. You were—and still are—two halves of a whole," he finished solemnly.

"Oh, don't you start that with me. I've heard enough of Roberto's sickening sweet euphemisms for souls joined at the hip. I don't need more of it from you."

She glared at him then turned away. *Is there anything in this drawer that feels familiar and fits her now?* She knew these were her belongings, but somehow they seemed different, less like her than before.

"I can't believe this." Elizabeth cursed. She turned to Daniel, holding a pair of shorts and a shirt in one of her hands. "These are my things. I wore them before I heard of Roberto San Miguel. Now I look at them and they seem as foreign as a G-string. Where have I gone to?" she asked raising a hand to her head. "I am Elizabeth Sanderson of Tampa, Florida," she chanted. "I am a third grade school teacher. I have one good friend, several medium level acquaintances and no family. I read dime store novels, but I know they're fiction. I don't smoke or drink, at least I didn't until four days ago. Now they both look good to me." She heard her voice crack. "Do you see a third grade teacher in this room?"

Daniel shifted in place, an amused grin on his face.

She wanted to beat him to a pulp. "You're just as impossible as he is." Spotting her purse above the dresser, she reached over and pulled it toward her. "Look at this," she instructed. She retrieved her wallet and shoved her driver's license in his direction. "And this," she commanded, flipping it over to show him a picture of her with Ghillie. Lisa had taken the photograph less than a year ago.

"That's what I was before Roberto showed up. A sparrow." She sighed. "I'm still a sparrow, hidden beneath the clothes of a parakeet. You can dress me up, but I'm still the same person." *Or am I?* The question hung like Christmas lights, long after the end of the season.

She settled on a pair of cut-off shorts and a long tee shirt. Daniel remained still, but his amusement disappeared. He was frowning.

"I need to see me again. I need to see Elizabeth Sanderson and none of these things fit. They're going to fit, though. I'm going to put them on and I swear I'll feel like myself again."

It didn't work. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she wasn't the same woman she'd been in Tampa. She groaned loudly as she admitted the truth. She could either accept the truth by kicking and shouting, or by dealing with it head-on. As usual, she chose the practical approach. She didn't have to like it, but she did have to come to terms with it.

"I still don't see a third grade teacher or the woman from the pictures, either in those clothes or in this room," he commented when she returned from the bathroom several minutes later. "I see a beautiful woman named Elizabeth Sanderson who's come out of hiding."

"Damn you," she cried, hurling her hairbrush at him. She groaned again. Somehow, she had to stop these violent tendencies. "Shut up and show me this island, preferably the parts with the easiest escape routes." She threw her head back to place her hair behind her. She grabbed a ribbon from the top of the dresser and pulled Daniel out of the room.

Chapter Seventeen

"Well, if it isn't Raul and Paco," Elizabeth exclaimed, the sarcasm stinging. She began to wonder if they had a sixth sense about her presence.

"They're going with us," Daniel said, a hint of anger in his voice.

"Excuse me? Oh, of course. They are my lock and key, or at the very least my bodyguards. How silly of me." She huffed with displeasure as she positioned herself in the seat of the jeep. "I suppose you're here as both chaperone and tour guide?" She glared at Daniel. His silence meant he agreed. "Great, now I have a chaperone and Secret Service. What more could a woman want?"

"Daniel, why does she talk so foolishly?" Paco asked. "Does she not realize how dangerous it is for her to be alone and without protection?"

Paco's expression gave her no reason for misunderstanding. In his eyes, she was a spoiled child who had no concept of reality.

She glared back. "Believe me, Paco, I've had all the protection I can stand. What I need is fresh air and distance. Lots of distance, and you could throw in a fast boat with a compass."

"You don't want to do that, Elizabeth," Daniel warned.

"I know, I know. Try to escape and I'll be in Eduardo's clutches within an hour."

"Foolish woman," Paco muttered. He added something in Spanish, which made Elizabeth glad she couldn't understand. What he'd said couldn't have been complimentary.

"This whole scene is ridiculous," she grumbled. "Great plot for a book," she mused. "Capture some innocent bystander, convince her she's the key piece in the ultimate puzzle. Oh, and throw in some family jewels to spice things up."

Daniel piped up. "Family jewels worth several million."

"Several million?" she repeated in surprise. "Perhaps Rafael moved them and Lupita didn't leave the island with them? He could have kept them for himself."

Raul's rage came through loud and clear in his words. Elizabeth didn't need a translator to figure out she'd stepped over an invisible line. "Rafael San Miguel was an honorable man. My family has served his for many generations. He did not need to steal from the Hernandez family to gain more of what he

already had."

He turned to glare at her from the front seat. She had to admire his belief in his ancestors, as well as his undaunted service to Roberto.

Daniel didn't appear to be any more understanding of her situation than Raul was. "I don't understand how you could think that kind of thought about Roberto. Even if you don't believe he loves you, surely you at least recognize he's a good man."

"I understand he's the good guy in all of this," she conceded. "I'll hold my votes on whether he loves me or not. He's in love with a dream woman, a slave girl who's been dead for generations. He doesn't even know me. *I* don't know me, so how could *he*?"

"When Roberto told me that he would find you soon, I thought he was a fool for believing in the impossible. When you returned with him this morning, I thought I was the fool for not believing him sooner. Now I know it was neither of us," Daniel said. "But I forget I'm merely a tour guide. That's one of the fire stations for the island," he pointed out angrily. "You know, if you can't see how much Roberto cares about you, you need a prescription for glasses."

She shuffled in her seat, stubbornly refusing to meet Daniel's gaze. She had glasses. They were clear ones to hide from the world. Perhaps it was time to stop hiding.

"Has it occurred to you what Eduardo Hernandez would do if he got hold of you?" Daniel asked. "He has killed islanders to reach Roberto. What do you think he'd do to you, knowing how Roberto feels about you? Hernandez doesn't just want the jewels. He wants Roberto, dead. And you'd be a great bargaining chip."

His point made, Daniel fell silent and the hum of the engine, the sand shifting beneath the jeep's wheels, were the only noises heard for several minutes.

Elizabeth nibbled at her fingernail, wriggling it about in her mouth while she considered Daniel's words. Finally, she turned her attention to the landscape surrounding them. Did Roberto love her? If he didn't, he was going to elaborate lengths to get her cooperation. Was he watching over her as a matter of protection or was Daniel right? Did Roberto have to make her feel beautiful in order to get her to find the jewels? Maybe he wasn't even expecting her to find the jewels. She played back the memory of finding her cat in her bedroom and Roberto's pleasure at her happiness.

Daniel's voice broke into her thoughts. "I'm touring the island alone. Yep. It's no problem. I enjoy driving around with a comatose rider." He shrugged.

Guilt and shame filled her to the brim. "I'm sorry, Daniel. Raul and Paco, I apologize to you, too. I've been acting like a spoiled brat."

Raul accepted her apology in silence, his gaze speculative. Then he nodded and turned away to scout the area around them. Paco did the same.

Daniel grinned, his trademark expression, which said everything in the world was in proper order. Elizabeth was surprised to realize how much she'd missed his easy-going manner.

"Have I missed much?" she asked shyly.

"Only the island cemetery, the tobacco fields, and the vineyard. We're coming up on the Cathedral and the school now."

She could tell which was which from the stained glass windows and the tall bell tower on the church.

"The majority of the island residents are Catholic, but Roberto had a smaller chapel built for other denominations," Daniel commented at her questioning look. "He's here at every Mass, unless he is not on the island."

Well, here's another new territory to learn. She had never been exposed to the Catholic beliefs. Father Carlos was a pleasant enough man, middle-aged and spoke English with the accent of the island. She decided she would probably enjoy Mass if he was leading it. He didn't seem to take offense when she did not cross herself as Daniel, Raul and Paco did. He seemed to accept the fact she wasn't Catholic. She wondered if she would have to convert to marry Roberto. *Marry him? When had she crossed that bridge?* An hour ago, she was ready to kill him and now she was debating marriage to the man? She stopped walking so abruptly that Daniel's hand instantly rose to steady her.

"Are you all right? Did you see something?" He looked as concerned for her as Roberto had been when she woke up the first time on board his yacht.

"I'm fine," she reassured him. *Yes, I did see something. It was my future and I'm not sure why it appeals to me.* The rest of the church tour passed in a haze.

The schoolhouse was charming. She inhaled the scents of chalk then imagined students about the room. This, at least, was home territory to her. "How many students do you have, Daniel?" she asked when they left the school building and returned to the jeep.

"We have thirty-five regular students, ranging from kindergarten to tenth grade. There's a fund for each child's education in the United States with host families for the eleventh and twelfth grade," he informed her. "Roberto felt it was important for each child to have the opportunity to study there if they wished. The parents have the right of refusal and I still teach for those grades. But I haven't seen a parent refuse yet."

"Do the kids return once they've seen the States or do they take off as soon as they can afterward?"

"Most go back to the States for their college. Roberto has set up a fund for this as well. We've had two or three leave the island for America, but most of the students return home and make the island stronger. You'll find Roberto is very open to new ideas that will improve life here."

"Are you electing him for sainthood, Daniel?"

"Hell, no. But I believe in giving a man credit where credit is due. It's a bit more than you've been doing lately, isn't it?"

"Touche." She was grateful when their attentions went back to the road. She recognized the heady scent of flowers, but she didn't know their varieties. "Is there anything to be said negative about this paradise?"

"Not much." Daniel shrugged and she laughed at the similar expression from Raul. "The best part is that most people don't know about us. We're just a dot on the map, yet we have beneficial connections to other countries through Roberto."

"No drugs, no poverty. It's just too good to believe." Elizabeth was in awe. She saw Raul's face darken in her peripheral vision. "What is it Raul?"

"*Se nada*," he answered quickly. "It is nothing," he repeated in English for her benefit.

"Nobody said we were free from drugs," Daniel explained. "Eduardo Hernandez has found it a useful

source of income to purchase weapons. There is no utopia, Elizabeth."

"What about your police?" She hesitated for a moment. "Do you have a police force here?"

Raul spoke up. "We have fine officers here, *Si*."

"Roberto's not the end to everything, Elizabeth," Daniel chastised her. Her face heated at the reminder. "He runs the island very much like an American town." He reached to steady her as the jeep hit a pothole in the dirt road. "There's a police force, all of whom answer to a captain, who answers to a Board of County Commissioners. A man would have to be crazy to try to run this place alone. Roberto is committed, not crazy."

If the two men were out to impress her with tales of Roberto's influence, they succeeded admirably. Elizabeth's attention slipped from the conversation as they approached an overlook.

"The water's so clear," she said, bending slightly to look down at the shoreline below. "So this is what Caribbean blue looks like. It's kind of a mixture of turquoise and aquamarine. It's so clear, so beautiful."

Even the white froth of the waves had a crystalline sparkle. She had never been good at turning a poetic phrase, which would have done the sight more justice. The sound of the waves crashing against the rocks below brought a feeling of continuity. Time ceased while she simply absorbed the sights and sounds, felt the salty air touch her skin.

"I love this place," she told Daniel. "I'll have to come back again sometime."

"Ask Roberto to bring you. It's where I usually find him when he's away from the castle."

She considered his words as she sat down in the grass. Roberto and Daniel were very much like her and Lisa. East meets West and they find a common ground. How? She pulled up a blade of grass and put it between her forefingers, then blew. She smiled afterward at the recreated memory. The whistling noise sounded just like it did when she was a child. Leaning back on her arms, she faced him again. "Tell me about him, Daniel. How did you meet? What brought you here?"

"What can I say that you don't already know? He's a good man. The best friend I've ever had."

"I hear a 'but' in there somewhere," she said. "You're not exactly saying it, but your eyes are guarded. What gives?"

"But I worry about him."

She rose from her position of leisure, prepared to do battle. If he was going to try influencing her in Roberto's direction, she was not going to stand for it. He waved his hands lightly in the air and there was a new urgency in his voice.

"Don't get your feathers ruffled again. It's not like he's some deviant who only wants you around to save the San Miguel fortune. You have to understand that he's been so alone. When I met him in college, he was sober and steadfast. I know you understand. It's the way he focuses on one thing like it's a lifeline and keeps moving toward it. Now I know he was walking toward you." He searched her eyes before she started to interrupt him. "Go ahead and frown. It's the truth."

"How do you know it's me?" She shrugged and felt a pain in her shoulder muscles. Pure tension, she reminded herself, and let them slide back down again.

"I didn't at first. He told me about the island in college, how he was preparing to return and take over the family responsibilities. I thought it explained why he was so solitary. I mean, why make friends when

you're just passing through, right? It wasn't until I came to the island, that I realized this is the same way he lived while he was growing up here. No friends, no support. Just him. Then it all made sense. He couldn't become best buddies with someone here if he was expected to govern fairly for everyone. Can you imagine how hard it must be to put a friend in prison?"

Elizabeth felt a tug on her heartstrings, a subtle reminder that she had lived the same way. It was a lonely existence. At least she'd had Lisa to count on, even in her childhood.

"Not only that," Daniel continued, "he was considered strange in many ways. Here on the island, he's considered one of the 'gifted' so he's set apart. At school, he was overwhelming. Sort of scary. The girls threw themselves at him and the guys backed off. I guess one or two of them might have stood up to him, but it didn't last long. He's a master of intimidation." Daniel's forehead scrunched as if he was in deep thought.

She wondered about the girls Daniel had mentioned. She didn't have to wait long for the answer.

"Your mind's spinning again. I said the girls threw themselves, I didn't say he caught them." He smiled sheepishly. "Well, only a few. Nothing serious. He kept saying he was waiting for *the one*. He'd told me about his visions of her. You. It was spooky and even more strange now, when I see he was right."

"He told me about them, too. He described certain scenes, and they're all things I remember. It gave me goose bumps." She looked down at her arms and noticed she had them again then glanced over at Daniel. He'd apparently observed the same thing.

"What about you? Any visions of him before now?"

"Not as a kid," she answered with a small shrug. "I guess it didn't work both ways. The first time I saw him was—" Her face grew hot as she remembered the dreams. "Never mind. I don't want to discuss this. Let's just say I'd seen enough of him to know who he was when we met."

"Darn. With an expression like that, I think I would have enjoyed hearing about it." His blue eyes pierced her and nailed her to an imaginary wall. "And you can still say this is all a freak coincidence."

"God, Daniel. I don't know what to think," she said. *Besides this would make a great movie. Lovely thought, Elizabeth. Just get someone else to play your part, okay?* She glanced down at the bumps covering her arms again. "I frankly don't want to speculate on any of this."

"But you have to," he persisted. He gave a small, twisted smile in answer to her glare. "Everything is tied together in this: Roberto, the island, Eduardo Hernandez and the jewels."

"Let's not forget our good chum, Lupita," she added sarcastically.

"You still think he's hung up on her and not you, don't you?" She felt the imaginary wall at her back as he pinned her with another lengthy stare. "Explain this, then. If he's got a thing for Lupita, why did he see you as you were growing up? Why did he paint your portrait from his dreams? Why did he run into you at a restaurant, where you just happened to be and he just happened to go there for dinner? How did he know you had *his mark*? You might be tied to Lupita in some way, but you're not her and he's not Rafael. You're Roberto and Elizabeth, caught somewhere in the second act."

Her mind spun. Each of the events had taken place in a particular order, from start to finish. Coincidences didn't happen in sequence.

"Good God, I can't believe I've crossed over," he murmured. "I've gone from believing Roberto was obsessed with some ridiculous story, to where it's all beginning to sound normal." He looked as

dumbfounded as she felt.

"Tell me about it," she said dryly. "One day I'm celebrating my twenty-eighth birthday. The next, I'm on a rollercoaster. I'm obsessing about tattoos and dreaming in technicolor. Then there's this gorgeous hunk who is the answer to all my prayers, only I don't remember asking for him. He shows up, throws me over his shoulder and carts me off to Paradise. Only thing wrong is that there's a snake in this Paradise, just like the Garden of Eden. Half the time, I can't tell if I love him, hate him or if I'm just in a bad case of lust. Now I'm wondering if I was Lupita, where would I have hidden a couple of million in jewels?"

"Gorgeous hunk, huh? Answer to your prayers?" His eyes twinkled with mischief. "Sounds like Roberto's not the only one smitten."

"Smitten?" She dragged the word out as if it was a curse. "Where'd you get your degree in English?"

"Cracker Jack box. Came with a nifty spy ring."

"Hope you still have the ring. We may need it." She laughed.

The sound of waves crashing behind her brought her attention full circle. They'd been there long enough for the skies to turn color. Brilliant cascades of pink, orange and blue were in the distance. There was a golden glow to the waves as they formed and raced to the shore. Awareness trickled in, a sensation that she'd been there before, perhaps several times. Perhaps Rafael and Lupita had visited this place? Whatever the reason, her emotions were a jumble, a mixture of peace, love, and sorrow. Lupita had been here. Elizabeth was certain of it. She could feel the hopelessness, the desperation to escape, and the devastation of having lost the man she'd loved. Rafael. She shuddered.

