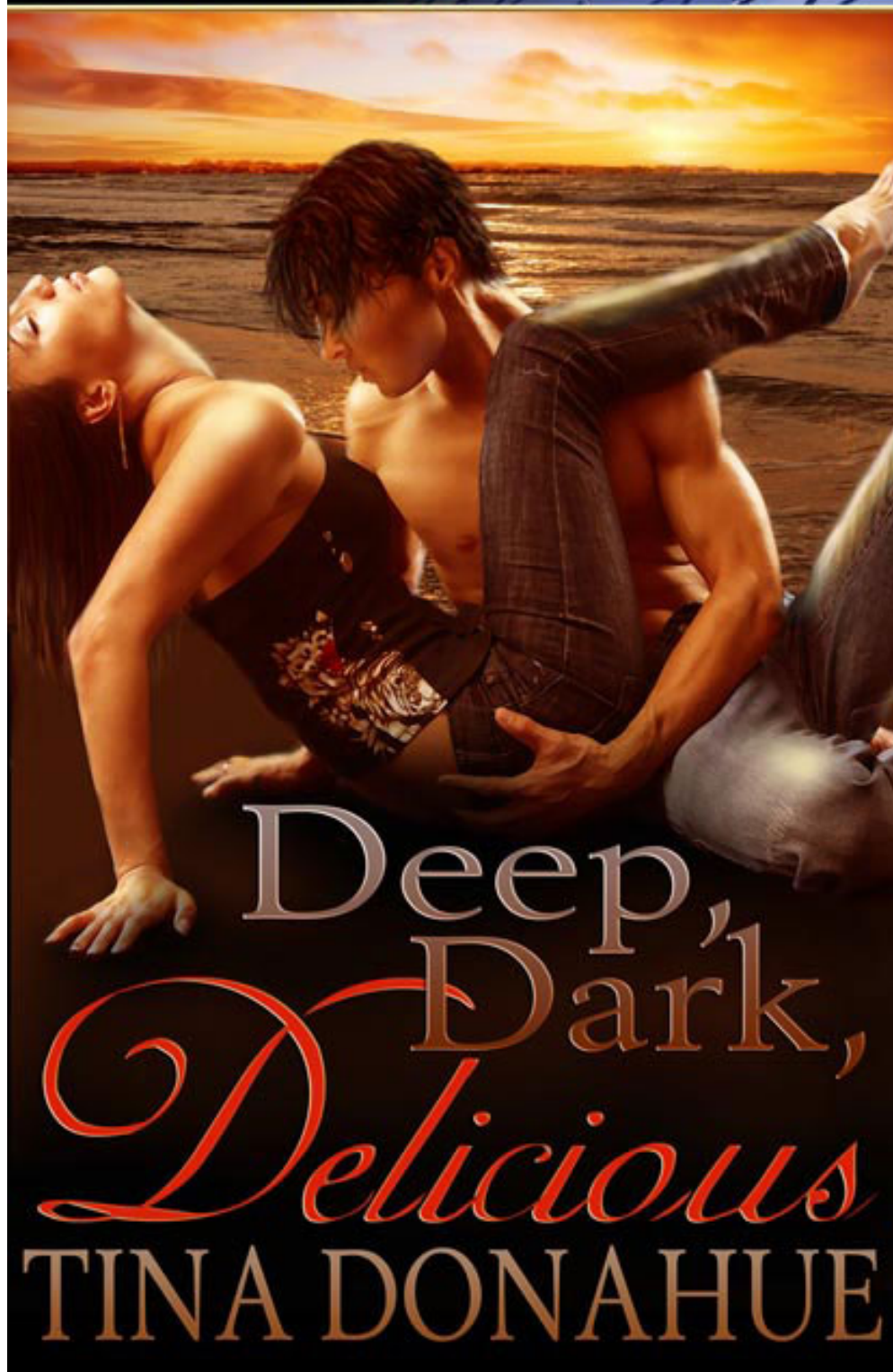


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Deep, Dark, Delicious

Tina Donahue

A wickedly sensual feast...

