



Her Will, His Way

By

Terri Molina

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Dedication

For my family, who never had a doubt.

To my dear friend Rhonda, who helps me stay sane even when she isn't.

Special thank you to my critique partner, Pam Mellor, and my readers—
Hermina, Michelle, Abel, Peter, Danielle, Eileen—and, of course, my
editor Nancy, for her patience.

Chapter One

"Are you sure you don't mind closing up for me?" Anita asked her assistant, Berta, as she scooped her purse from the desk drawer.

The young woman waved her off. "No, not at all. It's only a couple more hours. Besides, I don't think we're going to get a mad rush of people wanting carnations," she said with a grin. "Now, go on and get ready for your date with Officer Hottie."

"It isn't a date. I'm just making him dinner," Anita said. "He goaded me into it."

"Yeah, right. And you don't have the least bit of interest in him," Berta said with a dubious nod.

"No, I don't. I can barely even stand the man's company." Anita frowned at her friend. "Would you stop with the mmm hmm's?"

Berta held up her hands and shrugged. "I'm just saying the way he looks at you...you'd have to be blind not to see it."

"There's nothing to see. I've known Tony for almost twenty years. He's an arrogant son of a bitch who thinks he knows everything."

"And you, being so proud, can't resist proving him wrong. It has absolutely nothing to do with that killer body or those bedroom eyes," Berta said.

"I've never noticed."

Berta laughed, nodding her head. "Oh, yeah *that* was convincing."

Anita grinned and adjusted her purse strap over her shoulder. "I'll see you Monday." She made it to the door before stopping. "Oh shoot! I

forgot Mr. Jimenez is supposed to drop off some more of his vases."

Berta stepped forward and placed her hands on Anita's shoulders, turning her back to face the door. "I can handle Mr. Jimenez. I *did* work for your grandfather for a couple of years before you took over the place. Now go make yourself sexy for your date. And I want to hear all the horny details Monday."

"It's not a date!" Anita said before the door closed behind her. "He tricked me into it. Just like he always does," she added with a frown.

Damn that Antonio Hernandez! In all the years she'd known him, he'd looked for ways to tease her into some sort of debate, and she would have a determined need to prove him wrong, never realizing until later that he'd been setting her up.

She slid into her car and thought about how he'd cornered her in her grandmother's kitchen two days earlier. He'd been mowing the lawn and came in for a drink. When he noticed her at the stove, he started speaking in Spanish, smirking when she didn't respond.

"It's a shame you have so little respect for your heritage," he said, shaking his head.

"Just because I don't speak Spanish, doesn't mean I'm any less a Mexican."

"You can't even make a simple plate of *migas*," he said, gesturing toward the mess of eggs sticking to the skillet.

"I can cook as well as you," Anita returned.

Tony stepped closer, caging her in against the counter, a mischievous gleam in his dark brown eyes.

"Yeah? Prove it. You can cook me dinner Saturday night."

Wisps of black hair draped his forehead. The smell of freshly cut grass clung to his skin, mixing with his own musky scent. She silently cursed her libido for reacting as if she'd been hit with a flamethrower.

"I don't have to prove anything to you," she said, glaring up at him.

Tony's smile was crooked and every bit as cocky. "That's what I thought." He leaned in, his mouth inches from hers. "You're afraid to be alone with me," he said in Spanish. His smile spread when her eyes

hardened. "Prove me wrong," he said, switching back to English. "Saturday night. My place." He stole a kiss then caught her arm when her hand came up to slap him.

"You only get to do that once," he said then left her alone in the kitchen.

Jerk!

Anita laid her hand against the quiver in her stomach. It was the second time since she'd known Tony that he'd kissed her. The first time was after he had the nerve to tell her to break off her engagement to Paul.

Arrogant bastard.

It didn't matter that he'd been right about her ex-husband. Antonio Hernandez had no right to tell her whom she should or should not marry, and she'd told him so with a slap across the face.

She spotted the state trooper's car and felt the flutter of anticipation settle in her stomach.

So what if Tony is a handsome man, she thought. And so what if the taste of him had stayed in her senses and sent her hormones in an uproar. It didn't mean she would go against her principles and date a Mexican. It's not that she's prejudiced; after all she's full-blooded Mexican herself. But she had seen how domineering the men in the Valley are to their wives, and she refused to allow a man to tell her what to do. The dinner tonight was to prove a point, not become a couple.

He'd called her a *gringa*, she thought with disgust. Just because she'd been raised in Chicago and didn't know Spanish or how to make tamales didn't make her any less Mexican did it?

Regardless, it was her own pride that had her agreeing to cook him dinner. He told her she had lost all respect for herself by losing respect for her heritage. Maybe it was true, but it wasn't because she didn't respect her heritage. She had come back to the valley hadn't she? Okay, so maybe inheriting her grandfather's flower shop had been a deciding factor, but it wasn't the only reason. She'd also come here to take back what was stripped from her when her parents decided to raise her in Chicago.

She'd spent every summer in the Rio Grande Valley from the time she turned twelve until she married at twenty-one. It was only natural

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that she would return when her life was such a mess.

And it had nothing to do with Antonio Hernandez!

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Antonio watched the little Ford Escort pull away from the curb in front of the flower shop and considered switching on his lights just to give Anita a fright. If they weren't already set to have dinner later, he would have stopped her for some sort of traffic violation just to steal a few minutes alone.

They'd first met nearly twenty years ago when she'd spent her first summer with her grandparents. He'd never really paid much attention to her until a couple of summers later when she'd spent the day helping his mother make tamales to sell to the migrant workers.

Anita had argued with him about something ridiculous and, after several more debates, he'd suddenly found himself falling madly in love with her. Although she was only fourteen at the time and he had just graduated high school. He would never have lived it down if his buddies had found out he'd had fallen for a girl barely on the cusp of womanhood. But he didn't want to chance losing her, so when she came to town he spent whatever time he could at her grandparents' house doing odd jobs for the elderly couple and finding ways to irritate Anita so she would notice him.

A smile curved his lips. He wondered if she were still pouting about making him dinner tonight. After all, he did trick her into it by inferring she had no respect for her Mexican heritage, not that he really believed it. But that was the fun of dealing with Anita; she would take whatever criticisms he threw at her and try to prove him wrong.

The Escort slowed at the stop sign and continued through the intersection.

Antonio shook his head with a laugh. He'd let that one go this time. After all, giving Anita a ticket would ruin his plan to have her fall in love with him.

Chapter Two

Anita propped her feet on the barstool in her grandmother's kitchen and flipped through a steno pad.

"Are you sure this is an easy dish?" she asked with a wary glance at the petite woman across the counter.

"Yes, *Nieta*, it is a very simple dish to make. And was one of your grandfather's favorites. It's what made him fall in love with me."

Anita caught herself before she fell off the adjacent stool. "Whoa," she said. "This is a simple dinner, Grandma. Not a date and certainly not a romance. It's just two people, who can barely tolerate each other, sharing a meal." Anita saw the grin on her grandmother's face and narrowed her eyes. "Don't you give me that look, too."

"What look would that be?"

"That look that says you think I'm interested in Tony."

"Well, why wouldn't you be? He's a very handsome man," her grandmother said, turning to the cupboard and pulling out small bottles of spices.

"Yeah, well, his lack of personality more than makes up for that," Anita said, dryly. She climbed off the stool and took a bottle of water from the refrigerator. "Besides, I'm only doing this because he tricked me into it. He said I'm not Mexican enough. That I'm too *white*."

"And of course your own pride has forced you to prove him wrong," her grandmother said with a grin. "It is a smart man who knows what buttons to push on a woman."

"Whose side are you on? Just because he butters you up doing little jobs around the house doesn't mean he's not an arrogant son of a bitch."

"Ay, *Nieta*, such a mouth."

"You see, he makes me crazy," she said, with a wry smile. She glanced at the clock and sighed. "I'd better go and get this over with. Thanks, Grandma," she said, placing a kiss on the woman's cheek.

* * * * *

Anita let herself into Tony's house using the key her grandmother kept. She set the bags of groceries on the kitchen counter, doing a cursory study of the room. Several pots and pans sat on the stove, which she assumed he'd left out so she wouldn't have to hunt them down. Tacked on the refrigerator door was a note that read: *I'll be home by six. The fire extinguisher is under the sink.*

"Funny," she said, grabbing the note from under the fish magnet.