"Cold?" Daniel asked.

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, just a lot of sensations coming together at once. There are too many contradictions. Danger."

The thought sprung out of nowhere, carrying a trickle of apprehension. Unconsciously, she scanned the rocky cliff across the small inlet, amazed to see a twinkle of light on a nearby ridge. Perhaps it was a pool of water, catching the sunlight to make a reflection? But what would a pool of water be doing that high up? Perhaps it was a puddle from recent rain?

"I feel like we're being watched," she told Daniel.

"Raul," Daniel called out.

Within seconds, a wall of men surrounded Elizabeth. "Daniel! I said I *felt* like we were being watched. I didn't ask for an army."

"Where, *Senorita*?" Raul demanded. He spouted something in Spanish, which had Paco dashing to the jeep and returning with binoculars.

She attempted to scoot beside Raul so she could point the area out, but he kept her firmly behind him. "If I can't see it, Raul, I can't point out the place."

"There is no need, *Senorita*," he replied. "I see him."

"Him? There's a person up there? Why?" Already, Daniel was pulling her to the jeep, with Raul and Paco acting as a human wall. "But—but," she stammered. "I don't want to go."

"*Senorita* Elizabeth, we go," Raul declared firmly, lifting her in the vehicle. He'd started the engine

before she could recover.

"Hey, cheer up, kiddo. At least you'll be home soon and you and Roberto can kiss and make up."

"I may need some pointers from the expert. From what I remember, you and Lisa broke up as regularly as nightfall, but you always got her back by mid-morning." It was better to make light of the situation than dwell on what she was going to say to Roberto when she saw him next.

"Oh, yeah." Elizabeth could tell Daniel was in a different time frame by the far-off look in his eyes. "She had a way about her that kept me running back for more."

"Sounds like Roberto," she mused. As much as she'd like to say differently, there was something about the man that kept her dancing to his flame.

"Like I said—hook, line, and sinker." He chuckled.

"Daniel, do you really think there's such a thing as eternal love? I mean, is it possible for two people to love each other, returning for another lifetime, for another chance? Or have I slipped over the edge?"

Daniel sighed. "If love can last forever, show me the dotted line so I can sign up. Most of my relationships last until dinner. What you and Roberto have is," he paused and stared off in space, then turned back to face her, "unique. Lasting."

It was funny how a simple comment from a friend could put everything in perspective. She smiled at Daniel. "Thanks, pal."

She licked her thumb and stuck it in the air, laughing at Daniel's dubious glance before he licked his own thumb and rubbed it against hers. Elizabeth felt sixteen again, grinning like a fool and acting as if she owned the world.

When she looked up to the second story of the castle, she had cause to smile again. Roberto's silhouette emerged at the window then slipped away. How long had he been looking for her? Her heart lifted suddenly. His thoughts merged with her own, leaving Elizabeth weak with longing. She felt his relief, the question he'd contemplated for hours. What would he have done if she left? His whole life had revolved around the day they met and it would end the day they parted. These were not the thoughts of a man intent on using Elizabeth for his personal gain. *I understand, Roberto. I was wrong to misjudge you. Forgive me?* She thrust the thought forward, trusting it to reach its destination.

When he appeared at the window again, his answering smile warmed her soul. She felt his heart race and watched Roberto in her mind as he took the stairs two, sometimes three steps, at a time.

"You were gone a long time. I missed you."

"I missed you, too," she conveyed silently. Touched by his candor, his caress heated her blood. The announcement that dinner was waiting for them earned a grumble from Elizabeth's stomach, and they shared a private smile. He led the way, entwining her hand in his, while Daniel trailed along behind them. Raul and Paco disappeared as soon as they arrived at the castle. The changing of the guard, Elizabeth thought wryly, but she was no longer irritated by the knowledge.

"Am I dressed all right?" she asked.

"Is dinner a formal affair?" Roberto chuckled at her attempted glare. "Of course you are dressed properly. You have never looked more lovely."

She considered his statement hogwash since she was still wearing her cut-off shorts and tee shirt and the

wind had blown her hair around on the bluff.

"She may get a bit of a sunburn," Daniel said. The two men acted like parents discussing a child. "We spent quite a bit of time on the bluff. She seems to enjoy it every bit as much as you do, Roberto."

Roberto seemed very pleased when he pulled them to a stop. "Ah, yes, it is my place of solace. Did you find it so as well, Elizabeth?"

She could feel his eyes penetrating into her soul as his fingers caressed her cheek.

"It's about time I was included in this conversation. I was half expecting one of you to cut my meat for me," she chided both of them. "The bluff was gorgeous."

"Raul saw a man on the cliffs," Daniel said, his voice hesitant.

Roberto's hand tightened around Elizabeth's. "Relax, *mi amado*," she transferred by thought. "You're hurting my hand, Roberto," she said. "Everything turned out well. I sensed danger and Raul took over from there. We came home."

Roberto swayed visibly, and Elizabeth knew it was because of her endearment. The rest of the world faded away as they stared into each other's eyes. "You're not going to lose me," she promised. "I understand the dangers. You have to trust me, *Querido*. I will not take any foolish chances, but you cannot hold me prisoner."

"Anyone here remember something about food in the next room?" Elizabeth and Roberto turned to see Daniel's smirk. "I know that you two can live on love, but I require sustenance."

Daniel winked at Elizabeth. "And don't think I haven't noticed the communication going both ways," he observed with a chuckle. "It's like being the only person in a room who doesn't speak German."

"Poor baby," Elizabeth clucked. "Anna, please don't forget Daniel's warm milk," she asked as the elegant servant passed by.

"You're pushing, kiddo," Daniel chuckled. "Nice to have you back again."

"I see that you two have renewed your friendship," Roberto observed. He raised his eyebrow, gazing speculatively at both of them.

"Nothing you have to worry about, *Amigo*," Daniel promised. "I think many of your worries are over."

Roberto nodded, his eyes glittering as he focused intently on Elizabeth. "So, tell me, Daniel. Where else have you taken Elizabeth so I will know what highlights to point out to her later?"

She was impressed that Daniel had remained standing until they reached the table. He sat down once she was seated. Highlights in Daniel's red hair glistened from the lights above the table, giving the illusion of a halo. That was a crock—Daniel was no angel, now or during their childhood years.

"We only touched the surface, *Amigo*," he answered briefly. He wasted no time digging into the contents on his plate. Once again, she was amazed at the amount of color displayed on her dinner plate, the vibrant hues enticing her to partake of its contents. The choice of spices, rice variations and assorted vegetables made the simple meal of steak a gourmet delicacy.

"This is wonderful, Anna," Daniel said.

Anna murmured a small reply, and Elizabeth noticed something out of place. Was it her imagination, or did there seem to be a moment of tension between Anna and Daniel? As quickly as it appeared, it was

gone. Anna refilled water and wine glasses as though she were a waitress whose tip depended on her service. Either that, or she cared very deeply for those she served, which started Elizabeth thinking. Had Roberto ever—

Chapter Eighteen

The little green monster named jealousy arose and Elizabeth shoved it aside. “It is very good. Thank you, Anna,” she added to Daniel's praise.

The smile that lit the woman's face was as good as a reward for lost treasure. Elizabeth wondered if she would ever get used to the level of emotions surrounding her. Sentiment was foreign to her nature, yet the last few days she'd been bombarded with displays of affection. Roberto nodded his agreement and Anna seemed to float out of the room in the same manner she had entered.

“I showed her the Cathedral, the school, and the bluff. We drove by the cemetery and vineyards. I'm not too certain she was awake to notice the vineyards. She had her mind on other things. You'll need to show them to her again some time later,” Daniel teased.

She felt her face color at the mention of her errant mind during the ride.

“There has been much for you to absorb, Elizabeth,” Roberto apologized. “I hope you will come to see the island as home.”

It is my home. Our home. The hours away from Roberto had solidified so many things in her mind. She met his intense stare with her own, and watched his eyes light with pleasure. His hand upon hers did little to steady her pulse rate. She was grateful to Daniel for commanding Roberto's attention and drawing it away from her. She listened quietly to the dinner conversation, absorbing as much information as possible from the matters discussed.

Roberto looked more relaxed after dinner. He chose a place on the couch in the library then pulled her down beside him. Elizabeth enjoyed watching him savor his cigar afterward and the after dinner liqueur was a perfect finish to a wonderful meal. She found herself relaxing in the presence of the two men and was disappointed when Daniel announced it was time for him to go. He had kept her thoroughly entertained with stories about Roberto's activities during their college years, as well as some of the comical mishaps involving residents of the island.

“He's a very good friend to you,” she commented after Daniel departed.

Roberto shifted on the couch, pulling her against him, and Elizabeth eased her head against Roberto's chest. She heard his heart beat increase beneath her ear.

“Very much so,” Roberto said. “Much like he must have been to you in the past.”

“Some,” she agreed quietly. “The three of us had some good times together. One day it was Lisa and I, the next we were the Three Musketeers. Instant cohesion. Daniel has a way of turning a routine occurrence into an event.”

“It was that way when Daniel and I met as well. As if a hidden part of myself was revealed. He came to the island when I called and asked him to take over the school. No questions, he just packed up and moved. I missed him while we were apart.”

She remembered her earlier thoughts about Roberto having lived a lonely life. His affection was evident on his face whenever he spoke of Daniel. How could she doubt his true feelings when they were so easily displayed in his eyes and on his face? What would he say when she told him she agreed to

stay—with him.

“You have come to a decision, *Querida*?” Roberto asked, raising her chin so he could see her face.

“A couple,” she hedged. “We need each other to solve this puzzle. I—um—understand you more. The verdict's still out on destiny, but I concede to the greater force that brought us together.” The heat in his eyes unnerved her. “Just hold me,” she urged. “I'm not sure I'm ready for the next step.”

“The readiness is there, in your eyes, *Querida*. It is a short walk from the library to our bedroom.”

How well she knew. But there was time. For the moment, she wanted the comfort of his arms around her, the sound of his heart echoing in her mind. The world seemed peaceful now and she wanted to savor the precious moment. She shifted to nearly lie on the couch, her back against his chest. During the next couple of hours, they talked of trivial things, the subjects of new lovers. She eventually ended up in his lap, playfully swatting him when his comments took an intimate turn, or they disagreed on a minute detail. The world was theirs alone and their cocoon was warm and cozy. Until—

“What?” she asked, during a lapse in their conversation. His attention was elsewhere; there was no question about it. He wore a blank expression of eyes-are-open-but-there's-no-one-at-home. One second he was discussing the merits of childhood competition, the next, he was gone. “Yoo-hoo,” she said, waving a finger in front of his face. “Anyone home?”

“I am sorry,” he answered, and abruptly shook his head. “There is something wrong. I can sense it.”

They did not have to wait long for the answer. The telephone started ringing almost immediately.

“Wow. Who needs a psychic with you around?” she said under her breath as he reached for the phone. His conversation was brief and he was not pleased afterward.

“There is a fire at one of the factories. I need to be there. You may go with me if you wish.”

She didn't have to be a rocket-scientist to know he felt torn between her safety and those exposed to a more obvious risk. “No. If I go, I'll want to help out. Then you'll spend half your time worrying about the fire and those working on it, the other half either arguing with me or watching me like a hawk to make sure I'm safe. You'd be better off if I stayed here.” Piercing brown eyes sought and met her gaze. “Go. I'll be safe here.”

“Paco,” he called out. There was no response. “Raul is at the factory, as is Daniel. I do not like leaving you under these conditions.”

“Paco stepped outside for a moment, *Senor Miguel*.” Anna walked into the room as if she had just been passing by. “If you would like, I will walk *Senorita* Elizabeth to her room.”

“I'm guessing there are guards outside the house?” Elizabeth asked. Roberto nodded, unspoken questions in his eyes. “I won't run away. I'll lock myself inside my room until you return. It will be against my better judgment, I might add, but I'll do it because you'll panic if I don't.”

She watched, feeling his thoughts as he weighed the options in his mind. She was shocked at how well she could understand his thoughts. Her safety *was* his prime concern.

“Look, you're wasting time here,” she tried again. “You're needed, and I'm not going to hold you from your duties. Anna and I will stay together until you get back. Paco will come back any second now.”

After a lengthy pause, Roberto nodded his approval. “Thank you,” he whispered, before his mouth claimed hers hungrily. “Dream of me,” he encouraged her then propelled her toward the door. She had

no doubt she would. He was gone an instant later.

Anna was quiet as they walked, apparently choosing to allow Elizabeth the silence of her thoughts. They were nearing a corner when she heard a noise. Without warning, pain exploded in her head and everything went dark.

* * * *

Hours after he'd arrived at the scene, Roberto felt no better about his decision. His body was present at the two-story blaze, but his heart was with Elizabeth. He tried several times to see inside her mind, but silence reigned. How strange. He prayed he hadn't made a mistake by leaving her alone. He should have waited until Paco came back inside before he left, but he'd wanted to show her that he trusted her decision. What if he'd made a mistake?

Sweat ran down his face, streams of it had soaked what he wore beneath the yellow flame-retardant uniform. All around him, there were others dressed similarly, each doing their part toward getting the fire under control and put out safely. He had already been in the building twice. He'd seen for himself that they were fighting a losing battle to save the structure. Brilliant orange and yellow tentacles of fire burst forth from broken windows, as if to mock their attempts. Brown and gray hoses were everywhere, resembling huge tubeworms crisscrossing over each other, snaking toward the burning factory.

Organized chaos, one might call the scene before him. Circular streams of water shot from other hoses, competently aimed to drench the neighboring area and prevent the spread of flames to nearby buildings. Two men emerged from the smoky doorway, one being held up by the other. He was taken to the main truck, which also served as a temporary medical facility, and given an oxygen mask. Roberto had just been through the same treatment, so he knew exactly how weak the man felt from heat and smoke inhalation.

"Go home, Roberto. I'm sure you're concerned about Elizabeth, and there are plenty of others to take care of this mess," Daniel urged as he came up beside him.

"I cannot, *Amigo*," he said. "These are my people, I'm responsible for them." This was not a new argument between the two of them. Even before Elizabeth's arrival, Daniel had made his opinion known about Roberto's role on the island.

"You're a ruler, not a martyr. You said it yourself that you wanted to act more as a Commander. Major leaders, presidents and even kings don't show up for every fire or other crisis in their jurisdiction."

"Other governors, presidents or even kings are not trained firefighters," Roberto answered grimly. At least this time, Daniel had left off the part about births, deaths and marriages.

"Only because you insisted on taking the course. You also took lifeguard training, but I don't see you out on the beaches every day."

When Roberto glanced over at his friend, he could tell he was far from through on the subject. "Raul called me. I was needed."

"He called you because you needed to know where he was, not so you'd be here. Your circumstances have changed, Roberto. Before Elizabeth came along, you showed up at every crisis or event. No one expected you to be present, but you felt it was part of your duty. And it probably met some need you had. Now you have your own household to look after. So go, and do just that. There are a hundred and fifty other men who have the same training needed for this job."

Roberto stared at his long-time friend. Had Daniel always had this wisdom, or had it been hidden away

for the proper time to emerge? There was no doubt the man was right. His stomach twisted at the possibility Eduardo might take this opportunity to strike. Would he ever know the correct thing to do? He felt ill as Raul walked toward them, knew in his mind what he was about to hear and dreaded the words.

"They found a wrench near the gas valves, *Senor Miguel*."

"Intentional," Roberto murmured, not intending to say the word aloud. Which meant Eduardo Hernandez. Eduardo had expected Roberto to be torn between duty and love. He had failed Elizabeth—again. "I have not been able to sense Elizabeth's thoughts. She is in trouble."

Raul and Daniel were not far behind him as he turned and ran to his jeep.

* * * *

Elizabeth heard a moan. It seemed to come from a faraway place, but she recognized afterward that she had done it herself.

"*Senorita Elizabeth*," Anna whispered. Her voice was wrapped in fear. She said a few words in Spanish then must have remembered Elizabeth could not understand her. "You are alive. *Madre de Dios*. I was so afraid."

"Where are we?" She struggled to sit up and Anna came over to help her.

"I do not know. I fear the worst. I woke up a moment before you did."

She watched Anna's tears fall and placed her hand on the woman's shoulder to comfort her. She should be in immeasurable pain, Elizabeth thought. There was blood on the side of Anna's neck, an indication that she was lucky to be alive. If there was any luck to be found in their situation, she decided grimly. The only source of light was what came through boards nailed over a window frame. Daybreak? It provided enough visibility to make out the coarse plaster walls surrounding them.

