

Once burned is all it takes...

#### A Rancho Del Cielo Romance.

Twelve years ago, Raul Montenga left home to live life on his own terms. Yet for just as long, his nights have sizzled with erotic dreams of Penelope, the girl he left behind. Enough is enough. It's time to find out if the sparks are real, or all in his head.

Not that he expected a warm welcome, but her cold shoulder and icy rejection sting more than he cares to admit. So he's more than a little surprised to find her tomboy daughter standing nervously on his porch...claiming to be his child.

Dr. Penelope Gibson's worst nightmare isn't that her daughter wants to know her daddy. It's facing—and keeping at arm's length—her biggest youthful mistake. Now he's back and the feelings she'd thought frozen solid are melting fast. Along with her inhibitions, her clothes and her better judgment.

Problem is, Raul's not content to stop at getting acquainted with her daughter. He wants it all—Penelope's love, her body *and* her soul. After twelve years building a life without him, though, she's not sure she trusts him—or herself—enough to try.

Warning: This book features a wildly hot Latino firefighter dead-set on a mission to seduce. Contains bad words, fiery tempers and scorching sex. Oven mitts required.

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# Burn For Me

Dee Tenorio

# Dedication

For Daphnee...because she would have loved this one.

### Chapter One

Another damn dream. Seductive, sensual, sexual dreams of a woman he had never touched and a body he couldn't forget.

Raul rubbed his eyes and counted to twenty, knowing it wasn't going to do a damn thing for his aching dick. Not even cold showers seemed to do much about it these days. He'd just have to wait until his libido figured out that the sexy lady doc it craved wasn't remotely in the vicinity. 'Til then he was stuck with the cobwebs of yet another embarrassingly detailed sexual fantasy. Positions might change, outfits and places might alternate, but in the end they were always the same. Silken limbs, the scent of red-petaled flowers and long sable hair sliding through his fingertips. Her taste, her scent, so different from anything he'd ever known but stamped with a remarkable sense of coming home that never failed to overwhelm. And that was the kicker.

He'd had plenty of sex in his time, and most of it would probably have been satisfying if it had ever once been coupled with the emotions he felt in these fucking dreams.

"I love you, Raul." The whispers were always the same, too. Her voice, husky with want, following him into the waking world like ghosts. "I've always loved you."

Then their fingers would twine together while he slid into her perfect depths. Sensation that could drown surrounded him every time. He'd look into her eyes, the deep cobalt blue he'd never seen on anyone else...and he'd jerk awake in his bed, hips pressing into his mattress, face lifted above only his pillow. No kiss-moistened full lips, no passion-drenched blue eyes, no Penelope Gibson undulating beneath him, crying out that she loved him over and over again.

Every fucking time.

He hated that damn dream. For more than ten years he'd absolutely hated it. Whenever he'd been lonely, missing home, it never failed to show up. A harbinger of the homesickness he couldn't seem to kick. He'd come to think of Penelope as his personal symbol for the little town of Rancho del Cielo. After enough sexual reminders that he was far from where he should be, he'd generally succumb to visit his parents and siblings until he couldn't stand being around them anymore, and he'd head back to the life he'd created for himself until the next round of pointless hard-ons.

Sure, he'd looked for Penelope whenever he visited, but she always seemed to be out of town or just plain hard to find. All for the best really, since she was five shades too sweet, too perfect for the likes of him. As a kid, she'd had a crush on him that everyone and their grandmother knew about, which was probably why his subconscious used her as the holy icon of home, but enough was enough. Even if he considered her the one that got away, it wasn't like she'd hurt herself waiting for him or anything. By the time he'd made his first visit home, she'd already had a kid. His brain should have gotten a clue.

Then again, his brain knew a good thing when it saw one.

It didn't require a psychology degree to figure out that the sex dreams were because he had a one-track mind. And if that track wanted to go up one side of Penelope's curvy little body and down the other, who was he to stop it?

Apart from being the guy left with a throbbing case of blueball.

And only the ache in his groin could derail the direction of his thoughts, which it did by practically staining the edges of his vision black from the lack of blood in his brain.

Raul sat up, shifting the evil erection gingerly and willing his body to relax, wishing he couldn't so easily call up the sensation of her soft pink mouth wrapped around his c—

He jumped at the sound of his doorbell.

Who the hell rang the doorbell these days? That *he* knew? Most of his family thumped with their shoulders as they tried to walk right into his apartment, followed immediately by the irritated yowl of his name. Whoever it was stood out there by the second floor railing, patiently waiting. Definitely not family. Which left one option.

Salesperson.

Groaning, Raul reached for the pair of sweats he'd draped over the back of his desk chair and dragged them on. Would it be the overpriced meat truck that needed to kill off their leftovers for a cheap price? The mostly deaf Jehovah's Witness old lady who freaked him out every time she made her wobbly way down the stone staircase just feet from his extremely Catholic door? Or the only kind of salesperson he was happy to see—Girl Scouts bearing copious amounts of Thin Mints?

Mildly interested at that thought, he moved a little faster to the apartment door. A glimpse through the peephole revealed only the top of a small red hat. Someone short. Cookies were a definite possibility. He unlocked and opened up.

A little girl in a baseball cap, dusty raglan with matching red sleeves, and beat-up pair of blue jeans stood there, smudges of dirt on her cheeks. She held on to a black BMX bike by the handle and the seat. It was just as dusty as the rest of her.

He frowned. "Not selling cookies, are you?"

She leaned her head backward and to the side to eye him with such distaste, her mouth only opening on one side, that he couldn't help but think of his mother's expression when she was requested to do the unthinkable, like his laundry. "Do I *look* like I sell cookies?"

"Um...I'm gonna go with no."

Which seemed to placate the girl, because her small shoulders relaxed and her chin came down. There was a sound from downstairs, some parent snapping at their child, and her head turned as if she thought it might actually be for her. Could it be? He looked over her shoulder, noting that for an obvious tomboy, she sure had long hair. A thick sable braid, glossy even in plaits and dust, fit through the hole at the back of her hat and draped down past the middle of her back.

Nope, that mother had her unhappy kid in hand, pulling him down the walkway toward the parking lot. The girl in front of him visibly relaxed. Not a good sign. He knew what kids afraid of getting caught looked like.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, regaining her attention while wishing he had a shirt. Underwear would be even better. Best would be having a clue who the hell this kid was, but it was hard to see her features clearly, shrouded as they were by her cap bill.

"You don't recognize me?" Her small mouth turned downward, displeased.

"I can't really see you." He pointed at the hat.

"Oh, shit, I forgot." Fast as a whip, she yanked it off, zipping her braid through the hole so quick it had to have snagged some loose strands of hair with it. "Recognize me now?"

Implied was the threat that he'd better.

Trying not to smile, especially at the sense of unease creeping up his back, Raul studied the little girl's face. Heart shaped, her chin a little ball that jutted out with what could only be challenge, and cute, feminine features completely at odds with the personality glaring at him. Little bow lips, rosy cheeks on tan skin, her eyes wide and fringed with thick lashes. By feature, she only looked slightly familiar, as if he'd seen her in town or something but never been introduced. In a town of roughly twelve hundred, that wasn't a strong possibility. But he knew those eyes. Cobalt blue, almost glowing with intelligence.

"You're Penelope Gibson's girl." The one who had been the flower girl at the Whittaker wedding last February. He smiled in relief. "You look a lot different when you're not in a dress."

Until he mentioned the dress, her face seemed torn between happiness at being recognized and disappointment for something he couldn't imagine. As soon as he said "dress", though, all her features scrunched in utter dislike. "They had to give me fifty bucks to get me in that thing."

"You extorted Miranda out of fifty bucks?" He wasn't sure whether he should be more surprised about the extortion or the victim. Knowing Miranda Whittaker and her wily ways, though, he had to go with the victim.

The girl smiled, so bright and sly he just knew, right then and there, she was going to be serious trouble for her mother in another decade. Maybe sooner.

"No, I only got fifteen out of Miranda. She's good. I got the rest out of Trisha." The maid of honor. Both women were her mother's best friends, though. Should he count that for or against her? "She gave me extra not to get dirty, but she's a soft touch. I'd have stayed clean just to keep from pissing off my mom."

Okay, this girl was definitely trouble now.

"So, what can I do for you?"

Finally, the girl's confidence dimmed. When she blinked uncertainly up at him, for a whole second she looked exactly like her mother did at that age. "You really only recognize me from the wedding?"

Yes, but he had the feeling he'd be better served by silence.

She let out a soft, rising whistle of incredulity. "Wow, Danny's right. You are oblivious."

"You're friends with Danny?" Not as much a shock as he made it sound. His ten-year-old nephew was friends with every kid in town, if his birthday parties were any indication.

"I'm his best friend. Have been since, like, kindergarten. Where've you been?"

"Seattle," he replied numbly. Did she not realize how hard it was to keep track of the numerous offspring of his numerous siblings? He was lucky he had everyone's name right. Knowing their friends—kids who moved as a swarm, yelling, laughing, eating, crying and apparently swearing—required more brain cells than he could claim.

"Well, that's a reason, not an excuse." The little face was so prim it took real effort not to crack up. Who did she know that talked that way? Even Pen, prissy as she could sometimes get, never looked like she sucked lemons on a daily basis.

"Yes, ma'am." Amused or not, he was standing shirtless at his door, hiding as much of himself as he could with the plank of wood in his hands, and it couldn't go on a whole hell of a lot longer. "So, what can I do for you, Miss Gibson?"

Her eyes went wide and her whole little body went stock-still.

Shit, this could not be good.

Carefully, she unpeeled what he only now realized was a white-knuckled grip on the bike handle and stretched her hand out for a shake. Very formal, very proper and really strange, he could tell, for this kid. She swallowed. Slowly. "I'm Chloe Gibson, sir. I figured it was time we met."

Confused, Raul reached out his hand. "Raul Montenga, nice to meet you." If he didn't know better, he'd think she was about to cry the second his hand swallowed hers. She was staring at their bobbing hands, her round little chin wobbling and her teeth biting into her lower lip. But she kept right on bouncing her hand up and down, like a perpetual motion machine. It was shaking in his grasp, but she delivered a firm grip anyway. "Why did you think it was time we met?"

Crap, she was going to cry. Those deep blue eyes were filling with tears she seemed determined not to let fall. They floated there on her upturned face, making him want to turn away so she didn't have to wipe them away in front of him. But she didn't stop pumping his hand. What the hell was going on here?

"Because...I'm pretty sure you're my father."



"What do you mean she's not there, Mother?" Penelope stood next to her desk, eyes closed, rubbing the deepening crease forming between her brows, her other hand gripping the phone until her knuckles hurt. Ever since Chloe had started walking—and thus doing everything she could, just because she could—the line had been getting more and more permanent. In another year, it was going to become bigger than the Grand Canyon. "She has to be there."

She *promised* she wouldn't leave anymore.

Penelope longed to sit down. It would be so nice to get off her feet, but she had a roomful of patients to see. As one of only two doctors in town, she was generally busy, but with Dr. Pruett downshifting toward retirement, she was getting busier and busier. With the regular fall rush of colds combined with an onslaught of upcoming births, the last thing she needed was for Chloe to start acting up.

"Would you like me to get down on hands and knees and search under every rock and cavern on the property, Penelope? She opened the gate. I'm telling you, that daughter of yours has run off again."

Not that Penelope could blame her. Chloe and her grandmother had what one could only call a loathe/loathe relationship. But Chloe was too old for day care and too young to be left alone. Penelope wasn't even sure she'd be all right to leave alone after reaching maturity.

"Did you say something to her?" Again? Lorna's two-hour-long lectures were not events that Chloe was willing to abide.

"Nothing she listened to," Lorna replied dryly. "You can't expect me to remain silent when she speaks so disrespectfully. You simply cannot."

No, disrespect was one thing neither Lorna nor Penelope allowed. "I don't, Mother."

"I'd recommend washing her mouth out with soap, but I'm absolutely positive the child needs bleach. Where on earth did she learn those words?" Unspoken was the accusation that behind Lorna's back, Penelope must be swearing like a *Godfather*-film reject. Which was tempting at moments like these, but Pen refused to give in. Out loud.

"What did she say now?" Lorna's silence said more than Pen wanted to hear. She could feel the line in her forehead deepening. "I'll handle it."

She knew why Chloe had picked up swearing—nothing flustered Lorna's feathers quite like crude language—she just wished she could get the girl to quit. What had started as a shock tactic had become an increasingly out-of-control habit. Teachers and other parents were starting to notice. Pen had tried grounding her, tried training her, tried a swear jar, all of which worked at home just fine. But send Chloe to Lorna's after school and all her restraint flew out the window in a haze of blue.

Chloe had just never been good at resisting temptation.

"Have you tried calling Danny's Mom?" Chloe and Danny Montenga redefined the word inseparable, something that had given Pen pause on more than one occasion, but the concern dissolved in the knowledge that Chloe's interest in boys registered only in whether they had a better batting average. Danny was just

about even with her, making them bosom buddies. Part of Chloe's dislike for spending afternoons at Lorna's was that Danny couldn't be bribed to go with her. No one could be bribed to go with her.

"Yes, but Danny's at home and hasn't heard a peep from Chloe all day."

Sure, she'd believe that when the planet stopped turning. Penelope didn't need to look at her appointment book to know she didn't have time for this. Wednesday was her long day. The office was full and it was only three. She was looking at another three hours before she could get home. Chloe had timed her rebellion well.

"I've been through your list of her friends. Why do you think it took me this long to call you? She's not in any of the usual places."

Damn. Damn, damn, damn. Lorna was many things, but she couldn't be accused of not being thorough. "I'll cancel my appointments and—"

The door to her office opened and a familiar red cap peeked through. Unharmed and already sheepish, Chloe slipped into the room.

Relief, quickly overwhelmed by a surge of anger, flooded through her. "She's here, Mother. I'll call you back." Penelope was already dropping the phone into its cradle, mouth pursed to demand where exactly her daughter had been, when the door pushed open further, revealing the tall, dark form of the last man she wanted within a hundred yards of her child. "Raul."

Twelve years since her final, rude awakening about this man, but one look at him could still make her heart stop and her brain short-circuit. For blank seconds she could only stare. Take in the rich golden brown of his skin and that inky black hair full of curl and life. All of him was full of life, as if he were crackling with energy in that powerful frame. Her eyes traced the breadth of his shoulders under an old USC T-shirt, impossibly broader than in his youth, sliding helplessly down his torso to the lean hips encased in old jeans that loved him. So not fair. Couldn't he have gotten some kind of flaw over the years? One? But no, the same bedroom eyes, soulful and dark brown, same squared jaw and mouth with those dimples in his cheeks that never quite filled out. Full, tastable lips...

Lips most of the women in this small town have tasted, she reminded herself harshly, snapping herself back to reality. It had been a hard decade since she'd been the girl who'd have sold her soul for one second of his affection. She wasn't that girl anymore. She met his dark gaze with an even glance before dismissing him to address Chloe.

"Where have you been? Your grandmother has been worried sick."

Chloe's full lips quirked downward. "I should be so lucky."

"Hey, what have I told you about wishing bad things on your grandmother?"

Chloe's sigh could have moved a mountain. "Sorry."

"Where were you?" Pen wasn't about to be derailed.

"She came to my place," Raul's deep voice interjected softly. Not wanting to face him, unable to avoid it, Penelope turned her attention to the near-stranger leaning casually against her office door. His expression confused her. Watchful. Assessing.

Better to stick with Chloe. "What on earth possessed you to do that? Your grandmother lives *miles* away." Eight, to be precise, not that she was counting.

Chloe's left eye narrowed and her right brow raised, meaning she'd picked up the obvious question of how Pen knew where Raul lived. Wisely, she didn't ask. "I needed to talk to him."

"What could you possibly need to talk to *him* for?" Not shrieking, which was impressive, because her heart was thumping like a broken washing machine.

"Maybe you and I should talk privately, Pen."

Penelope skewered him with a fast glare and Raul's brows rose too. *Not the sugary sweet little girl he expected, hmm?* She crossed her arms and waited for Chloe to answer.

Chloe shrugged stiffly, her head dropping so that her hat shadowed her face all the way to her chin. When it came, her voice was small and tight. "I wanted to meet my dad."

Penelope felt the blood drain from her face. Without her permission, her eyes shifted to Raul and her stomach pitched sideways. A cord worked in his jaw, but his eyes held all kinds of questions that almost unlocked her knees. "Would you excuse us please?"

His hooded eyes blinked slowly. "I don't think so."

"What?"

"She thinks I'm her father. If you can deny it, go ahead. I'll get out of your hair. But if you can't, then I think you and I have some talking to do."

Chloe's hat came up and Penelope's face heated beneath two eagle-eyed stares.

"Pen?" Raul's stance lost its casual slump against the door. He straightened, beautiful mouth flattening into a hard line before he shot another wild glance at Chloe.

"I can't talk about this right now." When all else fails, deflect and hide. "I have patients out front. I'm late as it is." She gripped each end of the stethoscope hanging around her neck, finding her center behind the bedside manner she'd spent years perfecting. "Thank you for bringing her here. I'm sorry about any inconveniences she might have caused you. If you'll excuse me." There, a nice polite invitation for him to go away.

"Inconveniences?" Shock gave way to the black scowl she recognized as a very bad sign. Worse, he didn't open the door and go through it. "What the fu—hell is going on, Penelope?"

Well, he was still in control of his temper enough to censor his language. Not that Chloe particularly needed it.

"Nothing. Nothing is going on. You just need to go and let me handle this with my daughter." If she put a little too much emphasis on the word *my*, really now, who could blame her?

Except his scowl deepened and she decided that maybe he could. Raul's temper had been legendary when they were teenagers. He'd gotten it out of his system, she was sure, because he'd earned the rank of captain before coming home to join the local firefighters squad. Not that she thought he'd ever hurt her, but he did still have a habit of roaring a place down in a virulent mix of English and Spanish. With a host of patients in her waiting room, that could not happen.

"Look, Raul, this isn't the time or the place to talk about this."

"Then I'll wait right here until there is a time and a place." He widened his stance and crossed his arms to plant himself right in the way.

"You can't be serious." Please, God, don't let him be serious.

But he was. The hard smile that registered more as a threat than a grin told her he was.

The last twelve years never felt as heavy on her shoulders at they did at that moment. She glanced at Chloe, but her daughter was busy staring at Raul with a hopeful hero worship, and the pressure grew heavier. This wasn't going away.

Ever since he'd come back home, she'd expected this. Waited for him to look at Chloe whenever their paths crossed and wonder. Like she wondered. Like anyone with a pair of eyes probably wondered. Or a pair of ears, once Chloe got going with the swearing. Penelope had been lucky to have made it so long. She just hadn't counted on having to explain today. Or having to explain to Chloe, not for years.

"It's my long day. I'm on until six." A weak protest.

"I can wait."

She'd just bet he could. Pressing her lips together until it stung, Penelope darted a look at Chloe. "Behave. Find a book and read. Quietly," she added, because if one wasn't specific, Chloe found loopholes in the simplest of commands.

Her daughter didn't argue, which was almost as worrying as the conversation there was no escaping. Almost, but not quite.

#### Chapter Two

Well, her mouth was sure Montenga. Raul squeezed his eyes tight in an effort to retain what felt like millions of opinions pouring out of one small girl. Baseball, books, food, school, baseball, homework, baseball. She was currently on a tear that spelled all kinds of trouble.

"She's a prig who never has anything nice to say about anyone, especially not Mom." For an eleven-year-old, Chloe did scorn real good. "I hate going there every day. It *sucks*. You can't even begin to imagine how much it sucks being there. *Go read this, Chloe, go clean that, Chloe. Practice your French, Chloe. Stop making a mess, Chloe.* You know she checks me for dirt before she lets me in the car?"

"Your mom probably wouldn't want you talking about your grandmother that way." It was as close as Raul was willing to get to an admonishment. Defending Lorna Gibson just went against his grain. Something about the woman had always bothered him, from her uppity ways to her uppity looks, not to mention her uppity dismissal whenever they'd managed to cross paths. Or maybe it was just the quietly miserable look on Pen's face whenever her mother arrived to pick her up from school that set his teeth on edge even now. But she was Chloe's grandmother...

"Well, it's true. Mom doesn't want me lying either. What do you think is worse? Lying or being mean to people?"

Sneaky. If she *was* his kid, she'd have to have gotten that from him. "They're both wrong. But you can't fix what other people do. Just you."

Which sounded just parental enough to scare him into silence.

Who was he to be giving lessons on how to live? He didn't know the first thing about being a father. Had gone to damn impressive lengths to avoid being a father. Protection was an absolute must for him. So when the hell could he have gotten Penelope pregnant? Penelope!

No, it wasn't possible.

Then again, those dreams of his had always been shockingly real. The feel of her skin, the taste of her kiss. He even remembered a sexy little mole next to her belly button and a raspberry kiss of a birthmark, right in the fold where her thigh met her body. He remembered licking at it and feeling her hips buck in his hands.

Hadn't he just made it all up in his mind because he'd wanted her? How the hell could it be real?

He studied the girl again, not at all sure what he was feeling. He'd really thought Pen would out and out say he wasn't Chloe's father. That she'd look at him like he was completely ridiculous and throw him out on his relieved ass. At least, he was prepared to be relieved. Told himself he *would* be relieved. But as he'd dressed and grabbed his keys, he'd taken a few seconds to wonder—who wouldn't?—what it would be like if Penelope announced that yes, Chloe was his kid. But he hadn't expected it to actually happen.

Technically, it hadn't. She just hadn't denied it.

The Penelope he remembered was honest to a fault. She couldn't lie to save her own skin. Hell, she couldn't even let him lie for her and he'd liked her enough to try a few times. Her whole face would turn red and her eyes would bulge, like she was holding her breath or something. It was the only time when Pen wasn't pretty.

"You have to be my father," Chloe announced, not sounding the least little bit concerned she might as well accuse him of being Santa Claus.

"What makes you so sure, kid? Your mom didn't tell you, that's for damn sure." Crap, he hadn't meant to swear.

"Lots of things. My birthmark, for one thing." She thrust out her leg, scrabbling to drag up the denim of her pant leg high enough to show the splotch of darker pigment on the outside of her calf. It looked like a sloppy star, with three wide limbs and one smaller, slimmer line. "Danny has one just like it on his back."

Of course, her good friend, good buddy Danny's magical birthmark. He remembered it well. They regularly teased Danny mother, Julia, that it looked like a cannabis leaf and was proof she'd been smoking something when she hooked up with her husband. Raul didn't have the heart to tell Chloe no one else in the family had one.

Chloe seemed to register his lack of wholehearted belief. "Then there's the diaries."

His brows crashed down. "What diaries?"

"The ones in my mom's old closet. I get to hang out in her old room at Grandma's house. I mean, it's a guest room now, so I can't mess it up or anything, but Grandma never said anything about the closet. There's a whole bunch of stuff in there. There's this player thing, it plays these huge CD things, but mom calls them records. She said I could have them if I wanted, so I brought 'em home. I like the covers, everyone is wearing all these weird clothes and colors and their hair has all these colors. The music is okay, I guess. Do you know what block the New Kids lived on? Mom won't tell me."

Do not laugh. Do not laugh. "You said something about diaries?"

"Oh, yeah. They were in the box with the records. There's a bunch of them. That's how I found out about you," she confided while perusing a shelf on the bookcase. Penelope's medical books surrounded a whole shelf of teen fiction, some old, some still shiny new. He guessed that meant Chloe stayed in the office a lot. "She really liked you back then. You were on, like, every page."

And damn if his face didn't go bright red. As a young kid, Penelope's crush had been embarrassing as hell, since she hadn't made any effort to hide it. Probably that inability-to-lie thing, now that he thought about it. By the time they were teenagers, he'd become a total ass, taking her devotion as his due. By then it

was just part of life. Skip school, avoid Dad, Penelope loves me. Rake yard, take out trash, Penelope loves me. Eat dinner, go see movie, oh yeah, Penelope loves me.

Until she filled out. Never tall, just barely average height, she'd turned into an hourglass somewhere around age nineteen and all that had stood between her innocence and his raging libido for a solid year had been his extremely shaky morality. Well, that and his rock-solid sense that she was too good for him. Too nice, too sweet, too perky, too sheltered and too fucking in love with him to know any of it.

"We put two and two together."

"And came up with nine," Raul wasn't able to keep from saying.

"Did not. We asked Danny's mom when you moved away and that fits too. Exactly eight months."

"Babies are a nine-month situation, kid." Something he figured she'd know since her mother delivered all the ones born in RDC.

Chloe only smirked. "Nine and a half, brain child. They can stay in there for ten if they feel like it. I didn't though. I was early. Mom says I was born impatient."

Which was a Montenga trait.

"When's your birthday?" The question slipped out before he allowed himself any time to think about it.

"March twenty-fifth." Her small chin lifting, she finally pulled out a book from the shelf. Nancy Drew. Big surprise.

She kept talking, but he tuned it out, trying to think what had happened around the time he'd finally moved out of Rancho Del Cielo. Mostly fighting with his father. Lots of feather smoothing from his mother. Back then he'd been young enough to think he knew everything and dumb enough to tell everyone. About the only time he saw Penelope was...when, Trisha Arbourdale's wedding? Crap, he barely remembered that party. His hangover the next day was memorable though. Less than a week later, he'd packed his stuff and headed north, determined not to get sucked into living a life his family dictated.

Penelope burst through the office door, looking breathless and suspicious, her gaze darting the several feet between her daughter and his no-doubt ruddy face. Her eyes narrowed, but she didn't comment. Just asked Chloe to fetch her purse from the bottom of a desk drawer and asked him to follow them home.

It felt a little too obedient, but he did it, his big truck stalking her little beige Volvo like a shark trailing a guppy. He rubbed his eye as she pulled into the newer housing community of Forrest Glen. New people were moving into RDC all the time. There were actual strangers in town these days, though they didn't stay that way for long.

Figures she'd live here. The Gibsons were always just a little too good for the old Victorian houses with creaky floors or the Craftsmans that were popular back in the fifties. But Pen fit here. Nice without being lavish. New, without being shiny. Brick walkways and green lawns. White stucco and portable basketball hoops in the driveways. She probably had a pool in the backyard, too. Made his apartment look

like a hovel, that was for sure, but at least it wasn't the ostentatious, white-pillared *Dallas* knockoff of her mother's. He shuddered at the memory and pulled the truck to the curb in front of a cozy little two story. One of the smaller lots, sure, but more than comfortable for a single mom and her child. Penelope and Chloe pulled into the driveway. Out like a shot before the brake lights even turned off, the little girl all but ran over to his truck, reaching for the handle to drag him out and into her world.

His heart clenched. No matter what Pen had to tell him, this little girl needed a father. Wanted one so bad he almost wished he could be it, just so she wouldn't have that longing expression anymore. He searched her face again, looking for some sign of himself, but he couldn't tell if it were really there or just part of his imagination. Was her mouth really like his, only smaller? Was that gold shade of her skin because of him or because she spent all day in the sun? Those were Penelope's eyes, no doubt about it, and her hair color, but the hairline was different and it was thicker, with a curl there around her face. Pen's hair was straight. Fine. He knew her hair better than he knew his own. But what did any of that mean?

How the hell was any of it possible?

Chloe pulled him by the hand. Through the windshield he saw Pen standing next to the open door of her car, the wind catching the ends of her hair and whipping it over her shoulder. She had the same look on her face as Chloe, longing for something she couldn't have. But she wasn't watching him anymore. She was staring at her daughter. Wanting something for her baby that she didn't believe was there?

She held herself so tight against the wind. Stolid. Resolute. *Lonely*. That was always a word his mind rejected for her. Pretty, well-off, well-liked and possibly the only genuinely nice person he knew, someone like Penelope Gibson couldn't possibly be lonely. There was no ignoring it now, though.

She should have found someone by now. Should have found someone good enough for her, who could have taken those shadows away and made her smile the way she was supposed to.

She caught him looking. Her pointed chin rose, a wall of feminine pride straightening her shoulders. He felt the clash of her temper at being cornered this way, but he didn't feel sorry about it. Chloe clearly needed some answers. Some guidance Penelope couldn't give.

She locked up her car and led the way up the walk to the front door of her house. Raul acknowledged silently that he needed answers too.

"But—" The universal sound of a child being done wrong.

"Upstairs." Penelope was too tired to have this conversation with Chloe soaking up every lurid detail. Ordering her daughter up and out of the way, however, almost never happened without an argument. "Take a shower. Mr. Montenga and I have to talk and it's not a topic for children."

"He said I could call him Raul." Chloe didn't pout, exactly. The bottom lip got fuller and it stuck out, but her small face always seemed to resemble an old man with a lump of chew in his craw preparing to deck you.

"I don't care if he said you could call him the Easter Bunny. This is an adult conversation and you have another seven years before that includes you. Go."

The lip started to quiver and for a long second, Penelope considered softening her stance. Chloe never cried, not since deeming it for babies back when she was six. And now, almost twice in one day. But no. Someday, she'd explain to her daughter how she'd come into being, but it wasn't going to be today. And if she had anything to say about it, it wouldn't be in front of Raul.

She could feel his eyes on her. She hated being watched, but she especially hated being under his particular speculation. How could he, of all people, ever take her seriously?

Chloe finally gave in, stomping up the stairs hard enough to make a herd of elephants jealous. Her bedroom door slammed predictably, the small chimes on the knob ringing and rattling for several seconds afterward.

Satisfied, Pen grabbed the poker from the hearth and used it to close the heating vents as well. Chloe wasn't remotely above eavesdropping—thus the chimes. This wasn't the kind of story she wanted floating up the vents. Task done, she turned to Raul before putting the poker back in its stand. She peeled off her lightweight beige overcoat and moved past where he stood at the very edge of the living room to hang it on the wooden tree by the front door.

Grabbing a final deep breath, she invited him out of the tiled foyer and into the not terribly imaginative living room. Big couch in front of the window, a pretty standard blue sectional, the fireplace with its high hearth on the far wall. The couch faced a coffee table and a TV, and behind them a half wall with a white rail separated the living room from the raised dining area. The kitchen, dark now, lay just beyond the breakfast bar counter.

"Nice place," he said finally. "Cozy."

She glanced around, trying to figure if he meant it. His sister's house was cozy. More color, someone always coming or going, the furniture always in use. In comparison, her house probably seemed cold and unloved.

"Can I get you anything? Something to drink? Eat?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You're sure?" Food she could do. Truth...God only knew.

He fixed her with a sideways glance before reaching out to take hold of her hand. At first, his warmth startled her. Then it tempted her, which was so much worse. She pulled away too fast to be anything but insulting, but she couldn't help it. She took the needed steps to the couch and sat at one end, turning her back to the arm, her folded knee creating a wide berth on the cushions so there was no question of him sitting close.

He sighed, bowing his head for a second, hands on his hips. When he fixed his dark gaze on her again, she knew there wasn't any getting away from telling him. He wasn't angry, but he was at the end of his patience. "Who is Chloe's father?"

She opened her mouth to try to explain, but the words wouldn't come out. The truth was so...humiliating.

"It's a simple question, Pen."

Funny, she couldn't talk, but she could still laugh, in a strangled kind of way. "You'd think, wouldn't you?"

"Penelope—"

"I don't know, okay?" Had she shouted? She hoped not. She might as well have, given the stunned look on his face. "There was no way to tell for sure."

He blinked. Twice. Then, "How the hell can you not know?"

She flinched, waiting for a piece of the ceiling to fall. Nothing did, but probably only because it was held up by his thunderous expression. "Why not just invite Chloe downstairs, Raul? Or better yet, the entire neighborhood?"

He didn't look even slightly repentant.

"Can't you just sit and listen? This is hard enough without you standing there like judge, jury and executioner." She wasn't sure he'd move at first, but he finally folded his long body into the couch, his back so straight the cushiony seat might well have been a stone church pew. When she was reasonably sure he wouldn't jump up and start hollering the place down, she flexed her fingers and started again. "Do you remember anything about Trisha's wedding reception?"

He frowned, then shook his head. Great. She'd been hoping for some help, but no luck. "Just that I had the hangover from hell the next morning."

"Yeah." She forced herself not to roll her eyes. "Tell me about it."

"Are you going to keep throwing those little cracks in or are you going to tell me what happened?"

Fine. "Well, I only really remember the beginning. I was dressed up and excited that you made it since you missed the wedding. I thought, like most girls do at a wedding, that you'd finally notice me as a woman." This time, there was no avoiding a cringe. "You, on the other hand, couldn't seem to stop telling me how excited you were about leaving RDC behind and never coming back. How moving away couldn't happen soon enough."

He squinted his eye. "I said that to you?"

Oh yeah. "Why do you think I started drinking?" Young, desperately thinking she was in love, and the object of her affection was gleefully informing her how much he'd enjoy getting away from her. Her breaking heart had gotten a little easier to handle with every glass of bubbly champagne. Until all the noise and voices and white linens went fuzzy.

"I don't really remember much of what actually happened. Flashes of...you. Being in a storage closet." Brief, almost smeared in her mind. Fumbling hands in the unlit closet, only the crack of light peeking through the door. Rough breathing, rough touches that at the time had been exciting. She'd been talking the whole time, unable to stop rambling, especially when he lifted her fluffy skirt and rained funny little kisses all over her belly, tugging away her underwear with a casualness that only appalled her the next day. As if the man in the closet with her took panties off women with rubbery legs everywhere he went.

The next part she figured she only remembered because she'd almost sobered up for it. Being turned, pressed into the shelves, her head pillowed against folded towels, her hips guided backward against his body and the stinging pain of being filled too fast, with too much. She'd tried to pull away, her unsteady limbs not conveying her discomfort or distress. Seconds later, it seemed, it was over and she felt a kiss on her nape, a final thank you, she'd guessed, before he walked out.

Penelope shook off the vague, uncomfortable memories. "At least, I thought it was you. After the champagne and the mortification wore off, I worried, you know, that maybe I just wanted it to be you so badly that I made myself fill in the blanks. That it could have been anyone."

And that's what killed her. Anyone. Someone from Michael Arbourdale's side, a friend who'd come along. God, someone on the wait staff. She'd made herself sick for days, unable to believe she'd been so incredibly stupid, but having the stains on her dress to prove it.

"You were gone two days later. Not so much as a goodbye." Even if it hadn't been him in the closet, she wasn't sure she'd ever forgiven him for just leaving that way. He knew how she felt. Knew his leaving would destroy her. Sober, he'd done nothing to soften the blow.

"I was a real shit back then, Pen," Raul said quietly. He shook his head, regretful. "All I was thinking about was getting out on my own and living my life for myself. I didn't care about anybody's feelings but my own." He pierced her with a dark gaze. "I know it probably doesn't mean shit now, but I am sorry."

"It's okay," she replied automatically, shrugging.

The lines at the corners of his eyes deepened. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Pretend. You always do that. Act like everything is fine when it's not."

What else was she supposed to do? "I'm fine, Raul. It's water under the bridge. I was a dumb kid with a bad crush. I'm not the first person to survive it, I won't be the last. Eventually, I got over it." Sort of.

"So what happened after I left? Why not track me down when you came up pregnant, just to check if it was me like you thought?"

"Because I hadn't finished being stupid." Her cheeks heated. "I went back to school after you left. There wasn't much point in staying with my mother. I was so angry at you, I found the first guy I could find who looked as little like you as humanly possible and threw myself at him."

"Lucky guy," Raul said, but his expression was stony.

"I doubt he thought so," she murmured. She'd cried the whole time. It had been a disaster from the get-go. "When it was over, he left and I hardly saw him again. Just here and there on campus, but he never wanted to talk to me again."

"Bastard."

She hadn't thought so until later. She'd been so busy being embarrassed. "Then I found out I was pregnant and I had no idea who the father could have been. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. Track you down in Washington and say, 'Hey, I know you ran for your life to get away from me, but do you know if you slept with me before you left?' It was bad enough when Jason flat-out said he wanted nothing to do with a baby and I should get rid of it."

"That was his name, Jason?"

She nodded. Jason Litten. Blond hair so pale it was practically white, lean and long limbed, almost as pretty as a girl. Nothing like the rough and rugged masculinity of Raul. He was a plastic surgeon these days, specializing in dermatology. Probably still drove the girls wild. "I'm pretty sure Chloe isn't his. She's not remotely like him in looks or temperament."

"But that still didn't prove she was mine."

"No, it didn't. And when you came home for visits, you didn't seem even the tiniest bit curious about her, so I thought that said it all."

"Oh, I was curious." Something sharp in his gaze made her feel like a deer in the headlights. "But I didn't have any right to ask. I told myself you got over me, the way you were supposed to. Figured you'd finally found someone good enough for you."

"Yeah." She choked on the sarcasm. "Cause I'm just so great."

"You always were, Pen. Always knew the right thing to say, always did the right thing, never a step out of line. The only times you ever got in trouble were when you were following me around. I wasn't any good for you. I figured if I got out of your life, you'd finally see that."

She almost laughed. "Boy, and all this time I thought I was the one with pedestal problems."

He gave her a half smile, an amused harrumph escaping him.

"Seriously, I've been in trouble all my life. My mother just had a rule about not yelling in public. Following you and the other guys around was about the only fun I ever had."

Back then, Raul and his friends Burke, Selvyn, Josh, and Danny had been the town terrors. They spent most of their teen years riding motorcycles and driving fast cars, skipping school to fool around with blissfully happy girls. As many of them as they could find. Lucky for them, there were a lot of girls interested in becoming happy. In the last twelve years, three of those troublemakers had gotten married and one had died. Only Raul was left single.

Then again, even among his buddies Raul had always been different. Gleamed with a darker fire. Maybe that had been her infatuation. Maybe not, because she could still see it in him without her childish illusions. See all his coiled energy, waiting to spring.

When she was young, she'd ached to be the one to unlock his secrets.

Now, she might wonder but she was smart enough to keep her hands to herself. She had too much to lose and she'd given enough of herself away to this man. There just wasn't anything left to spare.

They sat in a strange, suspended silence, looking at anything but each other. Finally, there was only one thing left to say.

Penelope cleared her throat. "So, what do you want to do now?"

#### Chapter Three

"You're leaving?" Chloe's voice from the top of the stairs interrupted Penelope as she was ushering Raul to the front door.

He smiled up at her, a real smile thankfully. Pen wasn't sure what she'd have done to him if he'd put on his patient look. "Gotta hit the road, kid."