Eden DeCarlo may have narrowly lost Miami's best chef competition and the prize money she desperately needs, but she has caught the eye of dangerously virile Rafael Zayas, one of the judges and a wealthy restaurateur. Despite her vow not to let any man derail her life, Eden's captivated by Rafe's imposing masculinity, then challenged by the business deal he offers. He'll invest in her new venture if, for one month, she can satisfy his culinary expectations and the sexual attraction they both feel.

Dominant and unashamed, Rafe knows what he wants when it comes to carnal pleasure and will spare no seduction to have Eden in all the ways he demands – naked, wanting, submissive.

Within thirty days, he will teach her the delights of yielding to passion, relinquishing all control to him and fulfilling her deepest, darkest and most delicious desires.

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www.ellorascave.com

Deep, Dark, Delicious

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DEEP, DARK, DELICIOUS

Tina Donahue

Dedication

To TK and SL...my wonderful friends

And to Sue-Ellen Gower, editor extraordinaire. Your skilled guidance has helped me greatly, Suz – thanks so much.

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Chapter One

Faced with financial ruin, Eden DeCarlo wasn't in the mood to mingle at the wrap party for Miami's Master Chef Competition, a contest she'd narrowly lost. She'd come to tonight's celebration for one foolish, irresistible reason—to see a man she had no business craving.

Go on, get the hell out of here before he catches you staring. With a heavy sigh, she moved away from the other guests but didn't head for the door. Instead, she went in the opposite direction, halting at the indoor pool. Turning, she struggled not to look at Rafael Zayas again and lost, her eyes seeking him across the penthouse suite. A mistake, she knew. Men like Rafe could only bring more trouble.

Commanding and assured, he went to Eden's fellow contestants, shaking their hands, listening politely to each chef's gushing words, offering comments that made the males grin broadly and caused the females to drool.

Distressingly jealous at the young women's obvious flirting, Eden gripped her cocktail glass. *Leave him alone.* They didn't. Shoulders tensed, her gaze trickled down him.

Easily one of the tallest men in attendance, he wore a black dress shirt of an expensive fabric opened at the throat and black linen pants draped superbly on his lean, powerful build. The color enhanced his sooty lashes and eyes, bronze skin and cocoa-colored hair. Wavy strands dangled over his forehead, begging a woman to ease them back.

Eden's pulse beat triple-time. Hand trembling, she took a sip of her *Mojito Cubano*, desperate for the lime-and-rum cocktail to calm her so she could regain control. No matter her attraction to Rafe, no matter the heat in his eyes each time they spoke, she couldn't allow a man to derail her life. She'd seen what it had done to her mother and still lived with the consequences. Shaking off the past, determined for the future, she willed the booze to do its work.

Her heart continued to pound.

Unaware of her torment, the others laughed and talked. Their noise drifted across the spacious, moneyed room. More than five-thousand-square feet of shimmery chandeliers, sweeping staircases and arched windows overlooking the restless Atlantic and the brash glitter of Miami Beach. Soft Latin music played, a sensual mix of guitars and muted trumpets Gloria Estefan, Miami's former pop-princess, would have enjoyed. Expensive perfumes, colognes and the clean, sharp bite of the pool's chlorine mingled with the aromas coming from the kitchen. Tonight's feast included coconut shrimp, almond-crusted salmon, Serrano ham, roasted pork with an herb-garlic rub and delicate tomato sauces. Wait staff in crisp white shirts and dark dress pants provided

meticulous service, offering appetizers and drinks to tide everyone over until it came time for the buffet.

Rafe moved past the contestants, his dark eyes scanning the guests, searching.

Eden's mouth went dry as he turned toward her.

One of the competition's producers stopped him. With her arm slipped through his, the fortyish woman led him to the advertisers, among them Luis Famosa. Luis owned this penthouse and De Cocina Foods, which provided the competition's hundred-thousand-dollar prize.

Rafe greeted the elderly man as one would in Europe or in this country's immigrant enclaves, with a warm hug and a kiss on both of Luis' age-furrowed cheeks. The two men were among the most successful Cubans in Miami. Luis's food warehouses dominated the market. Rafe—a thirty-three-year-old celebrity chef, restaurateur and one of the competition's judges—owned a number of award-winning restaurants, had a line of popular cookware and books and served as the TV spokesperson for numerous products.

