MARY CASTILLO · BERTA PLATAS SOFIA QUINTERO · LYNDA SANDOVAL

## NAMES I CALL MY SISTER



STORIES



## Names I Call My Sister



#### MARY CASTILLO • BERTA PLATAS SOFIA QUINTERO • LYNDA SANDOVAL



HarperCollins e-books

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# TILL DEATH DO US PART



### MARY CASTILLO



#### Chapter 1

Dori Orihuela thought once again that she never should've left Denver when she turned onto the dirt driveway leading to Grammy Cena's house.

Bordered on both sides by solid walls of nopal cactus, Dori thought once again that her sister, Sela, should've been put in charge of Grammy Cena. Sela had always been her favorite. But no one could count on them showing up at the wedding sober, much less showing up at all, and so the duty fell on her.

Grammy Cena's dogs, Pepe and Churro, charged and snarled at Dori's RAV4. She stopped a few feet from the porch, cut the engine and rolled down her passenger window.

"Grammy, it's me! Don't shoot!"

At the sound of her voice, the dogs' snarls turned to joyous cries for attention.

Grammy opened the door and came out onto the porch. "Something bad is going to happen at this wedding," Grammy's witchy voice declared from the sagging little house with

#### MARY CASTILLO

the giant pepper tree in the back. Dori bet the tree still had the rope swing that her brother and sister would argue over. As the oldest, she had been the one who refereed their turns.

Grammy locked the door and then shaded her eyes with a bony hand. "Your Tío Fermin has been visiting again."

Tío Fermin had been dead since 1986, but he "visited" Grammy in the form of a skunk when he had messages from the other side. Grammy's house backed onto a small canyon below La Vista Memorial Park, but Dori had long since given up her argument that the canyon teemed with skunks.

With a sigh, Dori yanked her keys out of the ignition and realized nothing had changed in the five years she'd been gone. Pepe or Churro yelped when she opened the car door and it clonked one of them in the head.

"Hey, Grammy," she said, struggling past the two dogs who now circled around her legs. "You ready to go? We're going to be late to the church."

Grammy yelled sharply at the dogs, whose tails dropped between their legs, their ears pressed pathetically against their heads.

"Psh. I ain't in no hurry to go to that wedding," Grammy spat, scowling as Dori hurried to the porch to help her down. She twisted her arm out of Dori's grip, determined to make her way down the stairs by herself. They seemed a lot more wobbly to Dori than the last time she'd been there.

"How do I look?" Grammy asked, patting her hair.

When they thought they were giving Grammy their final good-byes last year, she had asked Dori if her mascara was smeared. To see her now, Dori thought, you'd never think she'd been at Death's door.

Grammy's wrinkled lips wore Max Factor red lipstick, just as they had since the 1950s, and her hair, which was dyed jet-black once a month, had been piled into her signature bouffant. When the sun touched her gold lamé pantsuit, Elvis probably looked down from heaven and shook his head at such bad taste.

"Very, uh, shiny," Dori replied, squinting her eyes. She could only imagine what dress her sister would show up in. "Now, you're not carrying anything, are you?"

Grammy remained suspiciously quiet.

"Are you?" Dori insisted in the voice she used to question suspects. "Whatever you have, you need to leave in the house."

"I'm an old lady. What if someone tries to attack me in the parking lot? Or that hussy your brother's marrying talks smart with me? What kind of world is this when an old woman can't protect herself—"

"I didn't make the law, and we're not going anywhere until you unpack."

Grammy stopped so suddenly that Dori's heart lurched because she thought she'd tripped and was about to fall. "I'll wait here all day if I have to," Grammy pouted.

"Then you'll miss the open bar."

Grammy ran her tongue over the gap where her two front teeth had been, while her eyes bored into Dori's to see if she'd back down. Dori put all her willpower into her cop face.

"No good cotton-pickin' nosy kids," Grammy finally muttered, thrusting her small suitcase of a purse at Dori. "Go ahead and take it. But your Tío Fermin was around this morning, and I have a feeling that I need to protect all of us."

Dori confiscated Grampy's old billy club, a switchblade, and a pearl-handled Saturday night special. There was so much felony time in her hands that she lost count.

"Wait here and I'll put them away in the house."

"But you said we'd be late!" Grammy shouted at her back. Still walking toward the house, Dori unloaded the gun before she got desperate and shot herself to get out of going to her brother's wedding.

Deep in the Immaculata Church, Sela watched her brother Robbie receive the traditional blessing from his *padrino*, Tío Vincent.

"God has blessed you with a virgin bride," Tío Vince said, his voice rough with emotion as he held a tiny box of gold coins. "These coins symbolize the family's gratitude for her virtue."

Grammy snorted, "Virgin, my ass. Sammy has got as much reason to wear white in a church as I do."

"Her name is Dannie," Sela hissed back. "And if God strikes you down for blasphemy, he'll get me for standing next to you."

Grammy reached into her ear and turned down her hearing aid.

Tío Vince then held out a gold braided lasso. "This lasso will also bind you and Dannie together in the eyes of God, just as it did your *tía* and me."

Sela watched her parents, their chests swelled with pride at their one and only son. Not only was Robbie now Dr. Robert Orihuela of Children's Hospital, but he was also marrying a twenty-two-year-old virgin from an old San Diego family. She couldn't count the number of times her mother chatted excitedly about how Dannie had been educated at Our Lady of Guadalupe and had debuted to society at the La Jolla Debutante Ball. In other words, she was bred to marry well.

Mom dabbed the corner of her eyes and Dad patted Robbie's shoulder as if he couldn't stop himself. When Sela had walked up to her parents earlier, her flame print dress in mango and pink nearly made her mother cry tears of despair.

Sela glanced over at Dori, who stood on the other side of

Grammy. In a tailored white pantsuit with just a peek of her opalescent cami, Dori appeared crisp and capable. She had that bronzed warrior beauty. With her caramel corkscrew curls and hazel eyes, Sela looked like a fairy that had fallen out of her dew-covered bed.

She wondered how she was going to tell Dori that Robbie had invited Pete, his friend and the love of Dori's life. Maybe she could talk Grammy into doing it. They'd been playing hot potato with that bombshell for weeks.

"Did I tell you about the dream I had last night?" Grammy said, her voice booming off the cool plaster walls of the dressing room.

Sela grinned and "forgot" to remind Grammy that she had lowered the volume of her hearing aids.

Grammy cleared her throat and cupped her hand to nearly shout in Sela's ear. "I was dreaming that I was having sex with Brad Pitt and at first I was thinking it was nice, you know, but then I realized I don't like that girly boy—"

"Mamá!" Dad hissed, but Grammy couldn't hear him.

"I like *un tigre*, a man like your grampy who can throw down and—"

"Mamá!" Dad shouted.

Grammy gave a start, her eyes wide and blinking as if she were senile. Sela repressed a grin that Grammy knew what she had been doing all along.

"Oh, did you hear that?" Grammy asked.

Sela basked in the horror on her parents' faces. Tío Vince froze in wiping the tears off his cheeks. He was from Mom's side of the family.

"This is the only day Brenda and I will walk *one* of your grandchildren down the aisle," Dad said in the tone that sent a warning zipping up Sela's spine. "We won't have it ruined."

Dori's left eyebrow shot up, and Grammy dismissed him

with a flap of her hand. Mom rushed over to make the peace.

"Girls," she begged Sela, not looking at Dori because she was afraid of her oldest daughter. "Meet us outside the church after the ceremony . . . for pictures, okay?"

"Are you sure Pammy—"

"Dannie," everyone corrected in chorus.

"Don't interrupt me," Grammy spat. "I thought she'd want us in the kitchen with the rest of the Mexicans."

Dori's hand clamped down on Grammy's walker. "Let's get some air, Grammy," she ground between her teeth, with a glare at Sela to help her or be left with their parents.

"Why?" The question shot out of Sela's mouth when they were outside, the sun sliding over her bare shoulders. "Why are we being treated like second class citizens?"

"Sela," Dori hissed. "Not now."

For their precious *mijo*, her parents refinanced their house so he could go to Stanford. But they had refused to let Sela attend the USC Thornton School of Music on a full scholarship because, according to them—or really, Dad—there was no future in music. For Robert, they refinanced their house *again* to impress Dannie's family, so they could pay for half of a huge society wedding and not look like a working-class family with two daughters who were known around National City as "those wild Orihuela girls."

"Sela! Sela, wait," Mom called, running after them. "Honey, I need to ask you a favor."

A fragile bridge of trust had been built between them ever since Sela learned that her mother had had an affair with Mr. Neal who used to live next door. Sela wanted more than anything for at least one of her parents to trust her, and she'd worked hard to prove it by saying nothing, not even to Dori, about her mother's secret.

"What?" Sela asked, hoping the favor was to stand up when

the priest asked if anyone was opposed to this union.

"Well . . ." Her mother's eyes fell as she dug around in her oyster-colored purse. "Dannie asked if . . . well, she thought that since we're in . . ."

Out of her purse, she pulled a pair of white gloves with tiny pearl buttons on the back.

"Dannie asked if you'd wear these," she said, her voice quivering as she avoided looking Sela in the eye. "Just during the ceremony. To cover up your uh, your—"

Sela's face stiffened as if she'd just been slapped by those very same gloves.

"Tattoo," Sela finished for her mom, holding up her left ring finger, which bore the words *Piss Off*, to any future engagement or wedding rings.

Mom nodded, her shoulders rolling forward. "Sela, please, you know how much I hate to ask you this, but—"

In all of its horrific clarity, Sela saw life with Dannie flash before her eyes . . . having to sit at the kids' table on Thanksgiving, finding out she wasn't invited to Christmas dinner, or being told not to get too close to the baby.

She felt everything inside her go silent as a breeze sent a shiver through the papery petals of the bougainvillea.

This was the day Mom had been dreaming of for her daughters. Given their track records, she would only get this one perfect wedding from her son.

Sela decided she would do this for her mom, and only her mom.

"It's okay," she said, taking the gloves. "Even though they don't go with my dress, I'll wear them for you."

#### Chapter 2

If Sela had to hear one more reference to Dannie's virginity or hymen, or look at one more gold-framed portrait of her sister-in-law, she was going to bend over and blow the sixty-five-year-old man seated next to her.

She glanced over as he belched into his napkin. On second thought, she'd just throw herself in front of the next Rolls that went through the Hotel Del Coronado's valet line.

Grammy stabbed her with her elbow, reminding her to look like she was praying as the priest blessed the meal.

Finally, the waiters swarmed the legendary Crown Ballroom while the quartet swept into a flaccid rendition of Vivaldi's Spring from the Four Seasons. The crown-shaped chandeliers twinkled against the vaulted paneled ceiling as crystal glasses clinked and conversations rose up from the lengthy silence.

She had to get through the dinner, the best man's toast, the first dance, the cake, all of which would be recorded and then replayed via live feedback on the giant screen above the DJ.

Sela turned to Grammy, seated between her and Dori. "You got anything strong in that purse?"

Grammy winked and pulled her purse open. Inside was a bottle of Herradura Anejo.

"Where did you get that?" Sela asked, marveling at Grammy's resourcefulness.

"The bar."

"The bartender gave you a sixty-dollar bottle of tequila?" Dori asked.

"You make it sound like I stole it. Your father's paying the bill."

"Good, then let's drink the whole thing," Sela said, mischief bursting in her stomach like sparklers.

"You're not supposed to drink," Dori reminded Grammy.

Sela's face fell. She'd forgotten about Grammy's cocktail of medicines. "Oh yeah, you shouldn't."

"Your grampy would die a new death if he saw us leave a perfectly good bottle of tequila untouched," Grammy said to her, then turned to Dori. "As for you, Tío Fermin is not happy about you becoming a cop."

"Tío Fermin was a snitch for the cops," Dori replied crisply. "He did it for the money, to feed his family."

"While smuggling illegal aliens over the border and making several hundred bucks per person."

Sela wished she could appear completely unruffled, like Dori.

Grammy pushed her shoulders back with the dignity that would rival the Queen. "He was helping his fellow man." She then turned to Sela. "Why don't you go up there and play something?"

Deflating, Sela explained, "I had a song all worked out, but ... well, Dannie said no. They already hired a professional."

She saw the outrage stiffen Grammy's and Dori's spines.

"Would it have killed them to let her sing one song?" Dori asked Grammy.

"Then why didn't *you* say something to them?" Grammy countered.

Sela and Dori spoke at the same time.

"How was I supposed to know-"

"Grammy, it's okay—"

"You're supposed to take care of your sister," Grammy argued with Dori.

"You do realize she's twenty-seven, don't you?"

"I don't care if she's sixty-seven, she'll always be your little sister. I took care of my sister, God bless her soul, before she died."

Sela's knee bounced anxiously as she waited for one of them to back down. Dori simply turned her attention to her as if she hadn't clashed with Grammy.

"So did you get the gig at Croce's?" she asked coolly.

"I don't know yet," Sela answered.

"When are you going to find out?"

"Any day, I guess."

"They're going to pay you, right?"

Sela tightened up. Did her sister think she was that help-less? "No, I'm doing it for free," she said sarcastically.

Dori sighed, tossing her napkin on the table. "I'll be back."

Sela happened to glance over her shoulder, and did a double take when she saw who sat at the bar.

"Oh wait!" she said, flapping her napkin at Dori. "Look at the goodies at the bar."

Well, what do we have here? Dori wondered as she grabbed onto the chair for support.

"What do you think?" Sela asked, dabbing her lower lip with gloss.

Grammy planted both hands on the table and twisted around. "Ohh," she cooed appraisingly. "Now that's what I'm saying when I mean *un tigre*." She shoved the bottle aside and fished out her gold tube of Max Factor red.

"He's mine," Sela pouted. "I saw him first."

"What? I'm just touching up my lipstick!"

Why did I come back home? Dori asked herself, snatching her purse with the trusty minideodorant she'd packed. Right now she felt like a prisoner who'd had a few years free, only to be thrown behind bars without doing anything wrong.

With Grammy and Sela salivating over some guy, she was guaranteed a night of keeping them out of trouble. Still sore from being yelled at by Grammy and then snapped at by Sela, she pushed her chair under the table. Let them get each other out of trouble.

"Have fun with him, okay?" Dori said.

"Don't you remember that game we used to play?" Sela asked.

Unfortunately, yes, she did. Before she had been recruited into the Explorer program at National City PD, she and Sela had earned their reputation as "those Wild Orihuela Girls" by picking the cutest boy at a party and then competing to see who could get him out of his pants.

Dori regretted not setting a better example to her little sister, and yet, Sela was her parents' child, not hers.

"I'm not going to be the wedding hoochie."

"Hoochie?" Sela asked. "If I was the wedding hoochie, I'd be out there dry humping every guy on the dance floor!"

"Like that," Grammy said, pointing to their cousin Lupe, who shouldn't have worn that red knit dress without panties. "She should've had one of them Peruvian wax jobs or whatever they're called." Shaking her head, Dori asked Sela, "Don't you think we're a little too old for those games?"

Sela pressed her chin into her shoulder. "Since you're the oldest—"

"You're going to compete for El Tigre?" Grammy asked, her head whipping from side to side.

A witchy smile curved on Sela's face, her eyes sparkling with the dare. "How else do you want to pass the time?"

Dori ran her tongue over the top of her teeth, her heart kicking up at the challenge. But then she reminded herself that she was a respected officer, not a seventeen-year-old chafing under the responsibilities her family had placed on her.

Still, she took another look and her body temperature spiked. He stood with one elbow propped on the bar, dressed in a black suit that was cut perfectly to fit broad shoulders and long legs. Black hair fell in loose waves to curl at his shoulders. She could almost feel that hair fisted in her hands.

"I don't think so," she said, hurrying away from the table, not really sure where she had planned to go.

She hadn't meant to look, but her eyes ate up the man with intense eyes the color of espresso. His straight nose ended in a sharp point, and those lips had just the right amount of plumpness to make a woman shiver when he kissed her. Grammy was right. He was *un tigre*, with the way he seemed to stand in wait, ready to pounce with all of his might, or slither under the cover of the crowd until his hot breath touched the delicate skin behind a woman's ear.

"Dori?"

She thought she'd imagined that voice saying her name. But when she saw Pete, the shock made her skin flash red hot. A high-pitched squeal whined in her ears.

He smiled easily, revealing tiny lines that hadn't been in the corners of his eyes when she'd left for Denver. His black hair spiked off the top of his head, and the gray suit accentuated his sleek, swimmer's body.

"Okay there, we got it over with," he said suddenly, and then turned around to walk away.

Then he pivoted back with an almost desperate laughter in his eyes. He'd always made her laugh, but not now.

"Hey," he said uncertainly. "I didn't mean to surprise you like that, I—"

He reached for her, and she knew if she'd been in complete command of herself, she would never have flinched away.

"Dori . . ." He said her name like it was an apology.

"I'm sorry, I—" She would kill Sela for not telling her. She sucked in her breath and bore down on her fluttering nerves. "Hi, Pete."

His smile wobbled precariously. "Hey there, Pi—" He caught himself before calling her Piglet, the nickname he had given her when they were dating. "I have no idea what to say next."

"I think it's, 'How are you?'" she suggested.

"Right, so then, how the hell are you?"

"I'm great."

"Heard you're now with San Diego PD."

"I am. How's the leg?"

"I got your card."

She had debated about sending it when she heard that he'd been knifed, trying to break up a jail fight. She had, but only signed her name.

"Since when did you start drinking piña coladas?" she asked, noticing the gaudy cocktail in his hand.

"I'm here with my, uh, fiancée." He held up the glass. "This is hers."

It looked like the kind of drink a college coed who just got her fake ID would order. But to order a piña colada in the Crown Room at the Hotel Del . . . could there be anything tackier than that? Yeah, Dori imagined, probably her dress.

Truth was, if she had known Pete would be here with a date—no, even worse, a *fiancée*—she would've shot herself with Grammy's pistol when she'd had the chance.

"See you around," she said, pivoting back toward her table.

Grammy's and Sela's eyes swung around guiltily when they saw her coming.

"You bitches," she hissed at them. The heads of their table guests swiveled up in shock.

"Mind your own business," Grammy told them, and then jerked her thumb at Sela. "She was supposed to tell you."

Sela reeled back. "No I wasn't! You said you would tell her when she picked you up."

"I forgot! You should've reminded me."

Dori's hand trembled when she reached for her water glass. "You both suck."

"I will not be spoken to like that from the likes of you," Grammy said.

"Dori, I'm sorry," Sela said. "We wanted to tell you but we didn't know how or when."

Dori sighed. She was at her brother's wedding alone, with no hot date, much less a fiancé. Meanwhile, Pete, who had left her in a fit of jealousy, sat a few tables away with some bimbo who drank piña fucking coladas, and no one in her family had warned her.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw El Tigre turn his back to the room, his movements sleek and fluid. She wondered if he'd catch her looking in the reflection of the mirror behind the bar.

Dori continued her survey of the ballroom and saw Pete, his back turned to her and blocking the view of piña colada chick. Her whole body broke out in sweat. There were five hundred guests; it would be easy never to come face-to-face with Pete again.

And yet she craved another encounter. But this time to show him up; to make him see what he'd lost. It was immature and pathetic, but it was the truth.

Her old recklessness broke loose from its tightly cinched leash. Her heart pounded with fury, lust, and old aches that she'd fought so hard to hide from.

Wicked laughter came from Grammy Cena.

"She's gonna take you on, girl," Grammy crowed to Sela with approval. "She's not an Orihuela for nothin'."

### Chapter 3

Sela stiffened in her seat. She'd been wrong to piss her sister off. Dori was a dangerous, bloodthirsty competitor when angry.

"Wait," she called as Dori prepared to launch her attack on El Tigre at the bar.

"Oh, now you're scared, aren't you?" Grammy laughed, not helping her at all.

"Ten minutes each," Dori said, calling the terms. "Two turns."

Grammy slammed her hand on the table. "I decide who gets El Tigre."

"How?" Sela and Dori both asked.

"I'll judge based on the first kiss after the dancing begins. So make it good."

"Only the winner leaves the ballroom," Dori decided.

"Then I go first," Sela said. She stood up, running both hands down the sides of her dress as Dori narrowed her eyes. Sela knew it was mean, but in this game she had to psyche out her opponent. "If I were you, I'd start looking for a backup plan before Pete hits the dance floor."

She had once read that Marilyn Monroe could walk down the street unnoticed. But at the snap of a finger she could emanate this glow that called every man to her. Summoning Marilyn's spirit now, she worked that floor like it was the catwalk.

She hadn't had this much fun in months. Music had taken up all of her free time, save for a few casual afternoons with her last ex. She really shouldn't have wasted her time, and just used a vibrator instead.

Power surged through her veins and her heart pumped up until she imagined waves of heat coming off her skin. She met the appreciative smile of a man whose wife was chatting with her neighbor. But Sela's smile hardened when she caught the glare from a friend of her mother's.

Her therapist had warned her about her need for attention; how it clouded her judgment and stole her power away. But Sela knew that if her parents and Robbie had included her in the wedding, if they'd put her on the inside track instead of firmly keeping her on the outs, she would've gone for El Tigre anyway.

She arrived at the bar with two people between them. The bartender asked what she wanted, and she asked for a Diet Coke, letting her eyes briefly meet El Tigre's in the mirror and then quickly glancing away as if it had been an accident. But the slight thrust of her chest, the ever-so-slight lean in his direction, beckoned him to approach.

She hadn't even counted to five when he asked, "May I pay for your drink?"

She turned and lifted her foot to the brass rail. With a practiced nudge, the skirt of her dress "accidentally" inched up to reveal a firm, pale thigh. "I think this is an open bar, but thank you." Testing him, she aimed her green eyes right into his dark, almost black ones.

A lesser man would've stammered and not known what to say. But El Tigre relaxed his elbow on the bar.

"May I have a drink with you?" he asked.

"I'm taking it outside. It's kind of hot in here."

"They're serving dinner."

"I'm not really hungry," she said, dropping her gaze down to the bar. "For dinner."

She could tell he was wondering if he should go with her. She bit her lip, holding her breath.

He cleared his throat. "Eric." He offered her his hand.

She took it and had a mini-orgasm right then and there. "Sela." She then added, "The sun should be setting soon."

"I've heard it's beautiful out there," he murmured, his eyes taking the time to drift down to the hand she'd placed on the bar, and then back up at her. "We should go while we have the chance."

Dori watched Sela slink out with El Tigre's hand riding her lower back. That little bi—

"Okay, the time is set. . . ." Grammy held her bifocals to her eyes and stared at her watch. "Now."

"She just cheated!"

"What did you expect? She's an Orihuela. And we don't cheat. We—"

"Cheat," Dori insisted.

"Make our own opportunities." Grammy shook her head. "You know, you're gonna get old before your time unless you loosen up. *Mí mamá*, God rest her soul, looked twenty-five when she was fifty years old."

Dori had never met Great Grandma Lourdes, whose black and white flapper portrait hung prominently in Grammy's living room. But she'd heard the stories. On the Tijuana side of the border, Great Grandma Lourdes was a madam, and on the San Diego side ran a bridal shop that covered her and her husband's bootlegging.

Grammy dumped her water into the arrangement of delicate pink roses and then poured herself two fingers of the Herradura Anejo.

"To my granddaughters," she toasted, and then sipped. After a satisfied ahhh, she declared, "Now if this kills me, I'll die a happy lady."

Dori pursed her lips as she flung her water into the flowers and poured herself a finger. Herradura Anejo wasn't a whambam-thank-you-ma'am kind of tequila. It was an expensive, exclusive mistress that had to be admired and savored.

The tequila washed over her tongue like liquid silk, leaving diamonds in its wake. She knew she would need another finger to fortify her determination not to turn around and see what Pete was doing. She tried looking into the polished silver flower urn, but it gave her an upside-down view of the room.

"What did he say when you saw him?" Grammy suddenly asked.

"Who?"

"Don't play stupid with me."

"He's engaged." She meant to keep it short but found herself adding, "To someone who drinks piña coladas at the Hotel Del before a five-course meal."

Grammy's responding hmm was loaded with meaning.

"I don't love him anymore," Dori thought to tell her just in case.

"Umm-hmm."

"He couldn't take it that I was first in the academy and he barely made it."

"Are you sure you couldn't take him being less than you?"

Grammy was partly right; but only a tiny part. Still, she shouldn't have had to hold back to cushion his ego. Pete didn't have a father who told him he had no right to be a cop because he wouldn't be able to do the job when he got his period every month. But she did, and she had to work ten times as hard to prove to her da—no, to herself—that she couldn't just do the job, she could be the best, with or without Midol.

"Well," Grammy said. "You could go over and get busy with Pete. That girl don't stand no chance against one of *mis nietas*."

"Let her have him," she said dismissively. "She's probably not threatening to him."

"Use El Tigre to show what he's missing," Grammy said slyly. Dori could see how no man stood a chance when Grammy had been young. "And let yourself have some fun."

How come her grandmother could read through her so easily? Is that what happened when you were as old as she was? When would wisdom ever show up on her doorstep?

"Where's your sister?" Mom asked, appearing out of nowhere.

Grammy pretended she was too deaf to have heard and looked up at the chandeliers.

Dori kept her gaze steady. "She went to the ladies' room."

Their mom might have been a marshmallow, but she knew her daughters well. "With who?"

"No one."

Mom started to back down. "Well, someone told me that she was talking to some man and—"

"Leave these girls alone, Brenda," Grammy jumped in. "And you tell that no good son of mine to be a real man and stop sending you to do his dirty work."

Grammy thrust her chin in the air, effectively dismissing Mom from her presence. Mom stood there, her mouth agape and eyes fluttering from the lashing she'd just received. The mere idea of standing up to Dad, as Grammy had suggested, probably made her faint.

Dori's armpits were raining sweat, sitting there between her mom and Grammy. She didn't know which one to be loyal to; her mom, who had been systemically broken down by Dad and Grammy; or Grammy, who made it perfectly clear that her loyalty was with her grandchildren.

"I'll go find Sela," Dori offered. It was as neutral as she could get. Also, it would keep Dad from hounding Mom when she went back to her place beside him.

After Mom thanked her and then made her way back to her table waaaaay on the other side of the ballroom, Grammy leaned over and said, "Go find your sister and warn her."

The thick salty air smoothed some of Dori's edges as she stood at the open doorway, just breathing quietly as the ocean rippled under the smoky lavender sky.

"Already doing damage control, huh?" Pete said beside her. She stiffened as if the ground had lurched beneath her feet. She hadn't seen him follow her out. Then again, she'd had her family on her mind.

"Excuse me?" she managed icily.

Pete just grinned, one of the few men who had never been afraid of her. "I saw her with that guy at the bar. She didn't even make the salad course."

It was one thing for her to criticize her sister, but she didn't take it from anyone else; which was another reason why Pete had left.

"Neither did you," Dori pointed out, sniffing the air between them. He'd changed colognes. Had piña colada girl made him switch from the one she used to buy for him? "What do you want, Pete?" "To make sure you're okay."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"We haven't seen each other in five years."

Actually it was four years, seven months, and two weeks . . . which had not been enough time to make her forget the way his kisses made her toes curl, or how he loved it when she tongued his ear, or the way he felt inside her.

"And I'm not okay," he admitted. "It was a lot harder than I thought it would be."

His honesty had always been her undoing.

But she was proud when she managed to tell him, "You should go back."

Or else she'd do something she would hate herself for. She didn't poach on another woman's man, even if he had once been hers.

"What if I don't want to?" He laughed dryly and shook his head. The back of his hand brushed hers, and the shock made her jaw clench. "How messed up is that? I love Suz, but I—"

"Don't," she shot back. "Don't you dare."

He was speechless, and she took the opportunity to escape before her pride, or her vulnerability, got them both in trouble. She wobbled on her heels as they slid on the textured walkway, but she didn't fall.

Scanning the grounds over the heads of meandering couples enjoying twilight, she found Sela with El Tigre by the Windsor Cottage. She should just leave them alone, she thought, and let Sela find whatever amusement she needed to get through the night.

And yet she wanted El Tigre, that gorgeous, dangerous creature who had a body that could make a woman forget loss and heartache. He could make a woman let go, to live for pleasure, to feel something other than anger. El Tigre brushed a lock of Sela's hair behind her ear, smiling hungrily at her.

Dori shivered, not from the air, but from that man's raw sexuality. She narrowed her eyes and rolled her shoulders back.

If she and Sela were still those wild Orihuela girls, then she had thirty more seconds to prove it.

#### Chapter 4

When Sela caught Dori standing there out of the corner of her eye, the smile she had for Eric collapsed.

Noticing, Eric asked, "What's that for?"

"My sister," she said.

"Did I get you in trouble?"

She leaned into his aura of heat. But she noticed that his nipple had beaded against his silk shirt. "Don't I look like the kind who can make her own?"

He laughed as if he hadn't in a long time. Sela liked the way it made her feel. Eric just might be a keeper. He'd only touched her like a gentleman; escorting her out of the ballroom by letting his hand hover over her lower back and then lightly grasping her elbow as they walked down the steps.

But heat simmered under the surface. She shivered as she imagined what it would be like when they finally lifted the lid.

"May I walk you back inside?" he asked.

"She'll want to talk to me alone, but . . ." Sela glanced over

at Dori, now not so sure that she wanted to play their game with Eric. He might be fun to keep around for more than one night.

"Let's meet inside later, okay?" she suggested, offering her hand.

He sandwiched it between his own. As she stood, his eyes trailed all over her and she flashed hot with the image of those big, rough hands gliding up her hips.

Oh, there was no way she was letting Dori in on her fun.

"I get the first dance," he said and let her go.

"You're too late," Sela said, joining Dori as the old-fashioned lamps lining the walk flicked to life.

"I have thirty seconds left," Dori said flatly.

"What if I don't want to share?"

"More like you're afraid you'll lose."

Bitch. Dori tried to use that Jedi mind shit on her, but this time it wouldn't work. "I don't think he's your type," she said through a tight jaw. "Or that you're his."

"Mom is looking for you because Dad saw you leaving with him."

Afraid they would be overheard, Sela grabbed her sister's arm and yanked her back toward the hotel. "Can we talk about this somewhere else?"

Dori jerked back. "Not that way."

Sela didn't have to ask why. "Pete followed you? What did he say?"

Dori's eyes shot out death rays as she jerked Sela away. They took the long way back to the lobby, through the shops and up a secret staircase that dropped them off behind the lobby bar.

Sela half wished she'd been the fly on the wall when Pete and Dori met face-to-face. She liked Pete okay, mostly because no other man had the balls to stand up to her sister. But he'd destroyed Dori when he left her. When they swept through the door of the ladies' room, Dori stopped so suddenly that Sela crashed into her.

"What the hell, Dori?" she blurted, then realized that Dannie was holding court in the lounge with her bridesmaids, mother, and a nun.

Dannie looked like a Ralph Lauren photo spread with her sculpted blond up-do, swanlike neck, elegant facial bones, and the graceful slope of her white shoulders.

Someone cleared their throat.

"Congratulations," Dori said, ever the diplomat.

Dannie's eyes narrowed suspiciously. What did we do to you? Sela would have asked if Dori hadn't yanked her into a stall.

"Here's the deal—" Dori started, locking the door.

"But I want to know what happened with Pete," Sela insisted.

"Nothing."

Sela rolled her eyes. "I don't want to play anymore. Eric is mine."

"You started this and now you're going to see it out."

"You can't make me." She tried to push Dori out of her way. But she didn't work out as much as her sister.

"What are you so afraid of?" Dori asked, a laugh tickling her voice. "Losing your touch, are you?"

"Like you? I don't think so," Sela shot back.

"You are absolutely unbelievable," Dori said.

Someone rapped sharply on the door.

Dori and Sela dropped their anger like a hot potato.

"Do you think it's the nun?" Sela asked softly.

Dori shrugged and called out, "Yes?"

"It's me. Let me in," Grammy ordered.

Dori opened the door, and Grammy forced Sela to wedge herself between the toilet bowl and the wall to make room. "What are you two arguing about? There's El Tigre out there wandering around by himself, and Lupe the wedding hoochie is making eyes at him!"

"Sela is welching on the game."

Grammy gasped with disappointment and outrage. "*Mija*," she admonished. "Dori needs El Tigre to show up—" She snapped her fingers, forgetting Pete's name.

"Pete?" Sela asked, and Dori's eyes turned stony with frustration.

"He has a fiancée," Grammy said.

Sela wilted with guilt. Now that changed things. She didn't mind showing up to Robbie's wedding without a date, but this was bad for Dori. Really bad.

Suddenly, she started thinking of all the things her big sister had done for her. How she'd never asked one embarrassing question about the gloves Mom made her wear . . . that Dori got angry at Robbie on her behalf because he hadn't let her play a song for him and Dannie . . . that her sister had come out to warn her about Mom . . .

Sela frowned. She hated being the bad sister. So if Dori needed Eric to show up Pete, then she should at least give her the chance to win him, which of course Dori never would.

"Look, maybe you should—" She wavered, briefly meeting Dori's hard gaze before her eyes fell back to the marble floor. "—talk to him. He actually has a brain to go with the body and the face."

Time slithered on its belly as Dori stared at her, probably analyzing every word she had just said.

"Someone say something," Grammy interjected. "I need to use the toilet."

"I want extra time because you took him outside," Dori said.

Sela's confidence slipped as she took in her older sister's

tough yet elegant beauty. Eric might find her strength and intelligence more appealing. He might be one of those guys who liked women who could kick his ass.

"Five more minutes," Grammy said to Dori. "We'll give you a handicap since it's been a long time for you."

"A long time for what?"

Grammy replied, "You know."

"I do not need a handicap."

Grammy turned to Sela. "You think you can take her on?"

No. Well, maybe. "Equal rules," Sela replied nobly. "That way the best girl wins."

With a disgusted glare at Grammy, Dori took Sela's hand. "There might not be much left when I'm done with him."

Sela grimaced when Dori squeezed the bones of her hand. Her competitive spirit was up, and it was about to get nasty.

Grammy laughed. "This might be a real Orihuela wedding after all."

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### Chapter 5

She so did not need a handicap.

With steam seemingly trailing out from her ears, Dori shoved the ladies' room door open, nearly hitting a sunburned tourist in the face.

She'd check this El Tigre out; see if he was all that Sela was making him out to be. More than likely he was just another loser in a long line of losers who'd dump Sela in a week or two. God knows it didn't take much of a brain for a guy to figure out that her sister was an easy mark.

Standing in the doorway of the ballroom, Dori took in a deep breath, falling back on her training. Slow the situation down and control it; don't let it control you.

Her gaze flowed over the faces. There he was. For the briefest second she caught a glimmer of "cop" in the way he leaned against the pillar with his arms crossed and his back to the wall. From there he could see everyone walking in and out of the room. The video crew that worked the wedding approached him but he waved them off.

Why wasn't he at his table?

She made her way over.

"Hi," she said when she got close. He turned those eyes on her. She should've double-checked her deodorant situation before leaving the bathroom.

"Hello," he said politely, yet he was on guard. "You're Sela's sister, right?"

"I'm Dori," she answered, holding out her hand. When he said his name, she looked down at the V of his shirt and had a mental image of herself licking his skin.

She cleared her throat. "Anyway, Sela had to deal with a family thing," she said, still figuring out how to work him. "She asked me to tell you she'd be back in about twenty minutes."

He opened his mouth to reply when something caught his attention behind her. Those warm eyes iced over, and Dori followed his gaze to the doors. Dannie walked in with her entourage. A quick glimpse at him and Dori confirmed that he was staring at the bride.

Before she could ask if he was a friend of Dannie's family, he turned the charm back on her.

"You two don't look anything alike," Eric said in a voice that was like the silken brush of a Hawaiian breeze. Dori saw that the warmth didn't quite reach his eyes.

"That's an interesting bracelet," she said, eyeing the brown beaded bracelet that slid out of his sleeve and over the dark skin of his wrist. "Where'd you get it?"

"I got it in Cancun last year," he answered. "I keep meaning to take it off but I keep forgetting to."

"Who gave it to you?" She kept her face as bland as possible, as if she were just making small talk.

"A friend." His tone warned her that he didn't want to discuss it.

Something wasn't quite jibing with this guy, and she couldn't put her finger on it.

"Can I ask you a question?" she asked, forgetting about landing him in the sack. "Are you a police officer?"

He jerked his chin back, thrown off by her question.

"My ex was an officer," she explained, "and there's, uh, something about you that reminds me of him."

She bet FBI as she edged closer so a waiter could squeeze by.

"DEA," Eric answered. "Do I have it stamped on the back of my jacket?"

She laughed, flipping through her mental files of whom she could call to verify his ass. Not answering his question, she asked instead, "So are you a friend of the groom?"

His eyes narrowed. "A friend of the bride's family," he said.

Just as Dori was getting warmer, she spotted Pete watching her from his table. His fiancée wasn't there beside him.

Her thoughts screeched to a halt and then crashed into each other.

"Oh, uh . . ." she muttered, trying to claw her way back to clarity.

"How did you know I was a cop?" Eric asked, and she looked up at him with blinking eyes.

"Well I . . ." She laughed because it was the only thing she could think to do. "Sorry. I forgot what we were talking about."

Her face flared. Damn it, she'd been doing so well. She'd been in control of the exchange and fucking Pete threw her off.

Eric turned back to her, having looked over his shoulder at Pete. "Is he the jealous type? Because he's coming this way."

She didn't think twice. "Nice meeting you."

"Wait a second. You didn't answer my question."

But she was already on her way out the door.

\* \* \*

Sela frowned when she watched Dori walk away from Eric, his eyes lingering on her swaying hips.

"What is she doing?" Grammy asked. "Where is she going? Is her time up?"

Dori had been with him for less than five minutes. Sela looked for Pete and found him following Dori.

Sela opened her mouth, about to say something along the lines of "Oh crap," when angry fingers bit into her upper arm. She nearly tripped as her dad yanked her close.

"What are you up to?" he said through clenched teeth, smelling like whiskey. "What were you doing in the ladies' room?"

His anger hit her like a punch in the stomach, leaving her no breath to even ask how he knew they had been in the ladies' room. Over his shoulder she saw Dannie watching from the bridal table, where she sat like a medieval queen.

"Dad," she teased in an effort to gather the pieces of her scattered control. "I had a rip in my nylons."

"You better. I told you and your sister once before"—he stabbed his finger at her face—"do not ruin your brother's wedding. No men, no drugs, no alco—"

"I'd nev—"

"Do not interrupt me!" Heads turned in their direction. "I mean it. I've had enough of you and your little games. Let us enjoy one special day without you trying to make a spectacle of yourself."

Just as quickly as he'd grabbed her, he turned and walked off, pulling down the lapels of his jacket.

*"Mija,"* Grammy said finally recovering, having been just as shocked as Sela. *"*Are you okay?"

Sela nodded, holding the tender spot on her arm. Her father strode across the ballroom, shaking hands and smiling like he hadn't just yelled at her.

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Tears smarted her eyes as humiliation washed through her. Far across the ballroom, her mom watched as Dannie's mother chatted blissfully. With the twinkling candles and the eruption of English garden flowers on the white-clothed tables, Sela felt as if this were a horribly surreal dream.

She made eye contact with her mom, and then her mother went back to her conversation.

"There he goes," Grammy said, pointing to Eric, who slipped out to the lobby.

"But it's Dori's time."

"She ran off! Go get El Tigre!"

Sela caught up with him. His smile unfroze the ice particles that had formed in her stomach.

"Family drama?" he asked.

For a horrifying moment she wondered if he'd seen her with Dad.

"Something like that."

"What happened?" He gestured at the red marks on her arm.

Relief loosened her stiff shoulders. He hadn't seen.

"An overly affectionate uncle," she lied, wishing she didn't have to.

"I have an aunt like that. Creeps me out." He held up a pack of cigarettes. "You mind?"

Night draped its shadows over the formal garden in the center of the hotel. Over the sounds of the jazz pianist playing "Tenderly," people chatting and laughing, she made out the distant grumbling of the beach.

"I might want a taste," she said.

He lit up and she took it from his fingers. His lips moistened the tip, and the sweet smoke tasted so good.

"Thank you."

"I met your sister. She's something else."

"What do you mean by that?"

"She's tough as hell."

Sela couldn't help but respond to that gravelly voice. If he had a southern accent, he'd sound just like Johnny Cash.

"So are you from the bride or groom's side of the family?" he asked.

"The groom is my brother. The bride is the spawn of Satan."

He laughed. "I know her brother, so . . ." He flicked off some ash. "Why do you call her that?"

"Let's just say that she's got my parents fooled into thinking she's a virginal saint."

"Really?"

"Sorry. If you're a friend of her brother's—"

"I don't know her that well. Hey, what's this?" He picked up her left hand and peered down at her ring finger, with its tattoo.

"I haven't much luck in the marriage department," she explained, not mentioning that she had three to back up that claim.

"Me neither," he said as if letting her in on a secret. "I almost proposed last year. We were on a trip to Cancun, but I found out she was seeing another guy when she called him from our hotel room."

"Yikes."

Without any warning, he pressed his lips against her tattoo. Nuzzling her hand, he kept his eyes locked into hers, silently asking if this was okay. She took a step closer, his hot breath exciting her.

Closer, his eyes willed her, and closer she went, until his hand slid under her hair and his shoulder was pressed between her breasts. His fingers lightly clutched the back of her neck as she sniffed the woodsy, almost peppery tang of his cologne. "What would you do if I kissed you?" he whispered against her temple.

She ran the tip of her tongue between her lips, dying to taste him but holding out just a bit longer to build the thrumming anticipation.

He hummed appreciatively and his fingers tightened their hold, locking her into place.

As he lowered his lips, she whispered, "We should've gone somewhere more private."

When his lips met hers, she sucked in her breath as if she'd touched fire. His chin had a fine bristle that weakened her knees. Her restraint vibrated, wanting to break loose as their kiss went deeper, wetter. Her hand landed on his shoulder, when she really wanted to cup him and stroke him. His hip pressed against her stomach, and she could see with blinding clarity those hips working him in and out of her.

It would be so good, so sweet.

"We better stop," he said, slightly out of breath. "Or I won't be able to walk."

"Where were you planning to walk to?" she teased.

"Somewhere more private."

# Chapter 6

"We're not doing this," Dori warned Pete when he found her.

"Just let me say what I need to say," Pete said, catching her at a dead end in one of the hallways in the old part of the hotel. "And don't knee me in the balls while I'm doing it."

"I should snap your neck. What the hell are you thinking, following me?"

"I've been wanting to see you ever since you came—"

"You're pathetic."

"You're an idiot if you think flirting with Eric Cervantes will make me jealous."

"Wha-Wait. You know him?"

"Enough to tell someone I—" He cleared his throat. "He's a great cop but he's not a happy guy."

"Why?"

"For one, I don't think his ex-girlfriend invited him to her wedding."

"Excuse me?"

He stared at her for a long while. "Dannie. His ex-girlfriend. You didn't know?"

Obviously. "What else do you know?"

He shrugged. "Rumor around the sewing circle is that he gave up everything for her—promotion, career, you name it. And then she left him."

Dori steadied herself. She had to find Sela. She had to find Eric.

"Wait a second," Pete called after her.

She threw her hand up in a gesture of dismissal.

"I need to say good-bye. Before I marry Suz."

She froze.

"Will you let me?"

She heard the hushed tread of his shoes on the thick carpet. Then his heat settled against her back. His familiar scent wafted around, eliciting memories of her hands and her lips exploring his skin, the sounds he only made with her, the way he liked to blindfold her and position her any way he wanted.

"I sometimes think that . . ." He couldn't finish. She willed herself into a statue as his hand came up and his fingers gently curved over the top of her shoulder.

"I love Suz. Don't get me wrong. But she's not you."

Dori spun around and his arm came up protectively. She caught it and yanked it down, attacking his mouth with hers.

She channeled all of her anger, her lust, and her pride into that kiss. He was stunned, not touching or kissing back. When she teased the seam of his lips with her tongue, a shock jolted through him and she pulled away just as his arms came around her.

With the back of her hand, she wiped his kiss away. "You're damn right she isn't me."

\* \* \*

"What the hell is going on?" Grammy said, greeting her in the lobby. "I can't keep track of you two running all over the damned place."

Dori never once looked over her shoulder to see if Pete followed her from where she'd left him.

But her heart still galloped from that kiss. She had no idea where the idea to do such a thing came from. And she didn't want to know. She needed to be in control, focused. She needed to find out what the hell her sister might be getting herself into.

"Do you know where Sela is?"

"No. They're starting the first dance. You want to see?"

"Not—" Wait, she told herself. If Eric were still in the ballroom, maybe she could see for herself if what Pete had told her was true. "Come on."

"Don't you hustle me around." Grammy yanked her arm free and dug her heels into the carpet like a horse about to balk. "Hold on. Who've you been making out with?"

Dori almost asked how she knew. "I'll tell you when we go into the ballroom."

She moved off, and Grammy hurried to keep up with her. When they made it through the doors, they were swept into a human tide pulling them toward the dance floor. Even in her heels it was impossible for Dori to spot Sela and Eric.

Frank Sinatra's "The Way You Look Tonight" came on, and everyone cheered as the spotlight captured the newlywed couple. Dannie's megawatt smile beamed down from the giant screen.

"Good Lord help us all," Grammy groaned as they started their choreographed dance. Robert bit the tip of his tongue in concentration, and Dannie's camera-ready smile never faltered.

Grammy smacked her arm. "Was it El Tigre?"

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Dori shook her head.

"Pete?" Grammy yelped, and Dori smacked her back to shut her up. "What were you thinking?"

"He was trying to compare me to his, you know . . . "

Grammy gave her a quick nod of approval. "That's my girl. Now your sister, she's gotten El Tigre outside twice now. You've got some catching up to do."

"I don't think that's going to happen." Just then she ID'd Eric at the bar. Dori swept her gaze across to the table. Sela's wrap was still draped over her seat.

Wasting no time or explanations, Dori made a beeline for him.

Eric grinned when she approached. She ordered a Turkey and Seven on the rocks.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Just a little drama," Dori said with just enough embarrassment to make herself less of a threat. She had always been good at faking.

He turned toward her. "So let's pick up where we left off. How did you mark me?"

"It takes one to know one," she replied.

His eyes followed her fingers as she reached into her jacket and pulled out her wallet with her badge. "San Diego PD," she explained, then flipped it shut in the palm of her hand.

"I thought so," he said with a genuine smile. He saluted her with two fingers held to his forehead. "So how long have you been on the force?"

"Three months here," she replied, toasting him with her glass and then faking a sip. "Five years with Denver. And you?"

"I left about a year ago. My buddy and I started a private security consulting firm."

She was getting warmer. "Do you miss it?"

He shrugged, his eyes falling downward. "The money's bet-

ter now that I'm my own boss."

"So how do you know Dannie again?" she asked, deliberately using her sister-in-law's name.

He tossed back the dregs of his drink. "I'm a friend of her brother."

He slid his empty glass across the bar. His jacket fell open and she noticed something small and square shoved in the inside pocket. The bartender refilled his glass and Eric took another healthy swig. She glanced at the mirror. He stared straight at Dannie.

The muscles in his cheek ticked and his eyes seemed to sink deeper under his strong brow.

Holy crap. Pete hadn't been lying. Then again, he never had lied to her.

The dance ended and Robert slid his hand around Dannie's neck and kissed her. The crowd roared and a man shouted, "Take her upstairs!"

Dannie pushed Robert away, clearly embarrassed. He followed her, apologies clear from the way he held out his arms. But the delicate virginal bride couldn't take his manly aggressions and melted into the arms of her mother and that nun who had been in the ladies' room.

They escorted her to the door, patting her hand and probably assuring her that this first night wasn't going to be as bad as she thought.

Dannie happened to look up then and see Dori and Eric at the bar. Horrified recognition bloomed on her face. With a cynical twist to his lips, Eric saluted her with his drink and tossed it back.

His glass snapped on the wood. He gestured for a third.

Dori's hand landed on his arm, which was trembling.

"Hey, you've still got the cutting of the cake to go," she

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teased.

He glanced over. The pain in his eyes was unmistakable.

Dori went in. "You know her, don't you?"

He took a moment to answer, straightening up on his stool and erasing any expression on his face. "She reminds me of someone I once knew."

He then slid off the stool and walked out.

"Time out," Dori said to Sela when she caught her spreading gloss on her bottom lip. Her sister sat in one of the club chairs in the Babcock & Story lounge.

Sela jumped when Dori grabbed her arm and yanked her up to her feet. "Come on."

Avoiding the ladies' room and taking a quick look around the busy lobby for Eric, Dori hustled Sela to one of the side staircases that were part of the original labyrinthine Victorian design.

"What has Eric told you about himself?" she asked.

"Not much," Sela answered. "We haven't been talking to get to know each other . . . if you know what I mean."

"Pete told me that he's Dannie's ex-boyfriend."

Sela's blood iced over.

"We need to get him out of here," Dori continued.

"Wha— Why?" Sela asked, still trying to process all that Dori was saying.

"I know you hate Dannie, but we can't let Eric ruin this wedding."

"But that would be perfect!"

"Sela! What about Robert? Or Mom and Dad? Stop thinking about yourself and think about what's best for our family."

"Not having Dannie as a sister-in-law is a good start."

"If anything goes down that ruins this wedding, Mom and Dad will never forgive you or me. Ever. Do you want things to be worse between you guys?"

"I can't see how they could get worse."

"But do you want things to get worse, Sela? Over sex?" Dori let her think on that, and then she went in for the kill. "I know how much it hurts you that they give all this attention to Robert. But this could be your cha—"

"Do you really think Robert would ever protect us? We're an afterthought to him, or else we wouldn't be sitting at the table in the back of the room."

"We're better than Robert."

"I can't believe you're taking *his* side *now*." Sela pushed by her.

Dori made a grab for her arm and then saw the marks there. "Who did that?"

She didn't have to ask again as Sela debated whether to tell her the truth. Dori knew it was her father who had left the marks. Anger filled every molecule in her body with blistering heat. She struggled to speak. "If you let Eric ruin this wedding," she said, "Robert will not just walk away from Dannie. And she's going to be that much more entrenched with him, making your life miserable."

"Mom would stand up for me. Eventually."

"Did she see that?" Dori pointed to Sela's arm, hating the look on her sister's face. "She never has, never will. We have to stop this."

"How?"

"First, we need to see if Eric is still in the hotel. If he is, we're doing this quietly with hotel security, to make sure he doesn't disrupt anything. If Eric wants to confront Robert after the wedding, fine. But not here."

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"So what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to find Eric and keep him busy."

Sela's eyes lit up.

"Not like that. Just keep him in one place where I can find you with Security."

"I'm supposed to meet him in the bar. He's probably looking for me now."

### Chapter 7

Sela tried to tell herself she wasn't backstabbing Dori. This had nothing to do with Dori. This had everything to do with her family casting her to the shit pile in favor of Dannie. She was going to tear the curtain down so they would see that little bitch for exactly what she was.

It wouldn't be a huge loss if her parents tossed her out of the family. Today showed that they loved Dannie more than they did their own daughter. Why shouldn't she hurt them as much as they had hurt her?

Sela stopped short when she found Eric talking to Dannie's maid of honor, Mackenzie, who held out her hands as if begging. She couldn't see Eric's face. Her skin chilled with fear as to what kind of man he was. Had he played her with that kiss, or had he genuinely liked her?

Wanting to hear what they were arguing about, she slipped into a wicker chair that was hidden from them by a potted palm tree. "Stay away from her," Mackenzie said. "She wants you out of her life."

"Oh really? Then why did she spend the night with me two nights ago?"

Sela didn't know whether to laugh or cry; whether to cheer with joy that she had found the chink in Dannie's armor, or howl that she had contemplated sleeping with her sister-inlaw's leftovers.

"You are such a dick," Mackenzie spat, and then walked away with a swish of her skirt.

When Mackenzie made off for the ballroom, Sela couldn't move. Her fingers wrapped around the edges of the chair's arms. If she glanced down, would she see the imprint of her heart beating against her chest?

She swallowed the saliva pooling in her mouth and tried to loosen the tightness of her face.

"Wait," she called to Eric's back. But he couldn't hear her.

When she caught up with him, she didn't mean to blurt out, "I know about Dannie."

He jerked to a complete stop and then turned to face her.

Okay, now what was she supposed to say?

"I think we can help each other," she said.

She searched for the sexy, charming stranger at the bar but only found a mean, angry man whose pride had been destroyed by the woman he loved.

She momentarily considered turning and hiding in the ladies' room for the rest of the wedding. But that's exactly what Dori would expect from her. "How were you going to tell my brother about you and Dannie?"

He stared at her.

"Do you still love—"

"No."

"Then why are you here, Eric?"

He stared at her, working his jaw.

Not quite comprehending the hypocrisy of her feelings, her breath got shaky in her chest. She had wanted to use him, and yet the idea that he tried to use her made her sick. "Did you come here to pick up some girl and rub her nose in it? Or . . ."

His face softened. "And I thought your sister was the one I had to look out for."

Sela backed off when he reached out to touch her. He got the message and kept his hands to himself.

"I want your brother to know the kind of girl he married," he said.

"Then go tell him."

"And yet, I have my pride." At the doubting lift of her eyebrow, he laughed softly at himself. "Or what's left of it."

"I can try to arrange for my brother to meet you in the bar." He shook his head. "I'll do what I have to do."

Chills raced up the backs of her legs. "Like what?"

He stepped back. "I'm going to show everyone at this wedding something they'll never forget."

"Hey, there's my little *policía*," Dad yelled when he saw her approaching him and his circle of cronies. Pete stood among them. He met Dori's brief glance.

She needed to stay focused on Dad. He was well on his way to drunk, and in front of his friends he had a super macho image to maintain. This would not work in her favor unless she could get him alone.

"You arrest anyone today, *mija*?" her cousin Rudy asked with a chuckle. They all thought "girl cops" were a joke. But Dori knew that Rudy currently lived with his mother and was hiding his assets from his last wife, who wanted support for their two-year-old daughter. She ignored him. "Hey, Dad, can I talk to you for a second?" "I just started my cigar. Rudy brought some Cubans from Tijuana."

"Yeah, so don't arrest me, okay?" Rudy chided.

She glanced down at his meaty hand, which was patting her arm. She'd have to tell her cleaners to pay extra attention to that sleeve. When his eyes ventured to the neckline of her blouse, she decided to give his license plate to her friends at Border Patrol and consider it justice for his daughter.

"Would you gentlemen mind giving me a minute or two?" she asked.

"Hey, you don't talk to my friends that way."

They leered at her, waiting for the uppity little female to step back down into her place.

Pete spoke up. "Did you see that girl in the purple dress?" He jerked his head toward the ballroom.

Dad gave his friends a "What can you do?" look and then turned to her, flicking ash off his cigar by her feet.

They herded over to see what Pete was talking about.

"Dori, go take this to your mother," Dad sighed, rocking back on his heels. "I don't have time right now."

"This isn't something Mom can help with," she said, hoping that would appeal to his male ego.

"I'd expect this bullshit from your sister, not you. What do you want?"

"Dannie's ex-boyfriend snuck into the reception," she said. "I'm getting Security involved to make sure he doesn't cause trouble."

Dad muttered in Spanish, "Women. Always stirring up trouble." He downed what was left in his glass.

"So you just want me to let him run around?"

"You wouldn't be doing this if you'd brought a date," he said.

Frustration made her sick to her stomach. "You think I'd make this up? Why don't I just leave it be and let him embarrass you and your new daughter-in-law?"

"Ack, get out of here," he said, and then sauntered over to his friends.

Dori refused to look at Pete as she returned to the ballroom.

Sela came running up to her.

"Why aren't you with Eric?" Dori asked. Then again, why should she care?

"I was, and he—" Sela stopped to catch her breath. "He said he's going to do something. He said that Robert should know the woman he married."

"I could care less," Dori said. "I'm out of here."

"Oh." Sela shrugged. "Well, guess that's that."

A hand smacked Dori upside the head, and then Sela got one too. "What the—"

"I've been watching the both of you," Grammy Cena started, "and when my sister and I were your age, one of us would've had El Tigre upstairs or at least in the ladies' room!"

"Did you turn your ring around to give us concussions?" Dori asked while the back of her head stung.

Grammy righted her diamond ring, working her lips as she prepared another verbal assault.

"He's Dannie's ex-boyfriend," Sela explained before they got smacked again. "And she slept with him two nights ago."

Grammy blinked and her mouth dropped open. "No!"

"I overheard Mackenzie telling him to stay away." She then told them everything.

"What does he want you to do?" Dori asked.

"Nothing. He just said that everyone would know what kind of woman Dannie is."

Dori remembered that square bulge in his coat pocket, the

trip to Cancun where his girlfriend got caught on the phone with another man. Dannie started dating Robert last year, and that square bulge was the same size as a minidigital videotape.

Suddenly, a light seared the surface of her eyeballs, and a guy squinting into the viewfinder of a camera said, "What do you have to say to Dannie and Robbie?"

Dori looked over her shoulder. The three of them were deer caught in the headlights on the huge screen behind the DJ.

"Oh fuck," Dori said. "He has a tape."

"Hey, this is live," the camera guy barked.

"How did you know?" Sela asked.

But Dori didn't hear them. She watched Robert kissing his bride's hand, looking worshipfully into her eyes. Dannie's smile was, for lack of a better word, tolerant.

Robbie glowed with happiness because he had no idea what he'd gotten himself into. Even though her brother had the emotional capacity of a gnat, he'd worked hard for his career and he took their parents to lunch every Sunday. But he had never shown affection to her or Sela, she thought, so why should she care?

But Dad had seen Sela with Eric. And when Eric did what Dori suspected he wanted to do, Sela would suffer.

For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, Sela was her little sister.

God damn it, Dori thought, knowing what she had to do.

"Where is Eric?" she asked Sela.

# Chapter 8

"Go with her!" Grammy demanded, giving Sela a push after the camera crew left them.

"What for?"

"The tape."

Sela shook her head, trying to clear it. "What are you talking about?"

"Ay, God save me from this family," Grammy begged, and then looked down from the ceiling to Sela. "Look there."

She grabbed Sela's head and turned it toward the DJ.

"Will you get off me!"

"Don't you see?"

"See what?"

"Mija, how do you think El Tigre is going to tell Robert?"

"I don't know—" Oh shit, Sela thought. He was going to play that tape on the live video feed. She whirled around. "You think?"

Grammy crossed her arms over her chest. "That's what I would do."

Sela ran back through the lobby and then down the halls that circled around into the main piano bar.

Tears pricked the backs of her eyes. She had to help Dori.

Walking on rubbery legs, she made it into the Crown Room, hoping against hope that Dori had found Eric or that there was no tape and no one would be the wiser. If anyone could do that, it would be Dori. As always, Sela realized, she had let herself get so swept up in some bullshit fantasy that she couldn't see the truth.

Blinded by panic, she walked right into Dori.

"Do you have it?" she said in a rush. "Please say you have it."

"I can't find him. I have Security searching for him, but—" "But he said—"

"More than likely he left," Dori said, her eyes darting about the room. "Maybe he chickened out."

Sela tried to absorb some of her sister's calm but it wasn't working.

"I'm out of here," she suddenly declared, unable to face her parents when the shit hit the fan.

"Did you find him?" Grammy said, blocking Sela's escape.

Dori shook her head, and Sela couldn't stop the shivers chasing each other over her skin. Grammy drew her spine straight like a general about to walk with her soldiers into battle.

"Whatever happens, I will stand behind you," she said.

"You always did," Dori said, then noticed the tears sliding down Sela's face. "Hey, come on." She put her arm around Sela's shoulders. "It's not your fault."

"What's going on here?" Mom asked. "You three have been as thick as thieves."

Dori, Sela, and Grammy slammed their mouths shut, not knowing what to say.