She pulled the food and supplies from the bag and went to work preparing the meal.

* * * * *

Antonio scanned the selection of cakes and pastries behind the glass counter trying to decide which one Anita would prefer.

"You really think bringing her flowers and chocolate is going to win her heart?" the woman behind the counter asked.

Antonio looked up at his sister and grinned. "Your husband said it worked on you."

"Yeah, well, I was easy," she answered. "This is Anita we're talking about. Need I remind you she's already made it clear, more than once, she doesn't like you?"

"It's called denial, Sis. Anita just wants to believe she doesn't like me. Deep down, she's hot for me."

His sister made a sound of disgust and rolled her eyes. "Don't make me throw up," she said. Her expression changed to concern. "I still

think this is a bad idea. I mean, it's like making a deal with the devil. And if Anita finds out what you did..."

"She won't. Once I convince her to marry me, the store will be hers. She'll never know I was involved."

"She'll know, Antonio. You can't expect her to just accept that her grandfather suddenly changed his mind and left her his store because he believed she could run it. She's a smart woman. She's going to find out sooner or later. And when she does..."

"Then I'd better make sure she doesn't," Antonio said.

"*Usted es tan obstinado como ella,*" she said, shaking her head. She blew out a relenting sigh and reached into the case.

"Here..." she grabbed a small cheesecake dribbled with chocolate and placed it in a box. "This should win you some points. She's always been a sucker for my cheesecake."

"Thanks, Elena," he said with a grateful smile.

"Let me know how it works out. But spare me the details," she said with grin. "Good luck."

* * * * *

Anita's cell phone rang as she made a final pass over the tortilla with the rolling pin.

"Hey, *chica*, how's the dinner coming along?" Berta asked.

Anita tossed the flour disc onto the flat iron skillet. "It was going great until I started making the tortillas." She grabbed a spatula and used it to flip the bread.

"Having problems rolling them?"

"Not at all. Aren't they supposed to look like Alaska?"

Berta laughed. "Don't feel bad. The first time I made them they looked like Washington, as in George."

"Well that's encouraging," Anita said, using the heel of her hand to pat down another mound of dough. "Next time I'm just going to buy them."

"Next time?" Berta said suspiciously. "Already thinking about the

next date?"

"This isn't a date. And that was a slip of the tongue."

"Uh huh, I know where you want to slip that tongue."

Anita groaned. "That was crude even for you."

"Oh, don't tell me you don't want some of that. Antonio is hot! Especially when he wears that uniform...*ay, Dios,*" Berta said with a moan. "You just *gotta* love a man in uniform."

Anita shook her head with a laugh and tossed another deformed tortilla onto the skillet. "You love men period."

"Girl, if I had a man who was as into me as Antonio is to you, I'd jump on him. And I mean that literally."

"Well, sorry to disappoint you, but Tony and I are just friends. Besides, we're hardly each other's type."

"Tall, dark and yummy isn't your type?"

"You know what I mean," Anita said, using a fork to stab the air bubble on the tortilla.

"*Mujer!* This is the twenty-first century. Mexican women aren't as submissive as they used to be. It's equal opportunity now."

"If you say so," Anita said, placing the tortilla into the warmer. She tossed another bread onto the pan. It instantly bubbled. "I'd better go before I burn the rest of the fifty states."

"Fine, don't listen to me. But I'm telling you, if Antonio gives you even the tiniest signal that he's interested in you, go for it."

"He won't. Now, I have to go. He'll be here any second." She hung up the phone and frowned. How was she supposed to tell what kind of signal Tony was sending when all he ever did was pick on her? And even if she did figure it out, would she be able to act on it? She'd never been very good at seduction and had been too self-conscious in bed to really enjoy sex. Of course, if she'd been more aggressive and less inhibited, maybe Paul wouldn't have spent their ten-year marriage having countless affairs.

She peered out the kitchen window as the black and white sedan pulled into the drive. A ripple of anxiety coursed its way to her stomach, congregating like a flurry of butterflies.

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“Stop trying to make more out of this than there is,” she mumbled.
“This night is only about proving he was wrong.”

She lifted the lid on the *carne asada* and stirred the strips of meat.
The spicy aroma lifted into the air, making her mouth water.

“And he was damn wrong.”

Chapter Three

The first thing Antonio noticed when he walked into the kitchen was the smell of something burning. The second was Anita standing by the sink with her hand under the faucet.

"Good thing I have fire insurance," he said, placing the box of cheesecake on the table with a small bouquet of flowers. He moved to the stove and pulled the burning bread off the skillet, tossing it to the side.

"Keep it up and you'll be using your health insurance, too," Anita said, scowling at him. "And don't think this means I burned the rest of the meal," she added as he lifted the lid on the meat. Steam rose with the smell of the spices, overriding the burnt odor.

"It smells terrific," he said, stirring the meat.

"Thanks," she said, though there was a hint of caution in her voice. He smiled and reached out to take her hand.

"Let me see."

"It's just a little burn. I'm fine."

He held on when she tried to pull her hand back. "*No ser tal bebé, Anita,*" he said.

"I'm not being a baby," she said with an indignant frown.

Antonio flashed a smile. "I see you've been studying."

"Certain words tend to stand out," she said dryly.

He took his time inspecting the redness around the tips of her fingers. She had soft hands, the fingers long and graceful, her nails neatly manicured.

One of these days he was going to know how it felt to have those slender fingers slide over his skin. *The sooner the better.*

He lifted her hand to his lips, blowing softly over her fingertips, then kissed each one.

"Better?" he asked. The color rose in her cheeks, and something flickered in her eyes before she pulled her hand away.

"Yes. Fine," she said, skirting around him. She stopped when she spotted the box on the table then turned to him with annoyance. "What's that? Take out?"

Antonio laughed and stepped to the table to retrieve the box. "Dessert. I figured, since you cooked the meal..."

"Is that from Elena's?" Anita asked, touching the box as if it were the Holy Grail. The look of pleasure on her face nearly brought him to his knees.

"Yeah. I stopped by her...she knew you'd cooked...I thought...you'd like it." Antonio cleared his throat. *Christ, was he babbling?*

"Oh, my God, her cheesecake. It's my favorite," Anita said lifting the lid to inspect the treat. She rose to her toes, giving him a peck on the cheek. "Thank you."

As if suddenly realizing what she had done, she took an awkward step back and sent him a tremulous smile. "Dinner's ready if you're hungry."

"Starving. Just let me change out of this uniform." He left the room, more than pleased by her reaction.

It looked as if things were moving along as planned.

* * * * *

"You definitely score points for the meal," Antonio said, clearing the rest of the dishes from the table after dinner.

Anita tossed a glance over her shoulder as she pulled two longneck bottles of beer from the refrigerator. "I never said I couldn't cook. You just assumed it like you assume everything else."

"Nah, I knew you could cook," Antonio returned with a wry grin,

taking the beer she offered. "I just wanted a home-cooked meal and knew you couldn't walk away from a dare."

"Oh really?" she said, twisting off the tin cap from her bottle. "In that case, you get to clean the kitchen." She hopped onto the counter behind him, surprised when he shrugged and said, "Fair enough." She had expected him to argue, tell her it was her place to clean the kitchen. Her grandfather certainly wouldn't have lifted a sponge to help with housework.

She studied him as he rinsed the dishes and placed them in the dishwasher. Could she have misjudged Tony? After all, he wasn't anything like what she thought he'd be. Even at dinner he'd helped her set the table and even served himself. Her grandfather never would have done that.

She bit her lip, considering. Maybe her preconceived view about the men from the valley was wrong and what Berta said was true—it was a whole new generation.

Anita glanced at the table and the bouquet of flowers sitting in the vase. Berta's words replayed in her head. *If Antonio gives you even the tiniest signal that he's interested in you, go for it.*

Flowers and cheesecake. Couldn't get any more obvious than that, she thought with a frown. But what was she supposed to do about it? For nearly twenty years, she'd told Tony, in no uncertain terms, he wasn't her type. How was she supposed to let him know she no longer felt that way without him saying I told you so?

She turned back to Tony, scanning the length of him. He'd changed into a pair of jeans and a red cotton shirt, both of which hugged his broad frame. Memories of his kiss ten years earlier flashed in her mind, sending a jolt down to her toes.

