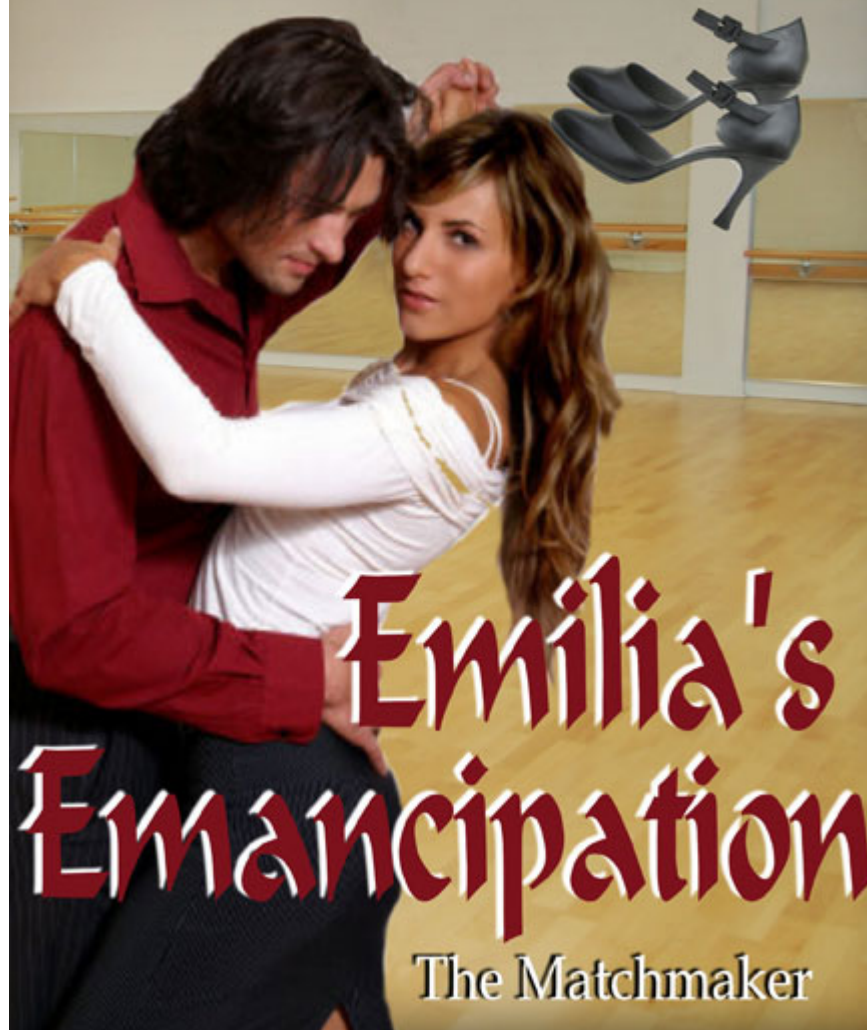


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Gracie C. McKeever



# EMILIA'S EMANCIPATION

*The Matchmaker 4*

**Gracie C. McKeever**

EROTIC ROMANCE



Siren Publishing, Inc.  
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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

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# EMILIA'S EMANCIPATION

## *The Matchmaker 4*

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## **Prologue**

*Chavez Dance Studio – Lower Manhattan*

Angela Calminetti felt the male instructor conducting the advanced Latin dance class in the adjoining room before she caught sight of him. A sudden jolt of excitement made her lose her count and she tripped over her husband's foot to land against his chest.

The instructor was the sultry, caramel-toned Spaniard from her visions!

She hadn't seen him outside of her dreams before now though she had been looking for him since she and Freddie had started their lessons just three weeks ago.

Freddie caught her against his chest now and held her close, laughing. "Jumping ahead to the Latin moves already?"

Angela smiled and leaned into her husband's embrace before pulling back to the proper space for a Waltz hold.

They were into just their third lesson of ten scheduled at the studio. Ostensibly, Freddie had purchased the lessons as an anniversary gift, but his less obvious motives were an excuse to spend quality, romantic time with his wife and bring back the spark to their love life.

Not that she and Freddie had anything to worry about in that department.

Angela looked up into her husband's face now and smiled, falling in love with him all over again at the thought of his gesture. However, she had a romantic gesture of her own to make and a love life that didn't involve her husband at all.

"I know what you're thinking, Ms. Buddinski and that's not what we're here for."

Angela cocked a brow. "What am I thinking?"

"That Emilia and the gorgeous dance instructor would make a perfect couple."

"See. You agree with me."

"Hardly. We've just been married so long I can read your mind, even without the benefit of your psychic gifts."

Angela smiled and playfully pinched his still-trim middle. "You have to admit, he is gorgeous."

"Should I be jealous?"

"Don't be silly. I'm speaking in a purely aesthetic sense, as an admirer in a gallery of fine works of art that I have no intentions of purchasing and taking home."

"But you want Emilia to take this piece of art home."

"It's my hope she'll want to once I get her into the gallery."

"Did I mention you are one scheming woman?"

"All the time."

Freddie chuckled and spun her around the polished wood floor with a sweeping move before executing a flamboyant dip to make Fred Astaire proud. "I guess I can't talk you out of interfering in your sister's love life then."

"Not a chance." Now that she was done with EJ, Nick and Evelyn, she had time to concentrate her efforts on Emilia the way her sister needed.

That last guy Emilia hooked up with a few years ago had been more than bad news. Angela couldn't let a travesty like him happen again. It wasn't good for Emilia or Anthony.

Freddie pulled her back up to stand against him, sliding his arms around her waist and drawing her close. "In that case, care to let me in on the latest

plot so I won't be surprised when your sister storms into the house one day soon trying to take off my head?"

"Certainly." Angela hooked an arm through her husband's and led him off the dance floor as several other couples swept across the parquet around them.

She sensed the dance instructor in the next room without seeing him, his aura a blue halo of energy burning bright around him and reaching out to her as he put his students through their paces in the sexy steps of the Tango.

His spirit was fiery and strong, yet that of a gentle protector. But most important, Angela sensed in him as she had in her brother-in-law Jason, fey qualities. She didn't know how strong they were or even if he was aware of them.

Perhaps, also like Jason, putting him together with his soul mate, something that Angela had some experience in, would spark the instructor's special abilities to life.

Regardless of his gifts, he was perfect for her inexperienced, sweet-natured sister with the wounded heart.

Ms. Independent Always Optimistic Emilia would vehemently deny the latter, but Angela knew her, knew all of her brothers and sisters and what they needed.

She smiled, already planning how she was going to get her sister and Mr. Dance Instructor together. She just hoped she could get Mercedes Chavez on board with her plot.

## **Chapter 1**

### *Wantagh, Long Island*

Emilia Vega followed the sound of her sister's voice, taking the short flight of cream carpeted steps until she reached the room where her sister sat reclining in a corner of the mauve leather sofa with one foot up on the cushions and in a cast. "Angie! Are you okay?" She rushed across the room to sit beside her sister on the sofa.

"Nothing serious. Just a broken ankle."

"Goodness, what happened?"

"I had a little spill while I was cleaning up in the garage earlier. Freddie rushed me to the hospital and there you have it." Angela knocked on her cast with her knuckles, just as cheerful and peppy as ever.

Emilia made a face nonetheless, couldn't imagine a broken anything not being painful and unaccustomed to seeing her sister immobile, even briefly.

She reached out a hand to squeeze Angela's shoulder. "So, there was no compound fracture or anything more serious?"

"Oh pish-tosh. Nothing so dramatic. I'll be out of this thing in six weeks, if not sooner."

"That's good to hear." Emilia nodded. "So, do you need help with the girls or something?"

"Danni and Tina are fine. It's me and Freddie who need the favor."

"Anything. Just ask."

"You know that Freddie and I have started taking dance lessons at this studio in Manhattan."

Emilia smiled, remembering how romantic she and her sisters, even the cynic and man hater Donna, had thought Freddie's gift when Angela told

them about it the day after she and her husband had returned from a weekend getaway. “How is that coming? Are you guys ready for *So You Think You Can Dance* yet?”

“We’ve still got a way to go for that.” Angela giggled and leaned close. “The favor I needed is for you to finish my lessons for me.”

“You’re kidding.”

“As you can see, I’m in no shape to play Ginger Rogers. And Freddie needs a partner.”

“Me? That kind of defeats the purpose don’t you think?”

“Not at all. It’s the thought that counts and I’d hate for all those lessons to go to waste. There’s seven more left.”

“The other sisters turned you down, huh?”

“I didn’t even ask them. I think you could benefit from the escapade more than them.”

That and she was single, Emilia thought, arching a brow and folding her arms across her breasts, beginning to smell a rat. “Oh really? And what do you mean by ‘escapade?’”

“Don’t be so paranoid. I just thought that you could afford a little excitement in your life. Step out of your comfort zone. Do something different and wild.”

“I get plenty of excitement in my life, thank you very much.”

Angela leaned back in her seat and mimicked Emilia’s pose. “Mmm, hmm. I have one word to say to that. Workaholic.”

“That’s not fair. You know I’ve cut my hours drastically in the last four years.”

“Thank goodness for small favors. But you still don’t take any personal time for your—”

“I have game night.”

“I mean grown-up time for yourself outside of what you spend with Anthony, smarty.”

“It’s Tony now.”

“He flexing those pre-teen muscles?”



Emilia nodded and laughed. She was glad to be off of the subject of her 'unexciting' life if only for the moment. She knew how her sister was when she wanted something. She was a regular pit bull. So how was she supposed to get out of this? "I can't count the number of times he's gotten huffy and reminded me that 'Anthony's' a nerdy name and Tony's much cooler. I thought I had a couple of more years at least before he started 'flexing his muscles,' as you put it."

"It was only five years ago when he had an imaginary friend."

Emilia grinned. "Butch. And if you mentioned it to him now, he'd totally deny it."

"I'll bet." Angela chuckled. "But back to the subject."

"Angie..."

"You did say anything, just ask."

"I know, but—"

"You'd really be doing us a big favor. You'll probably even have some fun while you're at it. And who knows? You might want to start taking lessons of your own."

"That's a gigantic leap."

"How can you not even be hungry for it? It's *dancing*, Em. You used to love to dance when we were younger."

"That was a long time ago." Just the mere mention of her flirtation with dance got her heart fluttering. She had taken all manner of dance from tap to contemporary and ballet from the first grade all the way to her sophomore year of high school when she had met and fallen for Anthony's father, her original Tony. That was all she wrote. Dancing gave way to a fresh passion, her new husband.

"Not so long that you've forgotten the joy of it."

"I don't know..." She couldn't come up with one good excuse not to do Angie the favor except her job and that wouldn't work if the lessons were—

"...on weekends, so there's no reason you can't do it with your new hours. And as for baby-sitting, Anthony," Angela cleared her throat, "excuse me, Tony, can stay here. You know how much fun he and the girls have when they get together."

This was the reason Angela had topped all the other girl scouts in their troop for cookie sales every year. She was a relentless saleswoman.

Angela pushed Emilia's shoulder with hers as if to move in for the kill. "What have you got to lose, Ms. Stick-in-the-Mud?"

"I am *not* a stick in the mud!"

"Okay, you're not a stick in the mud. Don't get your panties in a bunch."

"My panties are not in a bunch," Emilia mumbled.

She was well aware of what her siblings thought of her settled ways, calling her Saint Emilia, Emilia the Nun, and Goody-Two-Shoes, the unofficial conscience of all the Vega sibs since they'd been kids. They all swore she couldn't be bad if she tried.

Okay, so maybe Evelyn was right and she hadn't had an orgasm in she couldn't remember when, much less sex. And the only man she'd ever been with outside of one doomed fling a few years ago was Anthony's father.

But did that mean she was a boring, stick-in-the-mud divorcée who didn't know how to let loose and have a good time? "All right. I'll do it."

"I knew you'd see things my way."

\* \* \* \*

"No ball in the house!"

Anthony closed the back door behind him, stopped bouncing his basketball and cradled it under one arm as he made his way to the kitchen to grab some juice.

"Don't drink out of the container!"

He paused as he reached for the half-gallon orange juice container on the top shelf.

Geesh! He knew for sure his Aunt Angela and Uncle EJ could read peoples' minds, had grown up knowing he had really special relatives, but did all mothers have a sixth sense or was it just a Vega thing?

He pulled a cup down from one of the kitchen cabinets and poured in a healthy shot of orange juice then took a big gulp before carefully replacing

the container in the fridge because he was sure his mother would know if it was one centimeter out of place.

Anthony thought twice about bouncing his ball on the way up the stairs to his Mom's room, even if it would be on carpet since his Mom had such super-hearing. He froze on the threshold of her bedroom and gaped at his mother sitting at her vanity putting on make-up.

It wasn't a lot, just some mascara and blush, but it was way more than she usually put on, which was at most lipstick and even it was usually an earthy, sedate tone, nothing loud or fiery.

Anthony didn't think she *needed* make-up anyway. She looked fine without it, and if he asked some of his more advanced friends, which he *hadn't*, they thought she looked even finer, but then she wasn't *their* mother. Anthony couldn't count the times he'd had to put one of his friends in his place for calling his mom a 'hottie'. Sheesh, the things a guy had to put up with when his mother looked young enough to be his older sister and wasn't exactly a troll.

"What's the occasion?"

Mom stopped what she was doing and turned to him. "I'm going dancing, remember?"

"But it's not like...a date or anything."

"With your Uncle Freddie? I think your Aunt Angela would have something to say about that." Mom chuckled, finished what she was doing, stood and came over to kiss his forehead.

He winced, a reprimand about her mushiness and his being too big for kisses from his mom on the tip of his tongue, but he decided to be nice.

Mom put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed as she passed him to get her handbag hanging on the doorknob. "Ready to go?"

"All I had to pack was a toothbrush and some pjs. It's not like I'm going *away* or anything."

"I know it's only in the neighborhood and like your second home but you're still not going to be home home." Mom took her keys out of her bag and headed downstairs.

Anthony followed. "I don't see why I can't stay here. I am twelve and it's not like I can't take care of myself."

Mom turned to him at the bottom of the staircase and gave him her infamous arched-brow look that basically said, "You're too young to have an opinion in the matter."

"Sheesh, all right, I'm not old enough."

"Good boy."

"I'm almost a teenager," he mumbled.

"Almost doesn't equate to being. Besides, you *just turned* twelve." Mom ruffled his hair with one hand and opened the front door with the other.

Anthony grabbed his backpack from behind the front door, slung it over one shoulder and joined his mom out on the front steps as she closed and locked the door.

"When's the last time you had a haircut?"

"About four weeks ago."

"Hmm, it's getting a little shaggy."

"Mom..."

She threw up her hands in an I-surrender gesture that he knew she didn't really mean. "I'm just saying. You need to get it cut before school and that's next week."

"I'm going to go Tuesday."

"No pun, but that's cutting it a little close." She headed down the steps towards their minivan in the driveway.

Anthony sighed. His mom could be such a stickler sometimes.

He followed her down the steps, willing to walk to his aunt's, but figured he might as well ride with his mother so when she opened the passenger door for him he hopped in.

When Mom got into the driver's seat seconds later she said, "Don't forget your seatbelt."

"It's only a few blocks."

"More like eight and put it on anyway."

Grumbling, Anthony did as he was told.

Within five minutes they were pulling up towards Aunt Angela's driveway where his older cousins, Danni and Tina, were shooting hoops.

Mom honked the horn and both girls stopped what they were doing, smiled and ran over to the minivan to meet Anthony as he got out.

"Hi Aunt Em," the girls chorused.

"Hey girls! How's your mom?"

Anthony watched as they looked at each other and giggled before quickly turning serious.

Girls were weird but he got a funny feeling at their laughter, like something was up.

"She's fine," both girls answered.

His mom turned to him. "Going to be all right, kiddo?"

Anthony felt heat rush to his face. Did she have to keep calling him a kid? He got the message. He could already hear Danni and Tina ragging him later. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Right."

Uncle Freddie came out of the house clad in black dress slacks a matching shirt and shiny black shoes.

"Boy, don't you look spiffy," Mom said.

Uncle Freddie popped up his collar. "Hey, I'm trying to look the part." He turned to Anthony and gave him a cool homeboy handshake and half-hug. "You're growing like weed, kiddo."

For some reason when his uncle called him kiddo it didn't sound half as bad as when his mom did it. Not even when he accompanied it by mussing Anthony's hair before he got into the minivan next to Mom.

"You girls play nice with your cousin," Uncle Freddie said to Danni and Tina.

"We always do," Tina said.

"See you tomorrow, Tony." Mom saluted before she started the car and waved at his cousins. "See you girls. Tell your mom I said hi and I'll talk to her when we get back."

"Okay, Auntie!"

Anthony watched his mom drive off and thought as moms went she wasn't so bad. He knew she was doing the best she could, so he tried to cut her some slack and let her get her over-protectiveness on, playing the mommy and daddy role. And she *had* called him 'Tony' after all. Not like he was used to the name yet himself. He was still 'Anthony.' Heck, he would always be Anthony because there was only one Tony Gallo and that was his dad even if the man wasn't around.

"So, did you bring any cool new video games this time, cuz?" Tina wrapped an arm around his shoulder as they walked up the stairs in front of the house and Danni wrapped her arm around his other shoulder.

"Yeah, cuz. What's in the bag?"

"The usual stuff." Why did he feel like they were trying to distract him from something?

The feeling grew when they walked him toward the stairs leading down to the family room where Aunt Angela was.

"Mom, Anthony's here!" Tina called as if in warning.

As soon as they reached the threshold and Anthony saw his aunt reclining on the sofa with one leg up on the cushions encased in a cast to just below her calf, he knew what was up.

Her ankle wasn't really broken.

He didn't know how he knew it, except that he didn't *feel* any pain or discomfort from her, two things he figured should accompany a broken anything.

Why had she lied to his mom?

He wondered if it had anything to do with what his aunts and other uncles called her 'matchmaking tricks' and if she was trying to hook up his mom.

Anthony didn't know how to feel about that one. His mom hadn't been with anyone in a long time, at least four years, and before that relationship, the dry spell had been even longer.

He guessed she needed someone in her life the same way almost all his aunts and uncles had someone in their lives though.

He wouldn't mind it if she hooked up with someone as cool as his Aunts Tabitha and Slany or, even cooler, his uncle Jason the cowboy from Colorado who Aunt Evelyn had married.

Any way he looked at it, he'd be losing his mother and as grown-up and old as he thought he was, that wasn't something he wanted. Question was, would she wind up with another self-absorbed, abusive jerk like her last boyfriend or a nice guy willing to share his time with a divorced mom's twelve-year old son as well as the divorced mom.

"Antho...Tony, come here and let me look at you." His aunt put her arms out, waiting for him to come over.

Anthony crossed the threshold, smiling. His Aunt Angela always had this affect on him.

Uncle Freddie said she could charm a hungry lion in the jungle out of eating her.

He went into his aunt's arms and accepted her hug before pulling back and when he looked in her eyes, he knew that she knew he knew her ankle wasn't broken.

Aunt Angela grinned. "I think we have a lot to talk about."