"Brenda," Grammy began. "You need to sit down-"

The Shakira song that had been playing abruptly cut off and the feedback from the microphone sent hands clasping startled ears.

A familiar voice swept over the crowd and unbuckled Sela's knees. "Everyone, I'd like your attention for a moment."

Eric was on the dais in front of the DJ. He raised a glass of champagne to Robert and Dannie, who stood in the center of the dance floor.

"It's not every day you find someone who loves you," he started, and then paused meaningfully. "It's not every day that you find someone you think you know better than yourself. Who you think trusts you and you can trust back."

"Who's that?" Mom asked.

Grammy Cena made the sign of the cross and began muttering a Hail Mary.

Dori released Sela and began pushing her way to the stage.

"I had that once with Dannie, and . . ." Eric paused, and curious murmurs hissed around the room. "And I don't know why or how I lost that. So Robert, I think you should know what will happen to you when she finds someone better."

The chandeliers switched off. The screen flashed on, and then there was Dannie on all fours with a naked Eric behind her.

For a moment, total, uncomprehending silence filled the ballroom.

"Turn off the tape!" someone shouted as five hundred people got to see Dannie in a way that only her gynecologist should have seen her.

A group of men surged at the stage while Robert and Dannie stood frozen in the center of the dance floor, their silhouettes trapped against the glaring video screen.

Sela knew that the images of her sister-in-law with Eric would be forever burned onto her brain.

"Oh my—" her mom managed, her eyes glued to the screen.

"Well, now I know why Tío Fermin was coming around the house," Grammy said with a sigh. "That Dannie definitely ain't no virgin now."

Dori had Eric's arm twisted behind his back just as his feet hit the floor to escape the snarling crowd.

"You want to live?" she asked as she shoved him toward the kitchen doors used by the wait staff.

He might have had a hundred pounds and a foot on her, but in her arm lock, he had no choice but to comply.

"You're a little late, aren't you?" he asked, his voice strained from the pain she sent up into his shoulder.

"Dori!" Pete called. He held the kitchen doors open for her. "I'll hold them closed."

Pete followed her and Eric into the clattering kitchen. Outside the metal doors, she heard chairs and tables being overturned in the ballroom.

Eric grunted when she pushed him out the back door into an alleyway of generators.

"You made your point, now go," she said, out of breath.

Eric held his shoulder, eyeing her like a wounded tiger.

"Your brother should be grateful," he said huskily, as if he were about to cry. "I gave up everything for her."

In that moment, Dori saw herself in him. Hopelessly in love with someone who had toyed with him. She couldn't hate him or pity him because they were two sides of the same coin.

"All you had to do," she heard herself saying to him, "was tell her good-bye. Robert would've figured her out sooner or later."

Then she walked back through the kitchen.

Half of the ballroom had emptied. Robert stood on the stage,

his face frozen in shock as his fist dribbled blood from the broken pieces of the plastic tape.

Dannie had sunk into her white skirts, her hands protecting her face as her maid-of-honor crouched protectively over her. Those who hadn't left stood there holding their gifts in their arms, staring at her with expressions of disgust, pity, and wicked glee.

"Is this what you—"

Her dad's voice turned her head. He advanced on Sela, who stood at the edge of the dais.

"Did you do this to your brother?" he shouted, his spit hitting Sela in the face.

Dori broke into a run as his fist came up, aimed at Sela, who was frozen in place with fear.

"Stop!" Mom's voice lashed out, stopping him.

"Don't you dare," Dori growled, holding his raised arm in place. "You've done enough." She swept in then, to shelter her sister.

"I tried to tell you," Dori said, staring her father dead in the eye. "If you should be hitting anyone, it should be your precious daughter-in-law."

Dannie's muffled groan turned everyone's attention back to her.

Disgusted, Dori rushed Sela out of the ballroom. Grammy followed, holding their purses.

"I'm taking you home with me," Dori said as they crossed into the lobby.

"I'll be okay," Sela replied through chattering teeth.

"You'll be better if you're not alone."

"Bring her to my house," Grammy insisted. "Both of you will stay with me."

The sharp air hit their faces, and Dori took in a deep breath.

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"Get us a cab," she ordered the valet. Grammy opened her mouth in protest, and Dori said, "None of us are in any condition to drive."

"You can let me go," Sela said in a stronger voice.

Dori released her, and was relieved when Sela didn't topple over from the suspicious stares of the wedding guests waiting for their cars.

She wished they'd hurry up with the cab. She never wanted to see such a horrible humiliation again. Dannie wasn't one of her favorite people, but even she didn't deserve that. The sooner they were away from all of this, the better.

She closed her eyes, thinking about what might be going through her brother's mind. It was one thing to find out that the woman he loved had lied to him; it was a whole new level of ugliness to find out in front of his wedding guests.

"Dori," Pete said behind her.

She immediately pictured Eric, the beaten spirit in his eyes when she'd tossed him out of the kitchen. She would do better, she thought. She would never be that broken. And so she faced Pete for the last time. "Good-bye, Pete," she said softly.

He opened his mouth and his eyes were suspiciously wet. His fiancée smiled with understanding at her under the wide porch that spanned the front of the hotel.

Dori felt Sela's hand sneak into hers and hold on as Pete walked to his fiancée.

"Don't look," Sela said as she pulled her away.

They said nothing as Sela pushed her into a minivan taxi. Dori had cut the last thread holding her to him. She went still before allowing herself to imagine looking at another man and not comparing him to Pete.

The driver helped Grammy into the back, and suddenly Robert's voice shot out through the melee. "Hey wait!"

His jacket flapped open as he ran around the startled bum-

per of a Mercedes. "You knew?" he asked roughly.

"We tried to stop him," Sela explained. "We didn't want you to find out this way."

"Roberto!" Dad hollered, and he and Mom hurried down the steps. Dannie and her parents were hot on their heels.

"I need to get out of here," Robert said, looking around as if he were lost. "I can't—"

Sela grabbed him and hauled him into the van, slamming the door.

"Where are you taking him?" Dad asked from outside, his voice muffled by the window. "Come back here!"

The window buzzed down, and Grammy Cena shouted, "Get away from this cab or I'll send your Tío Fermin to your house!"

"Let them go," Mom said, surprising everyone. "Just let them go."

"Brenda—" Dad started, his voice sharp with annoyance.

Dori snapped back to life and threw open the door. "Get in," she ordered her mother. Her father was so startled he didn't react in time to stop her.

"There's no more room for you," Dori told him, then slammed the door shut.

The door locks engaged and they lurched forward as the driver hit the gas, speeding off into the misty night. Sela had twisted around from the front passenger seat with a smile on her face.

"Aren't you glad to be back in the insanity?" she asked.

Dori shook her head in wonder that the explosion of her brother's wedding brought them together in a unified front. Maybe it would last the night, maybe it wouldn't. Either way, Dori thought perversely, that yes, she was glad to be back.

# WHAT STAYS IN VEGAS



# **BERTA PLATAS**





### Chapter 1



"Honey. Tony, you need to let go. Believe me, I know how hard that is." I tried to keep my tone even, when what I wanted to do was scream.

"No. No." The little words came out in a whimper.

I peeled my smelly two-year-old nephew from my leg and sat him on the foyer floor. His heavy diaper squelched. It was obvious that I wasn't cut out for motherhood. I wasn't cut out for much except being a flight attendant, my dream job since high school. And after seven years, that dream was over.

That was why I was in the doorway of my sister's Atlanta McMansion, wondering why my toddler nephew had answered the door.

The whimpering escalated into an impressive scream. All I'd done was ask where his mommy was. Apparently, the whereabouts of his mother, my older sister, was a traumatic thing for little Antonio. I understood how he felt.

I needed Susu, too. I needed her solid good sense. Her cook-

ing. Her hugs. And there was a good chance that she'd turn me away, and then I'd be out of options.

I could always sit on the foyer floor and wail with Anthony. It looked kind of therapeutic, actually.

"He needs his diaper changed." His sister Heidi was standing in the doorway, looking disgusted.

I'd always wondered why my sister had ended up naming her daughter Heidi. I hoped it was a literary connection. It sure wasn't out of longing for some alpine homeland. We were both born in Miami, Cuban-Americans a generation away from any homeland-pining, and my brother-in-law Carl was from Boston, of Irish and German stock.

Heidi wore front-pleated orange and pink plaid pants and a polo shirt that matched nothing I'd ever seen. The fashion wrongness of it made me cringe.

I held my arms out to her, needing a hug, even if it was from a supercilious six-year-old. Say *that* fast six times. "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"I don't think so. Tony's diaper leaked on your shoe and it stinks." She backed away silently and vanished down the hall.

I examined the unspeakable smear on the top of my suede Moschinos. No screams, no cries of anguish from me, even though these were the only shoes left to me except for a pair of ratty sneakers that I'd found in my grandfather's tackle box. I was totally beyond hysteria.

"Heidi, come back here!" I yelled. "Where's your mom?"

A door slammed in answer.

Great. I followed the echo. I'd never visited my sister in Alpharetta, one of Atlanta's affluent northern suburbs. The house was huge, thousands of square feet of airy, soaring spaces on a lot that barely extended past its footprint. The kind of place you got if you were married to a successful stockbroker.

A huge golden retriever galloped past me toward the front

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door. I listened for Antonio's scream, but heard only giggles. No rescue needed, thank goodness. I'm not good with dogs. Or toddlers.

It didn't narrow my job search, since I wasn't looking for child care or vet tech opportunities. I put those jobs right up there with stripping on the list of careers I wasn't cut out for. There were plenty of jobs that didn't involve children, pets, or pole dancing.

I walked through the house, sidestepping toys and pizza boxes. Susana must be totally depressed. She was normally such a neat freak. I hated to add my woes to hers, but she was the only person I could turn to.

Our mother had died when I was in high school, and Dad was in Europe with wife number five. That left only Susu to comfort me, and I needed it by the pitcher, not the glass.

"Susu? Baby, it's me. I need a teensy favor." No answer. I pushed open the door to the master suite.

Her bedroom was enormous. A pillared bed dramatically draped in gauzy curtains was plunked in the middle of a sea of eggplant-colored carpet. It was unmade, with mounds of bedclothes in the middle. Was she there? I inched toward the bed, then took a big breath, unaware that I'd been holding it. Empty. She wasn't huddled under blankets, feeling sorry for herself, sleeping away her depression.

It was so boring to deal with the drunk and depressed. My last roommate had been a drinker, and it made her choice of bedmates my morning surprise. Who would I see while I made coffee? An executive? A dirty-jeaned cowboy? My female boss?

That last one had probably gotten me on the short list for the first round of layoffs at the airline. I'd been a flight attendant for three years, ever since I'd left college out of deep loathing for higher math, and my pay had risen steadily during that time.

My plan had been to work, travel, and have fun. Then I'd retire and travel and have more fun. That agenda was trashed two months ago, when the airline's finances had tanked and I was out of a job. Since then I'd lived on my severance pay and my credit cards, and I'd looked for a job I could do. I couldn't type, didn't know a computer from an ATM and didn't have a college degree.

What I had was great legs and maxed-out credit cards. Despite my distaste for math, I could also do currency conversions in my head, which gave me hope that I could snag a job at the Atlanta airport's international concourse, just until the airlines started hiring again.

"Susu? Are you in here?" A toilet flushed and I scooted back out the door, pretending I'd just stuck my head in. The bathroom door was flung open and my brother-in-law Carl stepped out.

I stared, unable to speak. Carl was in white socks and tighty whities and nothing else. And those tighties were stuffed. Someone needed to invent support undergarments for men who were blessed by nature. I'd had no idea.

"Anita, what are you doing here?"

"I came to visit. Where's Susu?"

"She should have been home two hours ago. Don't you ever pay your phone bills? I couldn't reach you at home or on your cell." He stood there, his johnson curled like a big snake in his undies. I couldn't take my eyes off it, so I stared at my feet and the smear Antonio had left on my shoe.

"I've got a lead on a job here in Atlanta. Can I stay for a few days?"

"Stay as long as you want." He walked over to his dresser, pulled out a pair of folded jeans and put them on. "What's that on your shoe?"

"Baby shit."

"Tony, huh? Did you change him?" He caught the look on my face and rolled his eyes. "If you stay here, you have to help with the chores." He started down the hall and I trotted after him.

"Aren't you worried about Susu? Where did she go?"

Carl stopped and turned around. "Yoga." He laughed at the look on my face. "Yeah, that's what I thought, too."

The dog started barking and Antonio squealed. The front door opened.

"How's my precious poop machine? Both of you?"

I ran back downstairs, not anxious to be caught with my half-naked brother-in-law. "Su, I thought you'd run away."

"Anita! You look fabulous, darling." A thin, gorgeous redhead wearing my sister's face threw her arms around me and squeezed me hard.

I pushed her away and stared her up and down. Where was the graying brown hair, the lush curves, the trio of chins? The denim jumper, white ankle socks, and white Keds?

This woman was stunning. Susu had remade herself. She twirled. "What do you think?"

"Wow. I'm speechless, sis. What happened?"

"I woke up one morning and said, 'I'm thirty years old, forty pounds overweight, and I'll be damned if I look like this when I'm forty.' So I started running, quit eating doughnuts, and colored my hair."

"Carl must have fallen in love all over again."

Her grin faded. "He's mostly confused. I've been doing yoga for five months, and my teacher wants me to teach some of the newbies. Carl's freaked out."

I tried not to look at the trash on the floor or the fluffy drifts of dog hair in the corners. "He feels threatened because his life's changed."

"Look at you, the psychologist now. They run an article in the in-flight magazine?"

Ouch. She'd always cracked snide remarks about my intelligence without actually coming out and saying that she thought I was dumb. This trip was getting less comforting by the minute.

She pulled my aromatic nephew off of her leg, which he'd been clutching as if it was a life raft. "Come on *mi amor*, time to change that awful diaper."

She held him at arm's length as she walked up the stairs. I followed. I still hadn't told her I was staying there.

"So, could you use a little help around the house for a while?"

"Thinking of applying for the job?" She yanked the diaper off of Antonio, releasing an ungodly stench, and threw the whole thing onto a lidded bucket. It hit with a hefty thump, then slid slowly off. A little of its contents oozed onto the carpet.

I backed away.

The baby stood quietly while she wiped him down with scented Baby Wipes, leaving clean streaks on his brownstuccoed backside.

I got queasy if I saw a dot of dried urine on the floor of an otherwise clean toilet. I could not do this mommy thing.

"I could help with some things," I said cautiously.

"I got your phone message about the job. Sorry I didn't call back."

"I understand. You're busy. But I've got an interview at the airport. If I get the job—"

"You want to stay here until you get back on your feet?"

I nodded. She'd always been quick.

"Stay as long as you want, *querida*. Rent-free. But I'll need you to help with the chores. And the kids."

The smell of the diaper bucket was intense. Either way I'd be in deep doo, but industrial-strength rubber gloves would solve one situation.

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"No problem." Relief made me light-headed. I wondered if I'd been holding my breath, waiting for her decision.

She was my big sister, and when our mom had died when I was nineteen, she'd taken on that role, too. Despite her young, new look, I depended on her to be the sensible one.

After the baby was clean, Susu showed me to the guest bedroom. With pink-striped sheets on a sleigh bed covered in a quilt with all different kinds of roses on it, set off by taupe walls, it looked like a photo spread from *Martha Stewart Living* magazine. "Your bathroom's through that door." She turned and left me alone.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the oval mirror over the old-fashioned dresser and stopped to fix my hair. It was dark brown, and the gold highlights I'd added before the job fiasco needed to be touched up. Otherwise, I looked the same. Green eyes, clear skin, wide mouth that I hated but guys loved.

My looks had gotten me my first job, and they'd probably help me get my next one. I lay down without unpacking. A nap would keep the stress circles away.

I woke up again when Susu stuck her head in the door. "Anita? I'm going to a birthday party for a friend of mine. Want to come along?"

"Tonight?" I glanced at my watch. It was almost six. I'd slept three hours. "What about dinner for the kids?"

"Fed them already. I'm leaving in an hour if you want to join us." She pulled the door closed.

Leaving at seven, on a weeknight? That was something I seldom did, especially if I had a flight early the next day. I shrugged and decided that aside from the spotted high heel, I should be okay in my pinstriped interview suit and floral silk camisole. It better be. I didn't have anything else.

At seven I grabbed my bag and ran downstairs. Carl was watching television in the den, a huge room with a floor-toceiling stacked stone fireplace and leather furniture covered in colorful pillows and throws.

He didn't glance up as we passed. "See you later," Susu called out. She turned to me. "He never pays attention." She looked me up and down. "You're all chic. This is sort of a casual place, but they get business types, so you won't stick out too much."

"Great." I didn't even own a pair of jeans anymore, so it would be hard to dress down. I thought of all the clothes I'd lost when I got evicted. The curbside stack had been practically picked clean when I returned from an interview. I had the clothes I'd interviewed in, some underwear, and my *abuelo's* tackle box sneakers.

When we got back to the house I'd go shopping in Susu's closet. She seemed to have gotten over her frumpy wardrobe and into decent clothes, and now that she'd lost weight, some of them would fit me. She wouldn't mind.

We took off in the minivan, Susu dressed in a cute sundress and strappy sandals, and me in an interview suit with baby shit on the toe of my shoe. My new life had gotten off to a fabulous start.

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### Chapter 2

The party was at a private residence, a house as big as Susu's but on the Chattahoochee River. It cost millions to live on the banks of the Hooch. I appreciated the foyer, with its huge arrangements of fresh flowers. The vast room beyond it was bordered by a deck overlooking the churning waters below.

"Some house," I whispered to my sister.

She laughed and took my arm. "Becky's wife number three. To the winner go the spoils."

Becky looked like she was maybe nineteen. A poised nineteen, but she didn't even look old enough to vote. A humongous painting of Becky and her spouse took up part of the opposite wall. Mr. Becky was balding and pink-skinned, with shiny black eyes. He looked like Porky Pig.

The birthday girl was Susu's age, but so leathery from the sun that her flesh seemed cured, like a hide. All of the women wore lots of jewelry and expensive casual clothes. Susu mingled with them, air-kissing and hugging as if she'd known them all of her life.

"Did you come straight from work, dear?" one of the bigtoothed women said, laying a French-manicured hand on my arm. I hadn't been touched so much since the last time I'd booked a massage.

"I flew in this morning. I'm staying with Susu for a few days."

"How charming. Where do you live?" The question seemed sincere.

"I lived near Los Angeles. Playa del Rey. I hope to live here now."

The hand withdrew. "And you aren't married, right?"

"Right. Single." I smiled reassuringly. "Not looking, either." I meant to imply that her husband was safe, but when she winked and said she understood, I wondered what exactly she thought she'd heard.

We stayed at the party until three in the morning. I kept tapping my watch whenever Susu looked my way, but she ignored the hints.

She also drank like a thirsty guest at a Cuban wedding, leaving me to drive her polluted ass home. This was so unlike my sober, clean-living older sister. She snored, face pressed flat against the passenger side window, red hair stuck to her sweaty cheek.

What a lovely picture she made. What would Carl think? What *did* Carl think of his wife's different look, her new friends, her late night parties?

This was not the comforting home I'd fled to. I wanted the old Susu back. The one with the pillowy bosom, who baked cookies and cuddled her children and kept a spotless house. The one whose husband smiled all the time and told corny

jokes, instead of watching TV all evening, sullen and solitary in a landfill of a house.

My life had gone to hell, but I'd thought that hell was confined to LAX and its environs. I left everything behind to come to Atlanta. Well, okay, everything had been taken from me, but I didn't expect my sister to be included on that list.

As I helped her up the stairs, bumping into walls, I thought about the raccoon circles I'd have under my eyes in the morning. So much for beauty sleep.

Carl opened the bedroom door and took Susu from my grasp. Our eyes met in the night-light's dim glow and he turned away, as if he was embarrassed that I'd seen her like this. Then the bedroom door closed and I heard her wild giggles through the wall. I was alone in the hall. Carl was caring for Susu, but who would take care of me?

I accompanied Susu, miraculously not hung over, on her rounds the next day. Play dates, doctors visits, yoga classes, and shopping.

"I don't know how you do it all." I slipped my sunglasses on as we left the babysitter's house. The sun was brilliant today, but mostly I was embarrassed to be seen in the minivan.

Susu waved a hand airily. "One thing at a time. Like beads on a necklace, until it's all accomplished."

She shot a look at me. "What about you? What's up with you now?"

I told her about my eviction and my airport job interview.

"You have no savings, you've lost everything you own, and you don't look like you care. What is it with you, Anita?"

"What?"

She stomped on the brake, sending us both toward the dash. The car behind us honked. She swerved into a church parking lot and pulled around to the side of the yellow brick building.

My seat belt locked and I leaned back to give it some slack. "What was that for?"

She stared straight ahead, brows together. She looked furious. "All my life I wanted to please Mom and Dad. I did everything they asked me to, and you did none of it. I went to school, got good grades, dated in college, and had sex for the first time with the man I married. You smoked, you swore, you skipped church, and you snuck around with boys."

All true so far. I waited for the revelation.

She banged on the steering wheel and turned teary eyes toward me. Her nose was red and her skin blotchy.

"And you know what Mom said when she was in the hospital, dying? She wanted to see *you*. She said to tell you she loved you."

I felt my mouth sag open. "You never told me."

"What good would it have done? I didn't want to hurt you, but I was so mad at you. You weren't there for her."

"I was in the cafeteria with Dad. Give me a break." I was starting to get pissed off, and dizzy with emotion. Mom asked for me, and I hadn't been there. "Where's this headed, Susu?"

"It's headed nowhere, that's where. I've done everything right, you've done everything wrong." She started to wail. "It's not fair!"

"Are you saying you envy my unemployed, evicted, homeless lifestyle?" I looked around, but no one had noticed us there. At least we weren't having this meltdown in traffic. I opened my door. "Here, let's walk a bit. We'll get some air. It'll be good for us."

I stepped out of the van and was about to close the door when she came surging over the console and through my door, landing with both feet planted on asphalt. I took a few steps back and she grabbed the neck of my jacket and pulled me short.

"You are not running away, Anita. We are going to talk this out." She looked like a demon. I swear her eyes had red fire in them.

"I wasn't going anywhere. I was waiting for you, you crazy bitch." I covered my mouth. Oops. Not what you say to a crazy bitch.

She slapped me. I took it. I deserved it. Apparently she liked it so much that her hand started to swing back, open-palmed, for a second helping of Sorority Smackdown.

"Hold it right there, hermana. Look where we are."

Her eyes never left mine. "I was the good one. You did whatever the hell you wanted. Even after she died. I know that you got arrested for underage drinking. I know what happened with that guy from UGA, I know about the lawyer who was married."

"What, did you hire a detective? What does it matter? That lawyer was a long time ago."

"Three years was not a long time ago, Anita."

"So? What's gotten into you? Have you found religion or something? Want me to repent?"

"Would you?"

"I'm kind of on the verge."

She laughed, and it was evil sounding. "On the verge? Why, because things aren't going your way?" She hiccuped. "Anita always gets her way, and now she's had a little setback and she comes running to Sister Su."

"You were always there for me, Susu. You're so maternal."

Her hand shot out and smacked me again. This time I saw stars. Enough. I hooked a foot behind her knee and pulled her leg out from under her. She fell, then rolled up onto her hands and knees. I turned and started back to the van, but she tackled me before I took the second step.

My teeth hit the grass on the side of the parking lot. She was lighter, but she'd carried a lot of momentum. I spat out dirt and grass, swiveled my hips, got a knee under me and pushed her off, then pinned her with my body. Blood dripped onto her frantic face. Oh shit. I was hurt.

"What's going on, Susu? What's the matter with you?"

"I was the good one," she cried, twisting under me, trying to get purchase to toss me off. "I was good, and you—you—" She sobbed. Her eyes lost a little of their craziness, and then focused on my face above her. She looked horrified.

"What?" I shook her shoulders a little. "What were you going to say? That I was bad? Well I'm sorry."

She shook her head, tears leaking down the sides of her face and into her crazy red hair. "No, not bad. Fun. I was good, but you had fun." She sobbed again. "I'll never have fun like that Anita, I never will."

The police found us on our knees, crying, arms around each other. The young cop who came out of the car looked as if he was trying not to laugh.

"You ladies okay? We had a report of a scuffle."

I learned a long time ago to always be nice to cops, no matter what the situation. "It's okay, officer," I said, trying to smile. My lip had swollen and the words came out wrong. The smile didn't happen at all.

Susu had apparently not gotten that memo. She jumped up, breaking free of my arms. "Who? Who called the cops?" She looked around wildly. "It was someone in the church, wasn't it?"

"I can't say, ma'am. You all need to get in your car and move along."

"Yes, sir." I tried for the smile again.

"You goddamn people need to mind your own business!" Susu screamed. She picked up a rock from the prayer garden that bordered one side of the parking lot and heaved it at the building. A classroom window shattered.

She turned around, a look of wild glee in her face.

Totally nuts.

The cops were coming at her from either side, trying to corral her. I thought about jumping into the minivan and just taking off and leaving her insane self to them.

I remembered what she said about our mom, who had died in her arms while I was grabbing coffee with Daddy. She wouldn't want me to ditch my sister, even if she had gone insane.

"Susu, just calm down, you're making things worse for yourself." I got in closer to the tangle of navy blue arms and Susu arms and tried to grasp my sister.

"Ma'am, we'll need you to back away." The cop was huffing and puffing from the exertion. Susu wasn't even breathing hard, except to scream. That yoga really paid off.

"She's my sister, officer. I can take care of her." I'm not sure what he heard from my swollen lip. It was like having a water balloon pinned to my mouth.

Susu got an arm loose and punched the cop in the nose. He pulled back and his elbow clocked me in the lip again. It hurt so much that I slapped his ear. Oops.

I thought I'd at least get an apology from Susu, but she sat stiff and hard-eyed as we were put in the back of the patrol car. My interview suit was a mess and one of the heels had come off of my Moschinos.

Handcuffs, and I wasn't even in the bedroom. This was a week full of firsts.

Carl bailed us out.

"Disorderly conduct." He closed the door on his wife's side

of the car and held the handle of mine, ready to do the same. "Good thing the kids weren't in the car."

He shook his head, closed the door and drove us home. It was a quiet trip, because Susu wasn't speaking and I had two stitches in my lip.

Heidi was excited to see us. She'd been told we were in an accident and wanted to see my stitches. I went straight to bed, knocked out by painkillers, the booking process, and my sister's revelation.

Close to daybreak I had a weird dream that Susu was sitting on my bed, caressing my upper arm and crying. "I love you, Anita. I'm sorry I was so jealous. I'm sorry I'm making my husband and my children suffer. I just want to have a little fun. Something to remember when I'm old."

"It's overrated," I tried to say, but my lips were stuck together from the salve I'd put on them.

When I woke up, late the next morning, Susu was gone.

"What do you mean, gone?" It was hard to speak with a swollen lip.

"Gone as in took a cab and left with a suitcase." Carl looked as if he was one step away from the deep end. He was flinging starched, folded shirts into a huge pilot case.

"You'll have to check a suitcase that size. Why don't you choose a smaller bag?"

He didn't stop. Tennis shoes, hiking boots, and thermal underwear.

"Carl, I doubt she's gone to the Arctic Circle. Where are you going, and what are you going to look for?" And are you leaving me here alone in charge of the kids? Yikes.

No answer.

"And say you find her. What'll you do then? Toss her over your shoulder, or put her in this suitcase? Get real." That got him. He whirled to face me. "Get real? I'll show you real." He flung open the door, where Heidi was listening, wide-eyed. "Real enough for you?"

Heidi straightened, looked at both of us, and ran down to her room. Her door slammed.

"Do you think she knows?"

"That her mother's gone?" Carl's laugh was short and bitter. "Oh yeah. She woke up when Susu left. Luckily, Tony's still asleep, so keep it down."

Damn. I left Carl to his crazy-ass packing and knocked on my niece's door. No answer, so I opened it and went in. The room was spotless, every Barbie and Diva doll in place, a teddy bear tea in full swing on tiny tables and chairs in one corner.

Little feet stuck out from under the Disney princess dust ruffle on the bed.

I sat on the bed carefully. "Well. Looks like Heidi's gone somewhere. Too bad. I was going to tell her that I was going to bring her mommy home. Guess I can't. Wonder if she knows where her mommy went?"

Silence.

"I wonder if those teddy bears know? Excuse me? Hate to interrupt your tea party, but do any of you know where Heidi's mom has gone?"

"Las Vegas," A little voice said from under the bed.

"Really?" Was she making it up? Would a little girl who didn't live in Nevada or visit the city know about Las Vegas? "Las Vegas. Did she tell you that?"

"She said she was going to Las Vegas." Her little girl's voice went deeper as she did a darn fine impression of her mother's faux Georgia accent. "Las Vegas, land of slots and sluts."

Well, there was a word little girls didn't often say. Susu was

definitely headed to Nevada. "Thanks, Heidi. I'll bring your mommy back. And when I do, let's get a pedicure."

Her little toes wiggled good-bye.

I had to haul my crazy sister home, but where in sin city would I look?

# Chapter 3

I'd been to Paris three times, and I wasn't sure if this one counted as the fourth. The Eiffel Tower was there. The little cobblestoned streets and *boulangeries* filled with tasty treats were there. The hordes of American tourists were there. But so were long rows of blinking, chiming, singing slot machines.

The Paris Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, the theme park version of the City of Lights, was where Susu had booked a room, according to the receipt she'd left in her computer's printer tray, almost as if she was daring us to find her.

She'd bought a round-trip ticket and hotel package from an online service. Carl had immediately started to look for flights, although I tried to convince him that he was the last person she'd want to see there.

I guess I don't get any points for tact. But honestly, she was running away from a situation that she needed to face. Having the main instigator chase her to Las Vegas was not going to help.

#### BERTA PLATAS

A couple of calls to my friends at Delta got me a first-class seat on the red-eye. Thank goodness for the severance package that allowed me to fly with my old privileges.

I raided Susu's closet while Carl was tied up on the phone. One look at her so-called wardrobe and I realized one reason why she'd been so depressed. She hadn't thrown any of her "fat" clothes away, and they were like an open door beckoning her back to her old weight. She also hadn't left behind any of her new clothes, darn her.

I didn't have a stitch to my name and no time to buy more right now, although I'd be giving Carl's credit card a workout shortly.

In the meantime, my Prada tote was packed with Susu's cotton granny panties. I refused to wear the denim jumper and white tennis shoe outfit, nor the fleece ensembles that were a far cry from Juicy Couture.

I was in a navy blue JCPenney suit that screamed "junior office clerk," but it was the only decent outfit my sister owned. It hung on me. With my stitched-up lip, I must have been quite a sight.

Before I got on the plane I called the hotel from a pay phone, identified myself as Susu, and added my sister Anita to my room. The hotel clerk asked the usual questions, but I was ready for them, with everything from Susu's address to her Social Security number. I told myself that it wasn't identity theft, it was a family rescue.

The flight attendants on the trip out were kind, plying me with juice and drinks because I couldn't chew peanuts or pretzels. I wasn't good at talking, either. It hurt more today than it had yesterday.

Las Vegas is a 24/7 town, so I had no trouble grabbing a shuttle to the hotel. I walked past the reservation desk and headed straight to the house phones and once more pretend-

ed to be Susu, asking if my sister Anita had checked in yet.

"Not yet," the clerk answered.

I smiled into the phone and went to check in. Was I sneaky, or what?

"Has my sister Susana checked in yet?"

"She has." The elegantly dressed reception clerk smiled as she took my driver's license and photocopied it. I held my breath until the clerk returned, smiling.

I slipped the key card into my jacket pocket and tried not to race to the elevators. I wanted this over with and my sister back home where she could take care of me, damn it.

The elevators were crowded and I had to wait until one arrived that had room for me and my suitcase full of ugly borrowed clothes. When the brass doors opened again, twelve half-naked hunks grinned at me.

*Hallelujah.* One hour in Vegas and I'd already hit the jackpot. I squeezed in and rode upstairs in a wave of body heat and testosterone.

By the time I got to my floor I knew they were part of a boxing team in town for a big Golden Gloves match, and that they'd been downstairs working out. When the doors slid open I pocketed the list of names and hotel room numbers. I had dates lined up for the next three days. Seems boxers are fascinated by women with stitched-up lips.

I slid the key card into the door and eased it open. The light was turned off and there was no noise. I debated sneaking around in the dark. What the heck. If she was here, she'd know about it soon enough. I flipped the light on. The place was a mess. Susu had made herself at home.

Clothes were draped over every surface, and there were shoes all over the floor. I stared at a large pair of men's deck shoes set neatly by the desk. Uh-oh.

The bathroom counter held a man's toiletry kit, along with

Susu's signature rose-perfumed lotions and bath gel.

I backed out of the room, turning the lights off. I was so not telling my brother-in-law about this.

Back in the lobby I booked another room, smaller, but with a truly superior bathroom. No tub, but a shower that would hold six comfortably. Something to keep in mind when I partied later.

I thought about what to do next. Watch her hotel room door? Hang out at the bar? This was not the town where you could ask if anyone had seen a crazy redhead. The place was infested with them.

After stuffing the hideous clothes in a drawer, I went downstairs, hoping for a Susu sighting. No luck. Nothing to do now but to get decent, and that meant a trip across the street to the Bellagio, and the best shopping this side of Rodeo Drive.

When I returned I was dragging three full shopping bags, and Carl's Amex card was feeling heavy. What better reward from a grateful spouse than to outfit his needy sister-in-law after she returned his runaway wife? This was powerful incentive to succeed.

I dashed upstairs and changed into one of my new outfits, a pair of Diesel jeans, a fluttery Diane von Furstenburg top, and a pair of Kate Spade flats.

At least my lip had subsided from plum-sized to Angelina Jolie. The pain was something else, but I hadn't filled the pain medicine subscription, (a) because I'd had no money, and (b) because I didn't want to be doped up when I found Susu, although I was craving a cocktail in the worst way. Feeling more like myself, I went downstairs on a Susu hunt.

Two hours later I sat at the bar, sipping a Cosmo through a straw from the normal side of my fat lip, watching a clown work the crowd waiting at the restaurant's wrought-iron

gates. The clown wore baggy black pants, a tight black and white striped T-shirt, a red scarf tied around his neck, and a black beret at a jaunty angle. He was built. A flash of red hair shot by, trailed by Susu's unique laugh.

I jumped from the bar stool and followed, maneuvering through the maze of slot machines and dazed tourists up way past their bedtimes.

It was Susu all right. She was in the elevator banks, leaning against the wall, with a man slobbering all over her neck. Her head was thrown back, like a victim in a vampire movie, and her mouth was making little ooh-ooh sounds.

Gross, but at least I could get her back to Atlanta before Carl showed up. I'd almost reached them when the man heard my rapid footsteps and looked up. He wasn't a man. He was a kid. I stopped dead. I'd been expecting George Clooney, but this was Orlando Bloom.

Susu's eyes opened and after a second focused. On me. "Anita!"

"Anita? Like, your sister?" The kid looked at me with interest. Who knows what crazy tales she'd told him?

"That's me. Who are you?"

He extended a hand. "Rod Patterson. Of Patterson Tires fame."

"I've never heard of Patterson Tires."

He blushed. "Not here, of course. But we have twenty-five stores in California."

"Congratulations. Susu, can we talk?"

Susu pushed away from the wall. She was wearing a black satin corset thing with a short skirt that laced up the sides of her hips and no underwear to speak of.

"I don't think we have anything to talk about, Anita, and I don't know how you found me, but you can go home now."

"No can do. Homeless, remember? Unlike you, who has a

nice house, and a *husband*. And two kids. Remember them?" I added those last for Tire Boy's benefit.

He smiled. "Susu told me all about them."

The elevator door opened behind them and Susu grabbed young Master Patterson and pulled him into the car. She punched a button and the door slid shut before I could jump in, too.

I stepped back and watched the numbers on the digital display. They stopped at four. I smiled. *Gotcha*.

My triumph was short-lived. The fourth floor, like all the other floors of this hotel, consisted of several intersecting homogenized corridors. Same rugs, same doors, and just about soundproofed. Was it 426 or 456? The card in my pocket was unmarked, damn it.

Beside the elevators was a doorway marked STAIRS, which further deflated my joy. They could have jumped off here and walked to another floor.

By now it was almost three in the morning. I went down the hallways, listening. A couple of late night partiers gave me weird looks as they staggered past, then I got a hit.

Insane giggles bubbled through a door. I'd heard that drunken laugh before.

"Susu, open up!"

The giggles stopped. I prepared my speech about her poor children. Poor little Heidi. Poor baby Tony. Poor me.

The door swung open. "You asking for Susu?" The guy was wearing what looked like a shiny wet suit and a mask. The wet suit was attached by crisscrossed cords tied over a basketball-shaped belly covered in black hair.

Was Susu a nympho? And why was she punishing herself? This guy was beyond gross. "Yes. Is she here?"

He stepped aside. "See for yourself."

I took one step closer and looked over his shoulder. A

woman was tied to the bed, face covered with a hood.

"Susu?"

The man giggled and reached for me. I fell backward, grabbed the doorjamb and ran like hell. The guy was the giggler, and it couldn't have been Susu on the bed, since there hadn't been enough time since I'd last seen her for Susu to be hooded and tied up.

It seemed to be consensual weirdness, but not for me. At the end of the hall I stopped, gasping. Thank goodness for flats. I wouldn't have made it in my doomed Moschinos.

I looked down the hall at the endless doors, each neatly labeled with a room number. Impossible. I opened the stairwell door and headed two floors up to my room.

The room next to mine was having a raucous party. I thought briefly that it might be them, but it was a card party. I fell asleep to hysterical cries of "Go Fish."

Anything goes in Vegas.

The telephone awoke me an hour later. I fumbled for the receiver. "Fire?"

"No. Who's Fire?" It was Carl.

"Not who. What. I thought there must be a fire, because it's four in the morning."

"Oh. It's seven here. I thought I'd call to see if you found her."

"I did, last night. But it was so late I didn't want to bother you. Thought you might be asleep." I waited, but no apology came for waking me up out of mine.

"You have her? You're not dicking around, are you?"

I almost laughed. If anyone was allowed to use that phrase, it was Big Carl. "You heard me, right? I *don't* have her, but I *did* see her. She didn't want to talk to me. She's safe, she's here. I'll catch up with her. Stick tight, keep your cell phone handy. Say hi to the kids from Aunt Anita." I hung up and fell back asleep, but the damage had been done. I dreamed that Carl was there, and his freakishly huge dick was chasing me around the room. When I caught up with my cradle-robbing sister I needed to ask her if the Tire Kid was better than what she had at home.

I was up at eleven A.M., local time. I showered and dressed and headed downstairs to breakfast. Afterward I wondered what to do. I wasn't cut out for this amateur detective business. Too impatient, and it seemed like I'd be spending a lot of time watching and waiting.

I wasn't worried that I'd miss Susu and Baby Rod. The way they'd been chewing on each other's faces, they'd probably been at it all night and were right now either in mid-bunny or sleeping it off.

I thought wistfully of the deep sleep that only comes after satisfying sex, and got so worked up that I bought three more pairs of shoes and a killer silk Nicole Miller dress in red. This was such a party town. You had to be prepared, you know?

My mood about seven hundred dollars lighter, I went back to Paris and stopped at the Café Ile St. Louis, where I'd had breakfast. I ordered a café au lait and skimmed the *New York Times*. I didn't notice Baby Boy Patterson slip into the seat opposite mine until he poked his head over the top of my newspaper.

"I'll bet that's popular at the frat house." I picked up my coffee, ready to either sip nonchalantly or throw it in his face.

He sat back down. "How'd you know?"

I folded the paper. "Because I was young once."

He snorted. "Yeah, like you're a crone."

"I'm twenty-four. You're what? Seventeen?"

"Twenty-two." He was sulking now, his lower lip stuck out. Or he was doing an impression of me?

"Susu's almost forty." She'd kill me if she heard me say that. She'd just turned thirty. "She's hot."

"Yeah, and you're going to get hurt, you little homewrecker you." My expression was probably not the friendliest, because he quit being defensive and sat up straight, watching me warily.

"Are you threatening me?"

"Yes." I sighed. "No. But Susu's all confused. She's going through some rough times. This is me being nice and telling you to back off or she'll drag you through it, too." I eyed him, his expensive haircut, his black on black striped shirt. Ben Sherman, I bet. My last fling had one just like it. "I was right, wasn't I? You're in school?"

"Yeah. I'm a senior at Princeton."

La de da. "So where did you meet my sister?"

"Online."

"Oh, brother."

"No, really. It's great. We can talk about anything. She is so awesome. And we have so much in common—"

"Diapers, a mortgage, a husband?"

He gave me a look. "She told me about all that. Anyway, we decided that this would be a great place to meet." He waved around.

"So you hadn't met before yesterday?" And she said I worked fast.

"Not in person, but we'd e-mailed and chatted online so much, I felt as if she was my best friend." His face glowed when he talked about Susu. Not good.

"Listen, Rod." I grabbed his still-waving hand. He must have had some Italian in his background. "My sister's all the family I've got. What she has for you is probably hormonal. Like, a hot flash or something. She'll come to her senses soon." Please, God. Very soon. "I don't want you to get hurt, either."

"You're wrong, Anita. She's the best thing that's ever hap-

pened to me." He tried to tug his hand out of my grasp, but I held it tighter, then added my other hand. He pulled and I pulled. It slowly got closer to me. The whole while he was talking about how great Susu was.

A man's voice cut through his protests. "I thought Mom was hysterical, but here you are. What the hell do you think you're doing, Rod?"

Distracted, Rod quit pulling and his hand hit my breast and stayed there. I released him and he pulled back, knocking my coffee cup over. Café au lait spilled sideways, pooling at the edge of the table before forming a fast drip to the floor.

Rod and I both leaped to mop it up and banged our heads together. The guy who'd upset him laughed, an evil-sounding bark. I turned and saw an older version of Rod.

This guy was more Clooney than Bloom, and would have been very yummy if it wasn't for the sneer on his face.

Rod was standing, almost at attention, next to the table. I looked up at the newcomer. "I'm impressed. How are you with dogs?"

"Dogs?"

"You seem to have Rod trained to salute when you show up. Can you do the same with dogs?"

"Rod's not trained, or he'd still be at school. In class."

I turned to Rod. "You left school during classes?"

He shrugged. "Just for a few days."

That's all Susu was to him. Fun for a few days. I wondered if she felt the same. If so, then this whole thing would blow over and I could get her home. If not, my deluded sib was going to be hurt. Hurt and divorced, because Carl was going to dump her cheating ass.

My money was on the mutual fun theory. I beamed. "Well why didn't you say so?"

The brother glared at me. "Who are you?"

"Anita Suarez. I'm Susu's sister." I held out my hand.

He didn't take it. One eyebrow went up. "Sister?"

Helpful Rod chimed in. "Yeah. Remember, I told you about her? Anita's the slut."

# Chapter 4

I don't know why I didn't just deck him. A good *piñazo* with my closed fist, one that would make my boxing buddies proud.

Instead, I stood there, mouth opening and closing like a fish's. *The slut*. That hurt.

"I'm Chris Patterson." He extended a hand. I shook hands with him, grateful for his adult attitude. "I apologize for the moron."

"Some brother you are. That's not nice." Rod looked insulted.

"Not nice? You call me a slut, and he's not nice?" I couldn't believe this idiot.

"I didn't call you that. Your sister did. I was just quoting."

"You'd better shut up before she lets you have it." Chris's face looked like a storm front was moving through.

"I'm going upstairs." Rod nodded to me and pushed past his brother.

"Meet me in the lobby in thirty minutes." Chris glanced at

his watch. "We can catch the next shuttle to the airport and catch the two o'clock to Newark."

Rod shrugged and kept walking toward the elevators.

"He's such a kid." Chris looked down at the mess on my table. "Can I get you another one of those?"

"Thanks, but I think I'll head upstairs, too."

"To warn your sister?"

He didn't merit an answer. My newspaper was ruined, so I abandoned it. I dropped a five on the table as an apology to whoever would have to bus this mess and headed out of the café.

A strong hand on my upper arm pulled me short. I stared down at it, then at Chris. "And here I was, thinking you were better than your brother. Let go or I'll scream."

"Scream and I'll kiss you. Happens here all the time. No one will look twice."

"You are so disturbed. And I don't even want to know how you came up with that lame line. Scream and I'll kiss you." I snorted, not an easy thing to do. Get it wrong and it sounds like you have a cold. Or worse, you end up with an embarrassing nose thing and no tissue handy.

He looked at me, expressionless. "Where's your sister?"

"Why ask me? You should have asked your brother." I'd wanted to follow Rod upstairs and find where they were, but he was long gone. "Too late."

Chris looked toward the elevators, then back at me. "Damn. I thought you were in on it. You mean you don't know where they are?"

"In this hotel somewhere. I've been leaving them messages since I got in yesterday, but no luck."

He cursed. "He's going to blow the semester. You know how hard it is to get into Princeton? The idiot."

"Is that where you went?"

He glared at me. I shivered. He was so George Clooney. Angry George Clooney.

Carl had left a brief phone message to call him. I dialed, and he answered right away.

"I'd come, but someone's got to stay here and take care of the kids."

"It's better to let me handle it, Carl. We'll be back soon." I didn't mention Rod. I'd always thought that Carl was a dull, plodding kind of guy, but he was looking better all the time. Especially since Susu'd gone nuts.

I promised to call him later, then called the front desk to leave a message for Susu.

"She's checked out," the clerk said.

"Try Rod Patterson."

"Yes. I'll connect you to Mr. Patterson's room."

Bingo. The phone rang three times, and then the voice mailbox picked up.

"Susu, it's Anita. Carl's really worried about you. He's in Atlanta with the kids, but he's dying to come out here and I don't know how long I can hold him off. Call me, okay? I'm in room 752."

I didn't know what else to say. Rod had probably already warned her that his brother was here, looking for them. I hung up without saying good-bye.

If you're not gambling, and you're not with friends, Las Vegas is the world's most boring city. By three that afternoon I was ready to scream. I'd been keeping an eye on the front lobby, on the off chance that Chris would succeed in talking his brother into returning home. They'd have to walk right past me.

The time for the flight to New Jersey came and went, and no Patterson boys.

Had my sister been kidnapped by aliens, or what? She'd changed so much. My solid, mature sister was running around with a guy almost ten years younger. It would be hysterical if it wasn't so pathetic.

I was the one who was always accused of being selfish and wild, and here I was, trying to get her back to her old life. I dragged myself upstairs, nursing a headache from the constant noise of the slot machines.

I was snoozing through *Jerry Springer* when the phone rang. I jumped, mentally rehearsing what I'd tell Susu.

"Babe. Ready to party?" The lightly accented male voice wasn't familiar.

"Who is this?"

"Bernardo. Remember, from the bar last night? We compared fat lips."

The boxer!

"Bernardo, of course. How's the lip?"

"Better. I iced it. How's yours?"

"Much improved. Do you have a fight tonight?"

"Not me. Not till day after tomorrow. I thought you might want to party with us tonight. A bunch of us are going to catch a couple of shows, maybe go dancing. How about it?"

I looked at the TV. *Springer* was muted. I'd slept through it, and could expect more of the same. I'd go insane.

"Where do you want to meet?"

"I can come up."

"Ha ha. Good try. I'll meet you in the lobby, at the foot of the Eiffel Tower."

"Cool with me. See you there."

I jumped into the shower, feeling energized again. If Susu was going to be the death of me, I might was well have a little fun before I died.

\* \* \*

The house beat was hot at Ra's. We were deep inside the pyramid at Luxor, dancing under the spread wings of the Egyptian god.

Bernardo was a dancing fiend, and I laughed as I worked to keep up with him. The night had been great. We'd started at the Barbary Coast, eating dinner at Rai's before coming here to dance. The plan was to head to the Bellagio later for more dancing, and then end up with drinks before—whatever we ended up doing.

Flashes of light strobed through the darkness, giving me brief glimpses of Bernardo and his friends and their dates. I felt a little uneasy about their dates. I suspected that some of them were rentals.

My heart matched the heavy beat around me, and I loved the feel of the little silk shift as it slid around my thighs. It was hard to tell in the throbbing darkness, but I could have sworn that Susu was on the dance floor, too. Wishful thinking.

I stumbled a little, and Bernardo grabbed my arm.

"Hey, baby. Take it easy. You could fall down." He had to yell the words into my ear, his lips brushing my cheek. My nipples got hard. The guy was my height and all muscle.

His arm was around my waist and we were dancing closer, but my eyes were scanning back and forth, looking for my sister.

I spotted her again a few minutes later, and the same flash of red light illuminated Rod, dancing with his eyes closed and his head thrown back. What a dork. What did she see in him?

She didn't see me. I pulled against Bernardo and we danced closer to them.

Rod saw me. I know because he looked scared, then angry. He grabbed Susu and said something in her ear.

The next flash of light showed a startled Susu, looking

around wildly. What did she think, that I was going to knock her out and toss her over my shoulder?

For a second I considered it. Bernardo and his friends could definitely help me tote her home. I could tie her up, duct tape her mouth, and put her on a plane. On the other hand, Homeland Security wouldn't let me take a ticking bomb on board the plane, and Susu was definitely explosive.

I danced closer to her. Bernardo good-naturedly bounced along behind me.

"Susu, we need to talk," I yelled.

She grinned and twirled, moving her hips to the beat. College Boy jerked along like a balloon on a string. Dork.

I matched my sister's rhythm. "I talked to Carl."

"So what?" Yelling while she jumped took all the inflection out of her voice.

"So did you get my phone message?"

"No. No phone message. What did you want?"

I glared at College Boy. "I left you a message earlier today. Rod must have deleted it."

She laughed. "Probably did."

"And you don't care? If I did that you'd massacre me. You'd call me irresponsible."

The music had moved on to another dance tune, but the beat stayed the same. Bernardo and Rod danced around us, but we were face-to-face, dancing hard and yelling to be heard over the ear-pounding house jam.

Susu appeared and disappeared with the changing lights. It was the most surreal conversation I'd ever had.

"I don't care what Carl says, I'm not coming back until I'm ready, which may be never." She danced away and then danced back. "And by the time he comes here, I'll have moved on."

"Doesn't College Boy have to go back to school?"

Rod must have been close enough to hear, because he scowled at me.

Susu looked at him, then looked at me. "Okay. You want to talk? We'll talk." She grabbed my hand and pulled me off the dance floor.

Bernardo started to grab at me, too, but I waved him away. Susu didn't do the same to Rod because he stalked out after us.

We ducked into the restroom alcove.

I pulled away from her grip, but she held on. "You're hurting me, Susu."

"I'm hurting you? You are in my face everywhere I go. Why can't you leave me alone?"

"Okay, so your husband wants you back and you're not playing. That's cool. Your marriage is your business. But what about the kids?"

"So now you're the ethics police? You?" She laughed.

"What? Why is that funny?" Rod was hovering. I looked at him. "Bud, what is it about you that's so hot? I'm not getting it."

Rod gave me a look. "Why don't you go home? Your sister is an adult. Leave her alone."

"She's married."

"Look around you. This is freakin' Las Vegas. Most of the people around here are married. Not to each other."

He had a point.

Susu rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. She doesn't care if I'm married or not. She wants me to go home because she's feeling bad and wants a little home cooking."

"So untrue." Damn. Did she know me, or what? "I don't want you to get hurt."

"Rod won't hurt me. He's a decent man. He's been offered a job with the Defense Department."

Rod grinned and nodded, proud of himself.

"He's not the one I think will hurt you. You're hurting yourself. You're ruining your marriage, you've abandoned your kids."

"I have not. They're safe with their father." She gave me the eyebrow. "Come on, Rod. I've still got some dancing left in me."

Bernardo stuck his head in the hallway. "Is this a private party?"

Susu twirled her fingers in his short, crispy curls as she walked by. "Come on in, handsome. We were just leaving."

"Baby, you don't have to leave." He pointed after her as she and Rod left. "That's your bad-ass sister?"

"That's my goody two shoes sister. I'm the bad-ass in the family."

He watched Susu twitch her ass back to the dance floor. Her skirt was about six inches of green leather with a little gauze for a top. Rod strutted next to her. And she'd called *me* a slut?

"I think you lost that title."

I put my arm through Bernardo's. I wasn't worried. I'd have it back before morning.

# Chapter 5

Someone was banging on the door. I opened one eye and glared at the clock. Three A.M. This was not some wild Las Vegas—style wake-up call.

I was too exhausted to be worried. I closed my eyes and lay still, enjoying the weight of the covers, the feel of the expensive sheets against my skin. I'd enjoy this for just a little bit more and then I'd call the police.

The banging continued, now punctuated with someone yelling my name. Bernardo. He'd only left an hour ago. He probably forgot something, and I was about to give him hell for waking me up. I jumped up and flung open the door.

"What was it, your wallet?"

Chris Patterson's eyes widened as he took in my outfit, or lack thereof. "Do I need it?"

"Isn't it a little late to pay a visit?"

"You look like you're ready for company." His eyes were clamped on my breasts. I glanced down. My nipples were waving at him through my thin knit camisole. Traitors. "I was ready for bed."

"That's what I said." He started to push past me, but I blocked his way. Unfortunately, it brought us into full frontal contact. Well, the "unfortunate" part is open for debate. Big brother Chris had a hard body, long and lean, the way I like it. All thoughts of Bernardo slipped away. The bad-ass title was mine once more, in spades.

He'd put a hand on my waist to push me aside, but it was starting to slip down over my hip and toward happier places. I lifted my face, ready to let him have it. A kiss or a scream, depending on his next move.

He shoved me aside. I screamed.

He whirled to face me. "Shut up. It's three o'clock in the morning. You'll wake everyone up."

"Me? You're the one that barged in here."

"Where's your sister?" He looked under the king-sized bed.

"I'm not into threesomes, incest, or girls. She's with your brother, in their own room, their own bed." I looked at the clock radio pointedly. "Normal people sleep, you know."

I glanced at the open door, half expecting Bernardo to reappear, wishing he really had left something.

Chris followed my gaze and smirked. "I get it. You were expecting someone else." He started looking around, as if he was the head cop in a crime scene. "Are all these yours?" He'd opened a drawer and was sorting through my new underwear. He opened another drawer and pulled out an immense cotton panty, one of Susu's old ones.

He held it up, brows raised in astonishment.

I snatched it out of his fingers. "Excuse me, that's not yours." I heard my voice rising, taking on a Fran Drescherish tone. I hate it when it does that. "Someone left that here in the room." I slammed the drawer shut. "You need to leave, Chris. We'll talk tomorrow morning at breakfast and come up with a plan for getting our sibs back, but I need my beauty sleep."

He looked me up and down. "I'm thinking you don't need to improve a single thing." He grinned at me. "So where's your sister? What's her name? Frou Frou?"

"Susu. Short for Susana. If you want to talk to her, call her. Just call the front desk and they'll put you through to their room." Daring him to do so, I went to the telephone on the little square nightstand to the right of my huge bed. I dialed the front desk. Chris pulled open another drawer, lifting out tops and staring at the tags that were still attached.

"Expensive taste you've got, Miss Anita."

"Rod Patterson's room, please . . . Yes, of course. This is Anita Suarez." I turned and caught him staring appraisingly at my backside. I was wearing one of my new thongs, a black satin one with little black cords that tied at the side. He seemed to be fascinated by the little rhinestone bow that joined the cords in the back. I yanked down on the hem of my camisole, trying to cover it, but my breasts popped out.

"Does that say 'Cutie'?"

"You shouldn't read a girl's backside. It's not polite."

He was staring, open-mouthed. "Not polite to look at what's in my face?" He pulled out the giant granny panties. "Maybe you should wear these instead."

"No way." He'd already seen just about everything I had. I figured covering up would be false modesty, so I went to the bathroom to check out my hair and slipped into the high heels I'd abandoned by the sink.

"I'll bet your sister's just like you." His voice trailed off in a moan. "My poor brother doesn't stand a chance."

"Your poor brother is getting a job with the Defense Department, according to my sis. He can take care of himself."

"They scouted him," Chris said proudly, trying, and failing, to not look at my breasts.

"That's awesome. If he's old enough to keep the country safe, he's old enough to spend a weekend in Las Vegas without Big Brother coming to bail him out."

"He's never met anyone like her. He doesn't know—"

I'd had it. "Doesn't know what?" My fists were on my hips and I was starting to shake. "What fork to use at dinner? How to avoid the phone when you're hanging with a married woman?"

"Married?" The word seemed to be a revelation to him.

"Yeah. Married. With two kids and a husband who's probably too good for her."

Chris grinned. "Whose side are you on?"

"The side that will keep me happy, cowboy." And right now this big guy constituted my side. "You're treating me like the enemy, but we're after the same thing. To get our sibs back on track and out of Vegas."

"True, but you aren't being helpful. Does her husband have a gun?"

"No. Not if you don't count the 30.06. But he uses that mainly for deer."

Chris looked so freaked out that I laughed and told him I was kidding. Actually, Carl had a whole gun safe full of weapons. But he kept them locked up, out of the reach of kids and visitors, and it would never occur to him to use them on anyone, even an intruder. Besides, Homeland Security would stop him at the airport.

"We should work together." He spoke suddenly, as if my thought had entered his mind through my psychic percolator.

"Sure." I sat on the bed and stared at my fingernails, not anxious to be found out. "When did that idea come to you, exactly?" He ignored me. "This husband of hers, what's he to you?"

The question was so unexpected that my head shot up and I looked into his face. He was staring at me, his expression solemn and angry.

"He's my brother-in-law, that's what, you perv."

"Perv? Me? I'm salt of the earth." He sat on the bed next to me. "As a matter of fact, I didn't really believe you had a thing with your brother-in-law. But something's up. You and your sister are not normal."

"I'll say." I hoped I sounded normal. I craved normalcy. Instead, I got Susu. Bad karma. "She's a maniac. I've got my hands full trying to get her back home."

"Why doesn't her husband come to get her?" He lifted a hand. "No, you don't have to answer that. He doesn't want her back. I know I wouldn't."

"Back off, *cabrón*. Who are you to say what Carl wants and doesn't want? It just so happens that they are very much in love. She's having an—episode—that's all."

No one dissed my big sister.

"An episode? Running away from your family to Las Vegas with a college kid is an episode?" He looked and sounded incredulous. "So in your family, what's full-fledged lunacy look like?"

I jumped up and made a fist.

"Never mind. I'm looking at it. So all that trash talk about you was just that. Trash." He shook his head. "I knew it. No wonder you looked so crazy—you were trying to keep up with your sister."

I was overwhelmed by a warm wave of indignation. "There's no keeping up with her."

"You and I are in the same boat, aren't we? Trying to corral our runaway sibs."

"Yeah. Maybe we should join forces." I stared at the bath-

room light, thinking of Susu's erratic behavior. How could she think that Carl would ever forgive her for what she did?

I thought of that gun cabinet again, and felt a twinge of fear. Maybe she'd drive him over the edge. Maybe he'd come out here and shoot us both. Of course, he'd have to drive, and maybe he'd cool down before he got here.

I turned to Chris, who was staring at me as if I'd said something brilliant. "What?"

"I think you're right. We should join forces."

"Did I say that last, or did you?"

"You did. I'm sorry, it's late and you were ready for bed." His eyes trailed down my body, checking out my so-called sleep gear. "Unless you want me to stay?"

"Dream on. I'll meet you at eight in the lobby bistro where I saw you this morning."

Guys. They always think that if they see it, they can have it. I guess that's the allure of strip clubs, where every ugly Joe can imagine he can go home with a dancer.

I went to sleep alone, and dreamed that Bernardo and Chris were boxing while I changed diapers and called out, "What about me?" Talk about your stress dreams.