Type or not, he is definitely hot.

She took a pull from the beer, considering her options. She could swallow her pride and go for it or...what? Stay in denial? She followed his movements as he bent to pull the dishwasher tablets from under the sink, a smile of approval curving her lips.

"You know, if you keep staring at my ass like that I might have to

cool you off," Antonio said, grabbing the sprayer from the sink and pointing it at her.

Anita laughed, lifting her shoulder with a careless shrug. "What can I say? I like this domestic side of you."

"Really?" He replaced the sprayer and stepped forward, closing the distance between them. "You don't think men can do dishes? That's very chauvinistic of you."

"Right. This coming from a man who once told me a woman's place is in the kitchen."

Antonio grinned, placing his hands on the counter to cage her in, his voice whispering over her like a caress. "Yeah, but I was only eighteen and trying to irritate you."

Her stomach flipped. She shifted, hoping he didn't notice the flush creeping up her neck. "Well it looks like you haven't outgrown that yet." She placed her hand on his chest to push him back. The heat spread over her like an inferno. "You're in my space."

Antonio's lips curved into a sexy grin. "Are you still afraid of me, Anita?"

The amusement in his eyes stopped her from answering. He was baiting her again. Well, two could play this game, she thought smugly.

She moved her hand to the V of his shirt, skimming her finger over his chest. The warmth of his skin shimmered through her, charging every nerve in her body. She'd never seduced anyone before, but maybe it was time she did. After all, she'd moved to the valley to start a new life. And taking what she wanted, when she wanted, was the best way to do that.

She sent him a feline smile and gripped his shirt. "Maybe it's you who should be afraid of me," she said, pulling him into a kiss.

Chapter Four

Antonio had anticipated the move; after all Anita couldn't pass up a challenge. But the kiss still sent an unexpected jolt to his system.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closer, the desire he'd kept buried awakening with a powerful surge.

Anita wove her fingers into his hair, deepening the kiss as if refusing to relinquish control. He knew her well enough not to try to fight her for it—not that he could if he wanted to, he thought. Their first kiss ten years earlier had branded him, making him powerless against her. He wondered if she realized the hold she had on his heart.

With great reluctance he eased back. Though his heart pounded much too fast, he managed a crooked smile.

"I love it when you try to prove me wrong," he said.

Anita pursed her lips into a shrewd smile. "But you haven't proved me wrong. Have you, Antonio?" She slid her hand down into his shirt, pressing her palm against the hammering in his chest. The touch burned straight through his ribcage. "Should I call the paramedics? I think you're about to have a heart attack," she said smugly.

He slid his hand around the nape of her neck. "How about if you just give me mouth to mouth," he said, drawing her into a kiss.

There was no fight for control this time. Anita opened up to him, her tongue swirling with his in a seductive dance and sending his desire spiraling to the surface. Her fingers raked over his chest, burning a trail along his flesh.

He broke the kiss to journey down her neck, working tongue and teeth to satisfy his hunger. The jump in her pulse fueled his desire. Everything in him ached to have her.

He pulled back with a steadying breath. Her eyes were glazed, her lips full and red. His muscles tensed.

"I'll stop if you want me to," he said, bracing for her rejection.

"No. I don't want you to," she said in a husky voice. "It's been so long. I need this." She gripped his shirt and pulled him closer, biting kisses into his neck. Buttons pinged off the tile floor, his shirt tossed aside before he realized she'd stripped it off.

Need raged inside him, blocking out the meaning of her words. With a sudden urgency he pulled her blouse from her waistband and thrust his hands underneath. Her skin burned against his palm, her muscles quivered. He reached for her breast, cupping the soft mound through the lace fabric of her bra. Anita arched in response, a low moan rolling from her throat.

Antonio pulled the clothing off of her in one swift move, seizing her breast with his mouth. Her heart hammered against his touch. Anita's breath hitched, her fingers tightening on his shoulder as he feasted on her soft flesh. He flicked his tongue over the hardening tips, pulling them between his teeth to suckle. Her breath quickened, rousing his own desire.

"Tony," she managed, her hands gripping his shoulders and gently pushing him back. "Wait."

Antonio returned to her mouth, kissing her words away. He'd waited too long for her to come to him. He couldn't let her change her mind.

Anita's brain fogged as Tony began to kiss her again. It was as if he'd possessed her soul and all she could do was give into the demand.

Warmth shimmered over her as his hand skimmed down the sides of her body, stopping to rest between her thighs. She shifted on the counter, groaning when his hand grazed the patch of fabric and pressed against her. Electricity seemed to arc through her as her body more than reacted to his touch.

She became so lost in her response that she didn't notice he'd slid

her pants off until she felt the cold surface of the counter on her backside.

"Tony wait, not..." her words stopped on a groan when he slid his hand into her panties. His fingers found their way inside her, fueling an already burning passion. She closed her eyes, riding on the waves of ecstasy coursing through her.

Antonio brushed a kiss over her lips, his fingers still working their magic. "Something you wanted to say?"

"Kitchen," she said with a shuddering breath. "We're still in the kitchen."

Antonio moved his hands to rest on her hips and eased her near the edge of the counter. "Yeah," he said with a roguish grin. "It's where I eat all my meals."

Anita barely had time to catch her breath before Antonio freed her from her panties and closed his mouth over her.

She gripped the edge of the counter, her blood surging like liquid fire as he pleased her with his tongue. One finger slid inside her, stroking her most sensitive place and sending her passion reeling out of control.

She curled her fingers in his hair, rising to meet his touch. Her heart pounded furiously from the bold move, but it seemed to encourage him more. His tongue swirled around her, taking her gently between his teeth to suckle. She bucked up with a groan, bracing her hands on the counter to keep from falling. Antonio gripped her thighs to hold her steady, lapping up her passion with the hunger of a dying man.

She let out a cry of frustration when he stood, stopping his erotic assault.

"No, don't stop," she said between breaths.

"Not a chance." Antonio seized her mouth again as he lifted her from the counter and carried her out of the room.

He lowered her onto the bed, fanning her hair over the navy colored sheets, his gaze skimming over her. The desire burning his eyes nearly melted her in a puddle of need.

She bowed up with a moan as he continued his seductive journey over her body, working tongue and teeth, fingers and hands over every

inch of her.

"I want to make love to you, Anita," he murmured, pressing his mouth to her neck. "But only if you want me."

"I do. I want you," she said, sliding her hand into the waist of his jeans. Her heart tripped when she realized the thickness of him. "Now!"

Antonio didn't waste a second slipping out of the jeans. Anita lifted her arms, welcoming him to her. She slid her hand down to guide him in, hitching in a breath as he filled her.

"Slow down, Anita," he said with a strained laugh as she thrust up impatiently. "I want to enjoy this."

He brushed a kiss over her lips, setting a pace that nearly had her pleading. She bit down on her eagerness and rose to meet him thrust for thrust, moving in sync with his rhythm. The fullness of him sent delightful tremors throughout her body.

She gripped the muscles on his arms as their pace quickened. Sparks of passion ignited inside her, raging through her blood like a river of lava. She cried out, bucking up as he brought her over and beyond her desires.

Antonio drove into her with a final thrust, joining her over the edge.

* * * * *

Tony pressed a kiss to Anita's throat, traveling along her jaw and up to her mouth. With a satisfied purr, she wrapped her arms around him, absorbing his taste. She'd never felt so sated.

He rolled onto his back, pulling her against him.

"Like I said, I love when you try to prove me wrong," he said with a crooked smile.

"Hmm, I guess what they say about Latin men is true," she said curling against him. "You *do* make great lovers."

"Is that another one of your stereotypes about Mexicans?" he asked, settling back against the pillow.

Anita spread her fingers over the expanse of his chest, pleased his

heart hadn't slowed down. "It isn't my stereotype. It's the world's. I'm just agreeing with it," she said with a grin.

"Yeah, well you seem to have a lot of other stereotypes about us."

Anita traced her fingers over his chest, traveling a path down his stomach. "I wouldn't call them stereotypes. More like firsthand knowledge."

"Firsthand knowledge, right. You're basing your opinions on your grandfather."

She shifted, rising to look at him. "And my uncles, my father. You saw how controlling they could be, typical of the men from the valley. But," she added before he could respond, "I can admit I might have been wrong about a few things. About you." She slid her hand lower, skimming her nails along the length of him. She grinned when his breath caught. "After tonight, I have to say you've proven to be a little more...*unique*."