The kind of man who could have anything or anyone he wanted.

A tormenting heaviness settled between Eden's legs, the same now as when he'd judged her dishes in the contest, his rich mouth and beard-shadowed cheeks mesmerizing her. Why she wanted him wasn't a mystery. Like all rational women, she found his raw sexuality irresistible, the stuff of indecent fantasies. Not that she would act on it. Her mother's missteps taught her the danger of hungering for a man. Besides, she should hate him for eliminating her last entrée, which cost her the prize.

The three other judges had raved about her island flatbread, cinnamon sweet potatoes and *Chicharrones de Pollo*—the Dominican version of fried chicken. And then Rafe spoke, his voice resonant and lyrical with a hint of his native Spanish. "You have greatness in you. This effort, though good, wasn't worthy of your talent."

Her stomach had sunk even as her nipples puckered so tight they hurt.

Damn him. She guzzled her cocktail. Rafe nodded to whatever the male producer said. The movement freed more of his hair, the chocolate strands skipping over his brow. He lifted his heavy crystal glass, tasting his drink. Bacardi Gold shone on his bottom lip.

Eden forced down a swallow. Despite how her mind cautioned, she longed to lick the rum away and stroke his satiny mouth with her tongue. To rest her face against his neck and feel his accelerating pulse as she pushed his shirt over his broad shoulders and down his sinewy arms. To kneel before him, her nose to the dark tangle of hair above his cock, fragrant with musk. To know the seductive promise of his belly and thighs pressed against hers.

He gave Luis a parting hug, much like a favorite son to a beloved father, then turned and met her eyes.

Blood drained from Eden's face and returned so quickly her body didn't know whether to be hot or cold. Lightheaded, she shivered a bit with each.

Eyes fixed on her, Rafe approached, his expression ordering her to stay put, daring her not to move.

Disobedient, she backed into one of the wide towering columns, a fruitless attempt to flee what her body coveted. Above, stars twinkled through the domed glass ceiling. Here, the pool glistened beneath the light of the torches, the flames' reflection streaking gold over the blackened water.

Rafe reached her. She caught his scent, a sun-baked fragrance more caressing than the summer's night air—warm, sultry, virile. Her legs went doughy. She locked her knees.

If he noticed, he didn't let on, though his attention did sharpen, a handsome predator homing in on his prey. Lips turned up in a direct smile, he offered his hand. "Eden."

His vibrant baritone embraced her name with stunning familiarity, disconcerting her further. She shook it off. After tonight, she'd see him on TV or in print advertisements, nowhere else. She'd make certain of it regardless of her lust. She cleared her throat and slipped her coolish, damp fingers over his. His palm was dry and rough, betraying his humble origins. "Chef."

"Rafe." His smile brightened with his gentle admonition, saying he enjoyed being in charge.

An image rose unbidden in her mind. She saw herself in Z, his flagship restaurant, bent at the waist over one of the linen-draped tables as startled patrons and wait staff looked on. Ass high, thighs spread, she posed as he'd commanded, awaiting his touch. He wouldn't shove her dress up her thighs and over her cheeks to have her. He'd fold the gauzy cotton inch by inch, forcing her to anticipate what would come. Panting in expectation, with the chilled air-conditioning glancing off her naked buttocks, she'd remain still, her position imploring him to mount her, use her, punish her if she didn't obey.

Moisture gushed from her sheath. Heat scalded her face and throat. "Rafe," she amended. Her voice vibrated slightly.

He stroked her thumb. A glow slithered up her arms, settling in her chest and dipping to her legs. Her lids slipped down.

"Sir. Ma'am."

It took Eden a moment to open her eyes and focus. To the side, a young male server offered an hors d'oeuvre tray of firecracker shrimp and roasted Cuban bread. Disinterested, her attention swung back to Rafe.

His eyes remained on her. "Were those appetizers prepared using your recipes?"