## Chapter 6

The faux cobblestone street by the lobby was full of angry old ladies. I stood in line behind ten of them, waiting to get into the Ile St. Louis. I could see a flustered black-uniformed employee just inside the iron gates, waving his hands hysterically. Bad sign.

"This place is the pits," one of women said. "I'm going to write and complain. I paid a lot for this package. We were supposed to be seated at eight."

"You know Lois Cathcart? Her pacemaker failed. She's in the hospital." The woman she was speaking to was apparently on a different channel.

"Mercy. Did anyone call her husband?" The first old lady clutched a cup to her bosom.

I thought it was a coffee refill, but then realized that the cup was full of nickels. Slot fodder.

I'd come down early to wait for Chris, afraid that I'd miss him and he'd do something crazy like try to track down Rod alone. I didn't trust Susu. She might run again, or worse. Maybe I'd watched too many episodes of Law and Order.

"I almost missed you in this crowd."

I turned around, relieved to find Chris behind me. "I got here early."

He eyed the group surrounding us. "Not early enough."

The tense restaurant employee approached the gate, and the silver-haired crowd surged forward, taking me with them. There must have been fifty of them, and they were crying out angrily.

"When are we going to eat?" an old lady said.

"I can't stand up for this long," another put in. "My hip is killing me."

The man put his arms up. I think he meant to quiet them, but it looked a lot like surrender.

"Ladies, we've had a little setback, but I assure you, you'll all be seated within the hour."

"An hour? He expects this granny lynch mob to wait an hour?" I adjusted the shoulder strap of my purse. "I can take care of this. I know what to do."

Chris rolled his eyes. "Let's grab a cup of coffee at the *boulangerie* and go. We don't have time to wait for a table."

I looked him up and down. "What's your hurry? It's daylight, and Susu and Rod are sleeping it off, like happy little vampires. We've got all day."

My attention went back to the unhappy guy at the center of the firestorm. I worked my way to the front of the crowd, unsuccessfully trying to shield my sandaled toes from orthopedic shoes and rubber-tipped walkers.

When I reached the gate, I called out to the man. He was staring into the crowd. Behind him several uniformed women stood silently. The café was empty except for a few folks eating breakfast. The bleary ones had probably been at the machines all night. The others looked like business people.

### BERTA PLATAS

I motioned to one of the women. "I can help. Let me in."

She opened the gate a little and I slipped through and immediately grabbed the man by the elbow and hauled him around a corner.

"Are you insane? Why don't you let them in? They need to sit down."

"I can't. There's not enough room for them in the café. Clarice didn't show up this morning and there's no record of their breakfast arrangement."

I looked around. "There isn't room here for fifty."

"Seventy-five," he corrected. "They were supposed to sit in the restaurant next door, but it wasn't finalized. It's our fault, but without Clarice—"

"Forget Clarice. Have the servers set places next door for seventy-five. Order enough café au lait and hot tea for all of them. Bring in croissants and orange juice and forget all the hot food. You can make it up to them at lunch. Give them buffet tickets or something."

"Croissants. I don't think we have enough."

"Get them from the *boulangerie*. They do bulk orders, right?"

"Yes, they cater. We can do that." Relieved, he hurried off, snapping his fingers at the servers.

I grabbed one of them before she followed the others. "Open the restaurant and seat the group while you set the tables. I'm going to get them some entertainment."

I slipped back out. I cleared my throat and put on my flight attendant voice, clear and loud enough to be heard by everyone on the floor. "Ladies, if you'll follow me I'll get you situated." I raised a hand so they could see it. "Follow my hand, please."

Looking like a geriatric version of Madeline's crocodile line, I led them down the cobblestones to the restaurant. The

server had already opened the quaint arched doorway, and the women streamed through, their anger turned to excited chattering.

I left them to it and ran down the street to the shops where I'd seen the clown. He was there, juggling soft beanbags for a bored two-year-old.

"Excuse me? Can I borrow you?"

My breath caught when I saw him up close. He was perfect. Under the clown makeup he was a good-looking guy, and his broad shoulders and muscular chest did wonders for the goofy striped T-shirt. They didn't have clowns like this at *my* birthday parties.

"Pardon?" His French accent was convincing.

"I have a group of elderly ladies who are kind of irritated because their meal wasn't waiting for them. Do you know any songs and jokes? Can you do an older crowd?"

He grinned. "Mais, oui."

"Fabulous. Follow me." I looked at the kid, who had picked his nose and was examining the result on his fingertip. His mother came out of the shop and reached her hand down for him. He put it, boogie and all, in hers.

I shuddered and hurried back to the restaurant, the clown at my heels.

"I am Sebastien."

"Anita. Are you really French?" I couldn't believe it. This place was like a huge stage set. Beautiful, but unreal. I figured everyone was from around there.

"Yes, from New Jersey."

Of course.

I motioned him through the arch and he got right to work. Within seconds the old ladies' attention was riveted on the handsome young performer's agile hands and quick wit.

The servers were almost done setting the tables, and others

had started serving juice. The women seemed happy now and were teasing each other as the clown made mildly suggestive jokes as he juggled.

The hapless dude from earlier came to stand next to me. "I had champagne brought in, too, as an apology for the wait."

We stepped aside to allow a woman by with a tray of champagne flutes.

"Brilliant. I'm Anita Suarez, by the way."

"Ed Thompson, assistant café manager." We shook hands. "So, are you from corporate?"

"No, I'm a guest." And unemployed, too.

His brows rose. "You must be in the business, though. I really appreciate what you did. We're usually on the ball, but today everything fell apart."

"It happens." I patted his arm. "Call me if you need more help." I repeated my name. He could call the front desk to get a message to me. I spotted Chris leaning against the fake stucco wall across the street and walked over to him.

"Sorry I abandoned you."

"Don't be. I'm impressed." He pointed through the archway with a quick upturn of his chin. "You were a pro."

"It's a compulsion. I must have been a sheepdog in a previous life. I can't stand to see lost herds and bewildered flocks."

"I ordered breakfast for us."

"I need some." I followed him back to the Ile St. Louis, where the iron gates were now thrown open. Over coffee and buttery croissants I told him that I thought Susu and Rod were on the fourth floor.

"So we knock on all the doors?" he asked.

"I tried that. I won't go into what I saw."

He grinned. "I'll bet. As I see it, we have two options. We can bribe housekeeping to tell us, or at least to keep their eyes

out on who's where. We can also hang out at the elevators and catch them coming down the hall."

"The stairs are on the opposite side of the building."

"That's the problem with solution number two. The problem with solution number one is that we might have an incorruptible staff that won't take a bribe."

"Right. Like that's going to happen."

After breakfast, which I let him pay for, he went up to the fourth floor and I went to make friends in housekeeping.

The back end of the casino, like all large hotels, was a warren of utilitarian concrete areas. I found a woman uniformed like the ones I'd seen cleaning on my floor. Her hair was expertly colored and she wore well-applied makeup. I smiled and walked as if I worked here, keeping my torso turned so she couldn't see that I wasn't wearing a security pass. The laundry was ahead. I could hear the roar of the dryers and tumblers.

Another maid came out, prepping her cart with folded linen. This one was younger.

"Do you work upstairs?" I asked her.

I got a blank look, so I repeated the question in Spanish. "*Si*."

"Can I ask you for a favor? It's my sister Susan's birthday and I need to leave a present on her bed."

She put her fist on her hips and looked at me skeptically. "How did you get back here?"

"I walked. I just want to leave a teddy bear on my sister's pillow. Can you tell me who works the fourth floor?"

"I do, today." She was still frowning. This wasn't going to be easy. "You just walked back here?"

"Yes, why?"

She pointed up at the tall ceiling. I looked at what she was pointing at. A camera.

Moments later a security guard came through, looking

around. He spotted me and the maid slipped away silently. "Miss, are you a guest here?"

"Yes, sir." I gave him my high-watt flight attendant smile.

"May I see your room key?" I rummaged in my purse and produced my key card.

He examined it carefully, then handed it back. "The housekeeping area is for employees only. I'll escort you out."

"I just wanted to put a teddy bear on my sister's pillow, but I'm not sure where her room is. It's a surprise."

"Uh-huh." He walked beside me, careful not to touch me. I wasn't in trouble, yet.

"I guess you get a lot of odd requests."

He ushered me through the door and into the faux Parisian gaiety. "You wouldn't believe. I suggest you give your teddy bear to the front desk. They'll take care of it."

He said "teddy bear" as if he didn't believe it existed. The nerve.

Sebastien the clown walked by. "Thank you, Anita. I think I'll be working in the restaurant from now on."

"Really? That's great."

The security guard looked at the clown. "You know her?"

"Yes, she set up the restaurant this morning for the old ladies. They tipped big." He winked and went through the Employees Only door.

The guard looked confused. "You work here?"

"Not yet." I smiled and went up to my room, hoping to catch another housekeeping cart. No luck, but there was a message from Susu. She wanted to meet with me poolside at ten. I glanced at my watch and hurried back out.

If this went well, I'd have her on the nine o'clock to Atlanta.

The pool was on the roof, so I took the elevator up. The doors opened onto paradise. A huge garden surrounded the enormous circular pool, which wasn't crowded this early in the morning. I found Susu quickly. She was facedown on a massage table, having a poolside massage at the base of the Eiffel Tower.

"Here I am," I said gaily.

The woman who was digging into Susu's neck smiled up at me and continued her work.

"Hi, Anita." Susu sounded blissed out. "Jealous?"

"Oh, yeah. I want to put my hands around your neck, too."

She snorted into her crossed arms. "I had the best time last night. We should go out together more often."

"Running into you at a dance club is not going out together." She lifted her head and gave me a look, rolling her eyes up toward the masseuse behind her.

"Like she hasn't heard it all." I smiled at the woman. "Haven't you?"

"You wouldn't believe." The masseuse gave a short laugh.

"That's exactly what a security guard just told me downstairs. You need to go home, Susu."

"You sound like a broken record, Anita. I'm enjoying myself. I feel so alive."

"Then why are you acting like you have a death wish?"

"Don't be such a drama queen. Death wish. Carl wouldn't hurt anyone."

"How about Carl? Think he's hurt?"

This time when she lifted her head her eyes were blazing. She'd lost the sleepy, happy look.

"Carl is getting a taste of what I had. Abandoned with two kids and an ugly life."

"Ugly? A mansion in the suburbs, a new car, and yoga lessons? Friends who live on the river? A husband who gives you anything you want? Yeah, the tragedy of it makes me weep."

"I'm trapped, Anita. You don't understand. You're free to do

whatever you want. You're beautiful, and you travel, and you have lots of boyfriends. I feel ugly and used."

"Girl, there's nothing to be jealous of. I traveled because it was my job. It's hard to work on a plane and not end up somewhere else. And I was a flight attendant. That's kind of like being a waitress and bouncer at thirty-five thousand feet."

"But you loved it."

"I sure did. I am going to miss it every day of my life. Time to move on, though. I'm unemployed, and I don't have Carl paying *my* bills." Well, actually he was, but Susu didn't know that.

Susu had her head back in her arms as the masseuse worked on her shoulders. "I'm tired of Rod. How do you get rid of a guy?"

Relief swirled around me like a cooling breeze. "You let him down easy. You don't want to make a big scene, you know? So say something like, 'I have to go home.' It should be easy."

"Oh, I don't want to go home. I love this place. I just want to ditch Rod. He's such a kid. And he thinks he knows everything." She looked up at me and smiled. It wasn't a nice smile "I kind of like that guy you were dancing with. Very sexy. Rod's going back to school, and then I'm moving in with you."

I think my mouth actually dropped open, like in a cartoon. "With me?"

Bernardo would be so disappointed. And I had my eyes on hunky Chris, too. Having my messy sister with me would seriously damage my privacy, and my nerves. The only person who would be pleased with the arrangement was Carl.

"What's the matter, Anita? Don't like surprises? If you want to live with me in Atlanta, the least you could do is let me stay with you here in Vegas. We could go clubbing together. It'll be fun, like when we were in high school."

"We never hung out in high school. You were always at chess club and I was at cheerleading."

Her smile grew forced. "See? I have a lot of catching up to do."

I fished my key out of my pocket and put it on the table next to her elbow. "Room 752. Put your stuff away. Don't make a mess. And don't tell Junior where you are. I don't want weeping boyfriends at my door."

I got another card from the front desk, then called Chris from my room and told him about the latest development. He called me back five minutes later.

"So she's not going home?"

"No. I don't know whether to be happy or depressed. At least the Rod part of it is over with." And if Rod went home, Chris would probably leave, too. My day was getting worse by the minute.

"Want to have dinner tonight?"

"Yes. Susu can find her own fun. Is there a Thai place around here? I'm craving it."

"I'll find the best Thai place in the world for you. Be ready at eight. And dress up."

I danced around the room. Mine alone for only a few more minutes. It wouldn't be so bad. Chris had a room, too, if things headed in that direction. And Susu could find her own fun. If she didn't want to be with Rod and she didn't want to go home, she couldn't expect me to be her one-woman entertaining committee. Besides, she already had called me a slut. I had nothing to lose.

She couldn't hold me hostage about living in her house, either. I was getting into Vegas. I could stay here. I made a couple more calls, and then started to get ready for my big date.

Susu showed up while I was in the shower. I couldn't come out of the bathroom because she had the bellman moving suitcases around. She barked orders like a drill sergeant.

When he was gone I came out, wrapped in a towel. The hotel room had been transformed. Suitcases covered every surface, including my side of the king-sized bed. Susu had left.

I got my underwear from the drawer, then went to the closet to get my red gown. All of my clothes had been pushed to the right, six inches of the closet, where the light didn't reach. The rest of the space was taken up with Susu's stuff. I jammed her clothes to the left to give my few things some breathing room and put my dress on.

In the bathroom, I whiled away the minutes putting my stuff away into my cosmetics bag and doing my makeup. I surveyed the clean countertop glumly. Chances were it would be awful when I got back from my date.

I repaired the ends of my hair, making sure the strands lay the way I wanted them to, then grabbed the silk wrap I'd bought with the dress and hurried to the door. I didn't want to meet up with my sister.

The door opened before I reached it. Susu looked up, startled. She had her key card in her hand and was reaching down for another suitcase.

Her eyes widened. "Where are you headed?"

"Dinner. Don't wait up."

"Let me guess. That yummy boxer?"

"No, not him. But if he calls, tell him lunch is on me tomorrow to wish him luck. Tomorrow night is his big fight."

"He can leave a message. I won't be answering the phone."

"Oh." Of course. If she answered the phone, she might end up speaking to Carl. Or worse, Heidi. "See you."

She sat on the bed and looked around at all the stuff. Just for this little trip, she'd accumulated more belongings than I'd lost in L.A. when I got evicted. Except for furniture, of course. She looked a little lost. I refused to give in to pity, but I hurried

over to her and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Then before she could react, I was gone.

Chris met me downstairs and led me to a rental car. We left the strip's bright lights and drove north.

I watched him as we drove. He really did have a deep George Clooney vibe. He caught me staring and grinned. "What?"

"Nothing. Just thinking how strange this week has been."

"Tell me about it." He shook his head. "One minute I'm going over distribution reports, and the next my mother is hysterical, telling me that Rod is missing and that I have to drop everything to get him back in school."

"Is your mother the hysterical type?"

"Rock solid. I think she was seeing Vegas showgirl love child headlines." Again that grin, easier now that the danger of love children and older women had passed.

"That sort of thing doesn't make headlines. I'll bet it happens here every day. And worse, too." I smoothed the red silk of my dress over my leg.

He looked at me quickly and turned his face back to the road. "What do you mean?"

"People come here to either be themselves or be someone else. It's a potent combination. Love and hate sometimes have the same results. I'll bet the cops here have stories to tell."

"I'll bet."

"Your mother doesn't have to worry about Rod anymore." I played with the hem of my skirt. "He's going back to school."

Chris turned to look at her. The car veered toward the center line.

"The road, babe!"

He straightened the wheel and took a deep breath. "Are you sure?"

"My sister is both heartbroken and thrilled. I'm just relieved.

I thought it was just a fling, but I wasn't totally sure."

And I didn't know what I would have told Carl.

When we arrived at the restaurant, I was surprised to see that it was small and unassuming. I'd expected a luxuriously decorated place. The inside was spare and contemporary, and the minute we sat down, food started arriving at our table.

"I hope you don't mind. I preordered so we wouldn't have to wait."

"Impatient, aren't you?" I sipped from a spoonful of *tom kah kai* and shivered.

"How is it?"

"Heavenly. I'm a big fan of coconut and spicy food, and Thai has it all."

"Your last name is Suarez?"

"Yeah. My parents were born in Cuba. I was raised on black beans and rice and sweet fried bananas."

"Sounds great. I want to eat that."

"If you want it really authentic, I'll cook for you." I stopped. I didn't have a kitchen. What was I offering?

"Is something wrong?"

"Just thinking of what to do next." Find a job. Find a place to live. Get a life again.

"Finish your soup, or abandon it and try one of these." He waved at the savory dishes that were fast piling up around us.

"What did you do, order one of each?"

He shrugged.

The owner came out to greet us. "Take care with this food," he said. "Too hot makes your blood too hot." He winked.

Chris grinned at me, and I didn't know what to say. Me, who could flirt with anyone. I was at a total loss for words. That worried me more than anything had so far on this crazy trip.

I hadn't even slept with this guy; plus, he'd seen the granny panties in my drawer and my serious bed head, and he was privy to my extreme family problems. And worst of all, he was headed home, wherever that was, as soon as his brother cleared out. I couldn't be falling for him. No way.

Bernardo was wrong. I *had* regained the title of Ultimate Loca. Just not the way I'd imagined.

# Chapter 7

We returned to Paris before eleven and had a drink at the bar. I was already planning to drop my purse next to the side of the bed so the condoms would be handy.

"Do you need to get up early tomorrow?" He signaled to the bartender as he spoke to me.

"No, thank goodness."

"No sheep to herd?" His grin had become familiar. I was going to miss it. "What would you like to drink?"

"Single malt. Aberlour, if they have it."

He lifted an eyebrow. "I think I'm in love."

He was joking, of course, and I laughed, but my heart wasn't in it. Our time together was coming to an end. I'd make tonight count.

"You'll need to sleep in just to rest your ears and throat," he said. "Do you realize that we've been talking for three hours straight?"

"We didn't eat very much."

"It was good, though. I'll have to remember that place next time." He played with a matchbox someone had abandoned on the bar.

"Do you come to Las Vegas often?"

"Quite often. My company has interests here."

"Would that be Patterson Tire?" The scotch warmed me, its sweet, peaty taste a great foil for the spicy dishes we'd eaten.

He looked at me. "What do you know about Patterson Tire?"

I shrugged. "Just what Rod said. As if I was supposed to know what it was. Did I say something wrong?"

Chris's face relaxed. "It's the family company, and we're on the verge of going public. Rod's outrageous behavior could cause a scandal. Stock prices and all that."

"No wonder you freaked. Speaking of freaks, I wonder if Susu is asleep."

"Why do you care?"

"Because I'm here to get her back. The only way to find out is to go up there, and I'm not ready to go to bed."

"You could call."

"She won't answer."

Bernardo and his boxing buddies swarmed into the bar area. I waved and Bernardo waved back, although he looked long and hard at Chris. They clustered around the bar and called out orders to the bartender, who apparently knew them from before.

"Do you like boxing?"

My question took Chris off guard. "Not really. I've never been to a boxing match. I've seen—"

"That's Bernardo Maltiades over there. He's a Golden Gloves champ."

"Really?" Chris turned to look at Bernardo, who was glaring back. "Why is he looking at me like that?" Bernardo looked like a rottweiler who'd lost his favorite bone. Oops.

"We went out last night. Ignore him. He's just being pissy."

"Pissy doesn't sound like a word you apply to a guy like that." Chris stood, then I felt his hand at my waist, warm and strong. Then it moved lower. "I'd say 'menacing' is the correct word."

His hand felt wonderful on me. It made me think of other places it might feel even better, but he was going to start a fight. "I think suicidal is one that might be used for you. Are you being deliberately provocative?"

"Something like that." He looked down at me and gave me the full George Clooney effect. Dazzled, I could only stare into his eyes.

"Excuse me, take your hands off my woman." Bernardo stood in front of us, hands politely clasped in front of him, but holding back a nervous energy that made him almost vibrate.

"Bernardo, please. We were just having a drink. And besides—" I cut my eyes over to the rest of the boxing team, which was gathering closer. I didn't want to diss him in front of his friends. If I said that I wasn't his woman, they'd have plenty to say to him.

Chris removed his hand from my waist. I felt a little disappointed, probably due to some leftover caveman gene floating around inside of me.

Bernardo didn't relax. He took a step closer. "Who are you?"

"Chris Patterson. Who are you?"

"Bernardo Maltiades."

He and Chris nodded. I was beginning to think that Chris might have a little caveman in him, too. He seemed to know the secret he-man signals.

Bernardo moved so fast I didn't see the punch. One second Chris was standing next to me, the next he was on the floor.

He got up, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth and nodding as if he had the answer to a question he'd been pondering.

Then it was Bernardo's turn to fly backward, into the arms of his teammates. He came back like an enraged animal, fire in his eyes.

Chris was ready for him. With the bartender shouting and women screaming, the two of them drove each other's bodies back and forth across the little bar area. One of the guys on the Golden Gloves team grabbed me and pulled me out of the way.

"No, let me stay."

"Lady, you already got a fat lip. You don't want a black eye to go with it."

I quit fighting, indignant that he should mention my lip. I thought it was looking pretty normal.

Susu was suddenly there, climbing over my rescuer. "Let go of my sister." She was on his back, knees hiked around his waist, hitting them over the head with her purse.

He tried to scrape her off against the bar, but then two other guys intervened, grabbing her and pulling her off as if she were a human tick. Then she was fighting them, too, and they had their arms up, trying to protect their heads from her hefty handbag.

I didn't know where to help and stayed well back. I already had stitches from the last time Susu got mad, and I wasn't about to get in the middle of the two dogs going at it on the other side of the bar area. Either way, I'd get clobbered.

Whistles sounded around us. It was Security, and about damn time. It took two guards to subdue Susu. Bernardo and Chris had already stopped fighting and were standing, chests heaving, bent over with their hands on their knees.

Bernardo's lip was split and Chris was bleeding from a cut on his forehead. The bartender put two napkins filled with crushed ice on the counter, and the team's trainer sat the two men on bar stools and attended to their cuts.

The head of security was a burly guy with red hair going white at the temples. "I can't believe you guys. A fistfight in the casino bar. Morons. You especially." He was pointing at Bernardo. "You know better. Want to hurt your chances tomorrow night?"

Bernardo shook his head.

"That lip's going to need stitches. You get stitches, you can't fight."

"No stitches," the trainer said. "I can fix it." He pointed over his shoulder at Chris. "Him, too. No doctors, no police report, okay?"

Chris produced a credit card. "I'll pay for the damage to the bar."

The bartender plucked the card from his fingers. "Two thousand should cover it. Are you a guest of the hotel?"

"Yes."

"Then any other damages we'll just charge to your account." His response sounded practiced. This probably happened more often than I'd thought.

Chris nodded and took back his card. There didn't seem to be much damage that I could tell, except for some blood spots on the carpet and overturned drinks. It was certainly not two thousand dollars' worth.

"Hey man." Bernardo had risen, but stopped in front of Chris. "That's some uppercut you have. You should come spar with us."

"I don't box." Chris looked at him warily.

"You don't? Where'd you learn to punch like that?"

"Karate."

"Aaah . . ." The gathered team members all nodded and looked at each other as if everything made sense. The trainer pulled two tickets out of his blazer.

"Come watch the bout tomorrow night, on us." The unspoken thought was as a thank-you for not pressing charges against Bernardo, who threw the first blow.

"Okay, thanks." Chris pocketed the tickets.

Susu was staring at them. "That's it? Kiss and makeup? No cops?"

"What did you expect? It could have been much worse." I put a hand on her to steady her as she got up. One of her shoes was missing and I found it under a table.

Two men in suits were standing next to Susu when I got up. "Ms. Dunne?"

Susu stood very straight. She knew she was in trouble. "I'm Mrs. Dunne."

"Follow me, please."

The three men walked to where the boxers and Chris were. The man in the suit looked at all of them, frowning. "I understand how excited you must be at the thought of your match tomorrow, Mr. Maltiades." He turned to Chris. "And I appreciate your offer to make reparation for the damage. But the hotel cannot tolerate criminal activity, or public fighting. I have to ask you all to please leave the hotel tonight."

"I can't leave." Susu looked shocked.

Chris was stunned, too. "I've never been kicked out of anywhere before."

"Aw, don't let it get to you," the trainer said. "Happens to us every once in a while. No matter how hard you train these hotheads to stay out of fights, someone gets mad at someone else. Usually over a woman." He gave me a disgusted look, as if it was all my fault. "Sorry, Anita." Bernardo looked ashamed and defiant.

"That's okay. I didn't get why you fought about it, though. You and I aren't exactly a couple."

He shrugged. "I don't know. I saw him there, and you looked so pretty and it made me mad, 'cause I thought we'd get together tonight. And then he touched you and it was like there was a fire in my head."

"So now you have a fat lip again." I smiled and reached for his face, but he caught my hand in his and moved it away.

"I came here to fight. Just didn't think I'd do it in the lobby bar."

The team manager came by. "I'm getting rooms at the Mandalay. How many should I get? We'll only be there tonight and tomorrow night."

Hands went up, including Susu's. After a moment Chris raised his hand, too. I figured I'd stay with Susu, wherever that was.

She took me aside. "Anita, I need to stay here. I still haven't talked to Rod, and I don't want him to leave without explaining. Just tell them that you're keeping your room, and I'll stay there. I won't make any problems, I promise."

"So I have to go to the Mandalay? Why can't we both stay here?" I didn't want to lose sight of her, even if the yummy Chris would be staying somewhere else.

"Because I got kicked out. One of us has to leave."

"Oh, like they can't tell us apart." I stared at her brilliant red hair.

She put a hand up to touch it. "I'll take care of this tonight. We look almost like twins when my hair's brown." She frowned at my head. "You need to get those highlights touched up."

No kidding. "Serves you right if you end up getting gold highlights to keep your room. And you'd better not call any attention to yourself." It would ruin my future plans if she trashed my room at Paris. I left the group and walked to the front desk to make arrangements. The head of security was standing behind the counter and came over to speak to me.

"Ms. Suarez, I'm sorry that I included you with the others. I know you weren't involved. You don't have to leave."

Thank goodness. I hadn't been sure about the verdict. I gave him my highest wattage smile. "I was just going to change my checkout date. I may be staying a few more days."

He nodded. "Good to hear. I hope you understand—"

I cut him off. "No need to explain. I totally agree with your decision."

The clerk was staring at me. Or rather, at my dress. I was still in my red Nicole Miller gown.

Do I know how to dress for an occasion, or what?

## Chapter 8

The next night I was in jeans again and feeling underdressed at the Mandalay Convention Center for Bernardo's fight. Chris, the entire Golden Gloves entourage, and I had checked into Mandalay Bay with no problems.

It would have made more sense for them to have stayed there anyway, since it was where they'd have their bouts, but Bernardo said that they had moved to Paris to avoid confrontations with other boxing teams.

Susu was back in my old room in Paris, laying low. She called to leave me a "mission accomplished" message regarding her hair color. In dark glasses and a subdued attitude, she would be discreet.

I'd never seen boxing live before. From the moment it started I was on the edge of my seat. Maybe it's because I'd just seen a bare-knuckles fight up close and personal. Maybe it was the aftermath of the adrenaline rush I'd felt after my fight with Susu in Atlanta, but as each boxer took his turn in the ring, I felt a personal stake in his fight. My heart was racing as Bernardo knocked out his opponent. The defeated boxer lay flat on the mat, head lolling, and the crowd cheered. Barbaric. And exciting.

Chris turned to me. "This is what the ancient Romans must have felt like. It explains football, too. Someone should write a paper on why violence is such a turn-on."

Our eyes meet. I was feeling just as hot. He grabbed my hand and we stood and hurried out of the arena. We went down a staircase, avoiding the cameras that were everywhere, and went into a semidark hallway lined with storage rooms marked CHAIRS and TABLES and offices with big glass windows.

Chris tried doors until one swung open. We quickly entered and he closed the door behind us. We didn't turn on any lights.

He kissed me, and I pushed against him. I couldn't get close enough to him. He shoved me back, holding my hips to steady me, until my backside hit a low edge. A desk. He tugged at my top and I fumbled with his belt, working fast, then his pants were open and he was in my hand, hot and heavy. Oh, yeah.

I thought I'd die if I didn't get him in me. He tugged my jeans off and lifted me onto the desk, pushing aside binders.

It was fast and glorious and sweaty and finished fabulously. Luckily I still had the condoms in my purse that I'd meant to use the night before, or we would have been in trouble. I was so not going to stop.

Afterward I thought I'd feel awkward, but Chris held me close, cradling me against his chest. Perfect. He was perfect and he was going home and I'd never see him again.

I sighed.

"Regrets?" His voice was low and rough.

"No. Wild monkey sex on strangers' desks has never been in my repertoire, but you make me crazy. Actually, I'm kind of hoping for a rematch." He laughed, and I heard it deep in his chest. I wanted to explore this feeling further.

"We've been kicked out of one facility. Let's not have to hunt for another hotel room tonight. I promise you, the next time we'll have clean sheets and a hot shower in the morning."

He promised. I loved the sound of that.

As we made our way back upstairs, walking a little unsteadily and holding onto each other's belt loops, my cell phone rang. Expecting Susu, I was surprised to hear Heidi's hysterical voice.

"Aunt Anita, Mommy and Daddy are getting a divorce. Daddy said so. Now he's gone and Ransom pooped on the dining room floor." Her voice had risen in pitch with each word. She sounded like a frightened mosquito.

"Who's Ransom?"

"The dog. There's nobody to clean it up."

"Who's taking care of you?" I glanced at Chris, who was frowning. I mouthed *my niece*. He nodded.

"Grandma. But she had a martini and she's snoring."

I glanced at my watch. It was close to midnight in Atlanta. "Do you know where your daddy is?"

"He's going to Las Vegas. He said he was bringing her ass home. He was real mad."

"I'll bet. Well, good news, pumpkin. Mommy's ready to go home. Go to bed, and in the morning Grandma will clean the poop and Daddy will bring Mommy home."

"Promise?" She sounded wistful. Poor kid.

"I promise."

"If they get a divorce can I come live with you?"

"You sure can. But they aren't getting a divorce. You'll see." She hung up and I turned to Chris. "I have to go back to Paris. Carl's on his way."

"I'll drive you, but I can't go in."

"Just drop me off and go to the Bellagio across the street. Pick a bar and call my cell phone and tell me where you'll be. I'll get Susu."

"Okay." We stopped and he kissed me long and hard again, then gently. My lips rubbed across his cheek, tasting him, soaking in his scent. I'd never felt this way about a man before. It was dizzying. Frightening.

He dropped me off at a side door. I came in through the casino and went straight up to my floor. I didn't have a key, since Susu had relinquished hers to security when she had supposedly left. I'd given her mine. It was ironic, since her husband was paying for the room.

She didn't answer my knock. I banged harder, keeping an eye on the security camera at the end of the hall. The last thing I wanted to do was call attention to myself.

I thought I heard muffled weeping come from inside. "Susu? Is that you? Open up, it's Anita." No answer, but there was definitely a woman crying inside.

I walked around the halls until I found a housekeeping cart at the junction of two halls. I thought it was abandoned until I heard a Spanish radio station coming from an open room. I stuck my head in the door. "Hello?"

The room was disgusting. Beer bottles littered the floor and the beds had both been stripped of covers. Used condoms were draped over the lamp shades. People were pigs. I added hotel housekeeping to my mental Not in this Life careers list.

The housekeeper came out of the bathroom wearing thick yellow rubber gloves and smelling of bleach fumes. *"Si?"* 

"Have you done all the rooms on this floor?" I asked her in Spanish.

"No, just the three corridors on this side. I only do the ones where people check out. They're empty, you see?" She waved around the room, her lip lifted in disgust. Her uniform had Carina embroidered in flowing script over her left breast.

"So you haven't done 725?"

"No, not if someone is still there." She looked me over. "Why, señorita?"

"My sister's in there. She's very upset, and she won't answer the phone. Can you let me in?" I hoped I looked like a caring sister and not like a hit man or an international jewel thief.

She frowned. "No, but I'll come with you." I hustled her down the hall toward the room. "Normally, when there is a problem like this, *señora*, we call Security."

"Please, no Security."

Carina looked at her grimly. "It's her husband, *verdad*? I hate that."

She listened at the door, nodded to me, and opened the door. The room was dark.

"Susu?"

Her voice was clogged with tears. "Go away."

I put my hand on Carina's shoulder. "I'll take it from here. She'll be okay."

"Miss, you know this girl?" Carina waited stolidly by the door, not letting me in.

"She's my sister." Susu started to weep again.

Carina looked doubtful, but she left.

"Susu, I'm going to turn a light on." I felt for the bathroom light and clicked it on.

Susu was sitting in bed, dressed, the covers up over her knees and a box of tissues next to her. More of them were on the floor, crumpled. Carina would have work to do there tomorrow.

"Rod's gone." Susu blew her nose again. "We had an awful fight." She sobbed. "But I'm okay. I'm just feeling stupid, that's all."

"Where is he?"

"Gone back to Princeton."

Chris would be relieved to hear that. "Carl's on his way. Heidi called me."

She stopped crying and stared at me. "Oh my God."

"I thought you wanted to go home."

"I do. When's he going to be here?" She turned the clock radio around and stared at the time.

"I'm not sure."

She jumped out of bed and ran to the closet. "We don't have a moment to lose. Let's go have fun. Come on."

She started to rummage through the clothes. She pulled out a tiny black leather skirt and a fishnet top and threw them at me. "Get dressed. You can't go out in jeans. Let's go dance at Ra."

Why not? I stripped and pulled on her clothes. Serious hooch outfit. "So we go to Ra, dance a little, and then you'll be ready to go home, right?"

"Right. Here, use these." She handed me a pair of tall wedge sandals. Wearing the same size clothes and shoes as her was a mixed blessing.

While she got ready, I called Chris. "We're going dancing at Ra."

"Hold on. Did you say dancing? I thought you were going to tell her about her husband."

"I did. She wants to go dancing. Can you meet us there?" He sighed. "You Suarez girls will be the death of me."

Funny how a lot of people thought the exact same thing.

In the hallway, Carina was pushing her squeaky-wheeled cart toward the elevators. She stopped when she saw us. "You're twins. I didn't know."

Susu and I looked at each other and laughed. With her brown hair and—yes, gold highlights—we did look like twins. We

#### BERTA PLATAS

descended to the lobby and then crossed it, walking quickly. We were trying not to attract attention, but the way we were dressed, that was just about impossible. Heads turned as we made our way to the street, and outside, a cab screeched to a halt the second I raised my hand.

Ra was rocking. We disappeared into the mobbed dance floor, sucked into the vortex of pumping, writhing bodies. Chris never showed, but I figured he was on the outskirts watching. Maybe he wasn't the dancing type.

I was about ready to take a water break when I got yanked aside from my partner, a businessman there for a payroll convention.

"Hey, stop it." I turned to the guy who had pulled me away. It was Chris. "Hi. Where were you?"

"I've been at every bar and dance club on the strip. The folks at Paris said you left in party clothes, talking about dancing."

"Wow." I couldn't imagine going to every single bar. "I told you we'd be at Ra."

"I didn't know it was a dance club inside the casino. I drove up and down the strip looking for it. Then I drove past the pyramid and it hit me." He looked pissed off and was yelling to be heard, so I smiled apologetically at Mr. Business and pushed Chris toward the restrooms.

Susu saw us and hurried to catch up. Chris's eyes bugged out when he saw us together. The Fabulous Hoochie Twins.

Chris glanced at Susu and then focused back on me. "I thought you were the sensible one."

Susu laughed. "Her? Sensible? She's the one who had the affair with the married lawyer when she was underage." She gave me a raise-browed look with a broad smile.

Chris looked at me, aghast.

"It wasn't as bad as it sounds." I'd heard all of these fun

accusations before. Susu paraded them every time she felt threatened by me.

She launched another salvo. "She's the one who got kidnapped by a warlord in Morocco and had to be rescued by the U.S Army."

"Kidnapped?" He stared at me.

"What? I didn't *need* to be rescued. Hassan was going to take me back." He'd been so cute about it, too, wanting to add me to his harem. Turned out there was no harem, and his dad was a college professor, not a sheik, but he was still cute.

"Oh yeah? What about this need to hang around with boxers?"

I'd had enough. "What are you saying, Susu? Spit it out. Rod told me what you said I was."

At the mention of Rod her bravado slipped a little. "Slut," she hissed. She tugged up the strap of her corselet, which had slipped off her shoulder. Definitely a case of pots and kettles calling each other names.

"Am I a slut because I know what I want and go after it?" I was in her face now. We were going to end it once and for all.

"I don't fuck everyone I meet, like you do." Her eyes were blazing.

"I don't, either." Not anymore. My eyes shot to Chris. I wanted him to have a good opinion of me. That was a first. "And I want you to get over this, Susu. You did what you wanted, I did what I wanted to do. And now we're different. You're not the person you were at twenty-one, are you? Well, neither am I."

"Anita, that was three years ago. You haven't changed that much." She tossed her hair and put her arms on her hips. Even though she was trying for defiant, she came across as wounded. I put my arm around Susu. "We Suarez girls are maniacs." Susu looked quickly at me. "Yeah?"

I hugged her. "Yeah."

"I could have told you that." Chris looked at me, and he didn't look angry. He looked hot. "Come on ladies, back to Mandalay."

"You need to come, too, Susu. I don't want to get into any trouble with the Paris casino folks." I didn't want to sink my chance of the job I'd been inquiring about.

"Okay." Susu's voice was soft. "Can we go back and get my stuff? I didn't unpack anything, so we just need a bellman to stack it on a cart."

I glanced at Chris, who nodded. "Let's do it now," I said. "There's someone I need to see while we're at it."

"A sheik, a boxer, or an attorney?" Chris grinned at me.

"Ha ha. The head of catering, actually."

Chris and Susu exchanged glances, apparently baffled by my reply.

At Paris no one seemed to notice when Chris and Susu went upstairs. I headed toward the employee-only area in the back.

The head of security was still there.

"You work twenty-four hours, or are you a clone?"

He looked up from his desk and smiled at me. "I could say the same to you, only I've met your scary clone."

"I got your message earlier and meant to call, but figured I'd see if you were really the workaholic you appeared to be."

"And I am, to my wife's sorrow. I was going to call you again in the morning about that package you dropped off."

"Yes." I held my breath, hoping I hadn't shot down another opportunity, although really, it would have been Susu's fault.

"I've made some inquiries since our call. Your coworkers speak highly of you, and your former employer does, too."

"You've talked to all of those people since yesterday?"

He smiled thinly. "Security has always been an important part of our corporate culture."

I remembered the cameras in housekeeping and nodded. It certainly made sense that a casino would be concerned about security.

"I think we can agree to your terms. We need to speak again. The head of the catering staff would like to join us. Say, tomorrow at ten?"

"Sounds great." I shook hands with him and he winked at me. The fix was in. Just like that, I had a job.

We headed back to Mandalay and booked a room for Susu. Chris headed back to his room while we did the paperwork. I think he'd had his fill of the Suarez sisters.

I trailed Susu to her room, ostensibly to help her, but actually to make sure her ass wasn't getting me into any more trouble.

She opened the door and then turned, looking like a sleepy raccoon. "You don't need to come in. I'm going to hit the minibar, get drunk, and then go to bed. Alone. And in the morning, I'm going to call Carl and grovel. I am going to beg him to take me back." She hugged me. "I'm sorry, honey. I guess I did get to be just like you, and it messed up everything."

"You needed to stretch a little. And you did, didn't you?" I wiped her eyes with a tissue, getting most of the smeared makeup off. Now she just looked a little goth.

She sniffed. "Yeah. I did. It's not easy to be you, chica."

"It's not easy to be you, either." I hugged her, and we stayed in each other's arms for a little while, savoring the warmth that reminded each other so much of our mom. "I promise I'll stand on my own two feet, okay?"

She laughed, tears in her eyes. "You'd better."

"Need help getting to bed?"

"Nope. I'm not drunk yet." She walked off, slender and strong, just like Mom.

At two A.M. our hotel room door at the Mandalay crashed open.

The delicious stroking on my skin stopped. Chris's head popped out of the sheets. He looked adorable with his hair standing up in untamed spikes and swirls. "Carl, I presume?"

"Yes, it is," I said. "Carl Dunne, this is Chris Patterson."

Chris looked at Carl appraisingly. "Beefy and buttoned-up. You looking for Susu, I suppose?"

"Where is she?" Carl's nostrils were wide and he was snorting like a bull. It would have been hilarious, except he looked like the preview minutes on *Law and Order*, where they set up the crime that gets solved later.

I started to pull the sheet around me to get up. Chris grabbed it and tugged it up around my neck. I couldn't move.

"What are you doing? Let go of me. I have to help Susu."

"She can help herself. She expects you to do the same, doesn't she?"

"Anita, is this man hurting you?"

"No, Carl, I'm fine. Chris, you meathead. Let go of me."

"Nope." He looked at Carl appraisingly. "Big guy, your wife is in the room down the hall. Twelve thirty. She's sleeping alone. Got it?"

Carl stared at him for a second. "I get it." He started to back out, then stopped. "Thanks."

"Wait." I glared at Chris, who had just given up my sister. "What are you going to do, Carl?"

"I'm getting Susu back. I'm ready to grovel."

"Great. That's two of you. There's a copy of her key card in my jeans pocket, on the floor."

I heard him rummage. "Got it." The anger seemed to have drained out of him, leaving him sad. Not as sad as he'd be when he got his credit card bill next month. But I had a job now. I'd pay him back. Maybe.

Guilt made me want to be nice to him. "Carl? She really loves you."

Our eyes met over Chris's muscular sun-browned arm. Carl's gaze was steady, no longer lost. "Thanks, Anita. For everything. I'll see you back home."

"I'm not going back, Carl. I got a job at the casino."

"Yeah?" He smiled. "That's great."

"Yeah?" That was Chris, eyebrows raised.

After the door closed, Chris kissed my temple gently. "That was sweet. You got all teary because of your good deed."

I looked up at him. "I did, didn't I? See, I'm not such a hard case after all."

He settled me into his arms again. "So you're working at the casino?"

"Well, the restaurant. They need an events coordinator, and I worked up a proposal and left it with the restaurant services manager after the granny breakfast fiasco, and they offered me a job."

"You work fast."

"At some things. Some jobs, you just have to take more time. Like this." I reached down between our bodies and showed him. "And you were about to do this."

His smile got a little dazed. "Yeah, that."

I forgot about my sister after that. Susu would solve her own problems.

Much later I lay awake caressing Chris's short hair and thinking about my future. Susu and Carl would probably patch things up, and I had a job, but would I ever see Chris again? As if he were psychic, he asked, "Can I come visit you here?" He was looking up at me.

"You bet. Slots are open 24/7. I guess I'd better hunt for an apartment."

"Then I can't use my great good-bye line for you." He nuzzled me, then rose up on his elbow.

"You thought of a good-bye line? And they call me a drama queen."

"Watch who you call queen."

I tickled his ribs. "Okay, so give. What's your great line?"

He grabbed my hands to stop me and put on a Humphrey Bogart voice. "We'll always have Paris."

"That's it? We'll always have Paris? How lame." I wrestled free and tickled him again.

He laughed and fended me off. "How about, 'Here's lookin' at you, baby'?"

"No, no. The line goes, 'Here's lookin' at you.""

He pulled me close and kissed me, one of those long, deep kisses that make me dizzy. I was breathless when he finally pulled away and looked deep into my eyes.

"Here's lookin' at *you . . .*" His voice was deep and full of promise.

Who needed a line from an old movie? We had Paris right now.



## WHIPPED



# SOFIA QUINTERO



### Chapter 1

Jennifer only agreed to do the workshop because she owes me. I know that, and so be it. I stopped feeling guilty for expecting quid pro quo from my sister when she won the St. Catherine's Academy spoken word slam with a piece I wrote. Do you know how hard it is to turn the Stations of the Cross into hip poetry? But it was Jennifer who transformed it into theatre. I have to give her that. Even crispy Sister Rita Clare folded into tears when Jennifer reached the Agony in the Garden and grabbed the mic, rapping, "I plead take this cup from meeeee, deliver me from my enemieeees," like she was channeling Tupac Shakur. I was so proud of her. And resentful. And, yes, jealous. I vowed then that if I were going to help my sister do anything—especially if I craved to do it myself as I often did—I would never again hesitate to demand a fair exchange.

My sister owes me for helping move Rocco's remaining things out of her East Harlem co-op to a Brooklyn storage facility. When her ex left to crash at a friend's place in Fort Greene, he only packed one suitcase and his CF Martin acoustic guitar. I couldn't believe it when Jennifer told me it was worth more than two thousand dollars. "Why can't a guy who can afford something like that hire movers?" I asked as I hoisted a stack of barbells onto the U-Haul. "When's Rocco coming anyway? He better not think he's going to show up here at the last minute after we've done all the work. And I hope he brings some friends to help."

Jennifer dropped his exercise bench into a corner of the truck. "Rocco's not coming." She started to walk down the ramp when I grabbed her by the arm.

"What do you mean he's not coming?" Then it hit me. I thought it was highly unusual for my sister to devote a Saturday morning to help her ex move out of her apartment when, according to Jennifer, she broke up with him because she had lost all respect for him. I should have known she was up to her ball-busting ways again. "Jen, please don't tell me Rocco has no idea we're taking all his stuff to storage."

She wriggled her arm out of my grasp and headed down the ramp. "Of course he knows," she said over her shoulder as I followed her back to the building. "I told him that if he didn't get the rest of his shit by the fifteenth, I was getting rid of it. If he doesn't realize I was serious until he gets the rental invoice, hey, that's not my problem." Jennifer held the door open for me, but I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk.

"Bad enough that you do these things, Jennifer, but you rope me into them!" I never wanted to help Rocco move even if at the time I had nothing better to do. "This is so fucked up...."

"You make it sound like I'm pulling a Bernadine," Jennifer said, referring to the *Waiting to Exhale* character who piles all her cheating husband's designer clothes and expensive toys into his BMW then sets them on fire. "Remember, I'm paying

for all this. And I was nice enough to choose a storage facility near where he's staying with whatever his name is."

"God, you so owe me!" I let her know.

And last week I called in my chip and ordered her to be at the library on Wednesday by noon as the next speaker of my Power Lunch series. Of course, Jennifer hated the idea of having to travel uptown in the middle of a workday and tried to get out of it. She said, "Hey, let me see if I can get Priya to do it." Priya is a senior partner at my sister's law firm and her immediate supervisor. In other words, she's also a prime target for Jennifer's ass-kissing.

"I don't want Priya to do it," I said. "I want you to do it." Then I hung up, probably surprising myself even more than I surprised her. Oh, I challenge Jennifer from time to time, but for the most part, I hold my tongue and certainly never tell her what to do. That was the first time I thought to myself, Wow, this training I'm doing is really taking hold. Anything for these kids. They really need to meet someone like Jennifer, especially the girls. Any adult who believes teenagers have it easier than they did has no clue what it's like to be a kid these days. They see all the technological wizardry-iPods, Sidekicks, TiVo-and think they live carefree. Their world may seem like a virtual playground to adults like my sister who've managed to graduate from adolescence with a sense of who they are or at least who they would like to become. But to a fifteen-year-old who's still trying to figure these things out, there's just too much stimuli out there and much of it's pretty unsettling. Of course, she doesn't see it that way until it's too late. She sees nothing wrong with posting a picture of herself in a thong bikini on MySpace, adopting the screen name The !llest Beyatch U'll Eva Wanna F♥K!, and counting "models" such as Vida Guerra and Karrine Steffans among her heroes.

This is why I piloted the Power Lunch series at the library

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this summer. Now that the kids are out of school, it's harder to get them into the library, never mind pick up a book. The ones who live in this neighborhood are more likely to sit on their stoops or hang out at the park on a nice day. If they come into the library, it's to escape the heat and peruse the free magazines. So every Wednesday, I buy a few pizzas or a six-foot hero (an exception I really had to fight for with my boss Elaine since no food or drink is allowed here) and host a speaker who answers questions about his or her job. As often as I can, I prefer to invite someone from the neighborhood, and so far I have a perfect record. I want the kids to see that you don't have to be a basketball playing rapper or actress-slash-dancerslash-"singer"-slash-serial monogamist to emerge successfully from the Bronx. The first speaker I invited was Tammi James, the formerly incarcerated and wildly popular self-published author of Every Trick Needs a Treat and its sequel, Tricks Ain't for Kids. One day nine teens came into the library asking if we had copies of Tammi's novels. Not one of these kids had ever been there before. Furthermore, three of them were boys who only come to the library to get on the Internet, flirt with girls, or flirt with girls on the Internet. No matter how hard I tried to push Walter Dean Meyers and Ernesto Quinonez on them, I could never get them to pick up a novel. So I cringed every time a boy came in and asked if we had Every Trick Needs a Treat and heard Elaine bark, "No, we do not carry that," then back away from them as if they were gun-toting gangsters.

Each time I rushed over and said, "If you like stories like that, maybe you'll like these." I handed them my list of gangsta lit substitutes, which includes titles such as *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas and *Native Son* by Richard Wright. Still, I ordered a copy of Tammi James's books for myself because I wanted to understand her appeal to the kids. Unlike some writers in the same genre, I found that she had a respect-

able command of the writing craft and truly wove her street life novels into urban morality tales that taught important lessons, as if she knew kids would be reading her adult fare.

So I researched more on Tammi James and found out three critical things. She wrote *Every Trick Needs a Treat* while doing two years in prison for counterfeiting and extortion. Yes, she made fake cash even as she shook down people for the real thing. How can you not admire such ambition? After being rejected by over three dozen agents and editors, Tammi selfpublished the novel and hawked it out of the trunk of her Geo Metro. In less than a month she sold over eight thousand copies on the corner of Westchester and Morrison Avenues, only a crack vial's toss from the slumlord's wet dream where she grew up.

Tammi was everything I needed to get the Power Lunch series off to a fantastic start. Not only was she known among the kids I was trying to reach, they idolized her. She had a glamorous job—at least, that's what her fans thought, and their perceptions were all that mattered—at which she was tremendously successful. (Or as Elaine would crack, "Obscenely so," with the word "obscenely" having more layers than baklava.)

Most important of all, Tammi James was a local girl done good. Actually, she was a hood rat gone good because despite the prurient nature of her tomes, she said all the right things to two dozen kids—yes, she drew that many on a sticky afternoon in late June—who attended her talk. She answered all their questions with candor, humor, and most important of all, respect. Tammi inspired the birth of quite a few writers that day, and not a single one of them left with the idea that they had to drop out of school, do time, or suffer an abusive boyfriend—all of which Tammi had done and relayed—to feel they would have meaningful stories to tell. Of course, when I invited Jennifer, I let her think she was my inaugural speaker. She was actually the third. The second speaker was Ms. Woo, the Korean owner of the most popular novelty shop in the area. I didn't expect her to generate the kind of attendance Tammi did, but after I did my research, I gambled that a respectable number of kids would show out of curiosity. Figuring that it would be a good idea to introduce the kids to a local business owner, I had asked them where they shopped the most. Of course, they mentioned places like Old Navy and Foot Locker, but I was looking for a mom-'n'-pop shop operation, not the local franchise of a major chain.

"Yeah, but you're not in Old Navy and Foot Locker every day," I said to Echo and Cindi, my two favorite informants. For a while I couldn't put my finger on why I liked them so much. It certainly wasn't because they reminded me of Jennifer and myself at that age. More like Echo and Cindi's friendship made me wish that Jennifer and I had been more like them when we were that age.

Echo sucked her teeth and nodded at Cindi, "She is. She ain't got no money to buy nothing, but she is."

Cindi gave her a playful slap on her arm. "Shut up, bitch."

"Shhh," I said, more for Elaine's benefit than out of any fealty to the reputed sacred silence of libraries. Never expect any publicly funded institution in the "'hood" to be quiet. I personally don't care if the kids swear so long as they do so only in jest and avoid the strong stuff. "Where do you go to buy your knickknacks? Things for your hair, school supplies and stuff like that."

Echo and Cindi both said, "From Ms. Woo."

"Ms. Woo's mad cool," Cindi added. "We go to her place 'cause she doesn't follow you around the store like she's waiting for you to boost something."

"Yeah, and she got jokes, too," said Echo.

So I invited Ms. Woo, and, yes, she had jokes, not to mention wonderful anecdotes. She'd lived in our community almost thirty years and watched it transition from a predominantly Italian and Jewish community to a Puerto Rican and black stronghold to the Dominican and Mexican immigrant enclave it currently is. Only a half-dozen kids came to lunch with her, though, and I need a speaker who is more like Tammi James and less like Ms. Woo, so participation in the Power Lunch series doesn't fade. Besides, Elaine is constantly complaining about the food (even though I pay for it and clean up with the help of the kids after every workshop) and threatening to cancel the program.

I expected a good turnout for Jennifer, not only because she's an attorney, but because I let the kids know that she was my sister. Not that I told her that the kids are more likely to come hear her speak out of a loyalty to me. Little did I know that what I did during the day would cast a spotlight on what I did at night, especially since I didn't want anyone to know—least of all my sister.

### Chapter 2

Just when the elevator reaches the lobby and I think I've managed to slip out undetected, who do I bump into when the doors open but my boss.

"Hey, Priya," I say. "See you in a bit." I hope she thinks I'm just running out to grab a bite and that I'm coming back to the office within the hour. As I inch past her off the elevator and into the lobby, however, I can feel her eyes scrutinizing me.

The elevator doors start to close behind me when Priya flings a well-tailored arm between them and they bounce open again. "How's the Berman case?" A wall of men—not a single one under six feet—glare at her. By the stiffness in her posture, I can tell Priya is aware that they loathe her for holding them up, and she's thinking, *They can kiss my four-eleven ass.* This is why I both worship this woman and would rather eat live scorpion paella than have her angry with me.

"Plenty of progress to report," I say as I make for the exit. "I'll fill you in on everything when I get back."

As the elevator doors loom toward each other, Priya yells, "Okay, let's say around four."

Shit. Okay, Jen, relax. If she's watching you, it's because you've been the first associate in the firm's history to accrue the most billable hours in a month for four consecutive months in a row. Priya's watching you because she likes you. She has no idea that you're headed all the way to the northeast Bronx to speak to a roomful of teenagers as part of some Career Day workshop in the middle of the work week. Nor does Priya need to know. At least not until you show her all the progress you made on the Berman case so she knows that I committed this act of charity on behalf of the firm and still handled my business.

If I don't get back into midtown by three-thirty, I'm going to kill Michelle.

I glance at my watch. A quarter to three. I clap my hands once and say, "So in conclusion, no matter what your interests are, you can find a way to relate it to the practice of law."

I glance at Michelle, who is busying around the back of the room, collecting soiled napkins and used cups and tossing them in a wastebasket. Michelle hounded me so much to say something to that effect, I told her that if she kept drilling the reminder into my head, the point would probably leak right back out of it. C'mon, now. If anyone knows how to command a room, it's me.

"You like music? Become a lawyer and work for a record label. You like sports? Become a lawyer and represent an athlete or maybe even an entire team. Becoming a lawyer doesn't mean giving up your passion for other things. It means translating that passion into a viable career that can last a lifetime." A boy in the back of the room raises his hand. The brim of his baseball cap is pulled so low over his face, I swore he was sleeping throughout my entire lecture. While I'm glad to discover that I hadn't lost his attention, I'm hoping his question doesn't lead to an onslaught of interrogation. "Yes, you have a question?"

"You said that being a lawyer is a secure way of life, but I thought there were more people in law school than there are lawyers in the streets."

"Where the he—" I catch myself. "Where did you get that statistic?"

"That's what Keanu Reeves says in The Devil's Advocate."

"Stupid!" says his friend who sports his own baseball cap backward. He smacks the kid who asked the question on the back of the head, and for a second I wonder if I have telepathy. "Al Pacino said that, not Keanu Reeves."

A shrilly voice in the corner says, "I love me some Keanu." I can't tell if the voice belongs to a boy or a girl.

Gee, thanks, Michelle.

A pudgy girl raises her hand. I squint through my glasses to read her name tag. "Echo?" Naming your child after spirits, cars, nature, virtues, and scientific phenomena should be deemed a form of child abuse and rendered illegal.

She lowers her hand and strokes the baby hair she plastered against her temple with God knows what slimy concoction. "I got a question."

Great. "Shoot."

"Me and my friends, we've been having a lot of problems with the cops 'round here—"

"Yeah, in Harding Park," says a girl with a name tag that says Cindi with a heart drawn over the second i. Is that a bow she drew through it, too?

Fuckin' wonderful. "Okay." I glare at Michelle, who's grin-

ning and nodding, pleased that they were eager to take up more of my time by seeking free legal advice. Look, I wouldn't mind if I had known. If Michelle had said, "I want you to hold a pro bono legal clinic," fine. I'd have asked her to have patrons register, submit their queries in writing in advance, and then make fifteen-minute appointments. That way I could prepare to answer their questions in some way that might prove useful. They don't get disappointed, and I don't waste my time.

But I wasn't expecting to do this. Instead I have my handout with steps toward becoming a lawyer, tips on how to choose and get into a decent law school, and the pros and cons of the most popular specialties. Now when I have to blow out of here at three o'clock on the dot, these kids are going to hate me because they didn't get out of this what they wanted. And I'm a corporate lawyer to boot, not a criminal attorney. Yeah, thanks a whole lot, Michelle. "So what's going on?" I ask.

"We be hanging in the park, right," says Echo. "And the po's always steppin' to us, tellin' us we gotta keep it movin'." Every English teacher the girl's ever had should be gathered at Madison Square Garden and hung from the rafters to send a message to the next round of recently hired teachers: *This will happen to you if you fail our children.* "But we're, like, yo, this is a public park. As long as we ain't doing nothing wrong, we should be able to chill here for as long as the place stays open."

Echo does have a point. *If* they're not doing anything wrong. "So what do you go to the park to do?" I ask.

Cindi says, "We just sit on the benches and shoot the shit." "Do you eat?"

"We can't. Food's not allowed in the park. If we get hungry, we bounce."

"Do you smoke? Tell the truth."

"Nah."

"Stop lyin'," says the Boy with the Brim over his face. He finally pushes back his cap, revealing sharp cheekbones and brilliant dark eyes.

"Not in the park, stupid!" says Echo.

I'm beginning to like this girl. "Okay, do you ever bring a radio with you?"

"No, we can't."

"The only thing we do is, like, talk. . . . " says Cindi.

"... And take some goofy pictures with our cell phones ...." adds Echo.

"... And try and holla at the dudes playing basketball," says the BWB.

Echo slowly twists in her seat and fixes her eyes on him. "You just mad 'cause ain't nobody hollering at you, Christian, so don't speak unless spoken to." It's official. I do like her. She turns back to me and says, "Look, Ms. Saez, we ain't breakin' no laws or rules or nothing. We just chillin' there."

A girl in the back of the room says, "We do get a little loud though, sometimes."

"No matter! It's the park. That's what it's there for."

Now Christian says, "What? The playground's right there by the expressway. We can't hear each other if we don't shout."

"That's what I'm saying," says Echo, and the kids start yammering about the "po" trying to chase them out of the park when they should be harassing the drug dealers.

Cindi jumps to her feet. "Let me tell you why they're doing that, though."