"Another castle?" she asked Anna, turning to look at her. There was fear in Anna's eyes.

"*Si*, it is possible. The Hernandez *castillo* remains on the island."

"Hernandez." Elizabeth breathed in the stale air and shuddered with distaste. It made sense. In fact, it was the only thing that made sense. Her fears rose, as did her hackles, when she heard voices from outside of the room. The words were spoken in Spanish and each of them seemed to turn Anna paler than the word before.

Elizabeth sympathized as her gaze flew from Anna's face to the door. She was equally paralyzed in fear when two men burst into the room, followed by others who filed into position beside them. She could not understand the words, but there was no doubt the first two men had disagreed on something. The light that followed them into the room gave Elizabeth her first glimpse of the past, now turned into the present.

"Esteban," she whispered. The gleam of white teeth set in a vicious smile terrified her.

"Eduardo," he corrected her. "So he found a woman as *loco* as he is. Do you believe you are doomed to repeat the past?"

A string of words in Spanish streaked past her and she had no idea of their meaning. Judging from his expression, she didn't want to know. He had the look of a man who was playing a card game and had already stacked the deck in his favor.

"Have you figured out why you are here?"

Elizabeth didn't want to know why. She looked over to Anna for some form of reassurance, but the other woman had fainted. She wasn't sure if she was sorry for Anna or relieved. At least one of them didn't have to endure Eduardo's stench. *Roberto, see this*, Elizabeth prayed. She opened her mind as well as her eyes. *I'm at the Hernandez castillo and you have to save us.*

Another argument erupted between the two men. She followed their gaze over to Anna's prone form. She waited for a fight to break out, but nothing happened beyond their verbal exchange. When she glanced up again there was only a grim acceptance on the part of one man and a frightening smile worn by Eduardo. He intended to kill Anna. She sensed his intentions in the foul-smelling air.

"No! You can't kill her!" She threw herself in front of Anna. "I won't let you."

"Move San Miguel's whore," Eduardo ordered. "Do not worry, *Senorita*, your time will come soon."

Two sets of beefy arms wrapped around her and dragged her away. Elizabeth was shoved to a nearby corner, where she was forced to peer between the legs of her captors. She didn't want to watch. Bile burned her throat, but she couldn't look away. Eduardo pulled a gun from his waistband, aimed it at Anna, and fired twice. Anna's body rose with the impact then fell silent.

Elizabeth felt a painful hole form in her chest. How could anyone display so little regard for life? Tingles of fear rose along her spine. Was she next?

"They call you Elizabeth."

Eduardo turned toward her and the men in front of her moved out of the way. He acted as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Her whole body shook and she couldn't stop it, despite the quiet murmurs of calm she could hear from Roberto.

"Is a strange name." Eduardo lacked education as much as he lacked sensitivity. "But is perhaps better than Lupita." He glared at one of his men then turned his attention back to Elizabeth. "You must forgive my man here," Eduardo said. He pointed to the man bent over Anna's body in remorse. "He sees something to be done yet he cannot do it. There are men who still refuse to kill a woman." Eduardo shrugged. "I have no problem with this."

Tentacles of fear reached in and clamped about her insides with piercing hooks. Her breath came in painful gasps.

"Roberto will come with the jewels," he said. "Then you will both die. Until that time, you will be my guest. I will send a woman to help you clean up. You can entertain me while we wait." His evil smile left no question about his expectations of her.

"I don't dance, Esteban," she said. There were times it paid to act dumb and Elizabeth had learned her lessons well. Weak men expected it from a woman. If he thought she was crazy and reliving the past, why not use it to her advantage? Her voice shook, but she held his gaze until it shifted down her body and then back up. Terror consumed her, but it would not control her. She would not allow him to win. If he thought she'd just lie down and accept her apparent fate, he'd better think again.

"Ah, we are back to Lupita. No matter. There are other ways a woman can provide distraction."

She refused to contemplate what form of distraction he'd enjoy. Her panic level decreased only for a moment when the door shut behind them and she was left alone once more, alone with Anna's dead body. She shuddered as reality closed in with the darkness. A creature moved about in the far corner and

she shrank away. Her body trembled as she tried to bring it back under control.

“Come on,” she coaxed herself. “Get it together.” She stared at her hands, willing them to stop shaking. There was Anna to consider. She owed it to the woman to check and see if she was still alive, if there was anyway to help her. A burst of hysterical laughter followed. What she knew about medical attention could fill a thimble.

Regardless, she inched her way over and peered down at the woman. Lord, she had been pretty. She had such a flawless complexion, perky nose and dark, silky, straight hair that flowed past her shoulders. Anna was too young to die this way. Elizabeth couldn't find a pulse and she prayed she was looking in the right place.

An invisible door opened to a part of Elizabeth's soul, and thoughts of Roberto flew from Elizabeth's mind. An eerie feeling overcame her, similar to when she'd seen the San Miguel crest, and sweat beaded on her skin. There was so much blood on the floor. Pools of it surrounded Anna, and the sight of it caused Elizabeth to shake uncontrollably.

No, this can't be happening again. Finger paints. She'd spilled her paint again and Mama would be angry. Helpless to do any different, Elizabeth dipped her fingers into the red pond and jerked it back again. It was warm and sticky, just like it had been—

Pictures bobbed all around her, images of her mother. But she didn't see Grace Sanderson, she saw the real thing, her biological mother. She looked like Anna, with a ready smile and the scent of gardenias. She was lying in a pool of red, just like Anna.

“Mama, wake up. I want breakfast.” Elizabeth looked down. She was nudging Anna's body, like an impatient child asking for attention. She jerked her hand away and stared at it, sticky and covered in darkness. She rubbed her hand against her shorts, feeling her skin sting from the roughness of the fabric as she desperately ground her fingers to remove the blood.

A whimper escaped as she realized what she'd done as well as its implications. Elizabeth crawled away and perched herself against one of the walls, staring at the closed door which locked her in. The plastered wall cooled her back. It helped, like a cool cloth on a feverish head. Memories forced their way into her mind, long shut out by a child who could not deal with them.

Elizabeth had awakened in the morning, springing into the room like always. Rosa Santiago had always been up before her, an apron around her waist as she hummed a familiar tune. There was typically a smell of cinnamon in the kitchen. Some days it was blueberries. Elizabeth had been hoping for blueberry pancakes that morning. Neither scent lingered in the air. Nor was her mother present in the kitchen. The atmosphere was strangely quiet—lonely. Where could she have gone? She passed the fragile drawing her mother had framed and put on the wall. Long vines decorated the outside, while a lion leaped from the internal flames. She remembered tracing the lines with her fingers, absently recalling her mother's story of how it had been handed down through generations. It would be hers someday, just like Rosa had inherited it from her mother.

Elizabeth was hungry. Where was Mama? She thought she heard her mother's voice calling to her from the carport. Maybe she was pulling weeds from the garden? Shock and fear registered at the same time as Elizabeth saw the woman face down on the concrete. Reddish-brown colors surrounded her head and formed a pool around the still body.

Afterward, she'd spent several days in strange places with virtual strangers clucking sympathetically around her. As soon as she'd become comfortable in one place, she'd be moved again. For hours on end, Elizabeth was forced to sit in a tiny office with strangers asking questions. Had she seen anyone at the

house? Can you tell us what he looked like? Was he fat or skinny? Then, she was shuffled somewhere else. She'd be awakened in the middle of the night and transported to a new home, a new bed and unfamiliar toys. Why?

Digging deeper into her memories, Elizabeth remembered now that her father had been gone a long time. All she knew of him was what her mother had said, which was very little. She had always gotten the impression her mother didn't like talking about the man. Guilt surged from within. What did she have to feel guilty about? Elizabeth glanced over at Anna. Then she knew. She hadn't protected her mother, just as she hadn't protected Anna. The image of a man, arguing with her mother, shoving her against a wall, stole into Elizabeth's mind. She had hidden, peeking out between the stair posts, scarcely breathing or else she'd be seen. She should have protected her mother from the bad man, but she was so little—and he was so big.

"Querida, it was not your fault. You could do nothing," Roberto's voice echoed in her mind.

Shaking like a leaf in turbulent wind, Elizabeth felt the past recede. Slowly, she could hear Roberto's calming voice, soothing her as if he was there, stroking her feverish brow and wiping the sweat from her face. God, how she needed him. Despite all her past fears, she loved him. He would never hurt her. He was her anchor in this tumultuous world. Would she have a chance to tell him?

His words were immediate, husky with passion denied for too long. *"I know, Querida. We will be together soon."*

Chapter Nineteen

In darkened silence, Elizabeth found answers to questions that, up until this moment, she never knew to ask. What could have taken years of psychotherapy and possibly even hypnosis, happened within hours. Had it been that long? If there was something to be grateful about in this situation, it would have been the fact she'd come face to face with her own past and reckoned with it. Now she needed to deal with more immediate concerns.

"Have faith, *mi amada*. I will be there soon," Roberto's voice came again.

She took comfort from the words, but it was against her nature to sit and wait for someone else to save her. Elizabeth no longer required complete control, but she'd be a fool to sit back and wait for a rescue if she could do something for herself. He was on his way, she reminded herself. He'd said so. She had to trust him. She had to believe in what they shared. But in the meantime, she needed to try to help herself.

"History will not repeat itself. Rafael and Lupita may not have had a chance, but Roberto and I do," she swore as her fist hit the plaster wall. One way or another, she had to find a way out of here. The stench of mildew and the metallic scent of Anna's blood were enough to incite her to action.

Determination grew over desperation and fear. Elizabeth knew she would have a chance at escape, and she intended to take it. She looked about the room for some sort of weapon, and focused on a loose board at the bottom of the window and pried it loose. *Would they miss it? Could she conceal it long enough to use it? Did it matter?* Regardless of the possibilities, she was not going to go down without a fight. She closed her hand about the wood and slid it under her tee shirt.

During the hours she waited, she practiced pulling the small plank from under her shirt and the various moves she could use to disable a captor.

Elizabeth could hear voices outside the door, the voices of a man and a woman. Her hopes for an easy escape vanished. Against one person, she had a chance. Could she defeat two? What if there was a gun?

Even in the shadows, the woman looked haggard, as if she had been around the block much longer than Elizabeth had been alive. The man was the same one who had appeared disconsolate over Anna's death. When they came into the light, she could see the woman's eyes were dull, all evidence of life swept from them.

Adjusting to the light took a minute or two, and Elizabeth felt a moment of relief when neither of her captors moved toward her. If they'd touched her in any way, the board Elizabeth tried to keep hidden would have been dislodged. Eduardo's man appeared to be involved primarily with the removal of Anna's body. He went inside, where she had been held captive and did not re-emerge to accompany them to wherever it was that Eduardo's woman was leading her. So far so good, she thought. The two of them went through a small hallway that led into a larger, longer hallway with many rooms on each side.

Did she dare use her weapon now? Elizabeth tried her best to listen carefully for sounds on the other side of the doors that they passed. If Anna had been correct, they were in the Hernandez castle, and from the looks of things, it had been a long time since it had been used. Cobwebs cluttered every darkened nook and cranny within the aged plaster walls. The wood she had pried from the window was still safely nestled within her shirt.

She would have to act soon. Elizabeth kept her path straight, appearing to accept her fate at Eduardo's hands. She edged her weapon from its hiding place and raised it to strike. The woman noticed it a second before it struck, too late to dodge from the impact, too late to call out for help. Her mouth opened and then shut as she collapsed in a heap.

Elizabeth's heart hammered inside her chest as she slipped through the next door to appear and lost no time in getting to the other side of the room. She exhaled softly, while she peered through the opening where a window should have been.

"Okay, we have daylight. This is not good," she whispered. Where could she hide until nightfall? Did she have time to wait for the cover of darkness? There were plenty of large bushes to hide behind for a few moments, but nothing she could use for an entire day. Regardless, she had a better chance hiding in the bushes than she did if she were cornered in the room. She wished she had spent more time in the gym as she hefted herself over the ledge and to the ground.

It was obvious no one had discovered she was missing yet. The silence surrounding her was eerie. In fact, Eduardo must have been working with a very small group of followers since she had not seen another one of his men since the henchman who opened the door to her prison.

Beware of things that seem too easy. Don't get cocky. She was free, but she needed to do what was necessary to keep herself that way.

Outbuildings. Hadn't there been outbuildings during Lupita's time? Where was a stable or a smokehouse when she needed one? She edged slowly along the outer castle wall, doing her best to ignore the scratches caused by the thorny bushes. With every step, she coached herself silently to keep moving, steadily inching toward the corner and aiming for whatever the building was she could see in the distance.

She froze at the sound of voices. It sounded like two men and she couldn't make out the words. She tried to open her mind to sensations. Were they the good guys or part of Hernandez's group? Nothing.

"Querida, we are here. Tell me where I will find you," Roberto conveyed from his mind to hers.

"Castle wall. The corner, behind some bushes," she answered. She slowed her breathing to a near stop so even that would not give her away. The hushed whispers of the two men stopped. Perhaps they'd moved

on? Once she thought it was safe, she started moving again. Tears came to her eyes as her nose collided with a chest built like a brick wall. The face she saw afterward bore the same expression of shock as hers.

Paco! Clearly, neither of the two had expected to run into each other. Panic surged within. Had Paco been part of Eduardo's kidnap attempt or was he here to save her? He clamped his hand over her mouth, motioned for silence then passed her along to the man behind him. As this newer, unknown male maneuvered her along the next side of the castle, Elizabeth wondered whether she was facing her doom or her salvation. How much farther did they have to go? Where was Roberto?

The unidentified soldier pointed to a clump of bushes, then smiled.

"Querida, come," Roberto whispered, but his words rang like a church bell in her mind.

He was here! Her soldier pointed again, then turned and crept away, in the same direction as Paco had gone. Six or seven other soldiers jumped from the bushes and immediately blended with the foliage against the castle.

Move, Elizabeth ordered her legs. She crossed the open area and dove into the green foliage as if it was home plate. It was there that she ran into the next obstacle, smashing her face into another brick wall, which smelled like heaven and home, all at the same time. She would have liked to consider herself a strong woman, but the sight of Roberto lifting her into his arms was enough to tip her over the edge. Relief flooded through her and her body went limp. She couldn't see through the moisture in her eyes, she just clung to him and let it flow.

"Ah, mi amada. Everything is all right. I have you now," he comforted her, rocking her like a child in pain.

Roberto had gone from disbelief at the sight of her running toward him to blind elation when she landed against him. His God had been benevolent once more, he thought. Panic subsided as he scoured every detail of her appearance. His heart burst with her quiet tears, wishing they were alone instead of in the midst of soldiers waiting for his orders. Silence was no longer necessary. It was time for action.

"Follow the others, round up Hernandez's men, and find Anna's body," he commanded Raul, then pulled him back for a final instruction. *"Hernandez dies at my hand."*

Eduardo would pay for what Anna and Elizabeth had endured. She was covered with dirt, her hands were stained with blood and there were scratches on every exposed inch of her body.

"You saw?" Elizabeth whispered.

Roberto didn't have to ask what she meant. *"Yes. I saw everything."*

Roberto mourned Anna's death even as he issued prayers of gratitude that his Elizabeth was alive. Uncaring of what others might think, he allowed his own tears of relief and pain to mingle with hers. *"I am sorry, my love. I should never have left you,"* he whispered into her hair.

"It doesn't matter, Roberto," she started, then hiccupped. *"I love you."*

His breath caught at her admission. He wondered if she even realized what she'd said. There were trails where tears had streamed down her dirty cheeks, but he thought it was the most beautiful face he'd ever seen. Those three words had never sounded so wonderful. His hands shook as he reached for her and kissed her deeply. She hiccupped again, even as she responded to his tender embrace, causing them both to pull away and smile.

"Oops," she said with a watery smile. "For hours, I can think of nothing but seeing you again. And when I do, all I can do is hiccup." Another one escaped, adding insult to injury.

"Eduardo will suffer for what he has put you through."

Creases formed in Elizabeth's forehead and her expression darkened with pain. Her tears started anew. "I can't believe Anna's dead."

"There was nothing you could do," he answered sadly. "You cannot blame yourself. Eduardo has much to answer for." His emotions, as leader of his people, warranted the pain that tore through his heart. His reactions as a man were similar, yet more volatile. He struggled with the blind fury aimed directly at Eduardo and men like him, who had a total disregard for human life.

"I felt so helpless. She fainted and—he shot her. Just pulled the gun out and—" Her whole body shook in his arms.

"*Querida*, there is no need for you to relive it. I mourn for her, as will others." Sorrow coursed through him, but he was relieved that Anna had not suffered the disgrace and unspeakable pain Eduardo was capable of inflicting. "For myself, I am grateful you were kept alive."

"I have so much to tell you," she said. "So many secrets I'd buried deep inside."