Raul's stare seemed to be devouring each small feature of Chloe's exposed face, memorizing it. Her hair was still wet, streaming down her back, but she was wearing a fresh set of pajamas, light blue cotton pants and a matching short-sleeved shirt. When it was wet, her hair darkened until it was almost black, putting her golden skin in sharp relief. Her narrow gaze swept over to Penelope, no doubt searching for something to blame her for.

The silent moment tightened the knot in Penelope's stomach. The one that had the weight and spikes of guilt. As if she'd stolen something precious from him.

Raul shifted, nodding at Pen before he slipped quietly out the front door. Not so much as a snick of the knob as he closed it behind himself. She sighed to herself. Would the man ever make a sound as he walked away from her?

"Am I allowed to eat?" Chloe finally asked, still at the top of the stairs. "Or am I grounded from food, too?"

"You should be." Pen gestured for her to follow. Together, they headed into the kitchen. Chloe hit the switch on the wall, heading straight to the fridge while Pen opened the cabinet without much optimism.

"Cereal?" Chloe asked, apparently not finding much where she was looking.

Penelope shook her head. "You're growing like a weed. You need more than that or you'll wake up in the night, starving." Plus, they'd killed off the not-so-Lucky Charms last night.

"One of us has got to learn to cook," Chloe grumbled. Though it might have been her belly.

"I could make some burgers." She had patties in the freezer.

"Loco Moco?"

Yeah, that would work. The Hawaiian dish they'd discovered out in Pacific Beach was within her skill set. Burgers over rice, with brown gravy and fried eggs. "You make the instant rice, I'll get the burgers."

For twenty minutes, it was just like usual in the kitchen. They didn't talk much, but it was easy. Chloe manning the microwave, Pen working the sizzling grill in the middle of her stove top. The kitchen was a

real cook's dream, with the wide gas-burning stove and rock-faced backsplash. It was open plan, an island with a sink in the middle. During the day, the glass wall that led to the patio and the pool let in so much light that it leaked into the living room via the tall pass-through. Most of the deluxe features were lost on the two of them—instant food connoisseurs that they were—but that wasn't the attraction for them in that area of the house anyway.

The small kitchenette table in the far corner was one of Pen's favorite places to spend time with Chloe. They ate there, talked there, sat there quietly just being together. She'd do her paperwork or her reading while Chloe did homework. She might not be a good cook, but most of her mothering had happened in this room. It seemed the best place to talk to Chloe now.

They set their plates and forks down, settling into chairs and sighing before they dug in. As usual, Chloe's was gone before Pen got halfway through her own. While her daughter toyed with a few grains of rice still in her bowl, Pen knew it was time.

"So, are you going to tell me what all this was about today or are you going to make me drag it out of you?"

Chloe kept her eyes on her bowl, shrugging a shoulder.

So, dragging it is. "You said you wanted to meet your dad."

"Yeah."

Wonderful. This was going to be more like pulling teeth. "What made you think Raul was your father?"

"He's not?" Chloe picked up her head, real worry on her little face.

Penelope reached out, running her thumb over the only slightly babyish curve of her daughter's cheek. Everything baby was starting to disappear. Aspects of her child she'd thought were years away were already coming through. Her face lengthening, her chin and jawline becoming just a tiny bit stronger. Her legs and feet had already grown inches in the last several months. In another year, maybe less, adolescence would start making itself known. Conversations like this one would be necessary. But oh, it was hard.

"I don't know." God, how many times was she going to say that tonight? It made her feel worse each time. Penelope lowered her hand, watching the scowl pull Chloe's brows together. "I made some mistakes before I had you. I was reckless and irresponsible—"

"You're always responsible," Chloe argued.

Well, at least her daughter thought highly of her, even if she herself sometimes didn't.

"Not always. And it caught up with me. That happens sometimes. In my case, I found myself pregnant and didn't know who the father was. Someday, when you're older and it doesn't freak me out so much, I'll explain better, but for now, that's really all I'm comfortable with."

Chloe's frown softened. She hated being talked down to. Honesty usually did what cajoling never would. "Does that mean there's a chance Raul really is my dad?"

Refusing to remember her faded impressions of his face, a flash of light streaking for a split second across passion-stained features, she blew out a breath and changed the subject. "How did you even start thinking it was him?"

Pink bloomed on her daughter's cheeks. "Well, Raul said I didn't really have any proof. But..."

Penelope listened, biting her lips to keep them together as Chloe outlined her unlikely connections between a similar birthmark to finding her own old diaries to talking to Julia Montenga Ruiz about when exactly her brother ran away from home. Pen had to agree, with a story that thin, she wouldn't have believed Chloe either. But Raul had given her enough credence to bring her home. To question Penelope for himself.

Why? Why would he do that when he said himself that he didn't remember the wedding reception? Didn't remember anything ever happening between them? Why had he given Chloe's story even a second's credence?

But he wasn't there to ask—smart enough to leave before she could ask questions of her own.

"Why didn't you tell me you wanted to know about your father?"

The bright animation left Chloe's face. She sank into the curved wooden chair. "I tried, a couple times. But you always got this look on your face. I didn't want to make you mad."

Yeah. That was a real concern of hers. "Chlo."

"It's just...Danny and his dad do everything together, you know? *Everything*. And even if he didn't, Danny's got all this family. Cousins everywhere and aunts and uncles he sees almost every day. There's all these people around him all the time. They go to his games and they throw him birthday parties and he goes to their houses whenever he wants. It's so different at his house than it is here. We don't have *anyone*, Mom. Sometimes, I don't even get to see *you*. I'm stuck with Grandma and she hates me—"

"Your grandmother does not hate you." *She's just impossible to please*. Penelope felt the weight of her daughter's misery around her shoulders. She knew it too well and she'd made every effort to please her mother. How much worse was the disappointment for Chloe, who fought for her personality with every scrap of energy she had.

"Well, she sure as shit doesn't like me."

"Chloe!"

"Sorry." But the peeping smile said she probably wasn't. Much.

"I'd ask where you hear all these things, but I'm really afraid you'll tell me." Penelope pushed her unfinished plate away, her appetite gone. Talking about Chloe's father was one thing. Lorna was a whole other discussion that Pen just didn't have the energy to dig into.

Part of her heart cracked, realizing that as different as she and Chloe were, the apple hadn't fallen very far from the tree. Somehow they'd both ended up lonely, looking in at happy families and wishing desperately they could be a part of them. She'd never wanted that for her own child. Never.

But there were so many things that Pen never wanted to turn out the way they had.

"Look, I know it hasn't been easy for you. It hasn't been easy for either of us and that's nobody's fault. It's just the way it goes for some people. But we're still a family. We have everything they do, there are just fewer of us. And if you think about it, almost no one has a family as big as the Montengas, but everyone else is doing all right, aren't they?"

Chloe's expression proved she wasn't sold.

Penelope swallowed the lump in her throat. From the moment she'd found out she was pregnant, she'd lived in fear of not being enough for the life she was bringing into the world. Pure selfishness had made her go through with it anyway. Wanting the baby who was little more than a thought, needing someone to love who could love her back. Who would. And yes, even the *idea* that the baby could be hers and Raul's...in her heart, keeping the baby had never been a question. Hard as it sometimes was, she hadn't questioned her choice once. Not until this moment, seeing the hurt on her daughter's face.

"I love you, Chloe." She made sure to look into her daughter's eyes, made sure Chloe knew they weren't just words to her. Weren't something she'd only been expected to say. "I love you so much, honey."

"I know, Mom. I love you too." Chloe blinked the sheen off her eyes, rubbing at one with the back of an impatient fist. "It's just...sometimes I want...more." Actual tears slipped free, smeared across round cheeks, and the pain in Penelope's stomach grew a hundred times. "I'm tired of how mean she is, Mom. They actually like each other at Danny's house. Why can't I be with people who like me?"

She opened her arms and Chloe came as if she'd been jolted out of her chair. She settled on Penelope's lap, her head on her shoulder. She didn't sob and she'd probably never sit like this again, but for a few minutes, at least, Penelope got to have her little girl all to herself again.

Petting Chloe's drying hair, Pen made herself sober. "No matter what we want, hon, you can't just *make* someone be your father. It's not fair to him."

Chloe sat up, wiping her face furiously. "He doesn't want me?"

Oh, how to answer that one. "That's not it. First we have to find out if he's your father or not. We'll run a DNA test tomorrow and get the results back in a week. We've waited this long," she added when Chloe opened her mouth to argue. "A few more days won't kill anyone."

"But what if he's not?"

Penelope couldn't bring herself to think about that. "Then we'll deal with that when we know. You and me. Not you and whichever guy you think might have a funny-looking birthmark on his butt, okay?"

Chloe finally smiled. Small, but good enough.

Penelope squeezed her again. "And please stop running away from your grandmother's house. Please, Chloe. Anything could have happened to you and I wouldn't have known where you were. I couldn't have helped you."

Chloe withstood the hug as long as Pen thought she could stand before wriggling away with the dishes, full of fake outrage. "Fiiiiine."

"You also owe a dollar to the swear jar and you're grounded for two weeks. No Danny's unless it's a practice day."

"Mom!" Nope, outrage was real that time.

"But I'll make you a deal. You can serve your time with me at the office."

The smile she got in reply was the reason she knew she loved being a mother.

It passed too quickly. "Man, this is going to be the longest week of my life."

Penelope watched Chloe rinse the dishes and put them in the dishwasher, her pleasure fading away as the words sank in. "Yeah. Mine, too."

@ @ @

The phone was starting to make his ass itch. Raul stared at the black receiver on his desk. For the last three and a half days, he'd jumped at every ring, nerves pulled tighter than fishing wire with nothing to show for it. His mood had gone into the shitter and everyone at the firehouse had made mention of it, like that was really going to help. Paperwork was piling up and the duty roster was full of guys he'd just noticed were total assholes. All they did was laugh and fuck around when there was work to do. Work *he* couldn't focus on.

The schedule he was supposed to have posted was still in front of him, not a single name or time slot making any sense. Josh Whittaker had had to take over drills the last few days—not a big sacrifice, Josh lived for that shit—but it was getting annoying to not be able to settle on anything but the results of that swab stick test Penelope had taken on Thursday morning. She'd warned him that they might not hear until Monday, but that she knew the folks in the lab who might do a rush job for her. No promises, she'd said.

What stuck in his craw was that for some reason he wanted a few promises from her. What the hell those promises might be, he had no idea, but he wanted...something. Everything just seemed wrong around Pen now. Hell, ever since he'd come back. Finding out about Chloe had only complicated some already confusing impulses.

He wanted to see Pen again. He wanted to touch her face, to see if it was as smooth and soft as it looked. He wanted to wrap his fingers in her hair, just to see if his dreams were really memories. He wanted to know what the hell was going on between the two of them almost as much as he wanted to know what the truth was about Chloe, and neither answer was coming on its own.

What bothered him most was that she didn't look at him the same. When she looked at him at all. The girl he'd considered his, like it or not, wasn't there anymore. She was guarded now, her eyes shrouded and cool. He missed looking at her and seeing everything she was thinking. In place of the fragile girl was this

*woman*, a stranger in a lot of ways, made of something stronger. Something forged. And it bugged the shit out of him that Penelope might have been forged by *his* stupidity.

Finally, on the end of the fourth ring, he reached out wearily and picked it up. "Captain Montenga." "Raul?"

He closed his eyes, releasing a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. She'd changed in a lot of ways, but not in the way she said his name. Husky. Unsure. As if she had some kind of pleasure just saying it but didn't want him knowing about it.

"Hi, Pen." Fuck it, who cared if she could tell he was relieved to hear her.

She didn't say anything for a few raw seconds either, then seemed to snap out of whatever was happening in her head. "The results are here. D-do you want to come in or should I just open it now?"

His hand tightened on the receiver. She really was nervous. But why wouldn't she be? A question she'd been too terrified to deal with was about to be answered. She hadn't said as much Wednesday night, but he knew Penelope. The old Penelope, anyway. Couldn't imagine what it must have been like for her to realize she wasn't sure who she'd just had sex with. As a first experience, too. He couldn't see making her wait any longer. "Now's good."

"Oh, o-okay." The sound of an envelope crinkling and paper shuffling. Even with his balls pulling up into a knot, he had to stifle a laugh. He'd have torn that fucker up trying to get at the information inside, but not Pen. She probably calmly ran her finger under the flap and folded it back to pull out the results. "Um...here...a ninety-nine point nine, nine, nine, nine, nine."

"I think we can skip the nines, Pen."

"—percent probability of inclusion. She's yours." A small gasp, almost a sob that had him closing his eyes in relief.

Wait. Relief?

"She's yours, Raul."

He definitely didn't mistake the sound of tears now. Not loud noisy ones, like his sisters cried. Pen was never into drama. But it made him wish they'd waited until he could be there. It seemed the kind of moment when she could have used someone to wrap their arms around her. Hell, maybe he just wanted someone to hold on to *him*.

"Are you okay?" he heard her ask.

"What?"

"You're quiet. A-are you all right? I mean, I know this is a lot to take in, all at once and everything."

Raul thought about it. He was breathing okay, his spine had finally relaxed and even his tortured nuts had gone back to their general laid-back ways. At least until it hit him like a two-by-four between the eyes that all those dreams, those fantasies, those haunting moments of sexual perfection he'd suffered all these years were based in reality. In Penelope. "I'm fine." His voice was rough as he closed his mind to what all

of that meant for the two of them. This wasn't the time. This was about Chloe. And about her, he was fine. How weird was that? "Are you okay? It's probably a relief...um, to know."

"Uhm."

Was that agreement? Better not to ask. "So what happens now? Do we tell Chloe?"

"If we don't, she'll start gnawing the wood on my file cabinet." That was one thing he was liking about this new Pen. A dry humor she hadn't had before. Then again, she had seemed to get a kick out of his impressions of her that night on her couch. Maybe it had always been there and he hadn't noticed, self-absorbed little shit that he'd been. How much else had he not known about her all those years ago?

"When does she get out of school?" He checked his watch. Eleven now.

"Two-thirty. She gets off the bus here around three."

"How about I meet the two of you there when she gets off? We should do this together. As soon as possible."

She took a long time to answer. "Are you sure about this, Raul?"

He got the feeling she wasn't talking about the time. Strangely, he didn't have a second's doubt. "I already missed eleven years, Pen. I don't want to miss any more."

"Then I guess I'll see you at three." She hung up with a basic click. Cool, efficient Penelope. He blinked at the irritation that roused, shoving it aside to concentrate on the important thing.

He had a daughter.

Despite the absolute terror of that little bit of reality, he couldn't help a small grin. He had a daughter. A crafty, sneaky, foul-mouthed kid who loved baseball and beating up her cousin.

Karma was better at her job than he ever gave her credit for.

Raul grabbed his lightweight coat and was already shrugging into it on his way out the door to his office. It didn't take long to find Josh riding herd on the probies with a whistle and a clipboard as they did speed drills with rolled hoses. The bastards were heavy as hell. Which meant the tall dark-haired control freak he called his buddy was having a hell of a good time watching the torture.

"I need to go off-site for the rest of the day. Think you can hold things down?" He could call in Bower or Quint if necessary, but Raul held out hope that after twenty days without an emergency, the day might stay light.

Josh flicked him a quick glance. "Who do you think has been holding things down the last few days?" Raul rolled his eyes. "I haven't been that bad."

"You've been a pain in the ass— Hey, Rodgers, if you don't get that hose head off the ground, I'm gonna shove it up your ass right next to your head!"

Rodgers didn't so much as huff, he just adjusted his hold and kept running.

Raul only shook his head. "And you wonder why none of them like you."

"Hey, I'm not the one who had them scrubbing toilets with their own toothbrushes."

"Yes, you were." Raul cracked a smile.

"You sure?" Josh frowned, blowing the whistle hard enough to nearly burst Raul's eardrum as Rodgers hit the speed drill deadline. "Next!"

"Wasn't me. I'm the one who rang the bell while they were in the showers so they'd go down the pole naked."

"I thought that was Wilde."

"Please, Wilde sucks at pranks." They looked at each other. "Maybe Wilde was the one with the toothbrushes," Raul conceded. It didn't really matter. "Can you handle it or not?"

"Depends, you gonna tell me what's going on with you or not?" His attention sharpened on the slow-running proble about to lose his hose. "You drop that son of a bitch, Conners, you'll be shittin' through it, I kid you not!"

"I like that one," Raul threw in with a nod. "Colorful."

"Yeah, but I need some variation. There's only so much you can do with a hose and some guy's ass."

"You'd know better than me." Raul started walking toward the lot, ignoring the sideways smirk Josh was throwing at him.

"Hey, I didn't say I was helping you, you lazy shit," Josh called out.

Raul gave him the finger without looking back.

"Fine, go. But I expect some answers when you get back, Montenga."

Raul only laughed to himself. Josh just had to have the last word. Raul could let him get away with it every now and then. Now just happened to be a good then.

Besides, he owed someone else an explanation first.

Ten minutes later, he pulled up in front of the ranch-style house he'd grown up in. The color had changed three times since he'd moved away at the age of twenty-two, but not much else had changed. The lawn was thick and green, the porch a garnet concrete that had been worn almost as smooth as glass. Shoes from countless family members were stacked on racks outside the door, most haphazardly, some he was pretty sure had been there for years. Opening the door, he toed off his own boots and stepped inside.

"'Ama?" Raul bellowed into the house, shutting the door behind himself. He always loved the first step into his parents' house. The carpets were soft, the air scented with the wax of prayer candles and years of cooking, whether anyone had lit either kind of flame or not. Today, someone was cooking. Tortillas and...something beefy.

"Raul? Vente, mijo. Ven." His father's voice beckoned from his perennial spot at the dining room table.

Raul had to step out of the foyer and into the living room to see the older man sitting, as he always did, at the head of a huge table.

It still surprised Raul to see his father smiling at him. Not that Thomas Montenga had been a bad father, but for most of Raul's teen years and early adulthood he'd been mired in the older man's disappointment. Thomas had wanted his son to get a job, find a nice girl and settle down, just like his older brother and pretty much all of his sisters. The job was supposed to be in house painting, the family business. The girl should have been selected from old family friends, any number of which could be found all over San Diego County. The Montengas were blended with all the old families, from the North County Alvarados and the Chula Vista Serranos to the Garcias in Escondido and the Flores bunch that seemed to have filled out everything in the middle. Thomas had been so sure that, if Raul had just done what he'd been told, chosen as obediently as his siblings and fallen in line with everyone else, he'd be happy. As an adult, Raul understood it was worry and love and a genuine desire for his son to be fulfilled that had been at the root of the loud arguments about coming home in the middle of the night, having been God only knew where, doing God probably didn't want to know what. As a kid, though...

But if things had been any different, Chloe wouldn't exist.

Raul leaned down to put an arm around his father, the man he knew he took after in more ways than looks and build, and hugged him a little tighter than he normally would. This situation might not be what Thomas had wanted—was probably what Thomas feared all those years ago, actually—but even having only known her for a few hours...the world wouldn't be right without that small face in it. Chloe had too much energy, too much personality, not to have deeply impacted everyone she met.

Thomas's lined face expressed puzzlement at the one-armed hug, but before he could ask anything, Raul headed into the kitchen to find his mother.

Ophelia Montenga was where she always seemed to be, in front of the old green stove she refused to allow her children to replace, flipping tortillas on the *comal* with one hand, stirring some kind of bovine heaven in an oversized pot with the other. Despite the fact that all her children had moved out years ago, she still made fresh tortillas each day and enough food for two armies at lunch. She wore her customary simple, short-sleeved house shirt and black cotton pants on her relatively small form—tall enough to almost be considered average height and squishy enough in the middle for the grandkids to consider her hugs the best. Her hair must have been recently colored, the champagne gold frost darker where the thick tresses flowed together at the back of her head. The whole style looked kind of like a pillow curving around her head, but no matter how much he teased her, she'd only shake her smooth oval face at him and make that weird tsking noise without moving her lips. She turned, eyes still on her tasks, presenting her soft golden cheek up for him to kiss.

The same golden color as Chloe's, he realized as he did so obediently.

"¿Qué estás haciendo aquí? ¿Qué, no debes estar trabajando?" she asked, knowing in that eerie maternal way of hers exactly where all her children were supposed to be.

"I left work for the day. I have some news I need to talk to you and Dad about." Raul answered in English. It was their thing. He had no problems with his parents' language, but Ophie refused to speak English as a matter of principle. So Raul only spoke English to her as a matter of his own principles. Whether they liked it or not, he lived in a broader world than the small sphere they inhabited.

"¿Habla?" She raised her eyebrow pointedly. "¿Tengo que poner mis tapones para oídos?"

Whether she needed her earplugs remained to be seen. "Probably not." He hoped.

"Siéntete, yo traeré el almuerzo."

He kissed her cheek again. "I knew I had good timing. You need help bringing all this out?"

He ended up carrying out the ceramic tortilla holder one of his nieces had made and put it on the table, shaking his head all the way. This had been his duty back when he was five, and Ophie had yet to trust him with anything bigger. He sat in the seat closest to his father's right hand and waited, a strange smile curving his mouth. It felt happy even if he was scared of what lay ahead of him. Who'd have thought?

Thomas noticed. "You have something to tell me?"

"I should wait for Mom."

"Continúe, puedo oírte," Ophie called from the kitchen, accompanied by the sound of clinking dishes.

He didn't doubt she could hear them just fine. She had senses like a bat in a cave and slippers that could hit him in the back of the head at equal speed. Come to think of it... He shifted his chair slightly, glad he was on the far side of the table away from the kitchen threshold.

"Well, it turns out...I have an eleven-year-old daughter."

Dishes clattered and broke somewhere in the kitchen. Thomas's brows rose so high the folds of skin pushing down the corners of his eyes lifted.

"Eleven?" Shock and outrage straightened Thomas's spine. "¿Con quién? ¿Cuándo? Why the hell didn't you say anything?"

"I just found out. She just found out. It's...complicated."

"Of course it is, *cabrón*. It's a baby!" And babies were not born illegitimately in the Montenga family. Not ever. Another second and Thomas was going to start looking for a newspaper to roll up.

"I know, Dad. I know. If I'd known, I would have done something about it, but I didn't. We're doing something about it now, though. She's going to be part of the family."

That seemed to calm his father a little. The older man leaned back in his chair. "Who is the mother? Do we know her?"

Unspoken was the question that the child might belong to some random lay he had in those days.

"Penelope Gibson. She's the doctor in town now, has a place out off Main. She delivered Julia's last two, I think."

Thomas frowned, his eyes moving slightly back and forth as he seemed to be trying to remember. His eyes widened again. "¿La güerita? The girl who followed you everywhere?"

Raul cringed inwardly. While the rolled newspaper was starting to look like a distinct possibility again, how much did it suck that Penelope's most outstanding reputation was as the girl who followed him? "The doctor, yes."

"'Ama!" Thomas called, leaning out past the table for a second, as if it were possible Ophie hadn't heard him. "You are the one who left her pregnant and alone? She was a good girl, pendejo. I raised you better than that!"

"I didn't know she was pregnant. Until we took the tests, she wasn't sure I was Chloe's father."

Thomas paled under his sun-darkened skin. "Chloe? ¿La Changa?"

So, they'd been introduced. "She's Danny's friend. You might have seen her around—"

"Ophelia!" Thomas stood up, pushing his chair back so he could stalk into the kitchen.

Raul sat at the table and sighed. Well, no one was bleeding from a hundred paper cuts. That was a positive. He heard rapid Spanish going on in the kitchen in low voices, but couldn't make out the words. Nothing good, he decided, pushing his own chair back and following his father. Before he could get past the entry, though, his mother pushed past him, all but running toward her bedroom where she slammed the door.

Disappointment filled Raul. He'd hoped it would go better than this. He looked up, meeting his father's sad expression as the older man turned the dials on the stove to the off position. The shattered ceramic bowls were still in a pile on the floor. "I didn't think she'd take it so hard."

"You know how she is about...things like this."

Raul frowned, not even having considered his mother's issues when it came to skin color. He'd known she wasn't happy about the women he tended to date, but she hadn't ever reacted by walking out of the room without even looking at him. "This is different. Chloe's her blood."

"She'll come around. Give her time." Thomas leaned his hands on either side of the stove, not looking at Raul. Not happy. "You have to make this right, Raul."

"I intend to." And he did. Chloe was going to be as much a part of this family as he was.

"Are you marrying her mother?"

Raul gave himself credit. He didn't choke. "I don't think that's really the issue right now."

"It better damn well start being the issue," Thomas growled.

"Penelope and I are just starting to talk to each other. I don't think I'd be able to get her to marry me without kidnapping and drugging the woman."

Thomas only harrumphed. His glare was on the food, but his sigh said his mind was definitely anywhere else. "Chloe Gibson. All these years...I should have known. She's exactly like you."

Finally, the knot in Raul's chest started to loosen. "She's funny?"

"She's loud." Thomas's smile was both pained and pleased. "Your mother and I always noticed her with the others. Always the leader. Always doing *something*. Like her shoes are on fire."

His tone made Raul smile. "She's a good kid, Dad."

"Yes, she is. But you owe her mother for that. And believe me, if she's been like you her whole life, you owe that woman more than you know."

Raul laughed. "I wasn't that bad."

"Ha, half these gray hairs are from you alone." Thomas shrugged off the sentiment. He fixed Raul with a steady stare that felt like it was going into him. "Are you ready for this, *mijo*?"

Raul wanted to reassure his father. Wanted to tell him he was all set to be father of the year. Except his organs were all but cramped up and his heart wouldn't stop thumping whenever he thought of screwing up Chloe the way he managed to screw up most things. He shrugged and held out his hands. "I don't know, 'Apa. But I want to be."

No, he *needed* to be.

Thomas stared at him silently for a few long seconds, then nodded and walked back into the living room. He went to the glass case where all the best dishes and family keepsakes were kept and pulled out a small cardboard box. He weighed the little package in his hand, lifted it to his lips and kissed it before turning around and holding it out. "Give this to her. Tell her what it means."

Raul reached for the box, noting the old printing on top, a green scroll design in the corners. He smiled, some of the weight coming off his shoulders. When he reached for his father, whispering his thanks, it didn't feel strange at all to have his father hug him back.

#### Chapter Four

Penelope knew as soon as Raul walked into her waiting room. A deep, teasing rumble was answered by a few nervous titters. He walked up to the front desk where Cara, her receptionist, and Erica, her nurse, watched him with curious eyes. They'd had questions when Raul had arrived with Chloe on Wednesday but, quiet souls that they were, they didn't ask them. At least, not of Penelope. Both women—one young and excited, the other older and considerably calmer—turned their heads to where Pen was standing, signing a prescription for a patient.

"If this one gives you any trouble, Sally, just call in. I'll set up another kind." Penelope handed her blonde patient the slip. Mondays were her obstetrics appointments and Sally Bishop was almost happily expecting her second.

"I don't understand it." Sally rubbed her hand over the curve of her belly. "When I was pregnant with Jack, I didn't have any trouble with that brand of prenatals at all. Now they just make me sick. Hayne thinks it's different because he thinks this one is a girl."

"He does have an eye for the pretty ones." Raul winked and leaned his forearms on the counter to peek into the office area.

Sally Bishop's cheeks turned pink, but she glowed under the compliment. "I'll see you next month, Dr. Gibson."

Raul left the appointment window to open the door for Sally. Penelope just shook her head, going over her paperwork one more time before handing it across the slim counter. Cara barely caught it, watching Raul move as if he were a dancing snack.

Go ahead and look, Penelope thought irritably, trying not to grind her teeth. Everyone noticed Raul. Was charmed by Raul. Had a secret appreciation for his brand of masculine beauty. She had no right to be annoyed by that. Or by his absolute comfort in being appreciated. Clicking her pen and slipping it into her pocket, she waited for him to come back inside.

Only after he'd opened the outer door for Sally did he show up again.

Penelope stared up at him, fists tightening in her pockets. "You're early."

Raul grinned, unrepentant. "Just a little. Figured I could wait in your office again. I got left on a cliffhanger last time. Does Nancy get out of the hole in the old gray cove or not?"

"I'm pretty sure she makes it." She refused to be tempted by his deep dimples. Been there, done that, had the stretch marks. She gave a nod to Cara, hoping to grab the young woman's attention. "Send Chloe right into my office as soon as she comes in, please. Were you able to reschedule that three o'clock?"

"What?" Cara blinked wide blue eyes at Penelope as if she had to remember where she was. Oy. "Sorry, yes, your three o'clock was moved to next week. Once we finish with the patients in the waiting room, we're clear for the rest of the day."

Penelope nodded, then led Raul into her office, sucking in a breath when he passed her so they wouldn't touch. "Nancy's on the third shelf over there. I'm sure you two will be very happy together."

He glanced at the shelf with a bemused expression, leaning against the front of her desk. How did he just walk into any room and take over the space? Standing there in crisp, dark blue pants, long legs crossed at the ankles, his white uniform shirt peeking through the open fire-station windbreaker, he almost made her think she'd walked into *his* office.

"Sure you don't want to hide in here with me?"

She jolted, almost gasping. Was that some kind of...proposition?

"Those last two patients of yours look like they're about to explode. They aren't going to like you telling them they're not ready."

Oh. She relaxed slightly, almost shaking herself for assuming...well, anything. "How would you know they're not ready?"

"I've got eight sisters who have, between them, a hundred and thirty kids. Believe me, I know when they're ready."

Penelope smiled despite herself. "You have twenty-nine nieces and nephews, counting your brother's kids." But he was right. One patient was hovering around twenty-nine weeks and the other was a more ripened thirty-two. Uncomfortable definitely. Ready? Not quite.

"Is that it? I could have sworn there were more."

She almost walked out, but had to ask. "What did you say to them when you first came in?"

A slow grin spread his lips. "They looked so shocked to see me. I just asked them not to tell anyone I was pregnant until I told the mother."

Yup, that would do it. "I should be back around the same time as Chloe. Then we can all go to my house, maybe? Tell her there?"

"We could tell her here."

She studied him. Despite his seeming casualness, his hands were gripping and re-gripping the edge of her desk. Was he nervous? Funny, she'd always thought he was immune to that feeling.

"All right," she said as evenly as possible, determined not to be concerned that anyone still in the office would hear. People were going to find out soon enough, anyway. If anyone overheard anything, well...that was life in Rancho Del Cielo. Chloe had no intentions of keeping her father a secret and, given

the energy coming off Raul, neither did he. She nodded and left, the smallest part of her mind starting to worry where that left her.

She went through her final appointments by rote. Making notes, asking questions, even displeasing her patients by telling them there was no sign that delivery was imminent. In the back of her mind, though, the worry continued to grow.

Chloe loved her, of that there was no question, but they'd always been so different. Chloe was strong-willed, for one. Athletic. Aggressive, not to put too fine a point on it. All parts of herself that Penelope hadn't been able to really relate to, parts that were becoming dominant in her personality. All parts of Raul. Would Chloe turn to him now, when she had needs or questions? Would she go to him and his family, searching for a warmth Penelope had never been able to provide?

Did her selfishness with her child mean she'd get in the way of that?

Penelope liked that question the least.

Just when she was sure she was breaking out in a sweat, she heard the bell over the front door and familiar clomping footsteps. "Hey, Cara, Mom around?"

"She said to go right into the office," Cara replied breezily.

Penelope waited in the hall between the patient rooms, a smile pasted to her lips. Chloe spotted her right away and, to Penelope's relief, she looked happy. She wasn't even dirty. Her sweater was tied in a knot around her waist, though, something Lorna would have grumbled about. Penelope didn't care. She met her daughter halfway, putting an arm around her shoulder and steering her to the office door.

"The coolest thing happened in my math class today. We had a logithon. And I won!" Chloe hefted her beaten green backpack on her shoulder. "I figured out the most logic problems and won a certificate for free pizza, how cool is that?"

"That's great," Pen said through numb lips as she turned the knob and opened the door.

This is good for Chloe. Pain wrenched her heart when Chloe stopped in her tracks at the sight of Raul sitting behind the desk.

Raul caught her daughter's gaze and unfurled the slow smile Penelope had seen a million times in her unwilling dreams. Under her hand, Chloe drew in a breath that felt too big for her lungs. "Whoa."

Sharing her doesn't mean losing her. Penelope pulled her composure tight around herself.

"Does this mean what I think it means?" Chloe looked up at her and Pen's throat strangled.

Say the right words. Say the right words. Say the right words.

"Raul's your father." They both looked over to where Raul was rising to his feet. He came around the desk, then his smile faltered and his gaze shot to Penelope's, as if he didn't know what to do next. She could have laughed or choked or cried or all three, really, because she didn't have the first clue either.

Chloe, as usual, had all the answers.

She slipped out from under Penelope's hand and threw herself at him with complete abandon, arms tight around his waist. Raul almost didn't get his footing in time, but at the last second he managed the impact and righted them both. A soft chuckle and he cupped his hand around the back of his daughter's head and relaxed into her embrace.

"I'm happy, too, kid." He was, Penelope realized, eyes stinging. He smiled down at Chloe, giving her back a gentle pat. No awkwardness at all. Some relief, even. After all she'd done to get him, had he thought Chloe would be anything but happy? "I have something for you."

Chloe pulled away. "I get a present?"

"Actually, it's a little different than a present. It's...tradition."

Chloe frowned. Penelope found herself drawn a little further into the room while Raul dropped down to one knee and pulled something from his jacket pocket. A box, no bigger than a matchbox.

"In my family, my dad has always said that if it weren't for all the saints in heaven, we'd have all driven him crazy." He gave the two of them a little half smile. "It sounds better in Spanish."

"No, it makes sense in English," Pen interjected, taking another step closer to see.

Raul opened the box delicately, pulling the lid with his thumbnail. "Well, when we were born, he gave us all saint medals, to protect us. And when each of us had kids of our own, he gave one to them, too. For the firstborn." He poured something out of the box, something silvery and fine. "As soon as I told him about you, he gave this to me. So you'd know that you belong."

Chloe reached out to touch the thin, dime-sized medal, then yanked her hand back as if it would burn. "Is it bad that I'm not Catholic?"

"You're not?" Raul lifted both his brows, as if surprised that anyone wasn't.

Penelope raised her hand briefly and waved. "Protestant."

His fleeting frown gave way to the shrug he answered everything with. "We just won't tell your grandmother."

Penelope pursed her lips, fairly sure Chloe's religious affiliations were not of the least concern to Ophelia Montenga. Too late, she realized Raul caught the expression, but she didn't answer the question in his gaze. "Are you going to put it on?"

"Can I?"

Pen tried not to be bothered that Chloe asked Raul.

He opened the tiny lock and held the open ends out to her. Chloe stepped into the silver circle, touching the coin reverently. Raul clicked the pieces together under her braid, pulling his hands free with a sigh. As if seeing his medal on her daughter satisfied something in him.

"Which saint is it?" she asked, when neither he nor Chloe seemed to know what to say next.

"There's different kinds?" Chloe tucked her chin until it was nearly flat to her neck, trying to look at the now upside-down coin. "Is this a good one?"

"They're all good. This one is Saint Christopher." Raul reached under his own collar for the slim necklace she'd never known the connotations for.

She'd heard of that one. "Isn't he the one for travelers?"

"Among other things. Not bad for a Protestant." His smile was teasing.

"She watches *Jeopardy*," Chloe added in, probably thinking that made Penelope sound smart instead of geriatric. "What kind does Danny have? He just says it's a Catholic thing and I wouldn't understand."

"I think he's got Saint Jude, patron saint of lost causes."

"Figures." Chloe smirked, pleased with her apparently superior saint.

Raul stifled a laugh. "So, I was thinking...sometime soon we should get you to my parents' place so you can meet everyone."

"I already know everyone," Chloe reminded him, but she didn't sound unhappy at the prospect. Her eyes were already dancing.

"Think of it as a reintroduction. Before you were Danny's friend. This time, you'll be family."

Alarms went off in Penelope's head. Scary ones, armed with memories she usually refused to entertain. "Maybe we should do something to celebrate, just us," she said suddenly, brightly. When two bewildered scowls turned her way, six shades of awkward burned her cheeks. "Or, just the two of you, if...if that's what you want." She frowned, wanting her tongue to stop moving. Why did she just offer to let him take Chloe by himself? Was she losing her mind?

"I could do an early dinner," Raul offered.

Chloe's eyes widened and she yanked her backpack from the ground where she'd dropped it in her mad rush to get to Raul. Some one-handed rampaging and she snatched out a white envelope like the sword from the stone. "I've got free pizza!"

Penelope leaned backward when they both looked at her as if she held the keys to the city. "Am I the deciding vote or something?"

"Well, I am grounded." Chloe sagged a little. She turned to Raul apologetically. "I forgot about that." Uh-huh. If he bought that, he'd get what was coming to him. Still...

"Well, it's not every day you get a saint medal," Pen said, going for a considering tone. A medal, a father, a whole flippin' clan. Pizza was the least Chloe could've asked for. At this rate, Pen felt lucky she didn't ask for a personal chef, just on the odds that she'd actually get it. "Keep that ticket for later, when you're with your friends. Buying dinner saves me from death by corn flake."

"We're out of corn flakes," Chloe answered with a cheeky grin.

Warmth suffused Penelope's back and a pleasantly heavy hand slid to her arm. Little sparklers in her brain went off, points of pleasure she'd forgotten all about, when that hand drew her backward against a body she wished she didn't still remember. "How about I buy? I mean, it's the least I could do since I get to sit with the two prettiest women in town."

"I thought Gennita Carlson was the prettiest woman in town." Chloe frowned up at him. Raul looked down at her, then back up to Penelope as if she had the right response.

Pen only shook her head. "You're going to need some new tricks if you plan on charming her."

His sneaky half-smile came out, his warm stare shifting to her lips for the briefest of seconds. "What about charming you?"

"Mom's uncharmable," Chloe said. Which was helpful, really, because Penelope couldn't quite breathe enough to tell him that herself.

"Is that so?" Raul ushered them out of the office, an arm around each of them. As if he had a right.

But he didn't.

Penelope pushed back, slipping out of his hold wordlessly. She couldn't let him do this to her. When he was young, he hadn't even realized how much he raised her hopes with every kind word, his every smile or subtle acceptance of her affection. But he wasn't a kid taking her for granted anymore. And she'd paid dearly for her lesson in protecting her heart.

Raul noted her withdrawal with only a slight tightening of his lips. She didn't know how to read the message in his dark eyes, only that it was almost as heated as the millisecond in her office. Heated and...challenging.

She let him take a step, then two, with Chloe ahead of her. Let him challenge her. It wouldn't get him anywhere. It couldn't. He was in their lives for Chloe. To be the father her little girl needed, deserved.