Echo waves her hands to quiet down the group. "Let my girl speak." They hush, and it amazes me the command she has over them. Especially since it's not an obedience born of fear. The girl is tough and feisty, but she's not a bully. Her peers listen to her out of respect.

Cindi says, "The reason why the cops are on us is 'cause that fat-ass councilman is running for reelection. I saw him on TV the other day saying that he's been bugging the police commissioner to put more cops in this neighborhood. Talking about controlling the 'youth element.'"

"Maaan," says Echo. "Fuck Cuevas."

"Echo!" my sister calls from the back of the room.

Echo gives a little smile and brings her fingers to her lips. "Sorry, Ms. Saez." Then she turns to me. "Sorry, Ms. Saez." Then she giggles at having to repeat her apology to two women with the same name.

"Call me Jennifer," I say. Is that my imagination or did Michelle just give me a dirty look? I would think that she'd prefer that I be informal with the kids. "Tell me more about this Councilman Cuevas."

Michelle says, "He's running unopposed on a tough-oncrime platform."

"Well, I ain't no freakin' criminal," says Echo, and a bunch of the kids respond in agreement. "What's the point of having a park in the neighborhood if we can't hang out there?"

"Why these politicians are always making a big deal about hiring more cops anyway?" Christian asks. "You'd think we lived in the wild, wild west and shit. There are other things that he could do for the neighborhood, you know, like reopening that community center in Soundview so we don't have to go all the way to Castle Hill to play ball."

"See, Ms. Saez, that's why we be in the park," says Cindi. "That center's far."

Echo says, "And it's always mad crowded."

"You're all making good points," I say, "and I'd like to answer Christian's question because it's a good one."

"What question?" he asks.

Patience, Jen. "Why politicians on the campaign trail always

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take a tough-on-crime stance, as Mi— I mean, as Ms. Saez put it. When you're an elected official, you only have a few years to show your constituents that your leadership has a positive impact on your community."

"Because if they don't see it, they don't vote for you again, right, Ms. Saez?" asks Echo.

"That's right, Echo. So you tend to focus on things that the voters can see right away. People immediately notice when there's a new beat cop on the corner of their street that wasn't there yesterday. They notice when the trash gets picked up an extra day every week or if the street in front of their house is repaved or the graffiti on their building is removed."

My sister says, "But if Cuevas were to succeed in getting the city to reopen the Soundview Community Center, the voters would see that, too, no?" What's Michelle doing? Challenging me, or feeding me a lead?

"That's true," says Echo. "They would have to watch and listen to the construction every day."

"Yes, but until the center actually opens and proves to be a positive change in the neighborhood—which can take years— most people will either tune out the construction or complain about the noise and debris."

Echo sucks her teeth and yells, "People are stupid."

"It's not that they're stupid," says Michelle. "It's that when you live in a neighborhood where there are so many needs, you start to lose hope. For example, it takes a long time to turn around a failing school, so people become conditioned to settling for the quick fixes."

*Hey, Michelle, I work alone.* I say, "You have to let the people in charge know that there's enough of you who are going to hold them accountable for what they do or don't do."

"What does that mean?" asks Cindi.

But Echo says, "We tried that already."

"What do you mean? What did you do?"

Michelle grins. "They organized a group and went to the precinct that covers the park." She's so proud. She must have had a hand in it. The kids probably complained to Michelle, and that's what she advised them to do. *Not bad, sis.* "After another cop chased them out of the park, Echo and Cindi rounded up their friends and headed to the precinct to complain."

"And how'd that go?"

"The clerk called the community affairs officer, and he met with us."

"Really?" I underestimated these kids.

"He was nice at first. . . ."

"No, he was just trying to blow smoke up our ass," says Echo. "He kept trying to say things like, well, we must be doing something we weren't supposed to, and that the park is for everyone, and that even if we don't mean to, we're probably acting in ways that's, like, scaring off the nannies and shit. Whatever!"

Cindi says, "And we weren't disrespecting him, Ms. Saez, I swear. We were just like, no, that's not it. But it's like the community affairs officer got tired of talking to us, so finally he said something real smart-ass. Something like, well, if you don't like it . . ."

"Write your councilman," Christian finished her sentence, punctuating it with a hiss.

Not a bad idea. "And did you?"

"Yeah!" all the kids yell at me.

Damn, I really underestimated these kids. They remind me of the time back in high school when I started that petition in defense of an alumna named Catalina Marte. My sister's class had extended an invitation to Catalina to be the keynote speaker at their graduation. When I found out who she was and all that she had accomplished, she became my idol. After graduating from St. Catherine's Academy, she went on to earn her bachelor's and law degrees from St. John's University, and today is the first Latina to head the American Civil Liberties Union.

As if that did not already make the principal, Sister Mary Lucille, a bit nervous, she also discovered that between law school and the ACLU, Catalina served as the general counsel of Planned Parenthood. Oh, and that she was a lesbian. And that her life partner Stefania was born male and was once named Steve. Don't ask me how Sister Mary Lu uncovered that last bit of intelligence. Sometimes I think the archdiocese has an investigative arm that would green the CIA with envy.

So without first informing the class of '93, Sister Mary Lu contacted Catalina Marte and rescinded the invitation. Michelle (who was secretary of the senior class) and the rest barked among themselves and then rolled over. I was so livid, I wrote the petition and began to collect signatures at lunch the next day.

When I reached Michelle's table, the snobby president of the senior class looked at me and said, "What do you care, Jennifer? You're not even a senior."

"That's exactly why I care," I said. "If we let Sister Mary Lucille tell you who you can invite to your graduation now, what's to stop her from trying to do the same to us three years from now?"

Michelle sighed and took the petition from me. "She's right." And then she signed it. Once she had the guts to sign it, so did other members of the senior class, minus a few brown nosers. Sister Mary Lucille called my sister and me into her office, laughingly told us that we had confused St. Catherine's Academy for a democracy, and tore up the petition in our faces. Then she told us if we felt that strongly about her rescinding Catalina Marte's invitation to speak, we could always exer-

cise our First Amendment right to boycott the ceremony and not go to graduation, although she was sure that would deeply disappoint our parents after *they* sacrificed so much and worked so hard to afford to send us to a *parochial* institution.

Not only did Michelle attend her graduation, so did I. Our entire family was there. Until then I had no idea we had enough cousins to populate a small island.

I look at Michelle now, and I just know that she's remembering the same thing. Except that she's not smiling. I stand up and lock my briefcase. "Well, it's time for you to follow up," I say to the kids.

"How?" asks Christian.

"Lobbying. That's what the councilman did when he pressured the police commissioner to assign more officers to this district. Now you make an appointment to see this Cuevas, and at that meeting, you state your concerns and make demands. Tell him to ask the precinct commander to order his officers patrolling the park to lay off you guys, and request that he secure the funding to renovate the Soundview Community Center so it can be reopened to serve the youth of this neighborhood."

"I'm down, I'm down!" The kids bubble up again.

"But you gotta come with us, Ms. Saez," says Cindi, and the rest of them call out in agreement. "You can, like, coach us on what to say and do, but you gotta be there to have our backs. Cuevas may try to run some politician bullshit, so we need someone there who can tell us our rights."

"Shit, if Ms. Saez is there, ol' Cuevas ain't even gonna try and run no game on us," says Echo. "She's, like, the Puerto Rican Hillary Clinton and shit."

### Chapter 3

Once Echo likens her to Hillary Clinton, I know Jennifer is hooked. Introducing herself as the legal representative of several constituents with some concerns about community policing, Jennifer calls Cuevas's office the next morning and makes the appointment herself. She tells me it's to ensure that Cuevas's staff took the request seriously. I'm not sure that's totally true, but I still respect the stealth tactic.

Because she also had a big case to resolve at her firm, Jennifer asks me to do some research on Cuevas in preparation for the meeting. My only interaction with the man has been to send him a thank-you letter several years ago when he enabled us to buy several computers for the library. Every City Council member is awarded a pot of money each year to allocate in his or her district, and during budget season every community organization and cultural institution in the area vies for a slice of this pie. Elaine informs me that the library is lucky to ever get a grant because discretionary funds are very much a political issue.

"Every politician has his pet projects, and almost all of Cuevas's pork goes to the Throgs Neck Center for Independent Living and the Castle Hill Youth League," she says. "He gives the center money because the residents are seniors, and they vote. Cuevas funds the league, however, because not only is the executive director his longtime buddy, he also harangues the kids to volunteer on Cuevas's reelection campaigns. You know how you have to collect about a thousand signatures from registered voters in the district in order to make the ballot? Well, I hear that overseer at the league pressures the kids to carry petitions for Cuevas."

I quickly learn that it's worse when I call Jennifer to share the results of my research a few days after her visit to the library. I convey how Cuevas distributes his pork, and she says, "That's not only unethical, it damn well might be illegal."

"Really?"

"If I'm correct, the people who collect the signatures themselves have to be registered voters who live in the district." Before I could ask Jennifer how in the hell did she know that, she asks, "Are these kids at least eighteen years old?"

"I don't know. I'm sure some are. But most probably are not. The center's geared toward kids in high school."

"I bet anything most of them are not eligible to collect signatures." I think I hear a copy machine whirring in the background, but it's probably just the churning of Jennifer's ambition. "Which means many of the signatures are invalid. Sneaky fuckin' bastard."

If that's what he's doing, Cuevas is more than a sneaky fuckin' bastard. He's a classic poverty pimp, a self-proclaimed community leader who pretends to have the interest of the poor at heart when he makes his own living off of their continued poverty. Cuevas keeps these organizations dependent on his discretionary funds so they will expend whatever resources they have to keep him in office—resources that are best galvanized on behalf of the people the organizations are supposed to serve.

The more I learn about Cuevas, the more I worry about the kids. I have no concerns about Jennifer. But what if Councilman Cuevas refuses to meet with them or makes the appointment only to shrug them off on his chief of staff? Or worse . . . what if he does meet with them and demoralizes them, annihilating their fledgling civic proclivities? I didn't invite Jennifer to meet with my kids for her ego to lead them into a spiritual massacre. "Jen, if Cuevas ODs, you have to protect the kids," I say as I feed a copy of his legislative voting record into the fax machine.

"If Cuevas what?"

"ODs." Then I remember that while Jennifer may be the one who's smart, I'm the one who's hip. "As in overdose."

She picks up the smugness in my voice. "Okay, 'Chelle, how old are we?"

I spend so much time around the kids, I sometimes soak up their slang, and it bursts unpredictably through my interactions with other adults. The other day Elaine made a catty remark when I refused to stay an extra hour to help her process some new arrivals. I told her I couldn't be late for my date, and she mumbled, "Cleopatra can see you anytime," referring to the black kitten I recently saved from a life on the streets.

I spun around and said, "Just because I choose to stay late every once and while, don't get it twisted. I have a life." At least, I do now that I've found Whipped. "So don't hate."

I don't go out of my way to speak like that. It just happens. Although because of this one man I meet at Whipped who has granola gentrifier-meets-hood-rat fantasies, it happens more and more often. I may be thirty years old, but I still think I pull

it off. "At least, I used it correctly." I punch in the number for Jennifer's fax machine at home.

"Well, translate."

Jennifer's smart enough to deduce from the context. I mean, isn't that what lawyers do? But I don't want to waste my time arguing with her about this. "If Cuevas steps out of line, put him back in place."

"Oh, that goes without saying," says my sister, and of course she's right. "Besides, he's not going to do or say anything to alienate these kids." When my fax machine connects with the one at her home office, I can hear it in ringing in the background.

"I don't know, Jennifer," I say. "He's supposed to be a real piece of work. Why don't you take the meeting with Cuevas?"

"You with the dual masters in library science and adolescent psychology are suggesting that I speak on behalf of these kids as if they can't speak for themselves?" Jennifer scoffs. "I can't believe how *adultist* you're being, Michelle. Doesn't being a good mentor to young people mean allowing them to make decisions and take risks instead of doing everything for them?"

If I could reach through the phone, it'd be a wrap for my sister. This is the same woman who did not even want to meet the kids. Now that they treat her like the second coming of Johnnie Cochran, she thinks she knows how to deal with them better than I do? I think not. "Let's get something straight, Jennifer. Sometimes being a good mentor to young people means recognizing that they are still young and should not be thrust into adult situations no matter how eager or ready they might think they are. Look, I didn't say to uninvite them to the meeting with Cuevas. All I'm saying is that since they've never lobbied an elected official before, maybe you should bring them along just so they can observe how you do it instead of pushing them on him."

"Michelle, you are so paranoid!" says Jennifer. "I'll have you know that I am preparing Echo, Cindi, and Christian very well for this meeting. I spent an entire day with them last weekend preparing a script and doing role-plays. And this Saturday, I'm going to pass on all the information you've collected and quiz them on it. His voting record on public safety issues should come in handy. Were you able to get your hands on any transcripts of relevant speeches Cuevas has made during City Council sessions?"

"Two weeks isn't exactly a lot of time to acquire all the things you're asking," I say. Although that's absolutely true, I still feel like a failure. Echo, Cindi, and Christian missed the last Power Lunch series, saying that they had to prepare for their meeting with Cuevas, and now I find out that they hang out with my sister on the weekends, too? Of course, I'm proud of how hard they're working on this issue. I'm just not more proud than I am jealous of all the time they're now spending with Jennifer.

You should be proud of yourself, Michelle, I tell myself. You're the one who brought them together. You knew Jennifer would be a good influence on them, so you've done a wonderful thing by introducing her into their lives. And it's not like you're not making a contribution to their cause. "But not only do I have a copy of Cuevas's discretionary grants for the past three years, I also found a record of how he distributed capital funds in the district. The Independent Living Center in Throgs Neck got a new stage for their auditorium, and the Youth League had their in-ground pool completely redone."

"So if Cuevas really wants to," Jennifer says, "he can see to it that the city allocates some funds to renovate the Sound-

view Community Center instead of dishing out the pork to the same handful of groups year after year."

"Yeah," I say halfheartedly.

"You should've seen Echo during the role-plays." Jennifer pauses to laugh, then continues, "Christian was pretending to be Cuevas, and I directed him to pull some macho bullshit on her. Echo handled it perfectly. She kept her cool, stuck to the script and told him that she would be monitoring his decisions in the near future. So stop worrying, 'Chelle. I have them prepared for the worst-case scenario, which is highly improbable. What kind of politician mouths off on a group of poised but reasonable constituents?"

I'm afraid that we're soon going to find out.

### Chapter 4

"What the hell do they want again?" the raspy baritone booms from the back office.

Christian's eyes balloon open. "Is that the councilman?"

"Yeah, but don't worry," I say, although I'm starting to think that maybe bringing the kids with me was a huge mistake. I mean, Cuevas has to know that we can hear him out here, so surely he's not referring to us. It's bad enough that we have been waiting to meet with him for over an hour. "Just think of him as the Wizard of Oz," I say. "His bark is much worse than his bite."

Echo sucks her teeth and twirls one of her braids around her finger. "Better not come at me like that," she says. "I don't care who he is."

"Hey, remember how we role-played this," I remind her. Then I hear Michelle's warnings echo in my head. "Look, if Cuevas becomes antagonistic, let me handle it."

The door to the back office opens and out comes the councilman's chief of staff, Ryan Alfaro. I feel Echo and Cindi hold

their breaths as he heads toward the reception area. Echo whispers, "He is sooo fine."

"Man, we ain't here for that," Christian says.

"Enough, you two, "I say. Although I realize that I, too, was holding my breath. Physically, Ryan is cut from the same cloth as my ex, Rocco, who was striking even without a backbone. *Oh, grow up, Jen.* I stand up, and the teens follow my lead. "This is it."

Ryan reaches us and stutters, "The councilman will see you now." And he says it as if he is truly sorry. He motions us to follow him.

When we walk into the councilman's office, Cuevas is flipping through a stack of messages while anchoring the telephone between his ear and shoulder. With 250 pounds heaved upon a five-ten frame, and a boomerang of gray hair around his head, the man could pass for a Puerto Rican Santa Claus. The problem is his disposition is less Jolly St. Nick and more Fat Bastard.

Cuevas ignores us as Echo, Cindi, Christian, and I take the seats across his desk. Every few seconds he scoffs at the message he's reading, crumples it up in his stubby fist and tosses it in the wastebasket. Suddenly, he barks into the receiver, "You know what I got to say about that? Fuck 'em!" Christian gasps and Echo giggles. I glance over at his chief of staff, who's rubbing his fingertips into his eyes so hard his eyeballs just might pop through his nostrils. "Fuck the NAACP, fuck the Urban League, fuck the whole lot of 'em." Cuevas swivels in his chair until it squeaks for mercy. "Let me tell you something about them people. They're always talking about unity this and solidarity that. But when we stand by them—be it in the street or in City Hall or *cualquiera*—what exactly do they give us in return for our support?" Cuevas slams his bloated fist on his desk. "They give us ice in the winter." Now it's my turn to gasp. I peek at Echo from the corner of my eye. The youngest of five children born to a Dominican man and an African-American woman, I pray she doesn't understand who the councilman means by *they*. By the way her knee is jiggling at a hundred taps per minute, however, Echo clearly does. Still, she is trying hard to restrain herself, and I adore her for it.

I shoot at look at Ryan Alfaro, who finally steps forward. "Councilman . . ." He mimes a plea for Cuevas to get off the phone and tend to us.

Cueva says, "Look, I have to meet with some constituents, but I've said my piece. You know where I stand, and it's not gonna change. Don't fuckin' ask me no more." The councilman slams down the telephone, and finally acknowledges us with his red, watery eyes. "You are . . ."

Ryan says, "This is Jennifer Saez, and these are Echo Contreras, Cynthia Morales, and Christian Rivera. They're all residents of Soundview, and they're here to share their concerns with you about the playground on Noble Avenue."

"Ah, Noble Playground," says the councilman. "Did you hear about the bill I introduced at the City Council last week?"

I grow excited and shoot a smile at the kids. This meeting might go well after all. "No, we haven't. Please tell us." Then I remember. There's nothing in Michelle's research about a bill regarding the playground. Perhaps Cuevas introduced it recently.

"Right now the baseball field is named after some Irish kid. Philip Hill, Hayes, *algo así*—"

Christian says, "It's called Philip Harding Field." His eyes are now the size of satellite dishes, telling me that he has no doubts that this meeting is going to go from bad to worse.

"Yeah, that's it! Philip Harding Field. Well, I introduced a

bill to change the name of the entire playground including the baseball field." The councilman waves to his chief of staff. "Give 'em copies of the resolution, Ryan."

Ryan opens his clipboard. "I actually have them right here." He hands each of us several clipped sheets of legal-sized photocopy paper.

"You're renaming the park after Willie Colón?" I ask. "Why?"

The councilman glares at me. "Don't you know who Willie Colón is?"

"Of course I know who Willie Colón is," I say. I notice the edge in my voice, but I can't seem to check it. "Everyone knows who he is."

The councilman points a pudgy finger at Christian. "Do you know who Willie Colón is?"

Christian hesitates. "He's got something to do with music, right?"

Cuevas growls and turns to Echo. "Do you know who Willie Colón is?"

"Yeah." I kick her seat, and she rolls her eyes. "Yes, Councilman." I pray that he doesn't ask her to prove it because even though I know she can, Echo instead will recount the one hundred and one things that prove the councilman is a bona fide loser.

"Con permiso, concejal," I say. The courtesy works because he looks at me like a curious bulldog. "We're actually not here to discuss your bill to change the name of the park. We're more concerned with the way the local precinct has been policing the playground there." I feel a little bad because this is Cindi's line in the script. When I glance at her, however, she seems relieved.

"That park has never been safer," Cuevas interrupts me. "Crime is down in this district twelve percent ever since I took office. I've been on the local precinct to move the drug dealers the hell on outta there." He waves to his chief of staff, who rushes to hand us a multicolored bar chart of declining crime statistics.

"But they're treating all of us like we're dealers," says Christian.

Echo adds, "Yeah, we'll just be sitting—oops! I mean, that all we are doing is sitting and talking on the park benches, doing nothing against the rules or regulations, certainly not disturbing the peace, when a police officer will come over to us and say that we have to 'move along.'"

The councilman squints at Echo. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah." Before I can kick her, she says, "I mean, yes, Councilman Cuevas."

"Are you Puerto Rican?"

What the hell ...? Always able to recognize a challenge and never willing to retreat, Echo lies. "Yeah, I'm Puerto Rican. So what?" I don't bother to give her a corrective kick because I'm thinking the same thing. Why does it matter if she's Puerto Rican or not?

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe the cops are harassing you because you wear your hair like *that*?"

Both Echo and I yell, "Excuse me?"

"Aren't you proud to be Puerto Rican?" Cuevas insists more than he asks. Before Echo can respond, he says, "If you're Puerto Rican and proud of it, why do you do *that* to your hair? If you act like a *morena*, you can't blame the cops for treating you like one."

Echo looks at me with eyes blazing. "He did not!"

Cuevas ignores her and sets his veiny eyes on me. "You asked me why I've decided to rename the park after Willie Colón. This is why. When I'm done, every damned park and

playground will be named after a Puerto Rican. Hell, if I could, I'd name every street in this district after a Puerto Rican. We're still the majority in this district, and our public spaces should bear our names. The Irish and the Jews and the I-talians . . . they abandoned this neighborhood decades ago, so why should anything here still be named for any of them?"

"Councilman . . ." Ryan squeaks his name like a mouse stuck in a glue trap.

"Ryan, don't worry. *Somos toda familia aquí.*" The councilman taps his desk. "You know how I won this seat?"

By first kissing the collective ass of the Bronx Democratic machine and then extorting volunteer hours and campaign donations out of members of the community organizations in your back pocket? I barely swallow.

"Because I—how do you kids say it?—keeps it real." Christian snickers, but Echo folds her arms across her chest. "That's right," Cuevas continues. "I'm not afraid to speak the truth on behalf of my community. And the truth is, the Boricuas in this neighborhood are losing ground. After all those years of struggling to improve the schools, increase services, and open businesses, what are we doing? Instead of staying here and building our economic and political power, we're selling our homes and businesses to the Mexicans and heading off to Florida. These Mexicans are taking over!"

Christian stops snickering. Not only is he Mexican, his parents recently opened a small but popular restaurant on Westchester Avenue. The previous owners were a Puerto Rican couple who decided to retire to Orlando. Despite the backlash from some of the older neighborhood residents, the kids made sure Christian's parents' restaurant became just as popular as the *lechonera* it had just replaced. During our prep meetings, Christian brought us *quesadillas* and *horchatas*, and one taste of his mother's homemade guacamole and I knew that no amount of Puerto Rican nationalism would keep that restaurant from becoming a success.

Christian says, "Don't you represent the Mexicans who live in this neighborhood, too?"

Cuevas throws his hands up in the air. "Why? It's not like they can vote for me. What would be the point? If they want me to represent them, they have to support me. Let them become citizens and register themselves to vote. They should carry petitions for me during the primaries so I can get on the ballot. And hell, illegal or not, nothing's stopping them from making a donation to my campaign." That idea is obviously new to Cuevas, and he likes it lot. "Ryan, make a note of that. We have to make campaign stops wherever them Mexicans are to tell them, 'Ask not what Cuevas can do for you. Ask what you can do for Cuevas.'"

Suddenly, the councilman jumps to his feet and aims his sausage of an index finger my way. "And you! You shouldn't be teaching these kids to lobby me. Brown shouldn't lobby brown. I've had it with you people coming in here complaining about everything. I did my job. I voted against the budget cuts. If you're unhappy about the cuts in funding to the public schools and health clinics and whatnot, don't come here whining to me. You want these kids to get a lesson in politics? I'll give you a damned lesson in politics. The speaker of the City Council—who's supposed to be a Democrat, mind you cuts some backroom deal with the Republican mayor and promises to convince the City Council to approve his budget. Well, Cuevas's vote cannot be delivered by nobody but Cuevas! Even when most of the other Democratic members of the council voted with the speaker and approved that awful budget, I stood up for the people of this district and voted against it. And you know what that cost me? I lost my seat as the chair of the Committing on Aging and my discretionary fund got

*slashed*! I stand up for your interests, and you have the balls to come here and lobby me? I'm not the one gutting the city budget. Instead of coming here, why don't you go lobby the Republicans from Queens or Staten Island?"

I've had enough. I yell, "Because *you* are supposed to be *our* representative. As residents of this district, we can't vote for anyone regardless of party in Queens or Staten Island. We can only vote for you."

"Or more like *not* vote for you," Cindi finally mumbles under her breath.

Now *I'm* on my feet. "How dare you speak to your constituents this way! Did it ever dawn upon you that the reason why people are moving out of this community is because your leadership is atrocious?"

"Go on, Jen!" Echo cheers. "That's what I'm talkin' about."

"You should be doing everything in your power so that this is a place where everyone—regardless of national origin, street address, or even political affiliation—wants to live. Don't you demand to be commended for voting against those budget cuts to schools and hospitals. That was your job. And it's also your job to unite the people who live here to improve the quality of life for everyone." Echo grabs my hand and pulls at it as if pumping octane into a Ferrari at the Formula One. "Who gives a damn who the park is named after when good kids are being driven out of it and onto the streets? What are you doing to help the newcomers believe they are a part of the community? What are you doing to make the longtime residents feel like it's worth staying here? Nothing. Instead you're spewing all this divisive nonsense as a way to deflect from the fact that you care about no one but yourself!"

"Get the hell out of my office!"

### Chapter 5

It's almost six-thirty when my telephone rings. Without looking at the caller ID display, I know it's Jennifer. On the one hand, I'm dying to know how the meeting with Cuevas went. But on the other hand, I don't have time to hear Jennifer brag because I have to leave soon to meet my date at Whipped. I let the machine answer while I finish feeding Cleopatra from the baby bottle.

"'Chelle, it's me," my sister says. "Pick up." I check my gym bag to be sure I have everything I need for tonight. "*Michelle, pick up.*" Why the hell does she assume I'm here? "Look, I don't know where you are, but you have to call me back now."

Shit, the meeting backfired. As much as I want to know what's going on and if the kids are okay, I just can't get into this right now. I can't be late for this date. It's my first with this new guy, and it sends a terrible message. Although maybe it wouldn't hurt to make him wait for me. I peck Cleo on her tiny, furry head and place her back in her faux sheepskin bed when my cell phone rings and vibrates at the bottom of my purse.

I fish it out and, sure enough, it's Jennifer. I don't answer the phone, but keep it in hand as I head out of the house and toward my car. The jingle of voice mail plays, so once I settle behind the wheel of my new Cabriolet, I finally check it.

"Michelle, why aren't you answering your fuckin' phones? Look, I'm headed over there with the kids. Fuckin' Cuevas gave us hell. Echo and Christian are plotting his assassination. Cindi won't stop crying. I don't know what to do 'cept I can't take them home like this. We should get to you in about five minutes. Still call me back!"

Cindi's crying? I debate whether I should call my date and cancel. No. I love the kids, and sometimes I even like Jennifer, but now that I finally have a life, I don't want to lose it. But I should at least call them and find out what happened.

I connect my headset into my cell phone, dial back my sister and pull out of the driveway. Jennifer answers after one ring. "Are you home?" Shit, she has me on speaker, and I can hear Echo ranting, Cindi bawling, and poor Christian going back and forth between egging on one and consoling the other.

"No, I'm in the car on my way downtown."

"For what?"

"Just tell me what happened."

"I'll tell you when we get to your place."

"I told you I'm not going home.

"Where the hell are you going?"

"To an appointment."

"An appointment for what?"

Now it's my turn to say, "Okay, how old are we?"

"Look, Michelle, whatever the hell you've got planned, cancel it."

I almost run a stop sign. "I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?"

"I mean, I can't." I turn onto the entrance ramp of the expressway. "Take me off the speaker, please."

Jennifer pauses, debating for a hot second whether to challenge me. "Wait a minute." Eventually, she returns. "Hello?" Her voice loses that tunnel quality, and the kids sound fainter. "This is an emergency, Michelle. What are you doing that's so important that you can't give me a hand here?" I'm a bit peeved that she's doing this at all, let alone in front of the kids, especially since I know that my sister knows better. She's the queen arbiter of appropriateness. Then in a strangled whisper, Jennifer says, "I mean, not only did this whole thing start as a favor to you, it went to hell when your research didn't include the bill Cuevas introduced to rename the damned park."

I have no idea what bill she's talking about, but I'm pissed enough at the suggestion that this is my fault. Since I know that the kids can't hear me, I say, "This lobbying thing was your idea. I told you I had a bad feeling about it, but you're the Puerto Rican Hillary Clinton, remember. I have an appointment, and you're the Mentor Extraordinaire, so you handle this on your own."

Just as I hang up on my sister, I swear I see her BMW speed by me on the opposite side of the expressway on the way to my house.

## Chapter 6

Even though Michelle hangs up on me—which she's been doing too freakin' much lately—I still expect her to be home when I get there. Sometimes my sister talks shit to me for no other reason, I think, than to remind me that she's older than me. But then guilt, sisterly duty, or whatever kicks in, and Michelle eventually tows the line. Of course, she will this time because if I hadn't done this Power Lunch thing for her, I never would have met these kids, let alone be in this situation.

When we arrive at the house, no one answers. I use my key to open the gate, and the kids and I wait on the porch. Sure, I can let us into the house—after all, I grew up here, too—but I don't want to overstep my boundaries. As it is, Michelle is going to be pissed to cancel her appointment and come home. I don't want to "OD" by not treating the place as if it weren't her personal space.

But fifteen minutes come and go, and Cindi sniffles. "I gotta use the bathroom."

I figure what the hell. On top of the hellish experience she

had at her first attempt at being a citizen advocate, I can't let the child suffer from a strained bladder. I open the front door. I say to Cindi, "The bathroom's right down the hall and to your right, sweetie."

"Ms. Saez's house is nice," says Echo.

Christian asks, "She lets you have a key to her house?"

"Actually, this is our parents' house. When my parents retired to Puerto Rico, she took it over."

"Oh, you don't live here with her?" asks Echo.

"No, I own an apartment in Manhattan." Even though I'm peeved at Michelle for not returning home, I refrain from telling the children that she never left this place. It'd probably embarrass her for them to know that.

Echo asks, "How come y'all don't live together?"

"Damn, stop being so nosy," says Christian. "Just 'cause they're practically twins doesn't mean they should be attached at the hip and shit. You see they don't really get along."

"That's not true," I say. "I went away to college, and Michelle stayed here, so . . ." When I returned to the city after graduating from college to attend Columbia Law School, it never occurred to me to move back home. Were it not for the fellowships I won, I would have graduated with too much debt to live on my own, never mind buy the co-op. And just because Michelle and I don't hate each other is no call to revert back to childhood living arrangements.

Before I can say anything more, Echo swats the brim of Christian's baseball cap and almost knocks it off his head. "I swear, Christian, you don't even want to start with me. I can ask Ms. Saez whatever I want, and if she don't wanna answer, she don't have to. She knows it's not gonna bother me none. You just take care of Cindi, okay?" Then Echo turns back to me. "You told us all about law school, Ms. Saez, but you ain't tell us where you went to college."

"I went to Princeton," I answer. "In New Jersey."

"Daaamn, Miss Saez. That's one of them—what they call 'em—Ivy League schools, right? The tuition's mad high, they're like real hard to get into and, like, mostly white people go there, right?"

I can't help but laugh. "Yeah, you can say that." Funny, I've always been proud of my Princeton education, but not quite like this.

Cindi returns from the bathroom, carrying Michelle's new kitten Cleopatra. Her face is dry, but her eyes and nose are red. I catch Echo elbow Christian in the side. He walks toward Cindi with his arms outstretched, and she places her head against his chest. I like him for doing this, but I like Echo even more for making him do it. The girl has him well-trained, and he's not even her boyfriend. If anything, Echo's whipping the guy into shape only for him to wind up with her best friend; I feel a twinge of sadness for her.

Needing no sympathy from me, Echo says, "I'm thirsty," and it's clear she expects me to offer her something to drink.

"Go find the refrigerator," I say. I have come to adore Echo, but there can only be one queen in every hive.

And with neither hesitation nor attitude, Echo walks out of the living room into the kitchen. She says, "If y'all want something, too, you better come 'cause I ain't your housekeeper." We follow her into the kitchen. I get some glasses while Echo pulls out a pitcher of homemade limeade.

"You guys, I'm really sorry about what just happened," I say. "I had no idea Cuevas would be such an asshole." Maybe I shouldn't be using this kind of language with them, but I'm only calling it as they already witnessed it for themselves. Besides, Michelle's not there.

"It's okay, Ms. Saez," Cindi finally says. After taking a long sip, she lets Cleopatra lick a drop of limeade off her

fingertip. "It's not like you knew how he was gonna be."

"Please call me Jen," I say. "After what we've been through together, you've earned that. And know that most politicians are usually more . . . political."

"How does a guy like that stay in office?" asks Christian. "I mean, no way we're the first people he's treated that way. And if Cuevas is like that with the people who can vote for or against him, imagine how he is with people he has any control over. Like the people who have to work for him."

Cindi sniffs. "Poor Ryan."

"What you mean poor Ryan?"

Echo shoots Christian a look that screams *Shut up!* She asks, "Jen, is it true all the things he said?"

"I didn't even understand half of what he said," says Cindi.

"Unfortunately, it is. Electoral politics is a very complicated thing with many shades of gray. Cuevas probably did lose a committee chair position because he stood up to the speaker of the City Council," I say. "But don't feel too sorry for him. He probably made an additional ten grand per year for chairing that committee. And you've seen his record. Cuevas didn't really do anything meaningful with that power. He's only upset because his pay was cut."

"How much does a councilperson make?" asks Echo.

"As of now? About ninety thousand dollars each year."

"What?" asks Christian. "I wanna be on the City Council." Cindi says, "Me, too."

I laugh and say, "And that's for what's theoretically a parttime job."

"For real?"

"Many council members have other jobs or businesses. Many are lawyers, like I am, who have their own practice. And some are the executive directors of nonprofits that they

founded," I explain. "But if you ask me, a really good councilperson should treat it as a full-time job. With that kind of salary and with so many people counting on you, there's plenty of work to do and more than enough money for you to devote yourself to it."

"You would make a great councilwoman, Jen," Echo says. "You should run against that fool Cuevas. I'd vote for you."

"Me, too."

"Me, too."

I smile and say, "Too bad for me you can't."

"But my mother can," says Echo. "My brother can. *Mi tio, mi abuela, mi madrina*, I would get all of them to vote you. Shoo, I can make my whole block vote for you."

And Echo being the sparkplug she is, I believe her.

# Chapter 7

As Greg launches into a complex lending formula, I realize what a mistake it was to invite him. I watch as he bores the five kids I manage to drag off MySpace to attend this week's Power Lunch. Two boys are asleep, the third is staring out the window, and the two girls are passing each other notes. Since I forced them to participate, I have no right to demand they pay attention.

And Greg. What was I thinking inviting him to present to the kids? I barely know him. I thought it'd be a good opportunity to solidify our relationship to make him do this. He followed my instructions to the letter so the fault is all mine. The bizarre thing is that Greg would be a hit in a roomful of adults. He defines acceleration clauses and loan-to-value ratios with confidence and clarity. He wears the navy pinstripe suit and parts his hair on the opposite side just like I insisted. Every so often he cracks a joke that would floor anyone who knows what it's like to scrape together enough money to pay a real bill—a car note, school tuition, rent. The biggest expense

these kids have, however, is refilling the pay-as-you-go accounts they opened for cellular phone service, so Greg's jokes sail over their heads.

And where's Echo? And Cindi and Christian? Why aren't they here? Since it's the middle of the workday, they can't be with Jennifer. Are they upset with me for not coming home after the Cuevas fiasco? I guess that shouldn't surprise me. *Admit it, Michelle, you deserve the cold shoulder. You didn't come home when they needed you because you wanted to punish them for choosing Jennifer over you.* 

Even though we have an hour left in the seminar, I signal Greg to wrap it up. He stops dead in the middle of his explanation of escrow and says, "And that concludes my presentation." Then he says not another word.

The girls who were passing notes notice that he's stopped speaking. Believing that he's resorted to that old teacher's trick of halting the lecture until the side conversations cease, they turn away from each other, lean back in their seats and fix their eyes on the front of the room. Not a peep from Greg, and they start to exchange scared looks.

I ask, "Does anyone have any questions for Mr. Adler?" One of the boys lets out a vicious snore, and the two girls giggle. "Then that concludes today's Power Lunch."

As one girl jostles the boys awake, the other checks her watch. "For real?" she asks me.

"Yes, please show Mr. Adler your appreciation and enjoy the rest of your day." The kids weakly applaud Greg and then jump out of their seats and race for the door, grabbing one last slice of cold pizza or a handful of pretzel nuggets on the way. I avoid Greg's gaze and begin to clean the room.

He slowly makes his way to me. "How did I do?" His eyes blink with desperation for my approval.

You were great, I think. It's not your fault that you were overly

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prepared because I told you that you couldn't be too specific. You bored them to death, and I'm the one to blame because even though you're confident, charming, and accessible, you just weren't the right speaker for this crowd. I'm so sorry I twisted your arm into coming here.

*Stop it, Michelle. Remember your training. You are never wrong.* I turn to Greg, look him in the eye and say, "I'm very disappointed in your presentation."

"But I did exactly as you asked me." Although he sounds confused, Greg's eyes flutter with excitement. "I followed your—"

"No backtalk!" I shout. "You were barely adequate." *Okay, that was pathetic, Michelle.* I really need to work on this. I'm supposed to humiliate him, but I just can't bring myself to do it. Even though this is exactly what Greg wants me to do, it's still hard for me let him have it. How do I salvage this scene?

I look at the wastebasket in my hand and shove it toward him. "Clean this mess," I say. "The utility closet is over there, and you'll find everything you need to sweep and mop this floor after you've cleared out this garbage." *Good, Michelle, good!* I never mop the floor. The library has a custodian who does that.

Even though Greg immediately takes the wastebasket from me, he says, "But I have to be back in my office for a—"

"That is of no concern to me," I say. "And if it's of no concern to me, it's of no concern to you, Gregory. You will return to your office if and when I grant you the permission to return to your office. Now clean this mess."

Greg hurries to remove his jacket and drape it across a seat. Then he rushes to toss stray cups and crumpled napkins into the wastebasket. As I watch him, I realize that I'm really doing this. I'm dominating him, and we're not even at the club!

Queen Josephine and Lady Lash were right. Damn, this feels so good!

As I make my way to the door, I say, "You are to stay in here with the door locked until this room is spotless." I mean, I can't have Elaine walk in on my guest speaker mopping the floor. "This evening you are to report to the club at exactly eight-twenty for your punishment. Don't you dare be late and force me to make it worse than it's already going to be. Do I make myself clear, Gregory?"

"Yes, Madame Michelina."

What a rush! I let myself out of the room, locking the door behind me. Now that Greg can no longer see me, I dance a jig in the hallway. Then my groove is disrupted by the last voice I expect to hear at the library in the middle of the day.

"What's gotten into you?"

"Jennifer! What are you doing in here? Why aren't you at work?"

My sister moves for the knob on the conference room door. "Let's go in here and I'll tell you everything." She tries the knob but it doesn't turn.

I grab her arm and say, "We can't go in there. It's locked."

"I can see that."

"The floor's wet," I say as I pull her down the hallway toward my office. "I just finished mopping in there."

"Oh."

We reach my office and, thanks to God, Elaine is out to lunch. I sit down, but Jennifer remains standing. She comes here unannounced in the middle of the workday, and now she won't sit down. This is big. "What's up?"

"I've decided to run for City Council."

"Jen, that's great!" It was only a matter of time before my sister would do something like this. I think she'd make a fantastic representative, or, at the very least an effective politician. "Wow, isn't the deadline for the primary right around the corner?"

"Yeah, there's a lot of work to do," says Jennifer. "I'm really going to need your support."

"Absolutely." I reach into my bottom desk drawer, pull out my pocketbook and search for my checkbook. "What's the maximum contribution I can make?"

"Oh, I don't expect you to do that...." she says.

Yeah, right. "I'm your sister. I should be the first to do it. C'mon, what's the max?"

Jennifer squints at me through her eyeglasses. "Three thousand." I scribble out the check, tear it out of the book and hand it to her. She stares at it. "Can you really afford this, 'Chelle?"

"I wouldn't offer it if I couldn't," I say. I stand up and open my arms. "I can't believe it! My sister, member of the City Council!" Jennifer gives a little shriek and jumps into my arms. As we hug, I say, "Councilwoman Jennifer Saez, representing the eighth district of Manhattan."

My sister pulls away from me and pushes her glasses up her nose. "Actually, I'm not running in East Harlem. I'm going up against Cuevas for his seat right here. The eighteenth district."

"You what?"

"I mean, between having grown up here and the research you just did to help us prepare for the lobbying visit, I know this community so much more intimately than where I currently live. Besides, I haven't lived in El Barrio that long at all." For a minute Jennifer sounds like she's rehearsing her response to a question posed by a debate moderator rather than speaking to her own sister. "I've been so busy at the firm, I really haven't gotten involved in East Harlem politics, so it's much more strategic for me to move back to Soundview and run here."

Strategic?

"And besides, this community deserves better than Cuevas."

That may be true, but I'm only willing to sacrifice so much to be rid of him. "You're just going to put your co-op on the market and move back to Soundview?" I ask. "Not that long ago you were telling me what a coup it was to buy property in East Harlem now that it's become prime real estate."

"I want this, Michelle," Jennifer says in that decisive tone of hers. "You know me. I wouldn't take this lightly for all the reasons you're stating. But I really want this. I want this seat more than any co-op. And I need your help."

What more could my sister want from me than a campaign contribution and some volunteer hours? Then it hits me. "You want to move back into the house."

"Of course I do. I have to," Jennifer says. I catch a rare glimpse of rejection in her face. "You say that as if you don't want me there."

Because I don't. I'm positive that the reason why my sister and I get along as well as we do—and it's only well enough to put us in get-along-well territory—is precisely *because* we don't live together. And now I have a cat. A second job. A whole new world. There's just no room for my sister.

The hurt look on Jennifer's face morphs quickly into her usual confident demeanor. "Look, 'Chelly, I know what you're thinking, and I truly understand. We're both grown women who haven't lived together in years. We lead very different lives and need our own spaces. So I promise you that the move's just temporary. Once I swipe the seat out from under Cuevas, I'll go find my own place, so we're only talking about a few months here. What do you say?"

One thing I do appreciate about my sister is that she's reasonable. Maybe that's because besides our striking resemblance, it's one of the few qualities we share. And the truth

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is, I really can't say no to Jen. The house still belongs to my parents so I'm really in no position to say that she can't move back. But even though I'm still a bit uncomfortable with the situation, I do believe Jennifer truly understands and respects my feelings. Of course she does. She would feel the same way if the shoe was on the other foot. And I want to support Jennifer in this exciting new venture like a good sister should. I really don't want to see people attacking my sister for moving into the neighborhood to run for Cuevas's seat, so if allowing her to reclaim her old address can reduce the likelihood of that, so be it.

I open my arms and say, "Welcome back to the neighborhood, sis!"

"Oh, thank you, 'Chelle!" Jennifer throws her arms around me. "Trust me, the time's going to go by really fast because we have so much work to do. When we're knee-deep in the campaign, you'll be so happy I'm under the same roof. First thing we have to think about is planning a fundraiser ASAP. Now I was—"

"Wait, wait, wait!" I say, waving my arms to flag down my sister. "You're going off and coming at me as if I were your campaign manager."

Jennifer laughs. "What do you want? An official invitation? Okay, Michelle, you're going to be my campaign manager. And when I win, naturally you'll be my chief of staff."

"No."

"Oh, c'mon, what more do you want me to say?"

"No, Jennifer, I don't want you to ask me to be your campaign manager," I say. "I can't be your campaign manager."

My sister says, "What do you mean you can't be my campaign manager?"

"What do you mean what do I mean?" I yell. I remember

where I am and lower my voice. "Jennifer, if I could do it, I would. But I can't do it."

"Can't," says Jennifer, "or won't?"

I don't like the way she asks me that, but I don't want to escalate this conflict. So I merely repeat, "I can volunteer a few hours per week, but I can't take on the responsibility of running your campaign. I just don't have the time."

But leave it to my sister to take it *there*. "What do you mean you don't have the time? You work here during the day, and ... that's it. Are you doing something with the kids? I mean, they're all volunteering on my campaign right through the general election anyway."

It's such a wrap. "Jennifer, I am thirty years old, and my mother is living on a tropical island enjoying her retirement by watching *telenovelas* and tending to her vegetable garden. In other words, I do not answer to anyone let alone my arrogant, younger sister. Listen to me carefully because I will not say this again. I just gave you a three thousand dollar check. I can offer you ten hours every week. I will allow you to move back into our house. But I am not going to be your campaign manager. Get it?"

Jennifer and I stand off, huffing at one another like two rams about to butt horns. Then my sister spins on her heel and heads for my office door. "Got it," she yells, and slams the door behind her.

Although I feel that my sister went too far and I did the right thing, that didn't feel anywhere near as good as dominating Greg. Not even close. I don't think all the domme training in the world is going to ever make it fun to speak to my sister like that.

## Chapter 8

Rocco beats me to Serafina's. When I walk through the door and toward the table, he gives me this twisted face, so I can't tell if he's happy or anxious to see me. I don't get it. He wanted to leave me. You'd think the moron would show me some appreciation for making it easy on him.

A little over five months ago he walks into the kitchen while I'm reading through the transcript of a deposition and says, "Jennifer, this isn't working out."

I saw this coming, and I meant to save him the anguish. Then the case I was trying to settle went into litigation, and he beat me to it. *Oh, be real with yourself, Jen. You got blindsided by the sexcapade that occurred the night before the chickenshit called it quits, and thought there was one last chance for you two.* 

When Rocco finally summoned the courage to say what we both knew for a long time, I didn't want to drag out the inevitable.

"So leave," I said. Then I went back to my transcript. "C'mon, Jen, don't be like that...."

"I'm not being like anything. You're unhappy. I'm unhappy. I own this apartment. There's nothing more to say."

Not that Rocco didn't harass me for "closure." After he moved out, he sent me countless e-mails and phone calls begging for me to talk to him if not meet with him. I answered him once. I sent Rocco a single e-mail where I clearly delineated that I knew the separation was for the best, that I harbored no ill will toward him, and that other than to arrange the logistics of his moving out, there really was no need to rehash what went wrong with the relationship. I never mentioned the loan, taking it as a loss.

So when I finally called Rocco and asked him to meet me for lunch, he presumed that I was finally ready to have the Conversation. I let him think that. If Rocco had any idea why I really wanted to see him, he never would have agreed to lunch at Serafina's.

Rocco stands up when he sees me. "Hi."

"Hello."

He walks around the table to pull out my chair. I chuckle to myself, remembering how long it took me to train him to do that. His next girlfriend should thank me. The man wasn't a Neanderthal when I met him. Far from it. It was that he was pretty spoiled, and therefore completely self-absorbed. It didn't bother me much because the fact that he had his own interests allowed me to pursue mine. That is, until he confused me for his damned mother.

"You look good," Rocco says. He means it. Whether he likes it or not, it's the truth. I look great.

"So do you," I lie. Rocco's one of those guys who thinks he's good-looking enough to ignore his appearance. He is, but that's beside the point. We're talking principle here. When he worked at the law firm, his Taryn Rose shoes were always scuffed and his Burberry ties always had coffee stains. Now Rocco's into the starving artist thing with torn jeans, a wrinkled T-shirt, and "mandals." How did I ever fall for this man?

"How's the artistic life treating you?" I ask, even though I really don't care. Of course, I hope the man is not literally starving, but as long as I don't have to feed him, I have greater concerns.

"Awesome!" he says, his eyes lighting up. "The band just landed a gig at Crash Mansion." Rocco digs into the outside pocket of his Ferragamo messenger bag and pulls out a stack of glossy postcards. He hands me one: a flyer listing a calendar of performances for the band he created called Homeland Security. Rocco refers to it as "folk hip hop." I don't know how accurate that label is because I could barely stand to listen to it. I had no problem with the music or lyrics or anything like that. I just couldn't get past the notion of a trust fund baby rapping about gentrification, school shootings, and the prison industrial complex. The fact that Rocco's family emigrated from Buenos Aires to the Upper West Side where he attended the Trinity School before studying at the London School of Economics hardly qualifies him for street cred. "When are you going to come hear us play?" he asks.

If he begged me, maybe I would go, but it's obviously a rhetorical question. Yes, it would surprise and even please him if I were to show up at one of his gigs. But Rocco and I both know that not only do I not give a shit about his music but also that he doesn't give a shit if I like his music.

I could lie again and tell him that I'd really like to, but what's the point? "I don't have the time," I say. "I'm running for City Council."

Rocco's eyes flare. "No way!"

I nod then prop my hand on my chin. "I had an encoun-

ter with my local representative and decided that the district needed better."

"But I thought you liked Councilwoman Mendoza. You even voted for her." Rocco squints in confusion and then leans forward so that no one can overhear him. "I remember you threatening to not give me any for a month if I didn't vote for her, too."

I roll my eyes at him. "I'm not running for the East Harlem seat. I'm moving back to the Bronx and running against Raul Cuevas."

Rocco scoffs. "I'm shocked at you, Jennifer. And quite a bit disappointed."

"What are you talking about? You always said I'd make a great politician. You encouraged me to run in the last election."

"But you're carpetbagging!"

I crumple up my napkin and toss it on the table. "Oh, that's bullshit. Save for the few years since I graduated high school, I've lived in that district all my life. And quite frankly, it hasn't changed a lick since I left."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Rocco asks. "Things haven't deteriorated."

"Things are not supposed to just not deteriorate," I snap. "They're supposed to get better."

Rocco throws up his hands. "Okay, okay, okay." Then he places his hands over mine. "I do think you'd make a fantastic local official, and I wish you all the best with your campaign. Tell me what I can do to support you."

"Glad you asked," I say. "I need you to repay me the five grand I loaned you."

"What?"

Rocco had quit the law firm for two reasons. One, to be with me. I insisted on it. I wasn't about to put both my heart and ca-

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reer on the line by dating someone at work. Two, to pursue his musical career. By the time he moved in with me, the money he'd saved had run out, and he was a long way off from getting his hands on his trust fund. I can't stand Rocco's mother because she couldn't stand me. That salty Latigringa—that's the name 'Chelle and I give to Latinos who would bleach their blood free of its African and Native American DNA if they could—never approved of her favorite offspring wanting to marry a Boricua *trigueñita* from a working-class family whose hair crinkled at the first hint of moisture. But the one thing I'll hand to that old bitch is that she knew her son and how to keep him in check. By her decree, Rocco doesn't get his trust fund until he turns thirty-five or gets married, whichever comes first.

I explain, "Yes, I'm entering the race at the last minute, but I can work that to my advantage. But I need money to raise money, Rocco. I'm going up against the political machine's favorite son. When this moron is finally forced out by term limits, the Bronx Democratic Committee already plans to hand the seat over to his son. Can you believe that?"

"Yeah, I can. It happens everywhere," says Rocco. "You know, my bassist lives in Brooklyn, and he told me—"

"So I'm going to need the money by the end of the month." While I'm happy Rocco understands my dilemma and sympathizes with me, I didn't come here to consult with him on strategy. I should be having those discussions with Michelle, but she wants to pretend she has a life. Her check for three grand is still sitting in my wallet, and I have no intention of cashing it. Instead I have every intention of making Rocco repay this loan as soon as possible. "I'm going to use the money you repay me to organize a fund-raiser, and hopefully I can flip that five grand into at least twenty. Meanwhile, I just submitted my application for public matching funds, which

means I'll get four bucks for every one I raise." The formula is a bit more complex than that, but like I said, I don't want to talk politics with my ex-boyfriend.

"Jennifer, I want to help you, but I can't do it," Rocco says. I'm really starting to hate that damned word. First my sister, now my ex. You'd think I wasn't self-sufficient and always begging them for help. On the contrary, it's hard for me to do this, and both of them should know me well enough to know this. "I'm more than happy to repay you the money," says Rocco. "But there's just no way I can scrape up five grand by the end of the month."

I already had a response to that, too, because I know Rocco doesn't have the money on hand. Until he gains access to his trust fund, he has to earn his keep like the rest of us, which is eventually why he needed to borrow the five grand in the first place. Except the rest of us do not get a new Ducati motorcycle on our birthdays or a check for a thousand dollars tucked in a "Just Thinking of You" card. No matter where she happens to be in the world with her boy toy of the month, Latigringa never fails to dote on her boy. "Sure, you have it," I say. "Either sell something or ask your mother for it."

Rocco jolts in his seat as if my words contain two thousand volts. "Are you crazy?"

"Don't throw a tantrum."

"Where do you come off—" I dig the tip of my Carmen Marc Valvo slingbacks into the front of Rocco's ankle. "*Ouch*!" He reaches down and grabs it.

"I told you to calm down," I say.

Rocco grabs his messenger bag and almost knocks over his glass of water. "I'm not taking this from you, Jennifer." He slings his bag over his shoulder and limps toward the door. I allow him to make it to the street before I drop some cash on the table and follow him. "Rocco!" I call. He shoots a frightened look over his shoulder and hobbles faster, like a terrible actress in a bad horror flick. He reaches the curb and hails frantically for a cab. By the time one pulls over for him, I'm by his side. I open the door for him. Rocco groans but climbs into the backseat. I follow him, and he groans again. I don't say anything. His whining has never fazed me. "You owe me this money, Rocco, and you know I wouldn't ask for it if I didn't need it. I took a leave of absence from the firm to launch this campaign, and I won't see the money from the sale of my co-op in time. You really think I would go so far as to suggest that you borrow it from your mother if I didn't need it?"

Rocco breaks my gaze and stares out his window. When he wanted to quit the firm to focus on his music, I supported him. In fact, my enthusiasm for the idea surprised him. He expected me to react just as his mother had. Despite the frequent gifts, Latigringa offered him no moral support and always asked him when he thought he might be done with this "artistic phase." I, on the other hand, allowed Rocco to move in with me when his savings ran low.

But I had conditions. If Rocco was going to devote himself to his music, I wanted to see progress. I wanted to read new songs in his notebook (even if I did find the lyrics a bit disingenuous) and to hear new melodies emanating from his guitar. I wanted to come home to notes on the refrigerator that read *At the studio, be home at nine,* and to stories about auditions and jam sessions. And because I had become the sole breadwinner and worked longer hours to support us both, I expected Rocco to manage the house. Groceries in the refrigerator, clean laundry in the basket, a hot meal on the stove, an empty bag in the garbage, and yes, a ready body under the comforter. I was lucky if I got a fresh roll by the toilet. Rocco

turned my place into a Dumpster and had not one recorded song or paying gig to show for it.

Although he failed to carry his weight, he had the audacity to call me domineering. "So I'm domineering because I don't let you treat me like your housekeeper," I said. "You don't think I have the right to demand that you do your share around here?"

"That's just it, Jennifer," he said. "Yes, we both know you have the right. So why be so demanding? Fine, it annoys you when I forget to clean the shower or pay the bills late. You don't have to punish me for it."

"Punish you? How do I punish you? I'm the one who's getting punished when you don't earn your keep."

"Last night you made me sleep on the couch just because I forgot to take out the garbage!"

"It was a recycling night!" I said. "Now we're stuck with all that paper for another week."

"The point is," Rocco said, "that was an extreme reaction to a little mistake."

"You know, Rocco, sometimes I think you do these things because you want me to get on your ass," I said. "Your mother allowed you to get away with anything and everything. Oh, you pretended to enjoy the freedom. But deep down inside, it bothered you that she didn't care enough to put you in check."

"You fuckin' bitch!"

I slapped him across the face and was hauling back for *el revés* when Rocco tackled me onto the sofa. We tumbled onto the carpet, tearing at one another's clothes. I commanded him to eat me until I came, and he did. Rocco begged for me to return the favor, but I refused. Instead I teased him until the point of no return and then I kneeled over him and ordered

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him to finish himself off while I watched. When he was done, Rocco kissed my hand, told me he loved me and wanted to marry me no matter what his mother said. We had never gone at it like that before, and I thought we had embarked on an exciting new path in our relationship.

The next day the wuss shuffled into the kitchen. "We need to talk."

Now, in the cab, Rocco finally turns away from the window and looks at me. "Okay, I'll ask my mother for the money, but on one condition."

Great. "What?"

"Homeland Security gets to play at your fund-raiser."

He's got to be fucking kidding! But that glow across his face tells me he's dead serious. Rocco intends to hold out for this. Why can't the man just do what I ask of him? This is why we can't be together.

"You get no pay, play only three songs, and I choose every single one."

"Half pay, five songs, and we choose them together."

"I said no pay, three songs, I choose."

"Okay, it is a fund-raiser so you don't have to pay us," says Rocco. "And I guess you do have to be careful that what we play doesn't contradict your campaign platform. So how about this? No pay, five songs, you choose."

"Or how about this?" I say. "No pay, three songs, I choose."

Rocco gazes at me in a way that tells me he misses me. And I miss him, too. But I also know that we will never work. We went somewhere new that last night, and from that place I had to go forward. But for whatever reason, Rocco needed to turn back. It scared the shit out of him, and yet in my gut I knew what happened was not a symptom of but the solution to our problems. I can't explain it. I'm not even convinced that I should feel the way I do. I never have been able to behave

according to how I should feel, but only how I *do* feel. Even when everyone says it's wrong. This is how I end up alone.

Now it's my turn to look out the window, because I can't let Rocco see me cry. I hear him say, "Okay, Jen, you win." First I wipe my tears, and then I turn to give him a smile.

# Chapter 9

To make peace with Jennifer and get her off my back, I offer to sit on her interviews for a campaign manager who can also serve eventually as her chief of staff. Of course, she resists left and right, insisting that she doesn't need my help. Then she finally agrees, only to make it seem as if it's her idea.

Jennifer spends almost an hour with every candidate. She takes copious notes and asks the same question a variety of ways, as if she's deposing a witness. Listening with one ear and minding the clock, I go on instinct. I know my sister and can tell who can work with her or not within minutes. Right now she's impressed with this Leslie Harewood, but I see nothing but trouble.

"As your chief of staff, I won't just manage your calendar and run your district office," says Leslie. "I'll be your eyes and ears in the community. If I see an issue that can be addressed with a change in legislation, I'll do the research and bring it to your attention."

I stand up and offer her my hand. "Thank you, Leslie. We have one more candidate to see, but we will be in touch with you shortly."

"Oh." Leslie shakes my hand then offers it to Jennifer. "Thank you . . . Councilwoman." She grins and skips out the door. What I would give to be that confident about anything, but I'm working on it.

"I like her. She's my favorite so far." Jennifer looks at the itinerary I gave her. "Actually, Leslie was our last interview."

"No, I screened a résumé I received at the last minute and decided to accommodate the guy," I say. "I think he's perfect."

Of course, Jennifer says, "Unless he rocks my world, which I seriously doubt, I'm going with Leslie."

"Trust me, Jen, you don't want to do that."

"Are you kidding me?" she says, staring at me over the rim of her glasses.

"She brings a master's degree in public policy from Columbia University, experience working at the Independent Budget Office, and existing relationships with key staff at City Hall. And that's just on paper. It doesn't hurt that she's an African American who grew up and still lives in the district and is fluent in Spanish. Leslie is perfect."

"She's too ambitious."

Jennifer scoffs. "There's no such thing."

"Jen, your priority now is to find someone who can manage your campaign given all the barriers you have to overcome," I explain. "The girl had nothing to say about that. All she talked about was what a great chief of staff she would make."

"Fantastic! She looks ahead. And that's the kind of drive I need if I'm going to beat Cuevas." Jennifer eyes me up and down. "Since my own sister is too busy to support me."