## Chapter 2

### *Chavez Dance Studio – Lower Manhattan*

Now that she'd taken Angie's advice, fancying herself up as if she was going on a date, which couldn't be further from the truth, she felt ridiculous. Or more accurately, she felt like a young girl playing dress-up.

Emilia couldn't remember the last time she put on anything more than a light touch of copper lipstick and that was only in deference to her job, otherwise, she went without, felt more comfortable going natural.

*Step out of your comfort zone.*

Not that ballroom dancing was that far out of her zone. There was a time she'd lived and breathed dancing, a time she'd done it well and had the trophies and medals to prove it.

She'd never taken ballroom dancing, per se, but could it be that difficult from all the other styles? Dancing was dancing, right? Dancing was universal.

Emilia watched Freddie stretching in one corner of the studio as several other couples went through their paces on the floor.

She guessed she should stretch too. She kept in shape with Pilates and aerobics but she hadn't done any dancing outside of family birthday parties and weddings. She would probably be using some muscles she hadn't used in a while tonight.

Emilia got caught up watching the graceful moves of a pair doing the waltz, wondered why they were in the beginning class since they looked so polished and natural, but then maybe they were a pair of instructors.



Funny, how she'd always found that formal style of dance boring but the way this couple did it, all fluid and elegant lines, spoke to her on a visceral level.

Emilia felt the hunger flare up in her chest, making her heart pound with anticipation, suddenly glad she had taken Angie's advice and come.

She heard a loud gasp from the corner of the room and jerked up her gaze to see Freddie hobbling around as he rubbed the back of one thigh.

Emilia rushed over and put a hand on his arm, the mother in her automatically coming out. "Are you all right?"

"I pulled my hamstring."

"What kind of stretching were you doing?"

"Just the usual stuff. I guess my old football injuries are catching up with me. You know I'm not as young as I used to be."

Emilia smiled. "None of us are." She hooked an arm through his. "Can you walk on it?"

"I'll try." Freddie put weight on the leg in question and instantly winced and limped back to the corner where he'd been stretching to rest against the barre. "Can you help me to that sofa over by the door?"

"Sure." Emilia let him lean his weight on her and helped him over to the sofa where he flopped down into one corner with a loud groan.

"I don't think I can do our lesson tonight." He looked up at her with such a chagrined expression on his face, Emilia's heart constricted with sympathy.

"Don't worry about it. We'll do it next week."

"No, no. Why should you miss out on a lesson just because I can't perform? Mercedes!"

Emilia turned her head to see the person Freddie was summoning, a tall, mahogany-brown woman clad in a playful black mini-skirt, with well-defined legs from here to Mars.

Emilia admired the graceful, smooth way she traversed the floor and thought she had to be either a visiting runway model or a dance instructor for the studio.

When the woman in question reached them in a pair of three-inch heels that accentuated the lean musculature of her calves and put her at almost a foot taller than Emilia's five-two, she was immediately transported back to her teens when she used to lament her petite dimensions and fantasize about being as sleek and leggy as the woman now smiling down at Freddie.

"Freddie, how can I help you?"

She had a sultry Spanish accent that only added to her exotic, sensual mystique and Emilia was sure had all her male students drooling and hanging onto her every word.

"First off, this is my sister-in-law, Emilia Vega. Emilia, this is Mercedes Chavez, the proprietor of the studio."

Mercedes turned to Emilia with a wide smile and took her hand. Emilia felt her energy and warmth all the way to her bones.

"It is nice to meet you, *Señora*—"

"It's *Señorita*," Freddie quickly corrected.

"Ah, you are not married?"

Emilia frowned, suddenly had a sneaking suspicion about this whole deal and was ready to pummel her older sister, broken ankle or not. That is *if* she had a broken ankle. In the meantime, she smiled for Mercedes, couldn't blame *her* for Angie's wiliness. "No, I'm not." She cut a look down at Freddie, wondering if his hamstring was really injured. He *had* played football back in high school, so it was conceivable he'd aggravated something with his and Angie's dancing lessons. Still.

"Anyway, Mercedes, I'm out of commission for the night. Bum leg." Freddie lightly punched his thigh.

"Oh, this is too bad, yes."

"Yes it is. But I don't want Em to miss out on a lesson after she so graciously agreed to stand in for my wife."

Mercedes nodded. "How *is* the *señora's* ankle?"

"She'll live, but the reason I called you over is I was hoping you could make some arrangements for Em to have a partner tonight? I know it's an inconvenience, but I really don't want her to miss out."

Emilia mumbled just loud enough for Freddie to hear, "Pouring it on kind of thick, aren't you, brother-in-law?"

Freddie turned an innocent gaze her way and asked, "What was that, Em?"

"Oh nothing."

Mercedes gave Emilia's shoulder a friendly squeeze. "I would be happy to accommodate the *señorita*!"

She sounded sincere, but with her paranoia sinking in thanks to Angie's antics and three siblings' weddings in as many years, Emilia was beginning to wonder if the lovely Mercedes Chavez was in on her brother-in-law and sister's plot.

Now that *was* paranoid! But then Emilia knew who she was dealing with and Angie could be relentless when it came to fixing up her siblings. Emilia just never foresaw her sister focusing this particular quality *her* way.

"Wait here. I shall return with the perfect partner!"

Emilia watched Mercedes switch across the floor into the adjoining room, feeling bad for her previous thoughts about the woman. She seemed so earnest and excited, like she really wanted to make up for Freddie and Emilia's misfortune.

Still, Emilia turned a glare on her brother-in-law as soon as Mercedes was gone. "I know what you're up to."

"Me?" He put a hand on his chest and widened his eyes.

"Sure you don't want to go to the hospital for that leg? Or will it be better in oh, I don't know, an hour or so?"

"I'm sure it will be if I just sit here and rest it."

She stared at him just long enough to burst out laughing at his innocent act then sat down on the sofa beside him and punched his leg. "You know I'm going to kill you both when this is over, don't you?"

He squeezed her in a one-armed embrace. "I love you too, sis."

Emilia didn't get a chance to reply because in the next breath Mercedes was ushering over a younger man from the other room.

She paused in front of Emilia and Freddie with her arm hooked through the *volunteer's* and Emilia could see that he had graciously agreed to stand

in for Freddie the same way she had agreed to stand in for Angie if the frown on his face was any indication.

“Emilia Vega, this is my son Ramón Chavez. Ramón, this is *Señorita* Vega.”

Though Emilia knew Mercedes was at least a few years older than herself, she didn’t believe there was any way the woman was old enough to have a son Ramón’s age. But even then, Emilia knew *she* was older than Ramón by at least several years and why was she thinking about the man’s age in comparison to hers?

*Because you find him so darn hot, that’s why!*

Emilia instantly grew wet between her thighs at the thought, couldn’t remember when she had been so instantly attracted to and turned on by a man.

Anthony’s father had had the rare power of turning her inside out with just a glance, but that was more than a decade ago, a decade and a years-long, soul-destroying affair ago.

Emilia blinked when she realized three sets of eyes were watching her and she had yet to stand and properly respond to Mercedes’s introductions.

She leaped to her feet and awkwardly stuck out her suddenly moist hand which was immediately engulfed by the caramel, smooth hand of Ramón Chavez.

The firm contact sent an electric tingle straight up her arm, cold heat spreading through her upper body until her nipples hardened and stood at attention. Her reaction was totally inappropriate, totally out of synch with the situation. The man hadn’t uttered a word yet!

“It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Vega.”

Emilia gripped his hand like a life preserver, the look in his mocha eyes and the sound of his bone-melting voice making her knees shaky and inciting visions of dashing swashbucklers. He even had a tiny gold hoop winking at her from his left earlobe to cinch the image.

This was ridiculous. She wasn’t a lovesick teenage girl. She was a divorced woman with a twelve-year-old son. She didn’t have time for pirate fantasies!

*That's right, Em. Focus.* "Please, call me Emilia. And it's nice to meet you too." *Atta girl! That's the way to put him in his place with the breathless flirty voice.*

"Em-e-lee-ah." He licked his full lips as if enjoying the taste of her name on his tongue. "It's a beautiful name."

What was beautiful was the way he said it—correctly, she might add—smooth, slightly-accented voice breaking down each syllable and elongating her name to make it sound like exotic poetry, not like most people who anglicized it to the mundane-sounding 'Amelia' even though her name started with an 'E.'

"You can call me Ramón."

She loved the way he rolled the 'R' and said Rah-moan. Moan. He could say that again. Was there any name he *didn't* utter with a sexy lilt?

"My mother tells me you're in need of a dance partner for the evening, Emilia."

Her womb contracted when he said her name again and caused another rush of warm moisture to her panties. "I really don't want to put anyone out."

"You wouldn't be putting me out."

Okay, was she going to have to resort to the truth and tell him there was no way she could dance with him because he turned her on too much? Yeah, that would go over well, and send Freddie flying home to tell Angie her evil plan to hook her up with the sexy dance instructor had worked. No way, José.

"You will not be putting him out. *M'ijo* is an instructor here at the stu—"

"*Part-time* instructor," Ramón said. "My mother is trying to get me to come on full-time, but she forgets I have other commitments."

"Ay, commitments. This is your calling. You are a *dancer*, Ramón."

"*Mami...*"

Emilia almost chuckled at his good-natured irritation, how much he sounded like Anthony, an adult Anthony with a deep and bone-sizzling baritone, of course.

She wondered if she and Anthony would be as close as Mercedes and Ramón seemed to be fifteen, twenty years from now.

How old *was* he anyway?

“Surely, you have other duties I’m pulling you away from...” Emilia gaped as he bowed at the waist in a sweeping, Old World gesture that took her breath away, especially when he looked at her from beneath those lush, curly lashes and made her nipples pulsate.

God, the man was a walking, breathing aphrodisiac! No way could she come back for another lesson. She didn’t think she could survive this one without floating away on a tide of her own fresh and sudden arousal.

Ramón softly brushed the back of her hand with his lips, the silken whiskers clipped in an oval around his upper lip and chin tickling her skin and sending the most delicious and startling electrical currents shooting between her thighs before he said, “Truly, you’d be helping me out when I demonstrate the steps to the class.” He gently squeezed her hand, waiting for her acquiescence. “*Señorita?*”

How could she say no? Why would she want to when her blood was sizzling at his touch and she felt alive for the first time in years?

Emilia closed her eyes and followed his lead into the middle of the floor, diving headlong in the deep end of a pool when she didn’t know how to swim and no lifeguard was on duty.

### Chapter 3

Ramón felt her hand shaking as he pulled her out onto the dance floor. Her obvious nervousness made him want to get next to her ten times more than when his mother had first dragged him over to meet ‘the beautiful and unmarried Emilia Vega’ and he’d gotten a good look at who his mother was trying to fix him up with *now*.

Upon first inspection Emilia was attractive—titian-hued hair falling down passed her shoulders in shimmering soft waves that begged to be caressed and framing an elfin face complete with stubborn cleft chin and pronounced, sculpted cheekbones. But it was the eyes—topaz, almond-shaped and sparkling with intelligence—that put her over the top to beautiful.

She had the kind of observant gaze that didn’t miss a trick, one which could be simultaneously bold and demure, or hot and cold depending on the circumstances. But beneath all its many facets, there would always be compassion.

He might have dismissed her as fragile and insubstantial if he wasn’t drawn and willing to look passed her diminutive size. But Ramón was willing, her generous, well-proportioned curves and toned muscles stirring him where many of his mother’s top female instructors’ leggy and full-bosomed shapes never had.

Christ, she couldn’t have been more than a buck-ten soaking wet, yet the minute he took her in his arms and showed her the proper arm extensions and positions for a Viennese Waltz, his cock hardened at the idea of getting her into some of the more intimate holds of the hot Latin dances. He could feel her sliding against him during a sizzling Argentine Tango or, a sexy

Salsa, imagining the heat of her pussy against his cock, making it throb with anticipation and hunger.

Ramón just barely held in a moan as she followed his lead in a flawless promenade.

“Are you all right?”

“Sorry, just doing some woolgathering.”

“Woolgathering makes you moan?”

It did when he was woolgathering about driving himself inside a sexy temptress who didn’t seem to know exactly how sexy she was.

Ramón just grinned in answer, tried not to think how it would feel to have her wet heat gloving his hard cock and milking him.

God, he wanted this woman, had never wanted anyone as much so soon.

Had it been so long since he’d indulged that he was now starving for a woman’s touch? Or was it just *this* woman’s touch?

“I thought I might have been doing something wrong.”

He glanced at her and though he wasn’t exactly a tall man at five-ten and she was wearing heels, he still found himself looking down several inches into those magnificent topaz eyes that were at the moment glimmering with uncertainty. “You’re not doing anything wrong. Far from it.” He wanted to pull her into his arms and just hold her, the alluring soft vanilla musk of her sending his libido into orbit.

He tried to beat it down telling himself she was so not his type, just a tiny slip of a thing if he was being honest with himself. Could she even handle the appetites and physical demands of a lusty Latin man who had a wife in his past and more than several experienced and enthusiastic lovers under his belt?

His mother had said she wasn’t married, but he wondered how inexperienced this made her. “How old are you?” he asked.

“Wow! I can’t wait to hear what you ask a woman on a second date.”

“Is this a first date?” He watched her face flush and wondered what salacious fantasies she was trying so hard not to entertain, determined to be the star of every one if given half the chance. His competitive spirit demanded it.



“You know what I mean.”

Actually, he did. He knew she was as attracted to him as he was to her and that she wasn't appreciating the feeling one bit.

Why? Was she afraid that the feeling was mutual or wasn't? Or was she just plain afraid of him?

Intrigued and unperturbed by her outrage, Ramón thought it was time to move their dance ahead a few steps. “I accept.”

She arched a brow. “I'm sorry?”

Ay, did she pull off the sultry seductress with little effort but rather than insulting or dousing him with ice water, her haughty expression and tone heated him from the inside out, made him want her more. She was a challenge, and he never had been able to resist a challenge. “I accept your invitation.” He tightened his hold on her slim waist as they glided across the polished parquet floor and he realized that Emilia was a natural. Since they'd stepped onto the floor and he'd outlined what he wanted from her, she picked up the steps of the dance with minimal direction and as naturally as she flirted.

“My invitation?” she asked.

“To a date.”

“I never said—”

“Did you used to dance?”

“What?” She shook her head as if to clear it and Ramón laughed as she glared up at him. “You're trying to confuse me.”

He was trying to do a lot more than that. Way more. “Is it working?”

“No. And in answer to your previous question, I'm forty-six. So perhaps you'd like to amend that acceptance?”

“Why? I still want to go out with you and I think you'd like to go out with me too.”

“I'm divorced. And I have a twelve-year-old son.”

He smiled, held her waist and hand firmer, body humming in response to her warmth and curves. At the rate he was going, he would come in his pants any second, worse than a horny teen and he couldn't remember the last time he'd done that or if he had at all. “Are you trying to scare me off?”

“Is it working?”

“Not by a long shot.”

She actually giggled and the light girlish sound sent explosions detonating in his chest, quickly spreading through the rest of his body to settle somewhere at the base of his spine, hardening his shaft and making his balls constrict with longing.

“And you? How old are you, Ramón?”

He was tempted to lie, didn’t want to scare her away after all her confessions, but finally decided on the truth. He didn’t want to start off whatever this was between them on the wrong foot, sure he had at least one strike against him with the age difference. He did not want to add dishonesty to the mix. “I’m thirty-three.” He watched her gape, thought he heard her gulp before she tried to pull away.

“I can’t do this.”

“What? We’re just dancing and enjoying each other’s company.”

“And making dates.”

“That’s what two adults who find each other attractive do, no?” He put as much emphasis on the word adults as he could without being too obnoxious. She needed to know he wasn’t as inexperienced or young as she clearly thought he was.

“Who says I find you attractive?”

He chuckled and pulled her against him, listened to the satisfying sound of her breath catching in her chest and felt her upright nipples poke just below his own through the sheer material of her dress and his shirt. He just barely avoided shuddering, masking his body’s instant responses to her with a monumental effort. Rather than focus on him, he turned it back on her. “Your body’s reaction to me says you find me attractive.” He leaned close, nuzzling her throat and inhaling deep, torturing himself with her closeness as he teased her. “More than attractive,” he murmured.

She tried to pull from his arms again, but he held her firm and, curiosity piqued, he asked again, “Did you used to dance?”

She averted her glance, an instant shroud of melancholy falling over her demeanor before she murmured, “A long time ago.”

He sensed a world of regret in her answer, wondered what had made her give up dancing, wondered *who* had made her give it up. “Another bold question for a first date?” he teased, trying to bring back her good humor.

When he succeeded and her full, copper-tinted lips curved up into a shy smile, Ramón thought his burgeoning erection would burst through his pants with his excitement.

“You’re something else, Ramón Chavez.”

“Then you’ll go out with me.”

“Not by a long shot.”

\* \* \* \*

After all her tough talking and mental threats, Emilia dropped Freddie off then drove straight home without going in to confront Angela or even give Anthony a good-night kiss.

She told herself it was late and she didn’t want to stir up trouble for something as trivial as her sister’s habitual matchmaking. But the truth was she needed some time alone to wrap her brain around all that had happened that evening and figure out what her next move should be.

As soon as she got into her house, she’d half-convinced herself that there was nothing to figure out.

She’d more than likely never see Ramón again and if she did, it would only be in passing during her lessons with Freddie. There, nothing to figure out, nothing to deal with, especially not unrequited lust. No siree.

Of course convincing her aroused nipples and soaking panties of this was another story altogether. Never mind the fact that the very thought of Ramón had her squirming in her seat as she bent down to slide off her high-heeled sandals.

If she were the type to masturbate, like her sister Evelyn was always telling her she needed to do, especially since Emilia went such long stints between men, she might be tempted.

Long stints? That was putting it mildly. Try four years.

God, when she actually considered her depravation in cold hard numbers like that, it didn't seem possible she'd survived it without going mad, except when she remembered why she abstained.

She was a mother with a son to think about and the last time she'd given in to her admittedly miniscule physical urges and let a man in her life when Anthony was eight and even much more impressionable than he was now, things hadn't turned out too well.

Her run-in tonight with Mr. Sex-in-Dancing-Shoes had her second- and triple-guessing her vow to stay celibate until Anthony was sixteen or at least more emotionally capable of handling a new man in his mother's life.

Evelyn said she was sacrificing her libido unjustly, said that what had happened with Ted was no reason to drop out of the dating game and deny her sensuality. Evelyn, the rest of her siblings and even her parents in fact, thought that she asked too much of herself, put too much pressure on herself to be perfect. And she guessed she did, logically or not, and especially when it came to the welfare of her son.

Despite all this, Evelyn assured her anyone could have let her guard down and made a mistake, but the problem was Emilia had made the mistake and it had gotten her son hurt.

Besides, sacrificing her libido was a small price to pay for the emotional and physical well-being of her son. She'd done without for even longer before Ted and after her husband, Tony. She could certainly do it again. No biggie, as the kids said.

Darn, did she have to think *biggie* now when she could just imagine Ramón sliding through her wetness and filling every long-empty part of her to capacity with what she'd felt was his biggie when he'd held her in his arms?