"Unique?" Tony flipped her onto her back, pinning her hands over her head. "Then I'm not the barbarian you think I am?"

Anita arched up with a sigh when he pressed against her. "Barbarian is relative. Let's just say you've surprised me," she said, reaching up to nip his lower lip. "And I've always liked surprises." A jolt of pleasure shot through her when he spread her legs with his thigh.

"Then I have a very big surprise for you now," he said, sliding into her.

Chapter Five

The church bells echoed in the air, pealing the noon hour as the congregation filed out of the church. Anita sat down on the stone bench at the bottom of the steps, shielding her eyes from the sun as Berta stepped up to her.

"Hey, I saw you sneak out earlier. What? No communion today?" Berta said with a knowing smile.

Anita shrugged. "I'll go to confession later."

Berta sat on the bench, sidling closer, a wide grin spreading across her face. "Confession! That means you have something to confess. Spill! Did you sleep with Antonio last night?"

"Shh, we're at church," Anita said, glancing back at the waning crowd.

"Oh, we're outside." Berta waved her off, but lowered her voice. "Girl, you are glowing, so that means it was good! Ooh, let me guess. He came home, saw you in the kitchen wearing a cute little apron and just couldn't help himself. He ripped off your clothes and took you right there on the table!"

Anita shook her head with a laugh. "You really need to lay off the porn."

Berta laughed. "All kidding aside, was it like the best sex ever?"

"Well considering it's been over a year, yeah. But I will say, Tony is...very good at what he does."

Berta fanned her face with her hand. "*Ay ay ay*, you're killing me."

So how did it happen? Was it romantic?"

Anita bit her lip and sent Berta a sheepish look. "Actually it was more of a dare."

"Ay, Dios, you and your dares. So, what? Did he dare you to take your clothes off?"

"No. I dared him to prove he wasn't afraid of me," Anita said with a smug grin. "And it just kind of took off from there. We had a good time, and then I left," she added with a shrug.

"Just a *wham-bam thank you, ma'am*? Doesn't sound like Antonio."

"Oh? And how would you know?"

"Ah, jealous are we?" Berta said with a grin. "Don't worry. I've never been with him. I tried a couple of times, but he wasn't interested. Which is why I don't think it was the dare that had you two tearing up the sheets. Admit it. You're more than interested in Officer Hottie."

Anita shifted on the seat and glanced at the church again. "There's my grandma. I have to go." She rose, pausing to look at Berta. "What is cortisone?"

"Cortisone? You mean the itch cream?"

"No, I mean...does it mean anything in Spanish?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

Anita shrugged and lowered her voice. "Tony said something right before he...you know. And I think it was in Spanish, but all I could make out was *me* and *cortisone*."

"Me and cortisone?" Berta said, furrowing her brow as she considered the words.

"It was probably nothing," Anita said, turning to leave. "I'll see you tomorrow." She stopped when Berta grabbed her hand.

"*Corazón*. He didn't mean cortisone he meant *corazón*. It means *heart*." Berta placed her hand over her chest, her eyes gleaming with pleasure. "He gave you his heart!"

* * * * *

Anita rubbed the fatigue from her eyes and glanced at the clock

above her office door. It was nearly midnight.

With a heavy sigh she clicked the keyboard and shut down the computer. There was no sense in working herself to the bone; her grandfather wasn't around anymore to impress. Although if she were honest with herself, she'd admit the real reason she'd locked herself away in the shop was to keep her mind off Tony and their *after-dinner party*.

When she'd agreed to make him dinner, the last thing she expected was to end up in his bed. Not that she hadn't once fantasized about what it would be like, although she was only sixteen at the time and fighting a losing hormone battle.

But she needed to be honest with him and admit their escapade last night had happened for one reason and one reason only. She'd been needy and horny. After all she hadn't been with anyone since Paul. Tony just happened to be at the right place at the right time. And now that she'd taken care of her libido, they could go on as they always had.

Berta's words replayed in her head. *He gave you his heart.*

Anita frowned and grabbed the beer she'd brought with her, finishing it before tossing the empty bottle into the trashcan.

Whatever Tony had said about his heart had been said during the heat of the moment. It didn't mean anything.

The aroma from the flowers swept over her as soon as she stepped out of the office, bringing back the smell of the bouquet Tony had given her, which brought back the taste of his kiss and the touch of his hands. She pressed her hand against the tickle in her stomach. It had been a long time since anyone stirred the kind of passion in her that Tony stirred.

"Dammit! Stop thinking about it," she mumbled. "You and Tony *are not* and *will not* be a couple!" And she wasn't quite sure why that bothered her. For most of her life she'd considered him to be like her grandfather and the rest of the men in the valley—domineering and oppressive. But as she stood in the middle of the store, she wondered if maybe she'd been wrong. After all, Tony's immaculate house and his readiness to clean the kitchen after dinner proved he wasn't anything like the men in her family. And, aside from his teasing her on a daily basis, he'd shown her nothing but respect as both a person and a

businesswoman since her arrival six months earlier. Not even her ex-husband had done that. Paul hadn't even stood by her side when the allegations of fraud sent her interior design business into bankruptcy.

As she looked around the store her grandfather had built with his father nearly fifty years earlier, it occurred to her that even her grandfather had reacted to her misfortune as if he'd expected it. But, if he truly thought she didn't belong in the workforce, then why would he leave her his store?

She jumped, her heart shooting to her throat when the bell on the front door jingled. Tony stepped inside, still dressed in his uniform. Her stomach flipped.

"Shit! You scared me! I thought I locked that door," she said, pressing her hand to her chest.

"You did. I have a key." He locked the door behind him and stepped farther inside.

"What are you doing here?" she said.

"I was on my way home when your grandmother called me. She hadn't heard from you all day and couldn't reach you. She was worried."

Anita pulled her cell phone from her pocket. She'd missed six calls. "Oh, I turned it off at church. I guess I forgot to turn it back on. I'd better call her."

"I already did. What are you doing here so late?"

Anita tried a casual shrug, turning to go back into her office. "I was just catching up on some paperwork. I have your niece's wedding scheduled soon, and I wanted to make sure everything was ready."

"It's two weeks away, and I'm sure whatever you and Yolanda worked out will be fine," he said, following her into the office. "Are you sure that's the only reason you're hiding out here?"

Anita tossed him a derisive look. "Don't flatter yourself."

He grinned, glancing at the bottle in the trash can. "You've been drinking. Not planning to drive are you?"

"It was only one beer. I can drive just fine," she said, crossing her arms.

Tony closed the office door and moved in closer. "Maybe I should

just arrest you now, to be on the safe side," he said with a roguish grin.

"I'm not in the mood for your games," she said, refusing to retreat when he caged her in.

"That's because you never win," he said, turning her around and reaching for her wrists.

"Don't you dare..." Her protests stopped when he touched his mouth over her ear.

"You have the right to remain silent," he said, continuing along the edge of her jaw. "You think you can manage that?"

Though there was humor in his voice, Anita felt his heart pounding in his chest. He might want to pretend it was a game, but in truth he was as affected by her as she was by him. She didn't realize how much the thought would please her.

She cocked her head to look up at him. "Not on your life," she answered, curling her arm around his neck and pulling him into a kiss.

Antonio took advantage of his position, snaking his hands up into her blouse to free her from her bra. She pulled in a breath as his fingers closed on her nipples, the pleasant sensation rippling down to her toes. She shifted to turn around, but he stopped her.

"Uh-uh," he said, placing her arms to her side. "I need to search you for weapons." He removed his utility belt and set it on the file cabinet. Moving in behind her, he slid his hands down her sides, his fingers flowing over the curve of her hips. "And I plan to do a *very* thorough search," he added, unsnapping the clasp on her jeans.

Anita stood still as he lowered the pants, her curiosity aroused.

Tony traveled slowly up her legs, his fingers touching lightly along her flesh. He followed his path with searing kisses, tasting her skin as if she were an exotic dessert. A soft moan escaped her lips. She gripped the edge of the desk, his ghostly touches sending sparks to every nerve in her body.