Ignore her, Michelle. "Jennifer, you need someone who's com-

petent but also . . . " I know exactly what I want to say, but I restrain myself. "Let me put it this way. Sure, Leslie will handle anything you throw her way, but it's obvious to me that she just can't . . . " I probably shouldn't use this word, but nothing is more perfect. " . . . submit."

"Submit?" My sister looks at me as if I suggested she engage in child labor. "I don't need anyone to *submit* to me."

I fight the urge to ask her if she would like to hear the evidence alphabetically or chronologically, but it's almost eight o'clock and there's no time for that. I have to leave soon for my own appointment, although I have yet to tell my sister that I have one.

"Yes, Jen, Leslie's perfect on paper. But you two are too much alike. The second you shoot down one of Leslie's grand ideas, she's going to jump ship." I head to the office door. "You need a campaign manager and chief of staff whose only purpose is to serve you." I open the door and usher in Mr. Perfect.

As I expected, my sister's jaw drops at the sight of Raul Cuevas's chief of staff. "Ryan Alfaro?"

"Not only is he the only candidate that has both experience in running a campaign and managing a legislative office, imagine all the press you'll get when the media finds out Ryan left Cuevas's campaign to run yours!"

"So much for loyalty," Jennifer says, although I can hear her salivate over my rationale. She's the underdog in this election in more ways than the average contender, and she knows it. But I have no doubt that Ryan's her man despite her legitimate hesitation. I nudge Ryan, to get him to speak.

"I can alleviate any concerns you have if you would just grant me five minutes, Ms. Saez," he says. He folds his hands in front of his silk tie. "Please."

Yeah, he's perfect for Jennifer. He'd drop to his knees and beg if she asked him to. I say, "Look, Jen, I've got to go."

"Go? Where?"

"I have an important errand to run." I think quickly. "I need to head to the central library to look up something for you."

"At this hour?"

"It's open late. When I get home, we'll talk, and you'll make a decision." I blow her a kiss, wink at Ryan, and rush out the door to meet with the Queen and a star member of the New York Jets.

# Chapter 10

"Have a seat, Ryan," I say as I take my own. What the hell is going on with Michelle? It'd be insane for me to hire him. I cut to the chase. "Does the councilman even know that you're on the market?"

"No, no, no. I've been wanting to leave for some time now, but I was just waiting for the right opportunity to emerge. But if Cuevas knew I wanted to move on, he would find some excuse to fire me."

"What on earth for?"

"That's just the kind of man he is, Ms. Saez. When he found out that our previous legislative director was applying to law school, he fired him for coming back five minutes late from lunch. This was a man with a wife and child. He wasn't planning on quitting until he actually began classes. But Cuevas could not imagine how anyone would not give his eyeteeth to do his bidding." Ryan pauses to hold up his résumé. "May I...?" I nod, and he places it on my desk. "Honestly, Ms. Saez, I could stomach the abuse if Cuevas were a good councilman.

But he takes his loyal constituents for granted, and the rest . . . well, I don't have to tell you."

"No, you don't." I scan his résumé. On paper he's stronger than Leslie. But she's a sparkplug like Echo. This Ryan . . . I don't know. He strikes me as a bit soft. "So you want to come work for me to stick it to Cuevas."

"Not at all, Ms. Saez! In that brief visit you had with him a few weeks ago, I saw in you a person that can lead others and make change for the better. One moment you were coaching those kids and giving them the confidence to speak up for what they believe in, and when Cuevas tried to humiliate them, you were standing up and giving him hell in a way that I have never seen anyone do. Not even the other men on the Bronx Democratic Committee." Ryan springs forward in his seat until his face is only inches from mine. "And now you're running for his seat when you have no ties to the county machine, no experience in public office, no war chest of which to speak...."

And Michelle thinks this guy is perfect for me? If Ryan keeps this up, not only will I not hire him, I just might throw in the towel. And move out of the state. "Why would you quit a secure job with such a powerful man to manage a bare-bones, final-hour campaign for a dark horse?"

"Because I know you can win," he says. "I can help you win. Not only do I know how the machinery works, I know everything about Cuevas."

As enticing as it sounds, I give myself a reality check. Ryan has much more to lose than gain by joining my campaign. For all I know, Cuevas sent him here to act as a mole. A really good-looking mole. *Knock it off, Jen. Where are you? Back in high school?* I say, "You expect me to believe that you're willing to risk your own political career to jump-start mine?"

"I don't have a political career."

#### SOFIA QUINTERO

"Sure you do. Even if I don't beat Cuevas, he won't be in office forever. Term limits will see to that. And if you remain loyal to him and the county machine, you can be next in line for his seat. Now why should I believe that you would give that up?"

"Because I never wanted that," says Ryan. "Ms. Saez, I have no desire to lead anyone or be in the public eye or anything like that. My strength—and what brings me the greatest sense of pleasure and fulfillment—is service." Then he laughs shyly, reminding me of Rocco when we first met and he wanted to impress me. "And truth of the matter is that, even if I aspired to Cuevas's seat, that'd be a pipe dream. The county committee has already chosen who they want to take his district when term limits forces him out of office."

"Yeah, I know," I say. "Raul, Jr." Ryan nods. "Unless you win."

# Chapter 11

"Of course you should let him," I say as I transpose two books on a shelf. I push the cart down the aisle as Jennifer follows me. "You don't have anything to hide."

"A complete stranger poking around my background, looking for dirt," Jennifer says as she hugs herself. In her Valvo pumps and Maz Azria suits, she usually seems six feet tall. Now she looks like a Girl Scout. I have this urge to protect my sister even though I know she's in no danger.

"First of all, if Ryan is going to be your campaign manager and chief of staff, he can't remain a stranger. You can't keep any secrets from him," I say as I wheel the cart around the corner toward the adult fiction section. "And Ryan is right. Once Cuevas learns that Ryan has leaped from his bandwagon to yours, he's going to scour the earth trying to find a way to discredit you."

"Not like he doesn't already have the whole carpetbagging issue," Jen says under her breath.

"Sure he's going to try that, but that's a minor thing, and

### SOFIA QUINTERO

you have a valid response," I say. Honestly, I'm starting to wonder if my sister should drop this campaign. Since Jennifer dove into it, she hasn't been getting enough sleep. Her late hours at the office enable me to keep my dates at Whipped a secret. Nor has she been eating right, from what the kids tell me, and they live off of junk food. Between her self-neglect and Cuevas's public verbal assaults, the lioness is losing her roar. But Jennifer won't quit even if she should, so the best thing I can do for her is help her see this campaign to its conclusion. "Just prepare yourself for the fact that he might twist the truth or straight out lie, Jen. This is the way campaigns are run nowadays. He's going to go negative, but you can counter if you expect it."

"Jesus . . ."

"Oh, c'mon, what's the worst thing he can find out about you?" I ask. "You ran up some charge cards while in college?"

"Actually, I was probably the only student in my dorm who didn't."

Of course not. "You see," I say. "You've never pulled a Paris Hilton, did you? There aren't any videotapes of you floating out there, right?"

"Oh, God . . . "

"Is that a yes or a no?" I tease.

"Michelle!"

"I didn't think so."

"Ever been arrested for anything?" I already know the answer to this so I ask it only to put my sister at ease. While in college Jennifer did participate in a few demonstrations, but she never got arrested. If anything, she was the one who summoned the pro bono attorney and collected the bail money for those who did.

Jennifer racks her brain for any tawdry events that might

come back to haunt her. "The only thing I can think of is when I made law review. I wrote a pretty strident article defending a woman's right to choose. Think he might use that against me?"

"That depends," I say. "Have you switched positions?"

"No!"

"Then don't worry about it." Even if Jennifer had flipped, Cuevas would never know. The woman's acting as if she's running for Congress. Of course, Cuevas is going to play dirty, but he's not going to go that far to discredit her. It's just a local election. "Being a maverick is not without its advantages, Jen. The worse thing he can say about you is that you've got no track record. Cuevas, on the other hand, has almost four years' worth of votes and quotes you can use against him."

Jennifer's eyes brighten. "It'd be great if you could—"

"No, Jennifer, I can't," I say.

"Ryan can't do it all, and you're in the perfect position to do it."

Because I truly believe in Jennifer and want to support her, I debate whether I should come clean. On the one hand, what I've learned can help her. On the other hand, Jennifer can't win this City Council seat if she's serving time for murdering me. No, this is not the time to reveal the turns my personal life has taken, especially when the truth is that I'm not willing to sacrifice it for her campaign. The only thing that lessens my guilt is the fact that my sister has no idea what I'm keeping from her. "I'm sorry."

"Are you really?"

"Wait here." I abandon the book cart and rush to the administrative office for my purse. I come back to find Jennifer picking up where I left off, reshelving books from the cart and reordering books misplaced by browsing patrons. What a freak. After snatching the book from her and placing it back on the cart, I say, "Trying to get me fired?"

"If it means you'll have to come work for me . . ." Jennifer stares at me as I reach into my purse for my checkbook. "No, Michelle, stop."

"I may not have time, but I do have money, so let me give you what I can."

"I can't accept that." Jennifer grabs the checkbook. "You've already given me the maximum contribution allowable by law, remember?"

"I'm your sister, for God's sake." I snatch the checkbook away from her and flip to a blank check. "Don't report it. Just deposit it, and spend it as you need it. The law can't tell you to refuse money from your own family." I make the check out for one thousand dollars, tear it out and hand it to Jennifer. She rips it in half. "What are you doing?"

Some library patrons at the computer stations turn to stare at me. Ever since Jennifer took a leave from her job at the law firm, she spends almost as much time here trailing me than at her campaign office. If my own sister continues to stalk me at work, I *am* going to get fired. Then my moonlighting gig will become my primary source of income. Come to think of it, that might be ...

"I don't want your money, Michelle," Jennifer says. "I need your time and expertise. Nobody can do research and organize things like you. Why are you so intent on denying me the best thing you can do for me?"

My face becomes hot. "So you think the only thing I'm good for is surfing electronic databases and pushing paper . . ."

"I didn't say that."

"... and that I'm not capable of doing anything else? That I have no dreams or desires other than to prep you for your close-up? Is that it, Jennifer?"

"Shhh!" says Mrs. Webb from "her" usual desk across the mystery aisle. The old woman is there every day, sometimes for four hours at a time. Elaine and I joke about charging her rent.

"I can't talk to you anymore," Jennifer says. "You twist everything I say."

"No, I just say everything you mean."

My sister throws up her hands and steps around my cart. "I'm out of here."

"Ciao."

She stops to turn around and glare at me. "Did you just say *ciao*?"

"What?" I yell. "I can't say ciao?"

Mrs. Webb says, "Shhhhh!"

Jennifer and I both suck our teeth at her, scoff at each other, then stomp off on our separate ways.

# Chapter 12

I head to the campaign office. Echo, Cindi, and Christian are there with a few more friends, preparing the invitations for my upcoming fund-raiser at the Marina del Rey. They listen to gossip queen Wendy Williams on the radio and try to solve her blind items as they stuff, label, stamp, and seal envelopes. They make each other laugh so much, no one notices my arrival but the ever alert Echo.

"Hi, Jen," she says. "Rye-yen called to say he was gonna be here soon." All the girls have a crush on "Rye-yen." Echo "pimped" him to recruit some of them to volunteer on my campaign, telling all her friends about the hottie she works for. But since Echo harbors the biggest crush on Ryan of all, she makes sure that her friends get their tasks done.

"Thanks, Echo." I slip into my office and grab the stack in my in box. At the top is a letter from the chair of the political action committee of Senior Sisters on the Scene, a twelve-yearold civic organization of African-American women over the age of fifty-five. The attached note from Ryan reads, *First*, *the good news*.

They voted to endorse me and made a five hundred dollar contribution to my campaign! Not only is that fantastic news, I didn't see it coming at all. Those old ladies were kind of tough on me, asking me as many questions about my personal life as they did my political opinions. I walked out of the interview believing that still being single and childless at the age of twenty-seven somehow worked against me.

But in the letter, the chair called me a "wholesome woman who as our representative in the City Council will serve as a wonderful example to the girls in this community." I have to thank Ryan for this one because it was his idea to have Echo and Cindi accompany me to the meeting. The SSS are quite respected and connected, so an endorsement from them is very likely to generate support from other groups in the district.

Next in the in box is a copy of the latest edition of the *Bronx Weekly Journal*. This time the attached note from Ryan says, "And now the bad news." I flip to the page that he has flagged with a paper clip. The headline on the editorial page immediately catches my eye: ONE MORE TERM FOR CUEVAS.

But when I read the editorial, I laugh. If I were Cuevas, I wouldn't leap to quote the *Bronx Weekly Journal* in my campaign material. Of course, although I'm disappointed to not have won its endorsement, Ryan warned me to not expect it. He said that even though the paper tries to maintain a facade of journalistic objectivity, it always endorses the machine's candidates. But this editorial amounts to a three-hundred-word backhanded compliment. In fact, I sit at my desk and start to brainstorm ways to spin the paper's halfhearted support for Cuevas against him.

A half hour later Ryan knocks on my door. I know it's him because he always knocks then waits. When I don't want to be interrupted, I tell everyone to hold my calls and lock the door. Otherwise, all my campaign workers knock then let themselves in, except Ryan. He knocks then waits for permission. I have to admit, I find it endearing and even a little sexy. Of course, I say nothing of the sort to him.

Still, I can't help myself. "C'mon in, Rye-yen." He enters, and I wave my list of possible campaign slogans at him. "Hey, this endorsement isn't as bad as it seems," I say. "I mean, the *Bronx Weekly Journal*'s practically telling voters, 'Look, in the face of uncertainty, go with the misery you know.' Let's challenge Cuevas to a debate."

Ryan approaches my desk and clears his throat. "I don't think that's a good idea, Jennifer."

"Not a good idea? It's a fuckin' awesome idea!" For some bizarre reason, the brilliance of this strategy zips past this ordinarily smart guy, so I break it down for him. "If Cuevas refuses to debate me, the voters'll wonder what he has to hide. If he agrees to it, I have a chance to use his record against him and present my platform. I can't lose."

"We should leave now so we won't be late for our next meeting," Ryan says. "We can discuss this later."

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he says as he grabs the papers I left him in the out box. "Let's just go."

I don't believe him, but I drop it.

I have no idea what's going on with Ryan. Ordinarily, he's so organized, but today it's been one fumble after the other. First, he forgets the speech I was supposed to give over lunch at the Soundview Collaborative for Intergenerational Initiatives. Then he brings the wrong MapQuest directions from the ballroom where the luncheon took place to the offices of the *North Bronx Reporter*. We were fifteen minutes late to meet with the

editorial board. As if that's not bad enough, Ryan gives me the wrong background material, so I enter the *Reporter* editorial meeting well-versed in the demographics and issues facing Parkchester and Morris Park when the *Reporter* covers the neighborhoods of Castle Hill and Zerega.

As he drives me back to the campaign office, I say, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't fire you." He stammers, and I yell, "Just one, Ryan!"

"Ms. Saez, I have no excuses for my incompetence as of late although I do have an explanation . . . if you'll allow me, ma'am."

This campaign is getting to me. Most women my age would cringe to have an attractive man refer to her as ma'am. But I like it. It saves Ryan his job for now. "Well?"

"I know I've been extremely preoccupied . . . "

"That's an understatement."

"... and I deeply apologize, but I've come across some information in my research that may have a major impact on your campaign."

It's clearly bad news, but I maintain my composure. "What is it?"

"I can't tell you," Ryan says. "I have to show you when we get back to the office."

Shit, this sounds really bad. "Does it have to do with Cuevas?" I already know it doesn't.

"No, it has nothing to do with Cuevas. I mean, it's the kind of thing you wouldn't want his campaign to find out."

Oh, God, it's *that* bad. About me? What in the world could Ryan have found that can be used against me that Cuevas did not already have? He already takes every chance he gets to slam me as, and I quote, "the opportunist who abandoned the community only to return now to embark on a career in politics."

Ryan rushes to fill my silence. "Now, I don't think the Cue-

vas campaign knows anything about this, and honestly, I don't know how they might find out. It's . . ." He searches for the right word. "It's obscure information."

What the fuck ...? "What do you mean, 'obscure'?"

"It's not the kind of thing you uncover unless . . ." Ryan pulls off the Bruckner Expressway toward our exit. "I just have to show you."

If I weren't so desperate to know, I'd kick him out of the driver's seat at the next stop light. Instead I'll wait until Ryan drops the bomb, and then I'll fire him. Wait, how the hell can I fire him? Now that he has uncovered this damning information about me, I'm going to go fire him? *Pendeja*, he'll run back to Cuevas with it, and my losing this election will be the *best* case scenario. Christ, I may be beholden to Ryan for the rest of my life. He could plunge into an affair with Echo, and I'd have to keep his borderline pedophiliac ass around to keep my own tail covered.

These thoughts and worse preoccupy me, and we are soon back at the campaign office. The kids are still there, hard at work. Echo refills the paper tray in the copier. "Hey, Ms. Saez." Then she lifts the lid, places a flyer on the glass, and hits the start button. She leans against the copier, jutting a voluptuous hip in our direction. "Hi, Rye-yen," she says as the light of the scanner beams across her face.

Ryan barely looks at her as he mumbles hello and leads me into my office. He locks the door behind us and rushes toward the computer. I pace behind Ryan's seat as he boots the machine and waits to connect to the Internet. He opens a window on the browser menu, clicks on a bookmark, then pushes away from the computer.

I take a deep breath, step forward and peer at the screen. The URL is www.whippednyc.com. A flash animation loads and then images flicker across the screen. I catch something

that looks . . . I don't know . . . like a gigantic ship's steering wheel except there are things dangling from the spokes. Before I can figure out what the hell I'm looking at, the image fades into one of a room with a mirrored ceiling and walls of . . . is that rubber? That photo soon disappears, too, and then I see one of a woman with straight dark hair and cherry red lipstick. She wears a black latex minidress, a police officer's cap, and thigh-high boots with heels that are at least six inches high. Not three. Six. At least. I had no idea they made heels that long.

I spin around in the seat and yell, "Ryan, what the hell are you showing me?" But he refuses to look me in the face. Instead he pins his chin to his chest and motions for me to continue looking at the screen. I turn around in time to see the word *Whipped*, well, whip across the computer monitor with a crackling sound. Under the logo scroll the words *Your Pain Is Our Pleasure.* "This is one of those—those—those . . . S&M clubs."

Ryan finally raises his head. "Actually, it's a dungeon. I mean, that's what they call it. Whereas a club is more like . . ." I must be staring at him something fierce because he drops his voice and gaze.

"What the hell does this have to do with me?"

"Click on, uh, 'Mistresses.""

I turn back to the monitor. The Whipped logo is still there because I have to click on a button verifying that I'm aware that the site I'm about to enter may contain words and images that may offend me, but hey, if that's exactly what I was gunnin' for, I first must verify that I'm of the age of consent in my state to view adult material. I click on the button, and the photos from the flash introduction pop across the screen.

Ryan says, "On top," and when I follow his direction, I find the menu. I select *Mistresses*, and a gallery of thumbnail pho-

tos of scowling women sporting leather and latex pop up one by one along the perimeter of the screen. White, black, Asian, blondes, brunettes, redheads, wafer-thin and plus-size, they're all different shapes and hues. The photo of the center square is five times the size of the thumbnails and is the last to load.

And the woman in it looks just like me. Her hair is much longer, much straighter, much darker. Her lipstick is such a deep purple, it borders on black. But the resemblance is unmistakable.

I don't know whether to tease or slap Ryan. It takes a second for me to locate him. He's skulked to the back of the room behind my desk. Since he's not in slapping distance, I scoff and say, "I can't believe you freaked me out over this. Yeah, she looks a lot like me, but you do realize that this isn't me, don't you?" How in the hell could Ryan think for a second that this mistress or whatever is me?

He says, "Oh, I know it's not you, but . . ."

The edge in his voice makes me whirl back to the screen. And then I see it. Under the photo of my doppelganger with the Elvira hair, it reads, *Mistress of the Month—Madame Michelina*.

My hands fly to my mouth, and I jump to my feet. I rush back and forth between the door and the window. "Ohmygodohmygodohmygod . . ." I chant into my hands. I scurry back to the computer, as if within those few seconds my nightmare would fade as quickly as it began. But, no, there was the Mistress of the Month Madame Michelina scowling back at me with the same bow-shaped lips and deep-set eyes that I see in the bathroom mirror every morning and night.

Oh, my God. My sister is a dominatrix! A fetishist. A ohmygodohmygodImgoingtokillthatbitchIsweartogod *sex worker*!

"H-H-How did you ...?"

"After I finished the opposition research on Cuevas, I started to see what I might find about you—"

I yell, "I thought I told you not to waste your time and my money with that shit!"

"Yes, I know, but—"

"*Aaaargh*!" I kick the chair so hard, it sails across the floor and crashes into the door. "I don't fuckin' believe her!" Someone pounds on the door. "What?"

"Y'all okay in there?" Cindi's timid voice sinks into the door.

"Take a break. All of you. Now!"

"Okay!" I hear her flip-flops paddle across the carpet away from my office door. I whirl around to face Ryan, who is now standing behind the safety of my desk. I realize what a lunatic I must sound like. *Jen, this is no way for a future member of the New York City Council to behave.* Oh, hell, Cuevas has probably thrown aides out the window of his fuckin' office. That thought only deepens my embarrassment, so I rein myself in. "Before I fire you," I say wagging my finger at him, "you're going to tell me what to do about this."

He looks at me as if I morphed into Carrie White's mother right before his eyes. "Just get your sister to quit."

"Get Michelle to quit?" Now it's my turn to glare at him. "Obviously, I had no idea that my sister was even capable of thinking about something like this, never mind doing it and promoting it on the goddamn Internet! What makes you think, Ryan, that she would even admit this to me?" All this time that she had me thinking she was making runs to Staples for office supplies or going to the midtown library to do research or otherwise doing something to help my campaign while I stayed here through all hours of the night, this Whipped was where she was?

Then the solution hits me. I turn back to the computer and

click on *Contact Us* on the menu. A page with the contact information and an inquiry form for the club or dungeon or whatever the fuck it's called appears, and I print it. I snatch the printout, walk over to my desk and pick up the telephone receiver. Thrusting both the sheet and the receiver toward Ryan, I say, "Call them. Make an appointment. Ask for my sister."

"You can't be serious!"

I check the number on the printout and dial it myself. A woman with a raspy voice answers. "WNYC, this is Miss Veronique," she says. "How may I help you today?"

*Murder Madame Michelina*. I take a deep breath. Then the first few words race out of my mouth. "I'd like an appointment with . . ." I can't bring myself to say it. "Your mistress of the month."

"Madame Michelina?"

"Yes. Madame . . . Her."

"I apologize for having to ask this, but are you a woman?"

I choke. It never occurs to me that this might be an issue. Are there women who go for this thing? I mean, if a woman gets her sexual kicks being strung along and ordered around, does she have to do anything more than be what she already is? A fuckin' woman!

Miss Veronique says, "I ask because Madame Michelina does not discipline women. She only disciplines men, so I would have to set you up with Countess Sappho or Mistress Cherry. Unless you're interested in domme training for women who want to learn how to control their male submissives. Then I can make an appointment for you with—"

I hang up the telephone. Ryan asks, "What happened?"

"You have to make the appointment." I dial the number again and shove the receiver toward Ryan. Even as terror seizes his face, I mouth *Do it*.

Ryan finally takes the phone. "Huh-ello? I'd like to make an

appointment with Mistress . . . " I flap the printout in his face, and he squints at the print underneath my sister's picture. "I mean, Madame Michelina? Uh, yes, I guess so. The name's Ryan. Yes, that's the last name, and the first name is, uh, G-G-Giovanni! . . . Yes, my name's Giovanni Ryan. My mother's, uh, Italian, and my father's Irish . . . Oh, you are, too. What a coincidence." I swat him on the arm, and Ryan jumps. "That'sfineI'llbetherethankyougood-bye." He finally hangs up the telephone.

"Well?"

"Madame Michelina had an opening tonight due to a cancellation, so Miss Veronique scheduled me for six-thirty р.м."

"Stop calling her that."

"Are you going to fire me now?" Ryan asks.

"No," I say. "Not until we go down there and I confront my lying, twisted, devious sister."

And Michelle thinks *I'm* a freak!

## Chapter 13

My trainer Josie and I walk into the "family" room after our last session. As she heads to her locker, I flop onto the love seat and start to unlace my boots. Lounging in the sofa across from me is Leticia aka Lady Lash. She still wears her Baruch College T-shirt and relaxed fit jeans and flips through an *InStyle* magazine. Leticia attends college during the day and works the eight-to-twelve shift at Whipped. Now that school is out, she still comes a bit early to unwind from her day job at the Gap and socialize with the other girls. Now I do, too, whenever I have the time, because everyone is so different yet very nice in her unique way.

Leticia glances over her magazine, and now that she realizes that Josie and I have entered the room, she sits up and tosses the magazine aside. "Oh, you have to tell me," she says excitedly. "How was Jaime LoBianco?"

Jaime LoBianco is the star quarterback for the New York Jets and the most prominent client in Josie's stable of submissives. I bring my hands to my chest and say, "Girl, TV does not do that man justice. He's so gorgeous."

"And a real doll, too," adds Josie. "Excellent tipper. 'Chelly, will you help me undo my corset, please?"

"Sure, just give me a sec." I pull off my second boot, stand up and walk over to Josie. She raises her arms slightly so I can loosen her latex corset. "And you know how some professional ball players seem big and muscular, but the truth is they're just fat? Not Jaime. He is cut!"

Leticia bounces in her seat like a little girl. "Did you get an autograph?" Josie and I burst out laughing at that question. "What's so funny, you bitches?"

"Tell her what I made you do to him," Josie says. She finally peels off her corset, folds it and places it in her locker.

"Never mind an autograph," I say as I join Leticia on the sofa. "I made him write 'My name is Jaime LoBianco, and I belong to Madame Michelina' on the blackboard one hundred times."

"Ooh, I'm scared of you," Leticia says, throwing her hand up so I can give her a high-five. "So he's into the mean teacher/bad student scenario, huh?"

"Actually, he likes to change it up every so often," Josie says, "and I like that about him more than anything else. Even the great tips," she adds as she pulls on a tank top with a silk screen of her three-year-old daughter's face on it. She reaches for a tub of makeup remover and smears the cream all over her tawny skin. "One time he wants to do the schoolteacher thing. The next time we'll do the Amazon thing. So long as he gets that paddle, Jaime's good. And me, I need the variety, too." Josie turns to look at us with a face full of white cream. "I don't know about y'all, but when I play the same role all the time, I get bored and fall off my game. I lose control of my subs, they start to rebel, and the next thing you know they're at the Castle of Desire." We all bristle at the name of our nearest rival dungeon, which is only down the street. There are actually quite a few dungeons in this neighborhood, but we all manage to have enough business to share and thrive. But those COD dommes are ruthless, punishing their submissives if they patronize any other dungeons. "I hated working there," says Leticia. "Instead of doing the enslaving, I felt enslaved. By the other women, no less, they were so damned competitive. I'm glad we got Jaime LoBianco."

"And, Josie, thank you so much for letting me participate in the scene this time," I say. "I learned so much."

"Hey, that's what domme training is all about," she says, then grabs a few tissues and wipes the makeup remover off her face. "You should practice all kinds of scenes with different types of guys, and then if you want, you can specialize or be a generalist like me."

"How come 'Chelly gets to train with Jaime LoBianco?" Leticia pretends to gripe. "When are you going to let a sister dish out to some hottie?" She turns to me and says, "See, I have nothing but average Joes in my stable, and after a while they stop challenging me. Now that's when I get bored and get myself into trouble. Like sometimes in the middle of a scene, I start to think, 'Your wife can't do this for you at home for free?'"

"That's not good," I tease her.

"I know." Leticia grabs a cushion from the sofa and tosses it at Josie. "So what's up?"

"Okay, quit whining," says Josie. "Danny Vilar's coming from L.A. next week to promote his new movie. Wanna sit in on that session?"

Of course she wants to sit in on that session. I want to sit in on that session! Danny Vilar is the Bolivian answer to The Rock and Hollywood's latest action star.

"Cool!" say Leticia. "But why just watch? Is that his thing?"

I live for the day when I'm less star-struck and can ask something like that as nonchalantly as Leticia.

"No, he's one of those guys that likes to test my authority, so I have to stay focused when I'm with him. He answers back, he forgets to address me as Queen, I say sit, he lies down.... You know, Danny's so huge, he really has to push my buttons, so when I let him have it, he can actually feel it."

Leticia says, "That's even more reason why you should involve me."

"She's got a point, Josie," I say. "Danny might really get turned on about the idea of 'needing' two women to break him down." I squeeze quotation marks in the air at the word "needing."

Josie leans against her locker and crosses her arms over her chest. "Really? You don't think the opposite? I've been afraid of sending him the message that I'm not strong enough to dominate him."

"Well, if he was your average gym rat from around the way, yeah, I could totally understand you worrying about that," I say. "But Danny's this attractive, famous, rich man who's so used to everyone catering to his every whim. He probably needs more convincing to feel that he's not in control."

"Oh, yeah," Leticia says as she nods. "And he's all A-list and everything. You know how massive his ego must be."

Josie starts to come around. "Hmmm . . . you guys may be right about that. So what do you think if I—"

There's a knock on the door and Veronica—aka Miss Veronique—peeks her head in. "'Chelly, just wanted to let you know that your six-thirty walk-in is here."

I groan at the idea of having to put those platform boots back on so soon. Josie reassures me that once I break them in, they won't hurt, and I pray she's right. "It's only a quarter after." "So you know what you do?" Josie says. "You make him wait until six-thirty, and then you punish him for being early."

Veronica applauds. "I love it." She curtsies before Josie. "That's why you are the Queen, Josephine."

"Seriously?" I laugh. "Punish him for being early?"

Josie says, "*Nena*, I'm dead serious. You told him to be here at six-thirty. Not six thirty-one. Not six-eighteen. Six-thirty. He needs to understand that you told him six-thirty for a reason. What that reason is, is none of his business. His only business should be to please you by doing exactly as you say. Nothing more, nothing less."

"She's right," Leticia says, snapping her fingers. "This is how Queen Josephine keeps asses in check and makes that paper. Listen to her, 'Chelly."

Josie preaches on. "Madame Michelina, you have other things to do besides meet with him, so he needs to respect your schedule. So you make him wait until six-thirty, and then you go out there and discipline him for disobeying your commands."

"Okay, I'll do it!" Suddenly, my feet come alive. I jump up and look for my purse. My coworkers cheer as I reapply my eggplant-colored lipstick.

"Michelle, his name is Giovanni Ryan," Veronica says as she heads for the door. "And Leticia, Michelle's new sub brought a woman with him who said she was interested in domme training. Once I set Michelle and him up in the Ruby Room, you can meet with her in the lounge."

"Cool," says Leticia.

"She'll be easy," says Veronica. "I know a natural when I see one."

"And what's her name?"

Veronica looks at the forms on her clipboard. "Gina."

We all exchange amused looks. "Giovanni and Gina?" says Josie, cringing. "I hope she's a cousin."

I look in the mirror, rub my lips together, then say, "Kinkiness must run in that family." Then I head to the Ruby Room to prepare for my session with my new client Giovanni.

## Chapter 14

This place is nothing like I expected, and that doesn't exactly calm me. When Ryan parks the car in a garage near Madison and Thirty-first Street, I wonder if he screwed up the address. This is Midtown, for God's sake. The Empire State Building is right there.

Then we walk to this dingy building above a wholesale fabric store, and while closer to what I imagined, it's still far off. Ryan and I ride up in this dark, gilded art deco elevator that has no button for the thirteenth floor. When we arrive on the floor, it seems like we step into another world. A hospital, to be exact. The floors and walls are so white, and the light is almost blinding. This Whipped place is the last suite on the floor at the foot of an L-shaped corridor away from all the other offices.

We press the intercom, and the same woman Ryan and I spoke to earlier buzzes us into the reception area. The front is very small and clean, with a few pieces of furniture that remind me of a doctor's office. I expect this Veronique to be in

full regalia. Thigh-high boots, a latex bustier, and leather garters over a thong bikini or something like that. But instead she wears a simple sundress that hangs slightly above the knees and a matching bolero jacket. The only thing out of place in her ensemble is the holster with the two-way radio that hangs low on her hips. She introduces herself as Veronica, hands Ryan a clipboard with consent forms, a medical history, and all kinds of paperwork, and asks me who am I.

I have to think quickly. "I . . . I'm his . . . my name's Gina."

"You're not a couple, are you?" she asks.

"No!" If I give the wrong answers, I might be asked to leave. Then I remember what she told me over the telephone. "Well, when my friend here told me about this place, I thought, 'I could do that.' So . . . "

"Ah, you're interested in domme training."

I'm still not sure what the hell that is, but I nod and say, "Yes, that's right."

Perky li'l Veronica chirps, "Oh, okay," as if I said I wanted to go out for cheerleading. "Let me give you our brochure and take you to the lounge where you can meet with one of the mistresses who will answer all your questions." She motions for me to follow, then says over her shoulder to Ryan, "And then I'll come back to escort you to the Ruby Room for your session with Madame Michelina."

So now I sit in this lounge, fanning myself with this brochure and trying to figure out what to do next. Of course, I have to get out of here and find this Ruby Room before Veronica takes Ryan there and Michelle recognizes him. But she's standing right outside the door speaking to this woman I can't see. I hope Ryan has the sense to write very slowly.

This is what you do, Jen. Once this woman walks in here, tell her enough to make her think you're legitimately interested, ask for the ladies' room, and find Ryan. And do it fast! A petite African-American woman wearing a Baruch College T-shirt and loose jeans enters the lounge. She offers me her hand and a huge grin. "Hi, Gina, I'm Leticia. Welcome to Whipped. I hear you're interested in our domme training programs."

Her causal outfit and warm greeting throw me. "There's more than one?"

"Of course, we have different programs for different needs. Didn't Veronica give you a brochure?" Then she notices it in my hand. "Oh, there you go. Let me show you." Leticia opens up the brochure and says, "We have everything from onetime 'Unleash Your Inner Dominatrix' seminars—you know, for women who don't really want to adopt the lifestyle but just want to have a few techniques to keep the love life from falling into a rut—to this three-day intensive for those who may want to incorporate BDSM into their daily lives." Leticia stops abruptly, shaking her head and smiling. "I'm sorry. I'm getting ahead of myself. Tell me this first, Gina—do you want to dominate a man that's already in your life or do you think you might be looking for a new career?"

"I—I—I... ladies' room please," I whisper.

Leticia grins at me as if women choke before her all the time. "Of course." She reaches into her pocket and hands me a ring with a solitary key. "It's down the hall to your left past the red door." Red door! I fight the urge to snatch the key and bolt out of the lounge. When I reach the door, Leticia asks, "Gina, can I get you something to drink? Water, tea, coffee . . ."

*Acid.* I swallow hard and say in the strongest voice I can muster, "Coffee would be nice, thank you." This will buy me some time to find this red door and get into what is surely the Ruby Room.

The second I cross the threshold, I'm down the corridor like Marion Jones running from a steroid allegation. I see the red

door and race toward it. When I get to it, I just grab the knob and fling myself into the room. "Ryan!"

Ryan's nowhere in sight, but there stands Michelle. She has on a fuchsia-colored bustier with black strings across the front and lace down the sides. Her matching leather skirt is so short that I can see the lace at the top of her black thigh-high stockings. And those boots . . . She must have bought them at a garage sell organized by the rock band Kiss. What is that she has in her hand? Is it a paddle? A black leather paddle?

"Jennifer!"

"Michelle!"

Then we both yell, "How could you do this to me?"

# Chapter 15

"You're going to get me fired!" I yell.

"Get you fired?" Jennifer shouts back at me. "You're going to cost me this election!"

"How am I going to cost you the election? This is my private life, not yours. How is anyone going to find out?"

Jennifer flails her arms and screams, "The same way I did!" I fluster for a moment. I mean, she's right. How the hell did

she find out? I hadn't told a soul. The only other people who knew were in the business or lifestyle with me. And none of my clients knew my real name, or anything else about me for that matter. "Who told you about me?"

I get my answer when Veronica comes through the door with Ryan Alfaro trailing behind her. "With all the yelling going on I thought someone else was conducting a scene in here...." Then she recognizes Jennifer. "Gina?"

"Gina?"

Veronica reaches for the two-way radio on her hip. "Michelle, do you need me to call security." "No, Veronica," I say. "I know these people. This is my sister, Jennifer."

"Oh." Veronica takes her hand off the radio. She glances at each one of us then says, "Okay, I guess you'd like some privacy, then."

"Please," Jennifer and I both say. Veronica hands me Ryan's forms, reaches for the doorknob and starts to back out of the room.

"You!" I bark at Ryan. "Stay." He steps around Veronica and into the Ruby Room, his eyes glued to the tassels on his loafers. When Veronica closes the door, I ask, "How did you find out about me?

"He was doing research," says Jennifer. "Once he finished digging around Cuevas's past, he started delving into mine." Her eyes cut into Ryan. "Even though I told him not to."

"It's one thing to defy her," I say to Ryan. "But you had no right invading my privacy. I'm not a candidate in this election."

"I wasn't invading your privacy," he says. "I found out about you by accident."

"Oh, you were just surfing the Internet in your free time and you just happened to come across my picture?" And the second I say that, I know it to be true. The slightest grin on Ryan's face even as he stares shamefully at the ground confirms that it's true. I walk over to him and gently lift his chin with my finger so I can look him in the eye. Using my loving but dominant voice—the one Josie trained me to use when rewarding a compliant submissive or reassuring him that no matter where the scene goes he's truly safe—I say to Ryan, "You're interested in this, aren't you? You want to be dominated. Not by a fat abusive man like Cuevas but by a strong beautiful woman with a bit of a tender streak."

His smile widens. Jennifer mumbles, "God help me."

#### SOFIA QUINTERO

I shoot her a look and start to tell her to be quiet when I take in her stance. In her tailored linen suit with the short skirt and high heels, Jennifer stands with legs apart and her hand on her hips. She's fuming so hard it's a wonder her glasses haven't steamed up.

Then it hits me.

I rifle through the forms in my hand until I find the preference checklist. Which scenario does Ryan rank as number one? *Boss Lady*. I look at his list of favorite costumes, and he has chosen none of the traditional options. Instead, on the line next to *Other* he writes *Suit*. Ryan made sure to cram an additional note into the margin. *But not a man's suit! A woman's suit*. *I'm not into the androgynous look. The more feminine, the better, please.* And of course in the prop sections Ryan has only one selected.

Glasses!

I get it so good now, I can't stop laughing. "I'm glad you think this is funny," says Jennifer. "My sister spends her nights running around this cavern or dungeon or whatever looking like Rosario Dawson in *Sin City*, and how do I find this out? Because she tells me? Nooo. Because my campaign manager is surfing the Web looking for women to spank him!"

"Ryan's not just looking for any woman, Jen," I say. I double over and hobble to the bondage bench with the handcuffs and leg irons. "He's looking for someone just like *you*. You got the man so worked up, he went on the Internet to find a dominatrix who looks just like *you*. And that's how he found *me*! That is so cute!" Now I'm howling, and even Ryan chortles just a little.

"You've been waiting for twenty-seven years for my ambition to bite me in the ass, so go ahead," says Jennifer. "Humiliate me."

And instead of getting furious at her arrogance, I feel sorry

for my little sister. I stop laughing and say, "Hey, Jen, don't think that. The truth is I stumbled onto this trying to be more like you."

"Like me! You want to be more like me, and this is what you do? I am nothing like this." But I can see right through Jennifer. Maybe she hasn't done anything like this, but she sure as hell wants to. After all, she really didn't have to come here tonight to confront me.

"Ryan, will you excuse us for a few minutes please?" I say to him. For a second he seems disappointed by my request, but eventually he complies. That boy is ready to take his whipping, if only I can convince Jennifer to dispense it. When he leaves, I pat the bench. "Come over here."

"I'm not sitting on that thing."

"Fine, but you're going to have to come closer so I can show you how to use it."

"I don't want any part of this," says Jennifer, even as she sneaks peeks at the torture rack. "When did I ever tell you that I would be interested in anything like this?" She swats a wrist restraint on the rack.

"Now that you mention it, it is kind of weird."

"Thank you."

"No, I mean, we're sisters, right. We're only three years apart and all that each other has left here in New York City now that Mom and Dad are in Puerto Rico and our cousins are all over the country." I stand up and walk over to Jennifer. Naturally, we're the same height, but in these boots I tower over her. For the first time in years I feel like the older sister again. "It's kind of odd that we don't confide in these things to one another. You know, that we don't talk about sex and relationships. And yet I saw how you were with Rocco, and I imagined that you were this Amazon in the bedroom, and I wanted to be more like you. So I took a workshop here, and then I took another, and the next thing you know, they offered me a job."

Jennifer scoffs. "Trying to dominate Rocco in the bedroom is how I lost him." As she speaks, she makes her way over to the bench. "He complained about my ordering him around about keeping the house and working on his music, but I think he liked it. I know he liked it. Then I went too far and tried to bring that into the bedroom. Well, he liked that, too, and it scared him." Jennifer sits on the bench and runs her fingers across the leather.

"Ryan's not scared," I say. "He'd love nothing more than for me to show you a few things to practice on him."

Jennifer suddenly leaps to her feet. "How could you stoop to this, Michelle?" She sounds much less judgmental now and much more concerned. "Okay, it's one thing to do this with a man you know in the privacy of your own home. But you're trading sex for money—"

"No, no, no! There's no sex involved. I mean, there is, but it's all psychological. It's fantasy. Role-playing. And it's one hundred percent consensual, safe and legal. Some of the most powerful men in the city are among our clients. After spending twelve hours every day with millions of dollars and hundreds of lives depending on their every decision, it's liberating to come here, drop their alpha male postures, and have a woman who they know deep down inside means them no harm tell him what to do."

Although there are so many more layers to this scene that I myself have yet to learn, I can tell that the little I explain to Jennifer makes sense to her. Then I reveal to her the one thing I know that concerns her most of all. "I couldn't tell you this before, Jen, because then I would have had to admit how I knew, but now that it's all out in the open . . ."

"What?"

"If by any bizarre chance Cuevas were to find out about me, he wouldn't dare use it against you."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well, he couldn't expose me without doing the same to some very important men on the Bronx Democratic Committee."

"No way!"

"And the State Assembly."

"Get out!"

"And at City Hall."

Jennifer rushes over to me. "Who?"

"I can't tell you that, Jen."

"But I'm your sister."

"I can get fired and sued."

"Just give me one name."

"No, I can't tell you that." I put the paddle in her hand and walk over to the door. "What I can tell you is that your campaign manager defied one of your orders, conducted personal business on your office computer and then lied to you about it." I open the door. "I think you should teach him a lesson."

Jennifer gives a sad smile. "You know the real reason why I was so against Ryan doing research on me? Because I knew he would find absolutely nothing. I was afraid that he would think I was boring." Then she slaps the paddle into her palm. "Ryan, get in here now!"

Ryan comes into the Ruby Room. Although his body is stiff with trepidation, I see the same flicker of excitement in his eyes that I saw in Greg's after ordering him to clean the library conference room. As I head out to leave them alone, Jennifer mouths to me *I love you*.

Yeah, my sister's a natural.



# **DISS-CONNECTED**



# LYNDA SANDOVAL



For my sisters, Elena and Loretta, who never embarrassed me. Usually, it was the other way around! (Not that I'm apologizing . . . ) Oh, and, Elena? The pink Izod was MINE, all mine.

### Chapter 1

"So, here's an interesting question for you," Lola said as she set the timer for the second pan of white chocolate-cranberry scones she'd just put in the oven. The room was redolent with the warm, sweet aroma of the first batch, now cooling on the countertop.

Cristy Avila hooked the heels of her Dansko clogs on the rung of the bar stool and wrapped her hands around her thick mug, fully savoring her caffeine moment. She needed to check stock and get ready for the day's customers, but there was something almost sacrilegious about rushing through a cup of Chef Lola Martinez's award-winning java blend. Besides, she worked for herself. If she wanted to linger over coffee, she damn well would. It was sort of the *point* of being your own boss, wasn't it? "Whip it on me."

Lola rinsed her hands, then turned back toward Cristy, wiping them on her apron. "What is the one deepest, darkest secret that you'd never cop to in public?"

"Whoa." Cristy widened her eyes and leaned back, one hand

holding the edge of the table edge. "Trying out the whole tabloid journalism shtick, are we?"

"Not exactly." Lola bustled about the café area, filling sugar and sweetener dispensers and stocking the antique bakery case with her incomparable breads and pastries. "Your sister and Wyatt were talking about it yesterday on their show."

Cristy blurted an inelegant little snort. "Speaking of tabloid journalism. I should've known."

"Anyway, they talked up this website—you'd love it. People send in handmade, anonymous postcards on which they've written their deepest, darkest secrets. The website guy scans and posts them for the whole world to read."

"Wow!"

"Yeah. I had to check it out, and it's amazing. There are so many levels of anonymity, people feel comfortable confessing things that would blow your mind."

"Like what?"

"Well, last night I read one where the woman admitted she'd sent money to the Red Cross during the last natural disaster, and now that she's broke, she regrets it. Scone?" Lola held one out, still hot from the oven.

"Thanks. Yum." She took a bite. "The Red Cross thing is pretty harsh. I mean, who'd admit that?"

"And yet, how cathartic for her to be able to unburden herself without fear of retribution. Another woman admitted that her first child was fathered by her husband's brother, but neither of them knew about it."

"That's horrid!"

"Wonderfully, deliciously, addictively horrid." Lola grinned. "I swear, it's my new guilty pleasure. So, back to the original question." She waggled her eyebrows. "What's your deepest, darkest postcard secret?"

"Hmmm." Cristy tapped her fingers on her chin. Deepest

darkest secret? Or deepest darkest secret she'd utter out loud? Because, let's face it, there was a big difference. Lola wasn't just her employee, she was her closest friend, and still, there were things Cristy wouldn't tell her or anyone. "I guess my deep dark secret is . . . I love Monday mornings." Especially since she'd opened the doors of her very own dream business. Now, the start of each work week felt like the gift that kept on giving.

In this era of congested highways and gun-toting, roadraging drivers, her daily "commute" down the stairs from her upper level living quarters set her heart pounding, too, but with anticipation rather than anger. Honestly, each morning her little oasis awed her as much if not more than it had on opening day. From the antique shelves, handmade baskets, and colorful bowls overflowing with yarn and needles, to the state of the art kitchen and café tables and comfy couches in the main room. The whole place just felt like *her*.

"Monday mornings?" Lola asked, incredulous. "That's your big secret? Geez, could you be any more lame?"

"What's lame about it? Do you know how many people would want to gun me down if I came out all bluebirds-onmy-shoulderish and admitted I can't wait for the start of the work week?"

Lola pursed her lips. "I suppose that's true." She glanced around at their cozy working environment. "And then again, with this place, I can't blame you." She sighed.

Indeed. Nestled into the nooks and crannies of a beautifully restored Queen Anne–style Victorian in northwest Denver, Cristy's entrepreneurial brainchild—called Simplicity, ironically—defied simple description. It was more than your run-of-the-mill coffee shop, although it had received "Denver's Best Cuppa Joe" award that year from *The Westword*, thanks to Lola's blend. And despite Simplicity's number one ranking in *The Traveling Knitter*'s "Top Ten Not to Be Missed List," it didn't qualify as the typical yarn shop, either.

To herself, Cristy referred to Simplicity as a "serenity salon," but that was a little too high on the woo-woo scale for the shop's more pragmatic customers to wrap their brains around. And when it came right down to it, people could describe Simplicity however the heck they wanted to, as long as they kept showing up in droves.

A peek at her watch lit a fire under her butt. "I need to get a move on." She drained the last of her coffee and pushed back from the table. "What's your big bad secret, Lo?"

"Let me think about it for a minute."

"Okay. But don't think you're off the hook." Cristy walked through each area snapping on lights and straightening displays, just as she did every morning—a routine that felt more like meditation than work. Whoever had coined the phrase "Do what you love and the money will follow" was a stonecold genius, and she was living proof. Less than a year had passed since the grand opening, and Simplicity was already operating well in the black. The house was paid off, and she'd even had to turn the food and beverage service completely over to Lola so she could focus on the rest.

Her long-standing fantasy of owning a hip little haven—a gathering place for twenty-first–century knitters and other women of all ages who needed a respite from Real Life—had manifested far beyond her wildest dreams.

Realistically, though, who would've thought a quirky niche business like Simplicity would become West Highlands newest version of a hot spot? And yet, that's exactly what had happened, thanks in part to her sister, Marisol, talking up the place during her number-one-rated morning show on KHOT radio. For once, Cristy thought grudgingly, Mari's big mouth had brought about positive results in her life. Her sister's in-

cessant blather had created a buzz, which snowballed into splashy profiles in the *Denver Post*, the *Rocky Mountain News*, *Westword*, and *5280 Magazine*. And the rest—as they say—was history.

Knitting was the new yoga, after all.

"And I'm the new Martha Stewart," Cristy whispered to herself with a laugh. She kicked off her clogs and padded into the back room wearing the socks she'd knit with the selfstriping yarn featured in this month's sales flyer. "Minus the prison stint, of course."

Best of all, Simplicity was her escape. As an introvert who'd somehow been born into a family of over-the-top extroverts, she needed it. But she didn't want to think about her family or her ill fit within the fold. Like the good daughter she was, she spent every Sunday smothered by the lot of them, and it took at least two full days to recover. Plus, it was Monday—the best day of her week. She wanted nothing more than to fondle new yarn stock in the quiet safety of her back room and *ignore* the twisted roots of her family tree, at least for a little while.

Plus, she still had to hear Lola's deep dark secret.

Cristy stretched her neck up to scan the week's shipments, stacked around the room in cardboard boxes. In the background, the vague mumble of Lola's small kitchen radio mingled with the birdsong carrying in through the open windows. Nudging past a large box of Addi turbo needles and other notions, Cristy bent to lug up another crate she hoped was from—she quickly scanned the customs label—yes! Her coveted yarn from Japan. Finally.

As was her habit, she wound her long hair into a messy knot on top of her head and stuck a knitting needle through to hold it out of her way. And then she tore into the box and sighed with pleasure. Really, was there anything better than a brand new pile of Noro yarn? She'd purposely scheduled all her deliveries to arrive late on Saturday afternoons so she could anticipate opening them first thing each Monday. Which was why, contrary to the norm in the industrialized world, she leapt out of bed early every Monday, excited to dash downstairs and go to work.

It all came down to tricking the brain.

And that *was* a good deep dark secret, no matter what Lola thought about it.

She was elbow deep in variegated strands of wool, and totally blissed out on solitude, when she heard the oven timer ding. Out of habit, Cristy glanced up at the retro wall clock, then smiled toward the archway leading to the kitchen. That timer went off each morning at the exact same time, which made her giddy. She so totally loved ritual and routine. Maybe that could be another deep dark secret. Spontaneity was overrated. "Lola?"

"Be there in a sec."

"Have you come up with your deepest darkest?"

"I think so."

Cristy stood up, squishing a multicolored skein of Kureyon in her palm. "Wait until you see what we got from Japan."

"Okay," Lola called. "Let me get a pot of 'What's the friggin' point?' going."

"Yeah, we call that decaf. Many people enjoy it."

"Whatever. It's an insult to coffee the world over."

Cristy laughed. Lola was a culinary school graduate who had come to Simplicity on the heels of a prestigious personal chef position. Her former boss? The second wealthiest proathlete-turned-business-mogul in Denver, behind John Elway, of course. Unfortunately, the guy was also a morally devoid, misogynistic prick—Lola's exact description. After he'd crossed one too many of Lola's lines, she'd "turned in her resignation," Lola style.

Rather than typing out a letter he would no doubt have ignored, she baked the man an elaborate ten-layer cake, then decorated it in her trademark exquisite fashion—right down to the phrase, "Go Fuck Yourself, Pin-dick," written out in perfect, forty-eight-point, butter-cream script. For maximum effect, Lola had the cake delivered to the man's office during his most important meeting of year.

Some people might have counted the cake deal as a red flag during the hiring process. Not Cristy. The fact that Lola had willingly divulged details of the comeuppance had pretty much guaranteed her the job at Simplicity. If there was one thing Cristy could appreciate, it was honesty. Not to mention a memorable parting shot. Great exit lines only popped into her mind after the opportunity to dole them out had passed. Lola had guts and one hell of a résumé, so she'd hired hersimple as that-and trusting her instincts had paid off. Lola fit so seamlessly into Simplicity, Cristy had a hard time remembering how things had been before she'd arrived. Plus, having an actual chef in charge of all the food and beverages had more than quadrupled sales and accounted for a large percentage of their return customer base. Denver loved Lola's baked goods, and Cristy paid her well for the privilege of being the sole supplier.

"Quick, turn on the radio," Lola said breathlessly as she blew into the room like a zephyr. She wore the standard chef's black-checked pants and white jacket, but her long red dreadlocks bounced against her shoulders as if in defiance of tradition. She handed Cristy a fresh mug of coffee and set a plate of scones on one of the shipping boxes. In the background, the brewing decaf gurgled, its rich smell permeating the whole place. "Hurry. I don't want to miss any of the show."

The show.

Cristy sighed. Okay, so Lola had one fault: she was addicted to Marisol's morning radio show.

"Not this morning, Lo. Please? I'm so enjoying the peace and quiet, which disappears instantly whenever my big sister's voice invades my space." She crossed her arms over her middle. "Besides, I'm pissed at her."

"Why this time?" Lola bit into a scone.

"Yesterday at brunch she leaned across the table and announced—loudly—that I needed some hard-core tweezer time, because my overgrown eyebrows were starting to make me look like Frida Kahlo."

Lola bit back a laugh, then scrutinized Cristy's face. "Well?"

Lola nodded, lips pursed. "Don't sweat it. The unibrow looks fine to me."

"Shut up!" Cristy slapped a palm to her browline. Okay, okay, so she'd pluck. Sheesh.

"I'm only kidding. Everyone knows how your sister is." Lola's lips quivered and she cleared her throat. "Plus, you have to admit, it's kind of funny."

Cristy bugged her eyes and reached for the second scone she probably shouldn't eat. "Funny? That's it, woman. No radio for you."

"Come on, please? She and Wyatt are in rare form today."

"Now, there's a shocker," Cristy muttered around a mouthful of scone.

"No. I mean, worse than usual. I'd be surprised if they don't wind up in a fistfight. They're courting fines from the FCC, big-time."

Cristy swallowed, then studied her friend as though she were psychotic. "You say that like it's a good thing."

"It's damned entertaining radio, I'll say that much." Lola picked up a skein of the Japanese wool. "Great colors." She

held them to her cheek. "A good match for my skin tone. You should knit me something."

Cristy brushed the crumbs from her fingers. "Knit it yourself. I taught you how." She splayed a palm on her stomach. "God, your scones are pure evil."

"I know," Lola said with a wink. "And creating them is both a science and an art, which is why I have no time to knit. So, if you won't knit me something, at least show me your appreciation by—"

"Turning on the radio," they said in unison.

"Exactly," Lola added with a nod.

"Fine." Cristy rolled her eyes, then ambled toward the stereo. Truthfully? She usually gave in. Marisol and Wily Wyatt often discussed topics that were better left alone, if you wanted her opinion. But she'd been enjoying the show much more since she forbade Marisol from mentioning her at all. Her business? Yes. But after one embarrassment too many, her personal life was now one-hundred-percent, no exceptions, off limits. That was the new rule.

Surprisingly, Marisol had agreed to it.

At least now she didn't have to listen to the show with bated breath, just waiting for her sister to whip their family skeletons out of the closet and parade them around for complete strangers to ridicule.

"First tell me your secret, Lo."

"Oh." Lola shrugged. "It's probably the cake thing."

"That's not a secret. Cheater." She switched on the sound system, then spun toward Lola, who was gleefully pawing through the Noro shipment. "If I must suffer through their nonsense, catch me up. What are they arguing about today?"

"Sex workers."

"Jesus," Cristy muttered, closing her eyes for a moment. "My poor mother. Never mind, don't tell me." "It's interesting stuff. Besides, your mother loves Marisol's radio 'tude. Where do you think Mar got it from?"

"Good point. More's the pity."

Lola drew out a skein of magenta alpaca and sniffed it reverently. "It all started with a debate about that strip club ban the right wingers are trying to get on the ballot."

"Politics. Great," Cristy scoffed. "Glad they're avoiding the incendiary topics."

"Yeah, well, Wyatt is on his 'once a slut, always a slut' soapbox, and your sister is defending the rights of women who choose such employment. And doing a bang-up job, I might add. No pun intended."

"Swell. My sister—great defender of fallen women." She rubbed the headache points on her temples. "Why couldn't I have been an orphan?"

"Shhh!" Lola said, pointing toward the speakers.

"Listen," came Marisol's clear, loud voice over the airwaves, "say what you will about sex workers, but it's not all about female degradation or a way for junkies to get their next fix. I know a lot of doctors and lawyers—businesswomen, too who used money from sex work for grad school."

"Prostitute lawyers? That's brilliant. And fitting! I mean, usually when you hire a lawyer, you end up getting screwed anyway." Wyatt cracked up at his own joke.

Marisol laughed, too, but quickly straightened up. "Sex work and prostitution aren't synonymous, Wyatt. There's stripping, online modeling. Even, I don't know, phone sex."

"Like those are any better?" Wyatt laughed.

"Hey, postgraduate work is expensive. These women can earn a lot more money stripping their way to an MBA than waiting tables at some chain restaurant for crappy tips. If it helps them to become highly productive members of society, I'm all for it."

Cristy's inner alarm started to ping at about what seemed, ohhh, wind chime volume. Just a niggling nudge for her to listen closely. Not to worry, though, because Marisol had promised....

"That's bull! Name one professional who has done it."

"It's not my place to name names. You know that."

He laughed. "That's because you don't have names to name. I can smell an Avila bluff a mile away."

"I'm not bluffing!"

"Riiiiiight." Wily Wyatt's voice dripped with überskepticism. He knew precisely how to prod Marisol into a verbal battle with his arrogant banter—one of the reasons they were so popular with listeners. "Then answer this, yes or no. You'd honestly trust a lawyer or doctor if you knew she'd tabledanced her way through college?"

"Darn right I would. In fact—" Marisol cut herself off—a wholly uncharacteristic move.

Cristy could almost hear her sister weighing her pros and cons, and in that split second her internal alarm volume cranked up to air raid siren level. She stood immobile, transfixed with the voices emanating from her sound system. Blood began to pound in her ears. Her sisterly psychic connection warned her to brace for the impending verbal train wreck before she even heard the whistle. "Uh-oh."

"What?" asked Lola.

"Nothing." Her sister never hesitated before a blurt. Never. There had to be a reason, and logic said ...

But, no. It couldn't be, because Marisol had promised-

"Give it up," said Wyatt.

"Well . . ." said Marisol.

"No. I'm begging," Cristy whispered, moving closer to the speaker on wobbly legs. "Don't give anything up."

"What?"

"Shhh!" She flapped her hand in Lola's direction.

"Come on," Wyatt prompted in his well-honed cocky tone.

"Never mind," Marisol said.

Cristy exhaled in relief.

But Wyatt wouldn't let it drop. "You can't defend it, can you? I win this round. Just admit it, Avila. You're wrong. I'm right. Ha! No one would trust a professional if they knew she'd tramped her way through school."

"Not only am I offended by your use of the word 'tramped,' but I happen to know you're dead wrong," was Marisol's sharp retort. "And I have a great example."

Cristy inhaled sharply and braced herself.

"Well, don't keep Denver waiting."

"Yes! Keep them waiting!" Cristy shouted.