"No." She studied his mouth, breathless at its sculpted beauty. "Alexander's." The competition's winner.

Rafe arched one dark brow. "Thank you, no," he said to the server, his attention riveted to her. The boy turned away. Rafe added, "Wait." His thumb resumed stroking

her hand. "There's no need for you or any of the other staff to return. The lady and I don't want to be disturbed. Understood?"

Eden's stomach made a funny lurch, a combination of excitement and fear at Rafe wanting them to be alone.

The server inclined his head slightly. "Yes sir." Prior to rushing off, he glanced at the cleavage her dress exposed and the expanse of her legs beneath the skirt.

Uneasy at Rafe's hold on her, Eden pulled her hand from his. Not wanting to appear rattled, she ran her fingers beneath her shoulder-length hair, shaking it away as though it were a bother. "You surprise me."

Amusement glinted in his eyes. He swallowed his sip of Bacardi, turning the glass in his large hand. "Because I sent the boy away before he asked you for a date?"

Startled into smiling, Eden recovered quickly. "I doubt he was that enamored. I'm surprised you didn't try Alexander's appetizers. I thought you adored his food."

Her sarcasm registered on his face. "You blame me for losing, no?"

The frank question and lack of remorse in his expression derailed her again, though not for long. Her voice cooled. "I'm the better chef."

"Agreed."

She stared. Was he putting her on? His uncompromising expression said no. Her body softened with his approval until she remembered what she'd lost. The pain of it showed in her voice. "Then why did he win the hundred grand on your vote?"

Rafe finished his drink and put the glass on a wrought iron table to the side. Facing her, he spoke in a lowered voice, "Why were you born in this country when I was not? Why do some have opportunities handed to them while others have to fight for the same?"

Eden bristled. He believed she'd always had it easy and the contest represented nothing more to her than a foolish whim, not a last-ditch lifeline that hadn't worked out? "You're saying Alexander fought harder for the prize than I did?"

"He had to. The boy doesn't have your gifts."

Her eyes rounded. She wasn't certain whether to argue or thank him. Dammit. A second ago, she'd been ready to tell him to go to hell. Now she ached to cradle his face in her palms and burrow her tongue in his mouth, grazing his shaved cheeks with her thumbs. Unnerved, she sidled away and moved around the column to face the pool, out of sight of the others.

"Whoa, hold it," a youthful male voice said from behind. "They don't want to be bothered. At all."

Eden leaned to the left and looked over. A female server holding a tray of *piña coladas* retreated with the young man previously sent away. Seconds ticked by, matching the swift thumping of her pulse. She turned her face to Rafe.

He regarded her, his expression intent, confident.

A muscle in her pussy jumped. Her nipples hardened. He joined her. Eden lifted the *mojito* to her lips, a barrier for protection. Ice tinkled in her empty glass. Flustered, she lowered her hand.

Rafe's fingers folded over hers, sending a jolt of sensation up her arm. He took her slender glass and set it next to his on the table. "You're young," he murmured, "only twenty-eight. You'll have many opportunities to excel."

She warned herself not to sigh while she stated the obvious. "At twenty-eight you already owned a string of restaurants. You've won the freaking James Beard Award."

He offered a negligent shrug. "I've never taken anything for granted."

And she did? With her sorry background? "Neither have I."

His smile challenged her comment, creasing the corners of his lushly lashed eyes. "As I've said, you're young and far too cocky." He rested his hand on the column next to her head, his long fingers touching her hair. "From the beginning of the competition you had no doubt you'd win. You thought you owned all of the judges, especially me."

An uncomfortable flush stung her face and throat. Her voice sounded outrageously weak. "Showing confidence is not being cocky. In my mind, I agonized over every dish. I tried my best."

"You took few risks."

Her eyes followed his hand. His fingertips skimmed the line of her jaw and throat, sending a new rush of blood to the top of her head and deep within her groin. "I know what I'm capable of. I wanted to win."

"You wanted to be safe. Your choices, execution, plating and originality were strong, some would say excellent, but uninspired, without soul. Particularly on the last entrée, because you thought you'd already won. You believed you had secured my vote and so easily too."