He continued his sultry journey along the planes of her back, rising up to the hollow of her neck. His fingers trekked down over her ribs and to the flat of her stomach. Her body quivered as his hand whispered over the sensitive skin along her inner thighs, stopping to rest at the cleft

between her legs. One finger teased against the fabric of her panties before sliding under the elastic band. Moisture built in response to his touch, her desire raging like a firestorm.

"You take my breath away, Anita," he murmured against her throat, his breath hot and uneven as he kissed her neck.

Anita swallowed, cutting a path through the passion-induced fog clouding her mind. The reasonable side of her knew she should stop him. Hadn't she already convinced herself this wouldn't happen again? This was Tony, for Christ's sake, her grandmother's neighbor. The man she'd argued with for over half her life. The man she said she'd never want to be with.

Her body jerked with a jolt of pleasure as he slid two fingers inside.

Maybe *never* is too strong a word, she thought as her blood hummed.

"Don't hold back, Anita," he whispered, the heat of his breath warming her neck. "Let go for me. *Darme tu corazón.*" He buried his finger deeper, touching the heart of her.

Anita bucked against him, crying out as the release slammed into her with such force she thought for sure she would shatter into a million pieces.

Antonio buried his face in her throat, his arm tightening around her waist to keep her from folding.

"You win," she managed.

* * * * *

Anita shifted to look at the clock on the nightstand and groaned. "It's late. I'd better go."

Antonio glanced at the time as he settled behind her; it was nearly three o'clock in the morning. After making love in her office, he'd invited her back to his house to snack on the cheesecake he bought the night before. Then, with little effort, he had coaxed her back into his bed. And, though they'd spent the past two hours in each other's arms, he still hadn't had enough of her.

"Stay with me tonight," he said, caressing her bare shoulder with the back of his hand.

Anita hummed softly, tilting her head back to give him a kiss. "I can't. My grandmother's already worried. I'd rather she didn't catch me sneaking in at dawn like a sixteen-year-old who missed curfew." She climbed out of the bed and made her way to the pile of clothes on the floor. After sifting through the garments, she grabbed a shirt and put it on.

"Rosa knows you're with me. She won't be worried."

"She knew you found me at the store, but she doesn't know I'm here or that we...you know." She grabbed her jeans and pulled them on.

Antonio settled back against the headboard with a grin. "Oh, yeah, I know."

Anita turned and sent him a sour look. "Well, my grandmother doesn't, and I'd like to keep it that way if you don't mind."

"And if I did?" Antonio said, moving to sit on the edge of the mattress.

"Did what?" Anita said, sorting through the rest of the clothes on the floor. She picked up some socks and sat on the bed to put them on.

"Mind," he said. "I don't have a problem letting your grandmother know we're dating. I don't think she'd have a problem with it either."

"Dating." Anita sent him a sour look. "Making me cook you dinner then taking me to your bed, *twice*, doesn't qualify as dating."

"Ah, now, I never *made* you to do anything. I *challenged* you to cook dinner for me, which you couldn't pass up. And, as for this bed, well it was *you* who made the move that got us here. *Twice*," Antonio said with a smirk.

Anita started to speak then closed her mouth when she realized he was right.

"I'll tell you what," he said, taking her hand. "I have the next three nights off. How about if I take you on a real date?"

Anita considered him a moment then smiled and said, "Okay. When?"

"Tonight. Tomorrow night. And then as many days or nights after that as I can get," he answered, brushing a kiss over her lips. "I'm hoping

to make up for lost time." He rose from the bed and stepped to the clothes on the floor.

"Lost time? You have lost time?" Anita said.

Antonio turned, smiling at the pleased interest in her voice. "Nearly twenty years' worth," he said, leaning to give her another kiss. "By the way, if you don't want Rosa to know about *you know*, then I suggest you wear your own shirt home," he said, laying her blouse in her lap.

Chapter Six

"So is this a real date or did you dare her to be seen out in public with you?" Elena said, pulling a sheet of cookies from the large oven. The scent of chocolate filled the store.

"Funny. I think you're ready for Vegas," Antonio said, grabbing a cookie from the line already cooling on the rack.

"Are you planning to tell her about the shop tonight?" Elena grabbed the cooled pan and placed it in the display case, turning to look at him when he didn't answer. "You know you're running out of time, don't you? The lease on the building is almost up. If she doesn't agree to marry you before then..."

"I know the terms of the will, Elena. I was there, remember?"

"Yeah, well there was nothing in the will about deceiving her. Stop eating those." She slapped his hand when he reached for another cookie. "You always said Anita loved you but was afraid to admit it. Why not just trust that and stop this before you both get hurt?"

"I do trust that. But Anita has to believe it's her move. She won't admit she loves me if I force her into it. It took this long to get her to admit she even likes me." He followed her to the front of the store where an elderly woman stood, looking at the selection of pastries. "Look, Sis, I know you're worried, but trust me. Where Anita is concerned, I know what I'm doing."

* * * * *

"So you and Antonio are finally going out on a real date, huh?" Berta said, settling on the bed in Anita's bedroom. "This isn't another one of your dares is it?"

"Ha ha, very funny. Go ahead and say it. *I told you so,*" Anita said, rummaging through the clothes in her closet.

"Nah, just knowing I was right is enough for me," Berta answered with a grin. "So, where is he taking you?"

"Somewhere on South Padre Island. But he didn't tell me what I should wear," Anita said, pulling out a suit. She held it against her to inspect in the full-length mirror. "How's this?"

Berta scrunched her nose. "Too stuffy." She climbed off the bed to join Anita at the closet. "Don't you have anything sexy?"

"That would depend on your definition of sexy."

"Well, it wouldn't be business casual. Here, let me look." Berta stepped into the closet and began sifting through the clothes on the rack. "You know I think it's great you and Antonio are finally getting together. You make a great couple."

"Yeah well, don't read too much into it. It's only dinner," Anita said moving to the vanity to fix her makeup.

"Isn't that what you said a couple of days ago?" Berta said, peering around the closet door with a smirk.

Anita sent her a bland look. "So much for no *I told you so.*"

Berta laughed and stepped from the closet. "I'm just saying I'm glad to see you've finally admitted you and Antonio are more than just friends." She held out a skirt and blouse. "Here. This will work for wherever he takes you. And the best part is, it'll be easy to take off," she said with a wink.

* * * * *

The sun set with a splash of brilliant color as Antonio and Anita reached the restaurant, a two-story stucco building overlooking the Laguna Madre Bay. The hostess led them upstairs to a covered deck

where several tables were already occupied. She placed two large menus in front of them then took their drink orders before hurrying away.

Anita watched the sunset a moment, a warm smile curving her lips. "Wow. Isn't it beautiful?" she said, turning to Antonio. "You definitely get points for the restaurant."

"Thanks," Antonio said with a laugh. "It wasn't a tough decision. You like seafood and sunsets. Figured I'd combine the two."

Anita fiddled with her napkin, a light flush coloring her cheeks. "I didn't know you knew that," she said.

"There are a lot of things I know about you," he said with a wink.

Anita picked up the drink the waitress set in front of her. "Something tells me I should leave that comment alone."

Antonio grinned and took a drink from his beer. "So, how are things going at the store?"

"Really good. It's not much different than running an interior design firm, but it's definitely much more relaxing. I have to say I've missed the creative process, and with the shop I'm able to design things on a regular basis, all floral related of course, but I'd almost forgotten how great a feeling it is to know I've created something."

"Elena said Yolanda loves what you're doing for her bouquet."

"Yeah?" Anita said with a pleased smile. "Well, thanks to her and your sister I've gotten a few more weddings scheduled. Plus school starts up in a couple of months and I've already started getting orders for homecoming corsages. If business stays this good I might be able to move on with my plans to expand."

"Expand?"

"Well, it's not anything major. I've been thinking about building a greenhouse in the back lot connected to mine so I can grow some of my own plants. My grandmother is a whiz with roses and pretty much anything that'll grow from soil. And I want to add a nationwide delivery service. I still have to check more into it, but I think it'll benefit the store as well as the town. I've also started working on a Web site—" She shook her head and laughed. "Sorry. You don't want to get me started on the shop. I could bore you for hours."

“I don’t mind,” he said taking her hand. “I like seeing you happy. And I think you’re doing a great job with the store. You’ve made it yours. Your grandfather would be proud.”

“I don’t know about that, but thank you for saying so.”

Antonio decided to let the conversation drop. There was no point in arguing with her when he knew she was right. Victor Perez would rather have closed his store than leave it to his granddaughter.