Emilia sighed, squeezing her legs together against the erotic images of her and Ramón burning up the sheets to no avail. The harder she tried not to think of him, the harder she squeezed her legs together, the friction created between her labia only making things worse and her more aware of what she was missing in her life which was the weight of a man on top of her,

between her legs, pushing through her slickness until they were one where and how it counted most.

She closed her eyes, one hand sliding under her dress and inside her panties, fingers brushing her labial lips before freezing.

Now what? It was one thing to talk and think about masturbation, but quite another to actually do it. And Emilia never had.

She knew Evelyn would probably keel over in shock if not laugh herself silly at the news despite being the first of their siblings to have dubbed her Emilia-the-Nun.

She was tempted to call Evelyn, but could imagine how that conversation would go, basically calling her younger sister for tips on how to masturbate. Don't *think* so!

She'd survived this long without getting herself off. Surely she could survive a little longer.

But Emilia had never encountered a man who set her skin on fire with just a look and had moisture overflowing into her panties with a simple introduction.

Ramón Chavez was a force as big as her much prized self-control, a force she couldn't deny as much as she wanted to.

How hard could masturbation be anyway? She was an independent, Twenty-First Century career woman after all. All she needed to do was open herself up to a little experimentation and touch herself. She'd already stepped out of her comfort zone once tonight. Surely she could do it again.

Of course it would help a little if she knew where her G-spot was!

After a couple of minutes of useless fumbling, Emilia sighed in frustration, almost ready to give up. The only things that kept her going were the Vega, non-quitter gene and the suddenly intense need to get off.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, determined to do this for once.

Emilia conjured Ramón's face, picturing him when he'd held her in his arms, mocha eyes gleaming with lust to match the wicked grin on his full, sensual lips, long elegant fingers stroking her waist and threading through

her fingers with just enough ownership to keep her from questioning his desire and intent.

She imagined what he would do with his fingers now, skating them along the insides of her thighs maybe before separating her lips with his thumbs and teasing her opening with his tongue.

Ooh, that alone left her shuddering, just the idea of his mouth on her, licking her throbbing flesh, sucking, biting ... *Okay, girl. Get a grip!*

She didn't have his tongue but she had her fingers, imagined her fingers were *his* fingers, slowly sliding inside before stopping.

Emilia gasped at the thrill of touching herself so intimately, held on to the image of Ramón's caramel face, the rich smooth sound of his voice. She wiggled her finger around and brushed her inner walls before sliding in another finger.

She moaned, sliding her other hand up to her breasts and gently pinched an erect nipple.

Emilia panted, circling and pumping her hips against her hand as she thrust and twisted her fingers inside herself.

*Ramón's fingers.*

It was Ramón's hand that glided from one breast to the other, Ramón's fingers that tweaked and turned her nipples until the sensation zinged all the way to her core and set her swollen clitoris on fire. It was Ramón's thumb that flicked her wanting kernel of flesh and made Emilia whimper with the decadent excitement of it.

She was so wet her fingers were soaked, making it all too easy for them to slide deep, curve up towards that elusive...magical...button...that..."Oh God!" Emilia stiffened in shock, held her fingers in place for one long, desperate moment before firmly massaging the soft spongy gland beneath their tips. She was so near exploding into a thousand shards of spent flesh on the bed she didn't know how she kept the presence of mind to continue her quest.

Emilia squeezed her eyes against the sensations overwhelming her, forcing Ramón's name to burst from her lips as she toppled over the edge of her precarious cliff of abstinence straight into liquid dissipation.

Panting, Emilia slid her fingers from inside her and turned onto her side, thinking there was no turning back now. She had opened Pandora's box.

More like Ramón had opened it.

The shock of her actions barely worn off, Emilia's body already prepared for a repeat performance, vaginal muscles tightening and clutching at the idea of coming beneath hands other than her own, climbing towards another climax at the idea of coming beneath Ramón's hands.

## Chapter 4

It was never too early in the school year to meet with the parents of his students by Ramón's way of teaching, but he'd rather the meeting occurred under positive circumstances.

At his last assignment in the city, he'd made it a habit of requesting meetings with parents the first day of school. He liked to get to know his kids through their parents' eyes and get a feel for what he'd be dealing with, being as proactive and cooperative as he could working within the bounds of bureaucratic red-tape.

His maverick methods weren't always appreciated, especially from the older teachers who didn't like him upsetting the status quo with his highfaluting ideas about teaching inner city kids. Take it to the suburbs was the general consensus of his peers so he had, but not for lack of trying and not before taking a bullet to the leg for his trouble while breaking up a schoolyard brawl between two boys.

It had been a through-and-through flesh wound but he couldn't convince his mother that he wasn't risking life and limb or, at the very least, his career in dance if he continued to teach junior high English in Brooklyn.

Like his mother, Ramón wasn't a quitter and briefly contemplated going back to the same school, but to stop his mom from worrying so much, he'd agreed to change schools rather than stop teaching altogether.

Since she'd gotten her way on one front, Mom took full advantage of the situation while she could and daily worked on getting Ramón to come to the studio full-time and help teach her beloved dance classes, when she wasn't trying to fix him up that was. She called herself grooming him to take over the business, but as much as he loved dancing, teaching it wasn't



his passion as it was his mother's and he had other fish to scale teaching English and, evidently, dealing with troubled students again.

Ramón thought he'd gotten away from the at-risk kids prevalent in public schools when he took his act on the road to Wantagh, but knew he was being naive. Unfortunately, drugs, guns and other societal ills didn't stop at the border between the inner city and the suburbs and Ramón wondered exactly which societal ills ailed Anthony Gallo.

The kid was an honors and straight A student from what Ramón read in his school records. He just seemed to have a problem keeping his eyes open in English class, a blow to Ramón's ego to be sure, but he was more concerned with the other possible causes behind the kid's sleepiness other than boredom.

Talking to him after class hadn't helped one iota. As he'd expected, Anthony had been evasive and close-mouthed, putting down his sleepiness to cramming the night before and promising he wouldn't fall asleep in class again. Normally, this might have been good enough, especially when Ramón considered how widespread sleep deprivation was in America's kids, but something in Ramón's gut told him he needed to investigate the situation further.

He sat behind his desk now leaning back on two legs of the chair, tapping the eraser end of his red pencil against the desk and glancing at the clock in the back of the room as he took a break from grading an earlier pop quiz.

Ramón coolly waited for one or both of Anthony's parents to arrive and for the games to begin but nearly lost it altogether when Emilia Vega skidded to a stop on the threshold of his classroom and gawked.

\* \* \* \*

Emilia had to be imagining things. Ramón Chavez hadn't just almost toppled over in his chair behind Mrs. Merrick's desk and wasn't now standing fully recovered and staring at her as if she was a tasty morsel he wanted to devour.

Sure she'd been so concerned with what the problem could be with Anthony at school that she had barely paid attention to the signature at the bottom of the letter he sheepishly handed her the night before. She'd just assumed it was Mrs. Merrick's signature.

How could she have missed such a big detail?

Emilia had been so proud of herself for managing to avoid Ramón Chavez at the dance studio her last two trips there, despite Freddie's valiant and obvious efforts to keep them in each other's path, and here, Ramón was Anthony's English teacher.

If Emilia didn't know better, she'd have sworn her sister had a hand in this, but it wasn't like Angela had gotten Mrs. Merrick pregnant. The woman's taking maternity leave was just an inevitable matter of time, but did that mean her replacement had to be Ramón Chavez of the sexy dance moves and sinful body variety and not some other Mr. Chavez of the pot belly, balding pate and nearing Social Security benefits variety?

God, she was getting all worked up over nothing. What she needed to think about was Anthony and why his teacher, regardless of who he was, wanted to see her.

Ramón extended a hand. "This is a surprise."

"In more ways than one," Emilia mumbled and took several hesitant steps into the classroom, successful in convincing herself that her unease was unwarranted until she put her hand in Ramón's and almost melted into a puddle on the floor from the skin to skin contact.

She cleared her throat, hoping the effort worked its way up to her brain and said, "So this is the other commitment you mentioned at the studio that night."

He nodded. "I missed you at the last couple of dance sessions."

Emilia gaped. "Tell me that's not why you summoned me here today."

"*You're* Anthony's mother?"

"In the flesh."

Ramón released her hand to slide it around to the middle of her back, smoothly directing her to a chair beside his desk. "I didn't call you here as a ruse if that's what you meant earlier." He grinned and it was as if that

simple act was a direct link to Emilia's breasts, the sight of his sensual mouth tilted up hardening her nipples to painful proportions.

She used to think her husband was the cat's pajamas, a master at turning her on without any real effort, but Tony's gorgeous African American poise had nothing on Ramón's suave, South American sex appeal.

*Try saying that last bit five times fast, girl.*

Emilia gritted her teeth to keep from laughing. It was either this or she'd go crazy with the lust suddenly inundating her.

God, the man sent her from zero to seventy in five seconds flat!

*Think girl, think and put a break on your hormones! He's double trouble—younger and your son's teacher. If those aren't gigantic conflicts of interest for you, then nothing is.*

"I asked you here to discuss Anthony's difficulties in my class."

"Difficulties?"

"Please, have a seat." Ramón gestured to the chair again.

"I'd rather stand." The more discomfort she endured around this man the better. She didn't want to focus on how very pleasant his hand had felt on her back, how intimate. She didn't want to focus on how warm his smile made her inside, or that her nipples were tingling with need since she'd walked into the classroom and seen him. "English is one of my son's favorite subjects. I don't see why he would be having difficulties in your class."

Ramón sighed and leaned one cheek on the edge of his desk, bringing himself eye-to-eye with Emilia and this was only because she had on her heels, otherwise, he'd probably still have been taller than her. "Have you noticed any changes in Anthony's mood or behavior?"

Emilia frowned. "Changes in mood or behavior?"

Ramón nodded. "He's been having problems staying awake in my class, and I thought that perhaps he wasn't getting enough sleep at home or—"

"You're not suggesting he's on drugs are you?"

Ramón shrugged, but she could tell that this was exactly what he was thinking.

She didn't know what sort of troubled students he was used to dealing with in his past tenure as a teacher, but he could be sure Anthony wasn't one of them.

Emilia paced, her gut telling her Anthony wouldn't do something so foolish. She'd spent too much time talking to him about the negative effects of drugs, cigarettes and alcohol for him to try any of those things.

*Who are you trying to convince, Em? All kids are curious, like to experiment.*

"Emilia."

She paused in front of the classroom and glanced up at Ramón when she felt his hands curve around her shoulders.

Wow, she hadn't even heard him move from his spot on the desk!

"Don't take this as a personal attack against your parenting skills. I'm just exploring every option and trying to figure out what might be affecting Anthony's performance in my class, other than my just boring him silly."

She grinned at his teasing tone, knew the latter wasn't possible, and couldn't see anyone being bored around him. Her erect nipples and throbbing clitoris certainly weren't bored around him, all her internal organs awake beneath his touch and doing a shameless dance of joy.

Emilia gave herself an internal slap, firmly telling herself she should *not* be turned on by this man. This was not a romantic assignation but a meeting to discuss her son. If she was going to step back into the perilous dating waters with anyone, certainly it would be someone more suitable than a younger man who was her son's teacher wouldn't it? "I know what you're doing, and I appreciate it. But Anthony wouldn't do drugs. He's too smart for that."

Ramón silently looked at her.

"Look, I know that's what all parents say about their kids. But I know my son. He wouldn't do drugs."

"Okay, then is there something else that could be bothering him?"

Even though she had drastically cut back on her hours, delegating much of her duties as a buyer at Macy's, and tried to spend as much time as

possible with Anthony, she couldn't say for sure. Actually, he'd been avoiding her the last couple of weeks or so, had even begged off their standing game night Friday.

Emilia remembered checking on him when he went to bed early, thought he might have been sick, but he didn't have a fever or any other aches and pains. "I honestly can't say." She stared up at Ramón, searching his face for what she didn't know, but when he leaned in to brush his lips against hers Emilia felt as if she had come home.

Now, what had they just been talking about? Oh right, Anthony! Her son.

Emilia gathered enough wits about her to slide her hands up between herself and Ramón and push them against his chest but found herself fondling his hard muscles instead, fisting a handful of his shirtfront to pull him closer, all thoughts of appropriateness and propriety going right out the window with her good sense.

The spicy scent of his aftershave incited and intrigued her, something with sandalwood, subtle but masculine and so right for him. Emilia closed her eyes, took a deep breath and sampled it as she stood on her toes and opened her mouth to deepen the kiss.

She was like an overstimulated pubescent girl stealing kisses behind the bleachers at a football game and not the divorced mother of a twelve-year-old boy with problems in school, but couldn't manage to pull herself away. She darted out her tongue to capture Ramón's, eagerly dancing and tangling with his in an ageless wanton invitation.

What a thought, especially since she felt like she was kissing for the first time in her life, every sensation intensified, shiny and fresh like a new day.

She curved her arms around his neck, clung to him as she rubbed her agonizingly erect nipples against his chest, seeking relief, seeking more. Oh God, he felt so good, so warm and solid and real she didn't want to let him go. Ever.

Sheesh, she'd gone from the realms of cool, detached divorcée to desperate, horny middle-aged woman in mere seconds!

Emilia moaned deep in her throat as if to emphasize her thoughts, hands running up and down Ramón's strong back of their own volition. She wanted to feel skin, mindlessly searched for the hem of his shirt before she finally just took either side of his shirtfront and pulled them apart with more force than she thought herself capable.

Ramón released a low growl as buttons flew, large hands sliding up into Emilia's hair to cup her head and hold her in place. He pulled back enough to press his forehead against hers, panting as he held her. "*Dios mio*, what are you doing to me?"

That's what Emilia wanted to know—what was he doing to her?

She'd never been so forward with a man before, so primitive and wild.

But even as she thought it she couldn't help skating her hands across the skin she'd exposed when she popped open his shirt, fingers pausing over the fine sprinkling of hair dusting his pecs. She paused to roll his nipples with her thumbs, groaning again when his breath hitched in his chest and he suddenly caught her wrists and held them tight as if trying to garner strength. Whether it was for strength to go forward or retreat she didn't know, but understood the push-pull of the situation, compulsions stronger than the lure of forbidden fruit.

*Yes, forbidden fruit. Off-limits. Remember that.*

"Ay, ay, ay..."

*You can say that again, Ricky.*

Ramón murmured in his native tongue and Emilia just listened to his sexily accented words before finally opening her eyes to the sight of his closed ones—the long, curly lashes totally wasted on a man, just brushing his cheekbones—and it sobered her. Well, sobered her as much as she could be sobered standing in front of a man she had just tried and very nearly succeeded in mauling. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I shouldn't have—"

"It's me who should apologize. *I* shouldn't have. Not here, not like this."

*Where and how, then? I'm all yours!*

What was she thinking? What was she *doing*? He was Anthony's teacher. Goodness, her son! "Anthony—"

"Is what's important, the only reason I sent that letter."

"Of course."

He grinned. "But had I known Anthony Gallo's mother was the very beautiful and elusive *Señorita* Vega, I might have been tempted to manufacture a reason for a meeting."

"Oh really?" She couldn't stop the tiny fluttering of pleasure low in her belly that accompanied her automatic smile.

"Tempted, being the key word, Lia. As in you tempt me beyond the word."

"Since when did I become 'Lia' to you?"

He grinned and a gusher of moisture broke passed her dam of control straight into her panties. "Don't you like the sound of it?"

When he said it? *Heck* yeah! Sounded better than the generic pet names her family had for her—Em and Emmy. The man could probably recite the Constitution and make her come.

*We the people, in order to form a more perfect union...yeah, baby, yeah!*

"The point isn't whether I like the sound of it or not."

"What is the point?"

"How would you like it if I called you... 'Mon'?" Darn, she had no idea why that came to mind instead of 'Ray' and she realized her mistake when he flashed another grin, this one so brilliant, Emilia thought she would go blind with lust if she didn't climax first.

"I wouldn't mind at all. Especially since it's the sound you'll be making when I bring you to climax." He leaned in to murmur the last word against her ear, sliding a hand across her breasts before gently tweaking each nipple.

Emilia closed her eyes, fulfilling Ramón's prophecy when her head lolled back on her shoulders before she realized what she was doing a minute later. She jerked up her head, stepped back and slapped his hand away. "You're incorrigible." And such a natural, shameless flirt she thought

he could give her baby brother EJ a run for his money, or even her ex-husband who was the epitome of slick, gorgeous and flippant.

But did she really believe that last part? Superficially he might have bore a resemblance to Tony, but Emilia sensed a deep intense side to Ramón, sensed the layers of passion and sincerity beneath the flippant smirk and lustful gaze.

“I’ve been called worse.”

“I’m sure.” Emilia sighed and forked a hand through her hair to nape. “Ramón, I’m a mother, a forty-six-year old mother.”

He frowned at her as if she’d said she was a Martian. “You’re also a woman.” He closed the space between them, bent his head to nibble her earlobe before sucking the sore spot into his mouth and then licking. “A very sensual and sexy woman.”

Mmm, when he described her that way, in that smoky whisper, she didn’t even recognize herself. Little, quiet, shy and goody-goody Emilia Vega. Sensual and sexy? No way!

She’d never felt this reckless and hot with Tony and wondered if that had been a failing on her part or his. Certainly his. How else could she explain the wildly carnal sensations that went through her when she was in Ramón’s arms? She had never been so physically excited outside of the bedroom.

Emilia cleared her parched throat and took another step back, bumping into one of the student desks lining the front of the classroom. She leaned her hand on the desktop to steady herself. She needed to get away from him before she really exploded. “We’re not here to discuss my supposed allures but my son’s problem.”

Ramón arched a brow and chuckled. “Supposed? You don’t believe me?”

“That’s neither here nor there.” She waved her hand dismissively and Ramón stepped to her again, making her feel weak in the knees and smaller than she usually felt around men as he towered over her. “Anthony,” she squeaked.



“Have dinner with me. We can discuss him in a more relaxed and neutral environment.”

“I hardly think that’s proper protocol.” And since when would being around him be relaxing? The man was nerve-wracking personified. At least hormone-wracking!

“If you know anything about me, it’s that I don’t follow protocol.”

Did that mean he made it a habit of dating troubled students’ mothers? “I don’t think seeing you outside of the classroom setting is such a good idea.” Emilia eased from beneath him, sidling towards the door. “So, you’re a maverick, huh?”

“I can be if the situation warrants it.”

Emilia wondered what situations warranted his maverick-ness, but wouldn’t dare ask him. He might tell her, and it was way passed time to end this little meeting.

“I’ll see you in the studio, then. We’ll discuss Anthony and see if we can figure out what’s bothering him.”

Oh darn, she’d forgotten about those lessons. “Looking forward to it.” She didn’t know yet what was bothering her son, but she knew what, or make that *who*, was bothering her.

Could her starved and suddenly re-ignited libido stand another three or four lessons in the same room with this man?