"We will have time to talk. For now, just let me hold you and know you are safe." He didn't need the details. He'd seen the events unfold in her mind. How much would she actually tell him?

Roberto could hear the sound of approaching soldiers. Once again, his role as a leader dueled with his desires as a man. Raul returned bearing prisoners. There was a dark and deadly aura about him. Not for the first time, Roberto was grateful the man worked for him, rather than against him.

"Eduardo has turned coward and run. We lost him, but we captured these three. He says there are five others who escaped." Raul gestured toward the captive he held by the arm. "Tomas is taking Anna's body back for burial preparations."

Judging from the lacerations and bruises forming on each of the men's faces, Raul had beaten the information out of each of them. He appeared perfectly willing to kill them rather than to allow the men another chance to join forces with Eduardo again. Roberto gently put Elizabeth aside and stood to face the three prisoners. Each backed away as he reached forth to place a hand on their shoulders. Raul's eyes widened, as did every man under Roberto's command. Roberto had never exercised his gift in this way before, but he would today. While he sensed fear in two of the prisoners, the third stared stonily ahead, raw anger emanating from his bones.

"This man is loyal to Hernandez," Roberto told Raul. "Take them to the *castillo* and put them under guard. Eduardo shot Anna." Roberto focused on Raul once more, seeing how deeply his rage ran. He would not give him an excuse to murder these men, but he could certainly understand the desire. "If he gives you any trouble—"

"Will Raul kill them?" Elizabeth asked after they left. Apparently, she had no trouble reading between the lines either. "He certainly looked capable of it."

"Any man is capable of killing, just the same as a woman. Anna was Raul's cousin and they were very close. While Eduardo fired the shot, the third man was one of two who kidnapped you and Anna."

Elizabeth froze. "Should you trust Raul like that, knowing he was so close to Anna? What if he loses his temper or worse?"

"I would forgive him," he said simply. "But he will kill only in self-defense. The men will be turned over to the island authorities."

He did not add that they would be given to the authorities once he had the information he needed on Eduardo's location. He stared over at her, reminding her of their unfinished business.

"We should be leaving now," he said. "I'm certain you would enjoy some food and comfort."

He smiled, reading her thoughts. Elizabeth was looking forward to a lot of things. Food and comfort were only two of the things on her list. A hot bath and some loving arms ranked higher on the scales.

* * * *

"My memory is coming back in bits and pieces," she said to Roberto later that day.

They had already discussed what she'd discovered about her mother and father. They had gone to Anna's family and extended their condolences. It had been an uncomfortable visit, to say the least, but they had done it together. Elizabeth could only hope she'd brought comfort to the family and not bitterness. After all, their daughter had died while she lived. Elizabeth smiled as she remembered Roberto's shock when she announced she was going with him to see Anna's relations. His matters of state were now hers. She would never let him feel alone again.

Roberto apparently felt the same way. He waited outside her door while she bathed, indulging her—to a point. She understood. It was too soon for either of them to allow more than arm's distance between them.

Now they stood in front of the San Miguel crest and she traced the concave lines of the pattern. Official duties were over, and this was their time.

"There was a painting of your family's crest on the wall of our living room," she told him. "My mother would tell me the legends surrounding it as a bedtime story. About how the lion's heart beat only for its mate, that both were tested until they were allowed to reunite in another time or place. It was why they drew the faint figure of the head of the lioness in his chest. I'm afraid the rest of the story sounded more like a Cinderella vision than reality. They would know each other instantly, fall in love and overcome evil. Sounds sort of silly, until—"

"Until you put it together with our situation," he answered softly. "The family crest was changed by Rafael before he met Lupita. It was originally a lion leaping from the flames. He added the lioness."

"A man aware of his own destiny?"

"It's been known to happen," he said with a smile, a mere lifting of his lips that matched the tender affection glittering in his eyes.

"How do you think it came to be in my family? And how would my mother know the legends?" It was a puzzle she'd turned around in her head several times already. Was she a relative of Lupita? If she was, in some weird way wouldn't that make her a relative of Roberto? Would it make Rafael her great-grandfather six or eight times removed?

"*Querida*, you should not worry of such things. The obvious connection would be that the story was passed down from Lupita herself, but this is only one way things could have happened. Perhaps she entrusted the image to a friend and it was handed down with the legends through the friend's family. Who knows? I found the knife Lupita took with her when she left, in the hands of a Mexican family. They did not know how it came into their possession. The image itself renders a story to be told by some

romantic soul."

"But you don't believe that," she insisted, hearing a familiar rumbling from his mind to her own.

"What I believe is not important. I am overjoyed that you are back at my side. I should let you sleep, but I am hesitant to allow you out of my sight."

"Then come with me. Or better yet, let me come to your bed." Her voice quaked with the words, despite how right she felt about what she was about to do.

"You are aware of what you're asking?"

Her heart melted at his expression, a mixture of male desperation and apprehension with piercing onyx eyes. The passion inside of him called out for its mate.

"I've never been more aware. Or certain," she whispered huskily.

He walked her to his room, a fierce grip on her side as if he was afraid she would change her mind or be plucked from him at any moment. Each step took her closer to her destiny. To what seemed to have been a certainty from her birth, even if she'd only known of his existence for a few days. Had it been that short a time? Her life had changed, was changing even now, yet she had grown to glory in it rather than cower from it. Her self-assurance wavered as she entered Roberto's room. Slowly, he stripped in front of her, then stretched catlike on the bed. The vision of his male perfection was her undoing. He was so gloriously male!

Other than the small pooch of his stomach, his body showed no signs of excess living. He was perfectly sculpted. The sight heated her beyond her already high temperature. She gulped and heard it echo in the silence. Did she know what she was doing? She looked away from him as doubts surged in her mind, reminded again of the texture and shades of color in the room. This was definitely the room of her dreams. Moonlight shone through the large windows, casting shadows of the golden strands, creating an ivy pattern on the floor. Her skin tingled with awareness of what was to come. She knew, if she looked out those windows, she would see the stars shining down their approval on her decision.

"The next move is yours. Elizabeth, have you come to me?"

"Yes. I've come home—to you," she whispered. "I'm no longer afraid of you. Or me."

"Liar," he challenged, his eyes still shiny and full of hope. "I see the fear in your eyes, but it will not be there in the morning. You are afraid you will disappoint me, but this is not possible. Undress for me."

The moment of truth had come. He had seen all of her once before, but this time she would be exposing herself for him, to him. Then she'd be lying down beside him and giving herself to his care. Flickers of the old fears returned and were pushed aside. Tomorrow was only a dream, and each day would be a gift she would cherish with him. She would not run, but would face the future bravely. Her hand moved to the belt of her robe and shaky fingers loosened the knot then slipped the garment off her shoulders, allowing it to slide to the floor.

For the first time in her life she wanted to be a temptress. Her finger slipped slowly underneath the strap of her gown and she eased it lower, a centimeter at a time until it fell from her shoulder and exposed a section of her breast. She repeated the action on the remaining shoulder and watched Roberto shiver as the gown fell to the floor. Her tattoo burned, as if it glowed beneath his stare. She was naked, but she felt no shame.

"Beautiful. So beautiful." He rose to a sitting position. She licked her dry lips and tasted salt from where

her upper lip had grown damp with fear. Then she smiled as she realized he was watching her every move. She knew he wanted her to hurry to his side, but he was clearly waiting for her to take the necessary steps to the bed.

"I have dreamed of this moment yet I find myself unprepared for the reality of your being here. I do not recall trembling so in my dreams," Roberto admitted solemnly. "I had thought to have total command of myself, but I find myself reluctant to make any promises. Rafael has missed Lupita. And I have waited for you a long time, Elizabeth."

She would have questioned his words earlier in their relationship, but tonight she understood. This moment was a culmination of both Lupita's love for Rafael and Elizabeth's love for Roberto.

"Tell me that you love me," she demanded silently. Their mystical connection was still intact.

"Elizabeth, *Querida*. I love you more than life itself. I have waited a lifetime and would gladly wait a million more to have this one moment in time."

"This moment and many more, my love." She walked the remaining steps to the bed and stood before him. She basked in the way his gaze hungrily moved over her. His arms lay still at his side, though she knew he wanted, more than anything, to pull her to him. He would make her finish the offering before he would act. Elizabeth lowered herself to the bed and sat beside him. Still he did not act, and she understood. She pulled his hand from his side and placed it on her breast, sliding it down her body as she stared intently at the blaze of passion in his eyes. She released his hand and gasped as it made a slow journey to her hip, traversing higher to touch the tip of her breast and then came to rest on her cheek.

At long last he reached behind her head threading through strands of her hair and pulled her mouth to his. Each strained to meet the other yet remained separate as though delaying the inevitable pleasure for as long as possible.

"Do you seek to torment me, Elizabeth," he breathed against her skin. Other than the meeting of one portion of leg against another, the touch of his mouth to her cheek was the only contact they had allowed each other.

"We torment each other, *Querido*," she whispered. She pulled him back for another kiss. "It is that way with us. It has always been that way with us." Her tongue traced his lips.

"Vixen." He chuckled as he met her lips more fully and drew her breath away. He wasted no time in placing her under him then went still. Her body betrayed her by trembling. She had always been a coward where pain was involved. "I will not hurt you. Not now, not ever."

"I won't be asking you to stop," she promised. "I know the technicalities and what goes where. I know there should be pain, but I want this. Love me, Roberto, as I love you."

"That has always been my pleasure and my torment."

He feasted on her mouth once more, taking as much as he gave. She felt possessed and it thrilled her. His fingers played along her flesh, tracing patterns, which left her as breathless as his kisses. His touch felt as soft as butterflies yet it was so intense she could feel it in her soul. Her hands were not still either. They hungrily absorbed the heat of his skin along his back, and slid down to his perfect buttocks that she'd been admiring for days.

She withheld nothing as he pulled her closer to him; the melding of their minds complete as the joining of their bodies gained a faster tempo. She moaned in complaint as he moved away from her seconds later, his eyes glittering with the moonlight, a smile of pleasure on his face.

"I have waited too long to taste you. You must be patient, Elizabeth."

He nibbled and kissed his way down her body, from her ears to her shoulders, then lower. She arched off the bed when he reached her sensitive breasts and she heard him chuckle at her quick intake of breath when he tasted first one nipple and then the other. His hands were firm yet gentle, moving an inch ahead of his mouth.

"Roberto, no. Come up here," she cried as he moved lower, laving her belly button and causing a ripple both inside and out. "It tickles."

Another gasp. His fingers moved along her thighs and made their way to the core of her being. She stifled a giggle as she felt his assault on her senses, then felt his finger press into her, entering her femininity as his tongue teased her navel. Satisfaction roared through both of them, their minds open to each other. Roberto thrilled to her cry, an act as involuntary as the shiver that went through her body. She was moist, ready for him. Elizabeth felt his wonder at touching her, the intense pleasure of knowing they were together—finally.

While Elizabeth took pleasure at his gentle invasion, Roberto had other things in mind. He needed her more than ready. She had to want him more than her next breath. His fingers continued to play, separating her and stroking her until she was wild and writhing under him. His mouth replaced his fingers and he stroked her open thighs. Pure male satisfaction flooded him as she fell apart in his arms and screamed hoarsely with pleasure.

"Hush, *Querida*. You will start my men searching for the women's quarters. They will have no doubts what we are doing," Roberto teased and was rewarded with a crimson blush. Oh, how he had waited to see her like this, her eyes glazed, confused. Dazzling. "You don't want me to stop, do you?"

"Yes," she mouthed quietly, while her head shook in denial. Strands of her hair floated to her heated breast causing goosebumps along her skin. His hands never ceased their exploration, returning to the place causing her such delightful sensations. He could keep her like this all night and sleep tomorrow as a very happy man.

"Which is it, *Querida*? Yes or no?"

"You expect me to think? What an unmerciful man you are," she whispered. Then she gasped at the retaliation his fingers wrought. "Don't stop."

He laughed with pure masculine pleasure as he made his way back to the center of his attention. The walls exploded around her once more. As she came back to her senses, he was above her, his smile indicating he had been waiting patiently for her to return. He tasted her breasts once more and she felt the tug all the way to her womb. She was empty in a place only he could fill.

"What do you want, Elizabeth? Tell me or I will stop," he hissed through clenched teeth.

"Liar," she answered saucily. She loved the way his eyes lit with intensity. He resembled a hungry panther on the prowl. "I want you. In me. With me."

She did not need to ask twice.

"Look at me, Elizabeth. Keep your eyes open," he commanded when she threatened to close them to prepare herself for the pain. "There will be no pain," he promised. "I would have you see me as our bodies join."

The waves of spasms had receded from her core but the ache had remained, filled and ceasing only when

he had joined to her, with her. She was overwhelmed with sensations, his thoughts mingling with her own. Elizabeth heard his hoarse cry as he called out her name. She felt their lives blending together, her body enveloping his. He moved within her and her body trembled in reply. She was starved for him. "More," she demanded and he gave it. "All of you."

Roberto groaned and sank deeper. Elizabeth gasped, aware of more than their physical mating. Destiny fulfilled, two souls were melding into one.

"Do you feel it, *Querida*? We are one," he confided in a hoarse voice. "Already our souls embrace."

Her world had no substance. It began and ended with him. There was nothing above or below them, just this union between the two of them. They could have been in the clouds for all she knew, she could see the same vision he shared with her. *Two halves of a whole*, he had called them once. She felt it as she had never felt anything before.

He said nothing further as he truly carried them both beyond the earthly realms, stroking her until they both climbed among the stars. She heard their cries of completion as if they were a million miles away from their bodies.

Many minutes later, he made an effort to move his weight from her but she stopped him.

"Stay. I like this," she said. His face was scant inches away from hers and resting on the same pillow. Had it been only days since she had met him? She felt as if she had waited for him all her life. "Can we do that again?" She smiled at his raised brow, the twinkle in his eyes and the brief tilt of his grin.

"It is said that I am an amazing man, but even I have limitations," he said then kissed her nose. "Perhaps in a few minutes?"

"Perhaps." She pulled his mouth to hers once more. As he deepened the kiss, she reveled in tastes she'd never known before, intimate flavors that aroused her beyond belief. She transmitted her needs direct to his mind. Breaking the kiss, she smiled up at him as he stirred within her. His black onyx eyes stared into hers and she lost herself in their depths.

"Maybe sooner," he growled. His warm breath briefly heated her skin and his lips took her own captive.

It was much later before they rested and even later before they slept.

* * * *

Elizabeth awoke to full sunshine in the bedroom and a sweet ache between her legs. Roberto slept beside her, breathing so quietly that she instantly panicked. She touched his shoulder to see if he would make noise. When he grunted in reply, she breathed a prayer of thanks, feeling foolish for her fears. He pulled her against him, her back to his chest before she was able to register another thought. She doubted he was aware he cupped her breast with one hand while the other held her securely below her waist.

Roberto moved again in the seconds that followed. He moved her hair out of the way and kissed her shoulder as his hand returned to her stomach.

"Are you awake?" she asked. She was instantly aware of his hardness against her back.

"No. I am dreaming. I am dreaming of an angel in my bed." He smiled and then kissed her neck. "What is this—skin? I am not dreaming. Perhaps I am in heaven," he teased as his hand moved lower.

"Definitely heaven. Let me stay here. We can spend the day in bed."

"You'll get no argument from me," she said. She swished her backside against him and delighted in the

feel of skin against skin. Very aroused male textures. She settled easily back into his grasp.

"Are you sore?"

"A little. I feel very well loved." Touched by his concern, she smiled in to her pillow. "I'm hungry."

"Again?" He chuckled happily and she knew why. She'd already coaxed him into the kitchen once during the night. Who could believe she would be making love with the man of her dreams and she would be so hungry she'd feel ill? Roberto had handled the situation with sweet understanding and a heavy dose of sexual torment. The sandwich he'd made could have fed an army, but he'd cut it in half. His half disappeared almost instantly then he'd forced her to eat every bite of her portion, swearing she would be equally as hungry for him once they returned to the bedroom. He was right.

"You forced me to burn more calories than you know," she said. As far as she knew, he had loved her in every way imaginable.

"Then we should get up." He groaned and started to move his hand away to get out of the bed.

"Later," she coaxed and tugged him back toward her. She twisted and slid in to his arms. "I'm enjoying this too much."

Chapter Twenty

"Whoa, let me get my sunglasses," Daniel taunted when he came by later that day. "Girl, you have a five hundred watt megaglow." He dodged the less than playful punch at his arm. "I don't have to ask if you two made up," he said as he clapped Roberto on the back.

"A gentleman would keep his mouth shut," Roberto warned. His voice was not as stern as his words. He gazed over at Elizabeth, wondering how she was going to deal with others knowing of their intimacy. She'd turned three different shades of red at Daniel's first words, but she seemed fine now.