Her brows drew together.

His smile returned. "You're angry with me. Or is it that you hate me?"

She averted her gaze. Faint lights bobbed far out on the ocean, signaling passing ships. Bursts of color—lime greens, faded blues, tarnished golds—spilled onto the beach from the brightly lit hotels and high-rises. Rafe's scent, proximity and heat eroded her annoyance and determination to keep a cool distance. "No, I don't hate you."

"Then you do like me as I've suspected all along?"

Palms to the column, she pressed her fingers against the slick marble, requiring it for support. Denial rose to her lips, a perfect way to end tonight, considering she'd never see him again. She chanced a look at his face and instantly grew unsettled, starved, dizzy. The room shifted around them, the laughter and voices receded, the corners of her vision dimmed. She stared at his dark eyes hooded with brute desire, his mouth the bearer of bad tidings and the core of unbearable pleasure. *Lie to him, tell him no*, her mind warned. "Yes, I do," she admitted.

Satisfaction swept over his features. His fingers caressed the back of her neck. His thumb went to her jaw, nudging it upward, keeping her mouth lifted to his, ready for his impending kiss. "Tell me you want this."

Her lips parted to tell him she did, or to lie and say she never would. Uncertainty tore at her and he decided. His mouth found hers, his tongue invaded with an assurance that went beyond cockiness. For him adolescent behavior wasn't necessary. He knew what he wanted and went after it unashamed. His probing kiss delivered a surge of flavors—rum mixed with spices, tropical fruit and a hint of vanilla all wrapped around his wet heat. A whimper rolled through her followed by a needy moan.

Her hand slid up his biceps. His shirt's fine cotton owned the buttery feel of skin, tempting her to explore further. She clawed the fabric, using it to pull him close, to anchor his body.

Feet braced firmly apart, he pushed his thighs and flat belly into hers, forcing her against the thick column, giving her no chance to deny him or to escape his cock's stiffness and length. Her breath caught. The back of her head and shoulders bumped into the stone. He offered no apology. His tongue drove deeper, stealing her ability to protest or think. His free hand slipped beneath her dress's right strap, pushing it off her shoulder, pulling the top down to expose her breast. A dull ache travelled from her cunt to her inner thighs. For a long moment, he abandoned her flesh to the chilly air pouring from the ceiling vents and to the room in general, those behind them. His actions said he demanded she take a risk she'd avoided so carefully, to trust his judgment that no one but him would see her partial nudity.

Gratification, not compliance, spurred Eden. She ground her hips into his, her mound hurting for his shaft and balls, taunting them. Back arched, she rubbed her nipple against the solid plane of his chest, begging for his touch.

His mouth tore free, though his thumb remained on her chin, keeping it lifted, prepared for his return. Head lowered, he cupped her breast in his other palm, heating her skin. His fingers curled around the mound's pliant contour, kneading the softness so at odds with her rigid nipple.

Ragged breaths pumped from Eden's chest. Eyes closed, face lifted, her mind begged him to lick her nipple, to draw it into his mouth and suckle the compressed ring.

He obliged her to wait, leaving a trail of wet kisses on the top and sides of her breast. The walls of her vagina pulsed. He edged closer to the tip, his tongue circling the protuberance, though he didn't touch it as yet. He lapped her skin, dampening it, leaving her smelling of him. Apparently satisfied with his work, he latched onto her long peak, sucking hard.

Delight sluiced through Eden. Her lips parted on a surprised gasp. In the next instant, Rafe stole it, his tongue plunging back inside, owning her mouth, insistent on her full surrender.

No. At the fringe of her mind, the past returned—her mother turning her over to her grandmother, relinquishing custody just after Eden’s twelfth birthday because her mother’s boyfriend didn’t want the hassle of raising a pre-teen.

“It’s for the best,” her mom had said, then disappeared with the man for four years, giving up her only child for him, allowing him to come first and to forever alter their lives.

Ultimately, he dumped her. Didn’t matter. With careless indifference, her mother returned to Eden and her grandmother for five months. Regrouped, she left Florida with her next love.