## Chapter 5

Ever since his Aunt Angela traded war stories, grilling him about his gift and how he knew her ankle wasn't broken, Anthony had been having these weird dreams about an older teenager he'd never met but who seemed vaguely familiar. It creeped him out because the dreams were so vivid, and he felt he *should* know the guy.

In his dream he was at a college campus somewhere with the guy who was like a foot taller than him and several years older, so Anthony thought maybe he might be a student at the college.

The dream always ended the same, with the guy saying, "Don't blame her..."

What the heck was that supposed to mean? As if he didn't have enough to deal with adjusting to a new teacher and more difficult work this year. Not that he minded, he liked the tough assignments and English was his favorite class. Now he had to worry about having freaky nightmares and being, well, freaking different.

He didn't know how his Aunt Angela and uncle EJ handled it and wasn't sure he wanted to. He just wanted things to go back to the way they used to be when he couldn't feel other people's feelings. He wanted the dreams to stop, but fat chance of that.

Since school had started almost two weeks ago, he'd been having the same dream every night. And it didn't help him stay alert for his classes. He was barely able to keep his eyes open in English no matter what the teacher talked about.

He liked Mr. Chavez too. He was cool without really trying to be like some grown-ups did when they wanted to *relate* to kids but only wound up being more condescending than not.

Anthony didn't know how Mr. Chavez did it, but he managed to make English more exciting than usual to him, sharing stories about his adventures sky diving and bungee jumping and other cool stuff that always somehow related to the lesson of the day.

But sometimes not even these stories could keep Anthony awake, like the other day when he'd gotten caught snoozing and had the whole class razzing him for it.

Even worse was when Mr. Chavez asked to see him after class and handed him one of those dreaded form letters sealed in an enveloped addressed to Anthony's parents.

Anthony had briefly entertained the idea of ditching the envelope, but aside from being too honest for his own good, he knew it would backfire. Somewhere along the line, Mr. Chavez would get word to Mom and she'd wind up being more pissed at him for his dishonesty than if he had just come straight to her with the letter. Mom put like this high premium on telling the truth and all that good stuff.

So, he'd given her the letter last night and by his calculations his mom and Mr. Chavez were having a chit-chat about him trying to figure out why he was nodding off like a dooper in class.

Like he was stupid enough to try that stuff? No way!

His problem was just plain old lack of sleep. Even when he went to bed early, he still didn't get enough, inevitably waking up in the middle of the night with the freaky dreams and unable to go back to sleep.

He wished he knew what the dreams meant, wished there was someone he could talk to besides his aunt or Mom, someone like a guy so he could get a male's point of view.

Anthony thought of his father, but immediately discounted that. The last time he called Dad, the man said he didn't have time to talk to him right then. But that was the case any time Anthony called. Dude was only good for sending support checks to Mom. And sure he was always on time, but what good was that when Anthony needed someone to talk to?

Uncle EJ was a logical alternative since he had the whole gifts thing going. Maybe *he* could tell Anthony what the dreams meant.

“Hey sport. What’s up?”

“Mom!” Anthony jerked up his head, almost falling off of the sofa in Aunt Angela’s family room when he saw his mom standing on the threshold. He scrambled from his facedown position where he’d been reading a book for Social Studies to a sitting position. “When’d you get home?”

“A few minutes ago. I was upstairs talking to your aunt and uncle.”

No doubt talking about him and his problem in school. Pretty soon he’d be the talk of the whole neighborhood if he wasn’t already.

Mom crossed the carpeted floor to stand beside him and muss his hair.

“Mom...”

“Sheesh, it’ll be time for another haircut soon.”

“What did he say?”

“Who are we talking about? The teacher whose class you’re falling asleep in?” Mom sat down beside him and put an arm around his shoulder.

“Am I in trouble?”

“What do you think?”

“It’s not like I’m failing or anything.”

“No. Not yet. But if you’re not awake to participate *in* the class, then it’s just a matter of time, isn’t it?”

Anthony lowered his head and mumbled, “I guess.” How could he tell her what his problem was without really telling her? He didn’t want to talk about his dreams or his new gifts and have his mom start treating him special. She already thought he was special because he was so smart and excelled in school. That kind of special was okay, mostly, but the other one not so much. His mom worked and tried so hard to be a good mother. Anthony just didn’t want to disappoint her.

Mom put a hand under his chin to lift his head so she could look in his eyes and he gasped.

It always shocked him when he looked into her yellow-gold gaze, so different from his brown one. Everyone said his looks were a combination of his mom’s and his father’s—from his copper-brown complexion to his curly black hair to his brown eyes—and he guessed he had to take their

word for it, since he rarely saw his father except in old pictures from when he and Mom used to be married. He hadn't even been in the picture then.

Anthony often wondered what had broken them up, but Mom wouldn't talk about it and no one else in the family would either. But for him, it was as if their marriage never happened, his dad like this ghost from the past better left forgotten.

He thought he could have handled it had his mother talked bad about Dad the way some of his friends' mothers did about their ex-husbands, at least then he'd know the man had existed as more than just a specter who'd provided the sperm for his conception. But his Mom never said a negative word about the man, never stopped Anthony from calling him when he wanted to either, not that Anthony wanted to call that often. It was just, well, times like now when he would have appreciated a point of view other than his mom's, a male point of view other than his uncles'.

Mom wrapped her arms around him and held on for a few seconds before separating to stare at him again. "We don't have to talk about it right now if you don't want to."

"We don't?"

"I'll give you the weekend to think about it. Then we need to talk."

He guessed he wasn't in trouble yet.

Then he felt it, his mom's guilt, and he knew that she and Mr. Chavez had been doing more than just talking about him when they'd met earlier.

Anthony frowned, unsure how he felt about it, unsure how he should feel about it, aside from the general distaste of picturing his mom with any man, especially one who wasn't his dad.

He wanted his mom to be happy, could sense the glow of pleasure surrounding her as it hadn't in a long time if it ever had at all.

Had his teacher put that glow there? And if so, what did that mean for Anthony if his mom and Mr. Chavez started *dating*?

Mom cupped his face, running her thumb along his eyebrow and he got a flash of her in Mr. Chavez's arms, safe and warm and enjoying his touch.

Anthony sprang from the bed, seriously creeped out now. His aunt hadn't warned him things could get this bad and so personal.

“Everything else okay, baby?”

“Did anything else come up with my teacher that I should know about?” Anthony blurted, not realizing how accusatory he sounded, placing special emphasis on the words my teacher, until he noticed his mom’s cautious expression, as if she had been caught in a lie she hadn’t even told yet.

“Why would you ask that?”

He shrugged, had his answer even without his abilities. An innocent person didn’t answer a question with a question unless she was trying to hide something or stalling for time.

Anthony guessed he and Mom would have a lot more to talk about this weekend than just *his* school performance.

\* \* \* \*

Ramón caught himself looking for Emilia, distracted from his partner and the impromptu lesson he was supposed to be teaching for fear of missing her entrance with Freddie Calminetti.

The last couple of weeks watching her from afar, knowing she was avoiding him, knowing why she was keeping her distance and letting her get away with it anyway had been hell. Inaction was alien to him, something he didn’t owned, not when he saw something he wanted, especially something he knew he could have with the right amount of effort.

He told himself he was trying to give her time, trying to give her space but Christ staying away from her made him ache in deep dark places that had nothing to do with his sex drive and everything to do with his heart. He couldn’t remember being this lovesick over a woman without the benefit of having slept with her, at least not since his wife, Caro.

He’d always loved women—the way they smelled, the softness of their skin, their generous curves—loved making love to them. He especially loved older women, their experience and vulnerabilities yet innate fearlessness touching a well of protectiveness and need inside him that could have been dangerous to his psyche if he completely gave himself over to it. He was sure even someone as sheltered and innocent as Emilia seemed to be

still had limitless dreams, depths and strengths that Ramón could never fathom but craved to know nonetheless.

His mother thought since Caro's death he had become something of a serial dater, playing the field, lending his company and body to a succession of females but never committing his heart to any of them.

He hated admitting she was right, especially where his love life was concerned, but since Caro his heart *hadn't* been into any of his relationships. He enjoyed the bedroom gymnastics for what they were and had always been to him, a sensual release that satisfied him physically. But there had been no spiritual gratification or connection with any one woman, just empty sex.

In his own way, he supposed he was as sheltered as Emilia, differently but just as closed off to the world as if he had a physical wall erected around him.

Ramón didn't enjoy living like that, didn't enjoy empty anything or the idea of being closed off. When he did something, pursued any activity—sports, women, teaching—he did it with his all, no half-stepping, unless he counted now, of course.

"You're really not into this tonight, are you?"

Ramón glanced at his partner, Desiree—a beautiful, buxom blonde who, up until two weeks ago, used to get him hard just looking at her—and stopped just short of shaking his head. "I'm a little preoccupied." He grinned.

"Perhaps there's something I can do to help?" This was delivered in a kittenish purr accompanied by slow and gentle fondling of his back and arm muscles, none of which did anything to Ramón except put a lock on his libido and make him miss Emilia more.

*Dios*, somebody embalm him now! "Actually, this is something I have to work out on my own." Not that he knew how he was going to do that, at least until he saw Emilia and could find the answer to his dilemma in her topaz eyes.

"Let me know if you change your mind. It really wouldn't be a bother and as much as you've helped me get back into the swing, I'd love to return

the favor.” More fondling, this time a little bolder as she angled her thigh between his legs and rubbed her knee against his crotch.

Not a peep from his friend. Nothing, *nada*, zilch. He couldn’t be any softer. This was really serious. He was only thirty-three, but maybe he needed to look into getting some Viagra.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything?”

Ramón’s cock instantly came to life at the familiar voice behind him, belying his need for any artificial enhancers, Emilia’s dulcet, sultry tone enough to power his engines in no time flat.

He eased out of Desiree’s grasp and turned to see Emilia standing with her arms folded across her breasts, one hip cocked to the side as she tapped a foot against the parquet floor.

Was she annoyed or, even better, jealous?

His dick twitched at the latter possibility, but more at the sight of his diminutive Italian-American firecracker with smoke coming out of her ears.

“We were wrapping things up.”

Desiree arched a brow and closed the space between them to place a hand on his chest. “I thought we were just getting started.”

“Obviously, I came over at a bad time. I’ll just—”

“Stay right here.” Ramón sidestepped Desiree and caught Emilia by the arm, drawing her near before she could get away. “We need to talk.”

Emilia glanced at Desiree, seemed to grow as she tilted up her cleft chin with no small amount of animosity and Ramón was sure of it then. The green-eyed monster was at play.

He grinned, glad that she seemed to care that much but wanted to tell her there was no need for her to be jealous. As much as he wished it weren’t so, she was the only woman on his mind morning, noon and night and had been for the last two weeks.

He went back to Desiree, if only to be courteous and caught the catty look in her eyes as she smiled. He had to handle this carefully. True, there was nothing between Desiree and him except a mutual love of dance. Though Ramón knew she wanted there to be more, he had never been receptive to her come-ons as he preferred not to mix business with pleasure.



But the fact that he was willing to do just this with Emilia, plunging them both into a minor ethical dilemma, went a long way to show him that he really did have it bad for the woman.

“So, I take it she’s your preoccupation?” Desiree asked.

“Her son is in my English class at the school where I teach and is having some problems.” He regretted it the moment it was out, like he had shared a sacred confidence.

“Son?” Desiree glanced over to where Emilia was standing with her arms still folded across her breasts and sniffed. “She’s a little old for you, isn’t she?”

She made Emilia sound like a dirty old woman coveting a sixteen year old. Ramón didn’t know whether to be flattered or insulted, and for whom—himself or Emilia.

He frowned and bit back his retort. He was not going to go there with Desiree, especially since he was just trying to be the gentleman his mother had raised him to be. There was plenty of time to worry about the logistics of the age difference between him and Emilia. No need to tackle the issue prematurely, and certainly not with a minor acquaintance. He figured he had enough hurdles to clear with Emilia herself, chief among them he was sure, his being Anthony’s teacher. “She’s a student here who enjoys dance the same as you do, Desiree. That’s all.”

“Hmph.” She pulled her eyes from Emilia to look at him.

Ramón caught sight of Max, another male instructor at the studio and waved him over. “I’m sorry to have to pull out of your lesson, Desiree.”

“That’s quite all right. I see that you’re needed elsewhere.” Again, she peered over at Emilia and arched a brow. “I just hope that she can keep up...to your routine, that is.”

“I’m sure she can.” Ramón turned on his heels not a minute too soon and caught up with Emilia as she headed for the adjoining dance room. “Where are you going in such a hurry?”

“You looked busy.”

“Not too busy for you.”

“That’s nice, but it’s not as if I have any hold on you, and I certainly didn’t have an appointment.”

She had a bigger hold on him than she knew. He’d like her to have more of a hold, could picture her small, soft hand wrapped around his cock, squeezing as she guided his shaft to the creamy, soft folds of her pussy.

Ramón shook his head, trying to clear the sensual fog this woman invariably wove around him just being near, and even when she wasn’t near. “Desiree didn’t have an appointment either. My mother just asked me to fill in.”

“Well aren’t you the accommodating son?”

Ramón caught Emilia’s arm and stopped her in her tracks. “Is there some reason you’re angry with me?”

“Who says I’m angry?”

He just looked at her and waited until she blew a puff of air out between her lips and asked, “What exactly did she mean by you helping her get back into the swing?”

Ramón fought back a grin, didn’t want to antagonize her anymore than she already was. “Dancing, Lia. She meant dancing.”

“It didn’t sound like it to me.”

“And if she didn’t mean dancing? Why is it important to you?”

“It’s not. It’s just...” She huffed again, this time uncrossing her arms to throw them in the air out of obvious frustration. “Look, you’re my son’s teacher and it makes a difference to me whether he’s being taught by someone of questionable, uh...repute and taste.”

Ramón couldn’t help it this time, and did laugh. “At least you’re not casting aspersions on my character.”

“I don’t even know why I came over here. It’s obvious we have nothing at all to talk about and that you’re not going to be serious about anything I have to say.

“I’m serious about everything that concerns you, and we have plenty to talk about. You just insist on talking around the issues.”

“And what might those be?”

He knew what his issues were—getting her into the sack as soon as humanly possible. But it was more than just that, more than his peace of mind could process. He didn't want to engage his heart yet, but it seemed he didn't have a choice in the matter. In the end he settled for a combination of her issues and his and said, "Anthony's problem in my class." He paused here to cup her face. "And me and you."

"You and I are certainly *not* an issue."

"Of course we are." He caressed her face, her soft, peaches-and-cream skin so inviting he couldn't help himself. "And I'll have you know, I have impeccable taste." Ramón peered at her with meaning, liked the radiant blush that suffused her cheeks before she averted her eyes and lowered her head, wondered if the blush covered her whole body. The idea of putting his mouth against her flushed naked breasts had him throbbing in his pants. *Dios*, he was in a constant state of arousal since he'd met her! He put a finger under that beautifully-carved, stubborn chin and raised her head. "Impeccable," he whispered right before dipping his head to take her mouth with his.

Her shocked inhalation of breath caught him unaware the way he'd wanted to take her off-guard. It felt as if she was sucking the life out of him with her gasp and he thought he would gladly relinquish it for just a taste of her. He slid his tongue passed her slightly parted lips, reacquainting himself with her unique flavor like he could ever forget such fresh honey.

Would her pussy taste as sweet?

The thought had Ramón bringing his arms up around her, drawing her near enough to feel her body heat sizzling next to his, her vanilla scent, all feminine and raw, arousing him as much as her slit cradling his cock.

He lifted her off her feet, aligning her center with his and surreptitiously grinding his hips against her to the sexy salsa beat playing in his head. The groan that left his throat was totally animal, almost unrecognizable, even to him.

This woman made him burn inside for her, made him wilder with her demure sweetness and innocence than any of the more demanding and

experienced women in his past ever had, even more than...*Dios mio*, even more than Caro!

Remembering where he was, Ramón reluctantly ended the kiss, letting Emilia slide down his body back to the floor. That he had to steady her against him so that she wouldn't topple over encouraged him to no end, letting him know he wasn't alone in his rampant desire. "So, where's Freddie?"

"Huh? Freddie who?"

Ramón chuckled. "Freddie your brother-in-law and usual dance partner."

"Oh, Freddie!" She shook her head as if to clear it, craning her neck to peer up at him with a confused and dazed look. "I, uh, left him in the other room stretching when I spotted you. Told him I needed to speak to you and would be right back." She glanced around before her eyes finally found Freddie out on the dance floor with none other than the ever-present Desiree. She'd evidently dumped Max for what she thought were greener pastures.

"Does she know he's married?" Ramón asked.

"I'm not sure, but I know I don't like how close she's dancing to him." Emilia motioned to leave, probably to give Desiree a piece of her mind.

Ramón caught her arm mid-march and pulled her close. "Your brother-in-law's a big boy. He can take care of himself. I'm more worried about you."

"Worried about me?"

"Something's bothering you, has been since you arrived." He would have brought up her avoidance the last two weeks, but didn't want to let her know that she had gotten to him that much. His emotions already had him on shaky ground with her, no need to give her anymore power over him than she already had.

Emilia turned to glance up at him and her topaz eyes nearly took his breath away, affecting his body like a blow. "We can't have a relationship, Ramón. Not outside of the classroom or this studio. That's why I needed to talk to you."

Before a few minutes ago, she'd been doing a decent job of living up to that declaration. But the way she'd just acquiesced in his arms, the way her lips and body responded and molded to him? That was a whole different story than what her mouth said. "Are you worried about Anthony?"

"He knows."

"How can he? I haven't mentioned anything to him. I wouldn't take that liberty. Besides that, we haven't done anything yet."

"And I...I need to keep it that way."

She may have needed to, but Ramón knew for damn sure she didn't want to, not anymore than he did.

He put his arms around her again and leaned in to give her a chaste peck on the lips, pulling back just enough to murmur, "Aren't you entitled to a love life?"

"That's not the point."

"It is the point." Who had hurt her that she felt the need to close herself so thoroughly off? Or had the person in question hurt Anthony and now she was trying to protect him any way she could, including denying herself?

*Dios*, he didn't think there was anything more attractive than a lioness protecting her cub at all costs, nothing more attractive or more frustrating when he was the one trying to get past her defenses.

Ramón slid a hand up to cup her face, slowly caressing, intensely assessing before he finally came to a decision and smiled. "You're a dangerous woman to care about, Lia."

"Then why do you insist on pursuing me?"

"I like extreme and dangerous sports."

## Chapter 6

Emilia didn't know how to take Ramón's statement because no way in the world did she consider what was going on between them a sport. It was too serious, too mind-boggling, too physically unsettling for that. Extreme and dangerous were accurate, but not a sport. Sport indicated fun and games to her and the feelings and thoughts Ramón incited when she was near him didn't come anywhere near play for her, too important to be a game.

*He* was dangerous to her common sense. Why else would she consider entertaining his advances knowing full well they were totally wrong for each other on so many levels, the least of which he was her son's teacher and he was thirteen years her junior. Not to mention the little hypocritical speech she had given him about them not having a relationship.

But neither the danger nor her hypocrisy stopped her from agreeing to accompany Ramón to dinner after her and Freddie's lesson. The danger didn't stop her from looking forward to spending time with him outside of the dance studio and school.