Marisol released an audible breath. "Okay, so—" "No!"

"—my sister won't be thrilled that I broke a promise to her, but it's for a noble cause."

"Damnit!" Cristy covered her face with hands that had gone morgue slab cold. "No, no, no, no!"

"What the hell am I missing here?" Lola asked.

Cristy heard the bewilderment in Lola's question, but knew she didn't have to answer. Lola, and the whole freakin' world, would know her *true* deepest, darkest secret soon enough. She raised her eyes heavenward. "God? I know you're swamped, but please be listening," she said in a rush of words she knew were wasted. "I will never ask for anything again if you somehow stop Marisol from saying—"

"My baby sister, Cristy—"

"Shit!" She stomped.

"—the highly successful owner of Simplicity in West Highlands—"

"Shit, shit!"

"-worked as a phone sex girl during grad school."

"What?" Wyatt blurted in half astonishment, half laughter.

Marisol raised her voice and kept talking. "You asked, and I'm providing you with concrete proof that I am right and you are dead wrong. There is no question Cristy is a self-made business mogul, right?"

"Right, but—"

"But nothing. My kid sister is neither a tramp nor a slut. Hell, she barely dates, but that's a whole different topic. And yet she launched that business of hers with well-earned phone sex money, and I'm damn proud of her for doing so. What do you think of that?"

"Is that true?" Lola gasped just as Cristy yelled, "You *bitch*!" at the stereo speaker.

"Is it? Is it true?"

In the background Wyatt was hollering, "Bombshell! Bombshell! Bombshell! Folks, the phone lines are blowing up in the studio. Give us a call if you have a comment about today's topic. Little Cristy Avila, one of Denver's most successful upand-coming business owners, was a phone sex girl. Now *that's* the way to spice up your Monday morning commute. Cristy, if you're out there, how about calling in and giving the listeners a little sample: 303–555-HOTT. Bucka-wow!"

"I am going to kill her." Cristy sank to the floor cross-legged. Her body thrummed with the kind of prickly adrenaline surge brought about by pure shock. "I can't believe she did this! Again! She promised she wouldn't ever tell a soul, Lo." Cristy peered up at her friend with wide, round eyes. "How could she throw me under the bus like that?"

"Shit on rye," Lola said in a reverent tone as her lips spread into a smile. "It *is* true."

## Chapter 2

"She swore on her wardrobe that she wouldn't discuss my life on her show anymore! And you know how the Material Girl loves her damn designer clothes." Marisol was Blahnik to her Birkenstock. Couture vs. Comfort. Lhuillier as opposed to Levi's. One day, Marisol called, all excited because she'd gotten a great deal on a new pair of "Choos." Confused, Cristy'd thought her sister was saying "shoes" with some weird fake Spanish accent. No lie. That she and Marisol were even related boggled the mind. "It was a rule!"

Lola cringed. "This might be stating the obvious, but your sister doesn't strike me as much of a rule follower."

"I hate her."

"No, you don't.

"Yes, I do. I really, really do." At least, she wanted to. The ramifications of Marisol's blurt raced through Cristy's head. She felt violated. She felt outed. She felt naked and ass up in front of the whole world. She could just imagine the fallout—

A sick realization clutched her throat and shot ice down her spine. She jammed her spread fingers into the front of her hair. "Holy mother of—oh my God." "What? What now?"

"My parents. They know nothing about the phone sex job. I never told them. Obviously."

"Oops."

Cristy flopped back onto the floor and stared unseeing at the ceiling. "I'm fucked."

The hardwood floor creaked as Lola moved closer to peer down at her with a sympathetic grimace. "No, you aren't. You're a grown woman. Your parents can't punish you for ... damn, Cris. Sorry, but ... phone sex? *That's* what I'd call a secret worthy of a handmade postcard. How much does a gig like that pay?"

Cristy pierced her with a droll stare. "Lola."

Lola held up both hands in surrender. "Okay, no questions. Not yet, at least. What were we talking about? Oh yeah, your parents. They'll just have to understand."

"That's not it. I was always the good daughter! I liked being the good daughter. I never wanted them to know."

Lola shrugged. "If you didn't want them to know, you never should've told that sister of yours."

"It was an accident!"

"Make your peace, honey. The cat's out of the bag, what's done is done, and every other cliché that means you can't change what already happened. Besides, it doesn't cancel out your 'good daughter' status anyway."

"It's not like I *loved* the stupid job. But it paid great, and I could work from home while I studied." She groaned, bonking the back of her head on the floor. The knitting needle securing her topknot poked her in the skull, so she yanked it out and threw it. "How else was I supposed to afford this place? Did they want me living in their basement like some social mutant until I saved up enough?"

"Exactly." Lola spread her arms wide. "See?"

As if that were a decent argument. All she could *see* was her life swirling down the toilet.

"Chin up, Cris. It'll blow over." She held her hand out to help Cristy up from the floor.

Cristy accepted it, scrambling to her feet. "I'm so disowning her this time. Screw the free publicity. We don't need it. Business is booming here. We couldn't drive the customers away if we wanted to." She froze.

"What?"

"Hurry, lock the back door."

"Why?"

Cristy dashed to the front door and threw the dead bolt. She flipped the window sign to CLOSED, then yanked the curtains together behind it. "It's Monday. You know the Mondragon sisters always come early on Mondays because their kids are in play group."

"Yeah. So, what does that have to do with the back—"

"Just do it, Lola. Please." Cristy stomped around the room snapping roman shades down over the tall windows. "We have an hour before we have to open, and I'm not up for earlybirds. Not today." She needed sixty full minutes to somehow pull herself together.

Once she'd battened down all the hatches, she sank into the bay window seat with a pained groan. "I'll knock her on her ass next time I see her, I swear. This is war, Lola. It's gonna get ugly as hell."

Lola's eyes went round. "Right. How about I . . . um . . . go fix you a nice cup of tea," Lola said as she reversed it out of the room. "Something calming. Chamomile, I think."

"Screw calm. Steep some arsenic tea," Cristy hollered after her. "I'll offer my sister a cup."

"Lord almighty," she heard Lola mumble.

Geez. Cristy jammed her arms crossed. Ranting wasn't gen-

erally her style, but Marisol always brought out the worst in her. She could hardly blame Lola for wanting to bail. Releasing a sound midway between a sigh and a sob, she rested her head against the back cushion that nestled the side of the window seat. Why had she ever let down her guard with Marisol? Hadn't she been burned enough already? The betrayal was crushing.

Breathe, Cristy, she told herself. In . . . out. In . . . out.

It wasn't as though this was the first time Hurricane Marisol had stormed through her life, leaving a wide swath of devastation in her wake. One would think she'd be immune to it by now. *In* . . . *out*.

But, really, who wouldn't be embarrassed by the phone sex job announcement? What sane woman could become *immune* to having her private life exploited in front of the entire metro area, all for the sake of f-ing *ratings*? *In* . . . *out*.

Okay, so maybe exploitation was too strong of a word. After all, according to their mother, Marisol meant well. Whatever. The entire blabbermouth Avila clan *meant well*, but big freakin' whoop. They just didn't get it, not a single one of them. Over the years, her boisterous, boundary-challenged *familia*'s good intentions had done a piss-poor job of making her feel any less mortified by their antics. Or less exposed when they shoved her into the spotlight she dreaded with every fiber of her being. Kind of like *now*.

Inoutinoutinoutinout.

The flood of emotions carried her straight back to seventh grade, when Marisol had thrown the socially crippling, surprise "Welcome to Womanhood" party to celebrate Cristy's first menstrual period. Oh yes, the festivities came complete with blood red balloons, a cake decorated like a big-ass Midol tablet, and *boys from school* on the guest list. *Boys*.

That one had nearly killed her.

Of course, Marisol was so out of touch, she'd never dreamed the WtW party would hurt or embarrass her. She'd been genuinely excited by this evidence that her *hermanita* was growing up, and figured Cristy would be, too. In other words, Marisol had *meant well*. The tragedy was that she'd felt the need to *share*.

That horrific night had always ranked number one, by a wide margin, on her Most Humiliating Moments list. Until today.

Screw deep breathing. She buried her face in her hands.

Look, she'd long since accepted that she'd been dropped, tragically, into the wrong gene pool by some crack-smoking, half-blind stork. Obviously—because she was the only Avila who'd come equipped with the standard *embarrassment* gene. Which is why, at the ripe old age of five, she'd decided that her goal in life was to fade quietly into the background. God, how she'd tried. With Simplicity, she'd come *thisdamnclose* to succeeding.

Freakin' Marisol.

Enough. She needed to face facts. *Fading* was impossible unless she extricated herself from the tell-all talons of her relatives, once and for all. Problem was . . . she couldn't do it. No matter how much she wished she could right then.

Because—damn it all—she loved them.

All of them, even her big-mouthed, hag bitch of a sister.

Despite the traumas of her adolescence, despite every embarrassing thing they'd ever done, despite the fact that she didn't even date because the thought of bringing a guy to meet the Avilas gave her hives, she really did love her family. She'd *tried* to hate Marisol. Really, she had.

It just hadn't worked.

With a long, morose sigh, all her fight melted into something gooey and useless, like defeat. Resignation. Loss of will.

And sitting here wasn't going to change a damned thing. Cristy stood. She might as well bury herself in work and denial, *Just like usual.* She scuffed her way into the back room as Lola emerged from the kitchen holding a steaming mug.

Unshed tears stung Cristy's eyes. "I can't believe she outed me like that, Lola."

For a moment the two women stood across from each other just staring. "It might not be as bad as you think," Lola finally said in an uncertain tone, but beneath her zillion freckles, her face had gone ghostly white.

"Hello, *former phone sex girl*?" Cristy aimed both thumbs at herself.

"Well . . . but . . . yeah. Okay, I guess it's sort of bad. But . . . she didn't mean to upset you, I'm sure."

"She never means to upset me. That's not the point. People will look at me differently, Lo. My parents, customers."

"I don't look at you any differently. Frankly, I think it's an interesting facet of your past that I wish I knew more about. A lot more." Her money-green eyes widened and she held the mug out toward Cristy.

Ignoring Lola's not-so-subtle hint, Cristy waved away the mug. "I don't want to be interesting. I'd rather be invisible."

"I know, hon. I know." With a sigh, Lola set the steaming tea on an unopened box. "Look," she said. "Marisol loves you."

Cristy barked out a pained laugh. "Yeah. She loves me her way. She has no concept of what love would mean to *me*." She clenched her fists. "She might just love me to *death* if she doesn't stop humiliating me in public."

"No one has ever died of embarrassment."

"Great. I'll be the first mortification death on record. More fame—just my luck." Cristy reared back and punched her fist through the tape line of another box of yarn.

Lola yelped. "Cut it out, before you break your wrist."

"It's just *yarn.*" Unfazed, she tore the box flaps up. "You know, on second thought, a coffin sounds pretty good. At least I'd be away from it all, surrounded by peace and quiet."

"Stop talking like that. It's just her job," Lola said, starting in on a box of her own, albeit with less violence.

"Yeah, well her job sucks."

"It might suck, but she's damn good at it. Besides, people get it. They do. Listeners probably won't even believe what she said is true. And, if they do, well . . . I'm sure you're not the first sibling of a DJ who has been embarrassed in public."

"Is that supposed to cheer me up?" Cristy hurled a skein of variegated red mohair. It hit Lola's shoulder and deflected left, but she caught it.

"I guess it's just supposed to be the truth." Lola tossed the yarn in the air and palmed it again.

Cristy lifted the tea and sipped, considering her friend's words. Lola was right, of course. But the truth did not set her free. Marisol, with her big mouth and no shame, was the quintessential radio shock jock, which is why she and Wily Wyatt dominated the Denver radio market. Thanks to the Godzilla-sized photos of the pair decorating billboards, buses, and bar walls, Mari couldn't even go to Wal-Mart without someone recognizing her. That sounded like pure, undiluted *hell* to Cristy, but her sister ate it up.

The stupid radio show was popular because people loved to revel in the misfortunes of others, to squirm over someone else's embarrassment, and the evil duo served that shit up like homemade cherry pie. But *why* did it always have to be her freakin' pie?

Like a snap, her anger reignited. She pounded the side of her fist against her thigh. "That *bitch*! Maybe I'll sue her."

"Don't be ridiculous. She's your sister."

"All the more reason. A big dollar lawsuit might be just

what it takes to shake her into realizing I mean it when I say my private life doesn't belong on her radio show."

"It might turn out to be nothing. I mean, not everyone listens to the Marisol and Wily Wyatt show."

As if to directly dispute Lola's words, the wall phone started ringing, as did her cell from inside her purse. Cristy hesitated a moment, then silently chastised herself. She had a business to run, for God's sake. Lifting the shop's handset, she infused as much enthusiasm into her tone as possible. "Simplicity, this is Cristy."

"Hot damn," came the strange man's oily words. "It is you."

Her knuckles whitened on the receiver. "Who is this?"

"Come on now, Crystal. I used to call you all the time. Don't you remember? I'd recognize your voice anywhere."

She swayed, light-headed with alarm, and grabbed the wall to steady herself. "You must be mistaken."

"Not at all," he said with a low chuckle. "So . . . what are you wearing?"

"Don't call here again."

"Not gonna tell me? Bet I could find out for myself."

Cristy slammed the phone down, but not before she heard the guy's taunting laughter. Pulse racing in her neck, she spun to pick up her bag, wrestled her cell phone out and turned it off. She dropped it and her purse to the hardwood floor. Who the hell cared if the mirror in her compact shattered? What was another seven years bad luck?

"Cristy?" Lola asked, worry sharpening her tone.

Shaken, Cristy leaned her back against the wall and slid down to the floor. With her elbows on her knees, she dropped her forehead into her hands.

"Wh-Who was that?"

Cristy remained silent for a few long moments, then slid her

hands away and met Lola's concerned gaze. "Some pervert who called me Crystal," she said in a monotone.

Lola looked confused.

"My phone sex name," Cristy explained. "And he wanted to know what I'm wearing."

"Oh my God. Sick bastard."

Cristy listlessly flung her arm toward the front room. "And I'm sure it won't take long before he walks through that door to get my fashion details for himself. He intimated as much. Maybe he was just toying with me, but who knows?"

"*Dios mio*." Lola rubbed away the goose bumps that rose on her upper arms. "I never even thought of that."

Cristy managed a brittle smile. "Yeah, so how exactly are we going to run a business if we have to worry about some creep walking in? And how many people know I live upstairs? I can't even feel safe in my own home." Tension stretched between them as they pondered the frightening possibilities.

"You'll stay with me until this blows over."

"If it blows over. And actually, you'll have to stay here with me. I can't leave the shop vulnerable."

"Right. Of course not. Okay." Lola bit her bottom lip, her eyes wide and troubled.

"Marisol's innocent, well-meaning broadcast doesn't seem quite so harmless now, does it?"

The business line rang again. And again.

Neither Cristy nor Lola moved.

On the third ring, Lola bent forward and yanked the cord from the jack.

Cristy closed her eyes and exhaled into the silence. "I swear to God, my sister *will* make this nightmare go away and give me back my incognito life. No matter what it takes."

# Chapter 3

Damn it! She'd screwed up *again*! According to Mom, her baby sis was on a rampage, threat-

ening to disown her or kill her—whichever Cristy found the simplest and most satisfying at the time.

Marisol threw her gearshift into overdrive and merged into the steady stream of commuter traffic onto westbound I-70. Her insides were revving out of control, but her BMW handled the acceleration calmly. Just like her sister, Cris. Always infuriatingly composed and serene. Throughout their lives, Cristy had this weird talent for being able to anticipate consequences before she took actions so she could always make the best choice. The phrase "spur of the moment" didn't exist for Cristy. Marisol envied her that ability, but, truth be told, she also found it just a tad bit annoying.

She smacked the heel of her hand against the leather steering wheel. She hated being on her sister's shit list. Not that Cris would believe her—or even give her a chance to explain—but she truly hadn't meant to embarrass her. Couldn't Cris see

#### LYNDA SANDOVAL

that? How many ways would she have to show her love and respect for her sister before Cristy truly trusted her?

The whole groveling her way back into Cristy's good graces plan was a long shot, at best. She *knew* that. But what was the alternative? Over the years, she'd found it virtually impossible to discern what would or wouldn't send her sister flying off the handle. Shit, she'd given Cristy a simple shout out that morning for her determination and entrepreneurial ingenuity. Cristy's past had been the *positive* example of the show. A compliment. Hello! She figured Cristy would be proud of the resourcefulness that allowed her to launch her business at the tender age of twenty-six. But, no.

Okay, there was that teensy detail about not discussing her private life. But, still, it never ceased to amaze her how shy and private her sister could be. So she had one little phone sex job on her résumé. Big deal! That fact shouldn't be embarrassing to someone as successful as Cristy. But it was.

Why? No. Seriously. Why?

Someone needed to fill her in, because she just didn't get it. And yet, she knew Mom hadn't exaggerated her sister's anger. Mom said Cristy was more torqued off than she'd ever been, even angrier than she'd been after the Welcome to Womanhood party (which really had been intended as a thoughtful gesture). This time, Cristy didn't just want to disappear. She wanted Marisol's head on a stake. Of that, she had no doubt.

They might have landed on opposite ends of the personality spectrum, but she and Cristy were connected in some weird psychic way. All day long she'd felt Cristy's anger boiling over inside her own chest—like a wicked bout of acid reflux. They needed to talk this out, and yet Cristy stubbornly refused to answer her cell. She had left messages, urgent pages, text—*nada*. She'd pleaded with Cristy via voice mail, to no avail. She

even faxed over a note asking Cristy to pretty-please-withchocolate-on-top call.

Still zippo.

The stony silence from Cristy freaked her out more than anything, so she had no choice but to track her down and force the issue. She'd push her over and sit on her if that's what it took to make her listen to reason. That tactic had always worked well when they were kids.

Whatever it took to elicit a response from Cristy, she'd do it. Even if she had to instigate a screaming match or a fistfight. Food fight, pillow fight, arm wrestling—at this point, anything was better than her baby sister's silence.

She *adored* Cristy, and nothing she had ever done or *would* ever do was intended to hurt her. Period. Before this fiasco was over, Cris was going to know that, once and for all.

So much for Simplicity being her peaceful little oasis. After the phone creep scare, Cristy and Lola decided to keep the doors locked and only open them to regulars. They'd hoped doing so would lend a bit of normalcy to the day while keeping them safe from any deviants who might be skulking in the alley.

Talk about wishful thinking.

News traveled way too fast. Instead of the typical Monday stitch-and-bitch session, interspersed with brisk sales of both yarn and yummies, her family of regulars ignored their needles and peppered her with embarrassingly frank questions instead.

What did she say to the guys?

Would she demonstrate her phone sex voice?

Did it turn her on, too? (Please.)

Had she ever masturbated while on a call?

Ugh! As if! Were they out of their minds? They were as

intrigued by her alleged racy past as Lola had been. Consequently, she spent most of her day feeling like she'd landed in some jacked-up Jerry Springer episode. After the supertraumatizing masturbation question (shudder), she excused herself and hid out in the back room going through the rest of the blissfully silent boxes.

When Lola popped in to tell her that crews from two local TV stations had just pulled up in their vans, Cristy apologized to the customers and closed the place altogether. She hoped Marisol was satisfied. Not only had her sister violated her trust in the worst possible way, but she'd screwed her out of practically a whole day's profits, too.

After the last customer left, Cristy double-checked the lock, then peeked out the wavy glass of the front window at the news crews setting up their equipment. One crew even unloaded a cooler and chairs. Did they plan to camp out? Unfreakin'-believable that she would merit this kind of attention. Talk about a slow news day.

She shook her head at the absurdity of it all, then joined Lola, who was cleaning up the kitchen. "I wonder how long they'll stay out there," she said over the whoosh of the overhead mounted sprayer.

Lola wiped some water from her face with the crook of her elbow. "You know the media. They're like a dog on a bone."

Cristy slid onto a tall stool next to the wide worktable she'd picked up especially for Lola at an antique shop on Broadway. The thick wooden piece had come from Denver's historic Pasquini's Bakery. Cristy knew it would be the perfect thankyou gift after the first time Lola's baked goods had doubled Simplicity's profits. "Need any help?"

Lola smiled at her from the stainless steel sink, one hand aiming the industrial-sized sprayer she used to clean the pans and dishes. "Nah, there's not that much. But I'll take the com-

pany." She lifted her chin toward the vintage glass bakery case—another antique shop find. "Might as well have another scone. We have a lot of leftovers."

"Yeah, thanks to my hag of a sister." Cristy reached into the case and plucked out a doughy morsel. The clock ticktocked on the wall, and the lemony scent of the dishwashing liquid wafted in the air. Everything seemed normal, and yet it wasn't.

"You talked to her yet?"

Cristy broke off a chunk of white chocolate and popped it into her mouth. "How could I talk to her? She's dead to me. We'd have to hold a séance."

Lola rolled her eyes. "You need to talk to her, girl. Tell her about that sicko who called, at the very least. She's a local celebrity. She'll know what to do about it."

"I know. I'll talk to her as soon as the urge to pound her face in subsides." Cristy scrunched up her nose. "She's been trying to get ahold of me all day. She even faxed."

"Call her back!"

"No need."

"Huh?" Lola shook water droplets off a large baking sheet and set it upright in the prongs of the drainer.

"Trust me. Marisol doesn't like being ignored and—" She glanced up at the clock. "—she got off work twenty minutes ago. Ten bucks says she's on her way here right now, just as fast as her broom will carry her."

Lola laughed as she dried her hands on the green apron she always wore while cleaning up, then she lifted it over her head and hung it on one of the antique glass doorknobs they'd fashioned into wall hooks.

Right on cue, they heard pounding on the back door. Marisol never entered through the front door, for some unknown reason—another annoying aspect of her personality. "Cristy! Open up!"

"Speaking of Satan," Cristy said in a droll tone.

"Hurry!" Marisol said in a stage whisper. "Before the news crews see me." The sound of Marisol sliding a credit card into the door's lock mechanism carried into the kitchen.

Cristy quirked one eyebrow at Lola. "Should I call the cops on her? Have her arrested for attempted burglary? I'm sure Mom and Dad would bond her out, but probably not before she suffered through an invasive cavity search at the jail. That would definitely cheer me up."

Lola clucked her tongue and aimed one pointer finger at Cristy. "Stay here. I'll get the door." She started toward the sounds of Marisol breaking and entering, then hesitated and turned back. With a wan smile, she snatched up her knife block and moved it to the other side of the room, as far from Cristy's reach as she could.

Indignant, Cristy rolled her eyes. "Give me a break. I'm not the Lorena Bobbit type, you know."

"Sorry. I prefer to err on the side of caution. Can't have my good knives confiscated as evidence, after all." Lola shrugged, then disappeared into the creaky back hallway.

Cristy used the moment alone to take several deep breaths. She knew what her sister would say, and she knew it would piss her off even more. Same shit, different fiasco. Her blood began to boil. On second thought, maybe it was a good thing Lola had moved those knives after all.

Moments later Marisol click-clacked into the kitchen on her pricey five-inch heels. Inside, Cristy scoffed. Only her sister would dress up for a job in *radio*, for God's sake. She couldn't get enough of being the center of attention, right down to her freakin' impractical footwear.

Cristy's spine stiffened and she clamped her hands together in her lap to keep them from shaking. Her eyes narrowed. Lola followed Marisol in, wagging her finger at Cristy in a silent warning against the commission of murder, or something, Cristy thought. Whatever. If it came to that, Lola knew damn well it was justified.

"Have a scone," Lola said to Marisol in a false cheery voice. But her gaze never left Cristy's face.

Neither did Marisol's. She froze in the middle of the kitchen, her Tods bag clutched to her abdomen. She didn't acknowledge Lola. Instead, she gulped, then said, "Cristy?"

Stare-down.

Marisol's throat tightened, telegraphing her fear. Good. She should be afraid.

"Aren't you going to . . . throw something? Or yell?"

"Eat . . . a . . . goddamned . . . scone," Cristy demanded in her most evil voice. "And apologize to Lola while you're at it."

Marisol's uncertain gaze darted from Cristy, to the scones, to Lola, and back to Cristy. She edged over to the display and extracted a scone. "Wh-What for?"

"What for? In case you hadn't noticed, we usually sell out of Lola's baked goods. But thanks to your big mouth, today we have a shitload that will go to waste."

Marisol blinked rapidly. "I'm sorry. I never meant to—"

"Shut up!" Cristy lunged to her feet, fists clamped at her sides. "God! I pegged that one. That is the last thing I want to hear come out of your mouth. 'I didn't mean to,'" Cristy mocked. "You never mean to, Mar, do you?" She paused long enough for her sister to shake her head. "Too bad, because this time you crossed a line."

"But Cristy—"

"But nothing! Shut your hole! It's my turn to talk." She jabbed her arm toward the front of the house. "The worst part, Mar, isn't that we had the crappiest business day so far this month, even though we did. Or that Lola did all that baking for nothing. Not even that the news vans are parked outside waiting to pry into my personal life, which you *know* I despise—"

"Cris—"

"I'm not finished." She snatched up a long wooden spoon and pointed it at her sister. "You want to know what the worst part is? Give it a guess. You're a smart woman."

She swallowed thickly. "That I embarrassed you in public?"

"Strike one!" Cristy swung the spoon as if going for a home run. "Try again."

Marisol flinched. "That Mom and Dad know?"

"Strike two! Although I may never forgive you for that, come to think of it." She smacked the spoon on the table. Hard. "Dare to take a final stab at it? Be careful now. You've already got two strikes."

Marisol's hand fluttered up to her neckline and she took a half step back. "That I . . . um . . . broke a promise?"

"Strike three, Marisol, even though you do totally suck for that. Maybe you should look that word up, promise, because you don't have a clue what it means." Cristy spiked the spoon onto the floor so hard that the handle snapped off. "Three strikes, and you're out. Out of touch, that is. But don't worry. I'll tell you the worst part."

Shaky, Marisol slumped onto the edge of a stool. She hadn't touched her scone. For some reason, that fueled Cristy's anger like a squirt of gasoline on a flame.

"The worst part," Cristy said, stalking back and forth in front of her sister, "is that—thanks to you—I've been dodging calls from strange men who claim they used to call me on the stupid phone sex line. Of course, that was back when I was anonymous. Now they know exactly how and where to find me."

"What?" Marisol's eyes went wide.

"You heard me. Thanks to you, my anonymity is gone. Every pervert in the metro area now knows where I work and live."

Marisol's face drained of color.

"You seem surprised. Are you surprised?"

"Cris—"

"Because you shouldn't be. If you had taken a moment just one damn moment—to think before you opened your big mouth, you might have considered the consequences." Cristy bent and swept the broken spoon parts off the floor. This time she spiked them into the empty metal trash can, watching her sister startle when they clanged on the bottom. "It's not enough for you to ruin my business and embarrass me, but now you have to place me in actual physical danger? I hope you're happy!"

"Oh, God, Cris. Do you actually think you're in danger?"

"Gee, what do you think, Einstein?"

Marisol dropped her scone to the tabletop and crossed to her sister. She grasped her upper arms and didn't let go, even when Cristy tried to wrench away. "You have to believe I never meant for that to happen."

Cristy twisted violently a couple of times, trying to get loose of her clutches. When that didn't work, she hiked one knee hard—into the center of Marisol's left thigh.

Marisol yelped and staggered backward, rubbing her leg.

Cristy advanced on her until they stood nose-to-nose. Marisol's eyes welled with tears. "See, the thing is, you never mean for bad things to happen, and yet they do. Because you never think." Cristy rapped a knuckle on her own temple. "And I'm sick of it! You have no boundaries, and you have no respect for anyone's privacy. This time," she aimed a finger at her sister's chest, jabbing her just under the clavicle with each word, "you ... just ... went ... too ... far." And then she shoved her. Marisol stumbled backward on her stupid fuck-me heels, but Lola caught her before she fell flat on her ass. Too bad.

"Settle down, Cristy," Lola said in a soft chastising tone.

"God, I'm *so* sorry." Marisol wailed, covering her face with her hands. "I'm scared, too. God! What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to fix it," Cristy snapped. "All of it."

"How?"

"Jesus, Mar!" Cristy raked her sister with a scathing up and down glance. "For once in your life figure it out for yourself. I'm not picking up the pieces this time, and I *will* have my life back. *Fix it.*"

"Okay. I will. I promise."

Cristy barked out a laugh. "As if your promises mean anything to me. Just . . . go. Get out. And don't come back until you have a solution."

Marisol cast a pleading glance at Lola, who patted her hand sympathetically.

"Go!"

Marisol jolted to attention, then nodded and turned toward the back door. She swiped at her tears with the backs of her hands as she scurried off.

"Take the damned scone!" Cristy yelled.

Her sister lunged for the table and snatched up the scone, then made a beeline for the exit.

Cristy listened until she heard the old door creak open, then slam shut. And then she exhaled. Closed her eyes.

After a moment she opened them and calmly smoothed down her sleeves—one, and then the other. "Well," she said to Lola, "That went well, I think."

Lola's brows shot up. "Girl, Lord almighty." She made the sign of the cross over her body with one hand, finishing with a kiss on her knuckles. "Remind me never to piss you off."

# Chapter 4

Marisol leaned against her BMW and waited for her blood pressure to drop into the "safe to drive" zone. With shaky hands she wrestled the emergency pack of cigarettes from the zipper pouch inside her purse, then fumbled for her lighter. It took her three flicks to get a flame, and then she hacked out the first lungful of smoke like some amateur. She'd lost her touch. But that was okay since she didn't smoke anymore. Not really. People were right—it was a nasty habit. These were exigent circumstances, however, and exigent circumstances called for rules to be bent, nasty habit or not.

By the time she'd sucked the second cigarette down to the filter, the nicotine had sufficiently chilled her out. She dropped the butt onto the asphalt next to the first one, then smashed them both with the sole of her black Blahniks. After waving away the lingering smoke, she climbed into her car, eased into gear with deliberately calm motions, then crept slowly down the alley in the opposite direction from the news vans.

Damn. She needed a martini.

She'd irritated her shy *hermanita* before, but she'd never, ever seen her so ice-cold furious. It scared the crap out of her. What scared her more, though, was the thought of a bunch of creepy guys lurking around Simplicity. God! She raked one hand through the side of her hair, the other gripped tightly on the wheel. She'd have to concoct an ingenious way of atoning for this accidental sin on the show. That could wait, though. First priority was keeping her sister safe until things died down.

But how? Cristy was the planner in the family, not her.

Marisol weighed her options as she headed for the highway, her bottom lip clamped between her teeth. She would have suggested that Cristy close the shop for a week or two and move in with her, but could just imagine the response to that idea. She wouldn't even broach the subject of Cristy bunking at the parents' place, especially now that they knew the Big Secret. Oops. She'd forgotten that they hadn't known.

So Cristy had to be safe at her own place somehow.

Hmmm . . . Wait! What about a dog?

Relieved to have come up with a reasonable idea, she dug her cell phone out of her purse and speed-dialed Cristy. It rang once, twice, then—

"What?"

"How do you feel about Dobermans?"

Click.

Marisol lifted the phone from her ear and stared at it a moment, then flipped it closed and tossed it on the passenger seat. Okay, so Fido was out. *Argh*!

If she could kick her own ass, she would. Never, for a single second, had she imagined that her fun, lighthearted radio show would place her baby sister in danger. But it had, and now she had to figure a way out of its path. She didn't doubt her sister would disown her if she failed.

But what to do?

Maybe Wyatt would know. She retrieved her cell and speeddialed his house. His wife Suzie answered, complimented her on that morning's show, then passed the phone to her husband.

"What's up, kid?"

In a rushed waterfall of words she clued him in.

He gave a long, low whistle. "What are you going to do?"

"No clue. That's why I called you."

She heard his familiar sigh and could just picture him rubbing his palm in a circular motion over his bald head while he pondered. "Look, you can't recant what you said. It either wouldn't make a difference or it would make things worse. Not to mention, you wouldn't really want to because our ratings are amazing. Can you believe, several of the other stations were actually discussing our show?"

"Shit. That's *just* what I need." The ratings and buzz weren't worth it this time. Not at this cost. "Seriously, I need to come up with some sort of plan, Wyatt."

"I don't think you have to do anything. You know how fickle listeners are. The whole thing will blow over in a few days."

"Maybe for the listeners, but not for Cristy. Trust me. Besides, I'm more worried about all the perverts."

"That part's a little trickier." He paused, obviously thinking. "You could . . . I don't know. I guess hire some goon to hang around Cristy's place for a week or so, maybe."

"You think I should go that far?"

"Better safe than sorry."

"True. Okay." A goon. But where did someone find a goon? Goons 'R' Us? It's not like she networked with goons on a day-to-day basis. Wait just a second. Marisol smiled as the fog cleared in her brain and a perfect solution presented itself. She actually *did* know a goon—a professional goon—and she also happened to know he was a great guy. Hell, she'd even met his mother way back when.

"I've got it."

"What?"

"A plan. That's why I keep you around, Wy. Brainstorms."

"I had a brainstorm? Really? What was it?"

"I'll fill you in tomorrow." Marisol pushed the End button, then steered the Beemer onto the shoulder and engaged her emergency flashers. Vehicles whipped along the highway, rocking her car as they passed. She dug through her purse until she found the pressed paper bar coaster onto which her old buddy from high school, Diego Mora, had scribbled his phone number.

Running into him last weekend had been a pleasant surprise. He'd just moved back to Denver after a decade living in L.A. They'd spent a few moments catching each other up on their lives, then exchanged numbers so they could keep in touch. But honestly? She hadn't intended to call. Why would she? Their lives had gone off in vastly different directions. Pleasant or not, he was really just a blast from her past. Right now, though, the blast felt more like divine intervention.

Edging her curtain aside, Cristy peered down on the big black Hummer hogging up curb space on her street. It had been there since a little before dawn. Worry had left her restless and unable to sleep, and she'd just happened to glance out her bedroom window at the precise moment when the ostentatious gas guzzler had turned onto her street then immediately doused its headlights. If that weren't suspicious enough, the driver pulled the car to the curb one house down from hers then cut the engine, but no one had ever stepped out of the car.

Yeah, like she was really going to fall asleep after witnessing that. What was she, stupid? She watched the forensic dra-

mas at night like the rest of the freakin' country. She'd quickly brewed some coffee and then returned to her window seat to stand guard, and as she watched, she couldn't help but wonder if the driver of the Hummer would call her Crystal. The thought made her skin crawl.

Several cups of coffee later the sun blazed rose-orange in the eastern sky. Lola was still asleep in the guest room, and Cristy didn't want to wake her. But the more time she spent watching the Hummer, the more pissed off she'd become. She was no expert, but common sense said mixing *pissed* with exhaustion was probably a bad idea.

And yet, anger had long since ousted fear in her sleepdeprived brain, so right about now the idea of confronting this jackass sounded great. Did he think she'd play the prisoner role in her own home? Her sanctuary? That she'd run scared from him? Not damn likely, boy. Besides, if he wanted to break in, he would've done it under the cover of darkness. Right?

Stiff-backed with righteous indignation, she stomped down the stairs from her living quarters into the shop. At the door, she suffered one small twinge of don't-be-a-dumbass doubt. If her life were a horror flick, she knew this would be the ubiquitous scene where people yell "Don't do it!" at the screen as the too-stupid-to-live heroine runs into the dark forest wearing high heels. After all, once she unlocked the dead bolt and approached the Hummer, she was fair game.

Sure, she could do the allegedly smart thing and call the cops, but what could she say? "Send the police! There's a Hummer parked on my street doing nothing"?

Riiiiight, psycho. She'd been embarrassed enough for one week, thank you very much. Her only choices were (1) to go out there and confront the idiot herself, or (2) sit in her house waiting for something to happen, like some hapless, helpless victim. Yeah, she wasn't up for the victim role. Bring on the confrontation.

But . . . maybe a weapon would be helpful.

She glanced around her pretty little shop, as always loving the way the soft morning light angled in through the east facing windows and cast a glow on the furnishings and yarn. Glow aside, however, the place was seriously lacking in the whole weapons department. She didn't dare take one of Lola's precious, not to mention expensive, knives. After all, knives were to a chef what needles were to a knitter. Wait—needles. That was an idea.

She settled on a long, stainless steel pair, testing their weight—or lack thereof—in her hands. Not the most threatening choice, but it was the best she could do in a pinch. Surely they could at least jab an eyeball out or skewer a testicle if need be, right? *Ick*.

Needles in hand, Cristy peeked out the front window to make sure the guy still sat in the Hummer. Satisfied, she crept to the back door and eased herself out. The crisp morning air energized her as she stepped onto the grass, still moist with dew. She shivered. Careful to scurry from shrub to tree, she picked her way through her backyard, then her neighbors'. She skulked up the side of her neighbors' house to the front corner, then leaned her back against the cool brick wall. After a few deep breaths she shot a quick glance around the corner.

Still there, except now the Hummer was in front of her rather than behind her. Just where she wanted it.

She shivered again, this time from an unexpected rush of excitement. There was something very empowering about getting the drop on someone who was trying to get the drop on *you*. She'd have to remember the feeling and use it to outdiss her sister next time. If there *was* a next time, which there damn well better not be. But she couldn't think about that right now, because it was "go time" in Operation Hummer.

She felt a shot of gratitude that her Victorian was in a neighborhood that boasted huge cottonwood trees arching over the street in a rich canopy of green. She'd loved the location from the moment she saw it, but right then she loved it even more. All those trees—not to mention her neighbors' elaborate topiaries—would afford her plenty of cover as she approached the perv in the vehicle.

Crouched as low as she could manage while still being able to run, she dashed from boxwood bunny to topiary tiger, and finally to the oversized rear bumper of the obnoxious vehicle.

She stopped. Listened.

No change to indicate he suspected anything.

But if he had heard a noise, she thought, employing her best Nancy Drew deductive powers, he'd be most likely to check his driver's side mirror or rearview mirror. Her best approach, then, would be on the passenger side.

Hunched so low she was practically crawling, she stealthed her way up the side, around the front grill, and stopped just in front of his rearview mirror. She'd gotten a quick glimpse of his profile as she rounded the vehicle, and just as she suspected, his gaze rested firmly on her house.

Her anger flared. How dare he?

Again she stopped. Listened.

Still no change.

She could hardly believe she'd slipped in without him noticing. Sheesh! Not only did she have a stalker, but he sucked at his chosen crime. Exactly the kind of guy who'd drive a small-penis-equalizer vehicle and go in for the whole phone sex thing. He probably lived in his mother's basement.

His driver's side window stood open and the scent of coffee wafted out. He also had the radio on—low. She strained forward to hear it. One moment . . . two . . . and—Bastard!

The creep was listening to KHOT-Marisol's station. Of

*course* it was Marisol's station, and gee, her stupid show was about to start. That did it.

Cristy counted out a one . . . two . . . three in her head, then lunged forward and up like an Olympic jouster, jabbing the tips of her knitting needles against the front of the stalker's muscular neck.

He froze, lifting his hands ever so slowly from the steering wheel. Above the needles, his Adam's apple rose and fell. "Easy now," he said.

"What in the hell are you doing here?" she growled.

His eyes darted toward her, then registered surprise. "Cristy?" His gaze swept over her. "Little Cristy Avila?"

Shock drained all the adrenaline out of her. She blinked a couple of times, trying to place him. He looked familiar, but—

"Damn, girl." He grinned, visibly calmer. "Last time I saw you, you were all bony knees and braces."

"Wha . . ?" Holy crap, it couldn't be! "D-Diego?" She would hardly have recognized her sister's high school friend without the knees and braces crack. She squeezed her eyes closed briefly, then looked again. Yup, it really was him. Her heart clenched. "Diego Mora?"

"In the flesh."

He *would* have to put it that way. Diego Mora had been the object of all her earliest sexual fantasies. He'd been the hottest senior during her freshman year, but nowhere near as hot as his incarnation at age—she did the math—thirty.

But wait. Buzz kill image: Diego Mora as one of *Crystal's* customers. *Ew.* She swallowed tightly, praying it wasn't true. But she had to know. "Wh-What are you doing here?"

His right hand wrapped around the needles at his throat. "Do you mind?" He slowly moved the "weapons" away from him, then glanced down. He chuckled. And when his eyes

met hers, her traitorous tummy did that telltale lust flop.

"No way did you just attack me with knitting needles."

She hiked her chin, grasping for bravado. "It was all I had. Answer my question, what are you *doing* here?"

"Sorry." He shook his head as if to clear it. "The needles threw me. Your sister hired me to keep an eye on you."

She blinked, taking in his words.

Marisol. Hired Diego Mora.

Which meant he knew about the creeps calling her.

Which logically meant he knew about her phone sex past.

Which meant she wanted to vaporize right this minute and disappear beneath the earth's crust. Damn! What were the odds? Her freakin' obtuse sister had hired the *sole* object of her earliest teenage fantasies as her bodyguard? If that didn't just take the cake.

Cake. *Ugh.* The word immediately threw her back to the abhorrent Welcome to Womanhood party, which led her to thoughts of the boys who'd shown up just to stuff their faces with Midol cake and snicker at her plight.

Diego had been one of those boys—the only sophomore. He hadn't eaten any cake, and he hadn't snickered like the snot-nosed seventh graders, but so what? If she remembered correctly, he'd looked at her with something crawly that felt a whole lot like pity. Kind of like the way he was looking at her now. And somehow, as she stood next to Diego Mora's big, hideous testosterone-mobile brandishing her size ten and a half, stainless steel knitting needles, pity felt a million times worse than ridicule.

"Jesus, it never ends." Cristy spun away from the Hummer and stomped back toward the safety—such as it was—of Simplicity.

# Chapter 5

So, she wasn't thrilled to see him, Diego mused as he headed around the side of the house, returning to the Hummer. Not such a huge surprise. Clearly Cristy was embarrassed by the situation, and he couldn't blame her. He had no interest in exacerbating that fact with his unwanted presence reminding her of what the entire metro area now knew, thanks to her sister. No sweat. He still had a job to do, but he could easily watch the place from outside. He'd set up the surveillance camera behind the house, which afforded him visuals of the alley, backyard, and back door on his laptop monitor. Gotta love technology.

Poor Cristy. He shook his head. Marisol had been a blast to hang out with back in the day, and he still thought she was one cool chick. But he could see how being her sister might suck. Especially since Cristy didn't have the same bold, gregarious nature as Marisol. The woman said and did whatever came to her mind. Nothing embarrassed her.

Not so for little sis. He still remembered Cristy walking into

the house all those years ago and coming face-to-face with that whacked party Marisol had put together. *Surprise!* they'd all yelled, and shy little Cristy had turned from mottled red to ashy gray as the realization seeped through her shock. Damn.

He'd only gone over to help Marisol decorate the basement, but he still felt awful for even being there. In fact, he felt a little guilty for recalling it now. After that, he'd spent the rest of that year feeling secretly protective of Cristy. Those pissant seventh grade boys Marisol had invited tormented Cristy mercilessly. He'd even had to whoop ass on the worst of the little cockroaches—Kevin O'Kane—after the kid refused to let up. That pencil-necked prick had been a bully since elementary school, and although Diego preferred to use force only as a last resort these days, hearing O'Kane cry like a buckle-shoed baby girl as he took the smackdown had been one of Diego's more satisfying revenge moments.

Cristy didn't know about any of it—him watching her back, thrashing the little eunuch on her behalf, *nada*. In fact, after her party, Diego couldn't remember a single time when Cristy had actually made eye contact with him at school or anywhere else. She'd stayed safely inside her protective shell ever since.

Of course, a couple of years later, he and Marisol had graduated, leaving Cristy to brave the mean halls alone for three long years. How had the rest of high school turned out for her? Pretty rough, probably. Teenagers—especially good-fornothing shitheels like Kevin O'Kane—could be cruel as hell.

Diego had lost contact with the Avila sisters after that, but the whole incident had steered him toward his eventual career path as a private investigator and personal bodyguard. He'd liked owning his own business. Problem was, guarding celebrities, although lucrative, hadn't provided the same satisfaction as watching little Cristy Avila's back had. Which was why he'd left L.A. Not specifically because of the Avila girls, but because he'd grown tired of the artificial and competitive atmosphere in the City of Angels. He yearned for more satisfying work, not that he knew what that entailed yet. How ironic, though, that his first freelance assignment in Denver was guarding little Cristy Avila. Again.

Talk about coming full circle.

He eased sideways in the Hummer's roomy leather seat and propped his knee against the steering wheel. The familiar tormented emotions on Cristy's expression earlier had kicked him square in the gut. Her feelings had always shown plainly on her face—since she was a kid, *pobrecita*, like a neon marquee.

But, man. She definitely wasn't a kid anymore.

An image of her undulated through his mind, and he whistled low through his teeth. In the years he'd been away, Cristy Avila had transformed from Marisol's quiet kid sister into an absolute, off-the-chain knockout. She was the kind of hot where she probably didn't realize she was hot. Sexy, real, and unassuming. More gorgeous by far than any of the celebrities he'd worked for, as a matter of fact. They always turned out to be far too high maintenance and brittle, going heavy on the makeup and designer clothes just to cover up their insecurity. Not that it worked.

Cristy? Opposite end of the spectrum, big-time. She'd confronted him outside wearing old sweatpants and a holey Herman's Hideaway T-shirt, wide brown eyes flashing fire. Her long dark hair stuck out all over the place, like she'd just tumbled out of bed, and yet, she hadn't given it a thought. Man, that hair had done dangerous things to his blood pressure.

Three words to describe the grown up Cristy Avila? Hot, hot, and hot. Scorching hot. And yet she'd maintained that en-

dearing sense of sincerity and vulnerability that had tripped his protective instincts when they were high school kids.

His mouth spread into a grin and he chuckled softly.

He couldn't believe she'd been brandishing, of all things, knitting needles. Proudly, as though she were Xena, freakin' Warrior Princess. That sense of the unexpected added to her appeal. He liked a woman who kept him guessing.

Yup—Cristy Avila had grown up, and damned if he didn't love what he saw. But it didn't matter. He couldn't explain why or how, but even after all this time, he knew her. If he gave one indication of his interest, she'd write it off merely as a result of the phone sex revelation. And, okay, in the interest of full disclosure, the image of her on the phone talking dirty *did* fire his pistons. He *was* a man. Cut him some slack.

But that wasn't why he found her sexy, not in the least.

Not that she'd believe him.

Bottom line, he'd been hired to protect her, not to put the moves on her, no matter how appealing the thought. More than anything, he wanted her to come away from this trauma knowing that not all guys were dirtbags, and that Diego Mora always had, and always would have, her back.

The news vans had returned.

Not just the ones from yesterday, either. There were more, lined up on the street like vultures on *Wild Kingdom*, drawn by the scent of road kill. Ironic, because after her stressful, sleepless night, she felt like road kill. The news vans' mere presence stirred up a cauldron of defeat, desperation, and deep-seated resentment inside her. Sheesh, wasn't there a murder to cover? Some sort of illegal police chase or sexual harassment claim in the fire department to follow up on? At the very least, they could certainly report on yet another stupid decision or comment made by the President. Those issues were news fodder. Her life was not.

And yet, she had to play by their stupid rules regardless of how it hindered her business, because they'd somehow decided she was the flavor of the week. Idiots. If she didn't lock the place down like a prison cell, she had no doubt they'd barge right in with their cameramen, shove mics in her face, and then take every word she said out of context. Consequently, for the second day in a row, the phones were unplugged, her shop was locked, curtains drawn, and a sign on her front door read, BY INVITATION ONLY UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

Her regulars were invited-no one else.

The whole thing cranked her off and freaked her out. And even though she'd stomped away from him that morning, she had to admit, knowing Diego Mora was outside watching the place eased a lot of her fear. At least she didn't have to worry about some freak spanking the monkey as he stared into one of her windows.

She'd have to apologize to Diego. He'd always tried to be nice to her when they were kids. She hadn't meant to be so rude earlier, but embarrassment had launched her fight or flight response, and judging from his sculpted physique, fighting would've been useless. Flight had been her only logical option. But, still. He probably thought she was a total wing nut, not to mention a tramp and a shrew. And that, combined with the growing pressure from the media, left her nerves wound tighter than a sleeve caught in a meat grinder.

For now, though, she needed to concentrate on business. On the surface, this was just another workday. A few of the shop's regulars gathered around the large table, stitching and bitching, just like always. But instead of joining them as she usually did, Cristy prowled the main gathering room straightening yarn displays and pretending she was fine, just fine, thank you very much for asking. What a load of crap. Oh, she put on a decent enough act. She shared in the laughter of her customers, pausing to ooh and aah over their various projects now and then, but her head wasn't all there. And everyone knew it. Bottom line, she pretended her life wasn't in shambles, and her regulars—God bless them—played along with the charade. At least, for a while.

After she had piled, unpiled, and repiled the new display of sherbet-colored eyelash yarn twice, Lisa Mondragon, the twenty-three-year-old, ultra-hip mother of twin toddlers, blew out a big sigh and set her aluminum needles down with that familiar *tink-tink*.

"Cristy, stop straightening those shelves and come knit with us. You know knitting is a cure-all."

Cristy turned from the wall of displayed yarn toward the familiar circle of knitters and clasped her hands behind her. "I'm sorry. Am I distracting you?" She forced a smile.

Lisa's sister, Racquel, beckoned her over. "You're not distracting us, but you're distracted. I know we're all pretending not to notice that giant purple elephant standing in the corner, but it's there."

"I—I'm not sure what you mean," she lied.

Racquel sighed. "We know the media's outside. We know you want to kill your sister. We understand why you're stressed out, okay? We're your friends."

"I....I know." Cristy dropped the act and ran her fingers through her hair. "And I appreciate it."

"So don't give them the satisfaction of rattling you, Cris." She huffed. "Too late, I'm afraid."

"Sit." Racquel indicated the empty chair with her chin. "We won't ask you any more uncomfortable questions."

Cristy narrowed her eyes playfully. "Promise?"

"For now." Racquel winked. "Aren't you still working on that round-the-bend sweater?"

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Sweater? Knitting? Huh? Oh yeah, *that*. Her normal routines had gone woefully awry. "I am," Cristy said with zero enthusiasm. She walked over and claimed the chair next to Racquel. "Eternally, because it scares the bejeebers out of me, that pattern."

"It scares everybody. You just have to go for it."

"I know. But it takes too much concentration." She tucked her hair behind her ears. "I'm going to leave it alone until I get through this fiasco. I don't want to mess it up."

"Nonsense," said Alma Perea, a Simplicity icon who'd started training for marathons at age sixty. Now, at sixty-eight, she had the body of a thirty-five-year-old athlete and the confidence of a twenty-five-year-old rock star. Not to mention, she could knit anything in the world, probably with her eyes closed. She'd begun knitting as a way to pass the time after her husband died, and found she had a knack for it. "It's the concentration that eases the mind, *mija*. Get the sweater. I'll help you if you get stuck."

"Okay. You're right." Cristy grabbed her bag from the window seat, then sat again, between Racquel and Alma. "Thanks." A lump rose in her throat as she looked around at her friends. "You don't know what it means to me that you're all here."

Alma blinked at her a couple of times. "Well, where else would we be? We're here every Tuesday, aren't we?"

"Yes, but—"

"What makes you think today would be any different?"

"I love you guys." She gave Alma a quick hug, then shook her head as she pulled out her work-in-progress. "What would I do without my Simplicity family?"

"Luckily, you'll never have to find out." Alma patted Cristy's knee, then leaned over to inspect her work.

"You, too, Lola," Racquel yelled toward the kitchen. "Get out here."

### **Diss-Connected**

Lola appeared in the doorway, drying her hands on a flour sack towel. "You ladies need something?"

"Yes. You," said Allegra Morrison, a gangly eighteen-yearold who took all kinds of crap at school because "her parents had named her after a drug." At least, that's what the other kids claimed. In actuality, she was named after her paternal grandmother, who'd spun her own yarn and had taught Allegra to crochet when she was three. Yarn work came to her in her bloodline; she'd already whipped through several complicated knitting projects like they were nothing, and had begun spinning and hand dyeing.

"Come sit with us, Lo," Cristy told her, releasing the last vestiges of her resistance. "There's no need for you to slave in the kitchen when we're basically closed."

"Except to the A-list," Allegra said, smiling shyly at Cristy before turning back to her project—a fitted halter top out of red, hand-dyed hemp.

"That's right. The A-list is always welcome." Cristy had felt an immediate kinship with Allegra when they'd met in Simplicity's first-ever beginning knitting class. The teen had started out quiet, painfully shy. Eventually, she grew more comfortable, and during their last session, she confided in the rest of them about how much she hated school and why. Cristy knew all too well what it felt like to be an outsider. After everyone besides Allegra had left, she had encouraged the girl to think of Simplicity as her oasis, too. She was pleased Allegra felt comfortable enough to do so.

"Okay," Lola said. "Let me get some treats together first. You all can be my guinea pigs. I just baked something new."

"Yum. What?" Lisa asked.

"I call them butter knit-knots." She grinned. "They're a bit like shortbread, but wait until you see them. They look like little sweaters in stockinette stitch."

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"I can guarantee you they're probably too gorgeous to eat," Alma said once Lola was out of the room.

"No way," Allegra said. "I'll eat anything she bakes, pretty or not. It's easy. You just have to close your eyes and open your mouth."

Everyone laughed. Taking her first deep, relaxing breath of the day, Cristy pulled her pattern from the felted knapsack she'd whipped up last winter for precisely that purpose. It was her project bag, and like any good knitter, she never left home without it. Then again, thanks to Mar, she might never leave home again. If she turned into one of those creepy old hermits with thirty cats and newspapers stacked five feet high, it would be Marisol's fault.

Lola presented the knit-knots, to much adulation, on a big orange tray from the local imports store. Despite Lola's insistence, everyone refused to eat the masterpieces after they found out Lola had carved the design into each one individually.

Lola pouted. "How would you feel if I wouldn't wear one of your sweaters because I knew how much work had gone into it?"

Cristy arched one eyebrow. Her mouth watered, and the rest of the women looked just as ravenous. "She's got a point."

"Here." Allegra pulled out her camera phone. "I'll take a picture for posterity, and then we can eat. Deal?"

"Deal," they said simultaneously. With a permanent digital record of the cookies in hand, they dug in. Pure, buttery bliss.

"Lo, these are your yummiest creations yet," Cristy said.

"Thanks. Maybe I should take a few out for Diego. I'm sure he's getting hungry," Lola suggested, glancing toward the curtain-covered front window.

Cristy eyed her sharply.

"Or . . . I could just set some aside? Never mind," Lola said. "Huh? Who's Diego?" Allegra asked.

Lola said, "He's—"

"No one," Cristy said, casting a "thanks a lot" glare at Lola. "Just an old friend of the family." She stared straight down at her knitting, watching her stitches get tighter and tighter. Swear to God, if she had to rip out these rows, she was going to bitch-slap her sister clear to California. This pattern was difficult enough without the added annoyance of having to redo any part of it.

"Actually, he's a professional bodyguard," Lola said quickly, holding her chin high as she faced Cristy head on.

"Lola!"

"Marisol hired him to watch the place because Cris has been getting some scary phone calls since the radio show." She spread her arms wide and shrugged. "They're *familia*, Cris. They have a right to know. You don't have to carry the burden alone just to maintain some sort of image in front of them."

"She's right," Lisa said softly. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I don't know. It's embarrassing!"

"You know, we've all been publicly humiliated at one point or another. Maybe none of us has ever worked as a phone sex girl, but we really do get what you're going through."

Cristy's shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry. It's just so infuriating. My sister always puts me in awkward situations. The former job isn't something I'm proud of."

"Why not?" Racquel waved her arms around at Simplicity. "Look what it got you."

"Well, there's that. Sure. But no one really needed to know the details, did they?"

Racquel smacked her sister in the arm with the back of her hand, smirking. "Tell her about that time with Mom in the Safeway parking lot. Talk about embarrassing." "Ugh!" Lisa fluttered her eyes closed for a minute, then held up her index finger. "This goes nowhere, ladies."

"Of course not. Fess up," said Alma, eyes gleaming with anticipation of some juicy girl gossip.

"Well, I had a crush on this particular guy in high school. Popular, athlete, the whole nine yards, and we'd been doing the mutual flirt thing for a while. I was sure he'd ask me out soon. So my mom, Racquel, and I were walking through the parking lot toward Safeway one day when he pulled up in his Camaro."

"Lisa was laying on the whole cute act," Racquel said, "trying to be cool and stuff as they chatted at his window."

"Yeah, of course I was." She grinned at her sister. "And the whole time I was praying that you and Mom would just go into the store without me so I could get my full flirt on."

"But, no," said Racquel.

"Nope. No such luck. Instead, Mom actually walked up to me as I was talking to him, lifted my arm by the wrist and sniffed, then said—"

"We need to get you stronger deodorant, *mija*. You smell like fried potatoes with onions," said Racquel, imitating their mom's accented speech.

"And that's *verbatim*, people," Lisa added.

"Oh, my God!" Cristy exclaimed as the rest of the group gasped, laughed, and chattered. Cristy covered her mouth. "I can't believe she fronted you like that! What did you do?"

"You mean, other than wish for an instant death?"

"Been there," Cristy said.

Lisa rolled her eyes. "I skipped school for three days and then never spoke to him again. Lance—" She smacked her palm on the table. "—that was his name. I'd blocked it out. *Ugh*, I haven't thought about that in a few years." She scowled

playfully at Racquel. "Thanks for the memories, sis."

"That's beyond awful, Lisa," Cristy said, feeling less alone for the first time. "Really."

Lisa brushed away the sympathy and started knitting again. "For the most part, I'm over it. I still have a B.O. complex, though. I think I've tried every antiperspirant on the market at least once. No lie."

"I've told you a million times, you don't stink, sis. That was just some adolescent hormone thing."

Lisa smiled gratefully at her sister.

"Something awful like that happened to me once, too," Lola said, her face turning red.

Cristy couldn't imagine anything rattling Lola. "Do tell."

"Well, I was a senior. This is weird, but I'm going to tell you anyway, because I know you'll all understand." She paused for a deep breath. "I'd worn my favorite pair of underwear to school one day. You know—" She flipped her hand. "—the kind you hunt for forever, that don't give you VPL or crawl up your crack or anything?"

"What's VPL?" Alma asked.

"Visible panty lines," the others intoned, in stereo.

"Ah." Alma nodded with understanding. The lingo might change, but finding comfy drawers was a universal female quest, regardless of age or generation.

"So naturally my period started that day."

"Of course," said Alma, with a wise laugh. "Murphy's Law."

Lola nodded at her. "Yeah. I didn't have any tampons with me, and I'll leave out the ugliest details, but that afternoon, I'd asked my mom for advice on how to get the stains out."

"Ay, pobrecita," Alma said.

"Yeah. But, I'm talking, my favorite pair. I know it's gross,

but I had to save them if I could." Lola paused to grab a knitknot and crunch into it.

"Waste not, want not," Alma said.

"Don't keep us in suspense," Allegra added.

Lola swallowed. "So, instead of explaining how to clean them, Mom said she'd give it a try herself."

"Uh-oh, I'm getting scared." Cristy grimaced.

"You should be scared." Lola bugged her eyes. "That night, I was on the phone with my boyfriend. Mom picked up the extension to tell me it was time to say good-bye, because it was a school night. I said okay, and she started to hang up. But then something possessed the woman to say, 'Oh, before I forget. I tried to get the stains out of your underwear, but the bleach ate holes in the crotch panel. I'm sorry, honey.' *On the phone!* With my boyfriend on the other end listening to every word."

"Oh my God." Allegra's eyes went round with horror and her hands stilled in mid-purl. "I would have run away."

"I thought about it. I think I died a thousand deaths as she spoke the words." She shuddered. "It was really awful."