Eden’s palms went to Rafe’s chest, fixed on pushing him away. Her mind resolved not to repeat her mother’s mistakes, to desire a man so badly it ruined everything else.

He must have sensed her reluctance. His kiss cooled, becoming tender. Tears pricked her eyes. Her knees sagged, bumping his. He slipped one arm around her waist, pulling her close, offering support. Once more, her mind said *no*. Her body refused to listen. Too quickly, her fingers went to his opened collar to roam over his hot, smooth skin.

Breaking their kiss, he snuggled his cheek against hers. His breathing was harsh. He pulled the top of her dress down, smoothing the stretchy cotton over her breast, his fingers tugging her nipple.

Bone-deep contentment rippled through her.

Mouth to her ear, he whispered, “Come home with me.”

Convinced of her response, Rafe claimed her mouth again, not allowing her to speak.

Words would come later, now he demanded the pillowy comfort of her lips flavored with rum and lime. For twelve endless weeks, he’d fantasized about this as her eyes sought and met his during the competition. Many times, her expression would cloud inexplicably and she’d look away. More times, she had not—held by him as he was by her.

The muscles in his arm flexed, holding her as hard as he dared. He inhaled deeply, catching her fragrance...part perfume, part female. A delectable hint of melon and jasmine with the earthy richness of musk, reminiscent of lazy mornings spent tangled in sheets and a lover’s embrace.

He intended to savor each of her luscious curves thoroughly and unhurriedly throughout his estate. They’d begin on his bed’s sweetly scented linens and move to the heated indoor pool or perhaps the Jacuzzi. Later, naked and dripping, he’d lead her to his kitchen and direct her to lie upon one of the food islands, spreading her legs, bending her knees. Beneath the bright lighting, where she couldn’t hide anything from him, he’d feast upon the juicy petals between her legs. At last, they’d end on the grounds of his estate, their bodies cushioned by the dewy grass and blanketed by the morning’s steamy air. Who could blame him? She had a classically feminine figure, as

alluring as Marilyn Monroe's, as succulent as Jennifer Lopez's, meant to indulge and thrill a man.

Needful of a breath, he tore his mouth free, gulped air and opened his eyes. His heart tripped then beat far too briskly at what he saw. Chestnut waves threaded with gold framed her exotic features, tawny from her Cuban ancestry, rosy from his kiss. His pulse responded with several extra beats at what he'd accomplished. Her plush lower lip was damp and bruised, her slightly flared nostrils as earthy as her fragrance. Long, dark lashes lightened her hazel eyes, a blend of beige and green rimmed by brown, slightly unfocused with wonder. A tiny topaz sparkled on the left side of her nose, her sole adornment. He pictured her wearing only it, her nudity bathed in moonlight and used by him. His cock thickened, his balls plumped, his gaze prowled her provocative dress. Its coppery tint was a shade darker than the gem's amber color. The fabric clung to her generous breasts and dipped to a sharp V at her waist to flare at the skirt and accentuate her lavish hips.

He grinned, liking it, though she wouldn't be wearing the garment for long. Nor would he allow her to cover herself in his presence. Alone with him, he wanted her nude. Stepping back, he lifted her hand to his mouth and brushed his lips over her slender fingers, kissing each knuckle. "I'll say goodbye to Luis and then we'll go."

Her eyes cleared. She twisted her wrist, releasing his hold. "No."

Although surprised at her response, he continued to smile secure in what they both required. "No? Why?" He fingered the ends of her hair, soft as cashmere. "You don't want me to take a moment to say goodbye to my dear friend? Are you in that much of a hurry?"

Her face shifted to his hand moving down her shoulder, his fingers running over her downy arm. She pulled it away. Her voice trembled. "I can't go with you."

Confused, he sobered and brought back his hand. "Tonight?" Briefly, he hesitated. Something he rarely did. "Or any night?"

She glanced past his shoulder at the windows on the far end of the pool, the party reflected within them. Like a blast of wind, the celebration's din rose to an intolerable level and fell quickly, causing a few voices to stand out. Rafe heard Alexander's giddy laugh. Its shrill quality said the boy couldn't quite believe he'd snatched the prize from Eden. Had her wounded sense of pride caused her to pull back just now? If so, where had it been during their kiss? "Is one of the other contestants coming this way?"