She'd seen Freddie's look of satisfaction when she'd given him the news that he would be going home alone after their session, knew he would be blabbing to Angela and didn't care.

Emilia tried to convince herself that she was going out with Ramón to learn more about Anthony's problem in school, to find out how she and Ramón could work together to help Anthony, but she'd be kidding herself if she pretended this was her only reason.

She wanted to go out with Ramón, curiosity about what this was growing between them as well as lust behind her decision.

Ramón waited until after they ordered, took a sip of water, then leaned his elbows on the table and propped his chin on his folded hands. “So, tell me about Mr. Gallo.”

Emilia had just lifted her own glass of water and taken a sip, spluttering and quickly putting it down to pat dry her lips with a corner of her napkin. She coughed to clear her throat before saying, “I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone so forward in my life.”

“I don’t believe in wasting time. And I’d just like to find out whether or not your husband is in the picture at all and—”

“I really don’t think that’s any of your business.” She hated the prim and proper tone to her voice, but other than squeezing her legs together beneath the table in a futile attempt to staunch the flow of her need, she didn’t know what else to do to keep her cool and distance herself from the desire smoldering in the air between them.

Emilia lifted her chin a fraction trying to give Ramón her best withering look but from the smile on his face, she had a sinking feeling she missed her mark, that he could plainly smell her arousal and knew how wet she was for him. Finally, she arched a brow. “Well?”

“Well, I just wanted to establish to what extent your husband is involved in Anthony’s life.”

“Oh.”

“Why did you think I brought him up?”

She looked at the devilish gleam in his mocha eyes and knew Ramón knew exactly what she had thought, that he was asking because of his interest in her and not her son.

“Actually, it is my business either way as I’m interested in you and how your relationship with your husband affects Anthony.”

“Ex-husband. We’re divorced.”

“I understand that.” Ramón nodded and sat back in his seat, slowly licking his full lips and looking at her across the table in an assessing manner that made her feel like a small animal beneath the scrutiny of a predator. “How often does your ex visit Anthony?”

“Actually, he doesn’t have visitation rights.” Emilia watched Ramón arch a brow, waited for the grilling that she knew would come.

“No visitation at all?”

“None at all.”

He frowned. “Was he abusive? Do you have a restraining order against him?”

Emilia almost laughed out loud at the idea. Tony didn’t have a violent bone in his body, had never laid a hand on her out of anger and often professed to being a lover, not a fighter. There had been no physical abuse as much as there had been emotional defection and neglect.

Emilia saw the tension in Ramón’s face, his jaw muscles working as he gritted his teeth and she reached across the table to cover one of his hands with hers. “It was nothing so dramatic. We just parted ways soon after Anthony was born.”

He turned his hand over to hold hers. “Are you telling me Anthony’s father doesn’t acknowledge his existence?”

God, when he put it that way it sounded so harsh, putting Tony in a horrid, if accurate, light. “They speak once in a while.”

“Once in a while?” Ramón drummed the fingers of his free hand on the table. “Who initiates these calls?”

Emilia automatically squeezed his hand, felt like he was taking Tony’s non-paternal behavior just a little personally, as if he’d once walked in Anthony’s shoes. “Anthony calls him.”

“And?”

“And, they talk.”

“Has Anthony ever expressed an interest in seeing his father?”

“From time to time, yes. But the moment has never been convenient.”

“Anthony’s twelve years old. Either the man wants to see his son or he doesn’t.”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

Ramón took her other hand and held it. “Why are you defending him?”

She almost gasped, but if she had learned nothing else from her dealings with the man, it was that Ramón pulled no punches. “I’m not defending



anyone. I'd just rather not push Anthony into a position where he could be—"

"Rejected?"

The waiter brought over their orders, Emilia's braised lamb and steamed asparagus and Ramón's prime steak and mixed vegetables, skillfully setting the dishes down before each of them and ensuring that everything was okay before he left.

As soon as he was gone, Ramón dove right back in. "So, Anthony's father doesn't want to have anything to do with him, but won't come right out and say it, thereby leaving you in front of the gun."

"Anthony is my responsibility."

"I understand that. But you didn't make him alone."

"What do you want me to do, Ramón? I can't exactly *make* him see Anthony. I can't manufacture feelings that aren't there." How could she share with this man who took home the problems of strangers' children every day that Tony chose not to have a relationship with the son they made together? How could she explain being half of a disposable family and that Tony had another older son that Anthony didn't even know about?

Emilia felt as responsible for the dereliction as Tony should have, as if his desertion was her fault. She couldn't *force* him to come around and see Anthony, couldn't force an interest that wasn't there, but she thought maybe she wasn't as insistent with Tony as she could have been. And as for the omission about Anthony's brother, God, she beat herself up every day for never telling him he had a brother. She should never have followed Tony's lead to keep the secret. Even her own kin, as family-oriented as they all were, had thought it best to leave the past in the past and pretend that Tony's outside woman—now wife—and child didn't exist.

What would Anthony do if he ever found out? He'd have every right to blame her. She was just as culpable as Tony, maybe more so.

"Lia, I wasn't blaming you. I was just thinking out loud."

She gaped at how much he reminded her of Angela and EJ in his ability to read people, at least her, so easily. He just as easily put her on and off the defensive with a glance, a murmur or a touch. Not to mention she was

actually getting used to his little nickname for her, liked it especially coming from him, reinforcing an intimacy between them that no one else could duplicate or share.

Ramón released her hands and opened and placed his cloth napkin over his lap. “We should eat before our food gets cold.”

Emilia didn’t have much of an appetite despite the dish being one of her favorites, but managed to eat a nibble of lamb and a couple of asparagus spears before Ramón spoke again.

“I’m just curious...”

She jerked her gaze up from her plate when he paused, waiting for the other shoe to drop before she teased, “Just thinking out loud again?”

He smiled, washing the anger and sternness of several moments ago completely away. “Does he know what kind of damage he’s doing to Anthony by refusing to see him?”

“I don’t think he cares.”

“Maybe someone should make him care,” Ramón grumbled.

“Someone like you?”

He shrugged. “I suppose it’s not feasible. Short of harassment and stalking it’s like you said. We can’t force him to be interested.”

Her heart trembled at the way he said we, making her problem his problem.

Emilia shifted in her seat, center throbbing and panties moistening at his fierce protectiveness. She hadn’t felt less alone in a long while, someone else sharing the burdens and decisions of day to day living, as in a couple.

*But you’re not a couple and you and Anthony are not his responsibility, at least not in the long run.*

When she got right down to things, how long would his interest last? He was only filling in while Mrs. Merrick was on maternity leave. After this school year Anthony wouldn’t be his problem anymore, wouldn’t be Ramón’s responsibility.

She didn’t want to depend on his comfort and support when they would each surely be snatched away as soon as she and Anthony got used to them.

“Personally, I think Anthony’s father is a jerk.”

So did Emilia, but she didn't want to say so. She'd gone this long without bashing Tony, especially in front of Anthony, and intended to resist the temptation for as long as possible.

"I know he was your husband, and you must have loved him once—"

"Once."

"But Anthony is a great kid. He deserves better."

She knew he was neither insulting nor trying to get in her good graces with the compliment, heard the sincerity in his voice. She was heartened and touched that a man who'd known Anthony for only two weeks recognized what she'd always known and his own father refused to or couldn't see. Their son was a beautiful gift and blessing from God when she'd least expected, had indeed given up on getting pregnant.

When they'd initially gotten married their first year of college against all of her own family's advice, pregnancy had been the farthest thing from Emilia's mind. She was too busy adoring her new husband and wanting him all to herself. Tony had other ideas, wanted children immediately. It was an issue over which they often butted heads. Once they settled into their sophomore year of college and Tony realized that Emilia wasn't changing her mind on the issue, that she was determined to get her degree, he let the issue slide, or so Emilia had thought.

Sometimes, she was actually grateful for his defection more than she resented it, took advantage of every moment she could spend with Anthony alone and without his father's influence. Not that she'd ever delude herself into believing she could be both mother and father. She knew better and, of course, Angela never let her forget it, constantly reminding Emilia of what she already knew. No amount of doting and well-intentioned uncles could take the place of Anthony's father as much as the family may have all wanted it to be so.

"Does he at least pay child support?" Ramón asked.

"He does." Tony paid the court-ordered amount of spousal and child support and considered his obligations and responsibilities to Emilia and Anthony fulfilled. He had a new family now—another wife and a teenage

son in college—the family he had always wanted, and she and Anthony did not fit into that equation, never would.

“No matter what the amount is, it’s not enough and could never make up for his absence.”

“I agree.”

Ramón put down his knife and fork and reached for one of her hands again. “You know, I’m beginning to think you’re a saint.”

She felt the heat rush to her face at the familiar description, though coming from Ramón it had the added effect of making her panties moist and not just the expected blush her siblings elicited when *they* called her a saint. Was her reaction sacrilegious or normal? Around Ramón she didn’t know right from wrong, good from bad anymore. She just felt, her body so attuned to everything he said, every move he made he and she might have been one. “I’m far from a saint.”

“Close enough from everything I’ve seen.” He smiled and released her hand. “Anthony’s lucky to have you in his life.”

“I’m the lucky one.”

Ramón grinned as he picked up his knife and fork, digging into his food with gusto, as if her reaction spurred his appetite.

She wished she could switch gears as fast and easily as he seemed to and wondered what would come out of his mouth next. Whatever it was, she realized she looked forward to it, nipples hard and tight anticipating the sexy sultry sound of his voice again.

Was it just the fact that he was younger that made him so bold and self-assured, or was it just something intrinsic to his personality?

What she knew for certain was that she’d never felt more inexperienced and young in her life than she did beneath the sharp gaze and youthful exuberance of Ramón Chavez.

If her feelings for him were any indication, then Emilia was well on her way to shedding her good girl image forever not to mention breaking her unspoken promise to her son.

## Chapter 7

Ramón had let his temper get the best of him and that wasn't something he did.

For the most part, he'd done a decent job keeping the focus of the conversation on Anthony and his absentee father, and he had to admit talking about the man made it much easier for him to keep his concentration *off* Emilia and how much he wanted her and *on* Anthony where it needed to be. It also had the unwanted, added effect of digging up demons he hadn't successfully buried after thirty-three years.

Emilia's ex-husband's dereliction was inexcusable, no matter how tolerantly she painted him, no matter how much she wanted to protect her son. And as the conversation had shifted, degenerated really, highlighting just how much Ramón had in common with Anthony as far as fathers went, it had taken everything in him to hold his temper and not totally rip Anthony's father a new one. As things stood, he had done a pretty piss-poor job of not allowing his opinions and biases to color the conversation.

The whole while he'd been talking to Emilia he saw and heard his mother, abandoned by a rich German playboy as soon as she'd become pregnant. He'd been a debonair European jetsetter enamored of the 'exotic, young native dancer' he'd met at Carnival while vacationing in Rio de Janeiro, but a coward without the *cojones* to stand up to his blueblood parents once the woman he professed to love became pregnant with his child.

Gunnar—Ramón would never think of the man as anything other than a sperm donor, never a father—had tried to do right by his mother, Ramón supposed, securing passage to America, pulling strings to speed up her

citizenship and providing a tidy sum with which his mother had used to open her first dance studio.

She'd done well for herself in the ensuing decades, always seeing that Ramón never went without, but more importantly growing the business she so cherished until she'd established the *Chavez Dance Studios* as one of the more famous and popular chains in New York.

Ramón knew it had not been easy, understood the personal sacrifices she had made along the way. He especially remembered more than a few nights as a little boy walking by his mother's room to find her crying.

She'd always deny she was crying over his father when Ramón would ask, but he knew better because he had shed his own childish tears over a faceless man he'd grown to loathe the older he got.

Did Emilia cry over Anthony's father? Did she, despite everything, still love him? Was that why she defended him?

Ramón swallowed down the comparison to his mother and Emilia's pasts, knew that Freud would certainly have a field day with his thoughts, especially since he was having a field day himself mapping the similar love lives of his mother and his, if he had anything to say about it, soon-to-be lover.

"Where are you dragging me to now?"

Ramón paused, easily twining his fingers through hers.

She'd earlier let him walk her several blocks from the studio on Murray Street to one of the ubiquitous restaurants that lined the sidewalks of West Broadway when he'd insisted on taking her to dinner. But still her voice held more of an edge of teasing than concern when he led her down the street, even further away from the studio.

He couldn't help automatically turning in the direction of his apartment building, wasn't eager to leave her company or see the evening with her end, and responded, "It's nice out. Do you mind walking with me?"

"Not at all."

He smiled, her easy response a refreshing change from the Desiree's of the world who liked to play catty games and backstab.

He hadn't realized until just now how tired he was of the entire dating scene, how exhausting and uninspiring being single and playing the field had become.

*You need to settle down, m'ijo.*

His mother's constant harangue echoed through his mind as he glanced down at Emilia's face beneath the glow of a nearby streetlamp.

Did she think to protect him from her life of loneliness with the warnings? It wasn't as if he hadn't found and tried love once. He had. And he'd lost it. Horribly, lost it.

Ramón's breath hitched in his chest when he looked at Emilia, wondering if he could find love again with her wondering if he already had. "There's something else I'm curious about," he blurted.

"What's that?"

He grinned at her tolerant tone, realized he had put her through the ringer earlier in the evening with all his antagonism and questions, but couldn't stop further prying. "Is Anthony's father black?"

"Yes he is. Why?"

"Just curious," he repeated.

He had been surprised when he discovered Emilia was Anthony's mother, not just because of the different last names, but he had assumed from his student's mahogany-toned skin, much like his own mother's, that Anthony's parents were black. He didn't know why he assumed this, especially considering his own mixed heritage, and especially now when he could so clearly see a resemblance between mother and son despite Emilia's cream complexion and golden brown eyes.

Ramón cupped her face, her past marriage to an African American only shining a brighter light on her compassionate, non-judgmental nature, intensifying the resemblance between his mother and Emilia's inner strength and highlighting the similarities between their circumstances.

When Ramón remained silent for so long, Emilia must have taken it for disapproval instead and frowned. "You don't have a problem with that, do you? That I married and had a child with a black man?"

"What? As in I think you're tainted or something?"

She shrugged. “Stranger things have happened.”

“No, I don’t have a problem with it.” He slid an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to his side as they walked amazed at how easy it was to like her in a platonic way as well as want her sexually—everything he had had with Caro, but more. “Has someone made an issue of it before?”

She shrugged again, her silence speaking volumes.

Ramón held her tighter, wondered about the jerks in her past that had had a problem with the race of her son’s father, wondered at how much his own childhood paralleled Anthony’s.

He’d come across a few aforementioned jerks as a kid, whites who once they met his mother, looked down their noses at him and Hispanics who shunned him because of his white heritage. The weird thing was he had more of a problem in New York, the melting pot than he did when he visited his mother’s home in Argentina, the South American people much more tolerant of his mixed race than the people in his birthplace.

“So, have you gotten all of the curiosity out of your system?” Emilia asked.

“About you? Never. I want to learn everything there is to know about you, Lia. Everything.” He leaned in to kiss her lips, lured by her sassy pout, its shiny fullness, especially of her bottom lip when she stuck out the tip of her tongue to lick it.

Ramón stared and followed the path of her tongue, cock throbbing in concert with his heart while he licked his own lips. Anticipation heated and pushed the blood through his veins until he thought he would burst with wanting her.

He pulled her close, sliding his fingers beneath the soft fall of titian hair to cup the base of her skull. The musky-sweet scent of her skin was a powerful draw, making him salivate as his lips met hers again, and she whimpered beneath his lingual onslaught.

Ramón was ravenous for her, greedily pulling her tongue into his mouth, sucking it like he was trying to fill a hole inside him with her taste. And maybe he was, everything about Emilia a satisfying attraction capable



of filling all the places left so empty and cold inside him by Caro's and their child's death, left empty by his own father's defection. Everything about her was a soothing balm to his derelict soul.

He groaned deep in his throat at the sudden thought of his loss, pressing his body close to Emilia's and gently grinding his hips, seeking the euphoria and refuge of her soft heat.

Ramón realized then he hadn't just raked Emilia and Anthony's lives over the coals with his questions earlier. He'd raked his and his own mother's lives through them, the painful similarities in Emilia and her son's existence unearthing the pain of his own.

Emilia smoothed over the old betrayals and wounds when she reciprocated his fervor, tongue tangling with his as she slid her arms up to encircle his back and hold him close before abruptly averting her face to rest her forehead against his chest. Panting, she fisted his shirtfront like she was trying to rein in her emotions, the firm, desperate contact of her knuckles speeding his heart. "I know we're close," she murmured, "but where exactly do you live?"

"How do you know we're close?"

She didn't answer, except to take his hand and wait.

Ramón grinned and tilted back his head to indicate the loft apartments right above them. "I knew you were dangerous."

"No more than you."

He shot up his eyebrows. "Me? I'm a pussycat."

"More like a panther on the prowl." She opened the outside door with one hand and dragged him into the vestibule with the other.

Ramón held her hand while he searched his pockets for his keys with his free hand, wincing when his fingers brushed against the hypersensitive erection threatening to burst through his slacks if he didn't get Emilia naked and writhing beneath him soon.

He unlocked the door as soon as he found the key and guided Emilia to the elevator. He was resigned to taking her once they were inside, already too far gone to make it to his apartment without tasting just a sample of the woman.

When the elevator arrived, they switched roles again, Emilia dragging him on and searching the control panel like she knew where they were going.

Ramón sidled behind her and bent his head to nibble an earlobe. “Four,” he whispered and watched as Emilia thumped the button and turned around to face him.

He closed his eyes as she reached out her hands to touch him, fingers at once tentative and forceful, switching back and forth between shy coquette and amazonian seductress. She ran her hands from his shoulders to his waist before jerking the hem of his shirt out of his pants.

“Rip the buttons like you did before.”

“Are you sure?”

“Do it,” he growled.

She didn’t hesitate another second, took a side of his black silk shirt in each hand and tore them apart.

Ramón closed his eyes and shuddered when she splayed her palms against his bare chest, her cool little hands a stark contrast to her hot little mouth homing in on his tight nipples.

She nipped him, circling his aureole with her tongue, her heady female aroma wrapping around his head until Ramón was ready to throw up the white flag in surrender.

“Ay...*Dios*...” He caught her around the arms and pressed her back against the wall adjacent the control panel, simultaneously punching the Stop button as Emilia’s handbag plunked on the floor.

“Oh, yes.” Emilia curved one leg around his hip and drew him near, tangerine, silk blouse gaping open to reveal her voluptuous cleavage as she pushed herself against him.

Ramón licked his lips while he undid a couple of buttons and reached inside her blouse to palm one full breast. For someone so petite and slim, she had the most delectable tits and ass, generous curves calling to him like a siren’s song. He peeled down a cup of her lacey demi-bra, smiling at the flushed hard nipple, erect and inviting his touch. He bent his head to lick and suckle, moaning when her hot woman’s scent wafted to him.