And if Antonio’s plan failed, that’s exactly what would happen.

Chapter Seven

"Okay, the boutonnieres are ready, and I made an extra one just in case," Berta said, placing a large rectangular box on the work table. She nodded in approval at Anita's outfit, a burgundy thin-strapped cocktail dress. "You look hot."

"Thank you," Anita said, shoving the book she'd been reading under a stack of tissue paper. "I told Antonio to pick me up here since I still have to take the flowers to the church."

"Getting nervous about meeting his whole family today?" Berta asked, sidling up to the edge of the table.

Anita spread the tissue out some more. "No. Not really," she said, lifting her shoulder. "I mean, I've known most of them almost as long as I've known Tony. Besides, it's not like he and I are the ones getting married."

"Don't bet on it," Berta murmured.

"What?"

"Nothing," Berta replied with a sweet smile. "So, what's this?" Her hand shot under the tissue paper, grabbing the book. She danced around to the other side of the workbench before Anita could react. "*Spanish for Dummies*?" she said with a laugh. "What's this for?"

Anita made a failed attempt to snatch the book back. "What do you think it's for?"

"Hon, you don't need a book to learn Spanish. If there's something you want to know, just ask. Besides, living in the valley, you'll pick up

enough to get by."

"I know," Anita said, taking the book when Berta handed it back. "I was just trying to speed things along."

"You've been here seven months. Why the rush all of a sudden?" She raised her brow with a knowing smile. "Oh. I see. You're doing this for Antonio."

Anita squared her shoulders with an indignant frown. "I'm doing this because I run a business where most of the clientele speak Spanish," she said.

"You're doing it because it's a way to get closer to Antonio. You're in love with him," Berta added in an *I-told-you-so* voice.

"What? No. Don't be crazy. We've just started dating," Anita said skirting around the table to pull another box from the cooler.

"You've been dating for two weeks and, from what I've heard, dancing around each other for years," Berta countered. "Why don't you just admit I'm right?"

"Because you're wrong. I'm not in love with Antonio. We enjoy each other's company, but it doesn't mean we're anything more than friends," Anita said. She stopped when the bell on the front door chimed. Antonio strolled into the store dressed in a black suit and tie, wisps of black hair fringing his brow. His brown eyes skimmed the length of her, lighting with pleasure.

Her heart stumbled and landed like a hot stone in her stomach.

Berta glanced at him then turned back to Anita with a wide grin. "You *do* know I'm going to say I told you so, don't you?"

* * * * *

"Are you okay? You seem a little distracted," Antonio said, turning into the church parking lot.

"No. Yes. I'm fine," Anita said, making a conscious effort to loosen her grip on the box of flowers. "I was just thinking about a conversation I had with Berta."

"What about?"

"Nothing important," Anita answered with a shrug. She looked at the parking lot overflowing with cars. "So, how many people are they expecting at this wedding?" she asked.

"I think the last count was just over a hundred and fifty."

"Wow. And how much of that is your family?" she asked.

"Nervous?" he said with a crooked grin.

She watched a group of people enter the church then turned back to him with a nervous smile. "Maybe a little," she said.

"Don't be. No one's going to grill you about us. At least not until the reception," he added before climbing out of the truck.

"Great," Anita murmured, biting down on the nervous flutter coiling its way to her stomach. It was bad enough she couldn't get the conversation with Berta out of her head; now she was going to have to deal with speculative glances and endless questions from Antonio's family. And she wasn't looking forward to the same disappointment she'd gotten from Paul's parents the first time she met them.

"I should probably warn you though, I might have told them a few things about you," Antonio said, helping her from the truck.

Anita froze, locking her fingers around his wrist. "What do you mean you told them things about me? What exactly did you tell them?"

He gave her a wicked grin. "I told them you're hot for me. But you're in denial," he said, stealing a kiss.

Anita sent him a dry frown. "You know I'm really starting to rethink my whole opinion of you," she said, shoving the box of flowers in his hands.

"See? Denial."

* * * * *

The ceremony lasted just over an hour, the guests offering their congratulations to the new couple as they exited the church.

Anita waited with a group of women at the foot of the stairs, shooting an annoyed glance at Antonio, who only lifted his shoulders and gave her his best innocent smile. She'd been corralled with the other single

women two feet from the stairs as Yolanda prepared to toss her bouquet.

Anita took several small sidesteps, slowly making her way to the back of the crowd. The only reason she'd agreed to participate was because she couldn't find a polite way to decline Yolanda's invitation, but maybe if she stood far enough back she wouldn't have to worry about catching the flowers or getting trampled on in the overexcited frenzy.

"Aren't you going to catch the flowers?"

Anita smiled at the flower girl beside her. "No. I think I'll just watch," she said in a low voice.

Yolanda winked at the bridesmaid in the center of the mix then turned and tossed the spray over her head. The bouquet arced toward the center of the women but, instead of landing in someone's willing grasp, the flowers shot in Anita's direction like a spiked volleyball and landed at her feet.

The flower girl grabbed the bouquet and handed it to Anita.

"You won!"

Chapter Eight

It was nearly midnight when they returned home. Antonio pulled into his driveway then shifted in his seat to look at Anita. She sat beside him, her head resting back against the seat, eyes closed. He hoped she wasn't ready to call it a night because, since seeing her at the shop that afternoon, all he could think about was how much he wanted to be alone with her.

"You look tired," he said, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand.

She turned to him and smiled. "No, I'm fine. Just resting my eyes a bit."

Antonio leaned over and kissed her. "Good," he said with a wry smile. "Because I really want to see you out of that dress."

Anita curled her fingers around the lapels of his jacket and held him in place. "In that case, I'm wide awake," she said before taking his mouth with a hungry kiss.

Antonio moved closer sliding his hand under the hem of her dress, caressing up along the bare skin of her thigh. He stopped at her hip, stroking a finger over the thin strip of elastic resting above her curve.

He swallowed the tightness building in his chest and eased back. "I think we'd better take this inside," he managed.

Anita stole a glance at her grandmother's house. A soft yellow light glowed in the window. "Good idea," she said.

* * * * *

"Do those need to go in water?" he asked gesturing to the small spray of flowers from Yolanda's bouquet as they entered the house.

"No, but we can refrigerate them for now," she said following him into the kitchen. "What's that?"

Antonio looked at the small dress box on the table then turned to her with a smile. "It's a gift. For you."

She stepped to the table, sending him a curious look. "You got me a gift? Why?"

Antonio shrugged and stepped to the refrigerator to put the bouquet away. "Because I saw it and thought of you," he said. "Open it."

Anita sent him an impish smile as she reached to lift the lid. "Hmm, I wonder what could possibly be in here that would make you think of me." She separated the tissue paper in the box then froze. "Oh, my God." After staring at the gift a moment, she turned to him with a wide-eyed gaze. "Where did you get this?"

Antonio moved cautiously to the table and pulled out the wood-framed picture of a flower painted in red and orange inks. He'd bought it two years earlier while at a law enforcement training class in Boston. He'd never been much for art, but something about the intricate curve of the petals and the warmth of color made him think of Anita. "Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful," she said, a brightness in her eyes that told him she was near tears.

"It's called—"

"*The Pillslily*. I know the work. The artist, Ara Hagopian, is amazing. I commissioned him to do some work for my gallery last year, but then...I didn't have the money to pay him." She looked at Antonio, a tear spilling down her cheek. "*This* was one of the drawings I had ordered. How did you...?"

"I didn't. I bought it two years ago." He placed his hand over her cheek, sweeping away the tear. "Because it makes me think of you," he said.

Anita stared at him, a mix of emotions sweeping over her face.

Closing the space between them, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him with a passion he'd waited for his whole life.

"I want to make love to you," she said, burying her face in his throat.

Antonio scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom, her words burning into his heart. He set her next to the bed and reached for the hem of her dress.

Anita took his hand and stopped him. "No. Let me," she said, her hands moving to his waist to unfasten his belt.

Antonio rested his hands to his side to allow Anita to undress him, her fingers grazing along his skin, sending jolts of electricity to every nerve in his body.

With a gentle push she urged him onto the bed, moving his hands away when he reached for her. She rose above him, pressing a kiss to the base of his throat, continuing down over his torso. His heart pounded like a fist against his chest as her nails grazed over his ribs and down his abdomen.