Daniel laughed. "I never said I was a gentleman. A scholar yes, but never a gentleman. It's funny that you should have such a faulty memory, Roberto. I was the scoundrel and you were the gentleman on our team."

"And all this time I thought it was the reverse," Elizabeth chimed in. "Silly me."

"I tried to tell you, did I not?" Daniel wagged his finger at her as though she were an errant child.

Roberto thought she had never looked more like a woman. She was breathtaking and he was counting the hours until he could take her back to their room. While she still wore the vibrant colors of her heritage, her face outshone the brightness of the cloth. Overnight, his perfect rose had unfolded its petals and doubled its beauty.

"I believe I have a telephone call to make," she said. One glance at Roberto and she knew his thoughts. Last night's pleasure had increased the intensity of their link. "Will you be here when I get back?"

She was rewarded with his mischievous grin and a lecherous grab that she managed to duck before Daniel could see. This was a side of Roberto she was grateful to see. His dark stare could still drive her insane with heat, but his playfulness was her undoing. She suspected he had to adjust as much as she did.

As quickly as this new side of him arose, it gave way to his normal intensity. "I will always be wherever you are, *Querida*. Go make your call. Give her the information we discussed. If you would like, I will go with you."

She laughed at his uncertainty, understanding its origins. She was only going one room away, but it felt like miles. She shook off the memories and smiled at him. "It's girl talk, Roberto. You can't hover over me from now until Eduardo is in custody. We agreed."

She could see from his expression that he already regretted the agreement. But she was not a pet cockatoo to be kept on his arm at all times. They would deal with Eduardo Hernandez together. She would be sensible, but she wouldn't go into hiding behind locked doors. Sooner or later, he had to trust her instincts as well. And she'd gained quite a few. She had learned more than a few lifesaving instincts in the last few days.

Saying 'I love you' and making love with him had changed everything. Just as the experience at Hernandez castle had broken through barriers, so had last night—and this morning. Until then, she'd been sleepwalking through life. Now, she was living it, taking risks and savoring every moment. She wasn't afraid of the leap of faith required to marry him. The greater fear was living without him.

He had been so emotional when she gave her consent to marry him. She had never guessed a man could be so overwhelmed with joy. On her way to telephone Lisa, she replayed the memory in her mind. It would stay with her the remainder of her life.

"You do not give yourself to me on a whim. This I know, *Querida*," he said. He held both of her hands in his own. She'd been grateful he had allowed her to dress before they held this conversation that felt so important to her. "Tell me, please, that you are consenting to marry me at the end of this week? Say the words."

She took a deep breath and enjoyed the suspense she was allowing him to endure in silence. She figured it was only fair since he had driven her to the same brink of exasperation since she had met him. It felt wonderful to finally have something for which he needed answers.

"The words, huh? Like I really like your hair parted that way?" His frustrated glare came as no surprise. "I didn't think so. How about read my mind?"

"That is easily done," he said dryly. "You think you are being comical, but I know you are fighting a last fear. Say the words, *Querida*."

Her heart leapt in her chest as he stared at her, willing her to break the last barrier between them. Let go of the last card in the deck. How could it be so hard to say three little words? I love you, her heart murmured. *I love you*, her mind sighed. "I love you, Roberto." There! She'd done it! He sat patiently, his dark eyes coaxing the rest of the words from her. "I love you and I want to marry you. The sooner the better."

She had never seen such a fast transformation from concentration to delight. She never had time to dodge his embrace, not that she would have anyway. He didn't stop even as he crashed her back into the bed they had only left moments before.

"You have made me the happiest man alive," he cried as he kissed her over and over again. "You will know every moment of the day how much I cherish you."

Several minutes passed before he released her. She felt the loss of his warmth when he moved away. Sunlight came back into her world when he returned with two jewelry boxes in his hand.

"I was never certain if you would prefer to wear a ring of my choosing or the ring of my ancestors." He opened the two velvet-covered containers and laid them on the bed beside her. Each ring was as beautiful as the other, the glitter of gold amongst diamonds, but one was larger than the first. "Choose

which you would prefer, or I will have a jeweler flown in with an assortment for you to make a choice."

"Roberto, I can't choose. They're both so lovely," she whispered in awe. She fingered the smaller one. Comparing the two, there was a stark contrast between I'm-rich-in-love and I'm-wealthy-and-I-want-to-show-it-off. The newly discovered romantic inside of her clamored for attention and she heeded the call. She glanced over at him. His eyes were moist from his emotions as he watched her pick up the box to examine the smaller ring more closely. When held to the light, it rendered the image of a rose unfolding to the morning sun. Tiny petals surrounded the glittering diamond, which was just enough to offset the stone.

"So beautiful." Elizabeth spoke in spite of the lump in her throat. "Would you be upset if I chose this one?"

"You do me a proud honor. How could I be upset?" His hands trembled as he pulled the ring out and placed it on her hand. "When I saw this ring, it spoke directly to my heart. By choosing it, I feel you are confirming our destiny together. Again." Her gaze wandered to the second ring as he continued. The brilliant stone was huge and reeked of money and politics. "My grandfather gave this second ring to my grandmother, and my father gave it to his wife. The diamond dates back farther than I can remember," he explained. "Those were difficult marriages, alliances between families. Our union will be different. If you wish, you can wear the second ring on your other hand. Whatever you would like, it is yours to command. As I am."

Command him? She wondered. She couldn't visualize commanding him to do anything—except perhaps in the most lascivious and loving of deeds, which he had already honored at least twice.

"I am handy in other places beside the bedroom, *Querida*," he said. She laughed as he did at the reminder.

"I will call Father Carlos immediately to make arrangements. There is a seamstress on the island who would be honored to prepare your dress. You have only to choose from the latest of magazines if that is your wish. Or else I can have a representative come in with some gowns. Whatever you wish, it is yours."

Her mind began to swim with details. A wedding! Her wedding. She knew it was only right for the island residents to be involved in their wedding, but the details were a surprise. "I need Lisa," she declared instantly amidst her panic. She would know what to do.

"It is yours," he said. "Place a telephone call this morning and it shall be done."

* * * *

And so it was, she thought with a smile. She rushed to the telephone with the heady anticipation that had lingered the entire morning. Their only agreement was to keep silent on Eduardo Hernandez. There was no reason to worry Lisa unnecessarily.

"Elizabeth, where have you been? I've been panicking about you since last Saturday," her friend complained loudly. "Tell me you're safe," Lisa demanded without taking a single breath in between.

"I'm perfectly safe," Elizabeth answered, setting aside thoughts of Eduardo Hernandez for the moment. "In fact, I'm wonderful. I'm in love and I'm getting married in two days." She waited for the inevitable scream of surprise as her news sank in. She was not disappointed.

"My God. You're in love. With him? Has he drugged you? You've known him less than a week."

"You knew Alfred for less than that and you were married," Elizabeth reminded Lisa. "Before you remind me how that worked out, this is different."

"But that's me, not you. You're sane, sensible. Until..." There was a brief silence on the other end. "Maybe you're right. This is different. Are you certain about this?"

Elizabeth wasted no time in responding. "More certain than I've ever been. I can't explain it, Lisa. I need for you and William to come to the island for the wedding. At the very least, I need you to come and help me get this event planned."

"William's not here. We never married," Lisa said, then laughed at the gasp that followed.

"Whoa, hold on a minute. Did I hear you right? You never married him? What happened?"

Concern instantly replaced Elizabeth's surprise, and then excitement entered the mix. If she never married William, perhaps fate was working in Lisa's favor as well?

"I was devastated when you didn't show. You've been the only thing solid in my life. When the flowers and the tickets arrived, I was thrilled for you, but I was still worried. William just shook it off like it was no big deal. The more we argued about it, the less I liked what I saw." Elizabeth heard a sigh at the other end. "All he really wanted was a chance at moving into my place so he could eat my food, drink my beer. What happened to a man who wanted to provide for a woman, huh? I didn't live through three failed marriages to throw it all away on Mr. Wrong number four."

"Oh, Lisa. I'm sorry. The right guy is out there somewhere, I just know it."

If she could have seen the redhead, she knew she'd be watching her blink feverishly. Lisa always did that when she was shocked.

"Who are you and what have you done with Elizabeth Sanderson?" The demand came after another lengthy silence.

"That was the old Elizabeth. This is the new and improved version. I let the other woman loose."

"Oh my God. This I have to see. Jeez, I have three thousand things to do. Get a plane ticket, pack my clothes." She could hear the wheels turning in her best friend's mind as if she was standing right beside her. "Wait a minute! Is there an airport nearby? How do I get there? What's the weather like?"

"Slow down, Rambo. Let me give you the travel plans." With that, she began the rundown she had discussed with Roberto. Lisa's response to being picked up in a limousine and flown by private jet was a healthy shriek, which caused Elizabeth to hold the phone away from her ear. Typical, she thought with a grin. There was no doubt Lisa was already throwing things into a suitcase as they spoke. She rarely did anything neatly. It was a good thing since Roberto's men were already on their way to pick her up.

* * * *

"My friend, you look pleased," Daniel said. He appeared to marvel again at the glow in Roberto's face. "I'm happy for you and Elizabeth."

"I have much to rejoice about," Roberto conceded. Then he cast a second look at his college roommate. "When will you settle down, *Amigo*? I had cause to wait, knowing my Elizabeth would be found one day and we would be one. You have had no such cause to wait that I am aware of."

Roberto struck a match and lit a cigar. He puffed on it leisurely. What was Daniel waiting for? Once

again, he had the feeling his friend was going to come face to face with his own destiny.

"Once in my life, I thought I had the mystery solved. We were both too young, too unsure of our own futures to plan one together. It was before you and I met, a high school sweetheart. She had it in mind to travel and look for money. I've often wondered what became of her."

"You're talking about Lisa," he said. His friend's happiness had always been a concern.

"Perhaps," Daniel's features tightened, a line crossed his forehead and stayed there. "I don't seem to be doing well in the romance department. First, I panicked over a commitment with Lisa. Then I messed up with Anna and she left me. Now she's gone forever."

"One thing is not the same as the other," Roberto offered solemnly. "Sometimes to open one door, another must be closed. I feel for your losses with Anna, I miss her as well. If I had—" Roberto paused, his mind consumed with what-ifs. "But you must mourn her as a person, not as a lost lover. Your romance with her passed nearly two months ago. She was already involved with someone else, and you've been seeing Rosita."

"Rosita's just a passing thing. Neither of us has any plans for the other."

"Then you are a free agent, open for new experiences. Or perhaps it is time to renew old acquaintances? Just because a chapter is written, doesn't mean it's closed." He chuckled at Daniel's searching look.

"Speaking of old chapters," Elizabeth's voice broke into the silence. The two men appeared to be involved in a staring contest. She walked over and waved a hand in front of Daniel's face. "Yep, still there. I was beginning to wonder if you'd gone hunting down the Nile or something."

Roberto's arms were open and waiting and she went to them with a happy sigh. "What was I saying? Oh, yes. I was talking about old friends and new perspectives. You should know that Lisa's on her way. Alone," she added for Daniel's sake.

After her teasing actions, she noticed he was paying more than average attention to what she said.

"So you did not miss a wedding," Roberto commented, sinking into the sofa. He pulled her on to his lap. Elizabeth shivered as he moved her hair aside and placed a solemn kiss on her neck.

"I don't know if I'm going to be able to survive watching the two of you." Daniel laughed, but it sounded weak and odd. Elizabeth had the feeling he was shaking off the urge to ask more about Lisa. "I suspect I'll be taking a lot of cold showers for a while."

"Daniel!" She had cause to rethink her response as Roberto made it look as if he were pulling her skirt down to cover her. In actuality, he was finding a way for his hand to slide under it. She was shocked at both men. She ignored her lover's rising hand as it touched her skin. What if Lisa felt the same way? In the wake of her failed wedding, would they be bringing pain to her friend? Would the reappearance of Daniel ease her pain or make it worse? "Daniel," she started again. Maybe her suggestion would cure two concerns at the same time. "Would you be a dear and go with us to meet Lisa this evening?"

"Aw, Elizabeth, I thought you were different." He chuckled. "All married women want to see their friends in the same boat. Misery loves company, you know." He chuckled again at the dark venomous look she shot him in reply.

"I am not setting you up." She stopped the roving of Roberto's hand with a firm smack. "I just think the two of you might have some reminiscing to do."

"I can imagine," Daniel conceded dryly. "I'll be there. What time?"

Roberto gave him the information and she watched his eyes take on a gleam as their friend made his departure from the castle. "So, she's single and he is too. This should be an interesting reunion."

"You are a little devil," she teased, turning in his lap to kiss him. She did not need to be told it was what he'd been waiting for.

* * * *

"Lisa," Elizabeth cried as she saw her friend come out of the airplane. Hmm, she didn't look too broken up over William, she thought. Like Roberto had said earlier, it could be a very interesting reunion. The look of joy on Lisa's face echoed her own.

"My God. You said it, but I didn't believe it. Who are you and what have you done with my best friend Elizabeth?" Lisa's eyes misted, no doubt to the transformation and joy on Elizabeth's face. She hadn't been able to stop smiling all day.

"You look gorgeous," the gleeful redhead exclaimed as she turned her about in a circle so she could see all of the changes that had taken place. "No more frumpy scarecrow here."

Roberto reclaimed his bride-to-be and Elizabeth watched the flicker of a grin on her best friend's face. Lisa took a moment to admire the happy couple and then winked at her, turning a stern look toward him. "So you're responsible for this, huh? I should have guessed you would be when you hustled her out of the Cheetah Club like that. She missed the best parts." Then came her wildly wicked grin. "Give me a hug," she demanded. "I have to hug you. You turned the sparrow into a swan. She glows! But then again, so do you."

Lisa was like a stick of dynamite, lit and ready to explode. She was running on adrenaline. Elizabeth could feel it within the woman as she curled her arms through both of theirs and turned to look around. As they swirled, Elizabeth could see the small bags under Lisa's eyes that belied the state of refreshment Lisa was portraying at the moment. Had it been from worry about her or because of William's actions?

"I want to hear all about this, from both of you two. I can't believe this. Your limousine, your plane, your island? Even in the dark it looks stunning."

Elizabeth could tell the moment Lisa noticed Daniel. All motion stopped, whatever Lisa had been about to say was lost in the noise of activity surrounding the private jet. She resembled a fish gasping for air. Her arms came loose from theirs as her hands flew to her face. She took a step forward before she caught herself. Daniel tried for a cool facade, but it wasn't working. Elizabeth giggled as Daniel's gaze bounced all over Lisa in record time.

"Danny?"

Roberto threw Elizabeth a knowing look and immediately reclaimed her to his side. Together, they stood back and watched their two best friends size each other up. The accusing glance Lisa shot in their direction said volumes. Perhaps this had not been a good idea? Then again, as she saw the deceptive moisture in Lisa's eyes, Elizabeth thought maybe it was.

Roberto pulled Elizabeth's attention away so they could focus on the remainder of the occupants who were leaving the airplane. As promised, he had flown in a person who was overseeing a multitude of white formal gowns and other formal wear being unloaded from the airplane. She had requested Lisa to make some calls in this area and arrange for them to arrive with her, perhaps more as a means of therapy

than out of necessity.

When it came to Lisa's failed wedding, Elizabeth hadn't known what to expect where her childhood friend was concerned. There were people all over the island who could perform tasks necessary to make the wedding a special event and she would use them where she and Lisa felt best. Assuming, of course, that she saw Lisa again after being reunited with Daniel!

When Elizabeth looked again, the two were embracing as if they could remove the multitude of years they had been separated. Judging from the joy she saw on Lisa's face, Daniel was indeed the '*one that got away*.' She managed a brief moment wondering about Daniel's reactions before Roberto refocused her attention once more. The band of people and the scores of clothing and accessories brought by the bridal shop owner from Tampa took several vehicles to get from the small airport to the castle. Mixed in with the visitors was also the requisite number of guards. She wondered if Lisa noticed them, or anything at all beyond the man she'd left behind ten years earlier.

Roberto insisted the reunited couple travel in a separate jeep to allow them to get acquainted once more. No one argued with him. The two seemed to be in a world of their own and relatively oblivious to the actions of those around them.

"Are you hoping what I am?" Elizabeth asked, once they were seated in the jeep and moving toward their home. The warm breeze felt wonderful against her skin and the delicate aroma of tropical flowers made her think of paradise.

"I do not believe what I feel could be called a hope," he answered in a noncommittal tone. His dark eyes twinkled in the moonlight. "I think it is a matter of destiny stepping in once more. Fate has long fingers."