Emilia held his head as he took his fill, fisting his hair in her hands, grip and movements just shy of violent when she ground her pelvis against his. "I need this. God, I need *you* Ramón."

His heart stuttered at her words, the urgent intensity of her tone making his cock grow and throb exponentially in response. He held her leg in place and circled his hips, fitting his erection against her slit to experience as much of her sensual heat as possible with the hindrance of clothes. Finally, he just gave in and slid down to his knees in front of her, ready to worship at her female altar and unravel her mysteries, unravel *her*.

Just a taste, he told himself, just one taste to tide him over until they reached his apartment.

"Ramón..."

The questioning tremor in her voice made him glance up, a supplicant beholding the face of an angel and feeling unworthy at her feet.

"I've never...I've never..."

"Done it in an elevator before?"

"No, but that's not what I meant. What I meant to say is, uh..." Emilia fiercely blushed and averted her eyes.

Ramón smiled at her shyness, body humming with pure lust until realization dawned and he gawked. "You mean no man's ever..."

She shook her head, biting her bottom lip and closing her eyes as if she had something to be ashamed of when it most assuredly was the men in her life who should've been ashamed.

He couldn't imagine not wanting to taste her, couldn't imagine not indulging in her special female juices as much as possible, whenever the situation arose. "Madness," he mumbled. "Utter madness." Ramón gripped her thighs, sliding both hands up her legs and under her skirt until he teased the edges of her panties with his fingers and she trembled beneath his touch.

"God you've got me so lightheaded and confused. It's been so long..."

"Too long," he agreed, thinking she wasn't the only one lightheaded and confused and even though he didn't know how long she was talking. But any amount of time that kept him away from her was beyond long enough, he decided.

Ramón peeled her underwear down, a lacey pair of lilac panties matching her demi-bra and making his dick twitch in his pants at the idea of what the intimate apparel had covered. He slid the panties down further until they reached her ankles and Emilia obligingly stepped out of them. Ramón lifted the delicate material to his nose and took a deep breath, light-headed himself at the raw scent of her arousal. He slid the underwear into his pants pocket, mouth watering as he moved back in for the kill, sliding a finger into Emilia's hot pussy and growling at the amount of cream easing his entry.

*This is all for me. She is all for me. Mine.*

*All yours.*

Ramón shook his head at the response echoing in his head.

That wasn't possible was it?

"Is something wrong?"

"Not at all." He pushed her skirt up and touched his mouth to the pink swollen flesh peeking at him through the fine tuft of titian hair at the apex of her vagina. He teased her clit with the tip of his tongue before pulling it into his mouth and sucking with such fervor, the sound echoed through the car, almost drowning out Emilia's frantic gasps. He swallowed her nectar, the sweet-tangy sample making him want more of her, so much more.

Ramón wrapped his arms around her hips, pressing his face against her and inhaled as if to saturate his senses with her essence, as if to fortify his system until he could slake his hunger right and proper, deep inside her.

Emilia squirmed beneath him, fingernails digging into his shoulders in a take-me-harder gesture that had Ramón lifting and draping her legs over his shoulders as he came to his feet with his face between her sweet thighs right where he longed to be.

"Oh, my...this is so...soooooo..."

Ramón nibbled her clit, chuckling against her center when she squeaked. Her innocent surprise, the oops-I-did-it-again quality to her voice simultaneously endeared her to him and turned him inside out with desire.

He spread her labia with his thumbs, licking her vulva with relish for several long moments before plunging his tongue as deep as it would go.

Emilia squealed, squeezing her thighs tight as her feminine juices flowed into his mouth.

"Oh my! You do like dangerous games."

He pulled his mouth away only long enough to say, "*No te preocupes, pequeño querida*. I won't drop you."

"That was a mouthful, but as to the last part, I probably wouldn't fall if you did drop me. I'm floating on cloud nine."

Ramón chuckled as she sighed and arched her neck, letting her head fall back against the elevator wall. He wasted no time returning to his appetizer, the image of her ecstasy firmly imprinted on his mind. He was determined to drive her so far over the edge she'd soon be floating on cloud ninety-nine!

He sucked her labia into his mouth, nibbling and licking each side before lazily stroking his tongue passed her vulva to taste her spirits again, more intoxicating than the Bordeaux they'd had at dinner, more intoxicating than any other mind-altering substance ever made.

Emilia panted above him, her delicate feminine cries spurring him on. He pinched and rolled her clit with thumb and forefinger, licking and sucking her pussy until she incoherently babbled above him and uncontrollably shivered in his embrace.

Ramón held her tight until the tremors subsided, feeling her orgasm vibrating through him as if it was his own. He slowly lowered her to her feet and made sure that every part of her caressed every part of him before her shoes reached the floor. His nerves tingled with the contact and he held her against him, willingly prolonging the sweet torment of her body next to his, so close, but never close enough. "I can't wait to be inside you."

She didn't respond and he pulled back to look at her. "Lia?"

"I don't want to disappoint you."

"Why would you do that?"

"I...I told you. It's been a while. And a while before that."

Ramón frowned, couldn't imagine someone as sensual and hot as Emilia not engaging in sex for too long, but then maybe her long and his long were two different things. Long for him to do without was a couple of months, which was exactly how long ago he had ended his last relationship. That

affair had lasted exactly a week and since Caro, a week was the longest commitment he'd ever made to a woman. Anything beyond that and women started to ask questions, wanted to get personal and get to know him. He'd never been inclined to go beyond the superficial and share himself like that with anyone, until now.

Ramon cupped Emilia's chin and tilted up her face. "How long is a while?"

"Four years."

"Four years!"

"And about seven years before that."

He caught her by a hand, bent to pick up her bag and punched the Stop button again. "*Ay caramba! Usted tiene que engañar el mi—*"

"English, *por favor*."

He caught himself, realized how his tirade must sound to her when he glanced at her upturned face and saw the tremulous smile. "I'm sorry. I'm not upset with you. Trust me."

"What was that all about then?"

"Shock. *Dios*, either you're a Vulcan or the men in this city have lost their *cojones*." He watched her face flush as the elevator stopped on four and he dragged her off the car to lead her down the hallway to his loft apartment.

"Ever think that I've had offers and I was discriminating enough to turn them down?"

"You're right and in that case, I should count myself supremely lucky that the men in this town are all too stupid to realize you're a treasure worth pursuing."

"*Or* maybe you're right and I am a Vulcan," she teased.

"Then I'm going to enjoy converting you."

## Chapter 8

She'd never been more mortified in her life. To have to admit to her sexual inexperience in an elevator after a beyond-sinful man had just sent her spiraling into an abyss of unimaginative rapture was not high on her things-to-do-after-cunnilingus list.

If Ramón thought the length of time she had done without sex was a shocker, then he would really just bust a gasket when he found out that outside of her husband, she'd only been with one other man and according to her sister Donna that man was more worthless than most.

The idea that she wouldn't be enough for a sensual Latino like Ramón, who'd already taken her to the mountain top with his mouth alone when neither Tony or Ted had ever dared gone hiking down south, filled Emilia with more than a little anxiety.

Ramón did a nice enough job taking her mind off her imagined inadequacies just holding her hand as he escorted her into his apartment. He held her like she was important to him, squeezed her hand as if she was someone he valued, someone he didn't want to let go.

Was it just an act until he got what he wanted from her in bed before he discarded her?

God she hated being this way, hated when her inner Donna reared its ugly, cynical head, but she couldn't help wondering how many other women Ramón had held the same way. How many women had shared his bed, his life?

The questions made her realize she didn't know anything about Ramón, not enough to go falling naked into bed with him.

*And you thought you knew Tony inside-out before you married him, didn't you? Look how that turned out.*

Sheesh, until now, she hadn't allowed herself to think of Ramón's past life before her, hadn't allowed herself to entertain the idea of him with another woman. She didn't want to imagine him doing the same things to another woman that he had just done with her in that elevator. She knew her denial couldn't last. Soon she would have to ask him those unpleasant probing pre-commitment questions that women asked and that sent men screaming into the night. She was not the only one involved here. She had Anthony to think about.

She would never be able to step on another elevator again without reliving the moment when Ramón lifted her onto his shoulders and drank from her like a dehydrated man! She thought that alone might well be worth the price of Ramón's inevitable defection.

Was she so turned on because it had been so long or simply because he was forbidden fruit and knew his way around a woman's body?

She used to think Tony knew his way around a woman's body, but after Ramón, that notion didn't hold much water. And Ted had barely been a blip on the orgasmic radar screen compared to either man.

Emilia barely had time to appreciate the cool beige and burgundy symmetry of the living room before Ramón dragged her through the loft, flicking on the overhead lights to a large master bedroom.

She inhaled at the sight of the ocean-size bed furnished in bold brown and blue bedding and dominating the area like a stage beneath a spotlight.

Ramón stood behind her, lifting her hair off her neck and bent his head to slowly circle her nape with his tongue. "I've wanted you since I first saw you at the studio," he whispered.

She didn't know what to say, decided to say nothing that could spoil the moment.

Ramón slid his hands from her shoulders down to her butt, hands lingering on each cheek before he unceremoniously picked her up in his arms and tossed her onto the bed.

She yelped, scooting back on her elbows and heels, watching him toe off his shoes and quickly remove his shirt. The look he gave her, as if she



were prey he didn't intend to allow escaping, sent cold heat flooding through her center.

Emilia swallowed over the lump in her throat as she watched him strip, felt like a young virgin about to get into something way over her head. She tried to think of something to get her mind off of what was about to happen, but couldn't quite accomplish the feat, too eager to immerse herself in every sensation Ramón had to offer, wanting to experience every miracle that sex with him would surely afford.

Once he was completely naked, he stood at the foot of the bed in all his glowing caramel beauty, long, thick penis jutting out from his groin towards her like a compass needle pointing north, an inviting pearl of pre-cum shimmering in the slit.

"Take off your clothes, Lia."

His voice was liquid smooth, slowly flowing through and over her, filling every empty part of her with its exotic warmth.

When Emilia didn't respond, he climbed onto the bed with her, spreading her thighs and caressing them as he planted himself between her legs. "Or do you want me to help you?"

"I'll do it." She reached for her blouse with shaky fingers, slowly unbuttoning it as Ramón watched, motionless except for his mocha eyes following her every move. Her heart pounded in her ears as she pulled the hem of her shirt out of her skirt and undid the last button.

She slid her arms from the sleeves, every nerve-ending aware of his scrutiny when she discarded her blouse, nipples hard and tingling as his gaze brushed over her.

Emilia was so aroused and nervous she could barely breathe. She hadn't been naked in front of a man in so long the fear that Ramón wouldn't like what he saw pervaded her senses.

She was forty-six, after all, had stretch marks and a Cesarean scar almost as old as him.

But Ramón didn't seem turned off by her body, expertly relieving her of her bra, skirt and pumps before reverently dipping his head to kiss and run his tongue along said scar.

Emilia shuddered beneath his mouth and he circled her waist with both hands to hold her in place as he went to work licking a path down to her hot and swollen core.

*“Usted es tan hermosa,”* he murmured. *“Amo su cuerpo.”*

She loved the sexy lilt of his native tongue, noticed he lapsed into it whenever he was upset or turned on, but now more than ever she wanted to know what he had said, needed to know.

Emilia reached down to cup his face urging his head up. “English, *por favor.*”

He chuckled and the soft sound tickled her skin. “I said you are so beautiful and I love your body.” He circled her hip bones with his thumbs and kissed her navel. “Not too skinny, not too plump. You’re just right.”

Tears sprang to her eyes, surprising her with their unexpectedness and Emilia covered her face with a hand as Ramón planted his face between her legs as if there was no place else in the world he’d rather be.

His casualness smacked her world off its axis, his easy confidence belying the fact that he had barely been on this earth when Emilia was almost out of junior high.

Did it really make a difference? The way he touched her, possession and tenderness coloring every contact, told her no.

When Ramon parted her labial lips with his thumbs Emilia held her breath, waiting for the stroke of his tongue, warm breath on her flesh already pushing her to the edge of abandon and pleasure. She was yet stunned when he finally caressed her, licking her vulva and clit before thrusting deep inside her.

That he could bring her to climax with his mouth amazed her. That he could bring her to climax with his mouth so quickly—just a few strokes with his tongue against her vulva and clitoris and she was writhing on the bed, panting beneath the oral onslaught—was either a sign that she had been without sex for far too long, or she had become something of an insatiable nymphomaniac in her middle age.

She barely had time to catch her breath before he brought her to the edge again, sliding two fingers inside her, curving the longest one up

towards her navel before he brushed against her G-spot and Emilia almost leaped off the bed. It was nothing like when she'd touched it herself!

Ramón placed his free hand against her stomach, holding her still as he lowered his head to suck and lick her swollen flesh and continued to wriggle his fingers inside her.

Surely this wasn't normal, coming so often without the benefit of having a penis inside her. She was beginning to wonder if she had ever had an orgasm before, couldn't remember experiencing any of these feelings of completion and total satisfaction with Tony or Ted. Sex with them had been pleasant, at times exhausting and fun, but never this mind blowing, all encompassing desperate feeling, like she would die if she didn't have Ramón inside her. Now.

Emilia moaned, tumbling head over heels into another chasm of ecstasy, tremors riding her body and still Ramón wasn't through with her.

He reached across her for the top drawer of his nightstand, and pulled out a box of condoms.

He removed one, prepared to put it on but Emilia reached for him before he could sheath himself, eager to taste him as he had tasted her, eager to please him.

She took the packet from him and encircled his hard shaft with her free hand. It pulsed against her palm like a living thing, all hot and smooth. "Come." She drew him near, taking the reins and exerting her power.

Ramón moved forward as Emilia lowered her head, vibrating when she dipped her tongue into his slit and scooped out the jewel of pre-ejaculate there.

She savored the sample, the salty-sweet flavor making her hunger for so much more. She opened her mouth to take him in, lowering her head to the middle of his shaft before stopping to suck and graze him with her teeth.

Ramón hissed above her, hands almost instantly burying themselves in her hair and fisting against her scalp.

She sensed his restraint as he held her, touch firm but gentle, tightening slightly when she went down on him almost to the base and relaxed her throat muscles before coming back up to greedily suck his engorged head.

Ramón slid his hands down to her shoulders, gently pushed her back and his dick slid out of her mouth with a little pop. “You’re torturing me.” He smiled, reaching for the condom, but Emilia held it just out of his range. “Are you going to put it on?”

She was a little out of practice, sure, but she figured she could manage sliding it on, looking forward to another chance of handling him again.

Emilia ripped open the foil pack and discarded it before rolling its content down over Ramón’s throbbing shaft.

He closed his eyes and bit his lower lip as if she really were torturing him.

“Are you all right?”

He nodded. “But if I don’t get inside you soon, I think I’ll explode.”

“We mustn’t have that. We want you to explode inside me, not outside.”

Ramón laughed as he tumbled her onto her back, covering her body with his, surrounding her with his spicy-musky scent and his fierce warmth.

His skin was so hot it was as if he was on fire, and when he balanced his weight on his elbows and brushed her hair away from her face with both hands to stare at her, Emilia felt as if his fire would consume them both before he even penetrated her.

Ramón pushed up on his palms, parting her thighs with a knee before he settled himself between her legs and teased her center with the head of his penis.

Emilia curved her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. “Please, Ramón...don’t make me wait any longer.”

“Not much longer, *querida*.” He pushed forward and Emilia gasped at the solid feel of his shaft inside her, surprised that not even her teeming wetness mitigated the length and width of him. “*Dios*, you feel so good, so tight.”

“More. I can take it. Please.” She closed her eyes and squeezed her legs to draw him closer, telling him with her body what she needed, what she wanted. Him, all of him.

Ramón hugged her to him as he thrust inside her, holding tight while he ground and circled his hips against her.

Emilia closed her eyes at the intensity of his movements, the athletic precision when he stirred inside her before pulling back and plunging deep again, building a gently violent rhythm that she bucked her hips to match.

His heartbeat sped against her ear like musical accompaniment to their sensual dance, and Emilia worked to keep up with him, moaning as he pistoned his hips and powered them over the edge to a little death she had never known before.

She opened her eyes to see his face above hers, a light sheen of perspiration coating his face and giving him an ethereal glow, her own personal dark angel.

There was so much she wanted to know about him, so much she wanted to ask, but common sense and experience told her to keep her own counsel.

Rather than open her mouth to ruin the moment, Emilia settled for kissing and caressing his face, a lulling calm taking over her pursuits right before Ramón pulled her onto his chest as he lay on his back.

She fell asleep to the soothing rhythm of Ramón's heartbeat against her ear and promising herself to call Angela in a little while and check up on Anthony. She just wanted to catch a few winks. Just a few.

\* \* \* \*

Emilia heard her cell phone ringing from a great distance, dragging herself up from sleep slowly and trying to remember where she had left it.

She sat up in Ramón's king-size bed, pulled the sheet around her as she got out of bed.

Ramón caught her around the waist and pulled her back against the wall of his hard chest. "Where are you running off to?"

"My phone. It could be my sister. Anth—" She didn't have to get the word out all the way before he released her.

She retraced her steps to the living room, still not able to appreciate the understated but tasteful furnishings except as window dressing to her sexual reawakening. She tried to focus her mind on finding her phone, finding all

sorts of other things in her wake instead. Ramón's' shirt and her underwear were strewn on the floor and then, finally, her bag.

Emilia grabbed it up and dug inside for her phone, just missing the call. She saw Angela's number and told herself to be calm. It might be nothing. But it could be something. What else would make her call Emilia after midnight?

She dialed her sister back and Angela picked up on the first ring. "I called back as soon as I could, Angie. What's up?"

"Emmy, you need to come home. I think he knows."

## Chapter 9

Anthony woke disoriented and panicked at his unfamiliar surroundings. He didn't realize he was whimpering, still half-asleep, until he felt someone's arms go around him and pull him close to a pair of soft, motherly breasts.

But it wasn't his mom. He knew his mom's smell, a soft vanilla musk that was in everything his mother wore, a permanent fixture of her skin. "Mom...I want my mom..." He cut off the sob that crawled up and out of his throat, hating himself for being a big baby. He was in the double-digits, almost a teenager and boys didn't cry anyway. At least he wouldn't, no way. He wouldn't give his dad another reason for not wanting to be around him, another reason for staying away.

"Why doesn't my father love me?" Anthony heard the gasp above him and felt his Aunt Angela's arms tighten around him as if to shield him from the answer, as if to shield him from the truth. "I want to know why."

"Oh, Tony—"

"Don't call me that. I...I just want to be Anthony."

"Whatever you want, baby."

"Where's my mom?"

"She, uh, didn't want to bother you when she got in, so she just went straight home."

Anthony pulled back to stare at his aunt, grimacing as she turned on the bedside lamp. "You're a bad liar, Auntie."

"I keep forgetting you can see right through me."

He took a deep breath, deciding if he didn't do it now, he never would. Someone in his family had to know the truth, so he'd just start with the head and work his way down if he had to. "Who's David?" This time instead of

the sharp intake of breath indicating her shock, Aunt Angela's eyes widened. It wasn't a lot, and if he hadn't been looking for it, he probably wouldn't have noticed. But he did notice and he knew something was wrong. "Who is he, Aunt Angela?"