Reaching lower, she stroked his shaft, which was already hard and eager for action. Before he could clear the passion-induced haze from his mind, she positioned herself between his legs and closed her mouth over him.

A tormented groan rolled from his chest as she worked tongue and teeth, savoring the tight flesh. Her lips pressed harder as she stroked him with her mouth. It took every ounce of control he could muster to keep from going over the edge.

With a taunting flick of her tongue, she replaced her mouth with her hand and traveled back up the length of him.

Straddling his hips, her look intense, she peeled off her clothes. Bracing her hands on his shoulder, she slid onto him with a soft moan.

"I want to stay like this forever," she murmured.

Antonio shifted, raising his hips to take her deeper. "For always," he answered, brushing away the tear on her cheek.

"*Te doy mi corazón,*" she said, touching her lips to his. "I love you, Antonio."

Chapter Nine

Antonio sifted through the documents on his desk, grabbing the phone when he found the number he needed. He'd been dodging the lawyer's phone calls for the last three weeks, tired of the constant reminder of his looming deadline. But, now that Anita had finally admitted she loved him, he could let the lawyer know to draw up the papers that would give Anita the deed to the flower shop.

There was no doubt in his mind she would say *yes* to his marriage proposal tonight.

He opened the copy of Victor's will and scanned each clause. Victor had demanded that in order for Anita to become sole owner of the store, she had to marry Antonio before the end of the first fiscal year, otherwise the store and all its properties would revert back to the bank.

Knowing it wouldn't be easy to get Anita to fall in love with him, Antonio talked her grandfather and his attorney into changing that stipulation to an engagement. Victor reluctantly agreed but only after adding Antonio and Anita be married within three months of the engagement, which was fine with Antonio, since he didn't plan to wait that much longer to have Anita waking beside him every morning.

He punched some numbers in the phone and sat back with a warm smile, nodding at Victor's signature.

"Looks like we're both getting what we want."

* * * * *

Anita pulled into her driveway, stealing a glance at Antonio's house. His car was gone, which meant he was still at work and she still had a little time.

She grabbed the bags of groceries and a small overnight bag and carried them into the house, using the key she'd borrowed from her grandmother. She planned to make tonight a special night for Tony by staying through until morning.

With an eager smile she went to his bedroom to put her bag away, shaking her head at the untidiness. Tony might keep a clean house, but he often neglected his bedroom.

She placed her bag beside the bed then reached over to smooth out the comforter. A warm flush tingled over her as she remembered their night together and the look of pleasure on Tony's face when she told him she loved him. Although the gleam in his eye told her he'd been expecting the words.

Pushing the thoughts away with a contented sigh she stepped to his desk and began straightening the mess of papers on top.

It took her a moment to recognize the name on the document. With slow, mechanical movements she picked up the file and read the pages.

A cold chill seized her, squeezing the air from her lungs. A sharp pain, like the blow of a fist, slammed into her chest. She hadn't realized she was shaking until a hand closed over shoulder.

"Anita."

Antonio's voice thundered in her ears like a sonic boom. She spun around, shoving the documents against his chest and slapping him with as much force as she could gather. His head snapped back, but his feet stayed planted.

"You son of a bitch!"

"Anita, wait," he said, reaching for her arms as she pushed away from him.

"Don't touch me!" she said, jerking back. "I can't believe you did this. You planned this whole thing!"

"It's not what you think—"

"You bastard!" she said, curling her fists at her side. The pain of her nails stabbing into her palms was the only thing that kept her from crying. "You set me up! Made me believe I could trust you. Made me think you cared!"

"I do care—"

"And all this time you were laughing at me." She paused, the events of the last four weeks flashing through her mind. The knowing stares from his family and friends. The comments about her and Antonio made in Spanish, knowing she wouldn't understand. His niece's wedding.

"Your family was in on it, too, weren't they? Throwing me the bouquet? Making comments at the wedding about losing money on me? Was this all a game to you? Were you betting on me to see how long it would take to get me in your bed?"

"God, no, Anita," Antonio said, but she didn't give him a chance to talk.

"Or were you trying to make me fall in love with you so you could say *I told you so*?"

"No—"

"You've been lying to me all this time. Listening to me talk on and on about my store...*your* store," she stopped, her breath rushing out like hysterical laughter. "God, I'm so stupid. I actually thought I loved you."

"You do love me. Please. Let me explain," he said, reaching for her again. "I love you—"

"Don't say that to me. Don't you ever fucking say that to me!" Her voice hitched, choking on the pain she'd tried to keep hidden.

"Anita..." he said, reaching for her as if wanting to comfort her.

She glared at him, her heart pounding so hard she thought it might explode.

"Go to hell!" she said, slapping him again though there was no satisfaction in the burning against her palm.

She ran out of the room and out of the house with no plan where to go, the tears burning a trail down her cheeks.

* * * * *

"Tell me what happened," Elena said, handing Antonio a cup of coffee at her kitchen table.

He wrapped his hands around the mug, wishing the heat would melt the icy grip around his heart. On the table in front of him was the small black box holding his mother's ring. The ring he had planned to give Anita after dinner.

"She found the will. I'd left it on the desk...I didn't know she was going to be at the house so early...I should have put it away." He drank the coffee, hoping to clear the roughness from his voice.

"What you should have done was tell her the truth from the beginning," Elena said, sipping her coffee.

Antonio looked up with a scowl. "I don't need your fucking *I told you so* right now!"

She reached out and took his hand with a gentle squeeze. "Honey, you can fix this. Just stop feeling sorry for yourself. You screwed up, okay? You're not perfect. Anita knows that. Go find her and talk to her."

"I tried. She doesn't want to listen. She doesn't want me anywhere near her." He pressed his hands over his face. "God, what a fucking mess."

Elena sat back in her seat and nodded. "Yeah, you've certainly made a mess of it." She gave him a benign smile when he glared at her. "But it's not so bad that you can't clean it up. Besides, you've forgotten one very important ally."

Antonio raised his brow but didn't speak.

"Rosa," Elena said, referring to Anita's grandmother.

Chapter Ten

A soft knock on the bedroom door jolted Anita from her daze. She blinked at the blouse clutched in her hand then moved to the bed to put it in her suitcase. She continued her packing, not acknowledging her grandmother as she entered the room.

"Are you going somewhere?" she said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Anita walked back to the dresser and grabbed more clothes. "I'm going back to Chicago."

"I know you are hurting, *hijita*..."

"He lied to me!" Anita said, throwing the clothes into the suitcase. "He made a fool of me! He made—"

"—you fall in love with him?"

"I hate him," Anita said with a choked sob. She pulled in a shuddering breath and sat on the bed with her grandmother, allowing herself to be held. She'd never felt so hollow, so empty. "How could he do that to me, Grandma? How could he hate me so much to want to hurt me so bad?"

"Antonio does not hate you, *hija*," her grandmother said, stroking Anita's hair. "He loves you very much. He always has. And it is my fault this happened to you."

Anita sat up, wiping the tears from her cheeks. "What?"

"I told Antonio to do this."

Anita stood, taking a step back. "You told him to hurt me? Why

would you do that?"

"Not to hurt you. To help you," her grandmother said with a heavy sigh. "Your grandfather planned to close the flower shop after he got sick. Antonio and I tried to talk him into giving you the store, but you know how he was," she said, as if that last sentence were a legitimate excuse for her grandfather's behavior over the years.

"Your grandfather loved you very much," she said with determined force. "He didn't like seeing you so unhappy. So he made the offer to Antonio that, if he agreed to marry you before the end of the year, he would sell him the store.

"Antonio refused because he didn't want to deceive you that way. He said the only way he would marry you is if you loved him." A soft smile worked the corners of her mouth. "I've watched Antonio fight for your affections for nearly twenty years, and I've seen how you look at him. I knew it was only a matter of time before you both fell in love. But for that to happen, you needed to be here. So I asked Antonio to reconsider." She looked up, a sadness in her eyes. "We only wanted what was best for you. With everything you were suffering through, it seemed like a good idea." She stood and stepped to Anita, placing her hand on her cheek. "I'm very sorry."

Anita stared at her, trying to absorb the story she'd just been told, but all she could focus on was that her own grandmother had been in on the plan, too.

"I have to go," she said, grabbing the suitcase. She left the room without looking back.