"Who would've thought?" She leaned happily against him and felt his arms surround her. Once at the castle, she watched the large assortment of supplies for the wedding being marched into one of the multitudes of spare bedrooms. Roberto's housekeeper went about placing their new arrivals into their accommodations. Lisa sent her belongings ahead and Elizabeth promised the efficient maid that she would show Lisa to her room herself. As a result of the wedding and Lisa's arrival, Daniel was also invited to remain at their home.

"Bethi, this is absolutely gorgeous," Lisa exclaimed, looking from the stone flooring to the lighting and wall hangings, reminders of days past. "Such a combination of medieval and adobe."

Everyone heard her gasp as her gaze fell upon the crest of the San Miguel family. Elizabeth was grateful she didn't faint. "There's a lot you haven't told me, isn't there?" Lisa challenged as she looked from the crest to Elizabeth. "Isn't this the same as yours?"

"More than you know," she said. "It's exactly the same as what you're thinking."

"Let me get everyone a drink. Lisa looks like she could use one," Daniel offered, standing a few feet away. No one turned down his offer as he led the way into the study.

"My God. No wonder you're moving so fast." Lisa could only shake her head in wonderment after Elizabeth explained most of the events leading up to the present moment. She left out the part about the Hernandez family jewels and her most recent kidnapping. Daniel had already agreed to handle that particular conversation when they were alone. "Is there any part of this that makes sense? How can any of this be?"

"Is it necessary to understand how everything works in order to accept it?" Elizabeth said. She winked at Daniel, who coughed discreetly. In her peripheral vision, she saw Roberto standing in the shadows, smiling like a mystic in the semi-darkened room. "The sea rushes to the shore, but we have no real

explanation as to why it does so. Who can explain the mysteries of life and the ways between a man and a woman?"

Daniel winked at her. "Oh, damn. It's catching."

"Vixen," Roberto teased as he made a grab for Elizabeth. She made a playful dodge from his hands and then, with a giggle, allowed herself to be caught. He picked her up and carried her over to the couch, dropping down and pulling her on his lap. His light kiss quickly evolved into a deeper one and her response grew with her anticipation. Reminders of the prior week's events were an aphrodisiac, not that she needed one when it was his kiss to which she was responding.

"If I didn't see it, I'd never believe it," Lisa told Daniel. "This is not the same Elizabeth Sanderson who left Tampa a week ago. I can't believe the transformation."

"You should have seen my reaction when she arrived. You get used to them. At least that's what I kept telling myself all afternoon." Daniel chuckled. "They could have lit up a room without electricity or a light bulb this afternoon when they finally emerged from their room. It's been like watching a match light up whenever they come near each other."

"I can see that," Lisa marveled, shaking her fiery red hair about her head. "I think I'm jealous."

"Don't be. I'm here and things are beginning to look a little different since you've shown up."

Daniel and Lisa lightly touched their wineglasses together in a toast while Roberto and Elizabeth came back to reality.

"We really should let you settle in," Roberto remarked casually, then sent a meaningful look toward Elizabeth.

"Ohh, absolutely," she agreed. "Lisa, you must be exhausted after the flight and a long day. I know I'm tired."

"Take her to bed, *Amigo*. Lisa and I can find our own way to our rooms." Daniel laughed and shot them a knowing look. "Unless you're as tired as they're suggesting?" He raised the question to Lisa. He looked like a boy on Christmas Day, hoping the next present would be the one he'd requested from Santa. She shook her head and Elizabeth figured he'd be writing a 'thank you' letter to Saint Nicholas tomorrow.

Chapter Twenty-One

"We've done our duty," Roberto murmured under his breath, picking Elizabeth up and carrying her out of the library. "It is time for bed." She shivered with anticipation and his grin widened. "I have missed you, *Querida*."

He closed the door to their bedroom and she slid slowly down his body. He pulled her in to his arms. Already, she could feel the evidence of his desire.

"No need to miss me anymore," she whispered into his ear while he nibbled on the skin he exposed on her shoulder. "There's a lot to be said for these types of blouses." She pulled away from him to indicate the blouse she was wearing.

"Yes, it makes you so much more accessible." He pulled both sleeves down and watched the stretchy top slide down her arms, exposing both breasts in the process. Under his watchful gaze, they bloomed and begged for his attention.

"I think the designer for these types of clothing was a man," she hinted as Roberto's eyes darkened in anticipation.

"A very sensible man." The tips of his fingers brushed across her hardened nipples, causing her to gasp and lean into his touch. He moved behind her, one hand tracing a path across her middle while the fingers of the other continued their sweet torment. "Shut your eyes and keep them shut until I say, Elizabeth. I will return in just a moment."

Her lids closed as he ordered and she wet her lips with anticipation. She missed his touch already, every second making the loss more acute. It was impossible to determine his actions by the sounds he made. The sound of violins and other string instruments suddenly filled the air. Still, he didn't return.

"Keep your eyes closed and come with me," he commanded less than a minute later. The scent of recently lit candles made her smile. It was lavender, her favorite. Her steps faltered as she attempted to follow his lead without falling over some imagined obstacle. Then they stopped. She could feel his breath as he moved beside her, and then behind her once more, moving her hair to one side so her neck was exposed for his pleasure. "You may open your eyes now, *Querida*."

Her eyes flickered open to see the flame of nearby candles reflected in the mirror before them. There were no other lights on in their room and the small flames cast an orange-yellow haze in the glass. She caught a brief whiff of the sulphur from the matches he'd used to light them. The music, the candles: all of it was a heady aphrodisiac when combined with the look in his eyes as their images combined in the mirror.

"This is what I see when you keep your eyes open as I love you. Your lids try to close from the weight of passion, the color of your eyes is darker, more intense. When I touch you," he continued, emphasizing his point with a touch, "you melt like butter in the hot sun."

Elizabeth tried to keep her eyes open in spite of the sensations he caused by his hands on her skin. He reminded her that she was losing the battle and encouraged her to continue to watch. She opened her eyes to the sight of his hands caressing her breasts lovingly, testing the weight of each then circling the darkened nipples. She could hear a light crescendo of the music in the background. The scent of lavender teased her nose.

"You are beautiful, *Querida*. I just wanted you to see how beautiful you are."

Her knees nearly gave out when he gave a tug to her skirt, pulling it lower until it dropped to the floor, her blouse following it with a single tug. The image of a woman clad only in her lace bikini briefs, thoroughly involved in the passion surrounding her, was reflected in the glass. She watched in fascination as he traced the pattern of the tattoo on her hip. A lion leaping from the flames, the image of his mate echoed over his heart. Elizabeth heard his thoughts: *his beloved soul mate*.

"You cannot imagine what it does to me to see you standing here as you are. To see this mark and to know it makes you mine. As much as the wearing of my ring declares your love for me, this mark declares our destiny is being fulfilled."

Elizabeth could only stand back and watch helplessly in the mirror, as Roberto went to his knees in front of her. He nipped and then kissed her hip, his tongue tracing the pattern of the image once more. She shivered as she felt his touch throughout her body.

"So beautiful. So absolutely beautiful," he repeated again. When he was through, his hands trailed from her toes to her knees, to her thighs and back to her hips. He stopped for a brief visit, one finger tracing the line of her panties, commenting huskily on the hidden treasure he could glimpse beneath them. His

hands continued their trek as he rose and took his place behind her, touching her breasts, then her shoulders and wading through her hair.

She leaned back against him, her knees weak, and he chuckled with glee as one arm wrapped around her before she fell. He was not done, nowhere near done with his wondrous torment. Her attention was directed once more to the mirror, watching as his free hand dipped beneath the lace and she arched in response while he held her in place.

"I can't take this," she said hoarsely after several minutes of delicious torture.

"Ah, but you can," he argued. "This and more." He moved back in front of her, dropping to his knees once more and maneuvering the last of her clothing downward. He held her legs steady as his mouth replaced his fingers and she nearly dropped to the floor. One arm reached to the wall beside them as she tried to balance herself and still deal with the erotic sensations he was delivering.

"Roberto, please." Was she asking him to stop? She wondered if she even knew what she wanted in those particular moments.

"Look in the mirror," he urged.

Elizabeth barely had time to do so before the stars exploded behind her eyes. Her hands caught and held on to his shoulders while waves of pleasure rolled through her and she tried to remain standing.

"Enough. I can't handle any more." She begged for mercy until Roberto rose to join her. He held her while her insides quaked and convulsed in the aftermath. Roberto was hungry for her, she felt it in his touch and read it in his mind. Images of him surging into her warmth, her insides melting against him with liquid heat passed from his thoughts to hers.

He tugged her toward the bed, but she would have nothing to do with it. She had a few experiments of her own in mind. "Oh, no. It's my turn." Sensuality oozed with every word.

She kissed him, deep and hard, her tongue dueling with his for dominance. She kept her body separate from his in spite of his attempts to pull her closer. As if she had wished for it, she could have heard the music take on the imitation of thunder and then roll into another wave of melody. "Keep your eyes on the mirror, *Querido*."

The first few buttons on his shirt flipped open under shaky fingers. She moved beside him so his image and a side of her naked body could be seen. "Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful," she crooned. She kissed his shoulder while another button was undone, then traced a finger between the two opened buttons. She separated the cloth with her fingernails, played on his exposed skin, and then moved on. The game continued until his shirt was fully opened in front of the mirror.

"Have I told you how much I love this little V that your chest hair makes? It's absolutely stunning." Leaning on her toes, she reached and nipped at his neck. His hands flew around to touch her. "Uh-uh-uh. That's not allowed." She laughed as she moved out of his reach and slapped at his hand to move behind him.

His eyes glazed with unspent passion as she swiftly tugged the shirt from his shoulders and it slithered down his body. Her fingers traced his nipples as he had done to her earlier, chuckling softly as he groaned in response. "So sensitive. So wonderfully sensitive."

She did the same thing as her breasts connected with the hot skin of his back. Her fingernails scraped lightly down his chest and his stomach muscles jumped underneath her touch. Fascinating, she thought as she nipped, then kissed his strong back. One hand undid his belt buckle and the top snap of his pants,

while the other slipped underneath to stroke him as he had done to her. She was rewarded by his having to place his arms against the wall to remain standing.

Sexual torture was fun, she decided. He groaned again as she rubbed herself up against his back. His hand reached behind him, desperately seeking to grab hold of her. "Naughty boy," she teased as she slapped at him. "That's not in the rules."

"Vixen." His complaint held no heat. He was enjoying the game as much as she was. Another musical roll of thunder passed around them as she felt the power of being in control for this session of love.

"Now, let's see. How does a zipper work again? I think it's this way." She sounded like a schoolgirl until she gave a lusty laugh. "Yes, definitely this way."

"You are destroying me," Roberto complained hoarsely as his pants flowed down with gravity.

"Ah, but you're loving every minute of it." Elizabeth stroked him once more, thrilled as his manhood surged beneath her touch. Her fingers slipped beneath the band of his underwear and she had to remind him to keep his eyes open and watch the mirror. He moved back, pulling his arms from the wall as she reached and pulled the cloth free.

"Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful," she said. Her hands traveled all over him, always returning to the soft nest of fur that delighted her so much. Involuntary shudders racked his body and she laughed happily. "I love the way your nerves jump around beneath my fingers."

"I can't take this. We should move to the bed," he hissed with his teeth clenched.

"Oh, you can take this. This and so much more," she said. "You'll have to help me with this." She untied his shoes and tried to pull them off with his socks and all of the clothes around his ankles. "Men are a little more difficult to undress than women."

"I fail to see that." He let out a thoroughly pleased masculine laugh. The sultry, baritone timbre seeped through to her bones like warm brandy. He ran a hand through her hair, clenching a mass of it in his fingers and then released it. Sweet pain, she thought. His breath caught and held when she ran her hands up his legs as he had tormented her earlier, stopping at the one place where he reacted to her caress the most.

Elizabeth had never dreamed of loving a man like she was considering. She was shocked to realize how much she wanted to do this. Taking a shaky breath, she decided there was a first time for everything. She nipped and kissed her way along his thighs, stopping when he tugged her hair and forced her to look up at him.

"Elizabeth," he said huskily. "You do not need to do this. Not every woman wants to."

He was giving her a way out and she loved him for it. Of all the men in the world, she had found the one who thought more of her than he did of his own pleasures!

"I want to." His moans and groans, together with the tightening of his hands on her shoulders indicated she was doing something right.

"It is too much." He groaned, and then reached down and pulled her up against him. "Every man dreams of having a woman perform such an act of love. To have you do so is like having the stars in my hands, Elizabeth."

His mouth crashed to hers, tasting hungrily of her mouth and absorbing her groan of pleasure as she felt their bodies mesh together. She would never know how they reached the bed. One moment she was

standing in his arms, the next she was beneath him, her feverish skin atop silky sheets. Her nails raked his back, silently demanding that he join with her, to her. The thunderous sound of the music crashed into her mind and the tempo of the musical score maintained a steady rhythm with the notes of love being spoken between them. Later, sweetly exhausted, they never bothered to turn off the music or blow out the candles before they slept. At this moment, the threat of Eduardo Hernandez seemed a lifetime away. They would think of this tomorrow.

* * * *

"Roberto, you know I need to wear the bracelet some time soon. If I can get an image or something from Lupita to tell me where the jewels are hidden, we can solve this mystery and get on with our lives. I'm frightened. Eduardo Hernandez could show up any time and I can't stand the thought of losing you."

She had been trying to convince him since breakfast to allow her to wear the bracelet during the siesta hours while they slept. It made sense to her, why didn't it to him?

"Our wedding first, Elizabeth. I do not want the matters of the past to cast a negative glow on our happiness. My men are watching for any sign of problems. Let them do their jobs and we will be married as we plan."

"Our wedding plans are known all over the island, Roberto. It would be a perfect time for Eduardo to slip in and catch us unaware. We both know the history and I got a real strong impression he does, too. If he wants poetic justice, he'll do a remake of Rafael and Lupita's wedding." That got his attention. Big time.

"No! He will not be successful this time."

The sound of glass breaking in the kitchen caused her to flinch. "I think the folks in China heard you as well." She smirked. "It's no big deal, honey. Just give me the bracelet, we'll lie down and hopefully, I'll see something that can help us. You'll be right there to protect me and wake me if I need it."

"Good God, what's going on," Lisa demanded as she broke into the room from a full run. Daniel rode in the whirlwind behind her.

"It's nothing, Lisa. Then again," she gazed speculatively at her friend. "You're the sensible kind, sort of." She hesitated. "If you had the chance to solve a puzzle which could eliminate dangers, you'd do it. Wouldn't you?"

"Sure—in a heart beat," the redhead answered immediately. Her gaze bounced between Roberto and Elizabeth. "You're talking about the bracelet, aren't you? And this stuff with Hernandez?"

"We agreed to keep Lisa out of this," Roberto hissed. He glared at Elizabeth indignantly.

"Daniel told me," Lisa countered.

"Uh-huh. So there it is. You told Daniel and Daniel told her," Elizabeth said. She shot an accusing glare back in Roberto's direction. His head bent downward and she would have sworn he looked sheepish for a moment. "Buck up," she teased and nipped him under the chin. "Sometimes four heads are better than one, or two."

"I am sorry, *mi amada*," Roberto said. "You have had so much happen in the last few days. Between my finding you, your memories returning about your mother, the kidnapping."

"You were kidnapped by Hernandez? What memories of your mother?" Lisa demanded. "You never said

anything to me."

"Later, Lisa! It's a long story." Elizabeth kicked Roberto in the shin and sent a recriminating message to him silently.

"I've got time for long stories," the perky redhead shot back.

"Lisa," three voices chanted in an irritable chorus.

"Roberto, I'm no longer the wimpy sock you whisked away in the night," Elizabeth said. "It's time to get this mystery solved so we can get on with our lives. If you can activate every soldier on this island to guard us or search for Eduardo, I can do my part."

Standing across from him, she was certain she resembled an acorn standing up to a mighty oak. But what she lacked in size, she made up for in conviction. If Eduardo expected to step in and tear them apart for a hundred years, he needed to think again.

"Wow," Lisa murmured and slipped into Daniel's embrace. "I guess she doesn't need me anymore. Can she really get vibes from the bracelet?" Daniel nodded solemnly. "Cool!"

Watching the two of them together brought back a lot of memories, Elizabeth thought. The way Lisa had said the word 'cool' was fresh out of their high school days.

"You are right. I have been foolish," Roberto conceded with a frown.

Elizabeth blinked as she remembered what they were talking about: the bracelet, the jewels, Eduardo and his goons.

"I know in my heart we will only learn the truth if you are allowed to see it through Lupita's eyes," he said. "I also know it has become very important to me that you are never hurt. I fear you will be in pain, seeing the past unfold."

"Roberto, I'm okay with this because I know it's the past. We live in the present. I may not have understood that before, but I do now. Let me do this?"