He looked at her, waiting for the lie, deliberately reaching out with his mind for the first time since he figured out he had a gift and was special, and using it. And what he found he didn't like. More than just the way his aunt blocked him was the information he gleaned before she managed to shut him out. *Brother.*

Realization and bitterness swept through him at the same time the hot tears of betrayal filled his eyes. Right then, Anthony didn't think he would be able to take the advice of the young man from his dreams and not blame his mother for the lie.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm sorry to break up your party, but I didn't know what else to do, Em."

If Angela was sounding this flustered then this was bad.

How much, exactly, did Anthony know? And how had Angela known she was partying?

Emilia glanced at her sister as Angela led her through the house and caught the smile. Of course Angela knew what she had been doing because Emilia had been doing exactly what her sister had planned when she'd put Ramón's and Emilia's meeting in motion.

"Don't apologize, Angie. You did what you had to do. The important thing to do now is—"

"Damage control."

"Exactly."

Sounded good in theory but Emilia was at a loss as to what she was going to say to her son when he fixed her with his big brown eyes and asked her the ultimate question. Why?



She wished she had prepared better for this day, but how did one prepare for the psychic abilities of one's child? On top of everything else she had to deal with under the circumstances, her lie of omission was almost minor in comparison. Emilia told herself she should have been relieved that Anthony's abilities made it unnecessary for her to explain, but they were also an additional piece of the puzzle she needed to solve, a possibly unpleasant piece.

She should never have let Tony talk her into secrecy. Anthony had a right to know that he had an older brother.

God she'd been such a fool!

"You put your trust in the person you loved. There's nothing foolish about that, Em." Angela put a hand around her shoulder, but neither her words nor her touch brought Emilia any comfort, as she knew that no matter what she said to Anthony, he probably would never forgive her, never forgive any of them.

"He's a smart boy. Give him more credit."

"He's also half-Vega. And you know how long we can hold a grudge."

"But we always see the light in the end."

Emilia only hoped her son could do that to forgive her because he was the most important thing in the world to her and if she lost his trust and love, she didn't know what she would do.

It was funny how her priorities changed in a matter of hours. Hours earlier, she thought she would die if Ramón didn't take her as swiftly as possible.

Goodness, Ramón!

She'd only just rediscovered what having a special man in her life was like. What was going to become of their relationship now—a relationship at once oh so right and oh so wrong?

\* \* \* \*

Anthony sat with his knees pulled up to his chest and his arms wrapped around his knees when his mom opened the door and peeked inside Aunt Angela's guest bedroom.

He'd wondered what his reaction to her appearance would be when she finally arrived, had been so prepared to hate her, to give her the cold shoulder for keeping him in the dark, for deserting him when he needed her most.

But how could he hate the one person who had always been there for him with a warm smile, a firm hug and gentle kiss whenever he needed them? How could he hate Mom or begrudge her happiness?

He tried to tell himself that she had her reasons, but what reason was good enough to keep him away from his brother? Had it been her idea or his father's and did it really matter?

"Hey, sport."

"Aunt Angela wouldn't tell me who David is, but I already know."

Mom took a deep breath and sat down on the bed beside him, and Anthony felt her nervousness like a living thing sitting in the small space between them.

He wanted so badly to let her off the hook, to let them both off the hook, but he had to know the truth. "I know why Aunt Angela didn't tell me. But why didn't you, Mom?"

"Anthony..."

"What's so wrong with me that no one wants to have anything to do with me?"

"Baby, don't..." Mom put a hand over her mouth to stop the sob, but nothing stopped the tears from quickly filling her eyes.

Anthony instantly felt her pain. It was a physical ache in his chest, a tightening around his heart, hot and fiery spiraling down to his stomach like a tornado ready to dislodge everything he'd earlier eaten and make him throw up.

He hadn't gotten such strong images and emotions from his mother since that night he'd figured out that she and Mr. Chavez liked each other.

He wondered if it was because he was still new at this empathy stuff, or whether it was because he and his mom were so close.

Aunt Angela said now that his gifts were manifesting they would only get stronger and the most important thing for him to do was to learn to control them, not let them control him.

Anthony closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, tuning into his mother's feelings, tuning into her thoughts.

He caught flashes of how she'd spent her time earlier at the dance studio with Uncle Freddie and Mr. Chavez, saw her in an apartment with Mr. Chavez, kissing and...Sheesh, they were really close, and pulling closer and closer like two runaway trains. Anthony didn't think anything could stop their relationship from moving forward didn't think anyone could.

It still didn't mean he had to like what was happening, and he quickly blocked his mother's thoughts, didn't want to see any more. He had enough to deal with already without having to face the harsh reality of his mom dating one of his teachers no matter how much of a good guy he thought Mr. Chavez was.

Mom slid an arm around his shoulders, moving gingerly and slow as if she didn't have a right to touch him and was testing the waters. "I love you and want to have everything to do with you, Anthony. That's what's important."

"But it's not enough."

"I know."

"I want to see him." He watched her frown and felt her confusion before he added, "my brother."

"I don't know if that would be such a good idea."

"Now you sound like my father."

She didn't say anything and he reached again, tired of being treated like a little baby and shoved aside like his feelings didn't matter. If he had these gifts he might as well use them. "It was him wasn't it? He didn't want me to know."

Mom shook her head. "I won't put the blame all on him. I went along with it. I agreed."

Anthony gaped before he caught himself. He couldn't decide whether his mom had been totally selfless or not, couldn't decide whether she had been a victim in all this like him or not. "But why?"

Mom shrugged. "I don't even know anymore. I think it was just easier to go along and say nothing. Maybe it was selfish of me, but I liked the idea of having you all to myself."

Her words should have made him feel better but they didn't. "You're right. It was selfish."

"Anthony, you need to know that I never wanted to see you hurt. That's the last thing I would ever want to do."

"I know." But it didn't help because the plain fact of the matter was that she had hurt him, she and his dad had kept his brother away from him. "Does he know about me?"

"I'm not sure."

Was she just saying that to keep him from seeking David out? Or was she trying to spare his feelings again?

She squeezed his shoulder and pulled him close to her side. "When your father and I separated it was a difficult time for me. I can't deny wanting to make things easier for myself any way I could, and part of that was going along with his decision to keep his new family separate from...from you."

She could have just left the entire mess at his father's feet, but she didn't. She admitted that she'd gone along with Dad's decision and Anthony felt how difficult it was for her to admit that, to admit that she had been human, that she had been thinking not just of him but of herself.

Mom had always been the buffer between Anthony and his father, protecting him as much as possible from Dad's rejection.

Anthony decided it was time for him to protect and take care of himself.

## Chapter 10

As preoccupied as Emilia had been and as hastily as she had left his apartment two nights ago, barely sparing him a kiss and then only because he had insisted and pulled her into his arms to take one at the door, Ramón didn't know how welcome a call from him would be. But it didn't stop him from planning to call her the first free moment he got, right after his last class.

Not only did he want to hear her voice, but he was curious to know why Anthony hadn't shown up in school today. He wondered if it had anything to do with why Emilia had to rush off the other night. Was everything okay with her and Anthony?

He was worried about her. She had looked so defeated when she left, trying so hard but not succeeding in covering up her weariness. Watching her reminded him of a quote: *harder than iron, stronger than stone and more fragile than a rose*. He couldn't remember exactly where he had heard it, just thought it fit his Emilia so well.

Ramón closed his eyes, pulling her picture up from his memory, heart thudding at the vulnerability and nerves she'd shown when he'd undressed her, especially her reaction when he'd kissed her C-section scar, the slight stretch marks on her hips and thighs.

He'd wanted to tell her then that he loved her and would never let anything, or any man hurt her or Anthony again, wanted to lay claim to her soul as well as her body that night but had been as nervous and afraid of revealing his feelings as Emilia had been that he wouldn't like her body.

How could he make her believe that she was his ideal woman, that the sight of her scars, what he knew she saw as imperfections didn't disappoint him as much as it brought home the memories of his past loss? How could

he make her believe that she was the only woman in the world since Caro to make him want to give up his bachelorhood and risk loss again?

“Emilia Vega.”

Ramón caught his breath at the sound of her voice, cock immediately hardening, responding to the sexy feminine lilt. “Lia, it’s me.”

“Ramón? How did you get this number?”

“You should be asking yourself why the man you slept with the other night was forced to get your number from your brother-in-law instead of getting it from you.” He instantly regretted the accusatory tone, especially when he heard Emilia’s sigh on the other end.

“I’m sorry. I should have called you. I...I’ve been preoccupied.”

“That’s why I’m calling, to see if everything is all right. You left my place so quickly, we didn’t get a chance to talk.”

“I know, and I’m—”

“Don’t apologize again unless you mean it.”

“Of course I mean it.”

“Make it up to me then.”

She chuckled. “And how do I do that?”

“Come to my place for dinner Saturday. I’ll cook.”

“Hmm, you drive a hard bargain. But aren’t I supposed to be making things up to you?”

“Oh, you will be, trust me.”

This time she laughed, a genuine full-bodied sound that sent shivers of pleasure up Ramón’s spine. He didn’t think he would ever tire of hearing it, never tire of hearing the evidence of Emilia’s good humor. “So, how is everything? How’s Anthony?”

“He’s...okay.”

“I was curious since I didn’t see him in class today.”

“What do you mean you didn’t see him in class?”

The minute he heard the panic in Emilia’s voice he knew something was wrong.

“Do you mean you haven’t seen him at all today?”

"It's possible he just cut my class." He listened to her take a deep breath as if to steady herself before she said, "He wouldn't do that. Anthony's a good kid. He likes school."

"Not only bad kids cut." But kids with problems did and depending on how big or small his problems were Anthony might have cut not just Ramón's class but school entirely. "What happened the other night, Lia?"

It was as if he had turned on a water faucet full force. Words poured out of her so fast and furious he could barely make sense of them. He did get the gist though. The bad dreams that had been keeping Anthony up at night for the last few weeks, the brother Anthony didn't know he had, his anger at being lied to.

Ramón went through so many different emotions during Emilia's explanation he couldn't keep track of them all. But paramount was his sympathy for the at-odds mother and son. He could see both their sides, understand their disillusionment.

"Where could he be?"

Putting himself in Anthony's place, Ramón asked, "Is it possible he went to his father?"

"It's...it's possible."

He sensed her hesitation to get him involved or even ask for his help, but there was no way he would let her shut him out now. He was in this thing now for the long haul, for better or worse. *Dios*, he was taking marriage vows already! The thought should have frightened a confirmed bachelor like himself, at the very least struck a chord of anxiety in his competitive, daredevil's soul but it didn't. "The first thing we need to do is establish where he isn't, then move from there," he stated. "You call any family or friends he could have turned to. I'm going to search the school grounds and ask if anyone's seen him. I'm sure he's around and is just having a hard time dealing with me and you being a couple." He knew he was oversimplifying as he said it. He sure as hell didn't want to scare her off making the bold assumption that she had told Anthony about them but wanted to make it clear to her where things stood between them.

He knew it wasn't an ideal situation, Anthony having his mother dating his English teacher, but he knew the situation was more complicated than this, as complicated and easy as a young boy yearning to have a relationship with his father. Ramón knew the feelings all too well.

"What if he's not in any of those places?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, I need you to be strong and trust me. Can you do that?" He listened to her shaky intake of breath before she whispered, "Yes."

"He's okay, Lia. You have to believe that."

\* \* \* \*

Getting to Albany had been the easy part. Finding the campus and dorm where his brother lived was something entirely different especially since he was using unconventional means of getting the information and trying not to draw attention to himself.

Anthony put his newfound gifts to use, reaching out with his mind while still trying to maintain a shield against his Aunt Angela and Uncle EJ. No telling how strong those two were or how far their reach.

But he knew how his Mom was, knew how his family was. He was certain that as soon as he'd been discovered missing the alarm went up and the troops were assembled.

The entire Vega-Calminetti clan was probably gathered at Aunt Angela's now drawing up all sorts of scenarios and contingency plans to find him and bring him back home. The problem was he didn't want to go home, not until he got to the bottom of things with his brother.

He'd been all hyped when he first decided to come, nervous excitement pouring through him when he boarded the train at the station.

Anthony was lightheaded from the rush, felt like what Mr. Chavez described when he skydived or bungee jumped. Heart pounding in his chest so hard he thought it would burst free, perspiration pooling under his armpits and in the palm of his hands until he thought he'd melt away on a



stream of it, mouth so dry he knew he'd have lost in a spitting contest with his friends.

Anthony's excitement slowly turned to uncertainty the longer he walked around the quad without finding his brother. That and the thought of his mother's disappointment and worry almost had him regretting his reckless decision to come, almost but not quite.

He absolutely knew coming out here was the right thing to do, wouldn't have been able to live with himself, pretending it didn't matter that his father and brother didn't care about him when it mattered almost more than anything to him.

What made him such a bad kid that one of his parents wanted nothing to do with him? What had he ever done that was so wrong besides being born?

He knew his mom loved him, knew Mr. Chavez cared about him too, but that wasn't the same, wasn't enough to make ditching school more unattractive than not.

His funds weren't too shabby, years of hording allowances and side job money really coming in handy. He could probably make it on his own for a couple of days if he had to and depending on how things went with his brother, he might just consider it.

He knew he would have to go home eventually, that to stay away would be just plain mean, but he wasn't feeling particularly forgiving or nice, especially when he thought how his mother—his whole family, really—had been lying to him all these years.

Anthony still loved Mom, knew he always would, but that didn't stop him from wanting to see her hurt the way he hurt.

\* \* \* \*

Emilia hadn't stopped pacing the floor of Angela's family room since she'd arrived from work twenty minutes before and didn't know what would make her stop besides Anthony's safe return. She had been inconsolable since getting off the phone with Ramón and no amount of family reassurances made her otherwise.

Angela had called all their siblings and checked with all their friends who Anthony might have gone to, but none of them had seen or heard from him and now everyone was on high alert in case he did show up.

Emilia had called Tony from her cell en route from her job. It was the last thing in the world she wanted to do, but she had no alternative. She had to check all possibilities and, like it or not, Tony was Anthony's father and a viable consideration.

But Tony hadn't heard from Anthony since the last time the boy called him a month ago. He didn't seem particularly concerned that Anthony had cut school, taking the boys-will-be-boys stance and hanging up with barely a question as to *why* Anthony cut school.

Just as well, Emilia told herself. She didn't want his interference, didn't need it. She decided that she had made this mess, she would fix it.

But her independent mind-set went out the window the minute Ramón arrived.

Emilia had to consciously keep herself from running across the room and throwing herself in his arms when one of her nephews answered the door and a couple of seconds later Ramón appeared on the threshold of the family room.

He was like a ray of sunlight shining through the house, a connection to Anthony outside of her family that she needed and wanted to cling to. Just the sight of his firm powerful body—and the memories of what it could do to hers that the sight of him evoked—soothed Emilia, won her trust, like his deep honeyed voice had calmed her on the phone earlier.

He crossed the room, his movements graceful and confident, stance naturally proud and erect, all testament to his lithe dancer's body and making him seem much taller than the 5'10 that Emilia knew he was. And standing in the same room with her brothers who were both a couple of inches over six feet, did nothing to diminish his stature in her eyes.

The age gap between him and her had ceased to be a concern the minute he'd proven more responsible and caring a man to Anthony than his father would ever be. The conflict of him being Anthony's teacher was just

something she was going to have to deal with, she decided, and knew having him in her life was more than worth the risk of societal reprisals.

Emilia knew right then and there that she was falling in love with Ramón.

She glanced over at her sister standing a couple of feet away and caught the smile Angela tried to hide before she shooed everyone out of the room to let Emilia speak to Ramón in private.

She smiled at how accepting everyone was of him, of them as a couple. Even her younger but over-protective brothers didn't stay to give Ramón a hard time, but then General Angela had spoken and no one dared question her word, even when the General was still sporting a cast and walking on one crutch.

"You've got a big family," Ramón observed once they were alone.

"And this isn't everyone."

"I envy you."

Emilia frowned, not for the first time wondering about Ramón's family background and upbringing. She didn't even know if he had any brothers or sisters. "Are you an only child?"

Ramón nodded, took her hand and led her over to the sofa where he sat and patted the space beside him. "We need to talk."

"Now?"

"It's important."

She warily eyed the space beside him before sitting down.

Ramón wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. "My mother was a single mother who raised me by herself just like you're raising Anthony."

"I've had help."

"Yes, your family and I'm sure Anthony loves and appreciates them as much as you do."

She turned her head to look at him. "But they're not his father."

"Your ex-husband's desertion leaves a big hole in Anthony's life that no amount of aunts, uncles, cousins or grandparents can fill."

"You sound like you're speaking from experience."

"I am, but it doesn't take an expert to know Anthony's hurting."

"I know." She lowered her head like a penitent in the confessional and Ramón cupped her chin to lift her face.

"Look at me, Lia."

She did, searching his dark eyes for a glimmer of his confidence and strength.

"You don't have anything to be ashamed of. You did the best you could with Anthony, for him. If he was here, I'm sure he'd agree."

"But he's not here."

"We'll find him."

"Will we? Because I've run out of options except to call the police."

"I don't think we have to get that drastic."

"You sound like Angela." Emilia tried to pull away and stand but Ramón wouldn't let her, catching her around the shoulders and making her face him.

"I know I might sound unfeeling to you, but trust me, I'm not. I just don't think you want to call in the police for something that's essentially a family matter."

"But we don't know that!"

"Do you trust me, Lia?"

She looked into his dark eyes, automatically nodding, wondered how she ever questioned his wisdom and sincerity. "Yes."

"Good. You called his father?"

She nodded. "Tony hasn't seen him."

"Does he have any reason to lie or harbor Anthony?"

"Tony? You must be joking."

"Okay, that's what I thought. What about his brother?"

"He's never met David, didn't know he existed until...well, until the other night."

Ramón rubbed her arms in a slow, lulling motion, so unobtrusive that she barely registered him doing it. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

How did he do that?

She was already having a hard enough time dealing with what Angela told her about her son. Did she have to deal with a telepathic lover to boot?

She was still numb from the knowledge of Anthony's abilities. She didn't think she'd ever get used to what he could do, and Angela assured her he would only get stronger, at least as strong as their brother EJ. That frightened her. EJ had started out as a gifted telepath before his powers spilled into the area of precognition.

She couldn't decide what was worse, a son who could read her mind or one who could see her future.

What was it that Anthony saw in his dreams to drive him away from her? Had he seen her and Ramón together?

The possibility froze the blood in her veins. She didn't want him to find out about her and Ramón other than straight from her lips.

Should she tell Ramón about Anthony? Should she tell him what some in her family could do? Didn't he deserve to know what he might be getting himself into? If he felt half as strongly about her as she felt about him, chances were he was going to be around for a while. Did she want to scare him off before their relationship even had a chance to get off the ground?

He cupped her chin again and turned her face to his. "Without trust, we have nothing, Lia."

"You were right that we need to talk. There's something I have to tell you about Anthony."

## Chapter 11

Ramón wasn't surprised by Emilia's revelations only because he had had a vision of his own right after hanging up with her earlier.