"Did you and the guy break up?"

"Eventually, but not directly because of the underwear debacle. I think I was probably weird around him after that, though. It was the beginning of the end. I've always wondered who he told about it, if anyone."

"Be glad he wasn't like Marisol," Cristy lamented, leaning forward for another cookie. "She would've thrown a funeral for your underwear and invited the whole school to mourn with you."

"Funny how a lot of our most embarrassing moments have to do with undergarments or bodily functions," Alma said, laughing softly. "I dropped my bloomers on the road

once while walking back from the swimming hole near my house. My brother and his friends came driving up in my dad's old Studebaker, honking and waving them out the window. The wind caught them, and they looked huge, like a big, white, holey balloon. I like to thought I'd died right about then." She peered around at them with a smile. "My story might not seem as bad, mind you, but this was in the 1940s. Nice girls didn't run about showing their underthings to boys."

"Wow," Cristy said, shaking her head as she looked at each woman in turn. "Thanks, you guys. I had no idea. I thought my evil sister had cornered the market on embarrassment."

"Yeah, right," Allegra said with a little huff. "Just being a teenager is embarrassing these days. Especially if you're named after a drug." She sucked in one side of her cheek, thinking. "Although I guess I should be grateful my mom chose Allegra, though, and not Viagra."

The women howled with laughter.

"Being a teenager sucked back in the day, too, kiddo," Lola added, patting Allegra's knee. "Best time of our lives, my ass. It's the big lie everyone tells you, and you have to grow up and figure out for yourself that it's bull."

Allegra finished a row and aimed her empty needle at Cristy. "So, moral of the story, we've all been there in one way or another and we don't care about your past. We're on your side."

Cristy smiled at her friends, feeling teary. "Thanks, ladies. Really. It means a lot."

"Okay, back to the really interesting issue—this bodyguard guy," Lisa said. "Where is he, anyway? Outside?"

Before Cristy could answer, the back door banged open with a splintering noise followed by the sounds of two men in a violent scuffle in the kitchen. Startled, the women jumped up and ran to the archway, Cristy at the head of the pack. Diego, dressed in all black with some sort of handgun strapped to his muscular thigh, was in the middle of handcuffing a dumpy little bald guy sprawled, facedown, on the floor underneath him.

"What in the hell is going on?" Cristy craned her neck and peered down the back hallway. "Oh, no! You cracked my door."

Diego looked up. Both men were breathing heavily. "I saw him trying to get in. It's okay. Under control. Go back to whatever you were doing."

"It's original to the house," Cristy said, ignoring the strange man on her floor. She loved that door. Plus, it was easier to focus on that minor detail than on the intruder.

"I'm sorry," Diego said, wiping sweat off his forehead with the crook of one arm. "I'll have it fixed. Or restored. Whatever you do to antique doors. I have to take care of this yokel first, though."

"Get off me," came the other guy's muffled words. "Marisol told me to sneak in the back way so the news cameras wouldn't see me. I'm one of the good guys."

"Wait a minute." The familiar voice yanked Cristy's attention from her damaged door. She squatted down. "Wily Wyatt? Is that you?" She should've recognized him immediately, but it always caught her off guard that the sexy Marlboro Man radio voice came out of the squatty Muffin Man–looking guy.

"It's me. Call off the behemoth."

Cristy waved Diego back, offering Wyatt help up. "What are you doing here?"

"Bleeding. Glad to see the goon is working out well." He

scowled in Diego's direction. "But if it's okay with *him*, I need to talk to you."

"About what?"

Wyatt hoisted his pants up around his chunky middle. "We figured out the perfect way to clear up this problem."

# Chapter 6

Cristy made introductions all around while Lola grabbed a bag of frozen blueberries out of the Sub-Zero for Wyatt's busted and rapidly swelling lip.

"Sorry for the misunderstanding, man." Diego extended his hand, which Wyatt shook. Grudgingly.

Meanwhile, all the women had abandoned their knitting projects for the kitchen, so they could stare, slack-jawed at Diego. Cristy couldn't blame them. She had to admit, he looked übersexy in his secret agent man getup.

Not to mention totally out of place inside Simplicity.

While everyone caught their breath, Diego and Wyatt set about scarfing a plate of Lola's delectable knit-knots, heaping praise on her between bites. As for Cristy, breathing easy wasn't an option. Her tension had returned, full force.

She fought to recapture the calmness she'd found, thanks to her friends, by playing mind games with herself. "At least it was only Wyatt and not some pervert," she said. "Maybe the crank phone calls were harmless after all, and I'm overreacting."

Diego cast her an apologetic half smile.

"What?" she asked as dread coiled inside her tummy.

"I've already run off four guys and threatened two reporters who wouldn't get out of my face."

Cristy's jaw dropped.

"You're kidding!" Lola said.

"Were they all looking for *Crystal*?" Cristy asked.

Lisa, Racquel, Alma, and Allegra huddled closer to one another, awaiting the answer.

"A couple of them just wanted to ask you out, since, apparently, you don't date?"

"Yeah, whatever."

He shrugged. "Mostly, they were fueled by curiosity."

"That's because the interest is heating up," Wyatt said, his tone pleading. "Which is why I'm here. I'm sorry this whole thing ever happened, Cris. I didn't know Marisol had promised not to talk about your personal life anymore."

"It should be common sense," Cristy said in a snarky tone.

Wyatt ignored her. "But what's done is done. And right now, your lack of response is feeding the fire."

"Oh, really? Well, that's too damn bad," Cristy said, scissoring her hands in front of her. "If you came to tell me I'm obligated to talk to those bloodsuckers out there, Wyatt, I'm sorry, but it was a wasted trip."

"That's not exactly it." He lifted the frozen berry bag away from his lip. "Marisol and I have a better idea. She thought you might be more receptive if I explained it."

"That means I'm going to hate it."

"Actually, no." He offered a tentative smile. "It means you've got her running scared."

"Good." Cristy leaned back in her chair and crossed her

arms over her middle. "So, fine, lay it on me. What's the brilliant plan this time?"

"Well, interest probably won't wane until you satisfy the public's curiosity. So, she—*we*—think you should come on the show. As a guest. We'll have call-ins for an hour or so. Give the people what they want and then return to your regularly scheduled life."

"Have you both lost your freakin' minds? What is this, sweeps week?"

Wyatt cleared his throat. "That's television."

"Whatever!" Cristy shot up out of her chair to loom over him. Lola grabbed her wrist, but she jerked loose. "Just as a refresher for you and my hell-spawn sister, my regularly scheduled life doesn't include making a public spectacle of myself in order to boost your show's ratings. I don't *want* notoriety."

"You already have notoriety, like it or not. We're trying to put a new spin on it. Make things better." Wyatt held up both hands, palms forward. "Listen. That's all I ask. Okay?"

After several long moments of glaring, Cristy slumped back down in her chair, clenched her jaw and said nothing.

"Mar and I have been doing radio for a long time. We know how this kind of situation works."

"It's a wonder you guys have any family or friends still speaking to you."

He inclined his head. "I admit, we go too far sometimes."

"Yeah," Cristy said, with a snort of unamused laughter. "But only on days that end with a Y."

"Be that as it may, I promise they'll leave you alone as soon as you appear. Trust me."

"Says the shark to the clown fish."

"I mean it. Once people get their fix of you, you'll be old news just like—" He snapped his fingers. "—that."

"Sure I will."

"Think about it, Cris. In this day and age, the simple fact that you worked on a sex line isn't that big a deal. Everything has snowballed because of who you are—a local celebrity's sister—and the fact that you haven't said a word. It's how listeners are. Bloodthirsty on one hand, fickle on the other."

Cristy chewed on that one for a second, because damn it all, it seemed logical. All the knitters stared at her, waiting for her reply. Logic aside, she just *couldn't*. It was the principle of the matter. How could she possibly talk about a time in her life that she'd vowed to put behind her forever?

"You two would end up embarrassing me, so it's not worth it. Forget it. I've fallen into Marisol's nefarious traps before, Wyatt. Believe me, she started humiliating me a long time ago."

Unable to stop herself, she shot a quick glance at Diego. Did he remember the party from hell? Her skin started to sizzle with shame, so she refocused on Wyatt.

He tilted his baby Huey head beseechingly, then reached out and held her hand. His radio voice lowered to lullaby level. "The last thing your sister wants to do is make things worse with you, Cristy. She knows she did a stupid thing."

That was something, at least. "Still . . ." She shook her head. "Mar betrayed me. Why should I do her any favors?"

"It's not a favor for her. It's about you. You could do an interview with one of the news stations camped outside your house instead and achieve the same effect. But keep in mind, on our show, we'd give you full control."

"Riiiight."

"I mean it. We'll tape the whole thing on a two-minute delay, so we can cut anything you don't approve of. And we won't let questionable callers through. We owe you that much." He shrugged. "I can't say another reporter would do the same."

The room fell silent, but it pulsed with anticipation.

Cristy crossed her arms. Bit her lip. "Maybe you should do it," Lola said. Diego nodded. "Wyatt's got a point."

Cristy bestowed evil death glares on both of them. Traitors. "I can't believe you'd want me to appear my sister's show. Don't you see? It's just another opportunity for her to jam my whole life into the shredder." No one said anything. "Even if I agreed to it, I'd probably be so petrified, I wouldn't be able to utter a peep. Remember, I'm not a big-mouthed, spotlight hog like Mar." She grimaced. "The whole radio thing is just not *me*."

"We all get that, Cris," Lola said. "But the phone sex girl image isn't you, either, which is what you need to tell them, because otherwise *that* is the image that will linger. This is your chance to speak your side of it."

Everyone stilled, waiting for Cristy's final answer. She looked from her knitters to Lola, to Diego, and then to Wyatt. Why did it feel as if she were disappointing them? She twisted her mouth to the side and shook her head. "I know you're all trying to help, but I just can't face that. Sorry."

"I think you're making a mistake, honey," Wyatt said.

"Maybe. But it's my mistake to make, okay?"

He nodded, stood, then leaned forward and laid his palm on her shoulder. "You don't have to decide right away—"

"I already did."

"—so just think about it," he said, pretending she hadn't spoken at all.

Lola said, "She will."

"Lola!"

The chef rolled her eyes. "You'll *think* about it. That's all I promised."

"And there's no harm or commitment in considering it." Wyatt stood and handed the makeshift ice pack to Lola with a grateful smile. "I need to get home." "Thanks for trying, Wyatt," Cristy muttered.

"Please know your sister honestly wants to make it right." Cristy sighed bitterly.

Wyatt turned to Diego and made a circle in front of his face with one hand. "Remember this mug, okay, bub? I'd appreciate it if I didn't wind up licking floorboards again."

"No hard feelings," Diego said. He held out a fist. "I didn't recognize you. Radio, you know? Can't be too careful with Cristy's well-being at stake. I'm sure you agree."

After a moment Wyatt knocked knuckles with him. "Of course," he said, between clenched teeth, before nodding at the ladies then heading out the broken back door.

Odd, Cristy thought. Diego's apology seemed perfectly sincere. But she was sure she'd caught a glint of mischief in his eyes. The man might have been hired by the enemy, but maybe—just maybe—he was on her side after all. The mere thought made her smile.

The day had begun to cool off as the sun dipped behind the front range mountains. Even the news vans had decided to call it quits for the evening, which was a relief. Diego, however, was in it for the long haul. He was sitting in the Hummer with his knees cramping and his ass falling asleep, wishing Cristy would come out and talk to him, when all of a sudden she peered out the door—as if the two of them were telepathically connected.

He raised one hand in a wave, then waited as she scoped the area. Blatant relief transformed her face at the exact moment she realized the coast was clear. She sent a brief smile his way, squared her shoulders, tightened her hot pink sweater around her body, and strode purposefully in his direction.

Little Cristy Avila kept surprising him. She might be a private person, but she wasn't the shy, knock-kneed little girl he

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remembered from their teenage years. She'd stood up to Wyatt without shrinking at all, exuding more confidence than he'd ever seen in her. But beneath her older, more sophisticated veneer, Diego caught the occasional glimpse of the girl who'd hugged her textbooks to her chest and stared at the black and white linoleum tile as she moved through the school like a ghost.

The dichotomy made for an interesting package, and damn if he didn't love the wrapping.

She stopped outside his open window. For a moment they just stared at each other. Then Cristy tucked her hair behind her ears and cleared her throat. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot."

"You promise to tell the truth?"

He drew an imaginary X over the left side of his chest. "What is it we used to say? Cross my heart, hope to die? Or I'm sure you'll stick a knitting needle in my eye."

She gave him a look. "Ha ha. Bodyguard *and* comedian. I guess you're the total package then, huh?"

"I do my best." He leaned his forearm on the window frame. "So, what's your question?"

She narrowed her eyes and turned her head, scrutinizing him with a sidelong glance. "Did you *really* not recognize Wyatt? I mean, I know he doesn't look like he sounds, but his face is plastered everywhere."

"Oh. That." Diego grinned. "You think he bought it?"

She laughed then, her eyes wide. "You *did* recognize him. I knew it." She smacked him lightly on the forearm, leaving his skin tingling where she'd touched him. "I can't believe you trounced him like that."

"All in a day's work." He shrugged. "The only thing I am sorry about is your door, although the restoration guy said he could make it look perfect."

"It's okay." She crossed her arms and looked straight into his eyes. "Why'd you do it?"

"Crack the door? It was an accident."

"Not that. Why'd you beat Wyatt down?"

He held up his index finger. "First of all, I didn't beat him down. I just gave him a little face-to-floor counseling. There's a difference."

"Semantics, but okay. So, why?"

"Karma." He shrugged. "Your sister didn't embarrass you by herself. I figure Wyatt's just as much to blame."

"They do feed off each other, like parasitic twins."

"Exactly. Which is why he got a little face time with the hardwood. For good measure." He arched, stretching his stiff lower back as best he could. Sitting in the vehicle all day had tweaked his spine, and that dog pile entrance into Simplicity's kitchen hadn't helped. "I didn't mean to bust his lip, but—" He shrugged again. "—ol' Wyatt deserved to take one for the team."

"Wow. I never thought I'd be so touched by an act of violent revenge," she teased, laying her hand on his forearm again, "but thank you. That was so awesome."

"My pleasure." He studied her face. "I'm really sorry they embarrassed you. Your sister seems to have a knack for that, if memory serves."

"So you do remember. Ugh!" She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Forget I said anything."

"Hang on. Give me a minute to erase my brain."

This time he reached out. He ran the back of his finger down her cheek until she opened her eyes. "I'll never mention it again. It's okay. You didn't deserve it then, and you don't deserve it now." He held her gaze until she looked away.

Taking an almost imperceptible step back, Cristy cleared her throat. "Well," she said in a breathless tone, "Marisol's a

pain in the ass, but she means well." A shocked pause ensued. "Holy—" Her eyes went round and she shook her head with horror. "I can't believe I just said that."

"Don't worry." He grinned. "I won't tell her."

She slid both of her hands into her back pockets, palms facing out, and rocked on the soles of her sandals. "So, everyone's gone?"

"For now."

"Except you. What's your plan?"

He gestured to the interior of his Hummer. "More of the same. I'll be here all night, so you can rest easy. Although I'd be obliged if I could use your bathroom now and then."

A worry line bisected her forehead. "You can't stay out here all night long."

"That's what I was hired to do." God knows, he didn't want to. He'd much rather be inside the house kicking back on one of the chairs, but that was all up to her.

"Yeah, but—" Her expression went from conflicted to decisive in a flash. "You know what? Come inside. Lola is staying in the guest room, but you're welcome to the couch."

"I don't want to make you two uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable? You're doing us a favor watching out for Simplicity. And . . . for me."

"You don't owe me anything. Don't forget I'm getting paid. And I'm not cheap."

"I know. But I don't think I could sleep knowing you were stuck out here in this monstrosi—" She covered her mouth with her hand. "Oops," she mumbled through her fingers. "Totally rude. I didn't mean to say that out loud."

He laughed. "You're not fond of the Hummer?"

Her face turned bright red, all the way to the tips of her cute little ears. "Oh. Well. It's just a bit . . . large. And, you know, an environmental nightmare. Very 'red state,' if you want the

whole truth. But other than that, it's fine," she added, in an overly chipper tone.

"Good thing it's only a rental." He teased her with a fake grimace. "How could I live with myself if I'd actually shelled out for the thing?"

Her expression brightened immeasurably. "A rental? Oh, that's . . . that's a relief. I mean . . . no offense."

"None taken."

She looked up and down the massive vehicle and crinkled her nose. "Good. I'll shut up now. It's just that it's such an inyour-face vehicle. The whole Hummer attitude is more Marisol's style than mine."

"Agreed," he said, in as serious a tone as he could muster. "This would definitely be the wrong choice of vehicles for a knitting needle ninja."

"Very funny." She crossed her arms. "Laugh all you want, but if you'll recall, my needles and I got the drop on you, Mr. Not Cheap Bodyguard."

"Touché. I might just start carrying the things myself."

"Right." She angled her head toward the house. "So, are you coming, or what?"

He raised one eyebrow. "Any of those cookies left?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes."

"Say no more. I'm in. Those cookies are magic," he said, as though they had been the determining factor. But really? He'd go just about anywhere Cristy Avila told him to go at this point, baked goods or no. She intrigued the hell out of him.

The last thing on his mind since he'd come back to Denver was women. His life had too many loose ends yet. And he especially couldn't think of *this* woman, at *this* point in time, as anything other than a client. But the fantasy sure warmed him up. He grabbed his duffel bag from the passenger seat and jumped out, not wanting to give her a chance to change her mind. "I'm all yours. Show me to your cookie jar."

"Geez, Mora." She spun and headed toward the house. "You may not be cheap, but you sure are damn easy."

With the bag slung over his shoulder using one finger as a hook, he looked down into her eyes. "Easy? Maybe so," he said in a teasing tone, "but I always leave 'em smiling."

"I just bet you do," she said, almost too quietly for him to hear. Almost.

Grinning, he followed right at her heels, happier and calmer than he'd felt in a long time. Right up until the sound of breaking glass and Lola screaming knocked them out of fantasy land and straight back into reality.

# Chapter 7

They burst into the kitchen and found Lola standing frozen—and splattered in cake batter—behind the Pasquini's worktable. With a spatula death-gripped in one raised hand, she looked like some freaky, childlike, papiermâché version of the Statue of Liberty. The large mixing bowl in front of her contained what was left of the batter along with shards of broken glass and a piece of paper tied to a baseball with green jute.

Cristy skidded to a stop in the archway and her extremities went cold. Diego kept moving, systematically checking the rooms on the main floor.

A lump rose in Cristy's throat. "Oh my God! Are you okay?"

"Sh-Shit on r-rye," Lola said in a shaky whisper. A large dollop of batter dripped off the end of one of her dreadlocks and hit the hardwood with a splat. "What a godawful mess!"

Spurred into action, Cristy yanked a towel off the rack adjacent to the sink and rushed to her friend's side. She pried the spatula away, set it on the table, then began mopping up the batter dripping off of Lola's clothes and shoes.

"Talk to me, Lola. Are you hurt? Do I need to call an ambulance?"

"God, no. I'm battered but not broken. Get it?"

Relief rained over Cristy. She smiled. "Ah. You're still a smartass. That's a good sign."

"It startled me is all. Here, let me." Lola took the towel and finished up, a scowl on her face. "Asshole ruined my cake batter. It's a complicated recipe, too, that needs to sit overnight. I so wanted to surprise the ladies with it tomorrow."

"I'm sorry. You can start over with it, but I know that's not the point. Did anyone get in the house?"

"I don't think so. They just hurled *that*." She pointed, and they both peered into the bowl. "Lucky shot, too. Had to be someone with one heck of an arm."

"I'll say." The note was completely coated in batter, and hence unreadable. Someone needed to clean it off.

Diego stuck his head through the archway and pointed toward the mixing bowl, as if he could read their minds. "Don't touch that," he said. "Wait until I get back."

"You're the boss," Lola said, raising both hands in a gesture of surrender.

Cristy followed Diego's grim gaze up to the baseball's point of entry: a small, arc-shaped, stained-glass window. Shattered. Some of the leading hung from the frame like broken bones, but other than that, it was a total loss.

Her heart squeezed, and part of her wanted to sit on the floor and cry. First the door, now this. She'd have to check with an historic salvage house to replace that piece, if it was even possible. Fury licked at her gut. This fiasco was costing her more than just her pride and reputation. Then again, she'd send Marisol the bill since all of this was her fault. Hell, may-

be she'd tie it to a dirty brick and chuck it through the pristine windshield of Mar's BMW.

"The house is clear," Diego said as he strode through the kitchen toward the back door. At the hallway entrance, he drew his gun, holding it close to his thigh. "I'm sure whoever did this is long gone, but you never know. Stay here, both of you. I'll be right back."

"As if we'd go anywhere," Lola said as he headed outside. They heard the door snick shut and released their breath simultaneously. "Gosh, I'm glad he's here."

"Me, too," Cristy reluctantly admitted.

"Not that I wouldn't have cracked open a can of whoop ass on any of those perverts who came knocking, mind you," Lola said with a sniff. "They don't scare me."

"Of course they don't." Cristy bit back the smile that wanted to appear and pulled out a chair. "Come on. Sit down."

Lola wobbled to the chair and fell into it. Her shoulders sagged on another exhale. "God. Okay, I lied. The truth is, that scared the living crap out of me. I thought I'd been shot."

"Don't even say that."

Lola held out her hands. "Look at me. I'm shaking like a junkie in detox. Speaking of detox, do I ever need a drink."

"Say no more." Cristy tried not to think of the damage to her wood floors as she crunched carefully through the broken stained glass and retrieved her best bottle of tequila from the cabinet. She snatched a lime from the fridge, hacked off a few wedges, then arranged them along with a salt shaker, the bottle, and two shot glasses on the end of the table in front of her friend. She waved a hand over the accoutrements. "Have at it."

Lola eyed the spread. "I guess I don't have to invite you to join me."

"Hardly." Cristy pulled up a chair, then grabbed one of the

glasses and clanked it on the table. "Fill 'er up." She eyed Lola's hands. "Actually, allow me."

After the shots had been poured, the women went through the lick-salt-lick-slam-lime routine once and then again. Cristy uttered a little moan of pleasure as the tequila burned its way down her esophagus. Her lips already felt numb and tingly. She couldn't wait for her mind to follow suit.

Lola plucked the lime peel out of her mouth. "So, if you decide to go through with that plan to kick your sister's butt, can I lay the boot to her a few times?"

Cristy removed her own lime, setting it on the table. "Yep. You've more than earned the privilege." She stared at the disaster that was normally her clean, orderly kitchen. Chaos. It was just so *Marisol*. She couldn't live with that. "I have to do something, Lo, before things get worse. This is nuts."

"I agree."

Cristy braced herself. "What do you think I should do?"

Lola repositioned herself in the chair. "Truthfully?"

"Of course. Your opinion means a lot to me."

Lola twisted her mouth apologetically. "I think you should do the show. Decide on the rules and parameters, make your sister and that Teletubby partner of hers agree to each and every one of them in writing. But do the show."

Cristy groaned, hanging her head back. "How did I know you were going to say that?"

"Because you're a bright woman. You know, like it or not, that it's the best solution to a really crappy situation you didn't deserve." She bit the rest of the lime out of the rind.

Cristy rolled her empty shot glass back and forth on the table with her fingers. "Part of me feels like going on the radio show will mean Marisol wins. I *hate* that."

"You're looking at it from the wrong perspective." Lola

hiked one shoulder. "You can't change what she did, so face it head on. That way, *you* win."

Cristy absentmindedly ran her finger through a puddle of batter, then licked it. It tasted of vanilla and almonds. "What if it just makes things a million times worse?"

"It won't, and here's how I know. We'll call it the Dick Cheney Rule. In a nutshell, if you accidentally bust a cap in your friend's ass while hunting, it's best to just admit it. And the sooner, the better, too."

Cristy nibbled nervously on a cuticle. "Good point."

"It is. Remember how that whole thing worked out? We're talking around-the-clock coverage on CNN and MSNBC, etcetera, until his advisors, or whoever the hell, convinced him to nut up and come clean about it. Once he talked, everyone else stopped." She snapped her fingers. "Just like that, his bonehead mistake was out of the headlines and into the history books."

"I really, really hate that you're right."

Lola leaned closer. "Then consider this. Your sister has had an open platform to discuss your life all these years, and you've just had to sit back and silently take it."

Cristy scoffed. "More like bend over and silently take it."

"I was trying to be polite," Lola said in a wry tone. "Anyway, maybe one of your rules for appearing should be that you can reveal anything you want about her, and she can't reciprocate. Paybacks are a bitch, you know? Diss the hell out of her. Make stuff up if you have to."

Cristy chuckled. "Okay, that would be fun."

"So, do it." Lola shrugged, then reached out and grabbed a fingerful of the batter for herself. "Hmm, too much salt."

"Tasted good to me."

"That's because you haven't tasted it when it's perfect."

Lola wiped at the table with the batter-soaked towel. "Wyatt said Marisol's running scared. I bet she'd agree to absolutely anything you demanded, just to get her baby sister back."

"Well, I'm not promising that."

Lola smiled knowingly. "You know that's how it'll work out, though. You're family. Forgive and forget is required. And even if it wasn't, you'd forgive her eventually because that's the kind of person you are."

"I suck."

"No, you don't. Not in the least."

"What about the perverts, Lola? How will going on the show put an end to all that?"

Lola crossed her arms, thinking. "I don't know yet. But surely we can figure out a way to exterminate them."

Diego walked into the kitchen and thigh-holstered his weapon. "It's all clear. No one lurking around."

"I'll drink to that," Lola said, slopping a bit more tequila into her glass.

Diego looked at Cristy. "I called the cops, and a board-up service for that window. Everyone should be here soon."

"Thanks. I hadn't even thought that far ahead," Cristy admitted.

He pressed his lips into a solemn line and smacked his fist into the other palm. "Damnit. Lola, I can't apologize enough. That should not have happened on my watch. Are you okay?"

She slammed her shot, then held up the glass in silent salute. "Feeling no pain at this point, actually. Besides, it's not your fault. Care to join us?"

He shook his head. "Thanks. Not while I'm working."

"Oh, yeah. Diego's going to stay on the couch tonight," Cristy told Lola. The words felt thick on her tongue.

"That's great. Maybe we'll actually be able to sleep now. There's only one problem."

"What's that?" Cristy asked.

Lola bit her bottom lip and flailed a hand in Diego's direction "Dude is way to big for the couch."

"It'll be fine," he said. "I won't be sleeping much anyway."

"Nonsense. You have to get some rest so you can protect us tomorrow. Listen," Lola said, "I'll bunk down with Cristy and you can have the guest room." She waggled her eyebrows. "Unless, of course, you want to bunk down with Cristy."

"Lola!" Cristy blanched, her mortified gaze ping-ponging from Lola to Diego before she looked away. "What the hell?"

"Shoot, did I say that out loud?" Lola laughed, then raised a finger. "That, my friends, was the tequila talking."

Cristy moved the bottle away from Lola's reach. "Yeah, well it sounded like Marisol talking. Cut it out."

Diego's gaze narrowed with suspicion. "I wasn't outside very long. How much have you two had to drink?"

"Too much. Obviously." Cristy burned stink eye at Lola.

Diego's lips spread into a slow, wolfish smile. "Looks like you're the preferred bunkmate, Lola, much to my chagrin."

Cristy's palms began to sweat. She couldn't hack the sexy banter at this point in her life. Or—who was she kidding? ever. Especially not with Diego.

"But I will take you up on the guest room," he added. "If that's all right with you, Cristy."

"Of course. Can we read the note now?" Cristy managed in a strangely tight slur. "It's been a long day, and before that a miserable, sleepless night. If it's all the same to you both, I'd like to head up early and let Calgon take me away."

Diego crossed the room in two long strides. He studied the projectile floating in the batter bowl from a few angles, then muttered something and shook his head.

"What's wrong?"

"I was hoping we might get fingerprints off of it, but with all the glop on it, I doubt it."

"Glop?" Lola repeated.

"Just open it, then," Cristy said, ignoring the chef's mock outrage. "Fingerprints won't do us any good if we don't have a suspect to compare them with anyway."

Diego peered up at her curiously.

She shrugged. "I watch all the cop shows, too."

"Ah. Another armchair detective, thanks to the magic of television," Diego said wryly. "God bless America." He removed the baseball using his thumb and index finger, then pulled a folding knife out of his pocket and snapped it open. Carefully, he sliced through the jute until the ball rolled free of the paper, then he read. "Christ," he muttered with disgust.

"What does it say?"

"Looks like we don't need fingerprints after all, Detective Avila." He shook his head. "It's a note from some ballsy field reporter for the local Fox affiliate. Seems he wants to pay you for an exclusive."

"You better believe he's going to pay me. For replacing a priceless leaded-glass window, pain and suffering, and anything else I can come up with. Jesus! It's like everyone in the world has been infected by my sister. Marisolmonella."

"I hear there's an ointment for that," Lola added, half slur, half snicker.

"If Fox wanted me to talk to their guy, they might've thought twice before letting him destroy my property. Freakin' imbeciles." Cristy snatched the bottle and poured herself another slug of tequila. She knocked it back, coughed, then wiped her mouth on her sleeve. She aimed her finger at Diego. "And they can shove their exclusive. If I talk to anyone, it'll be Wyatt and the Wicked Witch."

Diego raised his eyebrows. "You're gonna do the show?"

She pouted. "I'm still thinking about it."

The doorbell rang, and Cristy and Lola jumped and grabbed onto each other. Diego pointed toward the window. "*Calmaté*. The board-up service," he reminded them. "Or the cops. Either way, I'll take care of it. Go on up, Cristy. Lola, they'll probably want a quick word with you."

She sighed. "I figured as much."

Cristy swayed to her feet, then steadied herself with the table edge for a moment before attempting to actually walk. When she'd found her center of balance, she zigged toward the stairs. Diego headed for the door, with Lola zagging at his heels.

"Lo, I'll move your stuff into my room," Cristy said. "Just show Diego where the guest room is, then come on in whenever you're ready."

"You got it."

Cristy paused halfway up the stairs. "Oh, and be sure to get a bill so I can send it to Fox. And my evil sister."

"Will do," Diego said. "Anything else?" The doorbell rang again, followed by a quick knock.

"Yeah. Don't forget to lock up. The way my luck's going, who the hell knows what might go bump in the night."

Lola placed a hand on her abdomen and looked ill. "Ugh. Yeah, that whole sleeping easy thing I said earlier? Kiss that notion good-bye."

# Chapter 8

"So, who is this Diego guy, really?" Lola asked later, as they lay side by side in Cristy's antique sleigh bed.

"What do you mean?" Cristy glanced over. Her heart thudded. "He's an old friend of my sister's. I told you that."

"I mean, who is he to you?"

Cristy stared up at the ceiling saying nothing. Finally, she murmured, "No one. Really." She waited for Lola to acknowledge that, and when she didn't, Cristy sighed. "Okay, he was the hottest senior at our school when I was a freshman."

"Not hard to believe. And?"

"And what? Nothing."

"Liar. And?"

"What is this, truth or dare?"

"No, it's your friend asking you a straightforward question and expecting a straightforward answer."

"Fine. I used to have a big gnarly crush on him. The kind where you sit in class writing versions of your name with his into the margins of your spiral notebook. 'Cristy Mora. Mrs. Cristy Mora. Diego and Cristy Mora'—that kind of crap. Complete with heart doodles. Yes, I fantasized about being his blushing bride. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Depends." Lola shrugged. "Is it the truth?"

A short pause ensued. "It's the truth. Stupid, huh?"

"Honey, if you *hadn't* crushed on that man, then the word stupid would apply. He's divine."

Understatement. "Well, keep my admission to yourself, please. It's one secret my sister never knew about."

"Did Diego ever find out?"

"Hell no! After he helped my sister decorate for that hideous party, I never looked at him again." She groaned. "I just couldn't. Talk about a buzz kill. I couldn't get it out of my head that every time he saw me, he probably thought 'maxi pad.""

Lola laughed. "He doesn't strike me as that kind of a guy."

"I know. I mean, he tried to be nice to me afterward, but it just creeped me out." She hadn't thought about the rest of that school year in a long time. She might have avoided Diego, but that didn't mean she wasn't aware of his presence whenever he entered her air space. And, looking back on it, he sure seemed to have been around a lot. How had she forgotten that?

She rolled to her side, facing Lola, and propped herself up on one elbow. "You know, I had this weird idea that he was the one who put a stop to the constant harassment I suffered after the party. But I never found any proof. It's just a feeling I had." She sighed. "Probably wishful thinking."

"What gave you the feeling?"

"I'm not sure." She pulled the covers up tighter around her. "For months after the party, this small group of guys gave me shit *daily*. I'm not exaggerating. I did my best to ignore them, but one day it all just got to be too much, and I started crying in the lunchroom, like an idiot." "That's so wrong," Lola murmured.

"I remember every detail . . . it was lasagna day, and my tears kept hitting the congealed cheese on top. Splat. Splat. Splat. I still can't eat lasagna to this day."

"Ruining you for lasagna is a crime."

Cristy nodded. "Diego must've seen them bothering me, because he walked up and asked me what had happened. I was so mortified. It was bad enough that I sat at a table by myself, like some loser. But for him to see me crying into my pasta? He was only trying to help, and I yelled at him to leave me alone, then ran off to hide in the girls locker room."

"God! You poor thing."

"The next day, the bullies' little ringleader came to school sporting a big-ass shiner and a busted tooth, along with various scrapes and bruises. He never hassled me again. Not once."

"That's so romantic."

Cristy scoffed and settled down on her back again. "Oh, please. The kid probably wiped out on his BMX. He never did seem very coordinated in gym class. I'm sure I concocted the whole Diego knight-in-shining-armor fantasy in my head."

"I wouldn't write him off so easily, my friend," Lola said in a smug tone. "The chemistry between you two is utterly combustible. That doesn't happen in just one day, which means it had to have carried over from before."

Cristy groaned. "Lo? I know this feels like a slumber party, but let's not fall too far into the junior high rabbit hole, shall we? I wasn't some waifish, ethereal heartbreaker in seventh grade, believe me. I was nothing more than outgoing, popular Marisol's dorky, bookworm kid sister. I had a mouth full of metal braces, a unibrow, and a nine-dollar hairstyle from Supercuts. Not to mention, legs so godawful skinny, my knees looked like knots in a couple of ropes."

Lola laughed. "You're exaggerating."

"I'm not. Besides, after they graduated, I never saw or spoke to Diego again."

"Never?"

"Nope. Not until all this happened."

"Hmm." Lola flipped onto her side, with her back facing Cristy. She punched her pillow, then snapped off her bedside lamp. "It sure sounds like fate to me," she murmured as she settled in. "G'night."

Cristy didn't reply, but only because her mind had begun to race. She reached over and snapped off her own bedside lamp, then stared up into the darkness, wide-awake.

Fate? She wasn't even sure she believed in it.

But sometimes you just had to wonder....

He couldn't sleep.

The muffled sounds of conversation drifting through the wall from Cristy's room had long since ceased. The guest room had sufficiently darkened once the moon moved past his window. The mattress was firm, and the crisp white sheets felt cool against his skin. A soft, lulling breeze even drifted in from the open window, and to top things off, he was exhausted. And yet he just couldn't seem to shut off his brain and slip into oblivion, no matter how hard he tried. Screw it.

Diego threw the covers back with a sigh and stepped onto the cool wood floor. He raked both hands through his hair in frustration. He couldn't very well prowl the house naked, so he pulled on a pair of jeans, but decided against a shirt. Too hot. At the last moment he grabbed his gun and threw a T-shirt over his shoulder, just in case. He eased open his door, then listened to make sure he hadn't awakened the women. Silence. He slid into the shadowy hallway and headed for the stairs.

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Maybe he was hungry. He never had been able to sleep well on an empty stomach. In any case, a few of those almostbetter-than-sex cookies should hook him up. And if hunger wasn't to blame for his insomnia, hey, the cookies sure couldn't hurt.

At the bottom of the stairs he turned toward the kitchen, but a light coming from the main room caught his eye. He froze. Listened. Did he hear something? Yes.

Hand resting on the gun's grip, he glided silently along the wall. He paused for a split second at the corner to listen, readied himself, then spun into the room and drew his gun in one smooth motion.

Cristy. "Shit!" He lowered his gun.

She glanced up and yelped, dropping the knitting into her lap and covering her mouth with both hands.

"Sorry about that." He blew out a long breath and relaxed. He took in the picture of her, long hair loose and shiny, wearing pink pajama pants and a curve-hugging tank top that—holy hell—should come with a heart attack warning label. Her legs were twisted into a position that made his muscles scream just thinking about sitting that way, but she looked perfectly comfortable, awash in the lamplight, knitting. Of course.

"You scared me."

She huffed nervously, pressing her palm against her chest. "*I* scared *you*? You almost gave me a stroke." She frowned down at the jade-colored wool piled in her lap. "I even dropped a couple of stitches. Dang it."

"What are you doing up?" He ambled toward her, cringing as he got closer. "And how can you sit that way?"

"Huh?" She glanced down. "It's the lotus position."

"Looks like the pretzel position."

"Haven't you ever done yoga?"

"Can't say that I have, no."

"It's comfortable. Centering." She straightened her back. "This is how you sit to meditate."

"I knew there was a valid reason I don't meditate."

She rolled her eyes. "Anyway, I couldn't sleep, and I didn't want to wake Lola. What are *you* doing up, besides scaring me to death?"

"Making the rounds."

"Oh." She picked up her knitting but didn't knit. She seemed to be staring intently at his face. Come to think of it, her gaze hadn't veered below the level of his neck since he'd entered the room. Two red blotches rose to her cheeks.

Then it dawned on him.

"Sorry." He yanked the shirt resting on his shoulder over his head and punched his arms into the sleeves. It astounded him how pleased her discomfort with his half-dressed state made him feel. "I didn't think anyone would be up."

"It's okay." She cleared her throat. "You surprised me, is all. It's not as if I've never seen a half-naked man before."

He raised one eyebrow at her.

She squeezed her eyes shut with a cringe, and when she opened them, her face grew even redder. "Forget I said that."

Not likely. But he decided to let her off the hook for the time being. "The truth is, I can't sleep, either." He aimed a thumb over his shoulder toward the kitchen. "I thought maybe a couple of those cookies might help. I'll leave a few bucks next to the cash register."

"Keep your money. At night, this is just home." She angled her chin toward the big round table centered in the room. A plate of the buttery treats sat in the middle. "Besides, I beat you to the cookie idea. Help yourself."

He secured the gun in his waistband, grabbed a couple of cookies, then swung a chair around next to Cristy and straddled it. He took a bite of a cookie, watching her knit. When he'd swallowed, he asked, "What are you making?"

"Oh." She held up her work, seeming strangely flustered by the question. "This really difficult sweater pattern I've been too intimidated to attempt. It was one of my New Year's resolutions. I know. Boring, huh?"

"Not at all. It looks like a complicated process."

"Want me to teach you how?" she said, obviously teasing him.

"I already know how," he said in a level, casual tone.

She blinked. Then again. "To knit?"

He nodded. "My *abuela* taught me how when I was a kid. I know my way around a sewing machine, too." He took another big bite of the cookie.

Her jaw dropped open for a minute, then she shook off the surprise and scoffed. "Very funny. You had me going there for a minute. C'mon. No *abuelita* I know would teach one of her precious macho grandsons to do all that stuff."

"You haven't met my grandma." He pulled a mock-fear expression. "She made us all play with baby dolls, too, so we wouldn't *burden* the women we eventually married."

"Seriously? She sounds amazing."

"She was something else, that's for sure."

"What was your doll's name?"

He hesitated. "Thor," he said, even though it wasn't true. He couldn't actually remember the name.

"Who names a baby 'Thor'?"

"Vikings?" With a shrug, he tossed the rest of the cookie into his mouth, brushed the crumbs from his fingers, then motioned for her to hand him the needles. She narrowed her gaze suspiciously but gave in and passed them over.

It had been a while. Awkwardly at first, he positioned and repositioned the needles in his hands. When he finally got the feel of them down and remembered the rhythm, he started

whipping away at the row. He glanced up to find her gaping. "What?"

"I don't believe it. You know how to knit."

"I just told you I knew how."

"Yeah, but I thought you were yanking my chain."

"Nope. Took me a minute, but it's just like riding a bike."

"Wow." She took her work back and ran her fingers along the ridge of his stitches. "Your tension is perfect."

He hiked one eyebrow. "You expected anything less?"

She smiled so sweetly at him, it sent a fireball of desire straight to his gut. "Well, who knew? You're just full of secrets, aren't you?"

He shrugged. "It's no secret. You just never asked."

She dipped her head, as if to concede the point, and started back on her project. "So, is knitting something you actually do? Or do you just know how?"

He rubbed his stubbly jawline with the back of his hand. "A little of both. I don't do it much anymore. But I used to knit to chill out before football games in high school and college." He aimed a finger at her. "And I'm trusting you to keep that little tidbit to yourself."

"Who do you think I am, my sister?"

"Oh, no." He couldn't help but let his gaze travel over the creamy skin exposed by the tank top. "You're very much an original, little Cristy Avila."

For a moment she simply studied him, then her brow dipped. She took a breath, as if preparing to speak, but said nothing. Instead, with a nearly imperceptible shake of her head, she pressed her lips together and refocused on her yarn and needles.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing." She kept knitting for a few moments, then looked up, bit her lip. "Actually, can I ask you a question?" "If I get to ask you one back."

She scowled. "Is it about the phone sex?"

"Nope."

"Really?"

"Really."

She paused. "Okay, deal."

"Ladies first."

She worked a few stitches, then tossed her hair and met his gaze. "This is probably stupid, but I'm just curious. And if the answer is no, I'm not going to explain why I asked it in the first place."

"Enough with the disclaimers. Ask the question."

"Okay." He watched her take a deep, fortifying breath. "Does the name Kevin O'Kane mean anything to you?"

*That* he hadn't expected. "Hmmm." He crossed his forearms over the chair back and drummed his fingers on the wood. "Kevin O'Kane," he drew out, as if trying to place it. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers. "Wait. He's the scrawny bully whose ass I kicked in high school because he wouldn't leave you alone. Now I remember." He smiled.

Her luscious, soft lips spread into a huge smile. "You did? I knew it was you."

"Yeah?"

She lifted one toned shoulder in a half shrug. "Well . . . I suspected. Thank you, but why'd you do it?"

"That's two questions, but since I'm in a generous mood." He brushed off her gratitude. "O'Kane was a hair bag."

She nodded. "Total waste of DNA."

"I couldn't agree more." They smiled at each other for a few long moments.

"Thanks, Diego," she said, more vehemently. "I mean it. He really made my life miserable until what you did."

"De nada. Okay. My turn for a question," he said.

"Go for it."

A lock of her long hair slid over her upper arm like a feather against naked flesh. Instantly, all he could think of was that hair of hers draping over his body. Skin against skin. Him above her, beneath her, inside her. Lust sucker-punched him so hard it left him awestruck and speechless. He forgot what they'd been talking about.

"Whenever you're ready," she said.

"Excuse me?"

She pinned him with a droll look. "Your question?"

"Right." He shook off the erotic images in his head as best he could. "Okay." He'd been planning to ask her how her last three years of high school panned out, but a new question popped into his mind. "Here it is. Why don't you date?"

She crinkled her nose. "That's your question?"

He shrugged. "I'm just curious."

"How embarrassing. Let's see . . . because I'm a dork?"

He shook his head. "The real reason."

"Does that mean you don't think I'm a dork?" she joked.

He tossed her a dry glance. "Cristy."

"Okay." Her hands stilled momentarily, then she quirked her mouth to the side. "But I think you wasted your question, because it's not that difficult to figure out."

"I'm slow. Spell it out for me."

She spread her arms. "You've met my sister. The rest of my family's just like her."

"Yeah? So?"

"If *you* had to bring your dates home to face that firing squad, believe me, you wouldn't date much, either."

"Eh, they're not so scary."

She rolled her eyes. "Ha."

He reached out and tucked the wayward strand of hair over her shoulder, letting his hand rest on her skin. Their eyes met.

## LYNDA SANDOVAL

Hers looked a little wary, a touch too wide, and very, very sexy. He swallowed slowly. "Know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think a smart guy wouldn't much care what firing squads he needed to face to be with you, as long as he was with you."

Her bottom lip trembled, and she raked it through her teeth to stop it. Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and he could see the pulse pounding in her neck. She swallowed tightly.

He wanted to kiss her.

Was she thinking about kissing him, too?

As if reading his mind, the tip of her tongue flicked out and moistened her lips. He clenched his jaw. Her breath hitched and he felt himself leaning closer. Closer still, until he could see the flecks of gold in her brown eyes. Closer, until he remembered the gun in his waistband and why he was there.

Damnit, what was he doing?

"Shit." He jolted to his feet, twirling the chair back to its original position.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Shaken, he ran his fingers through his hair, then turned back to her. "Look . . ." Words failed him. "I better head upstairs. You should try to sleep, too."

The red blotches were back on her cheeks. She hiked her chin. "Is everything okay?"

"Of course." He managed a tight smile. "Thanks for the cookies." Was he imagining it, or did she look as disappointed as he felt?

"Don't thank me. I didn't make them."

She waited.

He stood his ground, even as it shifted beneath his feet.

She released a long breath, and he almost could see her retreating into her shell. "It's okay. I understand."

But she didn't understand. Not at all. He wanted nothing more than to kiss her, hold her, but he needed it to happen at the right time and without the undercurrent of doubt she might have about his motives. With Cristy, it had to be perfect. She deserved nothing less.

Then again, the moment had felt pretty damn perfect.

And he hadn't read a whole helluva lot of doubt in her eyes.

Regret stabbed him. If he could turn back the clock, he'd say to hell with it, and pull her into his arms. He'd kiss her and hold her, and tell her he'd never let anyone hurt her again. But the moment had passed, and they both knew it.

He smoothed a palm down his face, grappling for his composure. No other woman had ever made him feel off balance like this. So much for getting some shut-eye tonight.

"Before you go up," she said, sounding both resigned and businesslike, "I'd like to be able to open the shop tomorrow. To the public again. But only if we can operate like any normal day, which means I need to be certain no undesirables slip in."

"Of course. That's what I'm here for."

"There is one thing, though."

He nodded once.

"I need you to try and . . . fit in." She moistened her lips, nervously this time. "I hope that's . . . okay."

He cocked his head to the side and frowned, confused. "I don't understand."

With a sigh, she grabbed her hair and wound it into a wad, then stuck a knitting needle through it haphazardly. Busy work with her hands. "I know Simplicity's probably not your kind of place," she said, in a rush of words, "I mean, well, you knit and everything. So that's something. But . . . I guess what I'm saying . . ." She looked at him guiltily. "If you could just dress more like a regular person and less like a secret agent man  $\ldots$ "

He laughed. He never knew what to expect with her, but that sure cut the tension. He held his arms out and glanced down at himself. "Are jeans and a T-shirt normal enough?"

She smiled, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. That came out totally wrong. It's not that you don't look normal. But, you just seem very, well—" She rolled one hand. "—authoritative in that all black getup. Sort of . . . menacing."

"Good to know."

"Yes, but people come to Simplicity to relax, chill out. It's an oasis, and I've worked extremely hard to cultivate that atmosphere. I don't want the customers to feel anxious because we have security. Or to get . . . distracted."

"Distracted?"

She nodded. "By you."

Well, well. She found him distracting. He decided he liked holding his hand close to the flame. "And you think I could be a distraction to your customers if I wore my—what was it? Secret agent man uniform?"

Her gaze slid off to the side. "Uh, yeah. I'm pretty positive you would be."

"Duly noted. Oh, and Cristy? Thanks for the vote of confidence." He winked.

"Whatever," she said, rolling her eyes playfully.

"Good night, dork," he said.

"'Night, secret agent man."

He started out of the room, the rhythmic clicking of her knitting needles the only sound in the house. At the bottom of the stairs he turned back, just to watch her. She looked so damn beautiful sitting pretzel-legged in her pajamas within the small cone of warm lamplight, knitting her worries away. Cristy Avila had grown into a strong, centered, capable wom-

an. But that irresistible vulnerability he'd always appreciated about her remained. She felt both familiar and new to him. Exciting and completely comfortable at once. "Cristy?"

She glanced up. "Yeah?"

For a moment he said nothing. Then he smiled. "I'd kick Kevin O'Kane's ass for you anytime."

She smiled, her head tilted to one side. "You're one of the good guys, Diego. Thank you." She pressed her fingertips to her lips, then blew the kiss toward him.

He reached up and pretended to catch it in his palm. But the truth was, he'd caught it with his heart.

# Chapter 9

"So, Diego," Alma said, eyeing him across the table. "Ever thought about dating an older woman?"

The group of regulars laughed.

He grinned. "Not until I met you, Alma darlin'. Now it's all I can think about."

Cristy sidled up, drawn by the comfortable laughter at the table. She wanted to knock on wood, throw salt over her shoulder, send a prayer to St. Jude, cross her fingers—all of it because, so far, her luck seemed to be holding. They'd been open for several hours with no problems. Whatever Diego said to the news crews that morning had worked. Though they all camped out, they'd so far kept their distance. The only men who'd come in were with their wives—purse holders rather than perverts. She didn't want to hedge her bets, but she was right on the verge of admitting that, perhaps, she'd overreacted.

Taking a deep cleansing breath, she laid her hands on Alma's

shoulders and gave them an affectionate squeeze. "What's going on, my friends?"

"Nothing much." Alma twisted around to glance up at her. "Your bodyguard is putting the moves on me, is all."

Cristy arched an eyebrow at him.

He feigned innocence. "Hey, you told me to fit in. I just didn't understand how fun it would be."

Allegra's jaw dropped. "You told him to fit *in*? Cristy! That's so disturbingly high school!"

Cristy held a finger to her lips. "Not like that." She glanced furtively at the browsing customers, hoping they were too preoccupied with the gorgeous yarn to pay attention to the center table's conversation. She leaned in and whispered, "And not for you guys, either. I just didn't want the other customers to feel weirded out because we have security."

"Why would that weird anyone out?" Lisa asked.

She bestowed her best duh expression. "Oh, c'mon. When was the last time any of you frequented a coffee or yarn shop that had an armed bouncer?"

"She has a point," Alma said, just as Lisa turned to Diego, wide-eyed, and exclaimed, "You're armed?"

"Shhh!" went all the others.

Lisa clapped a hand over her mouth. "Sorry," she whispered. "It's just kind of . . . hot."

Diego smiled at her. "Just a precaution."

"Excuse me." Cristy turned to find a small, mousy woman just a little older than herself hovering timidly next to her shoulder. "Do you work here?"

Cristy smiled. "I'm the owner. What can I help you with?"

"I'm interested in taking a beginner's class." She nudged up her glasses with one knuckle. "Do you have a schedule?"

"Of course. Right over here."

"Oops, that's my phone vibrating. Always gives me a jolt."

The woman rummaged in her shoulder bag and pulled out her cell phone, checking the display. She glanced up. "I'm sorry, I can walk and check messages at the same time."

"We've become quite the society of multitaskers, haven't we?" Cristy said with a wry laugh. "I remember when I'd drop everything to talk on the phone. Now I feel guilty if I don't combine every phone conversation with some kind of chore."

"Yeah. My daughter actually studies, talks on the phone, and instant messages all at once." The woman shook her head. "Makes me tired just thinking about it."

"Home phones, cell phones, e-mail—it just gets to be too much." She led the woman to the small writing desk on which she displayed sales flyers, class schedules, and free patterns in decorative felted bowls. "My college roommates and I used to study, watch TV, and talk on the phone all at the same time."

"Really? How was that?"

"Crazy. I'm glad to be off that roller coaster. It's one of the reasons I opened Simplicity."

"What do you mean?"

"Knitting is an activity for which you really have to be present. It's meditative, and yet it lends itself to socializing and intimate conversation."

"I hadn't thought about that, but you're right."

Cristy pulled their latest class schedule out of the black felted bowl. Checking it over quickly, she asked, "Are you interested just in knitting? We offer crochet classes, too. And felting." She turned to await the young woman's answer— *Flash*!

Cristy jumped and blinked against the sudden stars in her vision. The woman aimed her cell phone toward Cristy's face. *Flash! Flash! Flash!* 

A dapper, elderly man who'd ambled in moments earlier with his white-haired wife took the opportunity to pop the

camera disguised as a handle off his walking stick, hold it up, and snap some photos of his own.

Stunned and half blinded from all the flashes, Cristy held her forearm up to block her face. "Diego?"

She should've known—he was right on top of it. In an instant Diego had the camera phone out of the mousy woman's hands. He held it above her reach as he thumbed through the buttons to find Delete. Everything seemed to happen at once. The elderly man's wife looked from her husband to the other camera-wielding woman, then threw two skeins of Lamb's Pride bulky aside. "I told you it'd get us in hot water, Stan," she said before hightailing it out of Simplicity.

"Roberta!" the man hollered.

Like a seasoned cop, Alma snatched the fake cane handle camera from the elderly guy. "What on earth were you thinking, you old coot?" she hollered, laying into him with an impressive forehand/backhand combo. "Get out of here!"

"I'm just making a buck," he said, cowering.

"Who do you work for?" Smack! Thwack! "Spit it out."

Ol' Stan tried to ward off Alma's blows with his spindly arms. "No one. I'm retired. But the young man out there from the news offered me five hundred bucks to snap some pictures of that woman." He aimed a crooked, knotty finger toward Cristy. "Only a fool would pass that up."

"Only a fool would agree to that without asking a question or two!" *Smack*!

He rounded on Alma and grabbed her wrists. "Please," he pleaded. "Do you know how much my Roberta spends on yarn? It's taking over our whole house. She calls it a stash, like it's drugs instead of wool. Five hundred bucks is a lot of yarn, I told her. She still didn't think it was a good idea, but—"

"Next time, listen to your wife!" Alma wrenched her arms away and slapped Stan upside the head, knocking his combover to the other side like a barn door swinging open.

For the love of God, her sixty-eight-year-old yarn buddy was beating up a geriatric media spy. Cristy stood frozen as the true meaning of shit hitting a fan manifested before her eyes. This had to be a nightmare. Her brain felt like a pinball. She didn't know where to look; everyone seemed to be moving at once.

Red-faced, Stan pointed his cane toward the back of the shop, hollering something at Alma that was drowned out by Alma yelling at him. One of the yarn browsers took one look at the cane pointed in her direction, then screamed and crumpled into a faint. Allegra leapt up, knocking her chair over, and slid under the woman just in time to break her fall.

Cristy clutched her fists to her mouth, smothering a scream. "Is she okay? Are *you* okay?"

"I'm fine." Allegra fanned the woman's face. "I think she is, too. Don't worry. I have it under control."

Cristy gave a jerky nod, not appeased by Allegra's words, but thankful she'd paid her insurance premium.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, the drab little reporter jumped and flailed her arms at Diego, trying to grab her phone. "You can't do that! Stop it. Freedom of speech!"

"This is private property, honey," Diego told her calmly as he deleted each photo she'd snapped, "and you're not an invited guest. You're lucky I don't call the cops."

"It's a business."

"A business you can be tossed out of."

"Don't be an ass." The woman gestured angrily at Cristy. "Her life became public domain the moment her sister talked about her on the radio. I mean, look at the old guy. Everyone's trying for a crack at her, not just my magazine."

"What magazine is that again?" Diego asked as he finished deleting and held out the phone to her.

"None of your business." She snatched it away and shoved it into her bag, then whirled on Cristy. "This is all your fault!"

Stunned, Cristy stepped back as if she'd been slapped.

The woman's eyes narrowed into angry little slits. "Who the hell cares if you were a phone whore? Just give me a damn quote and I'll go."

"Phone whore?" Racquel said with affront.

"Here's your quote. Piss off," said Alma, giving the woman a shove toward the door.

She stumbled, but Diego steadied her, wrapping his hand around her forearm and using her own momentum to propel her over the threshold. He shut the door behind her. The woman stood on the porch, sputtering and fuming about harassment and assault and "the public's right to know."

Unfazed, Diego turned from the door brushing his palms together. "You, too, pops. Out the door."

"Not without that camera," Stan said, striving for a dignified air as he smoothed down his comb-over with a shaky, liver-spotted hand. "It is to be returned if I want my five hundred dollars."

"Alma, honey, pass me the camera." Diego held out his palm and snapped his fingers inward a couple times.

"You greedy old goat." Alma gave the old man another backhand thwack for good measure. "He's lucky I don't boot him in the rear with my foot," she muttered as she hurried the camera over to Diego. "I think I deleted all of them, but double check. These newfangled cameras. It was a lot easier when you could just yank the film right out of the back."

Diego checked, found the memory card clear. He turned it off and shook his head. "Really, Stan. Selling out for a measly five hundred bucks? You should be ashamed of yourself."

Stan harrumphed, hoisting his pants higher on his rounded belly. Diego grabbed one of his arms gently and escorted him out. "I ought to sue you!" he rasped toward Alma as he left.

"Knock yourself out, you old sack of bones. No jury would put a frail old woman like myself in jail."

"Gaaaaahmmm . . ." The fainter stirred, and everyone's attention zoomed in on her. Cristy swallowed, then flicked her hand toward the front door. "Diego, lock it. Please."

Diego did as she asked, then turned and winked at Alma. "Nice work, Starsky. But come on . . . frail?" He held up a hand, and she gave him a strong high five.

"If there is one thing I can't stand, it's a greedy opportunist." Alma straightened her spine and yanked on the hem of her Nike JUST DO IT shirt. "Forget the dating idea, Diego," she said, rosy-cheeked with excitement and righteous indignation. "Maybe you should hire me."

"I was thinking the same thing."

The woman who'd fainted sat up suddenly and glanced around with alarm. "What happened? Why am I on the floor?"

"You'll be fine," Allegra told her, smiling. "You just, um, saw a mouse and fainted."

"Oh, for heaven's sake...."

Just then Racquel bustled into the room carrying a cool cloth and a glass of water. She squatted down next to Allegra, and together they took care of the woman.

"Are you guys filming some kind of, like, reality show?" asked a teenager with bouncy blond pigtails. She wore funky colored fingerless gloves, even though the summer temperatures hovered near ninety degrees. Probably her first knitting project after the ubiquitous scarf, Cristy thought.

"Nothing that exciting, kiddo." Diego turned and addressed the rest of the customers in Simplicity, most of whom had ceased whatever they were doing to stare open-mouthed at the pandemonium. He proffered a polite smile full of omi-

nous warning. "Now then. Anyone else working for the media here?"

All heads vehemently shook. Mrs. Molina's eyes looked even bigger than usual behind her magnifying glasses. "You can check my purse if you want," she said, holding it out with shaky hands.

"Oh, my freakin' God," Cristy whispered, laying her palm over her forehead. This was exactly what she *hadn't* wanted to happen. She allowed herself a moment to picture her sister dying a thousand painful deaths, then tried to smile.

"Of course we won't go through your purse," she assured the owl-eyed octogenarian, rushing to take her by the elbow.

"If you're sure . . ."

"Mrs. Molina, I'm so sorry for the disruption. Please, feel free to browse as long as you'd like. Have a coffee. In fact," Cristy raised her voice so everyone could hear her, "I'll offer a ten percent discount on anything you might want to purchase. And cappuccinos are on the house."

When in doubt, offer free stuff. Excited murmurs filled the room as everything slowly returned to normal. Several of the women headed for the kitchen to retrieve their beverages.

As the raucousness died down, Cristy slumped into a chair with a groan. She propped her elbows on the table and rested her forehead against the heels of her hands. "Shit, I need a Valium." Three hands, each bearing a pill, appeared beneath her face. She glanced up. "I was kidding. Sort of."