He's not here for you, she scolded herself, shaking off the feel of his warmth from her shoulders, from her side.

Penelope said her goodbyes to Cara and Erica, telling them to close up and go home early. Cara tried to ask questions, but Penelope just took off her jacket and hung it on the hook. Getting her purse and her keys, she made short, eye-contactless work of getting out for the day.

He's not here for you, she mentally repeated. He never was.

But for a long time, she'd wanted him to be. Which was dangerous, because if he kept pushing, kept giving her those looks that made her heart stutter and her bones melt, it wouldn't take much to make her want him again. And loving Raul Montenga twice amounted to little more than emotional suicide.

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Two hours later, Raul wondered if maybe hauling ass with a hose over his shoulder was easier than parenting. Chloe's pizza place in Poway—RDC had yet to get a place of their own that catered to kids—was a cross between child heaven and hearing hell. A little girl in there had hit notes only dogs should be able to hear. And according to Penelope, that had been a *happy* noise.

Josh was going to kick his ass six ways from Sunday for taking more time off work, but it'd been worth it. Chloe was pretty damn deadly with video games, and the basketball-throwing game was her

version of stealing candy from a baby. Two more facts for him to add to his list of things he was learning about his daughter. He was currently up to ten—God, he hoped his parents didn't know about that Protestant thing already—but he had a feeling he'd lose count soon. There seemed an awful lot about his child to learn.

"I thought my nieces and nephews were loud," he complained again, walking with Penelope and Chloe to their door.

"They are," Penelope said over her shoulder as she unlocked her front door. "Your family is just smart enough not to trap them in an enclosed space."

Kids. No walls. Yeah, that seemed like a good plan.

Chloe wasn't bouncing off any walls, but she didn't seem anywhere near as tired as he felt. She thumped her way into the house and was already up three steps before announcing over her shoulder, "I better get upstairs and start my homework. Mrs. Garabedian is gonna be pissed if I don't turn in my vocab sheet. Thanks for the medal and dinner, R—" She stopped talking abruptly, turning all the way around and frowning at him. "What am I supposed to call you now?"

He blinked at her. Well, crap, he hadn't thought about that. "What do you want to call me?"

"Well, calling you Raul seems wrong. I mostly just do it 'cause it bugs Mom."

Penelope rolled her eyes, doing a great job of not sighing.

"What did she call her father?" They both turned to Penelope, who got that cornered expression on her face again. He'd really have to ask her about that one of these days.

"Daddy," she answered grudgingly.

Chloe scrunched the whole left side of her face. "Lame, Mom."

"Gimme a break, I was only seven when he died." She said it casually, but Raul remembered how she'd looked when her father died. For more than a year, he'd had to actually work hard to get her to smile. When he saw her, which wasn't often. Grade school was all about the grade you were in. He only saw her when she managed to get away from her friends so she could come watch the bigger kids on the recess yard. Back then, their two-year age difference might as well have been a ten-year one.

"Still." Chloe dismissed the suggestion with a one-shouldered shrug.

"Well, I guess Daddy's out." He could live with that. In his family, titles were important. They showed respect, created the framework that gave the kids a sense of security he knew firsthand. It had been soothing, when he was little, to know exactly his place in his world and the place of everyone else. But that place had eventually become a box, one he'd hurt too many people trying to get out of. "How about you stick with Raul until you figure out what you do want to call me? Maybe we can work our way around to Dad or something like that."

*Dad.* A moment of complete and utter terror ran through every nerve he had. This was really happening. The little girl looking at him like he was out of his damn mind belonged to him. Was part of him. Was his responsibility for the rest of his life.

Penelope frowned at him before she turned back to her daughter. No. *Their* daughter. "Go on upstairs, hon."

"Is he gonna be okay?" Why did he get the sense that the eleven-year-old was laughing her ass off at him?

"He'll be fine. Just a reality check."

"Because of me?" His child was nuts—that seemed to make her happy.

"Someday, when you're older, I'll tell you exactly how scary you've always been. Up, before I give Mrs. Garabedian a run for her money."

Some thumping, followed by a gleefully evil voice calling down, "Thanks for dinner, Daddy!"

Penelope reached out to him just as the edges of his vision went a fuzzy kind of white. "You better come in here before you fall down."

Her hand slid around his biceps, a smooth movement that brought the color back to his vision. Tossing the door closed, she tugged him into the carpeted living room and down to the plush couch. Her slim form was next to him, her thigh brushing his, her dark hair slipping over her shoulder. Close enough to touch.

She turned her cobalt eyes on him, the smallest ripple between her brows. "You all right or do you need something cold to drink?"

Raul shook off the unsteady feeling, but the realization that he was being an idiot didn't fade so quickly. "I'm fine."

"Sure you are."

His laugh sounded shaky to his own ears. "You'd think a man who walks into burning buildings would know better than to be scared of an eleven-year-old kid."

"Why? A burning building can only kill you. Kids can make you beg for mercy on a daily basis."

He could feel the color leeching from his face and forming a puddle around his ankles. It all rushed back at her soft, mocking laughter. "I'm starting to think maybe Chloe's evil streak comes from you."

"Probably," she agreed easily, separating herself from him and shifting back a whole couch cushion. "But you'll never get anyone you know to believe it."

A growing familiar sense of irritation sparked in his gut again. Why did she keep doing that? Even the most innocent of touches and she backed away as if he were the most repellent thing she'd ever known. It made him itch to touch her even more, dare her to admit openly what she'd been doing. Explain it.

It was what he would have done when he was younger. *Stupid*. Firmly of the mind that while he didn't necessarily want Penelope the way she wanted to be wanted, he had rights to her. As a man, grown and

unfortunately required to acknowledge his own selfishness, he knew he didn't have those rights. Any rights at all. He'd given those up twelve years ago.

"I'm not entirely a bad guy, you know. Someone might believe it."

She smiled, bemused. "Oh yeah? Who?"

"My sisters."

She outright laughed. Warm, inviting laughter that had his fingers knotting. "You've had the wool pulled over their eyes for decades. No, your family doesn't count."

"Well, hell, that rules out half the county."

Penelope tucked her hair behind her ears before slapping her knees and rising with nervous energy. "I better get you that water. I don't want it going to Chloe's head if she finds you passed out on the floor."

Yeah, there was something wrong with that girl if she thought freaking people out was a good thing. But that thought wasn't what had him watching Pen's lean form head for the kitchen.

"They're not bad people, you know."

"Who?" She called as she moved up the steps to the raised dining area.

"My family. They're really nice, believe it or not."

She turned, frowning. "I know. I've seen most of them pretty regularly the last couple of years."

The subtle dig was hardly going to get him off the topic. "But you don't want to see them as family."

Her arms crossed and the line between her brows deepened. "Why would I? I'm not their family."

"Chloe is." A fact everyone in this small town would know within days, he was sure. So was she, if the fine bristle tightening her features meant anything. "They deserve a chance to recognize her, to show her she belongs. *She* deserves to know she belongs."

"I never said they couldn't. They see her every week at her and Danny's baseball games. The two of them do everything together. I have no intention of getting in the way of that."

"Then why don't you want Chloe going to my parents' house?"

She brushed her long bangs with an impatient hand. "How about I just get that water?"

"How about you answer the question?"

"Because there's nothing to answer. I don't have any problems with Chloe meeting your family officially." She turned away from him, striding through the open doorway to the kitchen. As if she thought that would end the discussion. Really. Didn't she know him at all anymore?

Feeling a lot steadier, Raul rolled to his feet, following the sounds of clanking glasses and glugging liquid. He stepped in, finding Penelope pouring filtered water from a jug, her back razor straight.

He tilted his head, eying her appreciatively. She'd always been pretty. Not stunning, not flashy or brash, like her friends. Miranda Whittaker and Trisha Arbourdale could steal a room from the pope when they felt like it. Penelope, though, she was the quiet type—like a treasure you couldn't find unless you knew where it was. No one saw her, but once you noticed, you just couldn't look anywhere else.

And for the first time in his life, Raul Montenga was really looking.

Not with the hormonal surges of a twenty-two-year-old kid, though that horny bastard was still itching to get at her. With the mature appreciation of a man who'd seen and touched and found that the glitter other women needed to garner attention wore off after a while. Not Pen, though.

Her hair fell down her back, straight as a waterfall, the strands gleaming with different shades of chocolate, molasses and caramel. Her body was trim, curving gently at the hips and...well, all right, the horny bastard in him unquestioningly loved the round, firm shape of her ass in those black slacks. God knew his dick paid allegiance to it in a daily morning ritual. But there was more he could see now. How poised she was, not to yell or pick up heavy objects to toss at his head. The way she wore her pride around her like a shield. The way she didn't back down with him or their child.

Tearing his gaze from her butt, he glanced around, noticing the pool he'd expected out on the patio. She'd done amazing for herself, finishing her education, building her own practice. Shit, she'd come home with her fatherless child and faced down every judgmental, gossip-loving ass in this town. For as many as were harmless and kind, there were plenty who were vicious and cruel. But she'd stayed and walked with her head up for twelve years.

"I couldn't have done it," he said, making her jump as she turned with the glasses. "You didn't hear me come in?"

She treated him to a mocking shrug before holding out his water. He took it, noticing she slid her fingers away before he could touch them, even accidentally. Then she positioned herself against the counter, close enough that it wouldn't be an insult, but far enough away that he'd have to come after her if he planned to touch her. Another notch on his patience gave way.

"Why are you afraid of me?"

"I'm not." A denial that was too fast to be believable.

"Yes, you are. You're afraid of me and you're afraid of my family. I want to know why."

A flicker of irritation narrowed her eyes. "Just because I'm not leaping for joy at the prospect of visiting your family does not mean I'm afraid. It means this is all moving fast and I'm a little concerned about thrusting my daughter feet-first into an already established family dynamic she won't know or fully understand. I was hoping to ease her into a relationship with them. Gently. Carefully. To make sure no one gets hurt."

"Why would anyone get hurt?" But in the back of his mind, he felt the doubt, the concern rise.

Penelope's scoff told him he wasn't fooling anyone. "I've met your mother, Raul."

He stiffened, everything in him going angrily still. "And I've met yours."

He knew he'd hit a raw nerve when her cheeks flushed a fast, hot pink. She set her glass down on the counter, untouched, and crossed her arms under her breasts. It wasn't a calculated move, more as if she were hugging herself tight, but it shifted his attention nonetheless.

"I've done the best for my daughter—despite my mother's personal issues—to make sure she's been brought up safe, happy and secure, knowing that the people she loves, love her. And I've done pretty damn well so far."

"No one's arguing that." And he wasn't. She might be a little evil, but Chloe was a good kid overall. Better than he'd been at her age, that was for sure.

"I won't apologize for worrying about her welfare when I know there's a chance she could be hurt."

Did he want her to? Heart thudding, he couldn't answer, but he couldn't let her walk around ignoring the obvious either. "Word is going to get around soon, Pen. What's better for her, my brother and sisters finding out when she's brought to the house for them to accept or when it's thrown in their faces at the grocery store? How happy are they going to be to see her then?"

Finally, it was her turn to blanch. He took a few steps closer and leaned against the island counter, placing himself directly in her personal space. Let her look me in the eye and tell me what she really thinks of me. "Do you think I'd let them hurt her?"

"I think you close your eyes to things you don't want to see." She lifted her chin to meet his gaze steadily. Steely and completely unwilling to cower because he might not like what she said.

And damn if he didn't like it. Penelope all grown up. Determined to stand her ground. Absolutely irresistible.

Something about her could take him from pissed to aching hard in half a second. Something he decided right then he had to get to the bottom of. He straightened away from the island, watching her eyes widen as he came within inches of her. "Maybe I'm not as blind as I used to be."

She shivered, a fine quiver that reverberated through him. Not one of fear or revulsion. No, he knew that kind of shiver. Part of him even vaguely remembered it from his dreams. Arousal. Her eyes turned smoky, deep, and those soft pink lips opened just the tiniest bit, a breath escaping. He heard it. Felt it. Which was the moment he realized he was going to kiss her.

Of course, by then, he was already doing it. Tasting those pink lips, breathing in her gasp, sliding deep into her mouth. At first she was still, but then he felt her moan against his tongue, her hands grasping the open sides of his coat so tight they pulled at his neck. She strained upward, sliding her body against his. In a heartbeat she was devouring him just as much as he ate at her. Lips, tongues, teeth, it wasn't a kiss so much as it was an explosion.

"No!"

Raul found himself shoved backward, Penelope's hair slipping from his fingers as he reached for his bearings and found them completely scattered.

"We can't," she said, catching her breath faster than he did.

"What?" The only other word in his mind was why but he had enough wits not to ask that.

Pen wrapped her arms around herself, tight, lifting her fingers to her lips as if they were sore. Or maybe they stung, like his.

He had to clench his own hands into fists not to reach for her again and make them sting like hell.

The movement wasn't lost on her. A curtain slammed down in her gaze, locking him out completely. "No, Raul. I'm not doing this again."

"This is different." They weren't drunk. They knew exactly what they were doing, who they were with. Who they wanted.

"No, it's not." She wasn't cold, but she was sure. "I'm not going back to being that girl everyone pitied because she was infatuated with a dream. I'm not going to get Chloe's hopes up because I can't control myself. She's already paying for my inability to think around you. It's not happening again."

Chloe. Upstairs, oblivious to whatever the hell it was that had just happened.

"You should go," she added hoarsely.

"This isn't over, Pen."

"Yes, it is. It has to be. You just keep your distance and I'll keep mine. It'll be fine."

"Fine," he repeated. For a smart woman, she didn't have a fucking clue sometimes.

"Yes, fine," she said, going prissy on him. "Because I've already had to pull my life together once after you left. I refuse to put myself in a position where I have to do it again. I have Chloe to think about." Implying he didn't. Softer, but no less resolved, "You're a risk I can't afford."

Wouldn't afford. Raul wanted to say something to her, but he wasn't sure he knew what to say. He wasn't going to fucking beg, that was for damn sure. "We're going to my parents on Sunday afternoon. All of us. Be ready by noon."

She opened her mouth to argue, but he stalked out of the room, out of the house and into the cool outside air. He was halfway across town, truck windows open and temper slowly starting to abate, when he admitted to himself she was right to push him away. To stop his damn inability to ignore an impulse. Things were getting out of hand quick, and sex was the last thing they needed. Least of all in the kitchen, with a kid possibly showing up at any second. She was right, damn it.

But, he thought, remembering the feel of her—the taste and the impact of her on his senses—there was no way their attraction was going to just go away. Long before he'd started dreaming about her, Penelope Gibson had been Temptation personified.

Trouble was, he'd never been much good at resisting temptation.

## Chapter Five

"You doing okay, doc?"

Penelope looked up from the chart she was filling out to see her eighteen-year-old patient watching her with those too-keen eyes. Ellen Crisp had been in and out of Penelope's monthly free clinic for the last year, always pretty much for the same thing. "Sure, I'm fine."

"So how come you haven't gotten on my case yet?"

Penelope finished her note, tapping her pen an extra time or two before clicking it and letting the file pages flip through her fingers. "Maybe I'm hoping you'll pay attention to what I don't say this time around."

"Really? 'Cause I had the feeling you just weren't paying any attention."

"Being that I'm writing you a prescription to clear up that case of chlamydia you've got, I'm pretty sure I was paying attention."

Ellen flipped her dark hair over her shoulder, the sound of it hitting her paper gown reminding Pen of rice on a drum. Ellen was a pretty girl, a fact she was a little too aware of, given that each time she'd come in for a free pregnancy test, she'd gone out with a prescription for some kind of mild STD. "Damn, I thought it was just a bladder infection."

"One of these days it might not be something I can fix with antibiotics." She wasn't supposed to preach to her patients, but the ones she saw over and over again, like Ellen, got under her skin. Kids who thought they were invincible, thought nothing bad could ever happen to them. Ellen had plenty of things not go right, but she was almost determined to stick to her path of dangerous sexual freedom.

"There's the doc I know and love." The girl smiled. "And I do listen to you. I've been using the condoms."

Penelope raised her eyebrow.

"I ran out."

Penelope still had to work not to wince at the girl's utter lack of sense of self-preservation. "Have you considered buying some?"

Ellen's gaze dropped, her shoulders coming up near her ears. "No."

Everything in Penelope ached to reach out, take the girl's shoulders...and shake. Force her somehow to understand the risk she put herself into by not protecting herself.

Instead she reached out with the slip. Because if she did what she wanted to, Ellen would stop coming in for help. And what would happen to her then? "Take that. And get a bigger stack of condoms on your way out, okay?"

"Thanks, Doc."

Penelope nodded, started out of the room when Ellen stopped her again.

"The only reason I asked, though, was because you look kinda...freaked out about something."

Penelope froze. "Freaked out?"

"Yeah, for a second there, I thought I was dying or something."

"Not at the moment, no." What else was she supposed to say?

Ellen's lips twisted. "Yeah, I got that. But you can't blame me for wondering. You keep biting your lip and shaking your head. And you keep spacing out. It took you five whole minutes to remember what you were going to write in my chart."

"It wasn't fi—" Penelope followed Ellen's pointed gaze at the clock over the door. Just as she said, it was far too late in the day.

"And did you even notice that you've got two different-colored socks on?"

Penelope looked down in horror. Except...both her socks were white.

Ellen looked too pleased with herself. "That was just way too easy."

"If you can be this smart with me, why can't you be that smart about protecting yourself sexually?"

The smirk slipped but came back with a flash. "'Cause you're not a six-foot-four football player."

And that was why Ellen would never think too hard about what Penelope had to say. "Just promise me you'll be more careful, Ellen."

"I promise, Doc. No glove, no love." Exactly as she promised the last time she'd been in. And the time before that. How many times more would it be before Ellen caught something no one could cure?

Penelope left the room, heading straight to her office. She leaned against the door, taking a calming breath and wishing it had any effect at all. Unfortunately, Ellen was right. She was distracted. She was a complete mess and nothing was going to make it any better.

Raul kissed me.

That thought kept trying to run happily through her head, like a kid with its first balloon. Just like every other time, though, she crushed the thought without mercy. Chloe. She had to keep her daughter foremost in her mind. Especially since in a little less than twenty-four hours she'd have to walk with her child into the last place she ever wanted to go.

It wasn't that Raul's family wasn't nice. Most of them were great. His mother, though... Penelope suppressed a shudder and walked to her desk to check messages. Four, from the two women who had been trying to call her since last night.

Miranda and Trisha had both started calling about an hour after Raul had left Penelope's house, no doubt because someone from town had been in the pizza parlor. Or had seen him leaving her house twice in a week, and that was enough to start a forest fire of speculation. After the disaster in the kitchen, she hadn't been up to talking to anyone, least of all her best friends. Friends who knew just as well as she did how weak she was when it came to a particular overwhelming firefighter. They'd started on her cell phone next. She let them go to her voice mail. Now she stared at the white message slips Cara left on her desk.

When I get my hands on you... Call Me! from Miranda.

So how was it? from Trisha.

The other two were from her mother. No message, just a box checked that she'd like a returned call. Soooo not doing that one yet. She hadn't spoken to her mother directly since informing her that Chloe would be coming with her to the office after school for a few weeks. It hadn't been a pleasant call. Mostly because Lorna could smell blood in the water like a shark and she'd known something was going on. Not telling her that Raul knew about Chloe hadn't been a difficult decision. Keeping Lorna from grilling it out of her was the hard part. So, as she'd done with her friends, she'd ignored those calls, too.

Nope, when it came to ignoring reality, Scarlet O'Hara had nothing on Pen.

She sank into her chair, longing for it to be a deep bathtub filled with hot, hot water and all kind of frou-frou-smelling bath salts and bubbles up to her chin. That would be absolute heaven right now. Instead, it was a serviceable office chair with rolling casters that did nothing for the headache or the bad memories prodding her mind.

It's good you never told him. Seven years, and still those stilted English words sounded in her head like a gong. Ophelia Montenga had said them at Danny's fourth birthday party. Julia had invited all the kids from Danny's kindergarten class and, though nervous that Raul might be there—he wasn't—Penelope had taken Chloe. Ophie had shown up an hour later, silent as a ghost by Penelope's side while the kids played a wild game of musical chairs.

She'd always thought Ophie was the kind of Mom everyone wished they had. Laughing and playful, clearly dedicated to her kids. And God knew her children never stopped talking about her—always in a bragging way. My mom made me this... My mom taught me that. My mom, my mom, my mom. As a kid Pen had seethed with morbid jealousy. Who wouldn't, given Lorna Gibson's high standards on what a proper young girl did and did not do. What she wore, who she spoke to, how she presented herself. Life with Lorna, especially after her father's death, was like an endless upper-crust boot camp without commendation or reward. Those illusions had died a startling death that day, though.

"For the best," Ophelia had added with a stoic nod, watching Chloe giggle herself silly at having made it to a chair on time. The memories all had a slowed quality to them. Crystal clear, every sound preserved until they rang, but watching Chloe run and laugh and clap while her grandmother said the most

horrible words Penelope ever heard was a strange kind of nightmare she couldn't seem to wipe from her mind.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Pen had managed to choke out. Not convincingly, either, considering Ophie's smug nod.

"You think I don't see my son on her face?" The older woman's tone was acid. "It's better this way. If he knew, he'd only ruin his life, trying to make her fit where she doesn't belong. Better for both of them."

Penelope turned back to her daughter, all her happiness in the day sapped. Shock kept her locked in place, unable to believe it was really happening. That someone had finally seen what she saw everyday. Except Ophie was anything but pleased about it.

"She's happy this way. She'd never be happy with the truth. She'd never belong in our family. *You* will never belong."

That much, she'd known for a long time. Of the ten Montenga siblings, not a single one had married outside their race, something that until that moment, Pen had attributed to happenstance. Clearly, it wasn't. But Chloe was innocent, she wanted to say. So young and wonderful. Content in a way Penelope herself had never known. How could anyone hold that against her? But the only word that wedged free of her choking throat was "Why?"

Ophie's lips twisted at one side, her gaze firmly on the child she was rejecting. "There is no room in my family for *pinche gavachos*, *Güera*. I didn't care when you chased after him, because you never mattered. He never tried to bring you home. He knew better than to bring his trash to my door. But you...you need telling. Or you wouldn't have brought her here."

"She will never be accepted," Ophelia snapped, though her voice was little more than a hiss. "Never. Remember *that* the next time you think to push your bastard in with my grandchildren, *puta*."

Penelope had made apologies to Julia, taken her baby and run. Julia had given her mother a long glance and accepted the lie graciously, but Penelope had often wondered how much Julia might have put together. For a long time afterward, she'd get a guilty flush to her pretty face whenever Penelope crossed her path. There'd been no separating Danny and Chloe, though, so the two of them just silently seemed to agree the incident had never happened and gotten on with their lives. A life that, for Penelope, meant appreciating her own mother a hell of a lot more.

Lorna might be a lot of things—snobbish, difficult, aggravating and judgmental—but she was no bigot. She was honest, even if painfully so. Loyal and true. Chloe would see that one day. Probably a day very far away. Penelope just hoped she wouldn't have to see it because she was hurt by Ophelia too.

Hopes that were dwindling with each hour closer she came to Sunday at noon.

It could go so badly. Where Ophelia led, her children invariably followed. Not one of them ever did much to stop their mother's willful prejudice. They smoothed uncomfortable waters. Gave subtle excuses

to people who were unsure if she'd insulted them by ignoring them. They covered rather than dealt with the source of the problem, enabling Ophie's issues year after year. It wasn't much of a question what would happen when Ophelia made her opinion known. If she refused Chloe, all the others would reject her too. Chloe could lose so much more than a grandmother, and there was nothing Penelope could do to stop it.

Fear had her biting her lip again.

"If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times," Lorna's less-than-dulcet tones sounded from the doorway, which Penelope hadn't even heard open. "Stop chewing your lip. You'll draw blood one of these days."

"Mother." Penelope straightened in her chair without thought. As if her spine had long ago been trained to perfection in Lorna's presence. "What are you doing here?"

Lorna stepped in and closed the office door firmly. Nearing sixty, Lorna Gibson moved with strength of purpose in every motion. As usual, she wore a perfectly starched white blouse over a smooth blue skirt. No embellishments other than her wedding set on her left hand, her serviceable black pumps adding an extra inch or two over Penelope's height. Her hair had begun graying in her forties and now only showed a few hints of the dark chestnut shade Penelope saw in the mirror every day. Still thick, Lorna's hair was rolled around the sides of her head to gather into a bun at the base of her skull. The same as it was every day. Elegant. Precise.

Penelope allowed herself a second to wonder if Lorna's hair was anything like her own spine—completely incapable of changing shape.

Lorna placed her purse and light coat on one of the client chairs in front of Penelope's desk and stood there, hands clasped in front of her, as if waiting for Penelope to do something. *Other than sweat, that is.* 

"Mother?" she prompted again, when Lorna's eagle gaze felt like it was about to break the skin.

"I'm waiting for you to explain your rudeness. I figured that waiting at home was not going to give me any answers. I assumed waiting here might hasten the situation."

She knew better than to gurgle in front of her mother. "I wasn't being rude—"

"You haven't returned a call all week. And now I'm hearing that you're spending time with that Montenga person again. I may not be the most emotionally discerning person in the world, but I do know when I'm being avoided. I expect an explanation."

That Montenga person. Well, at least he'd been upgraded from "that ridiculous obsession of yours". "His name is Raul."

"I'm well aware of his name. I want to know what's going on."

Prevaricating would take more energy than Penelope really wanted to expend. And really, Lorna would find out eventually. Everyone would. Holding in a sigh, Penelope opened her top drawer and pulled out the manila envelope with the test results. Silently, she handed it to her mother.

Frowning, her blue eyes narrowing slightly, Lorna unbent enough to take it. She sat in the chair next to her purse and coat and slipped the papers out. She read, eyes moving as she took in the information. A flick of her wrist and the pages slid back into the envelope. She extended it back to Pen. "I suppose I should be surprised."

"But you're not." Penelope slipped it back into her desk. Of course Lorna wasn't surprised. She hadn't even expressed shock when Penelope had shown up at home pregnant and determined to keep her child.

"You were never particularly subtle about him." Lorna sniffed, blinked and flicked her cool gaze back to Penelope. "I suppose he's aware of his paternity."

"Yes."

A tightening at the corners of Lorna's lips never boded well for one's self-confidence. "Well, I hope you took steps to protect yourself and Chloe prior to this."

At what could only be a blank look on Penelope's face—her mind was still trying to formulate a question—Lorna tsked. "Proving he's her father gives him rights, Penelope. Legal rights. He could demand to be added to her birth certificate. He could interfere in every aspect of her life—medical, religious, educational. My God, he could sue you for custody. Surely you considered that before you gave him an open door right into her future." As usual, Lorna didn't wait for a response before her eyes flickered with disappointment. "Let me guess, you let your own feelings about him cloud your judgment yet again."

"No." *I just didn't think that far ahead.* Raul wouldn't take Chloe away. He was still trying to grasp the word *Dad*, for the love of Pete.

But Lorna didn't know that. Not that she'd been particularly sweet and pleasant before her husband's death, but becoming a widow in her thirties had left her with a kind of fatalistic pragmatism—only the idiotic should be surprised by oncoming doom. She raised an imperious eyebrow. "Oh, somehow I doubt that. As soon as that boy comes along, you completely lose sight of reality. You always have. That's how you ended up pregnant in the first place."

"Mother." The angry growl in Penelope's voice didn't faze Lorna.

It didn't stop her, either. "But the same has never been true for him, has it? He never once gave you a moment's thought when you were children, and when he left town, he didn't so much as look back once. Not at *you*. Don't get it into your head that having his child will change that. What good will you do Chloe if you tangle an already-complicated situation with your ridiculous obsession?"

She knew Lorna couldn't resist. "I'm *not* complicating anything. The only thing between Raul and me is Chloe. I'm not stupid enough to expect anything else." Even if he'd kissed her as if he meant to devour her.

Lorna's steely gaze bore into her again, but whatever conclusions she derived with it, she didn't seem inclined to share. "Chloe is your main concern, Penelope. The moment you created her, *she* became the

most important thing in your life. Not that man. Fantasizing about him or any kind of relationship with him will only make you miserable when it doesn't happen."

At least that they could agree on. "Chloe has always come first, Mother. Nothing has changed that."

Nothing will change that."

Her mother's mouth pursed, the fine lines around her lips deepening for a second. Whatever she seemed intent on saying, she appeared to rethink. "Well, at least with his obscenely sized family, you should have a little more help with her. God knows I can't take care of her forever."

Lorna-speak for "I can't control her anymore".

Penelope made a noncommittal sound. Lorna had already done far more than most other mothers would have. She'd supported Penelope through her pregnancy, been with her through the delivery and, though not exactly a Florence Nightingale about it, she had cared for Chloe almost exclusively as Penelope struggled to get back into top positions in her competitive courses. If it hadn't been for Lorna, she wouldn't have made it. Chloe wouldn't have made it. It'd be a cold day in Hell before Pen forgot that.

Still, it sure felt pretty icy when Lorna delivered her mega-sized doses of painful reality.

"What do you intend to do now?"

The evil little voice in the back of Penelope's head tempted her to say she was going to club Raul over the head and run away with him bound and gagged in the back of her car.

"He wants to get to know her, to ensure she has a place with his family." The other thing would have been satisfying, but only for a few seconds. "He wants us to go with him to his parents' house tomorrow."

"I suppose it's the respectful thing to do."

Funny, Lorna agreeing with Raul. Penelope would have to tell him about it, if only to see him make that expression of distaste.

"Be careful, Penelope," Lorna said suddenly, her tone an almost gentle warning. A warning of what, Pen didn't want to imagine.

"It's only his parents' house. What's the worst that could happen?" she asked with false brightness, repeating the platitudes she'd been cycling through her own head all day. It was just lunch. With people she knew from experience were mostly decent and kind.

"They could hate you," Lorna answered helpfully.

Penelope could only sigh and give in to the urge to hold her forehead with her hand. No, she was definitely not going to the Montenga house.

\*

The red porch mocked her.

Penelope stood on the strange garnet-colored concrete, watching Chloe toe off her beaten sneakers and Raul untie his black dress shoes. She wore a simple pair of black pumps—ones that reminded her

uncomfortably of Lorna's from the day before—and figured she could kick those off as she stepped inside. It wasn't the shoe removal bothering her so much as it was her own removal.

Raul had arrived at her house dead-on noon. His fire-station uniform, a feature she'd started to consider as much a part of his identity as his sly grin and chocolate gaze, was strangely absent. Instead, he wore a pair of charcoal slacks and a crisp white dress shirt. She could see the outline of an A-shirt through the fine grain on the fabric and the whole effect seemed to emphasize the breadth of his shoulders and the lean line of his hips. It was a completely unfair use of masculinity to get his way. Within minutes, he'd managed to hustle her into his truck and tuck Chloe in the backseat, all the while nodding at her arguments as to why this wasn't a good time for her. Now here she was, staring at the red porch and getting ready to enter the house of the woman who'd vowed never to accept her child. Lovely.

At some point, she was going to learn how to say no to this man and mean it.

"Can we go in now?" Chloe asked, balancing on the tops of her shoes.

Raul, finished with his own ties, nodded and opened the door. He slipped his feet from the shoes one at a time, stepping into the house without so much as a knock. He turned back, reaching his hand to Penelope, messages in his dark eyes she feared understanding. His hand stayed steady, the skin of his palm notably lighter than the bronzed shade of the rest of him. She saw scars on his fingertips, the calluses he'd earned, the strength of his hand there, but it was the rock-solid confidence of the offer that had her drawing in an unsure breath. His body blocked the door. There was no other way though without letting him lead. He wasn't just offering her help out of her shoes. He was asking her to trust him as he pulled her into his family.

She wanted so badly to do what she'd done all those years ago, grab her baby and run. She glanced at Chloe, whose little face was lit up with anticipation and impatience with her mother. No running this time.

Please, God, don't let this be the biggest mistake I've ever made. She slipped her hand into Raul's, felt his warmth infuse her fingers and kicked off the shoes. He pulled her across his body, transferring her to his other arm as he allowed her the space to enter. She thought he'd let go once she was inside, but his arm slid around her waist, keeping her close. Securely at his side. As if that were where she belonged.

Damn him for not even knowing when he was being cruel. Her eyes closed all on their own, her sensitivity to him overwhelmingly worse since that stupid kiss.

Damn herself for never learning any better.

"Ready?" Chloe asked, focusing Penelope's dazed senses back to the door.

Her face bright with challenge, she launched herself three unnecessary feet at Raul's side, giving a shriek when he caught her with one arm. Tucking her into his hold like a football, Raul started forward into the house. The small foyer opened on the right to the edge of what must be a living room. The sound from inside the house was nearly roaring, with a TV blaring and conversations crossing over it. Kids ran as a human clump into a room directly opposite the foyer, no one so much as noticing the new additions.

Penelope tried to pull away, not wanting to be glimpsed entering as if she were attached to him, but Raul's fingers spread over her belly and pulled her tighter.

"Cálmete." He lowered his head enough to rumble in her ear. "You don't want them to see us fighting, do you, Pen?"

"They'll see you limping if you don't move your hand," she said through her teeth as they were finally spotted.

"Tio Raul's here!" a teenaged girl yelled, coming out of the room the clump had disappeared into, a cell phone to her ear. She was pretty, her thick black hair pulled back from a striking face. She wore a black button-up shirt and a simple set of black pants and crossed the room to hug Raul and kiss his cheek.

"You leaving already?" he asked, hefting Chloe up a little.

The girl quirked her mouth. "Work. Matinee shift at the theatre came up short. If my mom asks, tell her I'm on the phone in the bathroom. She'll never know the difference." She tilted her head and neck to look at Chloe. "So you're our cousin, huh?"

"Hi, Bug." Chloe said, picking up her hand.

The pretty teen didn't so much as bat an eye at what couldn't possibly be her name. She just smiled, patted Chloe's head and shrugged. "Everyone's been kicking themselves for not figuring it out since you called," she said to her uncle. "See you around, Chloe. Save me some *buñuelos*, okay? I know you eat them all." She gave Penelope a passing smile then slid past all three of them and out the door.

"One down," Raul said almost musingly, "three hundred and twelve to go."

Penelope ached to go with the teenager. "Her name can't really be Bug."

"She had big eyes when she was a baby. It stuck."

"That's horrible." Especially for someone that beautiful.

"Nah. Keeps her humble." He tugged the hand he still had yet to move from her hip. "Come on, everyone's waiting."

Penelope didn't budge. "You really called them all?" He'd said as much when she made the mistake of letting him in her house twenty minutes ago, but she hadn't strictly believed him.

He raised a brow, shifting Chloe again so her braid hung sideways and her legs hung in crazy angles. "I said I did."

"I know, but—"

"But nothing. You have to start taking what I tell you at face value, Pen, or this is never going to work."

She had to swallow the rock that seemed lodged in her throat. "What won't work?"

His only answer was to narrow an eye at her and tug again. She was confused enough to be pulled forward into the warm reception of kids who were happy to see Chloe and their uncle. Adults watched from seats on the couch, dark eyes curious, no one apparently surprised that Chloe was practically upside down

as Raul moved the pack of them slowly forward into what looked like a dining room. A huge table, laden with all kinds of foods in bowls and bags and pink pastry boxes. Everything went quiet at once, the second Raul stopped. Kids parted, the TV silenced, the house going collectively still as Penelope finally saw the older man waiting in the captain's chair.

Thomas Montenga.

She'd seen Raul's father before, of course. The few times they'd been in speaking distance, he'd always been courteous, a bit of old-world grace to his still-large frame. When she'd seen him at Julia's parties for Danny, he always wore an old hat, kept a cane nearby and stayed in the shade. It had given her the mistaken impression that as a man coming up on seventy, he was in some way frail. Looking at him now, in his own home where he was unquestioningly the lord of the manor, she saw only a man comfortable in his own strength.

He looked like Raul, she thought with a nervous blush stealing over her face. Dark from years in the sun, his shoulders had only the slightest droop. His hair, more silver than black now, was combed back and slicked with some kind of oil, only the curl of his bangs falling forward. Like his granddaughter, he wore black, but the panels of his smooth cotton shirt were white, with black diamonds running the length. The lines at his eyes and the grooves around his mouth were deep, but not unkind. She could see the indentations where his dimples were, his full lips spread in a welcoming smile.

Raul brought Chloe upright, looking around while she blinked at the sudden shift, her small face still red from the pressure. "Where's Mom?"

Thomas's eyes flickered, his mouth flattening slightly. "She's not well today so she's staying in her room."

Penelope forced herself not to sigh in relief, especially when the pressure of Raul's fingertips bit into her hip.

Thomas's gaze shifted to Chloe, a smile lighting his craggy face into handsome lines. "But no one wanted to miss accepting the newest addition to our family, so we didn't cancel. You can talk to your *abuela* when she's feeling better, no?"

Chloe turned to Penelope for a second, brows raised. Pasting a smile on her lips, Penelope nodded. Ophie probably wouldn't feel better for a long, long time, but Chloe didn't need to know that. Not now.

"Ven, mija. Let me take a look at you."

Chloe took a tentative step, then another, so Thomas could reach out with a gnarled hand and gently touch her chin. He tilted her face from side to side, inspecting quietly. He looked into her eyes, long enough and deep enough that Penelope had to fight the urge to pull her child back. Finally, he leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

"I see a wonderful future for you, *changa*. One day, you come back and I'll tell you all about it." Chloe smiled. "Do I get rich?"

Thomas laughed. "Oh, you are your father's daughter." He leaned forward, conspiratorially whispering, "More than your wildest dreams. But that's just the beginning."

"Cool. And look, I'm wearing the medal." Chloe pulled it from beneath the collar of her T-shirt and held it out.

"I see that. How about you get some food and later we can talk about what that medal means."

"You mean the guy on it? Because I already googled him at school. The dog head thing was kinda creepy but—"

"I mean to us, your family."

"Ohhhh." Chloe shuffled for a second and glanced back at Penelope. "I should shut up and eat, huh?"

"It's a good place to start." Raul took hold of her shoulder and led her to the table. "Then you can go find Danny and show him how much shinier your medal is."

Chloe seemed to like that idea. She followed Raul to the side of the table where the plates were and little by little noise began to fill the house again. Kids flooded the table, not reaching for the food so much as trying to talk to Chloe all at the same time.