The double images staggered him when they first flew past his eyes like the faces of passengers on a subway train speeding through a station. The only way to relieve the disorientation was to squeeze his eyes tight as the mental movie rolled.

He plopped into his desk chair and took several deep breaths waiting for the picture to stop, or at least come into focus and make sense.

Ramón had never considered himself psychic before though he'd always had keen insight into people's feelings and was excellent at anticipating others' needs and wants. This anticipation especially helped in his dealings with his students, both in his English class and at the studio. But what he experienced earlier was something totally different from instinct or insight and fell into something his strict Catholic *abuela* would have called possession.

Ramón had almost told Emilia all about his visions of Anthony—backpack slung over his shoulders as he walked towards some university—before she told him about the psychic abilities that ran in her family, the moment to come clean about himself momentarily lost.

He had time for his own revelations later, he told himself. But now the most important thing for him to do was reunite Emilia with her son.

Ramón felt the tension rolling off of her in waves, wondered if his senses were heightened since that earlier vision or was he just so attuned to the woman in the car beside him because they'd made love. He'd never felt as close to any woman as he had to Emilia since they'd come together in his apartment. It was as if that single act of consummation sealed their destiny

together. He wasn't usually prone to such melodrama, left those emotional scenes to his mother, but ever since he had met Emilia he'd had a sense of completion as if he'd found the one when he hadn't even been looking.

They were well into their trip when Emilia finally asked, "Where are we going exactly?"

How was he supposed to explain to her how he knew where her son had gone without revealing how he knew? He couldn't and realized that now was the time to come clean. "I saw Anthony at a school, University at Albany to be exact."

"But why would he..." She jerked her head around to stare at him and Ramón felt the heat of her gaze on the side of his face like a hot iron. "You saw him? As in a vision?"

"Is that so hard to believe knowing what you know your son and your siblings can do?"

Emilia shook her head. "I suppose not. I'm still a little shell-shocked from everything that's happened in the last seventy-two hours, is all."

"Join the club." He grinned to soften his statement, despite not wanting to give her the idea that any of this was a laughing matter.

"So, you did have a vision?"

He looked at her briefly before turning his eyes back to the road. "I don't have much experience with them, but I suppose that's what you'd call it."

"And what did you see?"

"He's safe, Lia."

"But for how long? It has to be more than another hour away. What if something happens to him before we get there?"

"I alerted school security to let them know what's going on and to be on the lookout for him while we're en route."

"What would make him go there? We don't know anyone—"

"His brother."

"Oh..."

"I guess he figured if the mountain wouldn't come to him he'd go to the mountain. Or at least he'd go to one of them."

“What if David is like his father and doesn’t want to have anything to do with Anthony?”

“I’m hoping that won’t be the case, but if it is, we’ll just have to be prepared for some emotional fallout.”

“How can you be so calm? You’re talking about a twelve-year-old’s emotional fallout. I’m not sure if he can take anymore rejection.”

“Are you sure we’re only talking about what Anthony can take?”

“Is it so wrong for me to want to protect my son?”

“Not at all. But in so doing, you’ve deprived him of what could have been a valuable male relationship in his life.”

“I should have told him.”

“You did what you thought was right at the time.” He grabbed her closest hand and gently squeezed. “He’ll be all right. Kids are resilient.”

“Were you?”

Ramón frowned. “Was I what?”

“How old were you when your father deserted your mother and you?”

He looked at her, schooling his features as best he could but knew he had gotten little past her especially after their little eye-opening dinner when he had all but attacked Anthony’s father coming to the boy’s defense. He didn’t think he could have been more protective or revealing in his disapproval if he’d tried. “I was barely a blink in my mother’s womb.”

Emilia nodded, biting her bottom lip, tears glistening on her cheeks.

Ramón squeezed her hand again. “Don’t. It was a long time ago. I’ve gotten over it.”

“I’d like to believe that, but that sort of rejection isn’t exactly something you get over.”

“Not completely, no. But life goes on. Has to.”

“Don’t they realize what sort of psychological damage they’re doing to future generations of men and potential fathers?”

“It’s like you said. I don’t think they care.”

“How can they not?”

Ramón shrugged, had often asked himself the same question that he suspected daily plagued Anthony. What’s wrong with me that my own



father, my own blood, doesn't love me? If he thought about it too much or too long, he'd be bitter and he had worked too hard to get the man and his desertion out of his system, worked too hard to be his own man, someone a child like Anthony could be proud of. To be someone a woman like Emilia could love.

"Is your father why you haven't had any kids of your own?"

Dare he tell her that he'd tried to have a child, wanted kids and dearly loved having them in his life because his own father *wasn't* in his? What was he trying to prove anyway, being a father to every child that he could? That he was a better man than his father? "We tried to have kids once, my wife and I."

"You were married."

Ramón nodded, didn't know what to say to ease Emilia's obvious disillusionment.

"What happened?"

"She was older and it was a difficult, high-risk pregnancy. But we both wanted children..." He paused here, gathering his courage to say the rest. He had thought the worst part had past when he lost Caro, but he realized now sharing that loss with another person, someone he cared deeply about, was just as difficult. "She died during childbirth. The baby...didn't make it either."

"Oh my God."

"She knew what she was getting into. At least she thought she did. Still I tried to convince her not to go through with the pregnancy when we realized how risky it would be."

"Ramón?"

"Hold that thought, *querida*." He searched the road for the nearest exit, knew the rest of the conversation couldn't continue on the move, not the way he wanted to put both arms around her and feel her arms around him, and not from the shaky emotion he heard in her voice.

He found a spot on the shoulder of the road several yards up, pulled over and put the car in park before turning to face Emilia full.

Neither spoke, just leaned towards each other, drawn like a plant to the sun, lips and tongues colliding in an explosion of sensations—anguish, comfort, desire and need.

Ramón pulled the pins out of her chignon, soft titian hair tumbling down around her shoulders from the ascetic, sedate style in which it had been. He plunged both hands into the glimmering waves, fisting his hands against her scalp as he pressed her face against his and foraged inside her mouth, pouring his soul into hers, drawing her soul into his.

He tasted salt, didn't know if it was from his tears or hers, just didn't want to let her go, lips clinging, tongue searching for that other half of himself that he had been missing for far too long.

Emilia pulled away, breathless and holding his hands as she stared at him. "Ramón, I had a difficult pregnancy too and—"

"I would never ask you to do that again."

"You're a young man, Ramón. You need to know—"

"I love you, Lia. That's what I know."

"But..." She gaped.

"I know he's not mine but I love Anthony too. And I know I could be a good father to him."

"I don't doubt that, but—"

"We could be a family."

"What are you saying?"

"I know we're moving fast, but I know what I want and—"

"You certainly *don't* believe in wasting time."

Ramón chuckled, cupping her face with both hands. "So, what do you say?"

"I say..." She flung herself into his arms, tongue finding the shell of his ear and making his cock rock-hard in an instant. "I love you, Ramón. And I want you...right now..."

"Here?"

In answer she grabbed the lapels of his shirt and climbed onto his lap to straddle him. "I need to feel you inside me."

"I don't have anything."

"You didn't let me finish before. When I said I had a difficult pregnancy I meant it was the last one I'll ever have. I can't have anymore children."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not." She smiled. "I have Anthony."

"Since Caro, I've never had sex without protection and I don't want to do this unless you're su—"

"I'm safe and I'm sure." She put a finger against his lips, kissed him gently. "I trust you."

He stared up at her beneath the quickly waning light outside and could tell she hadn't found enough times in her life to say that last to a man, was honored that she said it to him. "I'm safe too," Except where she was concerned. Where Emilia was concerned he was totally reckless, totally without regrets and totally in love.

She shook her head, slowly unbuckling his belt and pulling down his zipper. "No. You're dangerous...very, very dangerous..." She bent her head and caught his mouth with hers just as Ramón reached for her. She pulled up her skirt, grinding her hips against him and brushing his erection with her slit.

Ramón slid his fingers under her lacey underwear, pushing it to the side as Emilia wrapped a hand around his shaft and pulled it from his pants and underwear. He shuddered at her boldness, her iron grip on him, trying to keep his head. "This is risky."

"I know. I'll make it quick, Mr. Extreme Sports."

He laughed, unbuttoning her blouse to bury his face between her fragrant cleavage. The musky vanilla scent drifted to his nostrils as he pushed down a bra cup to run his tongue around her aureole, the turgid nipple growing hard as he suckled.

Emilia moaned, the salacious sound vibrating through him while she arched her neck and guided Ramón's cock to her pussy opening. She teased her labia with the head of his penis, his pre-cum mingling with her sizzling female juices.

Ramón wrapped his arms around her, nipping her earlobe. "Take me in, Lia. Put me out of my misery."

“Oh yes...” She pulled up to position herself over his jutting cock, then eased down on him inch by teasing inch before impaling herself completely.

Ramón growled, holding her tight against him as she circled her hips and squeezed her vaginal muscles around him like a hot, velvet vise. His cock pulsed inside her as he bucked his hips to meet her downward thrusts. They moved slowly, in unison, plunging and thrusting, building up to a shattering crescendo before Emilia cried out above him.

Ramón managed one final upward push, holding her shuddering body as her orgasm rolled over her and set off his. He buried his face against her breasts, muffling a shout of pleasure when he hurtled full ahead into blinding ecstasy and powerlessness. It staggered him how a quickie with Emilia was more intense than a full-fledged encounter he’d had with any other woman.

Panting, Emilia nuzzled his throat, licking and sucking a path to his earlobe, the rough-smooth feel of her tongue making him hard all over again. It didn’t take much, not from her, to get him hot and ready. “God, I needed that link, that release so much. I can’t explain it.”

“I know what you mean and I was happy to oblige.” He caught her bottom lip between his teeth, gently nibbling and sucking before a vision rocked him.

He jerked away from her, closing his eyes tight against the glaring image of Anthony running away from someone shouting behind him.

Ramón snapped open his eyes. “*Dios!*”

“You saw something?”

With a gentleness that belied his fear and urgency, Ramón picked Emilia up and plunked her into the passenger seat. “We have to go.”

“Was it Anthony? Is he okay?”

“He’s fine.” He wouldn’t tell her anymore than that.

## Chapter 12

Emilia always thought it would be fun to do what Angela and EJ did, but reading Ramón's mind and knowing what he'd seen back at the rest stop felt more like life and death necessity.

He wouldn't tell her, no matter how much she asked, just kept assuring her that Anthony was all right. She knew better, knew that if her son was all right Ramón wouldn't be breaking the speed limit to get to Albany.

Something was wrong.

As if to pound home this point, Ramón reached for her hand and squeezed before turning to look at her. "We're almost there."

"I want to know what's going on, Ramón."

He took a deep breath. "I think Anthony found his brother."

"And that's bad?"

"I'm not sure. Precognition is new to me. I'm still sorting through the images I'm getting."

She knew from EJ how difficult this sorting process was, that visions didn't always make sense or happen in sequence. Like life it wasn't straightforward.

Ramón turned right on Lodge Street, then several blocks later turned left on Corning Place, driving for a minute before he asked a passing student for directions to the Downtown Campus.

They went another endless three miles before they reached Western Avenue.

The streets were relatively lively for this time of evening, scattered groups of students carrying festive Halloween decorations, whooping it up as they tossed ornaments to each other on the well-manicured grounds.

Fall was finally heavy in the air.

Emilia lowered her window and took a deep breath of the cool night breeze as Ramón slowed his speed and searched the dark sidewalks.

She didn't know if it was her maternal instinct or if she was developing Ramón and Anthony's gifts, but she felt her son nearby, homing in on the out-of-place boy with the backpack who was shorter and much younger than the other students on the street. "I see him!"

"Where?"

Emilia pointed out the window and Ramón pulled to a stop and parked the minivan at the sidewalk across the street from where Anthony stood with his back to them, glancing up where one student stood on a ladder and another stood beside Anthony, holding the ladder.

She unlatched her seatbelt and was out the car a second before Ramón who came around the front to join her in the street.

He took her hand and gently squeezed. "We don't want to scare him off with a big production. Let me go over to him first."

"I'm a big production?"

"You're his mother. He needs—"

"A man right now." She bit her bottom lip, seeing the wisdom, but not happy with it.

Ramón leaned in to give her a lingering kiss on the lips when she heard Anthony shouting at them from the sidewalk.

"Mom! Mr. Chavez!"

They both jerked their heads in the direction of the sidewalk and saw Anthony running towards them across the lawn, the teenager he had been with moments before, right on his heels.

Ramón broke across the street, waving and yelling at Anthony to wait.

Emilia noticed too late the reason for his haste just as Anthony stepped off the sidewalk into the street.

She knew he didn't see the car and that Ramón did. She knew she wouldn't make it to either of them in time but sped her pace anyway, crying out as a car sped towards the intersection.

The next seconds unfolded in paradoxical fast slow-motion.

Ramón raced to Anthony, ducking his head as he scooped the boy in his arms and tackled him back towards the grassy sidewalk.

The car sped through the intersection a moment later, honking horn in its wake and not even slowing down.

Emilia paused in the street just long enough for the car to pass, then was on the run again, heading for Ramón and Anthony cradled beneath him on the ground. "Please tell me he's all right! Tell me!"

Ramón rolled to his back and bounded to his feet, dragging Anthony with him just as Emilia reached them.

"Mom..."

She threw her arms around him, sure if he didn't have any broken bones, then she'd break some with her desperate hug. She tried to hold back, but couldn't mange it, squeezing him tight against her, inhaling the fresh, childhood scent of his soap-scented skin and burying her face in his soft curls as she felt his heart pounding next to hers, in synch with her out-of-control beat.

"I'm all right, Mom."

Emilia pulled away to catch him around the shoulders, giving him a gentle shake. "Do you know how worried we all were about you? You scared us half to death!"

"I know Mom and I'm sorry."

She heard the remorse and shakiness in his voice but they didn't stop her from giving him another shake. "Sorry? Sorry!"

"Lia." Ramón's soft murmur in her ear instantly calmed her and she glimpsed what life would be like with this man at her side, at her back through the good times and bad, especially the bad. "He's okay."

She released Anthony and turned her glance on Ramon, fought not to reach out to him the way she wanted, not in front of Anthony, though she could only imagine how hard his heart was beating too. "Are you?"

He grinned. "I am now."

"You saw it, didn't you? The car, the..." She paused, didn't want to say too much in front of Anthony and his companion, could see from Ramón's expression that he knew she was talking about the vision.

“I thought he was running *from* someone, not *to* us.”

No doubt he’d seen that car too and hadn’t said anything to her in an effort to spare her the horror of knowing about it bearing down on her son.

Anthony cleared his throat and when he got their attention he said, “I want you to meet my brother, David.”

He said it so naturally, as if he had been saying it all his life that Emilia couldn’t help but grin at the statement.

The young man who had been chasing after Anthony stepped forward with an embarrassed but disarming grin, offered a hand. “I have to apologize for not contacting you sooner, Ms. Vega. It was irresponsible of me. But Anthony’s a pretty smooth operator and we got to hanging and talking the last few hours and...” He paused to look at Anthony as if the two of them shared fraternal secrets, then turned back to Emilia. “We made a deal that he’d give me the number to call you after he spent some time here getting to know me. We just lost track of time.”

“Thank you for taking care of my son.”

David shrugged. “He’s my brother.”

Emilia looked into his deep brown eyes, his warm, calm expression diffusing the rest of her anger as well as engendering her trust.

She considered herself a lucky woman to finally meet him and her son lucky to have him in his life, castigated herself for depriving herself and Anthony of his acquaintance all these years.

“Okay, so now you’ve met my mom...”

Emilia and David laughed and both turned to Ramón as Anthony made the introductions.

“The man who saved my life here is my mom’s new boyfriend, Ramón Chavez.”

Emilia gaped as David and Ramón shook hands. “How do you know—”

“Mom, it’s written all over your faces. Plus, I caught the kiss.”

“You’re okay with...us?” She looked to Ramón as he wrapped an arm around her as if to protect her from her son’s possible response.



Anthony smiled up at Ramón then Emilia. “He’s a cool guy and I’m okay with it as long as David can come to the wedding. That is, if he wants to come.”

“I’d be honored,” David said.

For the first time in her relationship with her son, Emilia felt truly liberated. There were no secrets between them, no eight-hundred-pound gorillas. She was just free.

Emilia returned Ramón’s hug and slid an arm around Anthony, holding both close to her where they belonged. She faced the newest addition to her family, David, tears filling her eyes as she promised, “It’s a date then.”

## Epilogue

*Wantagh, Long Island – Eight Months Later*

Angela was in her element and couldn't have been happier watching Emilia and Ramón dance at their wedding reception, showing off some of their best ballroom moves in a lively salsa.

"Those lessons certainly came in handy, huh," Freddie said.

She grinned. "They certainly did."

"You're looking mighty satisfied with yourself." Freddie leaned in to kiss her lips, lingering long enough to make her stomach quiver and flip.

She smiled up at her husband and thought the fifty-five year old man still had some hot moves of his own. "Shouldn't I be satisfied?"

"With a four for four record? MVP batting champs in the major league would be proud of stats like that."

"Leave it to a man to turn everything into a baseball analogy."

"Hey, it fits."

"But it's very unromantic."

"I'm the practical one on this matchmaking team. I leave the romance to you."

"Smart man."

Freddie leaned in to nuzzle her throat, nipping and kissing her before lifting his head to ask, "So, who's next on your hit list, as if I don't already know?"

Angela found her sister Donna dancing with her son Freddie, Jr. and her husband followed her gaze.

Donna lost her footing just at that moment, looked up and met Angela's and Freddie's glances as if they were at fault for her misstep and she knew she was being talked about.

She sneered and gave Angela the evil eye. "*Don't* even think about it."

Angela just laughed, already making plans for her next match.

**EMILIA'S EMANCIPATION**

*The Matchmaker 4*

**THE END**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gracie McKeever is an author from the Bronx, and aside from several side trips along the way, has lived and worked her entire life in the New York City area. She has been writing since the ripe old age of seven when two younger brothers were among her earliest, captive audience for various short story readings and performances.

An eclectic and voracious reader whose audience has grown outside of the supportive family members, she's had the great fortune of being able to incorporate two of her favorite passions and talents—reading and writing—as a book reviewer for several online e-zines, both as a regular staff member and freelancer.

Her short stories, novellas and poetry have seen exposure in various lit and art magazines and other venues—online and in print. Of particular note, heard over the airwaves on KFJC's morning show, *Dancing In The Fast Lane With Ann Arbor (Unbedtime Stories)* out of Los Altos Hills, CA (*New Life Incognita* was the story of the month for March 2000). She's also proud to be a member of the ("Worlds' Oldest Active Homeless Paper") Street News family and has seen numerous articles, poems and novel excerpts published within its pages as well as having had a poetry reading on Pseudo On-line Network (Street News Review).

In 2001, Gracie caught the erotica bug, sinking her teeth into her first erotic e-book for a review, and hasn't looked back since, an instant affinity for the genre spawning her first erotica title, *Beneath The Surface*, published in 2006 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

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