The women each shrugged, putting the pills back in their purses or pockets.

"Whoa." Allegra shook her head as she watched the woman who'd fainted amble toward the café. "That was whacked."

"Are you okay?" the Mondragon sisters asked, in stereo.

"No," said Cristy. "I couldn't be *less* okay. Not to worry, though. Everything's going to be fine."

Lola emerged from the kitchen looking troubled. "Uh, Cris?"

Cristy struggled to focus. "Yeah?"

Lola gestured over her shoulder and stage whispered, "I've got people talking about free cappuccinos and whatnot? Did I miss something? I was outside throwing the trash away."

"I'll fill you in later, but yes." Cristy waved her hand wearily toward the customers congregated in the café section. "Anything they want, Lola, give it to them. Give it all to them. I just don't care at this point."

Lola, befuddled, glanced around at the others, then shrugged. "You're the boss. Free drinks, it is."

"What can we do, Cristy?" Alma asked.

"Two choices." She ran her fingers slowly through her hair. "Either someone can kill Marisol, or I need a phone."

Allegra lobbed her cell over, and Cristy caught it.

"So I guess the contract hit is out? Sucks to be me," Cristy said as she punched the phone's keys.

"Who are you calling?" Diego asked.

"Who else? The hell spawn," Cristy said through clenched teeth. She tossed her hair as she lifted the phone to her ear. "She wins, okay? I'll do her goddamned show."

# Chapter 10

"We're on in sixty seconds," Wyatt told Cristy, settling the big, bulky headphones over her ears.

She pulled them off and aimed a pointer finger at her sister. "You remember the rules, Mar?"

"Of course, sweetie. Don't worry. Do you think I'd do anything *else* to get on your bad side?"

"Hard to tell with you. Frankly, your track record sucks. Regardless, I swear to you—" She scowled at Wyatt. "—both of you, if you do anything to embarrass me or put me on the spot, I'm out of here. I will provide a *vague* overview of the whole phone sex thing, but there will be no demonstrations of any kind, understand? And don't call me Crystal."

"Of course not," Marisol said.

"Also, I won't talk to any questionable guys, nor will I tolerate being lambasted by the religious right for my personal choices, so cut off those callers before they even hit the air."

"We will," Wyatt said.

"You'd better, because I don't give a rat's ass about balanced

reporting. The only person who gets a voice today is *me*. This is not a debate about morals or politics or—God forbid—some backhanded way to boost ratings for your damn show. I'm not here to defend jack."

"Kiddo, relax." Wyatt laughed, sounding both exhausted and amused. "We initialed all your rules and signed the forms saying we agreed to them, didn't we?" He shook his head. "You're family. We're not going to lie to your face."

A standoff ensued.

"I still don't trust you. You two would hang your grandmothers' asses out to dry for higher ratings."

Wyatt pursed his lips, considering this. "That might be true, but we won't do that to you. Any more than we already have, that is, however inadvertently." He held up a hand to ward off any argument. "I know you don't believe me, so you'll have to just watch and see, because we don't have any more time to argue." Wyatt slid her headphones back on. "Now, take a drink of water. And a deep breath. Not at the same time, of course."

Cristy gave him a snarky fake smile. She adjusted the headphones then stole a glance out the plate-glass studio window into the private waiting area. Diego gave her a thumbs-up. In reply, she pulled a horrified face, praying he'd bust his way in and rescue her from this hell. He wouldn't, of course. Just like Lola, Marisol, Wyatt, and even her faithful Simplicity regulars, Diego thought this stupid radio appearance was the best move she could make. Regardless, the simple fact that he had come along for moral support made things a little less horrible.

Emphasis on *a little*.

She still couldn't quite see how subjecting herself to an hour of broadcast hell would solve all her problems. Then again, she couldn't face another disrupted day at Simplicity, which meant she was fresh out of alternatives.

Even if she wanted to back out, it was too late now. KHOT had been running promos for her appearance for two straight days, ever since she'd agreed to it on Wednesday. The advertisers would be furious if she walked. She wanted to teach Marisol a lesson, sure, but she didn't want the lesson to cost her sister a job. Therein lay the difference between her and her sister: she always considered the ramifications.

Red ON THE AIR lights flashed on above the studio doors, and Cristy's throat clamped shut. "Ack."

"You're okay," Marisol whispered. "It's just talking."

"Easy for you to say."

"Don't sell yourself short, Cris." She smiled. "You've got a mouth on you, too."

"I ask the questions," Cristy rasped toward her sister.

Marisol laid a finger against her lips and nodded.

"But don't leave me hanging if I get tongue-tied."

"I won't," Marisol whispered.

"Swear it."

"I *swear*. Okay, Cris? Wyatt's going to start things off, but whenever you feel ready to chime in or take charge, just do it. Don't think about the listeners. We're three people talking in a room, and one of them is your big sister who loves you."

Cristy's heart squeezed. She actually felt grateful for Marisol's presence. How freakin' annoying that she could want to kill Mar and hug her at the same time. The whole whackedout phenomenon of Sisterhood was overrated.

From the glassed-in control booth the producer gave a countdown of ten with his fingers, then pointed at Wyatt, who immediately cued the familiar lead-in music.

*Wait!* Her nerves went on red alert. Everything was happening way too fast. She wasn't ready! The music ended abruptly, and just like that she found herself stuck inside the Marisol and Wily Wyatt show, like a raccoon in a trap. Wyatt set off on

#### LYNDA SANDOVAL

his trademark blah blah blather, but she scarcely heard him, much less retained any of his words. Her pulse pounded so loudly in her ears, she was sure others could hear it. And it might've been her imagination, but it sounded like a steady rhythm of *stupid*, *stupid*.

Could blood talk? More importantly, could she?

God—what if she couldn't? Or if she accidentally blurted something horrid, sort of like stress-induced Tourette's syndrome? Or if she belched, like in the middle of a comment? Or choked on her own spit? All that stuff that made her loathe public speaking in high school? Sure, there was that alleged two-minute delay, but she couldn't rely on that. Marisol and Wyatt had broken promises before, so she had to keep her guard up, rock solid. No matter what else happened, she simply *must* chill out enough to think through her words before she cracked open her mouth, even for a yes/no question.

Think ... speak. Think ... speak. Think ... speak.

If she could make any sound at all, that is. Right at the moment, her throat felt tight enough to kill her. Boa constrictor tight. Neck-slammed-in-an-elevator-door tight. And on the other hand, assuming she could talk, what if her voice sounded like Minnie Mouse's? She never had liked that social climbing rodent. Mickey should've kicked her squeaky ass to the curb long ago, but that was a whole different issue.

She knew she hadn't been blessed with Mar's silky radio alto, and the stress wasn't helping matters, either. Cristy's breathing shallowed until stars floated before her eyes. She gripped the table to keep from falling straight to the floor.

On the outside, she knew she probably looked like a woman sitting calmly, with ugly headphones clamped to her skull. Inside, she was frantic, frazzled, and verging on flat-out psychosis.

What in the holy hell had she gotten herself into? She was an introvert! Introverts didn't volunteer for this kind of insanity. She wasn't a radio personality. Hell, she barely *had* a personality. She didn't want to talk about her life or anyone else's life, or anything!

Hyperventilation kicked in, good and hard. Because—oh my God, she should've thought of this earlier—but which was worse? Being embarrassed by your sister's radio show through no fault of your own, or embarrassing *yourself* on your sister's radio show? If this went to hell, she'd have no one to blame but herself.

The darkened, equipment-packed room swirled around her head. She felt like she was trapped on that horrific, barfinducing spinning teacup ride at Disneyland. In an instant all she could hear inside her head was that nightmarish "It's a Small World" song over and over and over.

As though tuned in to her panic, Marisol caught her attention. Never breaking stride with her broadcast banter, she grabbed a pen and scribbled on a sheet of paper, then held it up toward Cristy.

List of names.

Huh? Cristy reread the cryptic note and frowned at Marisol, shaking her head. Like, what the crap was that supposed to mean? Whatever happened to the popular, "You go, girl!" or "Break a leg," something along those lines? Even a cue card or a jumping off point or a reminder to breathe. But "List of names"? That didn't cheer her on or spark conversation. It just confused her, and confusion was the *last* thing she needed on top of her burgeoning hysteria.

It's a small world after allllllll— Stop.

Enough with the insanity. She needed to get ahold of herself. Practicing some yoga breathing, she forced herself to be in the moment, hideous as it was. She watched as Marisol and Wyatt chatted back and forth about the weather, celebrity gossip, and last night's reality television, as though doing so were easy. Come to think of it, it looked easy. Neither of them was ever, like, "Uh, so anyway . . . I'm at a loss for words."

It was so *weird*. She had to admit, her sister's smooth transition from off-the-air to on-the-air was impressive. Here she sat, shaking in her holey jeans, with her mind racing a million miles a minute. Meanwhile, Marisol never missed a beat, and nothing she uttered ever seemed forced. She grudgingly admitted her quick-witted sister was damned good at her job. No wonder Mar made the big bucks.

Feeling slightly less crazed, Cristy reached out a shaky hand and grabbed her water glass, taking a long drink that she practically had to choke down.

"Now, what we've all been waiting for." Wyatt cued up a taped drumroll that ended with the crash of cymbals. "We've got a special guest with us today. Our very own Marisol's kid sister, Cristy Avila, owner of the ever-popular Simplicity gathering place in West Highlands. Welcome, Cristy. Great to see you again, kiddo."

D-day. She did not want to sound like an idiot.

"Thanks, Wyatt. Wish I could say the same, but you know. There are only about a million places I'd rather be than here," she said with saccharine sweetness.

Wyatt and Marisol both laughed, but Cristy felt it was definitely with her and not at her. She stretched her fingers and popped her knuckles beneath the table. Okay, talking to Wyatt just then hadn't been so hard. No blurted swear words. No unexpected bodily functions. Maybe she could do this.

"It's true, folks. We kind of railroaded Cristy into being here, because we always strive to bring our listeners what they want," Wyatt said.

*Oh, please.* "Suck up," Cristy fake-coughed behind her hand. Marisol laughed again. You know, this really did feel like three people in a room talking.

"In any case," Wyatt said, "you're here, Cristy."

"I am," she said ruefully. "It was either that or kill my sister. I didn't think winding up in prison as Big Bertha's bitch was worth it." She flashed a wide-eyed glance at Marisol. "Shit, can I say bitch on the air? Oops, I just said shit, too."

"Twice. But we're on the delay," Marisol said, as amused as Wyatt was. "Don't sweat it."

"We're going to take your questions in a few minutes, folks, but first, Cristy, tell us why you're here."

"Duh, Wyatt, you've only been running promos for two days straight. Do you think your listeners are dimwits?" This was getting easier by the minute. When in doubt, be a smartass.

"Well, just to be clear—" He raised his eyebrows hopefully at Cristy. "—dare I say it?"

Defeated, Cristy said, "It's not like the whole universe doesn't already know, thanks to my sister, the Mouth."

"For those of you who've been living under a rock this past week, Cristy spent her college years—"

"Year, Wyatt. Get it right." She held up an index finger. "One year. My final year of graduate school."

"Gotcha. We do want to keep our facts straight."

"You do? What's with the sudden change?"

"Very funny. Our comedienne, Cristy, spent one school year working for a phone sex line. Did I get that right?"

"Yep."

"Which is the bombshell Marisol dropped on all of us during Monday's broadcast."

"Tell everyone why you did it, Cristy," said Marisol.

"Why does anyone accept a crappy job? Money. Plus, it didn't interfere with my heavy course load, since I only took calls at night. And I could work from home."

"Wait a minute. Callers had your home phone number?" Wyatt asked, incredulous.

"No, of course not. That would be *dangerous*." She gave Marisol the evil eye. "Incoming calls were intercepted by a computerized system, which would then forward them to our home phones. Anonymously, trust me." She flashed another death glare at her sister. "Anonymity was the key, at least until my sister decided to use me as an example on your show."

"Guilty as charged," Marisol said. "For the record, I have apologized."

"Uh, for the record, it's not the first time she's done something like this to me, so her apologies don't carry much weight. Isn't that right, Marisol?"

"She's right."

"And don't give any excuses about good intentions, ei-ther."

Marisol gave a dramatic sigh. "The truth is, folks, I do tend to speak first and suffer the consequences later. Or, actually, Cristy suffers the consequences later." She smiled encouragingly. "I'm *sorry*, Cristy, truly. I talk about my baby sister because I love her and I'm proud of her, but she'd rather I didn't talk about her at all." Then, to Cristy, "And, I maintain, you were the positive example during Monday's show, not that it matters. This is your chance to set things straight."

"Okay, enough of the sibling love fest before I puke," Wyatt cut in. "Tell us how the phone sex thing worked."

"The guy's got a one-track mind," Cristy said, bugging her eyes at Marisol.

"Don't all guys?" Marisol asked.

"Most, but I wouldn't say all." Cristy glanced out at Diego.

He winked. "Just as I wouldn't classify all sex workers as 'sluts' or 'tramps,' Wyatt."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've already had my hand slapped for that one. By your sister and just about every women's group out there. Not to mention my lovely wife—"

"The saint?" Cristy said, hiking one eyebrow.

"That she is." Wy att rolled his hand. "But about the phone sex . . ."

She sighed. "I'll tell you how it worked, but it's a lot duller than you'd imagine. First, you have to pick a service, and there are a lot of choices with different things to offer."

"Really! I had no idea. Like what?"

"For example, 809 numbers are located in the Dominican Republic, and they don't charge a per-minute fee. You'd just pay regular long distance charges. That's a pro, but the con for some callers is the fact that these lines are more like dating party lines. It all depends on what the caller's looking for."

"I'm so out of the phone sex loop!" Wyatt said.

"Which I'm sure your wife is happy about." Cristy smirked at her sister. "The 900 numbers you can find in magazines. Some are good, some aren't, and some will really rip you off. Are you bored yet, Wyatt?"

"Not in the least. Keep going."

"Fine. Oops, did you hear that?"

Wyatt perked. "What?"

"I think it was your ratings dropping by the second."

"Very funny."

"Moving right along, 011 numbers are offshore services. Mostly off the coast of Africa. You'll pay long distance rates, but there can be language barriers that make the call a waste of money. English-speaking callers should be aware of this."

"Check, avoid 011 numbers," Wyatt said.

"Not necessarily. But, whatever. Okay, 800 numbers will bill

your credit card. You have to be careful not to get bilked. But according to some of my old pals who are still doing phone sex work as a side job, the most reliable numbers these days are the 10XXX numbers."

"What's different about them?"

"Well, most of them are located in Canada, so there isn't a language barrier problem. They are per-minute services, but at least what I'm hearing—the 10XXX services are highly experienced and professional. You can generally rely on them to deliver . . . oh my God, I can't believe I'm talking about this."

"Just tell us," Wyatt said.

"Okay. In a nutshell, if you want explicit, hardcore, reliable, and professional, use the 10XXX."

"What kind of line did you work on?"

"A 900 service. We also had a psychic hotline in the company. But really, my experience wasn't that exciting."

"Is it fair to say you don't consider this bombshell about your past as hot news?" Wyatt asked.

"Wyatt dear, it's *no* news," Cristy said in an overly patient and condescending tone. "Half the women in my MBA program worked for the stupid phone sex lines. Thousands of women all over the country do it. Housewives, professionals, students. We take our earnings to build fantastic, fulfilling lives, while the guys who called us are probably still living in their mothers' basements."

Laughter permeated the studio. Even the producer was laughing, which bolstered Cristy's confidence. She waited for it to die down. "It would be news if, say, the First Lady had worked on a phone sex line, but me? Who cares? I'm a twentyseven-year-old, single, small business owner. That's it."

"And yet the media has been trailing you all week."

"All hype, no substance," Cristy said. "They've been hounding me because of you two, anyway. For goodness sake, I own

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a coffee and yarn shop. I'm a knitter. And I'd rather wear sweatpants than anything sexy. *That's* who I am. All through school, Marisol was the popular, outgoing one. I was the shy dork, and very happily so. The part-time phone sex job was a way to make a lot of money quickly, period. I didn't love it. I wasn't particularly skilled at it. But overall, your listeners should know that it's so totally *yesterday*."

"I hear you. But I still want to know what it was like," Wyatt said, almost whining. "I'm sure our listeners do, too."

"All righty, then. Got your notepads ready? In my limited experience, these guys—callers—paid by the minute. Almost six bucks a minute for—"

"That much?"

"No one ever said they were smart. Anyway, they paid that much for, basically, dirty talk."

"Like what?"

"Like whatever turned them on. The direction each call took was up to the individual caller. We didn't start in until the guy said something to set the tone. I mean, different people are turned on by different things. There wasn't a script. To lay it right out there, our sole job was to flatter each caller into staying on as long as possible, and we did that by keeping up the conversation *they* wanted to have. Think about it, sixty minutes? That's over four hundred bucks."

"And how much of that did you get?"

"It varies across the industry, but I worked for a fair company, and *no*, I will not name it. But we earned fifty percent of the call time."

"Two-hundred-some-odd bucks an hour for a part-time job?" Wyatt whistled. "That's some cash!"

*"Hello!* Which I was trying to tell you on Monday," Marisol said. "Cristy's experience was the positive argument against your contentions that all sex workers are sluts or addicts."

"Right," Cristy said. "The money's the whole point, Wyatt. I wanted to earn enough in a year to put a hefty down payment on the building that now houses Simplicity, because I fell in love with it the minute I saw it, but I was in college, you know?"

"And did you?"

"You bet. I was able to put down half and still have a chunk of capital for the business. It's the reason I was able to launch Simplicity and make it a success at such a young age."

"Good for you, woman!" Predictably, Wyatt steered the conversation back to the racier aspects. "And so, they'd call, and you ...?"

Cristy rolled her eyes. "We asked what each caller wanted and went from there, dragging it out however we could. It was easy. I mean, the callers will picture you however they want to, and they'll hear what they want to hear. Who you are on the other end is utterly irrelevent."

"What do you mean?"

"If you called a sex line, wouldn't you picture yourself talking to the busty blonde from the ad that prompted you to call in the first place? Lingerie, lust, the whole shebang?"

"Stop, you're killing me."

Cristy nodded. "Well, here's some reality slush to dump over your head. I'd say ninety percent of the time I was wearing ratty pajamas with my hair up in a towel and zit cream dotting my face. And there was *no* lust or arousal on my end, believe me. The woman at our company who made the most money—"

"How much?"

"I'd estimate about three hundred grand a year."

"Man, I'm in the wrong business," Wyatt mused.

"Anyway, she was a single mom, fifty-four years old, and weighed close to three fifty, not that her weight matters *at all*, because she was beautiful inside and out. But it's a sad fact about our culture that most people lust after the thin and fit. Anyway, she had four kids in college at the same time, and honey, she was living in style. All because men believe what they want to believe, and sister knew how to talk the talk. I adored that woman. She kept the job in perspective for a lot of us newbies. She even helped us amp up our 'fantasy voices.'"

"More power to her," Marisol said. "*That* is what I was trying to tell you, Wyatt. He never listens to reason," she added to Cristy.

Wyatt mulled it all over. "So you can honestly say you weren't *into* it or the callers, eh?"

"God, Wyatt, that's such a guy question."

"That's his specialty," Marisol said.

"I'm a guy!"

"Do you really think a woman could be turned on by some guy spending a ton of cash to jerk the gherkin while talking to a stranger who, sad but true, couldn't care less about him?"

"Well, maybe you weren't turned on by *every* caller."

"Try none of them. Know what I used my call time for? Studying. Believe me, even my least favorite class, statistics, was more interesting than these calls. They were so tediously predictable. We barely had to pay attention. Throw in an 'Oooh baby 'every now and then, and you're golden. Here's me: 'I'm touching myself right now, thinking of you, Horace,' and inside my head, 'Crap, I have twenty pages left to read before tomorrow. Could you hurry up?' Callers never could tell the difference."

Marisol laughed. "I'd kill for a tape of that."

"I'd kill *you* if you *had* a tape of it," Cristy told her sister before turning back to Wyatt. "The absolute only turn-on was the money, and I made a lot of it without ever having any live contact with anyone. Phone sex is safe and pretty chaste." She shook her head in pity at Wyatt. "I suppose you think the strippers who shimmy in your face are into you, too, huh?"

"Sure, why not?"

"News flash, Wyatt, the strippers think you're a toad just like all the other identical toads who drool while they dance. They just want your money. Half of them have *girlfriends*. And I'm not talking the shop-and-do-lunch kind of girlfriends, either, if you get my gist. But, hey, the theory of most sex workers is, as long as you guys are gullible enough to hand over your money, we women will be more than glad to take it. You'll be getting screwed, but not in the way you'd hoped."

"Harsh words from our guest, Cristy Avila, folks."

*"True* words. I banked on the callers' big egos. Strippers bank on men's big egos. We all did. In the no physical contact sex-for-money world, women have always had the upper hand."

"How about all you strippers out there giving us a call in the studio. Is Cristy Avila telling the truth here? We're going to find out, right after this."

Wyatt went to a song, then cued up a commercial to run after it. "You're doing a great job, Cristy."

She smirked. "I'm surprised you'd say that, what with me kicking your ass all over the airwaves."

He grinned. "Whatever works. You know me—I'm a ratings whore with the best of them."

After the brief break, they went back live. "Cristy, on a more serious note, we hear some men have been bothering you this week," Wyatt said.

"Yes, it's true."

Marisol gave her an odd look. "So I guess it's a good thing the company kept thorough logs of every single caller, isn't it?"

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Cristy opened her mouth but nothing came out.

"I mean, didn't you tell me you had a *list of names*, addresses, phone numbers, and other personal data on every single guy who ever called you? Kind of like how a call girl has her book of regulars?"

Surprise zinged through Cristy. So *that's* what the note had been about. "Oh, yes," she said, transitioning easily into her sister's lie. "And, since I've been having a little trouble, it's already been turned over to the cops. So my message to those guys is, nice talking to you, now leave me alone to run my business. You wouldn't want your wives, girlfriends, mothers, or whoever finding out how you spent your holiday bonus, would you?"

"Cristy," Wyatt said. "You'd actually do that?"

"Darn right. If they're messing with my business, I have no qualms about messing with their lives. And my business is not phone sex. It's Simplicity. A place for knitting, conversation, friendship, and the best coffee and baked goods in the world."

"There you have it. And we'll be right back after this."

"Do I ever love seeing Wyatt put into his place," Marisol said as the newest hit from one of the pop divas played.

Cristy took a long drink of water, then shared a squinty-eyed smile with her sister. "Don't act like you're off the hook. This whole fiasco was your fault, and my hour's not over yet."

"Hit me with your best shot, sis. I deserve it."

From the producer's booth came, "And you're on in five, four, three, two . . ." The red lights came back on.

Cristy glanced at the producer, realizing she hadn't felt nervous for a while now. Wow. Calls trickled in. A few strippers gave total support to her, as did women from all walks of life. Their favorite call had come from a timid minister's wife. She admitted, with some embarrassment, that she'd thoroughly enjoyed the show. And if she'd learned one thing from it, it was that she wished she could charge her husband for sex, since it was usually of the "Brace yourself, Effie" variety. That way, she said, at least she'd have the cash to buy a new pair of shoes now and then.

When Cristy got to the point where she felt like she'd set things straight enough, she decided to switch gears. Cliché or not, paybacks were a bitch. "Wyatt, have we sufficiently beaten the dead horse now? I'd like to talk about a different topic."

"What Cristy wants, Cristy gets. Lay it on us, babe."

"I want to hear from anyone who, like me, has a clueless but allegedly well-meaning sibling who manages to humiliate you constantly. He or she exposes your secrets, talks when shutting up would be the smart route. I mean, honestly, people, how do we keep from killing them?"

"Oh, great," Marisol said, but with a smile. "Fine, come on, callers. 303–555-HOTT."

Almost instantly, every single phone line in the studio went berserk. The whole metro area wanted to bash their bigmouthed siblings, it seemed. Ah, vindication.

"Now that," Cristy said, pointing to the stacked calls, "is newsworthy." She had such a great time commiserating with callers and dissing her sister, sixty minutes passed before she even thought to glance at her watch. Sure, a few of the callers brought up the phone sex, but it was either to tell her they wished they knew how to do it or to congratulate her for her ingenuity. Not a single negative caller was sent through.

By the end of the hour she felt confident that Denver's media was kicking themselves for wasting a full week outside Simplicity. Even better, Marisol and Wyatt had been knocked firmly into their places. This radio stuff wasn't anywhere near

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as bad as she'd thought it might be. And her life didn't suck as much, either. Now if the show had succeeded in scaring off the perverts, life could truly be normal and happy again. Her segment ended, and the producer, Wyatt, Marisol, and even Diego stood and applauded. All she could do was grin.

## Chapter 11

Cristy hadn't known what to expect at Simplicity after her appearance on the radio show, but it turned out to be a blessedly normal Friday. No news vans lurked. No unwelcome photo takers popped up. No strange men came in at all. Her regulars sat around the center table stitching and bitching like nothing had ever happened. Best of all, Simplicity's sales set a record high, especially on the café side. Poor Lola was working like a slave just to keep up with demand, but they needed it after the disastrous week.

By six o'clock that evening the shop had closed, although the regulars still sat in the front room knitting. Diego had disconnected his surveillance equipment and abandoned his watchdog duties to sit in the kitchen with Lola. Cristy found them laughing when she walked in. She smiled. "Wyatt and Marisol weren't kidding when they said I'd be old news almost immediately."

"Definitely," Lola said. "It's been a great day. But, damn, you women sure eat and drink a lot. I'm pooped."

"Why don't you sit down?" Cristy said. "I'll clean up."

Lola gave a little grimacy smile. "No offense, but I don't want anyone else in my kitchen. It's a deep-seated control issue that I'm just not willing to abandon."

Cristy raised her hands. "Say no more."

"Is the place officially closed for the day?" Diego asked.

"Yeah." Cristy sat on one of the tall bar stools. "I mean, the girls are still here, but we're locked up."

Diego nodded, then stood. "Unless you disagree, Cristy, I think my job here is done."

Unexpectedly, her heart squeezed. She swallowed, and went for the casual tone. "No, you're right. I think we sufficiently scared the creeps away. But thanks for everything. It really was . . . nice that you were here." *Nice*? What was she, some kind of pinafore-wearing milkmaid? Jesus. It was a wonder she'd ever made a dime in the phone sex biz. "Don't be a stranger. We might even let you join the center table if you promise to knit."

"We'll see about that." He leaned down and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, then crossed to Lola and did the same to her. "Keep up the excellent work, ladies. It was a pleasure."

"I can't really echo that, but we were glad you were here. And for God's sake, next time rent a hybrid."

"Will do," Diego said with a laugh.

And then he left. Just like that.

For a few moments Lola and Cristy sat in silence. The voices of the regulars drifted in, and behind that, the sound of the Hummer rumbling away from the curb. Cristy felt empty.

"It'll be weird without him here," Lola said.

Cristy tried to be the voice of reason, even though her words rang false in her ears. "He was only here four days."

"I know. That's what makes it so awful."

For some strange reason, Cristy found herself on the verge

of tears. She stood and shook her hair back. "I think I'll just go finish up with the girls and give them the gentle boot. It's been a long week."

Cristy schooled her features to hide her melancholy before entering the main room. Lisa, Racquel, Allegra, Alma—each woman deserved nothing but smiles from her for all the support they had given her this week. Her affection for them felt like a hand-knit cashmere blanket around her heart.

To her surprise, however, no one was knitting when she walked in. Each woman sat in her normal spot around the table, but their yarn and needles had been stowed in favor of . . . wine? Three uncorked bottles sat in the middle of the table, breathing, and everyone besides Allegra had a glass waiting to be filled.

Cristy stopped short and studied their expectant faces. "What's this?"

"Have a seat, honey," Alma said, gesturing to the empty chair at the head of the table. "We'd like to talk to you."

Her heart started to pound, but she sat. Had she done something to hurt or offend them? She clasped her hands in front of her on the table and made eye contact with each woman in turn, stopping with Alma. "I'm all ears."

"Wine?" Alma asked.

Boy, did she need it. "Actually, I'd love some."

Racquel poured wine all around and surprised Allegra with ice cold sparkling cider so she wouldn't feel left out.

"The thing is, Cristy," Lisa said, "we really enjoyed your radio appearance this morning."

"Oh." That was it? "Well, thank you."

"And we were glad to be here for you all week, when things were crazy," Allegra said. "Just like you're always there for us." She smiled shyly.

Had she failed to thank them fervently enough? Cristy

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splayed a hand on her chest. "Ladies, you have no idea how much that meant to me. I should've made that more clear. I mean, I can't even repay you."

"That's where you're wrong, honey bunch," Alma said, her tone determined and strong.

Cristy tilted her head quizzically. "I don't follow."

"Which is why we're going to explain this payback situation to you as we see it." Alma sniffed and straightened her back. "You see, we've talked, and we all agree it's just plain not fair for you to possess all those juicy phone sex skills and not share them with us."

*Huh?* "Oh, Alma—"

"No. We're serious." She held up a hand. "None of us want the job, for goodness sakes, but—"

"I have twin toddlers," Lisa blurted, her voice almost plaintive. She blushed all the way to her ears. "Robert's and my sex life has been pretty G-rated since the kids came along, and they're going to be two. That's a long time to go without some X-rated nookie. Frankly, I need something to spice it up before I go nuts."

"Me, too," Racquel said.

"And my Manuel, God rest his soul, has been gone for years now," Alma said. "He will always be the love of my life, but I don't think he'd want me to be a nun for the rest of my days." A pretty pinkness touched her cheeks as well. "You see, there's this new gentleman in my running club that all the widows have an eye on. I need something to set me ahead of the pack."

"Oooooh, Alma!" Lisa said. "You never said anything about that to us."

"Well, I was feeling out the situation."

Lisa stood to give Alma a high five across the table. "You go, girl. Crack yourself off a piece of *that*."

Cristy's mouth dropped open. She took several long gulps of wine, then held out her glass. Racquel topped it off. She pointed toward Allegra. "What about our young friend here? Am I supposed to expose her to my knowledge?"

Allegra rolled her eyes. "God, Cristy. I'm eighteen, you know. If I'm old enough to vote, I think I'm mature enough to get a few phone sex tips. I mean, I don't have anyone to use them on now, but who knows about the future?"

"You kind of owe them," came Lola's voice from behind her.

Cristy whipped around to find her chef leaning against the archway wall, grinning. "You knew about this?"

"Heck, I helped them pick the wine. Oh, and I'm done in the kitchen and all the doors are locked, so I'll just grab our cheese and cracker tray and pull up a chair if no one minds. I'm all for some heavy breathing on a Friday night."

Lola disappeared into the kitchen for a moment and returned with a gorgeous spread that included brie, gouda, and other cheeses arranged around grapes and dates and homemade crunchy bread sticks.

By the time everyone had loaded up a plate, Cristy was on her second glass of wine, feeling no pain. She also felt no shame. She hated to admit it, but going on her sister's radio show had opened her mind up to the idea of letting her inner extrovert out to play every now and then. What could it hurt? She'd always have her shell to retreat into, but venturing out could lead to . . . who knew what? And this was a perfectly safe venue in which to give her new boldness a whirl. Hey, if she could help spice up her friends' sex lives, why not?

"Okay," she said, enjoying her friends' bright expressions of anticipation. "Simplicity is closed for the day." She gave a sly smile. "But, *Sin*plicity is officially open, and ladies? Class is in session."

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The women all applauded.

Just before she started to talk, someone knocked on the front door. Cristy jumped. God, she hoped she hadn't released Diego too soon. The legs of her chair scraped against the wood floors as she pushed back. "Sit tight, gals."

She crossed to the front door and peered out carefully. It was her sister. Marisol gave a little finger wave.

Perplexed, Cristy threw the dead bolt back and opened the door. "What are you doing coming to the front?"

Marisol shrugged one shoulder. "Trying to turn over a few new leaves. Can I come in?"

"Sure." Cristy glanced at her friends over her shoulder and held up one finger to them, then stepped out on the front porch and pulled the door shut behind her. "I never got to thank you, for that list of names idea," she said. "To be honest, I had no idea what to use as pervert repellent. You really helped me out. And yes, it kills me to admit that."

Marisol smiled, a bit sadly. "Can you forgive me?"

Cristy crossed her arms over her torso. "Will you refrain from talking about my life on your show from here on out?"

"I'll try. I promise you that." She held up one hand. "Not that my promises mean anything to you."

A smile tugged at Cristy's lips. "You're such a pain in my ass, Marisol."

Marisol spread her arms, and Cristy moved forward into the hug. "I know I am," her sister said. "But you love me anyway."

"I do, damnit. That's the worst part."

Marisol laughed, then stepped back. "Truce?"

"Sure," Cristy said nonchalantly. "I mean, I can't legally kill you, and I hate it when we're not talking. As if you're *ever* not talking, but you know what I mean. To each other."

"I love you, Cris."

"I love you, too, you hag." They shared toothy, evil grins, like they'd been doing since childhood. "So, you want to join the party?" Cristy pointed over her shoulder.

"You're having a party?"

"Sort of." She smirked. "The ladies want me to give them phone sex lessons."

Marisol's eyes bugged. "And you agreed to it?"

"Eh, what the hell. It can't hurt anything, right?"

Marisol laughed. "I guess we're both turning over a few new leaves, huh?"

Cristy held up a finger and narrowed her gaze. "You will not—I repeat, *will not*, discuss this on your show."

Marisol made a zipping motion over her mouth. "My lips are officially closed."

"Wow," Cristy said dryly. "And I hadn't even heard that hell froze over today."

"Oh, shut up."

Arm in arm, the two sisters headed into *Sin*plicity together, and everyone greeted Marisol enthusiastically. They settled in, poured some more wine, and Cristy glanced around at her audience. "Okay, we'll start simple. Sometimes, when you ask a guy what his fantasy is, he may be reluctant to open up. So instead, take control." She grinned. "Come right out and tell him *your* fantasy instead."

"Really?" Marisol asked.

"Like, how?" Lisa chimed in.

"Easy. Pick up the phone. Dial. When he answers, use your sexiest tone, and say, 'I have this fantasy. . . . '"

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## Chapter 12

Cristy made the usual commute downstairs to Simplicity on Monday morning after hell week, and stopped on the landing to take it all in. Everything seemed the same. The familiar sunlight slanted in the windows, the yarn looked fluffy and inviting. The whole place still felt like *her*.

But something was missing.

Diego.

Damnit. She sighed, raking her fingers through her as yet unbrushed hair. She couldn't have her Monday mornings ruined just because she was mooning over some guy who would never be hers. She'd awakened earlier than usual feeling a little off, so she'd decided to creep downstairs and grab some coffee to take back up to her room. Lola wasn't even there yet for company.

She had to recapture the magic. With determination, she started around the main room, straightening displays and clicking on lights—just like every day. But instead of feeling embraced by the serenity of her little oasis, she felt lonely. On any other day she would have just buried herself in work and denial until the feeling dissipated, but something elemental had changed inside her in the past week.

She was still Cristy, the one and only Avila who'd been born with an embarrassment gene. She was still an introvert. She still wanted to fade into the background, but now she sort of wished she could fade with someone, rather than alone.

Okay, not someone. Diego.

She didn't want to lie to herself, for God's sake.

Cristy sank into the window seat and stared unseeing out her front window. Damnit, she needed to start asking for what she wanted in life. If she'd learned anything from Marisol, it was that. And what she wanted right now was Diego Mora.

She had no idea what, if anything, he felt for her, or if he'd even respond to her suggestions, but that didn't matter. Standing, she took a page out of her brave sister's handbook and grabbed the phone. She didn't need to look for his number, because she'd memorized it the moment he'd given it to her. For God's sake, she was just a grown-up version of one of those girls who doodled marriage names in the margin if a notebook, and right now she didn't care at all.

It rang.

Panic seized her, but she held it off.

A second ring.

This was stupid. Maybe she should hang up and-

"Hello?"

She swallowed tightly. "Diego?"

"Cristy? Is that you?"

She stilled all her fears, closed her eyes, said a silent prayer, then lowered her voice to its most seductive level. "If that's who you want me to be, sure. I'll be whoever you want."

A stunned silence ensued. When he spoke, she recognized his arousal in the timbre of his voice. "Damn, no wonder

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you made so much money on that phone sex line."

"I'm not interested in money at the moment."

"What are you trying to do to me, little Cristy Avila?"

"Me? Nothing. I'm just sitting here, still warm and cozy in my bed and wondering if you're busy this morning . . . because, I have this fantasy. . . ."

She heard his hard swallow. "Don't move. Cristy? Cristy?" "Yes?"

"I'll be right there."

"I'll be waiting. . . ." They disconnected, and she took the stairs two at a time so she could brush her hair and her teeth and spritz a little perfume on her skin.

Fifteen minutes later he knocked on her door.

Cristy swept it open and raked him naked with her bold gaze. It wasn't just the fact that he looked like male perfection, although that was a bonus. Diego Mora was truly one of the good guys, and she knew, without a doubt, that he'd always have her back. He knew all her most devastating secrets, and he liked her anyway. What more could she ask?

Taking a deep breath, she decided caution was overrated. She threw herself into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist. The heat from his hands seared through her thin silk pajama top and made her skin tingle. "Forgive me for being so forward."

"No apology necessary, believe me."

He smelled soapy and fresh and sexy, like a man with all kinds of ideas she wanted to experience. She flipped her hair back and pressed her lips to his, gently, and then more urgently. When they finally broke apart, she was breathless, and he obviously wanted her. God, risk was fun sometimes.

She smiled at him, and her heart clenched. "Hi."

"Tell me your fantasy," he said in response.

"Wow, don't you have a one-track mind?"

"You expected anything less? After a call like that?" He shook his head, then nipped at her bottom lip with his teeth. "Tell me, Cristy. In detail."

"I'd rather show you," she told him. "In detail."

The man needed no further encouragement. Carrying her easily, he headed for the stairs. "How much time do we have?"

"An hour and a half before Lola gets here."

He grinned. "Is that long enough for you to tell—*show*—me your fantasy?"

"Not nearly." She kissed his jawline. "But we'll make it work."

They started up the stairs, still wrapped around each other. Cristy glanced over Diego's shoulder at her own little oasis. The glow had returned, and she loved it more at that moment than she ever had before.

As they reached the top and headed down the hall toward her bedroom, she tilted her head back and studied him. "Want to know my deepest, darkest secret?"

"Of course."

"I love Monday mornings."

He entered her bedroom, kicked the door closed behind him, and then laid her gently onto her bed and followed her down. "You know," he said with a grin, as he gripped the shoulders of his T-shirt and pulled it forward over his head. "I'll be damned if they aren't beginning to grow on me, too."

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## FROM MARY CASTILLO, BERTA PLATAS, SOFIA QUINTERO, LYNDA SANDOVAL AND AVON A

## "Till Death Do Us Part" Mary Castillo

Under the wedding dress . . .

Full name?

Mary Castillo.

### Do you have a sister?

No, just a little brother whom I can't beat up anymore. When I left my mom and then newborn brother at the hospital, I was in tears. My grandma asked what was wrong and I allegedly told her, "I don't want a brother! I want a big sister or a puppy!"

I tried everything to get rid of him. On his first birthday, I informed Mom that he just didn't fit in and we should return him before his warranty expired. Whenever my brother did something to annoy my parents, I reminded them a puppy would have been so much easier. But now I'm glad we kept him. He's a good little brother, although he'll probably kill me when he reads this!

### So what true wedding horrors have you experienced?

There was the Wedding Hoochie of 1999. She wore a red knit dress and no underwear—Mom swore that she saw her, uh, hair,

if you know what I mean. Wedding Hoochie attacked every man on the dance floor, pushing their wives or girlfriends out of the way to grind against their crotches. By the way, she was not the kind of girl a man would want anywhere near his crotch. At one point I thought she was going to deep throat the beer tap but she was escorted to a cab.

# Is it safe to say that people should be on their best behavior when you're around?

Absolutely not! Where would I get all my best ideas from? Don't worry, America. I don't name names, and at the very least, I'll change your hair color so no one will be able to identify you.

## The seating chart ...

#### Are you more like Dori or Sela?

Dori. No, Sela. No, Dori. No—neither. Well, I guess I'm like Dori in that I hide my emotions and I can be terribly competitive. Sela has many of the qualities that I've often wished that I'd had. (How's that for a nonanswer!)

# Is there a character type you would like to try (a pirate, for example)?

I had always wanted to write a free spirit, and Sela was my first opportunity. It was a test to see if I could put myself in the shoes of someone who is impulsive, driven by desire, and then completely shocked when it all blows up in her face. I know that sounds like I judge her harshly but I really could see the story through her eyes, and when she gets chummy with El Tigre . . . heh heh . . . that was fun!

# Where did the idea for, ahem, the, uh, "big revelation" at the end of the story come from?

Not personal experience. The idea was born out of a conversation I overheard at a wedding. This couple had been to a "virgin" wedding, where the bride had saved herself for the big night. Apparently this was a big deal because the priest mentioned it during the mass and then the bride nearly had a nervous breakdown when it was time for her to leave with her husband. I thought to myself, What if she lied? What if there was evidence that she wasn't what she said she was? The story was born.

# Do you have plans for a sequel to "Till Death Do Us Part"?

Not at the moment. Sela and Dori were very strong in my head while I wrote the story and then they left to parts unknown. I imagine Sela went on to complete her CD and then had a torrid affair with her bigwig producer and then left him for someone like Axl Rose. Dori got over Pete and met a hunky, hubba hubba firefighter who volunteers at the San Diego Burn Center reading books to children. But their brother, Robbie . . . hmm, I wonder.

## What other books do you have out there?

There's *Hot Tamara (Catalina* magazine's Best Chick Lit Book of 2005) and *In Between Men*, which are related. (Isa, who is Tamara's best friend, is the heroine of *In Between Men*... get that?) And then there's my novella, "My Favorite Mistake" in

*Friday Night Chicas*, which is how I met Berta and Sofia. I was a fan of Lynda back when she was writing Latina romances for Kensington, and met her when she spoke at my RWA chapter. We're buds now.

## What's next, you big tease?

What would happen if you accidentally switched bodies with your best friend? Would you sleep with her man, pretending to be her? Could you stay alive while being Mommy to her oneyear-old kid, or finding the right guy for your single friend? Fabulously single Aggie Portrero and her new mommy friend, Nely Mendoza, find out that the grass isn't greener one way or the other in *Switchcraft*! Visit my website, www.marycastillo.com to read the excerpt and enter contests.





**MARY CASTILLO** is the author of *Hot Tamara* and *In Between Men*. Both novels were selected as "Chick Lit Book of the Year" by *Catalina* magazine. Mary loves to connect with readers through her website at www.marycastillo.com.

## "What Stays in Vegas" Berta Platas

# Susana's boy toy is a lot younger than she is. Would you date a younger man?

I would, except that my husband would object! But if I were single . . . Actually, I've always been attracted to older men. That doesn't mean I'm against older women dating younger guys. Go for it, *hermanas*! Let's show Hollywood casting directors that it works both ways, although it's borderline creepy that all those fiftyish male movie stars get paired with female costars who are barely into their twenties.

#### Does Susana ever get back with her husband?

Oh, absolutely. But it won't be easy. She left him, after all. He's a forgiving guy and he wants her back, but she's going to have to change, or compromise, and she's had all the compromise she'll ever dish out. She'll expect him to change, too.

You know whose story I'd love to do? Susu's daughter, Heidi. I'll bet that little girl has seen a lot. And while her mommy is off with her borrowed hunk, Heidi will think she's the lady of the house, dealing with the dog and the stinky diapers, even though she's at her grandmother's house. When her parents return they'll be working on their marriage, and Heidi's going to be a terror to get some attention.

## Where does that leave Anita?

Anita gets what she really wants—a new direction in life. She'll stay in Las Vegas, working a job for which she's uniquely qualified, and she'll be surrounded by great men. Chris will probably be in and out of her life. She might even take up boxing. So the question is, tighty whitey or boxer?

## Will we ever find out?

I've been thinking about Anita's crazy life. Her new job might be more thrilling (and definitely crazier) than she imagined, and it would be a fun story to write.

## What inspired you to write about Las Vegas?

I've only been to Las Vegas once, and then it was on business, but I was awed. It's all about indulgence. Big fun, big food, shows and glitz everywhere, but only at night. By day, unless you're in a casino, it's like any city. If you're in a casino, you don't know if it's day or night, and there are so many opportunities to sin! It would be the first place that "big sister" thought of when she wanted to give in to dreams of decadence.

## Do you have a sister?

I do. My sister is only twenty-two months younger than me. That means that part of the year she's one year younger than me, and then she's two years younger than me. When we were little, I gloated over being older. Now I cringe.

### Are you anything like Anita and Susana?

A little bit. But I doubt my sister will ever run off to Vegas. She's more into cozy cottages, good books, and a nice glass of white wine. She has her wild side, but it comes out on the dance floor, and when she's not dancing with her husband, she's dancing with our mother and me at wild and loud Atlanta Cuban Club holiday parties, where the music is live and the beat is irresistible.

#### What's next for you?

I just wrapped up a funny romance about a poor girl who wins the biggest lottery jackpot ever in the United States and proceeds to raise hell and spread the cash around with the help of her grandmother and her cousin—all the family she has. She's not very good at being rich.

#### Do you write to music?

Absolutely! My son Tony usually burns me a great mix, usually of house music, but for this novella, I had other ideas. I listened to Elvis Presley and Tom Jones, trying to catch that floor show/ glittery décor/all-you-can-eat buffet Vegas vibe. I prefer music that after a while just blends into the background, so that when I turn it on I'm immediately "there," in my story. But it was hard to ignore Elvis and Tom. I like to sing along.

# What's different about writing a novella, rather than a full-length novel?

You have to jump right into the middle of the action, since you have so little space to tell the story. It requires some thought so

that the story starts and ends where you want it to and within the pages you have to cover. Fortunately, I'm into puzzles.

## Playlist Tom Jones

"Help Yourself" "Love Me Tonight" "Can't Stop Loving You" "Sexbomb" "It's Not Unusual" "Delilah" "Thunderball" "Kiss" **Elvis Presley** "Viva Las Vegas" "A Little Less Conversation" "Good Luck Charm" "(You're the) Devil in Disguise" "Burning Love" "All Shook Up" "Little Egypt" "Blue Suede Shoes' **Bonus tracks** 

"Las Vegas" Los Creepers (punk) "Leaving Las Vegas" Sheryl Crow "Danke Schoen" Wayne Newton

## **Best Friend Bootcamp**

My sister was my best friend when I was little. Sometimes my only friend. As our parents moved us, trying to better our lives, we found ourselves the new kids in school, the new kids on the block. We hated it. Once, newly arrived in Manhattan, we found ourselves the only kids in the building and weren't allowed to play outside, either. Because we were also sisters, it was tough to stay out of each other's way when we were mad at each other, especially when we shared a bedroom in a little apartment. She thought I was loud, messy, and lazy, and that really got on her nerves. To me, she was a tidy, no-nonsense goody-two-shoes, and that got on mine, but we also had many things in common. We had a shared love of reading, and loved to introduce each other to new authors. We looked a lot alike, and because we were so close in age, for a time people often thought we were twins. That was both fun and annoying. I still have great sympathy for twins. They put up with a lot of inane comments from strangers.

I was jealous of her side of the room, which was always neat. She could cook anything and it always tasted marvelous. She was, and still is, fearless. Once, when someone at a family gathering said something unkind about one of our relatives, I rolled my eyes, mentally calling the person a jerk. My sister jumped up and with jabbing fingers and fierce eyes told them off. I was astonished and proud. She's always been that way.

My sis married young and moved away, living in several interesting places before returning to Atlanta. Meanwhile, I married, too, and had a busy life filled with children, work, painting, and later, writing. Allergic to moving after all that early travel, I stuck to Atlanta.

We wrote letters (this was before e-mail) and saw each other at holidays, but it was a struggle to remain close. Now we're lucky to live five miles away from each other.

She's recently started writing, and she's really good. The other day I dropped by her house and she was making beaded necklaces, as beautiful as some of the high-end jewelry I'd seen at Nordstrom. So, I can't be singled out as the artistic sister anymore.

I'm still messy and loud. She's still tidy and fierce. We're both artists, writers, and voracious readers. We love each other very much. I think we make a pretty good team.

I love you, Laura. If I ever run off to Vegas, come get me. I'd do the same for you, *hermana*.



Cuban-American author **BERTA PLATAS** was born into a family of educators and grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, New York City, and Charlotte, North Carolina. It wasn't until high school that her family settled down in Atlanta, Georgia.

She listened avidly to the stories her friends and family told, enjoying the rich cultural mix of each city she lived in. Summers were spent in Miami and Key West, where she recharged her Cuban batteries.

The mother of three teenaged boys and an eleven-year-old daughter, Berta is crazy in love with her husband, media producer Gary Rowe, and still lives in Atlanta with all her family close by.

Berta writes contemporary women's fiction with a strong dose of humor.

## "Whipped" Sofia Quintero

# Are any of the characters in your story based on real people?

Cuevas is a composite of some of the most outlandish politicians I have met through the years. Yes, some of the nasty things he does and says in the story were actually perpetrated by people we have voted to represent us. As for Jennifer and Michelle, however, they couldn't be further different from my sister and me.

# Tell us a little more about your relationship with your sister.

My sister is nine years older than I am, so growing up, she was either spoiling me with cute shoes and ice cream or terrorizing me. When she and my brother would go at it—which was often, considering they're only two years apart—they would try and make me choose between them. I should've exploited the hell out of that, but instead I would just sit in the middle of the hallway and bawl.

From the time I was eleven until I left for college, I had five foster sisters, which finally gave me a shot at being the older sister. I was pretty good at it, if I do say so myself. One day I'd be giving them hell for going though my stuff, and the next I was issuing threats to whoever was bullying them at school.

# What inspired the BSDM storyline? Is your sister a dominatrix? Are you?

No, I've never been a dominatrix, and as far as I know, my sister hasn't been one either. I'd like to think that we're close enough that she would tell me. Anyway, I can't remember what made me curious about BSDM, but I, too, used to think, "Oh, those people are sick." Then I started reading up on it, and once I even interviewed at a dungeon. I was just starting my novel writing career and was really strapped for cash. I might've gone through with it if they didn't require me to put a photo on the Internet. The woman who interviewed me said, "You'll have so much makeup on, no one will know it's you." Like I wanted to take that chance! Instead I started selling sex toys for a pleasure party company, which happens to be part of another story I've written.

## Do tell!

It's actually a short story for an anthology of erotica by Latina authors. The heroine in my story is a teacher's aide who is a "romance consultant" on the weekends. The problem is that she brings her business into the bedroom, and it actually has a negative impact on her marriage. While there are humorous moments, that story is much more of a drama than a comedy.

## Besides that, what will we see from you next?

I wrote another short story for another erotica anthology, this one featuring lesbian romances. That one's about a closeted movie star who is trying to revive her fading career by teaming up with the latest "it" girl. Just as they fall for each other, however, the younger starlet decides she wants to come out. Don't ask me who inspired that because I'm not telling. I'm also working on my second novel, which is about a woman who enters into an "arrangement" with three men. Each of them claim they want the benefits of a relationship with none of the obligations, but the novel poses the question, "Is there really such a thing as casual sex?" Geez, I'm sensing a pattern here. Anyway, to read excerpts and stay posted, visit me at www.myspace.com/sofiaquintero or www.sofiaquintero.com.

# Bondage & Discipline, Domination & Submission, and Sado-Masochism (BDSM)

## Myths versus Facts

**Myth:** People who enjoy BDSM fantasies or activities are mentally ill.

**Fact:** Psychiatrists once considered BDSM fantasies and activities pathological, but that's starting to change. Remember, there was a time when the American Psychiatric Association deemed masturbation unnatural and considered homosexuality a mental illness. In order for a particular behavior to be deemed unhealthy, it must interfere with a person's ability to function normally from day to day. Let's put it this way: the woman who puts in a hard day's work and then goes home and ties up her husband (with his consent, of course) doesn't have a problem, but the guy in the next cubicle downloading porn even though he knows it could get him fired does.

**Myth:** BDSM is for cruel people who get their sexual kicks out of causing others pain and humiliation. What could possibly be erotic about that?

Fact: This is untrue on at least three counts. First of all, BDSM

covers a vast range of sexual behaviors that includes things like light bondage and erotic spanking. Many individuals and couples engage in some form of BDSM. Second, BDSM is consensual. A successful scenario or relationship requires a tremendous amount of trust, and you can't deny that trust is damned sexy. Three, it's the submissive who actually sets the limits. No wonder most of them are men!

Myth: Dominant women hate men.

**Fact:** There are always going to be people who are drawn to particular sexual activities for unhealthy reasons, but the average dominant woman has tremendous compassion for men. Not only does she understand the constant pressure that society places on men to always be in control, she derives her own pleasure from being their escape from those pressures. A hateful or abusive woman would have no regard for a man's needs, feelings, or boundaries. Because negotiation and consent are the anchors of any BDSM scenario or relationship, however, the lady dominant not only learns and honors the submissive male's desires and limitations, she actually gets a sexual charge out of pleasing him.

**Myth:** Any man who wants to be dominated by a woman is unworthy of respect.

**Fact:** Many men who are sexually submissive in the bedroom are intelligent, assertive, and therefore successful in the board-room. Or on the athletic field. Or on the stage or screen. When we see their accomplishments in the public realm, it would never occur to us to have anything but respect for them. Now, for such a man to then be able to hand over control to a woman in the most intimate arena of his life, he has to have tremendous respect for *her*. Would you respect this man less than, say, the guy who blows half his paycheck at the strip club?

Myth: All those BDSM fetishists are polygamists.

**Fact:** People who participate in any kind of BDSM are like any other. Some are monogamous and some are not. They have children and careers. And, no, not all of them wear leather.



**SOFIA QUINTERO** is also the author of *Divas Don't Yield* and the co-founder of Chica Luna Productions in New York City. She also writes hip-hop fiction under the pen name Black Artemis.

## "Diss-Connected" Lynda Sandoval

## Cristy Avila's Ten Tips for Giving Good Phone Sex

- 1. Get comfy. While this doesn't necessarily apply to phone sex *work*, you should be focused and in the mood to have phone sex with someone you love. If candlelight and music work for you, go for it. Wine? Sure. Lingerie? Whatever puts you in the mood.
- **2.** If you aren't sure how to launch a phone sex habit with your partner, or if you're nervous, call him and say one sexy thing, then hang up. A simple example is, "I was just thinking about your sexy body, and I got so hot, I had to touch myself." Seeing how he reacts will guide you to further phone encounters.
- **3** Call your partner at work and ask him, "What's your fantasy?" When he tells you, flesh it out for him as if it's really happening, and let him interact. Who knows—the fantasy might happen for real later. (Be sure he's not in a meeting and on speaker phone, though!)
- **4.** Use detailed description and hot language to convey what you are or aren't wearing, why and how you're aroused, and what exactly you plan to do about it since he's not there. Balance the soft and sensual with the downright raunchy, and always base it on your partner's preferences.

- **5.** Sound effects really heat things up. Moaning, breathing, whimpering, as well as *other* sounds that mean sex to you. (Use your imagination!) Learn how to fake a good orgasm vocally, keeping in mind that if you and your partner are doing this right, you probably won't have to fake it.
- **6.** Read good erotica and don't be afraid to borrow scenarios. This will help you keep up on all the modern sex lingo, too.
- 7. Try out a story fantasy once you are both comfortable. Don't dampen the effect with a "Hi, how's your day?" type of beginning. Launch right into the conversation with "I have this fantasy. . . ." and then pull him into it with as many of your senses as you can over the phone.
- **8.** Stay in the moment for each phone sex session so it feels to both of you like it's actually happening.
- **9.** Remember "show and tell" in kindergarten? Try touch and tell over the phone with your guy, especially when he's somewhere that he can't *fully* react. It amps up the sexual tension like crazy. He can't touch you, so tell him what it would feel like if he was touching you right then.
- **10.** Don't be afraid to keep a notebook of erotic words, phrases, prompts, and so on to help you out at first. Soon this will become second nature.
- **11.** *Bonus suggestion:* Never leave a hot, nasty, erotic message on your partner's voice mail or answering machine unless you are a hundred percent certain he's the only one who will be listening. Enjoy!

#### **Questions for the Author**

#### What's your full name?

Lynda Sue Sandoval.

#### Do you have any sisters?

Yes, I have the two best sisters in the world, Elena and Loretta, hence my dedication. We're very close, a lot alike, and a lot different, too. Before you ask, no, neither of my sisters have ever embarrassed me like Marisol embarrasses Cristy. I'm just not that easy to embarrass, for one, and they aren't like Marisol. It's usually me doing the embarrassing. My sister Elena has always told me that I actually *say* things that the rest of us think about but are either too polite or too afraid to voice aloud. This always cracks me up. And it's true.

#### Have you ever done phone sex?

Uh, nope. Sorry to disappoint. I *hate* the phone, hate talking on the phone unless someone has information to convey (I don't chat), and I rarely answer my phone at home. In a bit of irony even *I* don't understand, I work part-time as a 911 fire/medical dispatcher for the fire department. Can't really ignore those phone calls. Maybe that's why I don't answer the phone at home. Hmmmm. Anyway, I got the phone sex idea because one of my

sisters had a college roommate who did phone sex during undergrad. I was a lowly freshman, hanging out at their apartment one night to escape the sardine can that was my dorm room—shared by four girls, mind you. This roommate, in her jammies and studying, was, uh, *performing*, right there in the living room. I always wanted to put that in a book because it blew my nineteenyear-old mind.

Oh, but I have to share a humorous story. Loretta was in Colorado visiting in July, and we were on www.Amazon.com picking out some yoga DVDs she thought would be good for me (she's a yogi, too). Anyway, my "recently viewed items" popped up and the list was *all* stuff about the phone sex industry, how to break in, etc. She looked at me all horrified and said, "*Lynda!*" I told her, "*Book research! That's all!*" It was funny as hell.

## What about the whole knitting thing?

My sister Loretta started knitting, like, in the *womb*. She's incredible, and she can knit anything. I think she could knit world peace, if given enough time and a decent political climate. Anyway, when she was in Colorado visiting for Elena's graduation from her Ph.D. program (you go, Elena), she taught me how to knit, and I've been addicted to it since. There is a very cool knitting store/coffee shop on old Pearl Street in Denver, and that gave me the germ of an idea for Cristy's life.

## Which are you, Cristy or Marisol?

I'm both. I'm very introverted, like Cristy, although most people don't believe that because I'm not shy and I have a sharp, smartass wit when I'm around other people. But, trust me, you have to be an introvert to willingly sit in a room alone for months on end, writing a book. And I've done fifteen of them so far. Probably more, by the time this hits the shelves. But, as I've mentioned, I'm also not afraid to speak out like Marisol. And not always at the most appropriate times. Oops.

### What was the best part of writing this novella?

I have incorporated a *ton* of private, longtime family jokes that will crack my sisters up. My mom, too. I just can't wait for them to read it. That was the best part, by far.

#### What other books do you have out there?

Sheesh, a bunch. Too many to list. How about popping over to my website—you can view them all there, and even click on the covers to order.

www.LyndaSandoval.com



LYNDA SANDOVAL, a former police officer-turned-author, has become well known for writing five romance novels for the Encanto line. She has presented workshops all over the country, including at the 1999, 2000, and 2001 RWA Nationals, and has been the recipient of many awards and recognitions, most notably the Golden Heart (finalist) and the Rising Star 2000. In 2000, she was profiled in People en Español. After leaving the police force in 1998, Lynda wrote full-time for four years, and recently joined the fire department as a part-time Emergency Medical Dispatcher/EMT.

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