Tossing the suitcase into the back seat of her car, she slid a glance at Antonio's house. She'd seen him leave for work a few hours earlier, not that she'd expect him to do otherwise. His game was over, and now he could get back to his life.

She swallowed the ache in her throat before it could choke her and made her way to the back of the house. Her overnight bag was still in his room. Since she didn't plan to ask him for it, she would have to go in and get it herself.

She wasn't prepared for the rush of grief as she walked into the

house. Pain squeezed her heart as if trying to drain all life from her.

Taking a deep breath, she continued through to the bedroom. She found her bag where she'd left it, the picture Antonio had given her sitting on top. She picked it up, skimming her fingers over the drawing. A tear dropped, rolling off her finger to streak down the smooth glass. She pushed the tears from her face and set the picture on the bed.

"Anita."

She spun around at the sound of Antonio's voice. Swallowing the emotions before they could surface, she grabbed her bag and moved toward the door.

"I just came for my bag," she said, continuing around him as quickly as she could, willing herself not to break.

"We need to talk," he said, taking her arm before she could bolt.

"Let go of me!" Anita swung her bag around, bouncing it off his shoulder. He yanked the case from her hand and threw it on the bed then grabbed both of her arms and pinned her against the door. Before she could react, he crushed his mouth to hers with a kiss so passionate she nearly gave into the ache. *Nearly.*

Antonio jerked back when Anita bit down on his lip, drawing blood, and barely missed her fisted hand before it scraped his jaw. Momentarily stunned, she landed several more blows before he garnered control, restraining her back against the wall.

"Calm down, dammit!" he said, surprised by the strength of her fury.

"Get off me, you bastard!"

Antonio shifted with an exasperated breath as her knee connected with his hip. He pressed against her to keep her from moving. "I know you're angry, and I'm sorry. Hear me out," he said as she bucked against him, trying to break free.

"I don't want to hear anything you have to say. Now let me go!"

"Not until you let me explain," he said with a gentle shake. "I love you, Anita. I've always loved you. And I know you love me."

"No I don't," she said, dropping her gaze from his.

"Then look at me. Tell me you don't love me," he said.

"I hate you!" she said, barely masking the tremor in her voice.

"That's not what I asked," he said. He placed his hand under her chin and turned her to look at him. "If you didn't love me, you wouldn't have told me you do."

"I lied," she said.

"I don't believe you," he said with a soft smile.

Anita shifted, her back going rigid against the wall. "Then believe this," she said, her eyes turning dark. "Whatever it was I thought I felt for you is gone. I don't love you. I'll never love you. You can have my grandfather's store. I don't care about it or you! In fact, I'd rather be dead than have to spend the rest of my life as your wife!"

She spat the words, the cold venom in her voice a direct hit on his heart. His voice was less than steady when he spoke.

"You don't mean that." She didn't answer but instead sent him a look that turned his blood to ice. He let her go, taking a step back. "You can go," he said, picking up her bag and handing it to her.

Anita hesitated then took the bag and rushed from the room.

Antonio dropped onto the edge of the bed and waited for his heart to restart.

Chapter Eleven

Anita gripped the steering wheel in an effort to calm her labored breaths. She had wanted to hurt Antonio, hurt him as much as he'd hurt her, but the pain she'd seen in his eyes hadn't given her the satisfaction she thought it would.

She looked at the house, a part of her hoping he would run out, drag her back inside, and argue with her until she gave in and admitted he was right. But the house stayed quiet, the front door sealed tight.

Blinking back the tears blurring her eyes, she shifted the car into reverse and pulled out of the driveway.

* * * * *

"Anita!" Berta's voice rang throughout the empty store. "There you are!" she said, rushing into the office. "Have you been here all night?"

Anita pushed the tears from her cheek and grabbed the box she'd been packing. "I'm just getting my things." Although she had spent more time crying and less packing in the four hours she'd been there. "What are you doing here?" she said, sealing the box.

"We've been worried sick!" she said, pulling Anita into a hug. "Are you okay?"

"We?" Anita said, peering through the door. Her heart sank when Elena stepped through the threshold.

"Hi," Elena said, standing a cautious distance back. "I know I'm

probably one of the last people you want to see right now, but I needed to make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine," Anita said, the cold inflection in her voice surprising even her.

"Look," Elena said, easing farther into the room. "I don't know what you think this was all about, but it was never Antonio's intention to hurt you. And for what it's worth, he's tearing himself up over this."

Anita grabbed the box and headed for the door. "You're right. You're the last person I want to see."

Berta grabbed her arm to stop her. "Anita. He really loves you. Don't let your pride stop you two from being together. Talk to him. Give him a chance to prove his love."

Anita looked at Berta's hand then gently eased away, the words she said to Tony burning in her mind.

"I wish I could," she said, not bothering to blink back her tears. "But it's too late."

* * * * *

Anita rested her head on the steering wheel, the ache in her chest making it difficult to drive any farther than the edge of the city limits. She wanted to turn the car around and go back to Antonio, apologize for the hateful words she'd said, tell him she loved him. But she couldn't. Maybe Berta was right, and she was allowing her pride to stop her. It had always been her downfall. It had cost her a business, a marriage and now the only man she'd ever truly loved.

She pulled in a shuddering breath and gripped the gearshift, but she couldn't bring herself to move the car back onto the highway.

She jolted when the red and blue lights from the state trooper's car flashed in her mirror. Her heart stuttered as a dark figure climbed out of the driver's seat.

Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe Antonio had come to take her back after all.

She rolled down her window prepared to tell him he was right and

that she did love him. The trooper knelt beside the car, the glow of the headlights lighting his features.

Her heart dropped. It wasn't Antonio.

"Are you okay, Miss?" the trooper said, looking in the car as if expecting to find someone hiding in the back.

Anita attempted a smile, but she couldn't keep her voice steady. "Yes sir. I'm fine. I just...needed a moment."

The officer glanced at his cruiser then nodded, offering her a benign smile. "Okay, then. I'll let you be on your way. You be careful, now."

Anita waited for the trooper to leave then, hugging the steering wheel, dropped her head on top of her arms and gave into the tears.

"You're not fine, are you?"

Anita jumped, looking up to see Antonio standing beside her car. The glow of the streetlight shone down on him like a heavenly beam.

She pushed the tears from her face and managed to find her voice. "What are you doing here?"

He opened the door, kneeling to take her hand.

"I can't let you go. I know you hate me now, and I'll do whatever it takes to change that. Just...please...give me the chance."

Anita hesitated then unfastened her seatbelt and climbed out of the car. Antonio stepped back as if he thought she'd strike him.

"You hurt me," she said.

Antonio took a guarded step closer, the tears in her voice squeezing his heart. He slid his hand around the nape of her neck and rested his forehead against hers.

"I know, baby. I'm so sorry." He took a breath and eased back to look at her. "I've wanted you for as long as I can remember, and it's all I could think about. When I saw a chance to bring you to the valley, I took it. I never thought it would turn out like it did. I wasn't thinking of anything but having you with me."

He waited for her to speak, to say something, anything that would revive his heart. But she stood still, watching him with no trace of emotion.

"Please, Anita...forgive me," he said, his voice hoarse from the ache in his throat.

He nearly flinched when her hand came up but, instead of slapping him, she laid her palm against his face and caressed her fingers over him.

"I'm sorry too...about what I said earlier," she said. "I don't really hate you."

The weight lifted from his heart. He smiled, brushing a tear from her cheek.

"I know."

With a watery laugh, she wrapped her arms around him and held on. "You know if this thing is going to happen between us, you really need to stop saying I told you so."

The End

Author's Note

The work of art mentioned in *Her Will, His Way* exists in real life. To see the painting "Pillslily", go to <http://thepatriotartist.com/> and view artist Ara Hagopian's beautiful work.

Author Bio

Terri Molina is a native Texan, born and raised in Southeast Texas. She is an active member of the Romance Writers of America, including the Northwest Houston Chapter and Desert Rose Chapter in Phoenix, Arizona. She writes multicultural romantic suspense, blending in the flavor of the Southwest with her Mexican heritage.

After years of living a nomadic life with her Coast Guard husband, she now resides in Southeast Arizona with her husband, four children and a dog. When she's not writing she enjoys reading, singing karaoke with the kids, and spending time with family and friends.