Pen, feeling a penetrating gaze on her face, turned back to find Thomas watching her. She didn't sense any judgment in those dark eyes. Just...curiosity. He gestured to the chair next to him. Penelope glanced at Raul and Chloe, who were maneuvering around the table, a shocking amount of food already stacked on their various plates.

"I won't hurt you," Thomas added.

Unable to be rude, Penelope nodded and took the seat. Thomas tried to catch her gaze, but—call it self-preservation—Penelope kept it down where her hands rested on the table. She caught his nod out of the corner of her eye and breathed a sigh of relief. She doubted he could actually see the future, but it didn't pay to let a man like that see too deeply into her soul.

"She's a beautiful girl," Thomas said finally, his accent curling the edges of his words. "You've done well with her."

"I had help," she said, her voice thick with her nerves.

"Sí, your mother, no?"

"Yes." The mother who'd left her in the office yesterday only when she'd been absolutely sure Penelope had no illusions that she'd ever mean anything to a man like Raul. Lorna's idea of protection, no doubt. When one had no unreal expectations, one didn't get hurt. Being in this house, surrounded by what was clearly a tight-knit group, unreal was about all there was. People were talking, laughing, hugging easily and as if everyone did it all the time. As if they hadn't seen each other in months or years when most of the adults lived in the same school district.

"A good woman."

"Yes," Penelope repeated, finally meeting his gaze. Lorna hadn't been happy when Penelope admitted she was pregnant. She'd been angry and embarrassed, but she'd never for a second given Penelope cause to doubt her support. Her acceptance. "She is."

Thomas's eyes widened and he seemed to register the comparison Penelope was silently making to his wife. For a second he bristled, his jaw tightening, but then he seemed to draw his temper back in. He blew out a breath before nodding. "Please, eat. My daughters worked hard to provide it all."

His daughters. Not his wife. Penelope nodded at the distinction. At least they understood each other. Neither of them had any illusions of what was really happening with Ophelia. What would never happen.

"I appreciate that, thank you." She rose, eager to catch up with Raul and Chloe and find the nearest corner to hide herself in. She didn't dare get it in her head that anyone here was particularly interested in her, as it should be. She was there for her daughter. For Chloe's comfort, a harbor should anything go wrong. That was all.

But, four hours later, she realized she should have emphasized that fact to Raul.

There was no getting away from him. She'd found a quiet place to eat in the living room, near the door where she could see everything and not intrude on any of the groups of adults or kids eating and laughing together as they watched a Spanish-dubbed old western. He'd found her, explained that Chloe was eating on the back porch with her cousins, and promptly planted himself at her side.

She found herself trying foods she'd opted not to put on her plate because he insisted she had to try them off his. His sisters—all eight of them, nine including his sister-in-law—were painfully good cooks. Within an hour, she was stuffed beyond all rational possibility and there was still more food to try.

He'd constantly bring her into conversations, until his siblings all began to expect her to express her opinions on a variety of things. What did she think of Chloe and Danny's team's chances of getting to the championship? Did she cook or did she bake? Did she have any tips on colic? Did she remember the time Raul got in trouble for knocking down the beehive at the annual Fourth of July picnic when he was Chloe's age?

As if the constant attention and the overfeeding she couldn't tactfully turn down weren't enough to drive her insane, he found eight million different ways to touch her. Nothing she could directly point at as bad. He didn't put a hand on her knee or slide his arm behind her head on the couch cushion. No, his shoulder, his thigh, his heat, pressed into her where he sat next to her on the couch. His hand bumped into hers, his fingertips grazing her leg every time either of them shifted. When he offered her food, often a bite from his fingertips, he always touched her lips. And damn if she couldn't see everyone noticing. Couldn't see them considering her just another conquest. Another notch on his tattered bedpost. Worse, a notch he'd already made long ago.

Unable to take any more of it, Penelope excused herself as best she could and wandered through the house until she found her way onto the deck, lack of shoes be damned. Cool air breezed over her flaming

cheeks, tossing her hair around as she made her way to the edge. Down below, a rich green carpet of grass covered what had to be an acre of gently sloping valley. Kids scrambled over it, kicking a soccer ball like a pinball, screaming and cheering and yelling as they ran from one end of a makeshift field to the other. It would all have been calming, she was sure, if she hadn't felt Raul step onto the deck behind her. It was a large deck and others had been there when she arrived. She heard them shuffle and eventually pass her to the steps down to the grass below.

Great. He was going to make a scene. Well...fine. She was angry enough to let him. She just hoped he was prepared to get as good as he gave.

## Chapter Six

Penelope leaned against the railing, her arms crossed under her breasts. Was it his anger or his warmth she sensed at her back before his dark hands rested on either side of her elbows? His chest pressed into her lightly and his low voice rumbled dangerously in her ear. "Do you want to explain what the hell that was?"

"Do you plan to listen?" Because he certainly hadn't listened to anything else she'd said.

His silence wasn't encouraging.

Penelope shook her head, not sure why she expected anything different. "I knew I shouldn't have come here."

"Why? No one's mistreated you. Or said anything to you. Chloe's fine. You should be fine."

"Well, I'm not, Raul. I'm not fine. I'm not fine with you."

He snorted, moving off her back to settle next to her, his back to the rail, his eyes crackling with temper. He crossed his arms and glared at her. "You insulted them, leaving like that. They only want to know you."

"They do know me."

"No, they don't. No one knows you, Pen. You put on this little smile and you disappear into the fucking walls. How the hell is anyone supposed to get to know you?" He kept his voice low, but it didn't soften the sting.

"They don't *need* to know me." She wished her whisper didn't sound like a hiss. "How do you think this looks to them, Raul? The way you're crowding me. Touching me. Trying to feed me, acting as if there's something between us when there isn't."

His jaw flexed but he didn't answer. Which meant he knew he was doing all those things.

"It's bad enough they all know how I got pregnant. I refuse to look like another one of your throwaway women. Or worse, so pathetic that I'd be available to you whenever you came along. I'm neither and I never will be."

"They don't think that." But his gaze dropped to his feet.

"Everyone in this town, particularly in this house, knows the way I felt about you back then. You have no idea what it's like to be looked at with pity by everyone you know. Do you think it'll be any different when you move on to your next conquest? Because I'm not like the others, Raul. I'm not going to slink off into the shadows and disappear into the fucking walls this time, am I?"

His head shot back up at her use of his words, eyes wide with shock. Which only served to make her angrier. She spent all her time with Miranda and Trisha growing up—she knew how to swear. Probably better than he did. She just happened to have a better sense of control over her impulses.

"I still have to face these people. And so will your daughter. I'd like a little dignity when I do."

The corners of his mouth were white and the lush curves were so hard they were nearly flat. Well, fine. Let him be pissed off. It didn't change anything.

"We'll finish this later." His lips barely moved as he growled the words. She didn't bother arguing more as he pushed off, leaving her alone on the deck.

Or so she thought.

"You have an interesting ability to put my son in his place." Thomas's graveled voice sounded amused behind her.

Penelope half spun, catching him rising from a cushioned recliner tucked into the corner of the deck. When he'd come out, Raul probably hadn't even seen his father sitting there among the teenagers. Until he'd turned around. Well, that explained Raul's reticence, anyway.

She bit her lip when the older man gestured her to the deck chair next to him. A glance inside the windows revealed no one listening nearby, which meant they'd all already gotten an earful or no one particularly cared about her little tiffs with their brother. They'd care if she upset their patriarch, though.

"I think it's time we talked, güerita."

Apprehensive, Penelope crossed the deck to the chair next to him and dropped into it, knees together and facing him. She folded her hands and met his gaze as squarely as she could. "I don't mean to put him in any place, *señor*."

"But still, you do what no one else seems to. No te preocupes. It's good for him."

Clearly, Raul's family had a different opinion on what was good for each other. "If you say so."

"I do. Mi hijo necesita a una mujer fuerte, alguien quien puede hacer frente a él."

Penelope gasped, torn between pretending she hadn't understood and assuring the man that she was hardly the strong woman he seemed to think his son needed. Standing up to Raul wasn't something she did because she wanted to.

The old man took the decision out of her hands. "Ah, entiendes español, ¿verdad?"

"My mother taught me French from the crib. I learned Spanish in school, like most everyone else."

Thomas's dark eyes didn't miss a trick. "For him, no?"

Humiliatingly, yes. And the Latin-based language hadn't been very hard to learn. At least it came in handy with many of her patients. Penelope took a lesson from Raul that she suddenly realized was handy. She shrugged one shoulder.

"¿Y la changa?"

Penelope nodded. "Why do you call her a monkey?"

"She climbs the trees at Julia's. The trees, the shed, the walls. She's never still." He sounded proud. If she had to guess, the wild genes had probably come from his side.

"Children pick up languages best from the onset. She learned all three at the same time. And the busier we kept her mind, the better she minded." Of course, being fluent in three languages meant it was three times as hard to keep any secrets from her. "She's very good."

"Está bien." He nodded, for once looking surprised. "But that's not why I wanted to talk to you." She waited, not sure what she was supposed to say.

"You know about my wife's prejudice." Well. Never let it be said Thomas Montenga beat around the bush. He didn't wait for her to agree. "How much do you know about the way things were sixty years ago?"

She blinked at the question. "I...I'm not sure how you mean."

Thomas nodded. "Sixty years ago, it was a lot harder to be a person of color. Here, it was hardest to be Mexican and though times are better, I think you know it's still not easy."

Yes, she knew. The attitudes towards migrants and naturalized Mexicans were often the same. Grudging tolerance. Laws had been passed, of course, but the nightly news was always littered with one story or another of the racial issues still plaguing the county. It wasn't a surprise that folks tended to stay to themselves. But Ophelia wasn't doing that. She was blocking any kind of change or choice to her family and nothing Thomas could tell Penelope now would change that.

Still, he seemed determined to try. "Back then, no one asked if you were a citizen. They just assumed you came illegally. And even if you were a citizen, the law had no interest in protecting you. It was our experience that the authorities were more interested in creating problems than solving them. Back then, we had to take care of ourselves.

"The sailors were the worst. They'd cause brawls and riots. They could attack us in the street and nothing would ever happen to them. They would just walk away while we were arrested for disturbing the peace. The police, they were good *para nada*. The lawyers would rather deport us than defend us. For the men, at least. You can probably guess what happened to the young girls."

A knot started to form in Penelope's stomach, a sense that Thomas's story was going to make her doubt her own resolve. She closed her eyes. *Oh, please, do not tell me this.* 

"Ophelia was thirteen when the soldiers took her. They raped her, beat her and left her for dead in a field."

She didn't want to feel pity for Ophelia. Didn't want shades of gray to alter her perceptions, but both began to seep in.

"Her parents took her home from the hospital and shut her in. They couldn't press charges, no one would listen. They just wanted to keep her safe, but all they did was make her afraid. Then make her angry. Her whole life, stolen by monsters with white skin. Their hatred and her fear stained her in a way we've

never been able to change. If I hadn't known her since we were babies, she probably wouldn't ever have married. But she trusted me. Only me. She feared everyone else.

"Even then, we had many hurdles to face. Things to overcome and it took time. There was no...cómo se dice...therapy back then." He said therapy like one would spit out something sour. "But we made it. We got through. We had our children and she found a different kind of peace. Happiness. It's been a good life. A good marriage. But no matter how good her life has been, nothing could fix what was broken that day in that field.

"The world changed, people changed. It's better now. They don't spit at you when you walk by anymore. They still want to sometimes." Thomas's chuckle had a world of sandpaper in it, almost sounding like a cough. "But they worry we'll videotape them and sell it. You know, they pay you better if you can speak espanish now?" That had him slapping his own knee, shaking his head with clear disbelief. "Everything is different now. My children, my grandchildren...they live in a better time and when they're my age, maybe no one will care what color anyone is because by then everyone will be every color. But Ophelia..." His mirth faded away. She could see the apology in his eyes, could feel him imploring her to accept.

"I understand." And she did. She knew what it was to feel as if the past would never stop haunting you. "But understanding why doesn't mean I can condone what she does. I'm sorry, but I can't. She's purposely holding a terrible crime against a child who had nothing to do with it." Penelope shook her head. "It's no better than what was done to her."

The hopefulness on his lined face disappeared. But, to her relief, he didn't seem angry. Just sad. Tired. "My children, they don't share her views. All I ask is that you give her time to accept the way things are and that you don't hold her mistakes against them."

"I don't," she rushed to assure him, but Thomas's face reflected his dubiousness.

"Don't you? My son was right about that much, *güerita*. How can you belong if you hold yourself apart?"

Penelope considered a guarded answer, but he'd been painfully honest with her. And while she knew Ophelia had meant what she'd said, Penelope needed to hear from this man in particular what he really planned for her child's place in his family.

"I don't know how to be anything else." She turned her head, staring out onto the hills of his property. It really was beautiful. Lush, full of life and vitality. Completely different from the yellow-tan mountainside behind her own home, rocky and dry and impossible to grow anything on. "Chloe does. She deserves a family that can be warm. That can be open and loving. It's all I've ever wanted for her. To be secure in knowing that she's loved and accepted."

"Do you hear that?" Thomas asked when she faced him again.

"Hear what?"

"The children."

It took Penelope a second to focus, but the rambunctious laughter, the yelling and good-natured name-calling... She could hear the happiness in all those voices.

"Your daughter is down there, in the middle of all that. Doesn't that set your mind at ease? She belongs here, just like all my other children and grandchildren. She will always be welcome. Always be safe, I give you my word. I cannot change my wife's pain, *que podría*, but I have always shielded them from it and they don't share it. No one will hurt her here."

It was a solemn vow. One she knew he made gravely and with all his heart. He wanted Chloe in his family. If the look in his eyes meant anything at all, he wanted it as much as Chloe did. Pen never had been any good at denying that look, not from Chloe, not from Raul and apparently not from the source. She smiled, nodding while he chuckled, pleased with himself for gaining her acceptance.

Even as she agreed, in her heart, she remembered Ophelia's vow. And worried.

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It was after eight by the time Raul finally got Penelope and Chloe back into his truck and on their way home. Four whole hours of being pissed off and smiling through his teeth had worn his nerves pretty fuckin' thin, a fact Penelope seemed to be the only one appreciating.

It wasn't a point in her favor.

She'd stayed out on the deck with his father almost the whole time after their argument. His *father*. As if Thomas were her personal shield from the rest of the family. From him. It was enough to get his blood boiling. Even now, she kept tossing him furtive little glances, checking no doubt to see if he were blowing steam from his collar. The only satisfaction came in smiling back and her nervous looks shuttling out the window.

Well, that and Chloe falling asleep in the back of the cab. The way she and her cousins had run around like some wild wolf pack, he was surprised she'd made it back into the truck under her own steam. She'd be out for the rest of the night. Which meant he'd have plenty of time to wring her mother's pretty, swanlike neck.

"Well, thank you for bringing us along," Penelope said as he pulled up next to her front lawn.

Raul grunted, about the only sound he was capable of at reasonable volumes. Get the kid in the house, close her door, *then* yell. Best damn plan he'd had all damn day. The others involved either strangling her or stripping her and doing all kinds of other things he shouldn't. He got out of the car and slammed the door.

"Raul!" Her voice was muted, but just short of panic as she scrabbled out of the passenger side. By the time she'd circled the truck, he'd already opened the back door to the cab and unlatched Chloe from the seatbelt. She all but poured into his arms, her limbs dangling in a completely different way from that

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afternoon. He scooped her close and kicked the door shut. Penelope watched him, eyes wary, but being an intelligent woman, she just led the way up the walk, unlocked the door and let him in before securing it again. Silently, she moved up the stairs and he followed once more, not allowing his gaze to stray to the sleek, smooth motion of her hips rolling left, right, left again with each ascending step. She touched a lamp after opening the door with the chimes, creating a soft glow that illuminated the room enough for him to see where he was going.

The room was almost too immaculate to belong to a kid. A bright red desk took up one corner, a computer set up there with a shelf full of books above it. A basketball hoop was affixed to the wall opposite the door and the twin bed, which he belatedly realized was bumping his knee. Her bedspread was the same red as the desk and her pillow was a giant white baseball.

For the first time in hours his smile was real. In every direction he saw signs that his daughter was a sports freak to end all sports freaks. And Penelope encouraged it. No frilly pink box like the one her mother had forcibly shoved her into. He laid Chloe down when Penelope pulled back the blanket. Pen tugged off the shoes Chloe hadn't bothered to retie.

"I should wake her up so she can take a bath," she whispered, sounding torn.

"Good luck with that." They'd need electric shock to wake this kid up. Raul flipped the blanket over the sleeping girl with a strange feeling spilling through him. As if this was something right, something he should have been doing all along. As if plopping an unconscious kid into her bed with her shoes on was something he'd been missing in his life.

He passed a hand over the softness of Chloe's cheek, something in his heart tightening almost painfully when she made a sound of contentment and cuddled into her massive baseball.

Penelope tucked the shoes under the bed and stole around him to head back to the door, where she waited for him to follow her again. Well, she'd wait a long damn time, then, because all this following was ending. Now.

He stared down at his daughter—his daughter, a thought that in and of itself was growing less incredulous and more exactly what he wanted—and knew in that moment that his life was about to change irrevocably. If he wanted, he could still back away. Keep Chloe at enough of a distance that he could be her friend, give her access to his family but not really change much. He'd work at the firehouse, finding all the meaning in his life in the work there, and keep longing for something more in his heart.

Or, he'd become her father. Be someone to guide her and protect her. Be more to her than he'd ever managed to be to anyone else.

The ease with which he made the decision should have startled him, but it didn't. Like snapping that chain around her neck, the pieces fell together inside him and the lock was set. They still had a long way to go, of course—no kid of his should be expected to live in a room this perfect—but at least he knew he wanted the experience. Wanted to be part of this. *Wanted*.

He tapped the lamp a couple of times to turn it off, and reached for the door handle. Penelope stood there, raising her chin when he waited for her to walk out first. She was stubborn, something he should have realized years ago, but some things didn't change no matter how deep in denial a person wanted to go. Faced with waking up her daughter or standing there staring at him for eternity, Pen finally let go of the door and walked ahead of him into the hall.

Satisfied, Raul pulled the door shut, silencing the chimes by pressing them to the door. The door directly across from Chloe's could only belong to Penelope. She caught him looking, he could tell because she bit her lip. Tempting, very tempting, to stroll over there and discover what secrets the elusive Miss Gibson had in there, but they had talking to do first.

Raul shook his head and pointed to the stairs. Was that relief or disappointment on her face? It wasn't a question he could let himself think about. Much. He forced himself down the stairs, listening for her footsteps in his wake.

It took a while, but Penelope finally came. She walked into the living room where he was putting the poker back on the hearth stand. Vents closed, door closed upstairs. Now, finally, he could lay into her.

Except when he turned, he didn't see the hard-shelled woman who had stood on his parents' deck and told him to back off. This Penelope was worried. Afraid. Of him.

His anger curdled in his belly. "I'm not going to do anything to you, Pen," he growled.

"I know." And then she backed up a step and crossed her arms.

"Now that's just fuckin' unfair." So what if he sounded like a ten-year-old. "You were ready to rip my balls off and serve 'em for dinner earlier. But now that we're alone, you act like I'm going to hit you or something. I thought you were better than that."

"I've had almost five hours to think about what you were going to say. You've always been somewhat...demonstrative when you're upset. I've never seen any value to yelling myself hoarse. So no, I'm not looking forward to this." He could practically see frost coming out of her mouth as she spoke.

"You didn't care about my demonstrations at the house."

"At the house, I was angry."

"But you're not anymore." Of course she wasn't, she'd had her say. And her say had been six kinds of insulting, each and every one of them telling him to keep his distance. Just thinking about it pissed him off all over again. "How convenient for you."

Her mouth twitched and some life snapped in her eyes. "I had every right to be angry. You were giving your family the wrong impression. On purpose."

Damn right he'd done it on purpose. "I was being attentive and you were giving everyone the cold shoulder because things weren't going your way. I hate to break it to you, *querida*, but you don't have all the answers and you're not the only one with something to lose in this situation. Those people are all going

to play an important role in her life now. That means they'll be part of *your* life, the same as me. Treating us like shit will kind of get in the way of that."

She rolled her eyes. "I wasn't treating anyone like anything. I was staying out of the way because the whole point was for them to accept Chloe. *Chloe*. Why weren't you giving her the grand tour, introducing her to the relatives, instead of finding new and inventive ways to excuse putting your hands all over *me*?"

He focused on the first accusation...for now. "I did. For as long as she stayed still for it. Unlike you, she likes people and dove right in."

Color flooded her cheeks in a rush. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," he said, taking that step forward she'd put between them and another two besides, "you're getting more and more like your mother with every damn day and it's getting on my fucking nerves."

She froze, her eyes widening while her mouth fell slightly open. He could just see the tops of her teeth, perfectly white and even.

"What the hell happened to you, Pen? Do you even see the way you're becoming like her? You freeze people out, shut off your emotions and act like you're too good to be bothered. You're thirty-two fuckin' years old, but you're locked up in clothes and restraints like some goddamned retirement-home lady. You used to talk about the way you'd be when you grew up. That you'd go away and do things, make a difference with your life. Everyone knew you were just waiting to grow up and get out from your mother's control, but you haven't. And it's wrong for you."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes, I do." He walked up to her now, invading her space, almost wrapping his hands around her shoulders, he wanted to shake her so much. "You don't think I paid attention, but I did. I knew you. I knew who you were under the frills and the manners and all that other shit she used to make you do. You used to *laugh*, Pen. I haven't heard you laugh once since I came back. Not a real laugh. It wasn't loud, wasn't crazy, but fuck, at least you did it. When the hell did you lose what made you special?"

That finally seemed to snap her back to reality because she put her hands on his chest and shoved. "You happened, Raul. *You*. I spent fifteen years throwing myself at you because I couldn't seem to help it and you never cared."

He let her move him, shock at her emotional explosion muting his earlier frustration. She pushed again, as if she thought she could throw him across the room instead of a single step backward.

"Finally, finally, when I thought you felt something for me, all that happened was a horrible drunken fuck in a closet. A *closet*, Raul. Nameless, faceless and completely forgettable." She pounded at him, enough that it actually hurt this time. Or was that only because of what she was saying? "You left and you never looked back. You *destroyed* me. Does that make your ego feel better? I thought I lost everything the day you left, and I've spent the rest of my life proving myself wrong. Proving to myself—if no one else—that you don't matter anymore, and you know what, I've done a hell of a job.

"So excuse me if I'm not special enough for you anymore. Maybe it was the pregnancy afterward that took a little of the shine off. Or do you think it was surviving medical school with an infant? It could have been the pointless relationships I tried to have every now and again, each one a little more depressing than the last. Or maybe, just maybe, it was living with my mother's unflagging disappointment my entire life because at every single turn, I've lived up to everyone's lowest expectations.

"And by the way, yes, she's a bitch, okay, but she's *my* bitchy mother and if you want my respect for your family you'd better damn well have some for mine. Either way, *you* do not get to decide if I'm special, Raul. You made your mind up a long time ago that I wasn't—"

The kiss muffled her words. She shoved at him again, but he didn't let her go. She had to stop talking. Because everything she was saying was ripping his chest open. He licked at her lips, taking her fists into his hands and holding them still. She kept trying to hit him, but eventually she stopped fighting. Instead he felt her lips soften, part and then the darting touch of her tongue against his. She stroked, a warm, wet invitation that he'd have to have been dead for three days to turn down.

Letting go of her hands, he cupped her face, gentling his touch but unable to tamp down the hunger. His body hardened for her, pushing against her. Her palms slid down his chest, burning a trail to his waist, where she grabbed fistfuls of his shirt and pulled his hips closer. Flush, their bodies strained into each other from chest to knee.

The kiss slowed, became an exploration. He tasted her lips, drawing the full curve of the bottom one into his mouth before delving back inside to stroke her tongue with his. His senses filled with her, the taste of her, the scent and the feel of her. She met him kiss for kiss, rising up on her toes to get that little bit closer.

When the kiss finally broke, he still held her face cupped in his hands, but the angry fire in her eyes had cooled, the cobalt color shimmering with unshed tears. With unabashed want. Her lips pink and swollen, open and moist enough for him to want to pull her right back in.

She stared at him, looking almost tormented. "Why can't I hate you?"

Wouldn't everything be easier if she could? He touched her lip with his thumb, caressing it carefully. "Probably the same reason I don't think I can let you go tonight."

He thought she'd get angry again, but all she did was sniff and blink back her tears. Her poise threatened to return, and with it he knew would go any chance of touching her. Kissing her again. Making love to her, which he'd just told her he meant to do.

A good man would have released his hold and left. A good man would tell her she deserved better than the way he'd treated her all her life. But if there was one thing Raul knew about himself, it was that no one in their right mind would ever call him good.

"Don't make me let you go, Pen. I won't be able to."

Penelope didn't pretend to misunderstand. Or lie and say she didn't want him just as much. "What about Chloe? I don't want—"

"I'll be gone before she wakes up."

She glanced down at the couch, a flicker of distaste making her flinch.

"Your bed." She was going to stop expecting the worst from him one of these days. He'd see to it. Starting tonight. Swooping down, he scooped her up to his chest and headed back to the stairs.

She squirmed, uncomfortable. "You don't have to—"

"Maybe I want to." She weighed just short of nothing, leaving him with the simple satisfaction of having her curvy body close. She didn't exactly relax, but she stopped wriggling, deciding to just go along with what he wanted. If that was all it took, he'd have to pick her up more often. "Maybe I'll always want to."

"Just tonight, Raul," she warned. "Doing this won't change anything."

He didn't argue. He didn't agree either, just held her tighter and pushed through the slightly open bedroom door.

Her room was like Chloe's, perfectly neat, every part of the space broken into easily identifiable compartments. The bed, the vanity, the closet, the overstuffed chair by the window. Pale mauves, cream and teals made it look like a space he'd find in a furniture store. Perfectly arranged to show as little personality as possible. She needed messing up.

He leaned against the door so it closed securely. "How well does sound travel out of here?"

She blinked at him. "I don't know, why?"

It was too hard to shrug while holding her. "So I can decide how loud I should make you scream."

Her mouth twitched. "I'm sure I'll be able to control myself for the full five minutes."

As gauntlets went, they didn't get thrown down much harder. He stalked with her over to the bed and tossed her on top of it. She came down with a yelp and a bounce.

"Oh, I'll give you a full five minutes, *querida*." Raul plucked at his buttons, shrugging the white dress shirt off his shoulders while her eyes went wide...and hungry. "Then you'll give *me* five minutes."

He kicked off his shoes. Determination on his face, he took firm hold of her ankle, and pulled her pumps off one at a time. He tossed them over his shoulder, not minding if he never saw them again. Kneeling on the bed, he reached for the button on the waist of her pants. He made such quick work of it and the zipper that she raised an eyebrow with that told-you-so look she liked to give.

It disappeared when he yanked the pants by her ankles and sent them flying. "I figure if we don't kill each other in ten minutes, we can always start all over again."

He tilted his head, studying her in just her black bikini panties and the light blue button-up blouse. Her hair fell around her shoulders in a wild tangle, her bangs sticking up on one side. He'd call this look "slightly mussed" and classify it under "hot". Especially if he could get her left knee to fall open just a little...

She tugged her shirt down nervously. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Shhh. I'm mentally recording this for future fantasies."

Her mouth took on a mulish cast. "Are you going to be serious about this?"

"Oh hell, no. I'm going to enjoy every second." And so would she, if he had to tie her down and make her enjoy it. He blinked, wondering if that was something to consider...no, not tonight. Maybe next time.

Penelope started undoing the buttons on her shirt—which normally was not a bad thing, except he got the feeling she was trying to move things along and that just couldn't be allowed. He climbed onto the bed, taking her hands away from the buttons and putting them down on either side of her head. She frowned up at him.

"I haven't suffered through twelve years of unrelenting hard-ons for you to go and unwrap my present for me."

Now she just looked confused. "When have you ever had to suffer sexually?"

"Just about every day since I left this place." He slid his legs across the bed until he was lying over her. "You've been haunting me, Pen."

"I've been what?" But her eyes darkened when he settled above her, one knee pushing between her smooth thighs.

"Haunting. Me. I've had dreams of you, ever since I left." He lowered his voice to just above a whisper, leaning down as if to kiss her, then at the last second grazing her cheek. He felt the surprised breath escape her before bringing his mouth to taste the racing pulse in her throat. "Sexual dreams. *Good* sexual dreams."

"Good?" Her voice had the smallest squeak. He risked letting go of one hand so he could drag his fingers down the length of her arm, lightly tracing over the swell of her breast. She jumped, her breath skipping.

"Nothing else has ever compared." It was a truth that had dragged him from self-exile, that had him chasing a woman who'd wanted nothing to do with him. That even now had him more aroused than he'd ever been in his life. "You were never nameless to me."

"Raul—"

He opened the last two buttons on her blouse, parting the fabric to reveal a serviceable black bra. Cottony. Sexy, not by design, but because of what it held. Mounds of creamy, swollen flesh that made his mouth water. He stroked the nipple distending the black cotton, pleased to feel her shudder under him. "You were never faceless."

He peeled back the cup of the bra, revealing the puckered nipple, a rich dusky rose color he just knew would taste like ripe berries. He lowered his face to lick, pausing to let his breath warm the tip first. She arched and he curled his tongue around it to draw it deep into his mouth.

Penelope bucked, eyes squeezing shut when his thigh rose to press against her sex, making her realize she'd grown wet from a few simple strokes of his tongue. She moaned, clamping her teeth down on her bottom lip.

He shifted, rolling fully above her and letting go of her hand at last. She watched his face while he stripped her blouse away, reveling in the tense lines around his mouth. As if just the act of undressing her was taking more control than she could imagine.

Part of her, the rational, pragmatic side that knew better, demanded to know what the hell she thought she was doing. She should be kicking him out of her house instead of unclipping her bra and allowing him to lift it away. She should be covering herself, not feeling a warm glow of satisfaction when his eyes smoldered at the sight of her bare breasts. She definitely shouldn't be lowering herself back to the coverlet, arms back up above her head, letting him look his fill.

You're going to get hurt again, the worried voice tried to reason.

I deserve this, a voice Penelope hadn't listened to in years chimed in. It was husky, sensual, and it liked the way he licked his lips before he bent back down to lick her. He nibbled up the underside of her breast, sending her nerve endings into paroxysms of delight. Then the heat of his mouth surrounded the tip and it was all she could do not to cry out. His hand reached for and found her other breast, kneading it, letting the pebbled nipple slide between his fingers.

Penelope reached down, sinking her hands into the thick curls in his hair and told the reasonable voice to go to hell.

Raul kissed his way down her belly, stopping suddenly at her belly button. "I remember you," he said, and she got the feeling he wasn't talking to her. He traced his finger over the mole she barely noticed anymore. "Tell me you haven't done anything about that birthmark on your thigh. I have this whole string of fantasies about that baby."

She frowned, her heart stuttering as she realized what he was talking about. The little strawberry mark at the highest point of her left leg. Unbidden came the memories of that first time, blurred and unsure. He'd lifted her gown and kissed her there then, too, as he pulled her panties away. He'd seen the mark in the beam of light...and remembered? "You weren't just..."

"Saying things to make you feel better?" He shook his head, his dark eyes so serious she had trouble swallowing. His hand slid almost reverently up her leg, his fingers hooking the upper edge of her underwear. "I thought the dreams were just because I never got you out of my system."

"I never knew I was in your system."

One side of his lush mouth curved upward, the grin so sinful and sexy it drew an answering smile from her own. "Oh, you have no idea the things I wanted to do with you back then." He pulled the panties downward, exposing her hipbone, which he promptly leaned down and nibbled. "What I want to do with you now."

"But you never...I...why didn't you?" Okay, it wasn't a cogent sentence, but he was slowly pulling her panties down her hips, nipping and licking her abdomen right up to the line of dark curls above her sex. Another moment and the panties were gone, leaving her completely naked beneath him. And he was for all intents and purposes still completely dressed.

"Should I have told you back then how much I wanted to take off all your clothes and lick every inch of you until you came in my mouth?" He crawled over her again, levering his weight onto his forearms. His gaze searing into hers, he lowered his face until he could kiss her, then leaned into her ear, his voice a harsh whisper. "Or how I would stay up late, jacking off, wondering if my fist was as tight as your pussy?"

Penelope gasped, the deep breath making her nipples abrade themselves against the lined texture of his undershirt. She shouldn't have been surprised that he was as earthy in bed as he was out of it. But still, the graphic question had her imagining him grasping himself, stroking the thick shaft she could feel through his clothes against her belly. No, not just stroking. *Fisting* it.

"Should I tell you that sometimes, I still do?"

"Yes." She turned her face so that she caught his mouth for a kiss. "Tell me everything. Show me."

She'd had lovers over the years. Bland excursions she'd gone on, looking for some spark, trying to fulfill a need she could barely describe and had fallen short every time. Here, now, Raul had barely stripped her, not even touched her intimately, and she was already so close to orgasm she quaked.

"I want to know what you look like when you come, Pen." He slid onto his side, one hand trailing down her midline before reaching possessively over her mound. "I want to know what you taste like."

Strong fingers parted her folds, sliding past her now-throbbing clitoris to stroke along the edge of her entrance. Teasingly dipping just the tiniest bit inside her before pulling out to stroke once more.

"Why can't you do both?" she asked in less than a whisper.

"Oh, I plan to," he breathed, finally sliding his finger inside her fully, using his palm over her mound to keep her hips still. Lazily, he rubbed inside her, rotating the heel of his hand with enough pressure to make her clamp her legs around him. "I'm just trying to decide which one to do first."

She pushed against him, rolling into the caress. "Decide faster."

"Mmmm, I don't think so. Fast is not what we're doing tonight."

The sensual haze lifted enough for her to turn her head and look at him. "What are we doing tonight?"

He stared at her face for a long moment, slipping a second finger inside her, slowly pistoning them in and out. He pressed on her clit, leaning forward to lick at her lips in time with the motions. The orgasm hit her like a freight train, nearly blacking her vision. She grabbed at his shoulders, her head tossing back into

the pillow. She rolled into his body, her leg folding up over his hip, the only thing between them his still-stroking hand.

His voice tight, he murmured, "We're going to right some wrongs."

## Chapter Seven

Penelope blinked up at Raul, his voice still echoing in her mind. He'd pulled himself up to sit, yanking off his undershirt and throwing it somewhere on the floor. His gaze traced over her, an expression she could only call delight lighting his eyes.

Her mouth felt unable to do anything but smile. "Was that my five minutes or yours?"

"Oh, definitely mine. Yours is coming up, though." He tugged open the slim leather belt he wore, slipped it through the loops with a whisper of sound, and let it drop off the edge of the bed. His muscles flexed beneath his golden brown skin as he moved to the foot of the bed, where her own feet were currently resting.

So unfair for him to be so beautiful. He made her hungry just watching him breathe. All that bronzed skin, smooth and warm to the touch. His chest had only the lightest sprinkling of hair, thickening into a trail near his navel and disappearing into the waistband of the pants he was now unzipping.

He's about to ruin all other men for you, that reasonable voice murmured, which almost made Penelope laugh. He'd ruined all other men for her the first time he'd smiled her way.

She sat up, languid but determined to take part in this. She hadn't the first time and she didn't want this to be at all the same. She wanted to know in her heart that she'd made every choice. That she'd reached out for what she wanted and taken it. Taken *him*.

Penelope rose up on her knees in front of him. Raul stopped moving, hands on his zipper, his breathing all but stopped. She put her hand on his chest, felt his heart pounding against her palm. Heat resonated up her arm, racing with tactile pleasure as she ran her fingers over the small, flat nipples and caressed his rippled laterals. She moved his arms out of her way so she could press her lips over his heart, starting a trail of kisses down his midline. The crisp hair tickled her lips, her tongue when she darted it out to taste his skin.

He swore when the kisses turned into sucking nibbles.

Penelope dragged her nails lightly over him, taking hold of the sleek black briefs beneath the open waistband of his pants. Not giving herself time to question her boldness, she dipped her hand in and found him, closing her eyes, her belly clenching in want. She gripped him tight and slid her hand slowly down his length.

Raul sucked in a breath too, hissing it out between his teeth. "I guess you want your five minutes right now."

Penelope smiled. Her fingers just met around him, a tantalizing fact that hung in her mind even as she released him to caress lower, where his sac was drawn tight in anticipation. Gently she ran her fingers over the texture of him, watching his jaw work back and forth and his eyes close tight. "Now is good."

"Now's fuckin' great."

Using her free hand, she pushed the slacks and the briefs down, freeing him, giving her the chance to caress the curve of a backside that had been teasing her for twenty years.

"I think we just hit a snag," she murmured, looking down at his erection. Heavy, thick and urgent, it was even more breathtaking than she'd expected.

"Don't worry, I won't hurt you."

She laughed, giving his arrogance its just reward by running her nail lightly up the bottom of his shaft. "I meant, I can't get your pants off this way."

"Honey, you could set 'em on fire for all I care."

"But—"

His arms banded around her and they fell together onto the mattress, his mouth already fused to hers, despite her laughter. A few determined kicks and his pants were gone, leaving his long legs bare to slide between hers. Call her simple, but just the feel of the coarse hair on his legs made her tingle, especially when he slid his thigh against her sex again, this time with specific intent.

Penelope reared back. "It's supposed to be my five minutes."

"I don't think so. You take a penalty for demanding to get me naked."

She licked her lip, trying not to grin when his eyes followed the action and his frown fell into place. "But I wanted to taste you."

He wanted her to as well, but he was clearly torn.

Penelope ran her folded leg up his flank, curving deeper into him, while running her tongue over the inside edge of her lip. "Just one minute?"

His eyes narrowed and she felt the heated throb of his erection against her stomach. "I'm not sure I'll last a minute."

"Then you can have that taste of me you were after."

He didn't argue when she put her hands on his shoulders and pushed. Getting him on his back, at her mercy, had a certain satisfaction all its own. Suddenly his big body was her personal playground. Not wanting to waste her minute, she moved between his thighs, running her hands up the powerful muscles there to slide over the deep groove where his belly gave way to the masculine grace of his hips. She leaned down to nip at it, taking in the flavor of his skin, the light musk of his scent. Clean, woodsy, darkly sensual.

When she reached his penis, though, she wondered if she could do this. She'd never wanted to take a man that way before. Wrapping her hand around the subtly upcurved flesh, she admitted to herself that she wanted this. Wanted to be purely in control of his pleasure...and her own.