He went to his desk and opened the drawer, returning in seconds with the ankle bracelet. Elizabeth felt a whisper of relief as he dropped the metal into her hand. Already it felt warm to the touch, giving her a glimpse of Lupita's face, her mouth turned up in an impish grin. Obviously, there had been some happy times in the woman's life as well. Her thoughts traced back to the last vision of Lupita with Rafael. Yes, Lupita had enjoyed some very happy times.

As to the present, Elizabeth looked over at Roberto and saw the same gleam in his eyes that must have been in her own. They had been sharing some fabulous times of their own recently.

Seconds later, they left the curious pair of bystanders in the study and walked to their room. She could feel the heat of his eyes on her as she slipped her clothing off and slid into a nightgown. She easily read his mind: he wished he was the silky material that hugged her curves.

"Naughty boy," she teased. She climbed into bed beside him, the bracelet in place around her ankle. Like a cat, she sought his heat and curled in to him. His arms instantly pulled her closer and wrapped around her.

"Can you sleep?" The sound of his voice, so close to her ear, sent pleasant vibrations down her spine.

"Probably. A certain man I know made sure I didn't sleep much last night." She yawned.

"He sounds like an evil man." He chuckled. "He should be rewarded tonight by having you do what you did last night."

"Perhaps." She smiled sleepily into her pillow as she heard his low growl in reply. He was a lion, and she was his willing mate.

* * * *

As Elizabeth's eyelids slid closed, the visions of the past began.

Lupita's gaze met the man she had just married, each smiling at the other as if they were the only two people in the world. Just for a moment, she wished it were so. The wedding had been a beautiful affair, and even Rafael's parents had chosen to be nice to her for the day. They had evidently come to the conclusion Rafael was going to marry her whether they opposed the union or not.

The reception was very elegant. Candles glowed throughout the Great Hall and in the dining area where people still mingled. "How much longer?" she asked silently.

"Five minutes. No more," he answered to her alone. His lips never moved.

Five minutes and they could leave these people and be alone together as husband and wife. What a wonderful ring to the words. She appreciated all the effort his family had made in preparing the reception in their honor, but she really wanted to return with Rafael to their room for some time alone. It had been a long wedding and an even longer reception.

Angry voices in the hallway announced the unexpected guests pushing through the doors to the Great hall. Lupita could hear the hush of the crowd as one of Rafael's guards was shoved to the floor, blood pouring from the knife wound in his chest. Esteban Hernandez's harsh laughter followed the scream from one of the women who witnessed the sight.

"I believe you have something of mine, Rafael San Miguel," Esteban called out as he burst into the Great Hall. "She may wear white to the wedding, but I assure you that only weeks ago she wore the thinnest veil to cover her well-endowed body." She gasped, and regretted the action as Esteban's eyes focused on her. "Ah, Lupita. A pleasure to see you. From my bed to the wife of a San Miguel, eh? Did you tell him of your parting gift to me?" Esteban pulled open the front of his shirt to expose the recent scars from her knife. The sight of his hairy body made her queasy. "Perhaps he should fear the same thing from you when he is not looking. Perhaps after he's spilled his seed within you?"

"Perhaps you will find a woman you won't have to force into your bed." She spat at his feet and backed away before he could reach her.

"Esteban," Rafael called from behind the man. "You will address your indecent remarks to me, not to my wife."

"I will address not only words to each of you. Before this day is through, both of you will remember the words 'til death do us part.' I expect to part you this day." Esteban's eyes glittered from the evil within.

Lupita gave him a wide berth as she moved to her husband's side. If they were to die, they would do so together. She would have no part of Rafael's pushing her to the side. The guests had already fled and only Rafael, his father, and the guards for each family remained.

"Go, my love," he urged with a kiss. "Find a safe place in the castillo. I will find you afterward. If I am not the winner of this bout, you know where to find your satchel. My family will shield you as the new mistress of this house."

Rafael gave her a quick kiss that included every part of his heart. The next moment, she felt hands close around her wrists to pull her away. She glanced up toward the face of his father before he dragged her from the room.

“Such a touching moment when a husband kisses his wife as he fears death.” Esteban laughed. “She may go. I will find her when I have exacted my payment from you for stealing her from my bed. I will take her back to mine and then she will die.”

Esteban's guards let them pass as she reluctantly allowed herself to be tugged along. The repeating sound of metal against metal made her turn around to see that her husband was all right. He had the upper hand at the moment. Esteban was the weaker of the two with swords.

She could only pray it would remain so and Rafael would join her in their room soon. An argument between the guards for each family soon rendered the sound of many swords meeting in battle.

“You did this,” Rafael's mother screamed. They were close to the bedroom Lupita shared with Rafael. Her husband had turned Lupita loose once they were past the guards. “I knew this would be the result when you came here. We should have killed you and sent your body back to Esteban on that first night. Rafael would have healed from the loss and chosen a more suitable wife. If my son dies, you will never be the mistress of this house,” she concluded and then spat on Lupita's wedding dress.

“Shut your mouth, wife,” Rafael's father ordered. “Your son fights for his life and you pronounce him dead. Lupita is under my protection until her husband returns.”

Lupita was shaken by the venom and hatred in the older woman's voice. She was right. She would never be safe in this house if Rafael did not come back to her. In spite of his beliefs, Rafael's mother would shove her at Esteban, just to be rid of her. She would do it when Rafael's father wasn't around.

“Go to your room, my child. Seek shelter,” Rafael's father said. Lupita blinked, unable to speak the words of gratitude that lay hidden below her throat.

“Be strong, my love,” she urged Rafael silently. Her hand to her heart, she felt a moment of pain and prayed she was not sharing a physical pain with Rafael. Surely he would best Esteban and this would be over soon. Reality took its place in her mind. If her lover did not live, she must leave and she must be ready to do so at a moment's notice.

Her hands shook as she moved the brick from its place in the fireplace wall and saw a portion of her satchel exposed. It had always amazed her that he had never condemned her for the theft from Esteban. He had never demanded she return it, never even discussed it except to show her where it was hidden. Perhaps he knew this day would come? The satchel in her hand, she knelt for a brief prayer. Her father-in-law found her still praying moments later.

“You must leave,” he said. “I cannot promise you will be safe here, either from my wife or from Esteban Hernandez. I will take you down to the sea and get you to a boat with one of my men. Take it to the mainland.”

“Rafael?” Her heart stopped as the man shook his head in sadness.

If she hadn't been on her knees already, she would have fallen to them with the news. In taking her husband, Esteban had as much as driven the sword through her, striking the breath from her body.

“He would have taken Esteban, but one of Esteban's guards put a sword into him while he was fighting. I have killed the man, but Esteban lives. He is already searching the castillo for you.”

In the distance she heard yelling. They were looking for her. "Come," he commanded, reaching down to take her hand to help her rise. She transferred the satchel under her skirts and allowed him to help her up and followed him out of the door. She trusted him. The older man had the same qualities in him that she loved in Rafael. Rafael. The point of a knife slid through her heart again. They kept to the shadows, creeping along the sides of the walls so they would not be seen. Like an instant replay of her escape from Esteban's house, she could hear his shouts, each a step closer than the last. Or maybe they were echoes against the adobe walls? Her father-in-law pushed her further in the shadows when Esteban emerged, his guards apparently occupied elsewhere.

"Where is she, old man? Have you hidden her? Her husband is dead and your family is safe. Return her to me now or die."

"My son loved her. She is his wife, for however little time it has been. For that alone, I am responsible for her safety."

She held her breath as she waited for the strike of steel. "Do you wish to die, old man? Perhaps be free from that tyrant you call a wife? It shall be good to rid the island of all San Miguels. The island is too small for two great families."

"Do you have another guard you can pay to stab me in the back?" the senior San Miguel challenged. "I seem to have killed the last one."

He made a slight waving motion with his hand behind him to tell Lupita to move when she could. He covered the action with the retrieval of his sword and a shaft of light from a nearby candle caught it as it swung toward Esteban.

"You will be no match for me, old man," Esteban growled.

Lupita was sorely afraid Esteban was right. Her breath caught as the two weapons collided and then started to volley. She could see by the way Rafael's father was attacking Esteban, he was trying to lead the man away from her.

Terror filled her as she realized she would probably have to cross the waters to the mainland alone. It was not likely Rafael's father had been given sufficient time to arrange for one of his men to meet her at the shore. Could she get the boat into the water or was it on a pier?

Once there, could she navigate the waters? Questions filled her mind as her chest heaved with pain and fear. The satchel heated in her hands, as if to remind her she had brought this destruction into the San Miguel family. The reminder only served to increase her pain. Guards stomped down the hall and they were not part of the San Miguel security. She could tell they weren't by the way they searched rooms as they went along. They also smelled badly, which was not typical for anyone associated with this family.

Except for one. Dominic. Lupita recognized his evil, even from a distance. He led the guards in their search. Had Rafael's mother freed him? Panic grew as she looked about for a room to go into and hide. Breathing hurt. Her heart was an empty echo. If she could just get around the corner...

Chapter Twenty-Two

Elizabeth awoke at Roberto's demand. His face was a mask of worry. "Why did you wake me?" she demanded after he had pulled her close for a passionate kiss. "We still don't know what happened to the jewels."

"It is obvious," Roberto said, his voice grim. "Lupita took them with her to the mainland. They were

probably seized when she was captured and sold back into slavery."

"I don't believe that," Elizabeth said. "She had a sense of responsibility to the San Miguel family. It doesn't make sense for her to take the jewels with her. If she made it to the mainland, they would have been like a trail of breadcrumbs behind her. Maybe she would take one or two, but not the whole thing. Rafael's mother hated her for the loss of her son and husband. Lupita felt guilty for causing it."

She had felt the same sting of remorse Lupita felt at seeing Rafael's father fighting with Esteban. Lupita would want to return something to the family for their loss of Rafael and his father. In her mind, the jewels belonged to the San Miguel family. Elizabeth wondered how she could know this and realized she just knew—Lupita would not have taken the jewels with her.

"My family betrayed her. It is not right for a San Miguel to betray one of their own."

"But she wasn't a San Miguel to any of them besides Rafael and his father," she persisted. Family pride was an integral part of Roberto's existence. It would tear him apart to believe his relatives were less than honorable.

"Regardless, I do not want you to live through pain with Lupita. It is sufficient for us to believe she left the island with the jewels."

"So what do we do about Eduardo Hernandez? We can't just tell him they're gone so get lost," she said.

"Hernandez wants more than the jewels. They are an excuse. He wants the island, the old ways." Roberto pulled her back against him. "Come here, *mi amada*. I do not want you to worry."

She thought his request was a bit like telling a mosquito not to bite. She would worry regardless of what he said. For the first time since they had made love, she was unable to receive comfort from his arms.

* * * *

"Why are you worried? You've got the perfect man and you look like a wreck. On your wedding day no less," Lisa chided. "Roberto has everything under control for your safety."

Lisa looked beautiful in the traditional colorful clothing of the island. The skirt was lengthened and dressed up so it fit perfectly as a dress for the maid of honor.

"Thanks," Elizabeth muttered. "I'm wearing this beautiful dress. I've put on makeup for the day and had my hair done and you say I look like a wreck. You are a real confidence booster, do you know that?"

Yards of silk and lace swished about as she walked around, pacing the room for the third time. What if Eduardo found a way in? Her teeth bit into her lower lip, where she already had a few puncture wounds. She stopped in front of a mirror and adjusted her veil once more. She looked like a bride, albeit a very worried bride. There were more creases in her forehead than on a rumpled sheet. It felt like she had a hive of bees swarming around in her belly.

"You can adjust that veil all you want," Lisa griped. "It hasn't moved since the last time you fiddled with it."

She was applying the last of her makeup and seemed pleased with the results. No doubt Daniel would approve as well, Elizabeth thought. The two had been inseparable since her arrival on the island.

"We're just about ready," Daniel announced as he stuck his head through the door. "Wow. Elizabeth, you look great. Worried, but gorgeous. Relax, this place is crawling with what you like to call Secret Service." He came into the room in spite of whatever his earlier intentions might have been. "I feel

privileged to take you up the aisle. At least I get to see Roberto's face when he sees you come into the Cathedral."

Daniel was playing double duty for the wedding. He was Roberto's Best Man and he was going to walk Elizabeth up the aisle since her father was dead. She couldn't think of a better person for the job.

"Why are you so worried? You know Roberto worships the ground you walk on and you feel the same way about him. You two are so good together I have to take a pain pill to deal with the ache in my heart," Daniel teased.

Lisa popped him in the arm for the comment. "Hey! What am I? Chopped liver?"

"You are a goddess of love," he quipped, bobbing down for a quick bow.

He feigned adoration, his hand over his heart. Lisa playfully took on a pose that reminded Elizabeth of a statue she had once seen. The antics of the two were enough to raise her spirits. She would worry about Eduardo Hernandez later. After all, if he couldn't be found during the search of every cave, house or building on the island, he probably wasn't in the vicinity. Besides, today was her wedding day, not Lupita's.

"That's better," Daniel said approvingly. "Now you look more like the bride I expected to see when I came in here. What say we go get you hitched, darlin'?" His nasal twang needed some work.

She nodded her agreement, her voice suddenly elusive. Lisa stopped them from leaving the room until she could pull Elizabeth's front veil down over her face and then backed away to admire her handiwork.

"You look beautiful, Bethi," she told her, using her pet name for Elizabeth. It had always been reserved for those times when Lisa was the most emotional. "I am so proud of you. I'm so glad you wanted me here to see this. You're going to get it right the first time."

Lisa was going to cry, she could tell. The tears had already formed in her eyes and were ready to drop.

"If you start this, we'll both be piles of black goo," Elizabeth warned. Her tears were extremely close to the surface as well. "They'll see our mascara streaked faces before they see anything else."

"You're right. I'm cool." Lisa danced a little jig, her hands outstretched emphatically. "I'm cool," she repeated, this time more brightly. Daniel laughed at both of them.

"Come on, Miss Coolness. We have a bride to deliver," he said. He laughed again. "Her groom has probably paced a mile by now."

Elizabeth noticed Raul's presence at the back of the church, as well as several other men who seemed familiar. They were the Secret Service, island style. Roberto was taking very few chances with Eduardo making a surprise arrival. She cast a quick glance outside the front doors and noticed Paco was present with two other men, standing by the limousine that would take them back to the house for the reception.

"It's time," Lisa announced, pulling all three of them up to the entrance area.

From where she stood, she could hear the beginning strains of the wedding march and it sank in that this was it. From this moment on, she would be Elizabeth San Miguel. Roberto's wife. Needles of excitement went through her as she looked to the altar and saw him standing there. Nothing in her life had ever felt so right. Their eyes met and held. Neither paid any attention to Lisa as she walked up to take her place a few feet from Roberto and then turned to watch Elizabeth's entrance.

Roberto smiled as she took the first stumbling step into the house of worship, her eyes still trained on

him rather than where she was walking.

"The other left foot," Daniel whispered.

Elizabeth giggled. They had gone over this at least twice and she still missed and started with the wrong foot. So be it, she thought sardonically. There were more important parts to this day than matching her steps to Daniel's. He seemed to feel the same way as he stopped trying to make a perfect entrance.

Breathing took work. All of her attention was focused on Roberto, who was now beside her, taking her hand to lead her up to face the priest.

"Estamos limitados con eternidad. Le amare por siempre," Roberto conveyed silently.

Elizabeth gazed at Roberto as the translation echoed through her mind. "We are bound through eternity. I will love you forever."

She didn't hear the words of the ceremony. Instead, she heard the beating of Roberto's heart, the silent vows that passed from one soul to another. Lisa's hiss and the thump of her finger on Elizabeth's arm brought her back to the confines of the church.

"I do," she said. Her voice sounded like some old frog with laryngitis, but at least she'd gotten the words out.

Roberto's hands trembled as he lifted her veil. His sweet kiss said he meant every word uttered during the ceremony. She melted in his arms, only to come out of the haze when their audience began to whistle and clap. When they turned to face the crowd, her face burned with embarrassment and he looked positively elated. He kissed her again when they were introduced as husband and wife, not that she minded. More clapping followed as they made their way down the aisle to the rear of the church.

"Do you think they'll kiss like that after the babies begin to come?" Daniel asked Lisa as they followed the new husband and wife down the aisle.

"Absolutely. I want a man who will kiss me like that."

Lisa sounded wistful. Elizabeth said a silent prayer for her friend. Maybe things in her life were turning around?

"What way is that?" Daniel asked.

"Like I was oxygen to his soul and he'd die without me." In her peripheral view, Elizabeth caught a glimpse of Lisa watching them closely. Elizabeth's main focus, Roberto, was watching her with eyes full of promises. Daniel was silent a lot longer than necessary.

"I feel guilty intruding on them," Lisa whispered to Daniel.