She rubbed her cheek against the deep rose-colored head, pleased that it pulsed against her restraining hold. Keeping him still, she ran her bottom lip over it, building the anticipation just that tiniest bit more.

He rumbled something unintelligible, but she thought he might be swearing in Spanish. She let her tongue slip out over the moistening slit at the head and found out for sure he was swearing in Spanish.

She tsked at him in reproof.

"Pen, put it in your mouth or so help me, I'll throw you down and fuck you blind."

She paused, wondering which thing she'd really prefer.

Groaning again, he started to rise and she dipped her head to take him in, finding it both strange and arousing at once. She sucked, wrapping her tongue around the shaft as best she could. His hand touched the side of her face, beckoning her to take him deeper. She complied, pulling back when he bumped the back of her mouth and groaned.

"Again," he growled as she stayed still, watching him watch her.

She did as he asked, seeing the flush on his cheeks grow deeper, darker. So she increased her pace. She tightened her hand on the base, gripping upward with each surge. His hips moved with her and she started to wonder who was pleasuring whom. Her body was heating, her folds swelling and throbbing with a need that wasn't being stroked. And she needed stroking. She needed filling. Now.

"Now," she repeated, tearing her mouth away.

"I left the condom in my wallet."

That's what she got for derailing his plan and getting him naked. She spun, looking off the edge of the bed for his slacks. She had to put one hand on the floor to reach the extended leg of the pants, then nearly screeched when she felt a wet, biting kiss on the lowest curve of her upturned bottom. She glanced back over her shoulder to find Raul smiling unrepentantly at her.

He went back to work and she almost fell off the bed. His hands snaked between her legs, parting and lifting her, and then his tongue delved into her folds and it was all she could do not to scream. His tongue stroked inside her, once, twice, before abandoning her opening to suck on her clit.

Her fist tightened on the pant leg while she shuddered. Desperate now, she yanked the pants over and scrambled for the lump of a wallet in the back pocket. Luckily it didn't give her shaking hands much trouble to pull out, and the two condoms in the dollar flap fell into her clutches quickly.

"I got them," she breathed, trying hard to hold back the orgasm threatening.

He pressed his fingers back into her.

"I don't want to come this way again," she finally demanded, not exactly relieved when he slowed his sensual assault.

"How do you want to come, Penelope?"

"With you." Rather than wait for him to torture her into specifics, she looked over her shoulder again and met his burning gaze. "I want you inside me."

The pause was infinitesimal. Before she knew it, she'd been hauled back onto the bed, back onto her back, back underneath him. Breathless, she could only stare up at him. He snitched the condom from her hand, tore it open and slid it on with an urgency she felt in her blood. Then he was pushing her knees open and angling the head into her entrance.

He sank into her, slow, thick and steady. She stretched around him, her breath escaping with a hiss. Finally, oh God, finally, he filled her completely.

"Ah, Pen, you don't know how long I've wanted this. *You*." Seated fully, he ran his fingers over her clitoris reverently, rumbling when her walls clamped down on him in response. His eyes opened, little more than dark slits, filled with passion and command. "I want you to remember this."

He withdrew at the same slow speed he'd pressed in, stopping just before he would have slipped out, then pressing back down. "This is our *real* first time, Penelope."

His hips ground into hers, his words and his meaning feeling like a brand on her soul. A deeper brand than any he'd made before. She fought it, pushing back against him, reminding herself that this was just sex, but he leaned forward and took her hands in his, the shift making her feel as if he'd filled her all the way to the throat.

He ground against her again, making her gasp, a sound he swallowed with a wet, claiming kiss. He moved within her. Faster, harder. All by themselves, her legs wrapped around him, her ankles clamped together at the small of his back. Ruthlessly, he pistoned in and out. She sobbed, the tension growing within her. If she could just have a second to steel herself, just one, she'd be all right. But he was relentless, demanding everything, giving everything, until she shattered around him, crying out, feeling him fall over the edge with her.

Breath coming in gasping waves, her body completely spent and still deliciously full of him, she stared up at the ceiling trying to figure out what had just happened. Because something definitely had. Something terrifying.

She'd gotten what she'd wanted.

But what the hell was she supposed to do now?



Raul glared at the phone on his desk, willing it to ring.

As it had for the last three days, it defied him without compunction.

A guy could easily learn to hate the modern age. In the old days he'd have simply grabbed Penelope and taken her home with him, and that would have been that. Nice. Simple. But no. In today's era, he'd had to gather his clothes after the most cataclysmic sex of his life and leave her house, exactly as promised. Then he'd had to come on duty for the last three days because he was the captain and he had his duty just like everyone else. One more day on, and then he'd be able to stop waiting for Penelope to snap out of the

stunned state she'd been in when he left. So stunned, she'd almost stopped him from kissing her goodbye, pulling back with barely concealed embarrassment. He could go to her office and...and...

That's where he always got fuzzy.

On the one hand, he was so damn sure what he wanted from her—everything. He wanted her to want him. To need him. To demand from him. He wanted to look at her and not see the wariness that had been in her eyes from the time he'd come back home. He wanted her approval. Her pleasure. Her love.

That was it. He wanted her to love him again. No, love *him*, not the person she'd put on a pedestal, but the man with flaws and a temper and all kinds of stupid fuckin' mistakes under his belt.

On the other hand...what the hell was he supposed to offer in return?

All he knew was what he wanted. What something primal inside him kept demanding was his by right. He had no idea what Penelope might want. No idea if he could give it to her if she ever asked.

The pencil in his hand snapped with a crack just as the door to his office opened, revealing another pain in his ass he didn't want to deal with.

"Still screwing up next month's schedule, I see."

"Go away, Josh."

The bastard walked into the room, closing the door carefully before dropping into the chair across from the desk and putting his feet up on the edge.

Raul glared at the friend he'd had for so long he'd forgotten why they started hanging out together. Josh looked precise as usual, black hair trimmed neatly, white shirt and dark blue uniform pants pressed into hard regulation creases. His blue eyes were all kinds of amused, as if he waited for something magical to happen, looking for all the world like he expected Raul to spout something out of his ass.

"What?"

"I'm just waiting for you to tell me what the hell is wrong with you lately. And don't even try to tell me it doesn't have something to do with Penelope Gibson. Just because I'm your friend doesn't make me stupid."

Not that he had any intention of lying, but curiosity made him ask. "What makes you think it's about Pen?"

"Well, let's see. First, she's ducking Randa and Trisha both—which has them seeing red, so I'd hide under a table around them if I were you. Then, everyone at Shaky Jake's is talking about how you've been at her house more than a few times the last few weeks."

"That's it?"

"There's also the small fact that her daughter is telling anyone who'll listen that you're her father."

Raul's eyes widened at that. "She's what?"

"Practically took out an ad in the paper. And all her little cousins are agreeing with her. Kids told their friends, who told their parents, parents started talking and next thing you know, there's a bonfire of gossip

at Shaky Jake's over how long you and Penelope have been sneaking around. Word is you've been sneaking into town for some wham-bam action since you left."

Shit. Shit, fuck, and goddamn. No wonder Penelope hadn't called. And she probably thought he was an ass for not calling her while the whole town exploded with innuendo. "I've got to go talk to her."

"I wouldn't," Josh interrupted as Raul made to get up out of his chair. "Rand and Trisha are already camped out on her front porch. You go tearing over there without knowing the right thing to say and it'll just get ugly."

Raul sank back into the chair.

"Figured."

"Figured what?" Raul dragged his hand down his face wearily. This was not quite how he'd planned for Chloe's revelation to go. But he and Penelope had both known from the beginning it could blow up into a giant, embarrassing scene. Damn it, how was Chloe handling it?

"You don't know what the hell you're doing with Penelope, do you?"

His doleful glare didn't have any effect on Josh. "If you think this situation is anything like when Miranda was pregnant, you're wrong."

Josh just grinned.

"I'm not looking for your advice."

"But you need it," Josh said, still looking like a know-it-all asshole. "You need something anyway. You're a wreck."

He was, galling as it was to admit.

"So you going to tell me what the hell is really going on or do I get to just sit here and enjoy watching you squirm?"

"Sadist." Which was no surprise to anyone. Josh's ability to torment perfectly innocent probles and ranked men alike was legendary. "Things are just a little complicated right now."

"Which means you've slept with her."

"Chloe's my kid, of course I've slept with her."

"Recently?"

Raul glared.

"Well, that's an affirmative if I've ever seen one." Josh put his feet down and finally sobered up. "Let's break it up a little, see if we can't figure out where your sad little mind is failing you. Are you worried about Chloe?"

Stupid question.

"How she's taking all this?"

No, that much Raul wasn't concerned about. "She's taken to my family like a duck to water."

"And to you?"

That one he wasn't so sure about. "She likes me."

"Have you talked to her this week?"

Just a call on Monday, that Chloe had made to his cell to ask about his work schedule. He'd told her he'd be off on Thursday and they'd planned to do something then. "Once."

Before the stark declarations of paternity. Damn it. An uncomfortable suspicion took hold in his gut. "The little rat planned this."

Josh scowled, sensitive as always when it came to kids.

Raul waved him off. "If you knew the kids in my family, you'd know calling them rats is the least we could do." Especially *his* kid. "She's scheming again."

"Any idea why?" Josh was used to schemes. Miranda always had a plan going for something.

"Not a clue."

"If I know her, you'll find out soon enough. But I don't think that's your problem anyway. You worried about taking care of her? Being a parent?"

"At first," Raul admitted, because Josh knew all about his issues. The whole break with his family had started because they'd wanted to box him into a role as a husband and father. They'd had a future expected of him and the prospect of it had chafed. He hadn't wanted to be in that box. Never wanted to be held down. Putting other people's wants first wasn't exactly his strong suit. At least, it didn't used to be...

"Not anymore?"

"What?" Raul blinked back to awareness. "No, keeping her safe and not throttling her myself before she turns eighteen scares me shitless. But—"

"But it's not the scariest part," Josh finished for him.

In his mind, Raul again remembered looking down at Penelope as he bent to kiss her goodbye. The hurt when she'd turned her face so he'd only touched the barest corner of her lips. Lips he'd nearly bruised with passion. Stubbornly, he'd matched her movement, kissing her so thoroughly it was all he could do not to strip down and get back in that bed with her. *That* was what scared him. His inability to let her build walls between them. His anger at every small rejection.

"You've got it bad," Josh said. "I mean, I always figured you did, but this is impressive. I wouldn't have thought Pen had it in her."

Raul almost growled. "Had what in her?"

If Josh picked up that accidental double-entendre, he'd kill him.

Thankfully, Josh had more brains that that. "Courage, I guess. It'd take a strong woman to put up with all your shit, that's for sure. I didn't think she'd be willing to give it another try."

Just tonight, Raul. Doing this won't change anything.

She'd meant it when she'd said that. And when he left, she knew he'd meant it when he'd disagreed. "She's not."

And that's why he'd been seething ever since.

Josh just watched him, then his direct gaze flickered down to the ground. "You can't blame her, Raul."

He shouldn't, but he did. And it didn't make any fucking sense.

"She always loved you, man. Unquestioningly. No matter what you did, who you were with, where you went. I know you were good to her, in your way. You didn't let anyone tease her. You protected her. You did your best to respect her, I know you did, so stop looking at me like that. No one said shit to her about it, but everyone knew she never had a chance with you. You were too wild and the last thing you wanted was to find some nice girl to settle down with. You were gonna break her heart one way or another, and we all knew it. Everyone except Penelope.

"You don't know what she was like after you left. Hell, I barely recognized her. She put on a brave face, sure, but she was like a ghost. Like someone had ripped out her heart."

And they both knew who that was. Raul's fists tightened so much his knuckles cracked.

"She got out of town almost as fast as you did. Next thing we knew, she was pregnant. People figured she ran out and did something stupid. She didn't hide from it. Kept her chin up and people respected that. But she was never the same. And now here you come, expecting her to be the same girl you left behind, and that's bullshit. Pure, unadulterated bullshit."

The urge to tell Josh to get out thrummed in his blood, but Raul knew his friend was right. It was bullshit.

"I don't mind telling you, you're probably the worst thing that ever happened to her, except maybe her mother."

"Don't go there," Raul warned, his voice gruff. Not that he was particularly happy about defending Lorna, but Penelope had demanded he show some respect and he would.

Josh didn't seem to mind. He had a fish to fry already. "Remember what you told me, back when Miranda first got pregnant?"

He did, but hearing it now was not what he wanted.

"'How many women stay in love with the asshole who knocks them up and leaves them to raise his kids alone?' That's what you said. And you were right."

"This is different. I didn't know I was the father. You think I wouldn't have done something about it if I had?"

"No, it's not. You just don't want to admit it now because the shoe's on the other foot. Right now, you're expecting her to just throw herself down and worship you like she always did. Well, she won't. She doesn't want to love you, Raul. Loving you is like hitting herself in the face with a hammer over and over again—it just makes her bloody and stupid."

"Thanks." The sarcasm dripped all over Raul's desk. "Really."

"You remember what else you told me?"

"Something tells me you're going to tell me anyway." And make me wish I'd kept my big mouth shut.

Josh leaned forward, blue eyes intense. "You told me to figure out what I wanted from her."

Oh, fuck, that wouldn't help. "I know what I want from her."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Her!" He stood up, needing to pace but he didn't have the space. "I want her, damn it. Every day, every night, that's all I can think about. Being with her. Talking to her. Listening to her. I want her to stop being so fucking polite and yell at me. I want her to say what she thinks instead of what she figures won't make me mad. I want her to stop pulling away from me. I want her right fucking here, all the time, and all she wants is to get away."

Josh stayed silent while Raul kicked his trash can across the room. It made a resounding boom where it hit the corner and clattered to the linoleum floor, rolling itself into the filing cabinets with a quiet little clack.

"I know I'm probably asking the obvious here, but did you think to ask yourself why?"

"Why what?" Raul put his hands on his hips, still glaring at the trash can. One side was dented, making it look like a half-crushed soda can. Maybe if he stomped on it once or twice he'd get some satisfaction out of it.

"Why you want her so bad."

No. He hadn't wanted to ask why because he didn't want to know the answer. Knowing the answer would mean becoming everything he'd sworn to himself over and over that he would never be. Trapped in a box. Locked into a future mapped out for him by his family long before he was even born. Just one more of those breeding Montengas who were happy enough just to get by.

But in his gut, he already did know. He'd known for a long time.

"I wasted it, didn't I?" He put his hands on the side corners of his desk, feeling as if his gut had been kicked in. "She loved me and I just...threw it away."

"Yeah, you did." Leave it to Josh not to pull any punches. But he didn't belabor the point, either. "If you want it back, you gotta do more than just demand it."

Finally, some hope. "I've gotta earn it."

"And you've got to make sure she knows why you want it. She's not going to risk her heart or her daughter's unless you put something on the table. She needs to know how you feel first this time."

Raul scoffed, half laughing, just imagining how that little scene might go. "No way in hell she's going to believe me."

Josh clapped him on the back. "That, my friend, is why God invented groveling."

But where to start. Standing in his office wasn't going to help any damn thing. "How bad is it out there?"

"Well, no one has shotguns, if that's what you mean." Josh frowned as Raul dragged his coat on. "Where're you going?"

"Shaky Jake's." Everything stopped and started at Shaky Jake's. "Keep an eye on things, all right?"

"Oh, hell, no. Randa would skin me alive if I missed this." Josh was already following him out of the office.

Shrugging the shoulders of his coat into place better, Raul decided to ignore him. Instead he walked out to his truck, rolling his eyes when Josh hopped in on the passenger side. Poor bastard, he must get out less than Raul realized if this was his idea of can't-miss entertainment. "I'm not even sure anything is going to happen. I'm just going to find out what people are saying."

"Right. With your temper?"

Raul gunned the engine and roared down the road. It was only three blocks to Shaky Jake's, but he'd keep the truck at full throttle if it would just shut his friend up. "People change, you know. I'm not the same asshole I was when I left."

"I know," Josh yelled, grinning. "You're a new and improved asshole. Squeaky clean and vanillascented now, right?"

"I really hate you sometimes," Raul grumbled, pulling up in front of the restaurant and not remotely giving a shit about the no parking sign. They both got out, Josh more than willing to let Raul lead the way into the town watering hole. He strode through the door and everything stopped.

Utter silence.

Impressive, considering the place was full to the gills on a weekday evening. Quarter to five, it wasn't even happy hour yet and there was standing room only at the bar and along the tables. How many times had he been one of them, listening like a *chepa* to stories of what was happening around town. He'd found some stories amusing. Some sad. A few even bothered him enough to set a few folks straight.

He'd never had the weight of all those questions on him, because even when he'd been the subject of rumor and innuendo, he hadn't cared. It had all slid off his back like water off a duck. But it hadn't been that way for Penelope. It had stuck to her all the years he'd been gone, been something she'd overcome. Something she'd withstood. Damn if he was going to let that happen again.

"Looks like you're on, Mr. Vanilla." Josh clapped him on the back, but Raul was too busy trying to decide what to say to feel pushed. He'd torn up the road to get down here. Time to put up or shut up.

He nodded at people, inching past them on his way to the bar. When he finally got to the polished mahogany surface, he couldn't help a regret for what he was about to do to it. Or what May Belle Butner—the owner—would do to *him* when she caught him.

With a quick heft, he hopped on top of the gleaming bar and stood to his full height. Unfortunately, all the stunned expressions followed him.

"I need everyone's attention for a sec. Can everyone see me okay?" he asked, which was stupid really, because they wouldn't tear their eyes off him if a car drove through the picture window. He clapped his hands self-consciously, doing his best to ignore Josh leaning near the door. "So, by now I'm figuring all of you have heard that Chloe Gibson's my daughter."

"Among other things, you lucky bastard."

Raul clenched his teeth, forcing himself not to look around and figure out what jackass had just said that. "Well, since I've known most of you all my life, I think it's pretty safe to say that's about the only thing any of you have heard that's true."

If he'd thought the place was quiet before, now he could practically hear the beer froth bubbling away.

"Since I have you here and I know everyone's going to talk, I'd rather you all talk about the truth. And the truth is, Chloe's my kid. Which, if any of you've gotten to know her, you'd understand why I'm proud of that. What I'm not proud of is that I missed out on her until now because I was an idiot. I was selfish, thoughtless, reckless and careless. I hurt people before I left this town. I hurt Penelope."

He looked around, surprised to find the full figure of May Belle standing in her kitchen doorway, arms crossed, watching him like a hawk. He'd have thought she'd have been on him like a banshee for where he was standing, but her clear blue eyes were fixed on him, waiting.

"She didn't deserve the way I took advantage of her all those years ago and she doesn't deserve to have all of you speculating about her now because of it. She's still the good woman, good mother and good doctor you have trusted for years. Nothing you found out today is going to change that.

"I have a lot to make up for, to Pen, to Chloe, and I'm asking you all as a personal favor, allow me to make it up to them. Don't make this some dirty scandal everyone in town talks about for the next thirty years. Don't make Chloe grow up with that on her head. *I'm* the one who screwed up. *I'm* the one you should be bitching about. I don't care what you say about me—hell, we all know I've earned it. Just please, keep Chloe and Penelope out of it, all right? That's all I ask."

He nodded at May Belle, then dropped down off the bar at the only open space he could find—next to old Ben Friedly. There was always a space there. Before Raul could move, Ben's gnarled hand caught his arm in a surprisingly strong grip. What fifty years of working in the sun hadn't etched and colored, sixty years of four beers a day had crackled quite nicely, but the old grumpy codger was still kicking. Raul looked down at the way-past-eighty-year-old man questioningly.

"That was pretty damn brave of you, boy." Ben's voice was as deeply grained as his lined face.

Raul sighed, relieved when people started murmuring around them, conversations going off in other directions. At least, while he was standing there. "Think it'll work?"

"Not a chance in hell." Ben cackled. "But maybe they'll give you three a little room to get your business worked out. Don't worry. You three will be fine. Lotsa folks older than you have had kids on the wrong side of the blanket."

Raul bristled at the prospect of anyone holding his mistakes against Chloe.

A bristle Ben shrugged off. "Don't let it bother you, boy. If anyone gives that little girl any trouble, she's more than got the gumption to tell 'em where they can stick their opinion."

Raul almost stepped aside, but then it occurred to him that Ben Friedly spent most of his time right there on the stool and had done so for the last twenty years at least. "How exactly do you know Chloe, sir?"

Ben's dark eyes just glittered up at him. "Son, you just worry yourself on keeping that pretty doctor of yours. You got your hands full with that already. Chloe's three steps ahead of you on everything else and believe me, you ain't got a prayer of catching up." Ben slapped the back of Raul's arm in clear dismissal, grabbing a pretzel from a bowl to suck off the salt.

Raul almost pushed it, but at the last second, he thought the better of it. Some things...some things a father might be better off not knowing.

& & &

Penelope pulled into her driveway with a groan. She'd been looking forward to coming home, sliding into a tub of hot water and trying to put this whole day behind her. Oh, it had started out all right. She'd woken up to sunshine and she hadn't even been hugging her pillow the way she'd caught herself doing since the night Raul had been in her bed. She'd thought it was a good omen.

It had been. The day was pleasantly busy, even if most of her patients had more curiosity than illness. Rebuffing vague questions was far easier than treating actual sickness.

At least until Chloe got off the bus and came into the chock-full office. Penelope could still see the whole thing in her mind, even though she'd replayed it a thousand times or more already.

"Hi, Cara!" Chloe bounced in, backpack slung over one shoulder while Penelope dropped a patient's file on her receptionist's desk.

"Hey, kiddo, good day at school?" Cara half stood, nudging the candy bowl Chloe's way.

"Pretty good. No one got detention today." Chloe snaked a butterscotch out like a mongoose after an egg. It was in her mouth before Penelope could complain.

"Sounds like y'all are stepping up your teacher detection skills. Where'd you get that?" Cara's curious question had Pen lifting her head, some part of her heeding an inherent alarm.

Too late, she realized Chloe was lifting her medal with a too-pleased smile on her face. "It's a present from my father. Isn't it cool?"

"Yeah, that's a nice one." Cara sent Penelope a confused look, one Pen tried to smile at, but it felt wobbly on her face.

"Hey, Mom?" Chloe's tone was too high. Too...sweet. For the span of a heartbeat, Penelope knew her child was about to do something terrible, but no matter how long that beat lasted, it wouldn't last long enough. "Would it be hard to get my last name changed to Montenga? I really think I should have my Dad's name, like Danny does, don't you?"

The collective gasp in the office should have imploded the room, but you'd never know it from the self-satisfied expression on Chloe's face. Penelope stuffed her into her office, but the damage had been done. Half her patients suddenly had things to do and couldn't wait. Translation: they were racing to set the grapevine on fire and, boy, did they.

So started a day full of improbable walk-ins, appointment cancellations and less than subtly probing questions. What had once been simply furtive glances morphed into head shakes and obvious disapproval. Thankfully, no one out-and-out demanded details about her "longstanding affair" with Raul, but it was clear everyone believed they'd been having one. Now, instead of being the girl who'd risen to her responsibilities, she was the pathetic schlep who had allowed herself to be Raul's plaything whenever he'd deigned to come to town. So what if she'd managed to be out of town and had never been seen with him once in all that time. Who needed facts when fiction was so much more titillating? Then Julia arrived out of the blue, with Danny and at least three other kids near his age, asking if Chloe could go to the movies with them.

Penelope looked wonderingly at the woman she'd kept at arms length as Julia smiled brightly. Too brightly, instant proof that things were getting around the town like a flash flood. Next thing she knew, Julia was hugging her, patting her back consolingly.

"Don't worry, Raul's taking care of everything. It'll all blow over soon." Then she scooped Chloe away, explaining she'd treat all the kids to dinner afterward and they'd be home by nine. They disappeared before Pen even realized she hadn't agreed.

By six-thirty, the office doors were closed, the appalled townspeople were out of the way and all she'd had to do was make it home and up the stairs to her bathtub. She would have been able to, too, if it weren't for the redhead and the brunette standing on her front porch, idly swinging baby carriers as if they were axes to be ground.

Too late to pull out and drive away.

Trapped and aware of it, Penelope shut off the engine and slid out of the car. She was in front of the porch step before Miranda and Trisha unpursed their lips to say anything. Even then, they all stared at each other for a solid minute of silence.

Trisha broke first. "All I'm gonna say is that you better cough up some details about the nookie."

Penelope almost laughed with relief. But there was still Miranda to deal with. Miranda, who had a little too much experience being in love with a man who didn't love her enough. Or so she'd thought until Josh saved her life and married her. She'd been the one who came closest to understanding how Penelope

could love a man who didn't love her at all. Would she understand why Pen couldn't share when her situation hadn't turned out as well as her friend's?

"You might as well let us in. We're not leaving until you tell us everything."

"Everything?" Penelope grimaced. She didn't have a clue what she was doing. Her best friends weren't going to be able to figure it out either and, unlike her, they would get loud about it.

"Everything from how you got knocked up to how Raul Montenga ended up on top of the bar at Shaky Jake's."

Penelope blinked. "Excuse me?"

Trisha pointed with her whole head at the front door. "Unlock. You spill, we spill."

Pen rushed between them, shifting the keys in her hand until she had the right one for the door. "You just mean at the bar, right? Not on it?"

"On it," Trisha confirmed with a grunt as she lifted the carrier up to her chest. The baby inside, one of Miranda's twin daughters, threw dimpled hands up in surprise, but for once didn't make much noise. Trisha hustled past Penelope through the doorway, making kissy-faces at her niece, her dollopy black curls swaying back and forth. "What I would have paid to see that man do a strip tease up there."

"Trisha." Miranda shook her head when Penelope spun in shock. "He wasn't stripping."

"What could he possibly have needed to do on top of the bar?" Pen closed the door, dumped her bag next to the coat rack and followed the women into her living room.

"Announce to the whole world that he did you wrong." Trisha settled into the chair by the fireplace.

Penelope froze two steps from the couch, her stomach feeling as if someone had just kicked it in. She brought her hand up to it, surprised to find her blouse smooth and untouched.

Miranda put her daughter's carrier down and sent Trisha a dark look before grabbing Penelope's arm to forcibly sit her on the couch. She pulled Penelope's now-freezing hands together between them, meeting her gaze with a steady green stare. "Now, we're going to let the girls out of the carriers before they start screaming, and you're going to explain why you haven't been returning our calls."

Trisha made a noise. "But I want—"

Miranda got her bulldog expression, eyes narrowing, abundant freckles brightening and her full mouth turning into an unhappy rainbow. She turned slowly, glaring over her shoulder at their wide-eyed friend across the room.

Trisha smirked. "I hate it when you get like that. I swear, you and my brother were *made* for each other. Stubborn and pushy as hell."

Penelope couldn't argue with that one. Especially when Miranda turned back to her with a firm, "Talk."

"I just...I didn't know what to say."

"I'm boinking Raul' would be a good place to start," Trisha inserted helpfully.

"I wasn't." Yet. Penelope could feel her face heating, not from the qualification so much as the memories. Unlike the incident in the linen closet, the night in her bed was still alive in her mind, painted in vivid color, sound and sensation. At the strangest times, she'd swear she could still feel his mouth on her, his tongue inside her, caressing her as if he'd been thirsting for a taste—

"Damn, look at her," Trisha cackled, shattering the blistering memory. "Guess I don't have to ask if it was good or not."

"Shut up, Trish." Pen tried to grumble, but it came out more as a laugh. She rubbed at her cheeks, knowing they had to be red as tomatoes now.

"Oh, come on. The guy is freakin' legendary around here. I just wanted to know if he was everything he's rumored to be. Guess I got my answer."

"Aren't you married?"

"And a mother of three, one of whom still won't sleep through the night, which means I'm horny as hell, thank you very much." Trish unbuckled the baby from the seat, pulling the carrot-topped little girl out and plopping her on her lap. Miranda did the same, opening the snaps at the neck of the baby's sleeper so she wouldn't overheat. Wide blue eyes, the Whittaker blue, bright as a summer day, blinked over at Penelope curiously. She'd delivered these two, having gotten Miranda to the hospital by the skin of their teeth, but God help her try to tell them apart.

"Is this one Billie or Marie?" Penelope reached out for the baby. A small grin, complete with a new little tooth poking out from the bottom gum, and the baby was leaning her way.

"That's Billie," Miranda said, pleased as always when talking about her children. Some people thought she'd be out of her mind with two infants to care for, particularly with Josh on duty half the week, but Miranda had surprised them. So far, everyone in the Whittaker house was not only surviving, but thriving. Josh was actually accused of being happy at times.

Penelope snuggled the seven-month-old, rubbing her face on the fuzzy belly to the sound of a husky little chortle.

"Illegal use of an infant," Trisha declared. "Not only is she trying to change the subject, she's blocking her face."

Penelope sighed. "I didn't want to talk about it, okay? I knew you guys were going to ask questions I didn't have answers to and I didn't want to deal with it, that's all."

"What about now?" Miranda crossed her arms. "Obviously, someone has some answers or word wouldn't be out all over town that Chloe is Raul's daughter."

"Which you're going to explain," Trish added.

"There's not a lot to explain, you can guess what happened."

"Honey, I've been guessing for twelve years. I want to *know*." Trisha raised her fingers, ticking the tips off one at a time. "How, when, where and why the fuck you didn't tell us?" Trisha always resorted to the F-bomb when Penelope wasn't being compliant.

"Explain Raul first. What do you mean he's telling people he did me wrong?"

"That's his story, apparently." Trisha shrugged. "He found out people are speculating about your relationship and he went right to the source. Hopped up on the bar and demanded everyone's attention. The way I heard it, he told people that he took advantage of you and then he left town. That he should have done better by you and that he's trying to do the right thing now. The kicker is that he asked that everyone help him out by not making it any harder for him to make it all up to you."

"That makes it sound completely different than it was." He was taking the blame. As if either of them had to answer to anyone else in this town. Penelope frowned, her mind replaying the look in his eyes that night in her bed. *This is our real first time*. Blazing with possession. As if he meant to be with her again...and again...and again. Now he was claiming to make it all up to her? What could possibly be going on in that damn fool head of his?

"So how was it then?" Miranda's brows drew together at Trisha's giggle. "Oh, you know what I meant."

"It was a mistake," Penelope answered firmly. Both times, it shouldn't have happened. "We were drunk at Trisha's wedding reception. No, I'm not giving you details," she added at Trisha's gasp. "It was more embarrassing than anything else. Then he was gone and I was...well, it doesn't matter what I was other than incredibly stupid. The truth is I wasn't sure if Chloe belonged to Raul at all, not until last week. He agreed to the tests and he's her father, but he was hardly the only one at fault. It took both of us being reckless. He shouldn't be out there asking for the blame."

Miranda's crooked smile made her eyes look sad. "Come on, Pen. You know him better than any of us. You know what he's doing."

Penelope looked down, letting the wriggling baby in her arms slide down to her unsteady feet on the thick carpet. "No, I don't. I know the boy he used to be. The one who put up with me and my stupid crush as best he could. I don't know the man he's become and I'd be an idiot to assume I did." An idiot to assume anything at all when it came to Raul.

Hadn't her heart been broken enough by her stupid assumptions?

"Think about it, Pen." Miranda reached out to grab her hand. "We don't change that much when we grow up. There's always that core of us inside, that part of us that makes us who we are, makes us special. That never changes."

It had for her. She'd lost what made her special, according to Raul. According to herself, some days. She'd lost something important and the fact that he knew it, that he could look into her and see it, hurt like nothing else. Like proof that he could still reach in and fill her heart...or break it into millions of pieces.

"I didn't ask him to do this," she said, anger a better reaction than the fear knotted in her stomach at what this grand gesture was supposed to mean. Especially since Julia seemed to know already what he'd been up to. The impromptu movie invitation had been his idea, just a part of his plan for damage control. A way to reduce the pressure. Damn him. "I don't need him trying to shield me and I don't want it—"

"He's shielding more than you," Trisha interrupted, her tone solemn. Gone was the lascivious light in her eyes. In its place was a fury people didn't often see there, not even her closest friends. "He's shielding Chloe. Protecting his child from a wave of gossip and speculation you can't even begin to imagine."

Penelope almost scoffed, but then she thought back to their childhoods. While she'd been soothed and supported by the town when her father died, the Whittakers had faced a whole other kind of attention. Their father had abandoned them and once the initial concern for their wellbeing had passed, people weren't shy about wondering what had made Jared Whittaker walk away and never look back. Could Chloe handle hearing the cruel thoughts and baseless wonderings about her mother? Without getting violent? The thought was sobering, because she knew the swear jar would be the least of her worries. If things got out of hand, what would that do to their relationship? Would it change how her daughter looked at her?

She fought the urge to stand and pace because the wobbly baby was clinging to her knees, trying to remain standing. Penelope sighed, remembering when it had been Chloe looking at her like that, her whole body trembling for balance, her eyes filled with triumph at the huge feat of pulling herself to a stand. So long ago now. Chloe didn't need her that way anymore.

One by one, Pen had closed the doors around her over the years, even shutting out her friends, isolating herself. It hadn't been a conscious choice, but once Raul had called her on it, she had to admit, she'd noticed and done nothing to stop it. Because it had seemed so much safer this way.

Now Raul was pushing her boundaries and nothing felt safe. Nothing.

"Look, I understand that you don't want to talk about what's going on between you and Raul," Miranda said into the silence. "But honey, don't try to tell us nothing is. You're not that good a liar."

Penelope swallowed, feeling choked. If she blinked, she'd cry, and she wasn't even sure why. Miranda's sincerity was unquestionable. They only wanted to help. To support. Why was she so afraid? Of what? Miranda and Trisha would slice their own wrists before hurting her.

Inherent honesty brought the answer. Letting them in meant lowering her walls, her defenses. And if they could get past her defenses, it would be easy work for Raul, who seemed able to crack them at will as it was. Something she had to make him stop doing.

Nothing could happen between them, nothing real. A relationship required trust. It required the ability to give yourself wholly to someone and she just couldn't do that. Not with anyone and especially not with Raul. She'd already given him her soul once. She didn't have anything left to give to anyone other than Chloe. Not even her closest friends.

"He's a wreck, you know." The back of Miranda's hand smoothed the loose strands at Penelope's temple. "Josh says he's driving everyone crazy at the station, waiting for you to call him. Especially now with the truth about Chloe floating around, the guys think you loved him and left him. Scuttlebutt at the station has it that the whole reason he came home at all was for you."

"He did not." He'd only come because their former captain had died in a fire and the local chief had personally requested him to take the post. "And Josh would never gossip."

"Sure he did," Trisha said with an evil grin, her earlier temper dissipated. "We've brought him over to the dark side."

Yeah, Penelope would believe that sometime after she'd believe that Trisha's husband wasn't sickeningly in love with his wife.

"Well, the scuttlebutt, no, but the wreck part I got from Josh." Miranda's frown of consternation had her shrugging. "He's taking a sick kind of enjoyment out of that, actually. Something about it being Raul's turn."

Raul? A wreck? Over her? No, that didn't bear even a moment's suspended belief. If he were going to care about her, if he were going to love her, he would have done it a long time ago. He just expected something different from what he'd got when he came home. He thought she'd still fall all over herself for him, but she'd learned too well from her mistakes. Just like she'd learned from the mistake of sleeping with him Sunday night.

And Penelope didn't make the same mistake twice.

## Chapter Eight

"Aren't we going to 'Lito's house for Thanksgiving? Everyone else is." By everyone, Chloe meant all of her cousins, who in the last month seemed to have become her entire world. Well, second to her father, anyway.

Penelope quirked her mouth, staring at the frozen turkeys filling the bin in the middle of the meat department in Jimmy's Market, hoping if she ignored the question long enough, her daughter might infer her own answer. Which was as emphatic a no as she could keep inside.

"Dad says he can pick us up, if you're not sure about driving out there alone."

Grinding her teeth, Penelope flipped through price tags hanging off the netting surrounding each bird. Each one seemed bigger than the last. Didn't anyone want a small, single-family-sized bird anymore?

"Or we can follow him, but I like his truck better."

Of course she did. Chloe liked everything about her father. She liked going to the firehouse, which she'd done as a reward when her baseball team had made it to the finals and at least once a week since. She liked the foods he was introducing her to on his off-duty afternoons when Penelope had reluctantly agreed to let him watch her. Apparently he had several tips for throwing a football better and he'd filled her head with all kinds of impossible expectations for the upcoming holiday. Like going to his annual family gathering at his parents' house.

Which would happen over her cryogenically frozen dead body.

"We're having Thanksgiving at home with your grandmother, Chlo, same as every year." Holiday dinners she could do. Something about the slow roasting of the turkey appealed in a way day-to-day dinner didn't.

"Mo-om, Thanksgiving at our house is boring."

"Mm-hmm." She found something that didn't look like it would require three months to eat and hefted it into the cart.

"Can't I go with Dad by myself?" Chloe had adopted the "Dad" with virtual effortlessness. Raul, the few times Penelope had been in speaking distance to him, hadn't batted an eye. Quite a change from nearly fainting at the sound of being called Daddy.

"No." Unequivocally. Thomas might have given his word, but Penelope would rip off her own limbs before she allowed Chloe into Ophelia's sphere without her protection.

Her perusal of bacon packages was interrupted by the rabid snapping of a rubber band. Penelope turned to look at the grumbling eleven-year-old at her side. Hat pulled down low over her eyes, Chloe was yanking on the thick red rubber band at her wrist. Yet another idea of Raul's, this one to curb Chloe's language. Apparently, it had been his trick for learning to stop getting smacked in the back of the head by his father for the same offense.

Given that the man still swore as if it were a dying tongue only he could preserve, Penelope didn't have a lot of faith in it, but at least Chloe had stopped coming home from school with notes from her teacher. Pen still hadn't decided if she was upset about how much Chloe was snapping it or the fact that it was working.

"Don't you have any other words you can use?"

"None that feel as good."

Pen glanced at the bright red skin on the inside of Chloe's wrist. "Yeah, 'cause that looks like it feels great."

"Dad says I should use it when I'm thinking things I shouldn't say either, so I don't accidentally say them."

Perfect. Not only would she end up amputating her hand, the child would end up mute. Penelope put the bacon down and crossed her arms. "What are you thinking then?"

"Nothing." *Snap.* Not that Pen needed the giveaway sound to tell Chloe was upset. Chloe was glaring down because she wasn't allowed to challenge her mother with a fit and she knew it.

"Look at me."

Chloe shook her head.