"Don't worry about it. They don't even know we're here," he said.

Daniel was very close to the truth. She kept thinking about Lisa's comment. Ever since they'd met, Roberto had acted as if his own life depended on her. In her old existence, she would have deemed him a wimp and dismissed him entirely. Now she knew differently, love had a way of changing someone's perspective. Time would change things but for right now, he was the difference between this breath and her next. Her eyes misted as she looked at her new husband and he wiped away a tear that escaped the confines of her eyelids and ran down her cheek. Oh, how she loved this man!

The castle—*castillo*, she corrected herself—was as guarded as the church had been. Raul and Paco

arrived in a car traveling in front of the limousine and they immediately checked in with the other guards. Guests began to appear immediately. It did not take long before island residents surrounded Elizabeth and Roberto, each wishing to extend their congratulations to the happy couple.

At long last, the line thinned and she was glad to stop being kissed and jostled in joy. The telepathic link between Roberto and Elizabeth worked like a pipeline for their thoughts. He felt the same way, though he reacted to each guest with the same respect and appreciation. She smiled. None of them would have guessed he wished them all gone. She understood completely.

Music played and wine flowed. The hall was filled with the sound of happy chatter, the noise of private toasting and remarks about the radiance of the newlyweds. She went into his arms to dance in a daze, feeling the intensity of his emotions as well as he did.

"It's funny," she said with a sigh. "It all started with a dance, didn't it?" She looked up, staring into his eyes, which glittered like her own. She could see her reflection in his loving gaze. "Or was it started with a dream?"

"It was the lion's head tattoo. The day you accepted your destiny."

"Maybe." She grinned. "However it came about, we're here now."

"You are my love and now my wife. I cannot tell you how happy this makes me. To know I will spend the rest of my life with you brings me unspeakable joy."

Elizabeth tried unsuccessfully to get past the lump in her throat to tell him she felt the same way.

"You do not have to speak it, *Querida*. I see it in your eyes and hear it in your heartbeat." Roberto pulled her head against his own and kissed her forehead, then her nose and finally her lips. By the time he was finished, her legs were weak and she was grateful he was holding her up. She leaned her head against his shoulder until she regained her strength.

She motioned to him minutes later. "Look." They watched Lisa and Daniel dance together, appearing as two halves of a whole. "They're such a good couple. I think we'll be putting on a second wedding pretty soon." She chuckled as Roberto agreed.

"I am certain it will be Lisa's last one. I felt it the first time I saw them together."

They danced through several more songs, both of them reluctant to separate. The noise at the doors to the Great Hall came to their attention slowly.

"Hernandez?" she whispered. Where love had been seconds before, fear crept into her heart. The doors burst open and the crowd gave a cry as Paco was shoved bleeding to the floor.

Elizabeth was flung between the past and the present, seeing the San Miguel guard bleeding two hundred years earlier. She immediately felt Lupita's presence in the room and then in her being. It brought a calming force, rather than one of fright. She would not give in to the memories of the time she'd been kidnapped. Nor would she allow history to repeat itself. Hernandez would not win this time.

"Roberto San Miguel," Eduardo called out as he made his way into the room.

"I am here." Roberto moved to where Eduardo could see him. She trailed behind him despite his efforts to remove her from sight. They would face this. They would beat their adversary together this time.

"I see that she found her way home," Esteban said to Roberto. "You have something of mine." Eduardo shot her a hostile glare.

Where Roberto was impeccably dressed and distinguished looking, Eduardo was as weathered as his clothes. There was fresh blood on his hands and smeared on the front of his dress jacket.

"We have nothing of yours, Eduardo Hernandez. Lupita took the jewels you seek many generations ago. They went with her to the mainland. Where you should be searching for them."

The two men argued heatedly as Eduardo refused to accept the explanation. Elizabeth moved quietly to the side of the food table. There was little she could do, standing by Roberto's side. He would die trying to protect her and she could not allow this to happen. She searched the table for the right weapon.

"It is my wedding day and I am unarmed," Roberto said. "Are you cowardly enough to shoot an unarmed man? Or do you wish to end this as it began?"

She watched Eduardo's gaze rise to the pair of swords mounted on the wall, glinting in the light that surrounded the Great Hall. Without asking, she knew they were the same two swords wielded between Esteban and Rafael generations earlier.

"There," he ordered Roberto. "Pull them down. I will play your silly game if you wish."

Elizabeth didn't trust him at all. She'd always been a relatively good judge of character, and her opinion of Eduardo hadn't changed since the first moment she'd seen him. He would win by whatever means he needed to, including trickery. She silently dumped the contents of the small plate beside her while she waited for him to act.

"These men with you, do they plan to go to their deaths with you on this day? Has someone told them their families are safely hidden from your influence?"

She watched Eduardo's eyes narrow against Roberto's piercing glare. One by one, the men accompanying Eduardo looked toward each other and turned speculatively toward her new husband.

"So, he has not told you that his powers over you have ceased," he said, looking at each man separately. "Do you choose to serve him freely? Or is the elimination of his threat sufficient for you to lay down your weapons? After all, the battle has always been between the two of us."

Roberto's lips curled as various articles hit the floor, everything from knives to pistols, and even a star-shaped metal piece. Elizabeth could only guess at its use.

"It appears you are alone, Eduardo. Unless you have paid someone to kill me as your ancestor did, this will be a fair fight. I will get the swords now."

Eduardo cast a glance in her direction, his arrogance fleeting. His lascivious and malicious look left no room for misunderstanding. It confirmed her belief that he had a trick or two up his sleeve.

Her beloved turned to retrieve the weapons from the wall, and missed the slight of hand movement Eduardo made when his back was turned. Their telepathic connection was once again their advantage. "Look out, my love."

Elizabeth saw the pistol in Eduardo's hand and the flicker of light on the wall at the same time. She flung the plate in her hand at Hernandez. Porcelain hit the side of Eduardo's head and a bullet hit the wall where Roberto had just been, a split second before he ducked. A second shot rang out and Eduardo fell to the floor in a heap.

In the aftermath, everyone's gaze flew from Roberto to Elizabeth, to Eduardo's prone body. Then they settled on Raul, who stood with his gun raised and pointed at the dead man.

“Good golly, Miss Molly,” Lisa crooned as she sprang into action and raced to Elizabeth's side. “Are you all right? How did you do that?”

“Frisbee championship, senior year of high school. Remember?” Elizabeth shot a lopsided grin toward her friend and Roberto as he made his way to her side. Past and present collided in that second. Rafael and Roberto became the same man. Elizabeth collapsed and everything went dark.

* * * *

Lupita knew her life was over if Esteban Hernandez were to see her. The library doors closed silently behind her, a feat Lupita had never been able to accomplish before. She considered it the benevolence of God that He allowed it to happen now. Looking about the room, her decision was made. She would escape if she could, but the jewels would remain here. Where to hide them? Books would offer no safety for the satchel. If Esteban were successful in killing Rafael's father, he would search the castillo thoroughly before leaving.

Think, she ordered herself as she looked at the multitude of assorted lounge chairs, tables and tapestries. Nothing stood out as a potential hiding place for the precious stones. She felt an odd sensation as she looked down at the woven rug that lay on the floor underneath her. There was a ridge in an unlikely place. Perhaps a loose board that she could slip the satchel under? She pulled the sturdy materials back to examine the floorboards underneath. There, she decided, looking at a board missing a nail to hold it down. It seemed a perfect hiding place. She heard the voices outside coming closer to the room and she knew she had little time to spare.

Her fingernails would not reach far enough on the board's edge to pull it up. She needed something longer to use as a tool. The knife collection on the wall caught her eye instantly and Lupita went over to take one from its mounting. Using it as a lever, she managed to pull the board up enough to create a space to slide the satchel underneath. It would be years before anyone found them, perhaps never. But at least they would be in the hands of the San Miguel family and not Esteban's. When the board was secure once more, she slipped the rug back into place. Lupita had more important matters to take care of now. The knife in her hand would prove useful in her travels. She decided to keep it.

Her wedding gown would prove difficult to maneuver in and she pulled at it to remove it. Better to travel in her chemise and pantaloons than not to be able to move at all. If the waves pulled her under, there was no question she would drown in the acres of silk. Lupita planted a kiss on the material as if it had feelings of its own.

A tear fell from her eye as she moved to the window and climbed out. She wiped it away angrily. Didn't she know better than to believe in happy endings? She had a long way to go and there was no time for tears. The baby must be safe.

The baby? Lupita realized in that moment it was true. She did not know how she knew this, but she was certain of the fact. This child, born of the love she held for Rafael, would be raised in safety. She would make certain of it. One last look at the room and she was out the window, running for the safety of darkness. It would be a long time before she stopped, not until she reached the shoreline.

* * * *

"Elizabeth. *Querida*, come back to me," Roberto pleaded as he held her in his arms.

What a silly man, she thought hazily. Where did he think she was going without him? She coughed and sputtered at the obnoxious smell wafting through her nasal passages. Ammonia! Good grief, who used ammonia anymore? What had she been doing anyway, cleaning floors?

"Bethi, wake up," Lisa's voice chimed in from further away.

That insidious odor was coming back. She coughed again and her eyes flipped open. "Get that stuff away from me. Have you never heard of mercy or waking the sleeping princess with a kiss?"

Roberto laughed. A full, belly-busting, feel-it-down-to-your-toes, spine-tingling roar.

"A princess with a mean right arm." Roberto said. "Remind me to stay out of your way when you're in a mood to toss things around."

"Yeah, well. It served the ba—jerk right," she growled, catching the slip of the tongue before it escaped. "If you could have seen the look he shot me before he went down," she said with a self-righteous smirk.

"I didn't have to," he said. "It was on every face in the room, including mine! Who could have known?"

"Well, there's a lot about me you still don't know, Roberto San Miguel. But you'll learn." Her face burned with the admission.

Roberto pulled her close and his mouth closed over hers. He was saying without words, how much he was going to enjoy the learning process.

"Good grief, they're at it again," Daniel murmured behind them.

"I know where the jewels are," Elizabeth said much later. "You'll need to let me up," she reminded Roberto. He seemed reluctant to let her out of his arms.

"Jewels? Did someone say jewels?" Lisa resembled a parrot ready to hop around at any moment.

"Wait. Who's taking care of Paco? Will he be okay?"

Roberto wasted no time in answering her question. "Rosita is taking care of him. She went with him to the hospital and the doctor promises a full recovery."

"Well, if I was the wagering sort, I'd bet his days are numbered as a single man." She'd seen the way Rosita looked in the man's direction when she thought no one was looking. As far as that woman was concerned, he was the peanut butter to her jelly.

"You have a strange mind," Roberto murmured. "Peanut butter?"

"I was a third grade teacher. What else do you expect me to come up with? If you insist on reading my mind, you get what you get." She laughed with him as they made their way to the library.

Once there, she stood and looked over the room. Lamps had replaced the earlier candles, although the candleholders were still in place on the walls for a more decorative purpose now. Newer lounge chairs had taken the place of the older ones, but she recognized at least two from the earlier time period. She ran a finger across the fabrics. "They look as good now as they did then."

"They were recovered," he explained, knowing what she was talking about. "We had the materials matched to the original. This was the one room I felt should remain as close to what it had been as possible. Lupita's gown was found over there." He pointed to the area around the window.

"She kissed it before she left." Her words were intended for Roberto alone. "She would have stayed and died with you, but she had the baby to consider."

Roberto paled visibly. "A child? How can this be? There was no mention of a child in my reports. Lupita

was captured on the mainland and sold into slavery. The knife was recovered by my people."

She looked from him to the knife collection on the wall. The ruby burned as if it was prepared to unfold the remaining secrets. Elizabeth walked over and traced its edges lovingly. Through it, she was provided with another glimpse of the past.

"Rafael's father had been able to arrange for a man to meet her at the shore. He never knew Lupita had it until much later," she said, feeling the ends of her mouth turn up for a smile. "He took her across to the mainland. He was in love with her before they reached the shore." She saw the speculative look Roberto sent her. "Really," she added. "Once on the mainland, they encountered some difficulties and the knife was stolen by another woman. That's the woman who was probably sold into slavery. Lupita was able to raise her baby in safety, just as she had wished. She and her new husband raised the child along with those that came later, but she never forgot or stopped loving Rafael."

"No wonder I did not find you in my search."

"You found me with your heart. Destiny is better." She smiled and caressed his cheek with her fingers. Seconds later, she looked about the room once more. Would the jewels still be there? As if led by a compass, she paced the dimensions then stopped and looked down. A rug no longer hid the board, but it was evident the floor had been sanded down and resealed since Lupita had been there. There still wasn't a nail in place to hold the board down, she marveled.

"We'll need something sharp," she told the group surrounding her.

Everyone moved at once to look for something. They looked like a chaotic troop of ants, each going in a separate direction. Within seconds, she had a letter opener in her hands and the board would not budge.

"Let me try," Raul requested.

She relented happily, placing a kiss on his cheek for his earlier bravery. It was the first time she was able to thank him. He worked at the board for several minutes and succeeded only at breaking the letter opener. Roberto disappeared for while and returned with a hammer and chisel. Together, they chipped away at the board then pulled it up.

"Looks like we're going to have to redo the floors, husband."

Her groom grinned in reply. The satchel was still in place, though portions of the cloth had disintegrated over time. The lights glimmered against the newly exposed jewels, and there was a magical feel to the moment. Against the walls, various colors bounced and played as if they were stars in the skies.

She could not translate the words Raul said, but she could easily guess at the meaning. He and Roberto pulled the stones from their hiding place one at a time.

"Are there any other members of the Hernandez family that we need to give these to?" Elizabeth asked when she had her voice again.

"One," Roberto said. "Eduardo's brother."

Daniel spoke up. "But Stefano is dead. You told me yourself."

Roberto's gaze traveled from Daniel to Raul. His first officer's brow was raised in question, but he said nothing. "It was a necessary lie. I apologize to you both." Roberto glanced at each of the men, but his gaze remained on Raul. "Stefano is a Hernandez, but his heart has not been twisted by his brother's poison. Once we have rounded up the remainder of those loyal to Eduardo, I will bring Stefano from

hiding. The secret remains with those in this room."

Roberto stared at each person in the room, waiting until he had received a nod of acceptance from everyone. His gaze lingered on Elizabeth long afterward and he grinned.

"So, let's see these babies," Lisa interrupted. Elizabeth laughed. "What? Can't I get a glimpse of them before they disappear?"

Excitement filled the room as Lisa ripped off a piece of fabric from her dress to wrap the stones in once they were all out. The elegant gown was now a mini-skirt and Daniel's grin was definite proof that he approved of the new style.

Roberto handed the flowery silk satchel to Elizabeth, who promptly gave them back.

"You hold them," she said. "I trust whatever you and Stefano decide."

There was no way to misinterpret his blunt stare and Lisa's gasp of shock. The words tasted awkward on her tongue, but they felt right. Only a week earlier, she would have died before putting her trust in any man. Today, she not only put the jewels under his control but she'd entrusted her very life and future to his loving care.

"Can I offer anyone some wedding champagne?" Roberto asked. The words tumbled out of his mouth after he'd wrapped a tie around the material holding the jewels and placed them in his desk. His smile was lighter than air, brighter than the lights in the room. "This day has gone beyond my wildest expectations." He shook his head. "I am married to the most beautiful woman in the world, my people are safe and secure and I am amongst my friends. Let us celebrate."

He walked up beside Raul and placed an arm over his shoulder and pulled Elizabeth into the circle of his other arm. He accepted her chaste kiss and then raised an eyebrow at her as she scooted away from him and placed Daniel under his newly freed arm. Immediately, he understood her intent.

The tiny troop made their way back to the Great Hall, gaily laughing at the day's events and the final outcome. Lisa and Elizabeth walked arm in arm behind the men.

"So, are you going for the brass ring, Lisa?" Elizabeth asked quietly when she had allowed some space between them and the group of men. "I take it Daniel is the one I've been waiting for you to find again? No more Mr. Wrongs."

"There's more to you than meets the eye," Lisa said. "I always believed that. Guess that's why we've been friends for so long. Okay, you deserve the truth. You're right. Daniel is the man. We've been doing a lot of talking and—"

"And?"

"You'll just have to wait and see." Lisa grinned. "Just like the rest of the world."

THE END

About the Author

I admit it, I'm a gypsy at heart. Give me two years of living in the same place and my feet get itchy. The world is too big and too beautiful to stay in one place for long. So give me a laptop, a supply of novels and a map, and I'll go anywhere, anytime. I'm currently a resident of Port St. Lucie, Florida, but my feet are tingling and itchy...

The greatest part of life, however, is my husband. He is the safe harbor for my heart and soul. He grounds me with his wisdom yet gives me wings, and he drives, rides or flies with me through this journey called life. God bless you, honey.

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