"Chloe." The hissed whisper bothered Penelope, but it was out and she couldn't pull it back. Her neck ached; she had been tired, stressed and irritated long before she ever reached the grocery store. She felt like she'd been that way for weeks and she didn't need Chloe playing games on top of it.

She had enough on her hands dealing with *Raul's* games.

For a month now, he'd been respecting her wishes, with his own special twist. He'd stopped pushing her boundaries, which would have made her happy if he didn't make it a point to watch her with those dark eyes of his smoldering so hot that it was all she could do to keep breathing normally. He made not the slightest effort to hide how much he wanted her, which had her staff swooning and half the town thinking she was insane for avoiding him.

Which was another thing that bothered her. After his little stunt at the local watering hole, he had the gossips eating out of his hand. Suddenly, instead of being regarded as the joke of a crush gone wrong, they were being regarded as some kind of town love story. Oh how sad, poor Penelope's afraid to trust the man she loves... If it was what he'd hoped for, it backfired on him because when people asked her when she planned to put him out of his misery, she generally asked if she should take him out behind the shed.

Worse, he'd started leaving notes for her at her front desk—in sealed envelopes so Cara couldn't get away with opening them—that held messages about the most mundane things. That he'd bought Chloe some school supplies or asking if there were any allergies he should be aware of. Sometimes just an itinerary of what his schedule would be for the week. Nothing personal, nothing that warranted so much privacy. She'd checked each message, sometimes up to three times, but there was never anything and the disappointment she felt made her angrier each time she looked. As if he were trying to get her angry at him. She outright refused to give him the satisfaction.

Now, facing her child, Pen wondered if there were satisfaction to be had at all. Especially when the hat brim rose and she was treated to the militant stare of her loving daughter.

"What were you thinking?"

The small chin jutted out, her bottom lip rising in the middle. After a darting glance around, Chloe switched languages. "Je pense que t'es jalouse."

Penelope reared back with a gasp, forcing herself not to look around and see who might be listening to their exchange. Someone Chloe didn't want to understand what she'd said. Part of her demanded she heed the concern, because if Chloe was worried, it was probably for a good reason, but the part of her that had gotten louder and louder since Raul had shown up in her office six weeks ago just about blew its top. "Of what am I supposed to be jealous?"

Chloe shook her head, lowering her glare again. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me." Because Penelope had the dark worry that Chloe might be right and she hated that. She hated a lot of things these days, mostly how out of control she felt. Her life had once been ordered. Not thrilling by any means, but she'd known day in and day out what was coming. Now all she seemed to think about were the things she didn't allow herself. The things she'd never tried, the possibilities she'd never given herself permission to consider. A night out with her friends. Clothes that were flirty instead of professional. One more night with Raul. Yelling at her disobedient child in the middle of a grocery store.

"Fine," Chloe burst out, her cheeks flaming. "You're jealous of me and Dad! You hate that he's my friend now. That I have anyone to talk to other than you!"

"I'm not jealous." She forced herself to say the words calmly even though part of her was calling herself a liar. "I'm glad you and Raul are getting along. You deserve to get to know each other."

"So why don't you talk to him, then? Why do you always leave when he's around? And then you won't let me spend time with my family, like you don't like them or something. Like you're better and you're not. You're acting just like *her* and I hate it."

No need to ask who "her" was.

Lorna

When the hell did you lose what made you special?

It wasn't the same question, but it might as well have been. Losing Raul—no, giving up Raul—was horrible, but losing Chloe...that couldn't be what she'd been doing. But one glance at the angry little girl in front of her, the one who had lost all patience with a mother who had somehow become more and more distant, and Penelope knew it was happening. Chloe wouldn't stay where she didn't feel loved. How long before she was running away from home instead of just her grandmother's house? How long before Pen pushed her own child into another family's arms?

Reeling inside, Penelope couldn't move. She almost couldn't breathe. She must have swayed because Chloe's face blanched and she reached out to grab Penelope's arm.

"Mom?"

It was too much to process. She felt as if parts of her inside were crumbling and she couldn't put them back together fast enough. Couldn't even understand why she was so desperate to.

A hand settled on her shoulder. "Penelope?"

She turned, surprised to see Julia Ruiz there. The woman smiled, a smile that Pen finally realized was just like her younger brother's. So that's why Chloe had switched to French. She should have realized, since Chloe had all but sworn off the language to irritate her grandmother, but not a lot was registering the way it should.

Julia tucked her thick black hair behind her ear, the end forming a single round arc back toward her cheek. Her smooth brown face seemed tinged with worry. "Are you all right?"

The question was soft, probably to draw as little attention as possible. Belatedly, Penelope realized the meat department had several other shoppers, a few pointedly inspecting their purchases, one or two watching as if this were the latest episode of a soap. She just barely bit back a moan of horror.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice hoarse. She wasn't, but she would be as soon as she was out of the store and... Hands starting to shake, she wasn't sure when she'd be fine again.

"There's a flu bug going around, you think you picked it up from your patients?" Julia's tone was a little louder and she brought her hand up to Pen's forehead, which was probably clammy. "You do feel a little warm."

Blistering humiliation had that effect. "I'll be okay."

Julia's smile was a touch brittle. Great, she'd overheard. Then again, who hadn't? But she was still trying to give Penelope an excuse.

Embarrassed, Pen tried to find the words. "We're just...just..." No, no words were coming to mind.

"You're just trying to get through a difficult situation the best you can." Julia reached out to Chloe, cupping the back of her head affectionately. "We're having movie night over at the house. The boys have picked some kind of action movie I just know is going to make me deaf. Why don't you two come over, get away from it all for a while."

"Oh we couldn't—" Penelope caught herself at the strained line of Chloe's mouth. Even Julia had seemed to brace herself for rejection. Julia, who was constantly swooping in and trying to help. Trying to smooth waters. Penelope saw with unflattering clarity that she was always the one who backed away, turned overtures down. It had to change. "But I think Chloe might like that."

Both Chloe and Julia's eyes widened.

"If you don't mind me picking her up later, I could use the time to do some...um, errands." Like what, she didn't know, but it was clear she needed to do some thinking. Some fixing.

"You don't mind?" Chloe asked. Normally, she'd be in trouble for raising her voice, but Pen couldn't even begin to deal with that yet.

She shook her head, hoping they couldn't tell that her eyes were stinging. "No, it's okay. It's six-thirty now. How about I come for you around...nine?"

"It's Friday night. If you want, she could spend the night, camp out with my girls." Eight-year-old Marisol and six-year-old Isabel were as girly as girls could get, but Chloe looked so hopeful, Penelope didn't have the heart to say no.

"She doesn't have anything to sleep in."

"Oh, don't worry about that." Julia dismissed that with a wave of her hand. "I've always got my sisters' kids around, I'm sure there's something in the clean laundry that'll fit. She'll have a great time—Danny's got a new game, too. About smashing something. She'll be fine. I promise."

Penelope nodded. "Thanks, I think that'll be fine."

"You're welcome to join us," Julia offered again, looking hopeful.

Pain twisted inside her. She'd held the friendly woman at extreme arm's length because of the part she'd played that afternoon with Ophelia. As if Julia had somehow been complicit when it hadn't been that way. It wasn't fair to her. "Next time."

Julia seemed to take that as a promise because she smiled, tugged on Chloe's shoulder and led her away. Penelope watched them go, forcing herself to stay calm, just in case Chloe looked back, but Chloe never did.

And that was the last straw.

Abandoning the cart, Penelope took the fastest route through the aisles to the front door, her hands shaking as she dragged her keys out of her purse. The auto-unlock got her in, but it took three tries to lodge the right key into the ignition. She pulled out, rushing onto the open road with a sense of panic she couldn't tamp down. She drove, no conscious idea where she was going. Home seemed wrong. It'd be cold there, empty. She couldn't face being empty.

Her hands shaking harder with each passing minute, she realized where she'd instinctively headed. East of Main, where the apartment complexes filled a block. Gripping the wheel tighter, her heart fluttering, she pressed harder on the accelerator. If she was going to him, she'd go full steam ahead. Maybe

if she built up enough speed, she could actually make herself knock on his door. Find a way to say all the things she needed to get off her chest.

Stop looking at me that way.

Stop making me want what I can't have.

Stop showing me how empty my life has become.

She pulled up outside the building and parked with a hard crank on the hand break, breathing hard, feeling cold and overheated at the same time.

She shouldn't do this. It was a mistake. The safe move was to go home, stand in a boiling shower and soak all the tension away.

But how long would it last? Ignoring Raul and how much she wanted him, how much she wished things were different between them, wasn't working. Nothing had ever worked when it came to him.

Why? Why couldn't she just make herself forget him? Make herself immune? He hadn't offered her anything. He hadn't even actually said he wanted her again, but here she was, getting out of her car and walking across the parking lot, headed like a heat-seeking missile for his front door. Not because she expected him to change anything, she just needed...something. Something only he could give.

She just hoped she had to courage to take it.

@ @ @

Raul frowned from his spot at his dining room table. No, he was right, that was his doorbell, ringing again. Pushing back his chair, he tossed his pen onto the spread of papers and headed out to the living room. On the third ring, he yanked open the door and stared down at the surprising sight of Penelope standing there under the outdoor light, arms crossed, shaking like a leaf. Which would have scared him, actually, if the absolute misery on her face hadn't already dropped his heart all the way down to his toes.

"What is it? Is Chloe okay?"

She shook her head, a jerky movement. "Can I come in?"

He stepped back, still frowning, as she walked in. What the hell could have happened to her? She wore a coat heavy enough for the mid-November weather, she couldn't be cold. If he didn't know better, he'd think she was in some kind of shock. She looked around, but he didn't think she was taking in the brown leather sectional or simple coffee table where he kept his sports magazines. He closed the door, hit the switch and the reading lamp next to the couch turned on, making her turn, blinking rapidly.

"You're scaring me, querida."

"Don't call me that."

He straightened at the snap in her voice. "My language, I can use it any way I like."

Though her hand shook as she tucked her hair behind her ears, some much-needed color spread over her cheeks. "If that's the case, you should be prepared for the world of insults I could rain on your head in French."

"But I'm not insulting you." Yet. She was a damn wreck, no way around it. "Tell me what's wrong. Why are you here?"

Her pupils were still too wide for his liking, even when she raised her chin in prideful opposition. "You need to stop, Raul."

"Stop what?" But he knew. Stop pressuring her.

She'd set up the rules, however unspoken, the day after he'd made love to her. No touching. No talking. Nothing that might shake her clear decision to lock him out of her life. He'd obeyed, because he knew she'd do a hell of a lot more than back off if he didn't. But under no circumstance had he given up on her. He couldn't even think of a situation where he'd consider it.

His calm seemed to incense her. "Don't play with me. You had no right to walk into my life after all these years and wreck it. Everything was fine before you came back."

Raul slipped his hands into his pockets, tamping down the flare of anger in his belly. "Was it? Really, Pen?"

"Yes, really." Her eyes locked onto his angrily and her hands fisted at her sides. She was still flushed, all the way up from under her beige turtleneck sweater that did nothing to highlight the figure he'd been dreaming about more than ever.

He stepped closer, studying her openly, keeping his hands to himself even as they ached to touch the curve of her face. "Hmm. I was wrong. You could learn to lie. You're still shitty at it, but if I were anyone else, you would've had a good fifty/fifty shot of me believing it."

Her sigh was more a bullet of breath escaping her.

"You weren't fine, Pen. Chloe wasn't fine."

"How do you know?" As if blind, deaf and criminally stupid people couldn't tell she wasn't fine.

"Because Chloe came looking for *me*." He almost felt bad when she flinched. But she'd kept him at more than arm's length for a fucking month, pretending to herself that if she buried her head long enough, what was between them would go away. He was more than hurt at the rejection. He was pissed. "Because if you were *fine*, your perfect little life would have kept going without missing a beat when I came back. But it didn't, did it?"

Her glare melted, those incredible eyes of hers filling with tears that quivered on the veriest brink of falling. She turned, hands rising to slash them away. "I didn't come here for this."

"For what?" Because she'd come for something and he was starting to get an idea what that might be. She shook her head, her voice a whisper. "I didn't want this." "Didn't want what?" He kept his voice soft, but something in him demanded she at least acknowledge the thing that kept him up at night, thinking of her and aching inside from the incompletion.

She huddled into herself, her fingers biting into the sleeves of her white trench coat. He'd give her credit, she was stronger than most people thought. Sweet little Penelope had a spine of pure steel and she wouldn't unbend it, not even for him.

But he couldn't stand there and watch her quake, looking fragile enough to snap. She could yell and hit him later if she wanted, but she needed someone to hold her and she'd come here. He knew a sign when he saw one.

He touched her shoulder, felt her stiffen, but she didn't pull away. Feeling surer with each second, he moved his arm around her, pulling her backward into his arms, scooping her into his chest and pressing his face into her hair. Her hands clamped around his forearms, he thought to pry him off, but her fingers clung. Grappled for a better grip. A pained sob escaped her, a sound so wounded he had no choice but to tighten his hold on her.

"Talk to me, honey. What's wrong?"

"I don't know." Her voice sounded strangled. He could feel her shaking harder now, as if she were holding a world of pain and agony inside herself by sheer will. "It's just all too much. You and Chloe and Mother and Julia. Everything is changing. Everything is different and I don't know what I'm doing anymore. All I'm making are mistakes and I'm losing her. I'm losing everything."

She bent, as if she hurt, as if she wanted to ball up right then and there. "I'm so angry and scared and lost and I don't know what to do. You were right, I'm becoming like her. Chloe's feeling it. I swear, I never meant her to feel like I did. I swear."

"Shhhhh, you're not like her." He rocked her side to side, little more than an inch at a time, realizing that the cold on her skin had gone more than skin deep. Holding her tight, he silently sent yet another unpleasant thought in Lorna Gibson's general direction.

"Yes, I am. And I'm hurting my daughter. She's all I have and she doesn't even want to be with me anymore."

"All she wants is to be with you, Penelope." He knew that better than he felt it himself. "She talks about you nonstop. She loves you. You're not hurting her, you're just...hurting."

Deep sobs raked through her, rattling her until he simply picked her up and carried her to the couch.

"I don't want to feel like this, Raul. I feel like I'm breaking and I can't make it stop." She curled on his lap, throwing her arms around his neck and clinging with blunted nails that dug through his old T-shirt to his skin.

He let her cry, still rocking her and pressing kisses he doubted she felt to her temple. Guilt—years of it—weighed on him. There was nothing he could do for her but help her ride it out, but he'd do that

willingly, even if every one of her tears felt like a lash on his skin. He'd done this. Not on purpose, but the result was the same. He'd pushed too hard again.

He'd known that the only way to Penelope's heart was to regain her trust. To respect her limits, which meant not touching her the way he ached to do. Not demanding from her, because he really didn't have the right and he knew it. Not driving his point home when she looked at him as if she expected an argument. When he knew damn good and well she wanted one.

He couldn't help wanting her, not that he gave that a whole hell of a lot of effort. Once he'd accepted what he'd been purposely ignoring for so long, he'd had four excruciating weeks to consider what an ass he'd been.

As kids, they'd always been drawn together, no matter how he'd tried to deny it. He'd claimed that she followed him, that she was a nuisance to be tolerated because he was a nice guy, but looking back honestly, he knew he was just as bad as she'd been. If she wasn't there, he sought her out, irritated that she'd been gone. When she hurt, he'd been the one to defend her. And when she'd gotten into trouble for whatever antics he'd goaded her into, he'd been the one to cheer her on. She was so much of his life that he'd had to *invent* a way for her to be at his side when he'd gone away, driving himself crazy with dreams about her.

He'd rejected her in their youth because he'd known good and well what would have happened if he'd given in to his want for her. He'd have married her, because that's what a woman like her wanted in those days. He'd have settled down, just as his father had planned and his family expected, and being caged inside other people's expectations would have strangled him. And she'd have been faced regularly by his mother's rejection of anything white, however subtle the snubbing might be. After a few years, his mother might have gotten over her issues with Penelope and Chloe individually, but there was no way to know for sure. That kind of constant rejection would have chafed away at Pen, crushed a part of her no matter how she'd dealt with it. Some happily ever after.

It wasn't her fault she'd pinned her heart on the sleeve of a selfish bastard who'd seen only a trap in her love. He'd given himself every excuse he could find to walk away from where he'd always belonged and when he'd left, a chunk of his soul had stayed behind.

But just because he'd finally found it again didn't mean Penelope had found the part of hers he'd torn apart. He had to give her time, no matter how much it hurt to do it. He'd planned to show her how he felt slowly. Give her time to see that he wasn't going anywhere. That he wasn't interested in anyone else. That he never would be.

He didn't think realizing that was what had her crying, trying to catch her breath over his shoulder.

"It'll be okay, Pen. You're not breaking. I've got you. I'm right here, I won't let you break."

She shook her head against his neck. "I didn't know where else to go."

He shouldn't have, he knew, but he smiled, knowing why she had. She'd come to him for comfort. That had to be progress. It's what she would have done when they were kids. "You can always come to me."

The sobbing seemed to subside, finally. Did she realize she was rubbing his shoulder with her cheek? He kept running his hand up and down her back, trying not to let the soothing touch turn into the caress he wanted it to be. If he let his imagination run away with him, he'd slip his hand under the white fabric of her tailored coat and let it wander over the small of her back, over the rise of her hip and on down her thigh to the back of her knee. The sleek black fabric of her pants wouldn't stop him from feeling a single inch of her all along the journey, either. The sweater she wore, while not revealing, gave him more ideas. Every time he caught her in one of those, he itched to sneak his hands up under the hem and remind himself just how curvy she really was. She'd call him all kinds of pervert, but the urge never failed to make him stiff for hours.

Of course, having her on his lap sobbing uncontrollably probably wasn't the best time for him to be thinking lascivious thoughts about her.

"No I can't. Coming to you is a mistake, every time." She rubbed her face with her hands, trying to mop up the moisture.

Opting to let her get away with the denial—for now—he helped her slip off his lap. "Bathroom's through that door."

Of course, the door was to the master bedroom area as a whole, a fact she seemed to realize when she hit the light switch and stopped for a telling few seconds before she veered wide to the right, in the extreme direction of the bathroom. He tried not to laugh—did she think his bed was going to up and grab her?

Figuring she might need something to drink when she came out, he wandered over to his kitchen and pulled down two glasses. A quick glance in his fridge had him grumbling. She had her choice of beer, beer, water or beer. Something told him Penelope wasn't a big partaker of Rocky Mountain goodness.

"You, ah, keep your place pretty neat, don't you?" she called out from the living room, still sniffing.

Raul stepped into the arched opening between the two rooms and held out a glass. "Spend half your time living in a firehouse and you get pretty used to picking up after yourself." Not that he didn't think there was a difference between putting things away and being a clean freak. Even looking at her now, he could see the way she'd rebuilt her poise by fixing her coat and smoothing her hair back with a little water. For a woman who'd just gone through an emotional ravaging, she still looked pretty damn good. Her eyes were red, slightly puffy with a faint bruising underneath. His mouth tightened at the sight. So much for hoping to reach her.

Cautious, she came closer to take the water from him. It was like watching a doe scent for hunters. He let her have the glass without touching her, motioning for her to sit. To his surprise, she didn't argue first.

Hmmm, maybe not all her walls were back in place.

He sat in the chair opposite her, gathering up his checkbook and the bills he'd been paying. "You ready to tell me what all this was about?"

"No." She rubbed her finger over the rim of her glass. The simple glass would never hum under her touch, but if she kept that up, he was pretty sure he might. Well, until she changed the subject with the speed of a cobra. "Why did you tell everyone you'd taken advantage of me?"

He stopped sorting. This was the question he'd been expecting out of her for a month, but all she ever did when he came by her office for Chloe was nod briskly and turn away. Her gaze was steady, the blue cobalt as cool as ever.

He gave the only answer he had. "Because it's true."

She shook her head. "No, it's not. We were both responsible for what happened that day."

"No, *querida*, not really." He set the pile aside and folded his arms on the table to meet her stare. "I knew better. I saw what I wanted most and I took you, not once thinking about your comfort or giving you the respect you deserved. You may have let me, but that doesn't mean I didn't take advantage."

Her lips moved, looking like she might be chewing on them in thought. He itched to reach out and stop her, but he kept his hands to himself. Someday she'd understand what a sacrifice that was for him and repay him accordingly, but for now, he'd just put it on her tab. "Why are you saying that?"

"Saying what?"

"That you wanted me. You could have had me any time you wanted back then, embarrassing as it is to admit. You had to be blind drunk to end up in that closet with me. I can almost guarantee I'm the one who took advantage of you."

"If that's how you want to remember it." He shrugged, because he knew the truth.

"That's the way it was."

He shook his head, smiling at her and apparently making her angry again because her eyes narrowed. At least she didn't look so damn cold anymore.

"Look, rewriting history doesn't change what it was. It doesn't do anyone any good to lie."

"I'm not lying. You have no idea how hard it was keeping my hands to myself where you were concerned. Knowing all I had to do was ask just made it worse. Especially when you were experimenting with micro-minis." He rolled his eyes in memory. That had been an especially difficult time, filled with long stares at legs that seemed to go on forever...until her mother found out and put a stop to it. He still couldn't say if he were grateful or not.

Her lips pursed. Yup, still distrusting him.

"Honey, I couldn't sleep on my stomach for weeks."

"If you felt that way, why didn't you ever do anything about it? You never hesitated with anyone else."

His eye twitched. Exactly how much a man-whore did she think he'd been? "You weren't just anyone."

She tilted her head and he knew it was truth time.

"You're special, Pen. Always were. Why do you think I never let anyone tease you for following me around? Why do you think I always talked to you, always tried to make you laugh?"

"You felt bad for me."

There was some of that, but not as much as he'd let her believe. Yet another mistake he was paying for. "I *liked* you. You were my friend. You saw *me*, not just another one of those Montenga kids. And when you looked at me, I knew you were the only person who saw something good in me just the way I was. Something worth caring about. I was a screw-up at home. I could have cared less about school and they felt the same way. I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up and I resented everyone trying to tell me I wasn't good enough for what interested me. Why would I mess up the only positive thing I had going for me?"

She looked down, tapping her nail on the glass again. "You can't expect me to believe that. Not after all this time."

Of course. She would need every bit of truth he had. "And I knew if I touched you, if I let myself love you, I was going marry you."

"Which would have been *bad*." The corners of her mouth pulled down with that weird self-effacing humor of hers.

"About you, no? About everything else, yeah."

"Everything else being?" At first, he wondered if she was still being sarcastic, but he realized she was just asking. That maybe, she might be giving him the benefit of the doubt.

"My dad had my whole future planned. I was going to start in the house painting business, earn my way up to management, and since my brother was already planning to take over when he retired, they figured I could either help him run it or marry some girl from among his friends' kids and start servicing another part of the county. All *I* knew was that I'd never be happy that way. Working the houses in the summer was one thing. Doing it for the rest of my life? No, and that's something he refused to understand."

"So you ran away?" The hard angles of her shoulders and expression softened just a tiny bit. Who the hell would have guessed this honesty crap would work?

"As far as I could get. But something kept dragging me back here, reminding me that this was where I belonged."

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"Guilt?"
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"You."

## Dee Tenorio

She stared at him, definite shock there on her face. Her lips parted, she blinked, but she didn't say anything. Which was fine, because he still had plenty to say. Plenty for her to hear and actually listen to for once.

## Chapter Nine

"I'm here to stay, Pen. And this time I know exactly what I want." He wanted his family. The daughter who made him laugh and reminded him a little too much of himself. He wanted Penelope. Wanted to have her look at him, unguarded. He wanted to hold her when she was ecstatic and when she was hurting. For her to keep telling him, no holds barred, when he was wrong and give him that wry twist of her lips when he was right. To laugh with her again and see that sparkle in her eye, just to know she was happy, the way she deserved. He wanted every day, every color and shade of his life, right next to her, because nothing was right when he wasn't.

She closed her eyes and shook her head tiredly. "You can't keep doing this to me."

"Doing what to you?" She had no idea how much effort it took not to do things to her.

"Making me want things I can't have."

"Am I?" He leaned forward, though she was too far away to touch. To kiss. "Seems the only one saying no around here is you."

"Because you don't mean any of this." She sounded so sure, even with everything he'd just explained. Which meant he had a bigger uphill battle than he'd expected. "My life without you really was fine. It was quiet, but I didn't get hurt. I didn't want anything different. I didn't get my hopes up because some man made promises he couldn't possibly mean. I was happy that way."

"I wasn't. My life without you is lonely as hell." The admission probably should have cost him more, especially when she jerked her head in surprise, but it wasn't a secret. Everyone knew he wasn't satisfied. "I mean, yeah, I did the things I promised myself I would. I found out what I was meant for, I saw more than the part of the world I was born in. But seeing places, meeting people, trying things...something was always missing. I never connected to anyone. I never had anyone I could share secrets with. No one I could just sit next to. No one who made me wish I was good enough for her."

"Raul." Her eyes shimmered again. "Don't."

"I have to, *querida*, because the way things are right now...they're not working. Not for you, not for me, not for Chloe."

"That is so not fair."

"But it's true. We're miserable, wanting each other and pretending we don't. We're making *her* miserable. We need to figure it out."

"Fine." Uh-oh. The prissy face. "We'll accept that nothing can come of it and get on with our lives."

"Penelope."

She folded her hands in her lap, blinking at him blandly. "It's what I want."

He snorted. "No, it's not."

"Yes, it is. I want you to let me go. No more of your little private notes. No more looking at me like you can see me naked all the time."

"I can." And damn if his mouth didn't water every time.

She kept going as if she hadn't heard him. "Chloe can spend time with you and your family, I won't get in the way of that—except for a few restrictions—"

Oh, he couldn't wait to hear what those would be.

"And if we let it, this...attraction will fade away. We did just fine for twelve years ignoring it."

"Yeah, a thousand miles of distance tends to help."

"You could move again." She smiled, a little bit of kitty coming out in her tone.

"I could, but I won't. I don't want to move again." He rapped the table with his knuckles. "How about I tell you what I do want. It's a pretty simple list."

She leaned all the way back in her chair, eyes wide. "I don't—"

"I want you, Penelope. I want my daughter. I want to be part of your lives. In your life. In your bed." He couldn't help a chuckle when her eyes grew so wide they almost swallowed her face. "I want to spend my life making you happy. I want to watch our kid, hell, every kid we have, grow up and go to college and drive some other poor bastard absolutely crazy. I want to hear your hopes and dreams. I want to help you achieve them. I want to be there for you and I want you to be there for me. What I'm saying, Pen, so that you can't possibly confuse this, is that I want you to get your hopes up about us, because this time I don't have any intention of letting you down." He rose from his seat and circled the table. He could feel her eyes on him, searing him even as he crouched in front of her and took her limp hands into his. "I want you to want me as much as I want you." Love me the way I love you.

She didn't answer, just watched their fingers twine together as if he were doing it all by himself. But he wasn't and that gave him hope.

"Do you know why you feel like you're breaking?" His voice was almost gone, he spoke so softly, unwilling to scare her now. When she shook her head, he rose enough to press a kiss to her lips. "Because those walls you hide behind are falling down, *querida*." Another kiss, one he thought she leaned into. "You don't want to go back to feeling dead inside any more than I do."

Her hands tightened on his and she definitely leaned into him this time. He felt the gentle pressure against his mouth. If this was her way of trying to shut him up, she'd gone the wrong way about it.

"Just give us a chance, Pen. One chance. I won't waste it." He licked at her lips and she sighed into him. "I swear, I won't let you down again."

In answer, she licked back, fusing their lips together and pulling at his collar. Hands free, he rose up against her, taking hold of her hips so he could drag her against him. Her legs wound around him and it was all the invitation he needed. He lifted her up, walking with her through the living room and into the bedroom. Dropping backward onto the bed, he rolled her carefully underneath him, his whole body relaxing just having her there.

Her hands slid everywhere, up his sides, over his shoulders, one sliding up his neck to his jaw while the other did its best to circle his arm, every touch leaving fire in its wake. She tugged at his T-shirt, all but pulling it over his head. Figuring the gloves were off, he made short work of getting her clothes off, too. She helped, trying to maintain the kiss as if he were a lifeline she couldn't do without.

He could live with that.

Finally they were both undressed, straining against each other. He considered it the greatest feat of his life that he remembered to reach into the bedside drawer for a condom. Because as soon as it was on, he sank into her, all thought ceasing to exist. There was only her, writhing under him, urging him deeper, faster, wilder.

He lost himself in heat, laying his forehead over her frantic heartbeat, desperate to give her what she needed. Her arms locked around his head, holding on as she arched so hard she lifted them both, a keening cry escaping her while she came, her muscles tightening around him until he had to bite the tender flesh of her breast in an effort not to join her.

Penelope quaked harder at the pressure from his teeth, which he soothed with a kiss. A hot swipe of his tongue, then a gentle, almost chaste press of his lips before he rose up on his hands, pressing deeper into her. She came down slowly, panting, her body rippling around the hard, hot intrusion of him. She opened her eyes, lids heavy, to see a strain on his face she didn't expect. He throbbed inside her and she had to pull in a breath at the surging response inside her.

It was unreal, how beautiful a man he was. Jaws flexing, eyes closed tight, his long lashes lying like fans on his flushed cheekbones. His face could have been sculpted in marble but for the warmth of his skin, the deep golden hue that made him look so vital. No stone could possibly convey the beauty of that.

She let go of his hair, sliding one hand over his cheek and jaw, down the powerful cords of his neck to trace the ridge of his collarbone. His shoulders were absolutely sinuous. She lifted her head to take a taste, running her teeth over the squared line of his tensing jaw.

"This isn't going to last near as long as you want if you keep that up, Pen." He thrust upward roughly when she licked his throat. "Damn it!"

She tightened her legs around him, lifting her hips to change his depth even more. Levering herself upward, she hooked her arm around his neck and used the other to support herself up from the bed. Braced, she slid up his length, then down his shaft again, stroking him with her whole body and sending a cascading

wave of pleasure over her own nerve endings. "I thought you said you wanted me. Don't you want me, Raul?"

He all but growled, even as he moved his legs to better accommodate her inverted ride. "If you're trying to push your luck, Penelope, you're doing a damn fuckin' good job."

"It doesn't have to last this first time. We can do this again and again and again..." Curving her body upward, the tips of her breasts dragged over his chest with each slow rise and fall. Still, he refused to move with her. "Chloe's with your sister." She nipped his chin with her teeth. "All. Night. Long."

His eyes opened, dark and burning with an intensity that almost scared her. "You still don't get it, Pen." He shifted, freeing one of his hands to grasp her hair. "I want more than one night this time."

Holding tight, he took her mouth again, settling their bodies against the bed and ending her teasing game with a decisive thrust that had her crying out in shocked bliss. There was nothing to mistake now. The kiss tasted of demand and desire. *Possession*.

Over and over again, he pistoned his hips into her hard and fast while his tongue and his lips feasted on her mouth. She felt inundated. Overwhelmed, but not in a way that frightened her. For all his power, he wasn't hurting her. It was almost as if he was...loving her. Staking an unmistakable claim on her body and soul. A claim she thought maybe she wanted. If she could somehow believe—

He pulled away, leaning back only to hook her left leg in the crook of his arm and raise it until it folded up against her chest, tilting her hips up as far as they could go. He hooked her other leg as well, while she stared up in dazed wonder. When he moved now, she felt his stroke all the way to her soul and she practically vibrated with sensation.

"I want *every* night." His movements slowed until she wanted to beg. The heavy thickness of him, gliding through her swollen folds, her position drawing her flesh tight around him. Just when she thought she'd give anything for another fast thrust, he changed his motion, now rotating to stroke every centimeter inside her. "I want the rest of our lives, Penelope."

"Don't ask for that," she whispered, reaching out to touch his chest, which had gone slick with his restraint. She wanted to give herself to him. She wanted to trust him, but she feared how much she needed him. It was too much. Sexually, she was ready to offer him anything, everything. But that wasn't what he was asking for. "This is all I can give."

He looked like a god, on his knees above her, brows drawn, dark eyes gleaming, midsection flexing as he drove her slowly insane. When he smiled, white teeth bared possessively, she knew it wasn't because he was happy. He came down over her, still holding her legs while he braced his weight on his hands, his kiss this time close to feral. "This'll do for a start."

Then he let loose, pounding into her as if he'd completely lost control. She screamed, an orgasm taking her so hard she felt blinded, only to be tossed under the waves of a second and a third, all the while

his thrusts growing wilder and faster and deeper. Distantly she heard him cry out, felt him let go of her legs so he could bury his face in the crook of her neck.

Both gasping, they hung on to each other with arms that seemed to have lost their strength. Penelope couldn't seem to open her eyes, not even when he slid free of her, shifting only to pull off the condom and dispose of it in the nearby wastebasket. Then, sleepily amused, she let him shift her into a spooning position, her back to his front. He pulled the blankets over them, wrapping his arm tightly around her middle before whispering, "This is only the beginning, *querida*."

"Mm-hmmm." Exhausted, she dropped into a deep, satisfied sleep, warmer and safer than she'd ever felt in her life.

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Raul came off the truck, cricking his neck to the side and shaking mud off his boots. The landslide in the eastern edge of RDC wasn't the worst one they'd ever dealt with, but it was still a pain in the...neck. A good two tons of hillside had melted into the backyard of a property because of near-flooding rains, knocking down trees and plowing half the house down with the people still in it.

Already sloughing his gear, all he wanted to do was head upstairs, hit the showers and possibly abuse his position so he could get first dibs on the therapeutic tub. Damn probies. They weren't the first crew he'd ever worked with that fucked up a shaky support, but you sure as hell wouldn't be able to tell by the bruise he could already feel forming on his thigh. Not to mention the dog scratches on his neck.

People he could figure out how to calm while they extracted them. Dogs, there was no hope for. Especially not two-hundred-pound German Shepherds wedged hopelessly in a pile of mud and broken wall pieces. As a bonus, the dog had a broken leg. Raul had a trio of scratches under his jaw that stung like a sonofabitch because of all the dirt. The only upside was the good chance he had of convincing Penelope that he needed some extra special care.

Just the thought took some of the drag out of his sore leg.

At least it did until he saw the small but still statuesque older woman sitting in the row of seats outside his office, watching him with a look he could only interpret as distaste. He stopped and stared, an uncomfortable splat of wet dirt falling from his hat to the concrete beneath his boots. Around him, other guys were unloading, all of them as filthy as him, if not worse, most of them complaining avidly, but he barely noticed them.

Lorna Gibson, waiting for him.

This couldn't be good. He hadn't seen her since Thanksgiving—a disaster of a completely different kind—and he'd been pretty happy that way. All three of them had—himself, Penelope and especially Chloe.

In the weeks since that holiday dinner, he had made all kinds of progress in his evil plan to win over the woman of his dreams. She talked to him now, at the office when he stopped in to pick up Chloe and drop her back off, occasionally letting him sneak a quick kiss before he left. She picked up on the first ring for him now, when he'd call her before she went to bed on those nights when he was on duty. Friday nights they'd started treating as family night, going out to the movies or staying in to play cards or board games. And sometimes, if he managed to stay late enough for Chloe to go to bed, he'd get to wriggle Penelope out of her clothes and love her right to sleep. Chloe, God Bless her, seemed to be dedicated to her nine o'clock bedtime. Happiness was this close to being his.

But it looked like the devil had come for her due.

Taking off his hat, he walked over to the open hall at the back of the truck bay, staying a polite distance from the woman. She eyed him slowly from head to toe, taking in the dirt, the heavy fireproof pants and coat, and with his luck she could probably see through his clothes to his spleen.

He nodded in deference. "Mrs. Gibson."

She eyed him coolly. "Mr. Montenga."

"Captain, actually." Not that he really gave a shit what she called him, but he had a feeling his chances to get a one-up on this woman were going to be few and far between.

"I assume you'll want to clean up before you enter your office." She sniffed, only wincing a little at the scent. So dogs peed when they were scared or in pain, big deal.

"I'd prefer it. If you can wait twenty minutes." He'd lose the tub, but how often did Lorna Gibson show any interest in speaking to...well, anyone.

She blinked a few times when a cold breeze burst through the bay. Was it because of the sting of the icy air or the scintillating aroma of dog piss? "It'll be worth the wasted time."

He grinned. If she were the type to take it well, he'd have a hell of a good time trying to get under her skin. But about the only thing one could count on good old Lorna for was the utter incapability to be a good sport. "I'll try for fifteen."

He made it back down in twelve. His hair was still wet, but that was fine, at least it was clean. Unfortunately, the bruise in his thigh was so wide and deep he was surprised he couldn't see it through the other side of his leg. Oh yeah, Pen would baby him silly for this one. It was almost worth getting dented in by a swinging support beam in the first place.

Dressed in a fresh uniform, the white polo and dark blue Dickies that were practically his second skin, he opened the door for Lorna and allowed her to enter first. Since the last thing he expected was the need for privacy, he left the curtains open over the large window between his space and the hallway.

Lorna took one of the two seats available in front of the desk, sinking into it with nigh on political decorum. She wore a simple, mid-calf-length gray skirt, a fairly basic white buttoned blouse, her tan rain slicker folded neatly over her arm. For an older woman, she was still in pretty good shape. Lean, her face

still smooth—though he wondered if that had anything to do with her general lack of expression—and her hair up in that old-style bun thing that always made him think of fifties sitcom moms. Her hair wouldn't dare so much as shift in the hard wind and rain coming down outside.

Raul headed toward his desk, determined not to limp in front of her. He might not particularly like Lorna—the unpleasant truth that she made him feel perpetually eight chose that moment to prod him—but he'd be damned if he looked weak in front of her. She had far too much sway with her daughter and he couldn't afford to make her an enemy. "So what can I do for you today, Mrs. Gibson?"

"Nothing terribly taxing. I'm simply here to ask you a question or two." She waited for him to sink, gratefully, into his chair. "I suppose I should simply cut directly to the point. You've been spending a great deal of time with my daughter and I've come to ask for myself what your intentions are this time around."

"My intentions." She wouldn't appreciate a chuckle, he knew it, but it escaped anyway.

"Yes, your intentions. I failed to ask before you moved away last time, leaving me to help raise your illegitimate child. As that was such a physically demanding endeavor and I am notably older, I decided it was in our best interests to enquire if you'll be staying this time."

Raul's brows rose almost painfully high. Well. Never let it be said Lorna Gibson pulled her punches. "This time—" he choked, spotting Josh walking past the window and looking visibly surprised to see Lorna in here with him. Josh's slow grin and even slower progress down the hall had Raul groaning.

"Yes, Mr. Montenga, this time. I wasn't aware your conversational skills were limited to repetition." He frowned, Josh forgotten. "I'm not leaving."

Lorna nodded but he couldn't tell if she found that reassuring or not. "Do you intend to keep seeing my daughter?"

He'd have to go with not. On the other side of the glass, Josh gestured to...shit, Wilde. Willy, tattoos flexing over his pale arms as he adjusted the white towel around his bare waist, laughed at what was clearly an inquisition. "Yes," Raul replied through gritting teeth.

"Do you think that's wise?" Lorna's steely gaze demanded all his attention. "Let's be honest. My daughter has a certain...vulnerability when it comes to you. Personally, I've never understood the attraction, but clearly it's an incurable weakness."

"Thank you." What else could you say to something like that?

Lorna shrugged. "The reason I ask is because you seem dead set on regaining her affections, but I don't think you're grasping what exactly it is that you're inviting. If you keep this up, Mr. Montenga, she will *love* you."

Raul decided to ignore the extra bodies filling the hall. "That's the idea."

Lorna tsked. "I was afraid of that after Thanksgiving."

Penelope had been adamant about spending the holiday with her mother, in her own house. So he'd surprised them and gone there. Pen had definitely been surprised, but—he decided—also pleased because

she hadn't asked him to leave. She'd let him kiss her cheek, hand her a bottle of wine and stay long enough to help her put the dishes away. Lorna hadn't hidden her suspicion that something was going on between them, but she'd been smart enough not to say anything while Chloe was there, demanding he watch football with her. Except for all the narrow-eyed glaring and needling, it had been a fairly decent holiday.

"What is it that's bothering you about this, Lorna? That I want to be with Penelope or that you have some confused notion of me interfering in your relationship with her?"

"Oh, I have no illusions about my relationship with my daughter. I know quite well that I've never been the parent she'd hoped for. Penelope takes after her father when it comes to her emotions, a fact that has not served her well in regards to you. She's soft, prone to reacting to situations without thinking them through completely. She would have preferred someone who could have related to her. I'm not particularly maternal nor am I the type of person to paint fantasies where they don't belong. I'm a realist.

"The reality of *this* situation is that my daughter doesn't need you. She's educated beyond you. Even if she didn't earn a proper living on her own, I've already seen to it that she and Chloe will be provided for long after I'm gone. You, on the other hand, have done virtually nothing—with the exception of providing sperm—to warrant my daughter's affections or trust, but she hands them both to you without question, evidenced by her complete inability to protect herself legally or personally. It is now painfully obvious to me that someone must step in to ensure that neither she nor my granddaughter get hurt any further.

"So I ask you again. What are your intentions? Are you trying to soften her up, hoping to take advantage of your paternity to cash in on her or Chloe's money?"

"Excuse me?" Even with the bum leg, it was all he could do not to stand up and throw the old bat out.

Lorna blinked. "I thought the question was rather self-explanatory. If you'd like, I can break it down into smaller syllables."

Fuck the leg. He rose, leaning onto the desk so he could look her dead in the eye. "I don't want or need Penelope's money."

"I don't suggest lying to me, Mr. Montenga." Lorna's voice could have formed icicles from his ceiling. "I'm well aware of your reputation in this town. The carousing you did when you were younger. The absolute disregard for your family and my daughter spoke for you quite well. Bluntly, you are not a suitable choice for her, but against all sense and reason, she refuses to have anyone else.

"So if I find out that you're toying with her, that you've given her hope for nothing more than your own benefit, I will see to it that you, your future and your family become nothing more than a misbegotten figment of my imagination."

Raul reared back, unable to believe that he'd just been threatened by a woman thirty years older than him, who hadn't so much as batted an eyelash while she did it. In fact, she looked just as unperturbed now as she'd been when she first sat down. Worse, he was pretty sure she'd be able to pull off her vow in much the same fashion.

He stared down at her. "You are one bat-shit crazy old lady."

She simply blinked at him. Waiting.

"I don't want your money, Lorna. I don't want anything from you but Penelope." He sat down, slowly, tamping down his temper because in a strange way, this was kind of reassuring.

He'd always thought of Lorna as an unfeeling, cold-hearted bitch who could suck the life out of a room like a black hole. Coming to him this way, ensuring privacy while she did her best to filet his balls, all in the name of protecting her child... Well, she'd never be cute and cuddly, but maybe she wasn't the icy source of all evil, either.

"I want to marry her," he admitted, because she deserved fair warning at the least. "I plan to stick around for the long haul this time. Any kids that we have, we'll take care of, so I'm pretty sure you'll be safe."

"And she knows this?" Lorna asked, rising like a queen preparing her exit. "Because if she doesn't, I'd recommend you keep it that way. She's been skittish about the prospect of marriage since she was little."

Raul frowned. Were they done? "She's never said anything about fearing marriage."

"Her father died from a heart attack at the age of thirty-six. General consensus is that our marriage did him in. You have about as much chance of convincing her to marry you as you do of growing a second head."

They both turned and caught sight of the window where the hallway was plastered with laughing firemen while Wilde did some kind of bare-assed jig, pressing his almost iridescently white cheeks against the glass.

Lorna turned back to Raul and dryly added, "Perhaps less."

She opened the door briskly, stepping out into the raucous noise, utterly unmoved. Raul followed, watching as she leveled the group to complete silence with a wintry glare. Confused as to why everyone stopped, Wilde looked up and, wide-eyed, dropped his towel in horror.

Lorna glanced down, then back up at the poor bastard's face before turning to Raul again. "You're overspending my tax dollars, Captain. Anyone can see that man doesn't require more than a washcloth."

The hall erupted into an explosion of laughter while Raul bit back a grin. "I'll keep that in mind when we restock, ma'am."

"See that you do." The crowd of men parted like the Red Sea before her and for the first time, Raul realized that Lorna Gibson had a devilish sense of humor. Having her in the family might not be the utter hell he expected.

Of course, now all he had to do was get Penelope to feel the same way.

## Chapter Ten

"Stop freaking out, Penelope." Miranda's stern voice through the phone didn't do much for Penelope's nerves. She was sitting in her office ten minutes after she should have left, and she couldn't seem to make herself leave. If she left, she'd have to meet with Raul and Chloe at her house. If they did that, she'd have to go with them to Chloe's school for the holiday play. Where her mother would be waiting. Where his whole freaking family would be waiting.

Where Ophelia would be waiting.

"Yeah, it's not like everyone doesn't already know you're doing the dirty with Raul," Trisha chimed in, thanks to the power of three-way calling. They heard traffic noise because, unlike Pen, Trisha actually had herself and her family on the road to the school where their kids would perform. "That man has been way too happy lately not to be getting a little some-some."

"I *know*," Pen groaned, laying her forehead flat to her desk. More than a little. It was like every time she saw him lately, she had to have him and Raul had done precious little to stop her. In fact, he'd only been making it worse, sneaking into the kitchen for kisses that left her clinging to the cabinetry, turning a simple guiding hand at her back to a tickling caress beneath her bra strap—and why was that arousing?

All the clandestine sex wasn't the worst of it, though. Ever since that night in his apartment, he'd been so affectionate. Teasing. Flirtatious. And intent. He rolled out the charm, and she was like so much melting cookie dough plowed beneath it. When they were out, he wanted to hold her hand. When he asked about her day, he actually listened to her talk. Then he'd tell her about things going on in town, simple things about what he saw and did, and all the while he'd keep Chloe in the conversation.

If she didn't know any better, she'd think they were some kind of happy family. But happy families did not live in three different places—when one considered the nights he stayed at the firehouse—and they did not have sex-crazed mothers tempted to slip the child a mickey so she could get her limbs wrapped around the Daddy as soon as possible.

Most importantly, they didn't stress out over going to a simple holiday play.

"This is all getting too...real."

"What did you think it was, honey? Playtime?" Trisha asked. "I could told you months ago Raul was out for the gold. That man is taken and anyone with a brain can tell he wants to return the favor."

"Could you *please* say something not utterly terrifying?" Trusting Raul that much, to commit to him that way...every muscle in her body yanked at the brakes. And yet, every night he called, every time he arrived at the door...she went right back to being cookie dough.

"I think it's sweet. He's courting you, all old-fashioned and everything," Miranda said, as if anyone couldn't guess her opinion. "I never knew he was such a romantic."

"Neither did I." It made her nervous. Yelling she could handle. His temper, she realized now, wasn't nearly as volatile as she remembered and shockingly, she could give as good as he could. Stranger yet, he considered that a positive thing. But all this emotional seduction, from the way he looked at her to the way he spoke to her—even about nothing at all—was confusing. Why was he doing it? She was already sleeping with him. He kept talking about their relationship like it was a permanent thing and she knew that wasn't going to happen. Especially not if she had to spend time around his mother.

"You didn't have any trouble going with him anywhere else in town," Trisha said. "I've even seen the three of you at Shaky Jake's—and God knows there's no bigger way to announce a relationship than letting the whole town have at you over a burger. What's the real problem, Pen?"

*Ophelia*. She picked her face off the desk and rubbed her forehead with her spare hand. "It's not going to last and all I can think about is when the other shoe is going to fall."

In fact, if what she worried about happened, tonight might just be the night. The constant expectation of what his mother might say if she saw them together, of what she could say to Chloe, was like a sword over Penelope's head every day. The Montengas were tight. When Ophelia rejected them openly—and Penelope had no doubt that she would, it was only a matter of time—what would that do to Raul? How would he respond? Thomas would support his wife, that went without saying. His sisters, including Julia, would get quiet and step back, looking anywhere but at her or Chloe until they walked away. But what about Raul? He made all kinds of sweet promises, but when his own mother made him choose, Penelope knew none of them would matter.

Or worse, what if he tried to stay with her and lost his family? He'd moved more than a thousand miles away to escape them and that hadn't worked in the slightest. If he lost them because of her, how long would it be before the resentment overtook any kind of affection? Too soon, and that would be worse than having him cut them loose.

Not that she expected the latter. In a matter of minutes, they could be on their own again and she wasn't ready for that. Wasn't ready to teach Chloe how to deal with losing everything she pinned her hopes on. A cold sweat covered her body, just thinking about it.

But there wasn't a choice anymore. The play was tonight. Chloe was the Christmas Star, of all things. She'd be about as inconspicuous as sunlight. And just as necessary to the play. There was no backing out of this or buying any more time.

"You don't know that," Miranda chided her, breaking the chain of thoughts Penelope was lashing herself with. "For all you know, Raul's thinking happily-ever-after, the whole nine yards. According to Josh, that's what it sounds like."

Yeah, because Josh was the master of commitment. Penelope rolled her eyes. "Even if he is, I'm not."

Trisha snorted. "Sorry, babe, but you wouldn't be this miserable if you didn't want to keep that man forever. And who can blame you? I saw him in swim trunks over the summer at Josh's house and if I wasn't married...mmm!"

"How do I disconnect her line?" Penelope demanded.

"There *is* no disconnecting her, I've tried a thousand times," Miranda said with a sigh. "And she's got a point. How about you show a little faith? Give him a chance."

How did she tell them she was already taking every chance she had left in her?

"None of it matters anyway. If you don't get that tush of yours over to the school in the next fifteen minutes, Chloe's going to be letting down the whole fifth grade class and you'll never hear the end of it."

She wouldn't. The understudy for the star was Lissy McKade, a cutesy little girl from the opposing fifth grade class who had the definite earmarks of a future perfect cheerleader. She and Chloe hated each other.

"Fine, I'm going, but I'm telling you, I have a bad feeling." From the tips of her toes, she didn't want to go to this thing. *It'll be over*, her gut told her with a dreaded surety.

"In the great words of someone famous, 'Too bad'. See you in fifteen!" Trisha hung up and Penelope sighed. She barely heard Miranda's wish of good luck and hung up the phone.

You can do this, she coached herself. You can do this. She stepped out of the office and into the hall where she found Cara waiting with a message.

"Raul said he couldn't get through your office line so he said to go ahead and meet him and Chloe at the school. God, you're so lucky, what I wouldn't give to have a guy call me with that voice..."

But Penelope didn't hear her. Raul had taken Chloe without her? And he wouldn't think the slightest thing about bringing her over to see his family before the show.

She was running before the color finished leaching from her face.

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"That is a lot of glitter—hey!"

Penelope, still breathless, felt Raul's arm snake around her waist and pull her to his side before she even fully entered the school auditorium. She blinked at him, startled when he dropped a quick kiss on her lips and went back to his conversation. With his brother. "Um, where's Chloe?"

That didn't sound too desperate. She hoped.

Raul gave her a sideways glance, a touch of concern lifting his brow. "She went backstage as soon as we got here. Something about not wanting Lissy to try on her costume."

"We were just talking about the decorations." Thomasso, named appropriately for his father because the tall man looked just as much like the older man as Raul did, pointed at the snowflakes hanging from the ceiling. She had to agree with Raul, the clumps of glitter were tinkling down as the loaded paper flakes blew in the streams of air from the central heat vents.

"I didn't know you had any kids still in elementary, Thomasso," Penelope said, trying to cover her relief that nothing terrible had happened. She even smiled, despite Raul looking at her with a touch of suspicion.

"I don't, but these things are huge to the kids, so we all roll out for them." He pointed to the three rows filled with what could only be Montengas. Adults, teenagers, babies. Everyone was there.

Penelope stared, unable to breathe. Oh, sweet God.

"Only child." Raul snickered and Thomasso laughed. "Come on, agoraphobe, I've got a nice safe seat for you, right next to your mother."

"Mother's here?" Was that good or not? And why was he leading her toward the horde that was his family?

"Sure, she's saving our seats."

Penelope took a second to check him for signs that he might be drunk, but he was as sober as ever, leading her to the row behind his brother's family. As she sat, Bug turned in her seat and waved.

"I heard Chloe's the Disco Ball this year. Is she excited?"

"She's the Christmas Star." Penelope rose again when she realized she'd dropped onto her mother's coat. She glanced at Lorna, but her mother only held out her hand for the jacket. Not so much as a displeased look for being parked with such a gregarious group. In fact, Lorna hadn't had a complaint in weeks. About anything.

"You haven't seen the costume yet, have you?" Bug laughed, throwing her uncle a wink. "Trust me, you're going to be hearing Donna Summer in your head for weeks."

"Bug was the Christmas Star for three years," Raul informed both her and Lorna.

"I thought this was the fifth grade play."

"It is, but something kept happening to the understudies, didn't it, Bug?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Bug laughed and turned back to her row to talk to a girl Pen could only guess was her sibling.

"Actually, when she was in fourth grade, more than half of the fifth grade class came down with chicken pox the day before the play." Raul slipped his arm behind her shoulders, giving Penelope a far-too-comfortable spot to lean her head.

"What about the other year?"

"No one really knows," he answered in a false ghostly voice. He stole another kiss, this one a little softer, which made her sigh. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

Fresh. Kneaded. Cookie dough.

"So, what kept you at the office?" he asked, relaxing in his seat.

Damn. Penelope straightened, the happy haze lifting as fast as it had fallen. "Just some last-minute phone calls that went longer than I planned."

"Oh yeah?" He looked interested. "Anything juicy going on?"

He didn't admit it, but one thing she'd learned in the last few months was that he was as bad a gossip hound as anyone else at Shaky Jake's. "How many times do I have to invoke doctor/patient privilege with you?"

"Just until I figure out how to pick the locks on your office files."

She was reaching for the rib on his left side that was still as ticklish as when he was a kid when there was a sound from the microphones.

"Welcome, families of Cielolitos Elementary!" People rustled to their seats and the lights in the auditorium flicked off, leaving only stage lights on what turned out to be the school principal. A tall man, Jan Van Dick was easily seen even from their chairs near the back. He started introducing the teachers of the fifth grade class, and little by little, Penelope relaxed. This would be fine. She had nothing to be worried about. Everything was going to be fine.

She felt even better when music started playing and little kids streamed onto the stage. Though the main speaking parts belonged to the fifth graders, the younger grades were all there, forming a chorus in the background. She'd never come before, not realizing that there was much to the event for the younger classes. Chloe had always said she only wanted to come for the desserts put out afterward and to see her friends, so Penelope always asked Lorna to take her. She'd been missing out and never even realized it.

She recognized Trisha's twin boys with the first grade group singing "O, Christmas Tree". The play wasn't the nativity the way it had been when she'd attended this school, but instead a conglomeration of the various winter holidays around the world with a fifth grader or three outfitted to sing about it. The eight kids linked together as a golden menorah trying to walk as one was a good laugh. Danny hammed up his role as "The Kwanzaa Kid", earning whistles from his cousins, but when Chloe came out, Penelope suddenly understood what Bug meant.

The costume was a bedazzled fantasy of shiny silver material draped over her shoulders, poncho style. On her head was a glittery crown a little reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty, but slathered in shiny beads. Her hair was loose for the first time in ages, rippling over her shoulder, painted somehow a matching silvery color. Just like her face.

"Don't worry, it washes out. I checked," Raul murmured in her ear.

A nearby flash of light startled her and Penelope stared at her mother, who was putting her camera back in her purse as if the world hadn't just fallen off its axis. "You're taking pictures?"

Lorna put her purse back down at her feet. "I always take pictures at these things. Otherwise she thinks I went home and came back in time to pick her up."

Well, that sounded normal.

"Sure she does." Raul laughed and, to her shock, she realized he had a camcorder already in his hand. Before she could say anything, Chloe started whistling, dancing around the stage to the tune of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas".

"Dear God, she couldn't have just sung horribly, like the other children?"

Penelope closed her eyes, hoping the other parents nearby hadn't heard Lorna's complaint, but Raul was laughing too hard for that wish to fly far. The auditorium lit up with applause when Chloe finished and within another minute or two, the teachers were back on stage, bowing with the kids. Then kids were streaming down and people were standing up.

Penelope lost sight of Chloe in the milling crowd, and given she was the only kid sparkling like the Tin Man, that was saying something. "Do you see her?" she asked Raul, his greater height probably giving him more of an advantage.

"No, she was right—oh, wait, my dad has them."

"What?" Oh, God. She pushed past Raul, ignoring his frown as she twisted through the moving crowd to get just three rows forward. Why were so many people in the damn way?

"Penelope?" Raul was just behind her.

She slipped past a man with his son on his shoulders and she could see Chloe, standing there with Thomas's big hand on her small shoulder, her smile brighter than any of the little jewels on her outfit. Ophelia sat in her seat, not seeming to notice them as she talked to Danny. A few more feet and...no.

*No.* Chloe's smile was fading. Thomas's lined smile darkened into a scowl, one directed clearly at his wife. Penelope actually heard the older man's snapped call of Ophelia's name. She pushed free just as the woman turned her head, her cold gaze landing on Chloe as if she'd just been presented with a particularly foul bug.

Chloe's eyes were huge now.

Penelope got there, wrapped her arm around Chloe's slim shoulders and pulled her back just as Ophelia touched the saint medal on prominent display at the top of Chloe's white turtleneck. Pen didn't care how defensive she looked, how confused Raul was as he made it past people in their direction.

Ophelia's dark eyes, almost black with displeasure, shifted upward to fix Penelope with a militant stare. "That medal changes nothing. She's no blood of mine. She never will be."

Penelope looked over at Thomas, saw his grim but resigned expression, and rage like she'd never known rose up in her. Pulling Chloe close, she stared down at the sitting matriarch and did something she'd never done to another living soul in her life.

The crack of her hand across the older woman's face finally did what nothing else had been able to—around them, people stopped moving, including Raul, who stared at her as if she'd somehow morphed into someone else before his very eyes. Maybe she had. Other eyes, every face around them, it seemed, took on the slow rising expression of anger. All except one.

Ophelia Montenga simply smiled.

Shaking, Penelope took hold of Chloe's shoulder and pulled but her little girl wasn't budging. Her face paint smudged, tears washing the silver to a red-rimmed edge under her eyes, Chloe clamped her hand around the medal. Giving it a yank, she looked at it one more time before tossing it on Ophelia's lap. "If it doesn't mean anything, I don't want it."

When Penelope pulled this time, Chloe came.

They pushed past Raul, who finally seemed over his shock enough to grab Penelope's arm. "What the fuck was that?"

"Not now, Raul." She kept walking, pushing Chloe in front of her, knowing that already people were talking. Guessing. Wondering what in the hell could have made the town doctor slap a woman more than twice her age.

"Yes, now."

But Penelope yanked her arm free, determined to get Chloe out the door. He must have seen the logic of that because he followed her without a word. It was only when she'd ushered Chloe to her car, pushed her into the backseat and closed the door behind her, that he grabbed her arms and made her face him again. "What the hell is wrong with you? How could you slap my mother?"

"If I thought it would do any good, I'd have punched her." She tried to push his hold off, but he wasn't having any of it. "Why don't you go ask Ophelia? Ask her what she said to deserve it."

Even with only the orange parking-lot lights, she could see him losing his color, a sickened expression pulling down the lines of his face. "She said something to you?"

"Of course she did. She doesn't acknowledge Chloe."

He let her go, sighing. "Pen, you have to understand—"

"No, I don't." She circled the front of the car, needing to get out of there. Get Chloe out of there.

"Damn it, Penelope." He followed her with thundering steps. "Things can't just change for her overnight. She's going to need some time!"

"She's had time!" she yelled back, turning to take him on right there in the parking lot, her better sense completely worn through. "Years of time. Ophelia has always known about Chloe, Raul. Since she was four years old, your mother has known. And do you know what she said? For me not to mix my

bastard with her grandchildren." Too late, Penelope glanced into the car and saw Chloe watching them with huge eyes. She was crying openly now. Not because of Ophelia, but because of herself. Because of them.

Raul seemed to realize it too, because he hissed words Penelope wouldn't repeat if her life depended on it.

Adrenaline bleeding out of her, Penelope ran her fingers over her brow, suddenly so tired she could hardly breathe. "I'm taking her home."

"Wait for me."

She tightened her hand on her keys, the feel of the metal jags jutting into her about the only thing that kept her from being completely numb. "Why? What's going to be different when you get back here? Your family is still going to be thinking that what she does is okay. That the way she just treated your daughter is acceptable. That Chloe should wait her out."

"Pen, just give me five minutes to get this straightened out."

"There's nothing to straighten out, Raul. I saw your father's face. He heard her and he did nothing. After he gave me *his word*, he still did nothing. No one in there is going to hold her responsible but I'll be damned if I stand by and watch my child get hurt over and over again. It ends here."

"What ends here?"

Ignoring the pain in her heart, especially the small voice in her mind whispering that she was making a critical mistake, she said the most painful word of her life. "Everything."

"Pen."

She turned away, got into the car and ignored his hand knocking on the glass. Ignoring her own instincts as well, she pulled out and left him behind.

Her regrets she took with her.

## Chapter Eleven

Raul stalked back into the auditorium and, wouldn't you know it, not a single damn person had left. Of course not. There was still drama to be had. He made it almost all the way back to his parents before his brother stepped into his path. They weren't all that different in size or height, but Raul was thirteen years younger and for the first time in their lives, that might be an advantage.

Thomasso shook his head. "This isn't the place, Raul. Don't make a scene here."

"That part's been pretty well taken care of, don't you think?" He moved past his brother, trying to get a hold of his confusion and his anger because they were twisting together and he didn't know who to direct either of them at. Penelope's pale face kept flashing in his mind, but so did his mother's, her cheek turning red and that strange smile on her lips. As if she'd been saying something to Penelope that only the two of them knew about.

Because she'd already had her say with Penelope.

The horrible truth stole the breath from his lungs. His steps felt jerked as he walked up to his parents and crouched down in front of them. Thomas's expression looked strained but his hand was tight around his wife's. Ophelia watched him, a small frown on her face. Did she know what he was going to ask? Did she think he could possibly accept this?

"How could you, 'Ama?"

"No hice nada—"

"She's just a little girl." *His* little girl, but he could see that didn't matter to her. She wouldn't *let* it matter.

Ophelia's mouth tightened into a hard line when he stood up again.

"When you're ready for all of us, Mama, we'll come back. But until then, I'll be with my family."

*"¿Cómo que* family?" Ophelia stood up, her tight expression demanding he come to heel. *"Nosotros.* Somos *tu familia. Tu* sola *familia."* 

Raul backed away, hating the position she was putting him in. *Us.* We *are your family. Your* only *family*. They were, but no matter how much he loved his parents, his siblings or their kids, they weren't the family that mattered the most. "Not anymore."

He walked out, feeling hollowed and sick, his only goal to get back to Penelope and Chloe.

"Mijo, don't do this."

He turned, stunned to realize his father had followed him. Thomas suddenly looked every one of his seventy-four years.

"Don't walk away from us again."

As if he wanted to. "It's not me, 'Apa."

Thomas shook his head. "This is my fault. I shouldn't have tried to make your mother talk to her. I knew it the second I said anything, but it was too late. I'm sorry."

God, if there were ever words he'd never wanted to hear come out of his father's mouth, it was those, especially not with that almost broken sound to them. "Dad, no."

"She took this off." Thomas raised his hand, a tremor running through it, and Raul felt even shittier seeing the lights glint off the medal and chain tangled in those gnarled fingers. "Tell her it means something. Tell her that her *abuela* was wrong."

"She *is* wrong." Raul knotted his own hands not to take the necklace. It belonged to Chloe, but he couldn't force her to take it. It was a gift that had to be given wholeheartedly. That necklace would only hurt her now.

"She needs time."

Raul winced at the words he'd said only minutes ago. A lie they'd all been telling themselves for decades. Time wouldn't change this, that much Penelope was right about. "No, she has to understand that Chloe is part of her family. Part of her. And that this damned prejudice of hers isn't something we can allow anymore."

"Raul, please."

"Ask her how long she's known Chloe was mine, Dad."

Thomas's brows crashed together. "What?"

"Ask her how long she's known. Ask her what she said to Penelope. *Then* tell me I need to give her time. *Then* tell me you'd give up your child and tell any of us to wait for her to love us."

Thomas's hand dropped.

"You spent my whole life telling me that when I was a man, my family would be the most important thing in my life. That they needed to come before everything else, period. That time is now, 'Apa. This is something I have to do."

His father felt strangely frail when he gave him a brief hug, then got into his truck and pulled away.

The miles took forever to cross, but finally he was able to park in front of Penelope's house. By the time he had his hand up to knock, though, the door was already opening.

"That certainly took you long enough." Lorna stepped back to let him in, already reaching for her coat. "I've already told you that I'm useless to her in these situations. Your response time needs work, Captain."

He couldn't quite work up a grin for her, but Lorna didn't seem to need one.

"They're upstairs." She walked past him and down the walk, leaving him to close the door. He watched her pull out from the driveway, the red lights from the back of her car out of sight within what seemed like seconds. But he knew he'd probably been watching a few minutes, because he wasn't looking forward to heading up the stairs and fighting with Penelope. Even more, he wasn't looking forward to having Chloe look at him with betrayal all over her face.

Still, eventually, he had to close and lock the door then start up the stairs. He heard their voices, soft, low sounds, as he walked up to Chloe's open door. Chloe was already in her bed, her face washed clean, but her hair wasn't so lucky. Though wet, a liberal amount of silver still stained the sable lengths. Penelope was sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning close while they talked. He almost hated to interrupt, but he couldn't have Chloe falling asleep thinking he hadn't supported her. He knocked on the lintel and the two of them turned to look at him in surprise.

"Dad!" Chloe cuffed Penelope's arm. "See, I told you we should have waited."

Raul would have gotten hopeful if Penelope's surprise wasn't instantly covered with that damn unemotional mask of hers. He was seriously sick of that defense.

"No, your mom was right. You didn't need to deal with that mess."

Chloe squinted at him with eyes that were still a little puffy. "Is, um, your mother okay? Mom really whacked her one."

Penelope's mask could only hide so much and her flinch wasn't on the list. "There are about eight million reasons why it was wrong of me to do that, Chlo."

"So why did you?" Chloe crossed slim arms while Penelope struggled for an answer.

"Because there was one reason why it was right," Raul answered for her, earning him a look he couldn't interpret. Maybe she wasn't sure what she felt about him saying it either. He came into the room, knowing he wasn't going to get an engraved invitation anytime soon. "When you get older, you'll figure out that sometimes that one reason doesn't outweigh all the other reasons why what you did was wrong, but every now and then, you do things without thinking it all through."

"Like whacking your mom."

"Like whacking my mom," he agreed, wishing one more time that Chloe had taken after her mother a little more in the decorum department. "The important thing is that you understand none of what happened tonight is because of you. Not you as a person. My mother doesn't know you that way. She has..." Hell, how could he explain?

"Issues?" Chloe supplied easily and he frowned. "Duh, have you *met* my other grandma? Believe me, I'm used to old ladies with issues."

He squinted at her. Unbelievably, she wasn't taking this as hard as he thought she might. "You're really okay about this."

She gave him his own half-shrug, that little chin rising. "No, but it's kinda dumb to sit here and cry about it. It won't fix anything."

It hit him then that she probably didn't get that fortitude from him. He reached out and touched her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I'm sorry, *mijita*. But I promise you no one else feels that way. Everyone in my family loves you, especially me."

Her lip wobbled, but she didn't cry again. "I wanna go to sleep now."

Or she wanted to cry in peace. Since her pride had taken enough of a blow for one night, he nodded and stood. Penelope looked like she might stay, but he took hold of her arm and pulled her to her feet. She could be as mulish as she wanted, they were working this out. Tonight.

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Raul didn't lead her to the bedroom like Penelope expected. Actually, so far nothing had gone as she'd expected. Now that the fear and adrenaline had stopped flowing, her rational mind was starting to click and the whole night seemed a scene of one mistake after another.

He extended a hand to the kitchen table by the windows and she sat uneasily. "Tea?"

She didn't know what else to say, so she nodded. Within a few seconds he had water boiling on the stove and was moving around her kitchen without hesitation. He gathered the tea and honey from the pantry—selecting the right box, she noticed—and mugs from the shelf. He moved as if this were his home. As if he were as comfortable here as in his apartment. When had that happened? Was it in the last several weeks that he'd been her lover? Or the whole two months that he'd been trying so hard to be a father?

"Where did my mother go?" she asked into the silence.

"She left as soon as I got here."

Penelope frowned, unable to reconcile his words with her mother's general behavior. Whenever drama happened, Lorna always waited around to remind Pen what behavior was acceptable and what was not. "That doesn't make any sense."

Raul raised a brow before bringing the two mugs to the table. "Maybe she thought we needed our privacy."

"My mother doesn't believe in privacy." Duty, honor and guilt, yes. Privacy, no.

"You know, I'm starting to think that we don't know your mother as well as we think we do."

"You thought you knew my mother well?" Penelope couldn't help the wry twist of her lips. No one knew the whole truth about Lorna Gibson, not even the daughter who guarded her from the dislike of an entire town.

"Well, no, but I knew her well enough not to mess with her."

That didn't bode well. "And now you plan to mess with her?"

He smiled, that devilish glint in his eyes while the dimples in each cheek grew slowly deeper. "Don't worry, I'm pretty sure she won't mind. She loves me."

"Er..."

"She loves you too," he added conversationally. As if it weren't the most absurd thing in the world.

"I know that."

"Do you?" The smile wasn't devilish anymore. He sobered, his expression softening into a serious look of concern. "Did you know that she came to me like a mama bear, ready to tear me three new assholes if I dared hurt you?"

"Excuse me?" If he'd suddenly started speaking Russian, he would have made more sense.

"She did. That day I got the bruise on my leg. She came to the firehouse, ready to run me out of town on a rail if I wasn't serious about being with you this time. But I managed to convince her that my feelings for you are real. That I'm committed to you and to Chloe. Which makes it a little strange that I can't convince you."

"I'm convinced that you're committed to Chloe," she hedged, her emotional balance swinging wide. Lorna had done that? For *her*?

"And to you. I'm extremely committed to you. Some might say a little obsessed. But God forbid we talk about that, right?" If only it didn't sound so important to him that she believe him.

He'd know if she lied and this time, she didn't think he'd let her squirm out of the conversation. "Raul—"

"Uh-uh. We're talking about this. All cards on the table. How I feel and how you feel about me. We're not going to cloud this with sex or responsibility either. It's just you and me, being honest with each other. For once."

Penelope contained a bristle, but just barely. "I'm always honest with you."

"No, you're not. You're not even honest with yourself." He set the tea down carefully. "You can't tell when someone loves you. When *anyone* loves you. Maybe it's because everyone you've ever loved hasn't given you what you needed. Your dad died, your mom became an iceberg and I disappeared on you. I'm afraid to ask who else hurt you, but I know the three of us probably did enough damage all by ourselves."

"Is the point of this discussion to call me an emotional cripple?"

"No, it's to tell you that you're a beautiful, loving, vibrant, *special* woman with so much to give but, for whatever reason, you lock everyone out. You want love, but you don't seem to believe people when they try to give it to you. And if we're going to make it, that's got to change."

Penelope tapped the mug with her nail, wishing there were a crack in it that she could pick at. If he were angry when he'd said that, she'd be justified in stalking away, but he was as calm as he'd been pouring the tea. Meaning she had to treat this as a conversation instead of a cavern full of man-traps ready to rip her to shreds. She lifted her chin at him, resolved to deal with this as calmly as him. "I'm loved."

"Yeah?" He smiled, damn him. "By who?"

"Chloe."

"And she's the only one you can think of?"

Why did she feel like a child trying to play chess against a professional? "Miranda and Trisha."

He nodded, offering no encouragement. Waiting.

"How long is this list supposed to be?" she finally demanded, irritated with his patience and quiet. This was Raul. He was supposed to be ranting and bitching about her attacking his mother.

"As long as you want it to be." His gaze took on a dark softness, like the caresses he gave her just before he kissed her. "And as long as it includes me."

Penelope's heart jolted in her chest, sending reverberations along her nerves to her fingertips and toes. "What?"

"I love you, Penelope."

She felt as if a gong went off in her ears. Was he being cruel? His face didn't read as though enjoying her discomfort, but why else would he say something like that? "Why are you saying that?" she finally asked, because the question wouldn't stop repeating in her head, practically sputtering her disbelief.

"Because I'm tired of waiting for you to figure it out on your own. If you haven't noticed, I've always loved you. Even when I was too stupid to understand how much or what it meant."

"Like a friend. You loved me like a friend." Imagining anything else would hurt too much. You couldn't just walk away from people you truly loved. You couldn't not show that love to them by choice. If what he was saying was true, he'd done both—on purpose. She'd almost rather have meant nothing than to have been so easy to cut out.

"That's in there too. Along with loving you as a woman. As my lover."

Her face heated so fast she had to stand up and take her mug back to the sink, untouched.

Too late, she realized he'd followed her. The hairs at the back of her neck prickled just before his dark forearms landed on each side of her, hands cuffing the lip of the sink, trapping her between. The heat of his body seeped into her back just as he pressed a kiss to the side of her neck.

"Does it really scare you that much, the idea of me loving you?"

*Not answering that in this lifetime.* "You throw that word around too easily." Her hands shook as she turned on the water to rinse the mug.

He pried the mug from her hand, turning off the tap before taking hold of her other hand and folding both their arms around her. Tightly nestled against him, his scent both soothing and agitating, she almost relaxed. She didn't want him to feel her shaking, to feel her fear. She wasn't even sure what she was afraid of. But terror raced with her blood through her veins and she wasn't at all sure which was winning.

"I've never said those words to a woman who wasn't a blood relative, *querida*. Never even wanted to."

"Why are you doing this?" Her voice sounded thready, desperate, but he wouldn't let her go and she needed to get away from this conversation.

"You don't trust me. I understand that. It's killing me, but I understand it." He lowered his chin to her shoulder. "You ran tonight. You thought I wouldn't support you, wouldn't support Chloe."

A sob escaped. Not like the time she'd cried all over him, this one was embarrassed anger all the way through. "I attacked your mother, Raul. What else were you going to do?"

"Hold you. Like I'm holding you right now."

She stilled, only the tremor in her body and the fluttering beat of her heart moving. "You weren't angry?"

"I was pissed as hell," he answered easily, not sounding the slightest bit mad. "But I was worried, too. I've never seen you do something like that, Pen. Never. I knew the second it happened that something more had to have been going on. But you never even considered telling me what it was. Because all this time, you never once thought I might be on your side. That's what we need to fix. That's where we need to start. Tonight. Right now."

The more he spoke, the deep rumble that she could feel at her back and in her heart, the less she shook. She realized, distantly, that her hands had curled around his arms, holding him in place as much as he held her.

"I'm always on your side, Penelope. No matter what, all our lives, I always have been. You know that. Tell me you knew that."

She stopped fighting, her head falling back on his broad shoulder. When she was young, she'd known that all the way to her soul. That was why she'd gone to be near him at every opportunity. Why he was the one she'd searched out when her father died. She'd known with every fiber that he wouldn't make fun of her for her misguided affection. That he cared about her. Even that he would never use her, though she'd made herself available for use at every opportunity.

All that had changed when he left. She'd felt so abandoned. So...betrayed. It wasn't rational. It wasn't even his fault, but she'd held his leaving against him. As if he'd done it to her instead of for himself.

Because if she hadn't, she'd never have been able to move on.

Except, she hadn't moved on, not at all. Her heart still beat...for him. Her soul still ached...for him.

If he were ever truly gone from her life, if there was no chance to see his face or feel his touch or taste his kiss, the tattered pieces of her heart would shatter irreparably.

And nothing would ever change that.

She squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting that knowledge but unable to deny it. "If I trusted you and you left again—"

"I'm not leaving you. Ever again."

"You don't know that." She couldn't count on promises like that. No one could. He had a dangerous job. He could get bored. He could feel tied down. There were dozens of reasons why he could disappear from her life.

"Okay, then, ask yourself this. Have I ever been unsure of anything I've set out to do? And be honest, *querida*. Have I ever gone back on any decision I knew was the right one for me?"

A rush of memory went through her mind, a thousand slides in a few heartbeats. The boy, so cocky and sure as he taught himself to ride his bike, falling over and over again until he had it right. The teenager, his independence sharpened with burgeoning resentment. The man-boy, the one who watched her with a heated gaze but pushed her away with a cool detachment. The adult determined to open his life to a child who expected him to change her life for the better. Determined to open Penelope's life too, to change it for the better as well, and doing it, little by little by little.

He was right. He'd never gone back on a promise once he made it. And when he set himself a course, he never veered from it. Not once.

Except...

"Yes," she breathed, opening her eyes in realization.

He was so startled for a second that he let go and she turned in his loosened arms. Dismay parted his lips with silent question, a confused scowl pulling his brows close together. But the strangest laugh bubbled in Penelope's throat, escaping from her still-quivering lips. Before he could demand anything, she pressed a soft kiss on him, then a second and a third, before wrapping her arms around his neck and squeezing tight.

"Is this good or bad?" he asked, his wide hands curving her against him.

"This is good." How many times had he told her that being in Seattle had felt wrong. That he'd had to make himself stay there, though his soul had demanded he come home. Not just to his family. To *her*. Relieved tears slipped over her cheeks and she hugged him so tight she almost wondered if he could breathe. But he wasn't pushing her away, so she figured he didn't mind. "It's very good."

She felt his relieved sigh against her own body. "Excellent. Now how about you explain how the hell me going back on my word is a good thing?"

"It's simple." She sniffed before she pulled back, not out of his embrace—his hold didn't slip that far and she had no desire to go—smoothing her fingers over the plane of his cheek. "You came back home."

His scowl didn't lift. "I don't get it."

"You were absolutely sure that living far away was the only way to be happy. But you couldn't forget me, no matter how hard you tried." She used a finger to smooth the lines formed by his brows bunching together. "Don't you understand? The only reason you've ever changed your mind was to come back to me. And even that took twelve years."

She had to bring her fingers to her own mouth now as that bizarre, almost hysterical laugh tried to get out again. "I know there was more to it. There was your family to consider, but...you're the most stubborn

man I know. The most stubborn person I've *ever* known. If the only reason you were willing to break your word in our whole lives was to *get* to me, why would you break it to get away?"

His brows finally lifted, rising high before he shook his head as if shaking off confusion. "Fuck it, as long as it makes sense to you."

His kiss muffled the sound of her laughter. And only when she'd stopped laughing, her tears dry and forgotten, did he lift his head again. He kept his forehead against hers. "So, you're going to give me the benefit of the doubt then?"

Penelope closed her eyes, her chest tight, but for once not with the fear that she was making yet another mistake. This felt bright and sweet. Like...hope. "Yes."

"You believe me when I say I love you?"

Her fingers curled around his collar, but she looked him in the eyes and nodded.

He gave a satisfied grunt. "What about that I'm not letting you go?"

Her fingers tightened. "That depends."

"On what? And try to tell me without choking me." At her gasp, he stole a quick kiss, taking one of his hands off her waist to press her fingers back to his neck. "Fine, choke me."

"I don't want to choke you."

"Okay, then just tell me. Whatever you need, however long it takes, Pen, I'll do it for you." His earnestness dug a little deeper into her heart.

"When you say you're not letting go, what does that mean for you? What am I supposed to expect?"

His big hand cupped the side of her face, sliding back over her hair. "It means that for the rest of my life, I'm devoted to you, Penelope. You and our daughter and anyone else that comes along. You're my family now, the most important things in my life. I want to marry you. I want to stand by you. Defend you, argue with you, love you, every minute of every day. Forever. That's what I want you to expect. That's what I want you to demand."

She could only stare up at him wordlessly.

"I'm going to earn your trust, wholeheartedly, and you're going to know that you have mine. No matter what."

"Even if I whack your mom?" She bit her lips to keep from grinning.

"Even then." His answering grin was tinged with pain though.

She touched it with a kiss. "I really am sorry, Raul. I just...I lost control. I—" When he shushed her, she frowned, knowing that evasive look too well. "What did you do?"

His shoulder hitched beneath her hand. "I made a choice. The right choice."

"Which was?"

"You. Chloe. I told my mother that until she accepted us all, I wouldn't be there."

"Raul, no." She didn't want to tear him from his family. She'd never wanted that.

"Yes. This is where I belong. With my family." He kissed her softly.

When he lifted his head again, she watched him with a narrow gaze. "That line isn't going to get you out of trouble every time, you know."

The devilish grin came back. In force.

But when her heartbeat skipped and started again because of it, stumbling and tumbling in her chest, she didn't mind in the slightest.

@ @ @

Penelope woke up slowly to the realization that Christmas had finally arrived. Not the usual holiday wakeup, which generally involved Chloe racing into her room and jumping on the bed to wake her up. This time she was quietly nestled in blankets and warmth. Muscled arms wrapped around her, the same as they had every morning that Raul wasn't on duty. She lifted her lids, looking down at the dark hand cupping her bare breast with sleepy possessiveness. Smiling, she took stock, trying to figure out where her limbs were in connection to his. Hopelessly tangled, as usual. His thigh between hers, her head on his biceps, his face in her hair, her hand under his wrist, holding tight.

He rumbled, some incomprehensible mumbling that made her smile, and cuddled tighter. Sleep twined around her, pulling her down into gentle darkness. She'd almost drifted off, only dimly aware of him shifting again to kiss her nape. "Love you."

She absently rubbed his arm, warming as she always did when he said that, which was often. So often that she'd have to bite her lips to keep from saying it back. Not that she didn't want him to know so much as that it never seemed the right way to tell him.

Wake up. Brush your hair, brush your teeth, I love you.

Go to work, kiss him goodbye as he picks up Chloe, oh yeah, I love you.

Get home, make dinner, clean the kitchen and by the way, I love you.

It always seemed too mundane to mention right then. But those unsuspecting moments were always the ones when the feeling crept upon her most. In the quiet times. So when he murmured the words, she didn't quite have the wherewithal to hold the sentiment inside. "Mm-hmm, love you too."

"What?" The sudden alertness to his voice had her snapping her eyes open in horror.

"What?" she asked stupidly, brain racing for recourse.

He sat up, the blankets pulling with him, making her scrabble for the sheet. Somehow she didn't think that excited grin came from her flash of nudity. Both dimples were present and he was all but jumping up and down next to her. Maybe this holiday wasn't so different after all. "You said you loved me."

"No, I didn't." But the lie wasn't meant to fool anyone. She was already holding back a smile.

"Yes! You did!" He was laughing, diving over her and kissing her face while she struggled for her dignity. It was nearly impossible to find with him poking her ticklish spots to drag the sheet out of her

death grip so he could wrap her around himself and crow. "You love me. I knew it, I knew you were going to tell me soon."

"No," she laughed, struggling not to giggle but failing miserably. He tickled and kissed and wrestled until she screamed with it. Especially when he settled over her, all sleep-warmed and happy, his arms around her and their legs tangled all over again.

"Say it again." He smiled down at her, his hair in a spiky disarray, his eyes dancing with pleasure, the dark brown color like honeyed chocolate. When he looked at her like that, there was no denying him.

This was okay, she realized. All the other times would have been fine too, but telling him like this... This was perfect. "I love you, Raul."

Her reward was a kiss that had her glad they didn't have any clothes to get rid of. "There, was that so hard?"

She wrapped her leg around his hip. "Well, now that you mention it—"

They both froze at the sound of something metal clanging downstairs. Raul frowned down at her before leaping off her and the bed, already grabbing for his pants. Penelope dragged on her robe while more clanging—was that voices?—echoed up the stairs. Whoever was down there wasn't being subtle.

Raul gave her a sharp look when she followed him to the stairs, but it didn't last long as he obviously recognized whoever it was. He smiled, just the slightest bit strained at the corners, and reached out a hand to her.

"Who is it?"

"You'd better come and see for yourself." He led the way down, keeping a firm grip on her fingers once she realized her house had been invaded, not by Christmas elves or by a fat man in a red suit, but by a horde of present- and food-bearing Montengas.

When they stopped halfway down, she stared over the rail of her own staircase in shock as kids of all ages deposited present after present around the tree she, Chloe and Raul had decorated only last weekend. The adults were carrying in foil-covered dishes, some still in pots, most of them still hot, given the number of oven mitts. Mortified to be naked beneath the thick terry robe, she clutched the throat and the flap over the legs closed with each hand as his sisters waved and their husbands did some kind of chin-lifting acknowledgement to Raul. Not that he had any shame at being caught shirtless at seven in the morning. And right in the middle of it, Chloe was directing traffic, pointing cousins in one direction, adults to the kitchen. Pen forgot to be self-conscious when she recognized the silver medal hanging over the collar of Chloe's Angels uniform PJs.

"Raul, she's wearing it."

He glanced up at Penelope for a second before following her line of sight to Chloe. "Well, I'll be a son of a—"

Penelope smacked his shoulder as Thomas moved carefully into the doorway of the house.

"What was that for?" With all the people milling around, it took him a second to realize his father was headed their way. "Oh."

"Yeah. oh."

Thomas stopped at the foot of the steps, waiting it seemed for them to finish coming down. Penelope almost tripped, but Raul steadied her by slipping his arm around her waist, something Thomas clearly noted. And, to her embarrassment, seemed to approve.

"What's going on, 'Apa?"

"Your daughter didn't tell you?"

*Uh-oh.* They all turned their heads to look for Chloe, but smart girl that she was, she was suddenly—inexplicably—missing from the living room.

"What did she do?" Penelope wondered if she should be dreading this or not.

"She rode out to the house last week and demanded to see her grandmother."

Penelope gave Raul a look, because the only way Chloe could have gotten loose was on his watch. He started making sputtering noises, but she shushed the excuses with a roll of her eyes. Clearly, Chloe was too much her father's child.

Thomas's amusement at that lightened the creases on his face. "She wouldn't leave until Ophie talked to her. Which is funny because no one else has been willing to speak to her for weeks."

"What?" Penelope forgot all about her robe, her eyes flaring wide. Raul's hold took on more of her weight. She put her hand on his chest, her palm finding his heartbeat beneath the firm, warm muscle.

Thomas's smile faded, but his eyes gleamed with pride. "When we found out what she'd done, not just to you and Chloe, but to Raul and the rest of us... It was wrong of her. Maybe if she had said the right thing, all these years wouldn't have gone by without us knowing she belonged. Raul might not have missed so much of her life.

"I had a long talk with my wife. We all did, but nothing changed until your *changa* walked into the room and demanded what was hers." Oh, he was definitely proud now. "Your mother didn't tell me exactly what was said, but she did tell me there was no pretending Chloe wasn't yours. Stubborn. Pushy. Rude. I think she did see you there, but more herself, when she was young, because the only thing she didn't call that baby was fat, but she was smiling. Next thing I know, midnight Mass turns into a war party, planning the attack. Everyone agreed to meet here. To bring Christmas to you." Thomas's gaze centered on Penelope. "I don't know that she can apologize the way she should, but she did this for you. To let you know you and Chloe are welcome. That she was wrong. It's a start, no?"

She nodded, wanting to cry, never having expected her house to literally overflow with people. To feel so...homey. The voices in the kitchen rose, some with laughter, grabbing their attention before the next eruption of sound from the living room. She looked again at all the kids finding a spot in there to settle into. Most were on the floor. "But we're going to need more chairs."

Raul's laugh against her ear made her smile. Happy as they'd been the last few weeks, she'd known separating from his family had been hard on him. The relief on his face, in his touch, had her rubbing her hand over his heart.

"We should get dressed," he rumbled, his voice thick with emotion. She knew he could care less about being seen shirtless, he just needed some time to get his feelings under control. And she could see how getting some underwear on might make her feel a little more comfortable as well.

Before they moved, the older man reached out and took Penelope's hand. His fingers felt both hard and worn, callused and fragile. He tugged her down a step, smiling again before kissing her cheek. "Welcome to the family, *güerita*."

Thomas let go and started a slow path into the living room, shushing a kid over on the couch. Penelope stared, feeling both marked and a little nervous. Raul ushered her up the stairs again, into the bedroom where he hustled her into the shower. In seconds, it seemed, his hands were on her and his kiss was leaving her breathless.

"Wait." She pulled back, pushing at his shoulders when he would have taken another taste of her. "Does your father think we're engaged or something? He welcomed me to the family."

Raul grinned. "No, he just knows when the writing is on the wall. I'm a taken man, *querida*. About the only one who didn't know that was you."

She could only smile back, but as she leaned in to kiss him something obvious hit her between the eyes. "Am I imagining things or did thirty people just come in my house, walking around like they own the place?"

"Sure did." A kiss to her nose and, damn him, a quick squeeze of her rear. "That's just part of being Montenga, sweetheart. Better get used to it."

"We could also get better locks," she said, when the squeeze turned into a slow caress.

"We could get padlocks and it wouldn't change a damn thing." He kissed her again, pressing her into the cool tiles while she giggled.

"I guess there are worse things in life than a holiday stampede." She gasped when his fingers delved between her thighs to find her already wet for him. He stroked, his expression satisfied and sensual, his full lips curving upward when the gasp became a moan.

"And just imagine, *querida*," his voice rumbled next to her ear, pleased and perfect, "for at least the next five minutes, you don't have to think about a single one of them."

## About the Author

Dee Tenorio is a sick woman. Really sick. She enjoys tormenting herself by writing romantic comedies (preferably with sexy, grumpy heroes and smart-mouthed heroines) and sizzling, steamy romances of various genres spanning dramas with the occasional drop of suspense all the way to erotic romance. But why does that make her sick?

Because she truly seems to enjoy it.

And she has every intention of keeping at it!

If you would like to learn more about Dee and her work, please visit her website at <a href="https://www.deetenorio.com/Blog/">www.deetenorio.com/Blog/</a>.

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All of You All or Nothing As their passion catches fire, so does a killer's vengeance...

### Love Me Tomorrow

#### © 2009 Dee Tenorio

#### A Rancho del Cielo Romance

In the sleepy town of Rancho del Cielo, a killer arsonist is targeting firefighter Josh Whittaker's friends, family and most importantly...the love of his life.

As fires encircle Josh's life, his troubles mount. His best friend is dead. The woman he'd give his life to protect is pregnant. Secrets he's held on to for years are spilling free. If he could just find his equilibrium, he could pull himself together. What he doesn't know is that someone is dead-set on tearing everything he knows apart.

Losing a lifelong friend has finally awakened Miranda McTiernan to how much of her life has been spent in limbo. Now that she's pregnant, a dream she never believed could happen, the reality isn't quite what she'd expected. Instead of being happy and secure, she's scared and hiding a secret that could ruin the future she's worked so hard to create.

Assuming she has a future...

Warning: Includes a heroine out to get her man, a hero determined to do the wrong thing for the right reasons, and hormones gone wild.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for* Love Me Tomorrow:

She dripped water, her eyelashes carrying droplets and her mouth curved into a smile trained directly on him. Josh had a hard time pulling in a deep enough breath. Until some part of his brain not rendered stupid noticed something out of sync. It wasn't her usual smile, the one that brightened her whole face and whole parts of his life. No, this one was confident. Pleased. Self-satisfied. *Son of a bitch*.

"Hey, Josh. I needed a swim, hope you don't mind."

Hairs on the back of his neck rose and tingled at the husky tone of her voice. *Careful. Don't let her know you're on to her—whatever it was she was doing*. Thankfully for his blood-deprived mind, it wasn't hard to guess what that might be. "Nope. My casa is your casa, right?"

Miranda's smile widened and she sauntered out to the lawn chair beneath the large patio umbrella. She lay below its shade, hiding from the direct beams of the sun, even though it was sinking behind the hills. She had to. Everyone in town knew she burned like a witch in Salem under direct sunlight. Anyone with a brain would know cream-colored skin like hers didn't need sun anyway.

But he wasn't supposed to have a brain right now.

So he watched her brush off all the excess water. Her fingers almost seemed to be caressing her own skin, over her forearms up to her shoulders, down her curved neck. He almost forgot how important breathing was when she ran her fingers over the slope of her half-exposed breast.

"Can you bring me a beer?"

She hated beer and he knew it, but that didn't register right away.

By the time it did, he'd already turned back into the kitchen and grabbed two from the fridge. He almost said something right then, but she turned to him with a diabetes-inducing smile. The little brat thought she had him exactly where she wanted, didn't she?

"Josh?" She pulled a small bottle of lotion from her tiny terrycloth robe and started applying it to her arms and chest.

He watched, unable to decide which of them to be more disgusted with. Her for thinking he'd fall for this stupid plan to seduce him or himself for being dumb enough to almost prove her right. At her humming, he shook his head and sighed. She was moving so damn slow, the sun would be down before she ever got it applied everywhere it needed to be. "I haven't seen that suit yet. Is it new?" he asked, handing her the beer, purposely keeping the entranced puppy look on his face. When her fingertips slid between her breasts, it took considerably less effort to do.

"Yup. It showed the most skin. It's not very me, but I need an allover tan."

He frowned, accidentally losing his stunned-stupid gaze. "What for?"

"Because men like tans. You turned me down. Now I have to attract someone else to be a father. I figure it'll help."

He screwed his brows together in consternation. "I thought you wanted the best family you knew for your baby." Hadn't she mentioned something about that when she was prattling about sperm donors? His eyes followed her oiled hands across her skin without his permission. How much lotion did two breasts really need?

Finally, she had mercy and moved on. The problem was that she reached around her ribs one side at a time, her inner elbows pushing the outer sides of her breasts inward so that the shining flesh pressed together and lifted upward and his brain began to throb. She arched her back and ran one palm down her smooth belly in a way that had his throat closing up. God help him if those searching fingers were going where he thought they were.

Instead, just as she touched the edge of that skimpy bikini line, she lowered her hips and strangely, his lungs deflated as if he'd been holding his breath.

"I did, but your family isn't available." She actually stopped to blink over at him with a saccharine grin. "Truth is, I don't have to be so picky. We live in RDC. I've known just about every man here all my life. I know *everyone's* family. There's plenty of men to pick from."

His breath stopped moving for entirely new reasons. She'd better not be thinking what he thought she was thinking. "You don't really believe you can just talk someone into fathering a child for you?"

She gave a spurt of disbelief. "Are you kidding? No one is going to volunteer for that. Not with you constantly browbeating anyone who looks at me."

He almost let himself sigh, relieved.

"So I've decided to become promiscuous. If I'm easy enough, no one will think about you at all." She had the audacity to wink.

Do not choke.

"You've gotta admit, it's the one thing I haven't tried. Even you can't beat up every man in town."

Do. Not. Choke. Her.

He scratched the side of his head so hard it was likely bleeding. "Aren't you overestimating here? I mean, not that you couldn't get their attention, but there aren't many available men just wandering around RDC, waiting for a promiscuous woman to fall into their laps."

She stared at him incredulously, but he continued calculating which men in their tiny little town she had to choose from. Thankfully for his escalating blood pressure, pickings were slim. He knew most men close to their ages were married or just damn ugly. Except for the guys at the—

"What about the guys at the firehouse? I'm sure a few of them wouldn't mind a tumble. What about Andy Raymond? He likes me. He probably wouldn't turn me down if we went out on a date."

Of course Andy wouldn't. The kid left a trail of drool behind her whenever she was in the station. Josh's brain skidded to a halt as he tried to think of a good way to deter her.

"No." It was all that came to mind.

She turned innocent eyes on him. Some feat, considering that Miranda was the least innocent person he knew.

"Why not?"

"Why not? Why not?" Shit. Back to square one. "The gossips," he finally dragged out of his ass.

"You think your baby would be able to live down your reputation after something like that?" Heartened by her blank blink, he picked up steam. "You know what this place is like. People are going to find out no matter what you do." Her mouth quirked to one side. "I can afford to move."

Of course she could. Her illustrated children's books had been doing well for more than a few years. She could afford whatever she damn well wanted. But the thought of her leaving left him even colder than the prospect of her traipsing around with any guy she could find. He searched for another tack.

"You can't leave your house. You love that house." It was falling down around her ears because she refused to update it to safety code, but she loved it.

"I don't have to sell it. I'll figure that part out later."

She continued rubbing the coconut-smelling concoction over her legs, lifting them straight up, one at a time, all but purring at the touch of her own hands. Josh scrambled for something else to think about other than her apparent flexibility.

"Well, it can't be Andy, he's only twenty-two."

"Young is good." She smiled lasciviously, eyes closed while she sighed, dropping her forehead to press against her shin, wearing a slow grin he could only call sinful. "I like a guy with...energy."

He couldn't contain a convulsion.

"Besides, it's not as if I'm limited to just Rancho del Cielo. We're not exactly in quarantine here. There's available men in San Diego. Even Orange County if I want. I could sleep with any number of them."

"You can't go around having unprotected sex with people until you get pregnant! It's stupid and it's dangerous!" Trump card. It was one thing to let Miranda get away with manipulating him. It was something else to let her get into that kind of trouble with other men. She'd behave now, he was sure.

Except she looked like he'd just stolen her bunny. She lowered her leg and any trace of a smile melted away. Suddenly, she seemed so uncertain and almost afraid, he wanted to scoop her into his arms and just hold her for a while.

Which would lead in all the wrong directions. He had to make sure she understood, and comforting her wasn't the way to go about it.

"I guess you're right," she conceded. "It's not the same world out there as it was when we were kids. It wouldn't be safe." She took a moment to consider her options. "I guess that brings me back to young Andy."

"Will you stop calling him young?" Josh rubbed his bleary eyes, willing away the idea she'd conjured of her and Young Andy Raymond. Damn, now she had *him* doing it.

"Who? You mean Young Andy? Young, young Andy Raymond." She was too damn giddy about ruffling his feathers.

"Youth isn't everything when it comes to sex. In fact, it's usually detrimental." He leaned toward her. "Experience goes a long way."

"That's a good point. Maybe not Andy. I mean, if I'm going to sleep around, I might as well enjoy it." Oh, for the love of God. "You're not sleeping with anyone!"

"I don't remember asking permission, Josh." She rose to her feet, putting her hands on her bare hips in a few lithe movements he shouldn't have noticed. Unnerved at facing her waist level, he stood too. Unfortunately, for him, the space between the two lawn chairs they'd been sitting on didn't allow for two adults to stand. He ended up wrapping an arm around her still-wet form to steady them both, and she pressed flush against him. The mixed smell of coconut lotion and Miranda, tempered by chlorine and wide green eyes blinking in surprise, dizzied his senses.

Or maybe it was just feeling her again, his body automatically taking her weight as if it still remembered the one time he'd been allowed. The time he'd been trying for years to forget. Now it was impossible to ignore the electricity he'd only ever felt with her. The air around them crackled almost

audibly. His arm tightened on her at about the same time that she rose on her tiptoes and tentatively pressed her lips to his.

## One Night in Napa

#### © 2009 Allie Boniface

Journalist Grant Walker has one chance to salvage his job and his relationship with his domineering father. When terrorists kidnap a fading film star's son, he's there to get the first interview with a grieving mother. Even better, her illegitimate granddaughter arrives on the scene—a granddaughter who hasn't been heard from in seven long years. It's the story of a lifetime, and all Grant has to do is deliver.

Kira March left her childhood home seven years earlier, vowing never to return after discovering a terrible secret about her birth. But when her father is taken hostage and her adoptive grandmother cracks under media pressure, it's up to Kira to find and destroy all evidence of that secret. Trouble is, a reporter has weaseled his way into the house looking for answers—and he isn't leaving until he gets them.

As the hours pass, Kira finds herself falling for the very man who can destroy her. And when Grant comforts her in the wake of a midnight tragedy, he discovers that reporting a story gets a lot more complicated when you have feelings for your interview subject. As dawn nears, both Kira and Grant are forced to examine the ways in which their fathers have shaped them—and the lengths they'll go to protect and uphold the family name.

Warning: This title contains a hunky hero who thinks he knows it all, an unconventional heroine who's out to prove him wrong, a ticking clock, family secrets, and enough sexual tension to heat every corner of an enormous mansion...especially when the power goes out

*Enjoy the following excerpt for* One Night in Napa:

Kira's eyes filled. After a long minute, she switched on her Internet connection. She wanted to know. She didn't want to know. She couldn't bear to look. Her knees popped as she stood and stretched. *Come on*. Her thumbs pattered against the keyboard, impatient. The screen took forever to load, and when it did, the picture looked faded and filmy. "Damn battery." She held it up to the light.

"Everything okay?"

She jumped at Grant's voice, just over her shoulder. "God. Don't sneak up on me."

He brushed dark curls out of his tired eyes. "Sorry." He leaned closer, and his breath raised the hairs on the back of her bare neck.

"Could you possibly not crowd me?"

He cleared his throat and stepped back again. She shivered at his nearness and wondered if he guessed that the real reason she wanted him away was because she no longer trusted herself not to fall into the comfort he was trying to provide.

Kira leaned against the counter and squinted at the screen. After a minute, a news report scrolled along the bottom: *Morelli Kidnappers Continue With Demands*. She shook her head and found another site with an AP bulletin, time-stamped 10:56 p.m.

"The administration is refusing to give in to the terrorists' demands to release twelve prisoners from the Guantanamo Bay complex," she read aloud. "At this time there has been no further discussion by either party. Ambassadors in the countries of..."

A cold stone lodged inside her stomach, and Kira stopped reading. She blinked to keep her tears at bay. "Refusing?" She looked at Grant and then flung the phone across the room. "How can they re-refuse?" She wrapped her arms around her waist and began to hiccup. "It's my fa-father—it's a person's *life* they're talk-talking about. It's—"

She couldn't get any more words out. She wasn't even sure what she meant to say. War images flashed through her mind: bloody bodies, overturned jeeps, a somber president who praised fallen troops, and mothers who wailed over their sons' coffins. *Hundreds of people die every year, in one war or another.*One person means nothing in the big picture. Not even a person the world adores.

She sank to the floor, legs rubbery. For the first time, the possibility that her father might really die clutched in the back of her throat. Shaking, she leaned over and buried her forehead against her fists on the cold tile.

"Hey." She felt a touch on her back. "Hey, hang on there."

But Kira had nothing to hang on to. No hope, no good memory. She opened her eyes and stared at the pattern of dark green and gray tile beneath her. It spun, grew lighter and darker by turns, until she thought she'd go mad. Tears dripped. Her head pounded.

"Kira?" Grant's hand moved from the small of her back to her shoulder.

She stiffened, but only for a moment. Then she acquiesced because the pressure at her temples and the tightness in her chest softened as he moved his fingers along her spine. She didn't speak. She barely moved. She remained prone, because she didn't have the energy to sit up. Fatigue washed over her in waves.

Still he sat there with her, silent. His fingers moved in the fringe of hair along her neck. His palm flattened in the space between her shoulder blades, and the heat from his touch seeped into her in slow degrees. Finally she pushed herself to a seated position, in slow jerking movements, until she sagged against the refrigerator with her arms crossed.

One breath, she told herself. In and out. Just keep breathing. It amazed her how difficult that one act could become, when it seemed as though the entire world crushed her with desperation.

Just breathe.

After what seemed like a long time, she opened her eyes. Grant was crouching beside her, a few inches away, and saying nothing. His hands rested on his knees. The breaths came more easily, one after another, and she rubbed a hand over her face. Outside, the rain increased, spitting against the windows.

"A little better?" His breath feathered her ear, and she shivered at the chill that crept along her skin.

She nodded. "A little." She closed her eyes as his fingers brushed her neck, and then her jaw. "That tickles."

He didn't say anything. But he didn't move away either.

Kira kept her eyes closed. For a moment, she let herself imagine she was sitting somewhere else. She imagined she was some*one* else, the someone else she'd tried to become after leaving home. *It would be so easy, if I was just a girl and he was just a guy.* She wouldn't be sitting here trying to rationalize every thought and resist every touch. She could flirt. She could turn and wrap her arms around his neck. She could just...be.

Grant's arm slipped around her waist, and he leaned closer, pressing his cheek to her temple. Affectionate. Comforting. Kira let the sensation move down her, warming her until her toes burned against the tile underneath them.

"Can I do anything?"

For a moment, Kira's thoughts turned decidedly twisted, and the fine line between the agony of missing her father and the ecstasy of blending into a man blurred. She almost told Grant he could do whatever he wanted, right then and there, wide windows or cold tile or granite countertop be damned. Then she reined in the heat that slipped through her veins.

"Like what?" Kira looked at him and lifted her chin. But facing him turned out to be a bigger mistake than she'd guessed. Want colored his eyes a deeper shade of blue, and his smile lit something inside her. She swallowed. She knew she only had to reach up with one hand, draw in his mouth with hers, and Grant Walker would wrap those arms around her and lift her, breathless, off her feet.

So she did.

Grant hadn't expected this. He wasn't sure what he'd expected at all, when he approached Kira and dared to touch her. He'd thought maybe he could ease her anxiety. Maybe even convince her to talk to him some more.

But every rational thought left his mind when Kira pressed her fragile frame against his and opened his lips with her tongue. His hands slid to her waist and he pulled her to a stand, breathing in a fragrance that reminded him of springtime.

She murmured something against his mouth that turned him heady. Grant shifted and took a step back, fighting for composure. She reached for him, her eyes so wide that he thought he might slip inside them and not come up for air. His groin ached, and something in the back of his mind thought he should probably stop this before it went somewhere it shouldn't. But this was Isabella Morelli he had his arms wrapped around. And she—was that a tongue stud exploring his mouth? Cold metal touched his bottom lip, and stars exploded behind his eyes.

She laced her hands behind his neck and stood on her tiptoes. Her mouth moved to his cheek, his neck, his collarbone.

"Hey." With great effort, he pulled away from her.

She continued to look at him with those dark brown, heavy-lidded eyes.

"This—I really shouldn't." He could barely choke out the sentence.

The tiniest frown knit her brows together, and she caught her bottom lip between her teeth. She locked her gaze with his, and Grant could almost feel her peeling away his shirt and khakis. Jesus, what a look. No wonder the camera loved her.

"I—" It took near-inhuman strength to loosen his hold on her waist. "I don't want..."

"Me?"

He almost laughed. "Christ, no. You—" You drive me crazy in ways you can't even imagine. But a bizarre sense of duty, even this close to midnight, knocked against his brain. He didn't want to fulfill the prophecy he knew waited for him at the Chronicle's office. He didn't want to play the predictable role of cavalier Grant Walker, playboy extraordinaire, and think with the wrong brain. Not when he was this close to getting the story of a lifetime.

He ran a finger along her chin. Yet somehow the story of Isabella Morelli was far less fascinating right now than the curve of her mouth. Or the length of her fingers, especially when they were buried in his hair.

"I'm a reporter," he began.

"So you said."

"I don't want to take advantage of you."

She raised an eyebrow. "Who says you're taking advantage?"

## Obsession

#### © 2009 Sharon Cullen

A Love on the Edge Story

Only a year ago, Officer Alex Juran and his wife Tess had it all. Love, a solid marriage and a baby on the way. Then in one heartbeat they lost everything.

Now, Tess is doing her best to move on. She has a thriving business and while she may be lonely at times, she's proud of the new life she's built without Alex.

Two days before their divorce is final, Alex is shot in the line of duty and left for dead. He faces a difficult recovery so Tess finds herself postponing the divorce and offering to care for him until he can live alone again.

At first, cohabitation is little more than combat. Alex's incapacitating injuries, the looming divorce, and his inability to remember who shot him have him lashing out at the nearest target: Tess. When someone begins stalking her, he suspects his shooter has returned. Convinced that Tess is in danger, Alex becomes desperate to recover his strength.

Because no matter how much she's hurt him in the past, they've been given a second chance—and he'll do anything to protect his wife.

Warning: This book does not come with a box of Kleenex, so please grab one before you start reading. Contains two people struggling to learn to love again, along with sex, violence and realistic language. And some very hot cops.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for* Obsession:

Tess opened her eyes and pushed the hair out of them to look at the clock but it still wasn't there. "Damn, Alex, it'd be nice to know what time it is."

She couldn't really be angry at him. Not when he'd gone to such lengths to finish her Christmas season for her. If watching him struggle to bake cookies hadn't told her how much she loved him, then curling up next to his warmth last night had.

She didn't know how many times he'd woken her, forcing her to swallow her medicine and drink the fluids the doctor recommended. His thoughtfulness surprised her, and yet she remembered a time, long ago, before careers got in the way, when he'd been the same man he was last night—tender, thoughtful, generous and loving.

A lone tear leaked out of her clenched eyes. It wouldn't last. It never did. He'd go back to his career and slowly drift away from her.

Rolling to her side, she pulled her knees up to her chest and closed her eyes again, willing herself back to the oblivion of sleep.

Small things broke her concentration. The slam of a car door, the slurp-slurp of Othello drinking out of his water bowl, the low murmur of the television, the soft hiss of the furnace right before it kicked on.

As sure as sunshine in July, she knew Alex was somewhere in this house. How often had she awoken with that knowledge?

Not often enough.

She was reluctant to face him, yet knew she couldn't hide forever. What would they talk about?

Face it, Tess, you have nothing in common with your husband.

They'd been living together for almost two weeks. Two weeks of constant activity between baking, delivering, shuttling him from doctor appointments to physical therapy. Weeks of avoiding the topic of divorce. They hadn't sat down and had a normal conversation in months. Now she feared they'd forgotten how.

Thirty minutes later Tess emerged from the bathroom freshly showered and wearing clean flannel pajamas under her robe. Her bones felt like rubber but she was tired of lying in bed so she headed for the living room.

The flickering of the television screen mingled with the flickering of the tree and fireplace. Alex was slouched in one corner of the couch, his bad leg resting on the coffee table, the other leg bent at the knee. A longneck bottle of beer dangled from his hand. Ragged jeans hugged his thighs and lay loose across his abdomen. A faded gray University of Cincinnati sweatshirt hitched up slightly to reveal a small sliver of skin between the jeans and shirt. His hair looked like he'd been raking his hands through it.

"You look better." His brown eyes reflected the fire in the grate.

"That's some compliment, coming from you."

He smiled and set the beer bottle on the table beside the couch. Using both hands, he grasped his bad knee, lowered his leg to the floor, grabbed his cane and stood. "You're probably hungry. I'll fix you something to eat."

"I can get it."

He hobbled to the kitchen, his gait stiff until he'd walked a few steps. "No problem."

Tess followed. "What time is it? I think someone stole my alarm clock."

"That would be me. Want to file a report?" He looked over his shoulder and threw her a grin that had her stopping in her tracks and trying to regain her breath. It'd been a long time since she'd seen that grin and Lord, how she'd missed it.

She cleared her throat and continued on to the kitchen. "What good would it do? You've got an in with the cops around here."

He laughed—a rich, deep sound that vibrated through her and made her heart ache. They used to laugh like that all the time. Before things fell apart.

"Did you get the cookies delivered?" She looked around the pristine kitchen. Every speck of flour had been wiped away. Every pan cleaned and stored. The appliances gleamed.

Alex opened the refrigerator and stuck his head inside. "Yup, all done."

Tess glanced at the digital clock on the stove. Eight o'clock. "You managed to make all the deliveries and clean up by eight?"

Alex backed out of the refrigerator, the makings of a ham sandwich in his hands. "That was yesterday, Tess."

"Yesterday? Are you saying I slept over twenty-four hours? That means today is—"

"Christmas." He slapped thick slices of ham on rye bread and slathered it with mustard, just the way she liked it.

"I slept through Christmas Eve? And Christmas day? Oh, Alex, I'm sorry. You were all alone on Christmas."

"No need to apologize. I've done the same to you once or twice."

Taken aback, she just stood there, twisting the belt of her robe in her hands. What could she say? He *had* abandoned her on many a Christmas Eve, but for him to acknowledge it was a huge step and one that left her confused.

He reached into the fridge again, pulled out a can of root beer and handed it to her. "You'll have to carry this. I only have one free hand."

Tess followed him into the living room, matching her pace to his. He placed the plate on the coffee table and sank into the couch with a sigh. She stood in front of him, still stunned she'd slept so long and missed most of Christmas.

Alex held his arm out, indicating the spot next to him where she could curl into his side. "Sit beside me, Tess."

She clutched the cold can and looked at his outstretched arm. Her wobbly legs gave out and she sank into the opposite end of the couch.

Alex's arm dropped, disappointment evident in the crease of his brow. Tess reached for her plate and ate her sandwich, chewing methodically while not tasting anything.

They watched *It's a Wonderful Life* in silence while the fire crackled in the grate and the dog snored at Tess's feet. The heat from the flames made her drowsy, but she refused to fall asleep. She wouldn't abandon Alex on Christmas night too.

After the credits stopped rolling and an infomercial began, Alex turned the TV off, but he continued to stare at the blank screen, occasionally lifting the beer bottle and taking a swallow.

The sandwich sat heavy in Tess's stomach. She took a sip of root beer to calm the churning.

This is what you dreaded, isn't it? Not the lack of communication, but the lack of having anything to say to each other.

Her gaze darted around the room, flitting here and there, everywhere but at Alex. She settled on the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree. Her attention sharpened, focused. She pushed herself up from the couch and walked with slow, hesitant steps to the tree where she touched the apple-shaped bell, sending a merry tinkling through the still house. Her gaze shifted to the bear pulling a tree behind him and then to the red glass globe painted with the Cincinnati skyline.

Memories hit her with enough force to double her over in pain. Only the weight of Alex's watchful gaze kept her back stiff.

When she swung around to face him, his brown eyes bore into hers, daring her to say something.

"When did you do this?"

"Two days ago."

"You had no right—"

"I had every right."

"How do you figure? We're—"

"Still married."

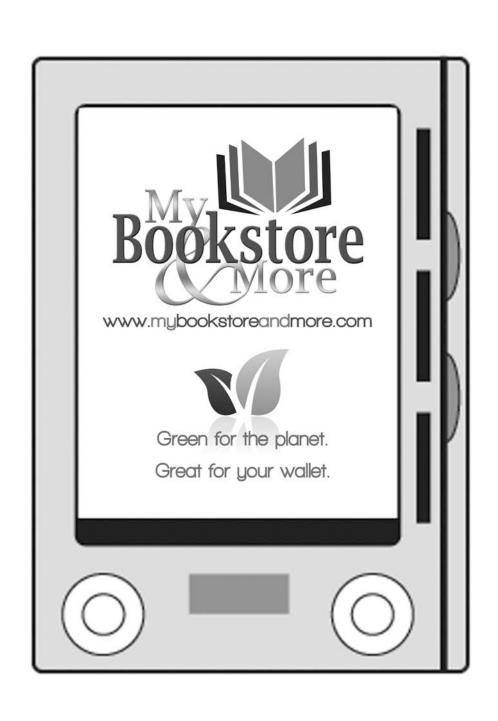
She took an involuntary step back, startled at his angry tone. He had a tight hold on the beer bottle and his shoulders were tense. He acted as if he hadn't known. Surely his attorney had told him she'd canceled the court date. Surely Alex had known she would never dissolve their marriage while he was in the hospital.

His lips thinned into a tight line, his eyes narrowed.

He hadn't known.

But he knew now.

Oh, God.



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