Eden kept her face turned from him. "No."

"A server? A guest?"

She shook her head.

The pulse in her throat beat too swiftly, betraying her mounting unease or arousal. Rafe recalled her fingers clutching his shirt, pulling him close and her lips parting to his tongue, welcoming, adoring. "Then why do you refuse to look at me?"

She did finally.

His puzzlement turned to agitation. Gone was the honest awe he'd witnessed a few seconds ago. Her present expression reminded him of the times she'd stood before the judges' table, awaiting his verdict on her work. Beneath her dispassionate demeanor, he'd detected fire, smoldering lust she hadn't allowed herself to admit. "Why won't you answer me?"

A coral blush crept from her throat to her cheeks. Her chest bobbed with her shallow breaths. "I can't come with you. I have too much work to do."

"At this hour?" It was nearly ten.

Something passed over her face. Determination? Irritation? "I'm busy."

He didn't believe her. Or perhaps he didn't want to. Unlike the other women he'd known, Eden already caused him to question himself. "With another man?"

Her eyes widened slightly as though she found the notion ludicrous. He warned himself not to smile in relief.

"No." Frowning, she smoothed her dress. "Work. I have a new venture."

"Congratulations. Another restaurant?"

Her expression froze with unmistakable humiliation, stopping him from saying anything else. *Idiot*, he rebuked himself. Everyone here knew she'd lost her fledgling business when Miami's economy tanked. He shouldn't have reminded her of it.

Too late. With a heavy sigh, she crossed her arms beneath her breasts and sagged against the column. "No. I'm renting my house out to vacationers and providing the standard maid and chef services."

The thought of her cleaning up after strangers didn't set well with him. Unwilling to voice it and wound her further, he kept his tone mild. "You're going home because one of your guests might need you?"

The corners of her mouth turned up in a sardonic smile. "If they needed anything at this hour, I'd tell them to dial the freaking Hilton."

He laughed at her sass, finding it enchanting. With others, he wanted her to always be this way, high-spirited, taking no shit. With him, he wanted her yielding. "How many days have your guests booked?"

Her features went slack. She glanced away. "I insist on two weeks at a time. Nothing less. If I can get it, I'd prefer a month."

"Eden." He reduced the brief distance between them, his thumb and forefinger on her chin, turning her face to his. Her lids fluttered, the guileless wonder began to return. "Do you have guests staying at your house tonight? Have you booked anyone as yet?"

She swallowed. "I've just started. I'm getting out the word."

Then why decline his invitation? A night's enjoyment wouldn't have a substantial impact on her barely begun work. "Is there another reason you won't come home with me?" He touched his lips to her throat, tasting the delightful saltiness of her fevered flesh. "You don't enjoy this?"

A strangled mewl said she did. Her arms uncrossed to slip around his torso. Just as quickly, she brought them back and sighed. "I have to keep working. I can't stop for a second. I have bills to pay."

He heard her lie. Not about her obligations, he didn't doubt she faced financial hurdles.

She intended to refuse him, in spite of their obvious interest in each other. He intended to pursue her because of it. Before another day passed, he'd have her naked, willing to take a risk on him and their passion in a way she never dreamed possible.

"Of course you do," he said to her earlier comment, easing back so he could see her face. "And I have a solution to help you with your finances."

The ends of her hair swept her shoulders with the quick shake of her head. "No. I couldn't accept your help."

He stepped back, hands on his lean hips. "You misunderstand. I'm not offering charity. I never give anything without expecting a fair return."

She took in his length, her expression growing more aroused and curious by the second. Her face lifted. On it, he saw a jumble of emotions—hope, fear, yearning, expectation. Suddenly, he worried he might disappoint her.

"Are you offering me the chef's position at one of your restaurants?"

Her voice sounded so young and eager, his stomach fisted. He should have predicted the question. It made complete sense. "No." He spoke quickly. "Unfortunately, I'd have to kill one of my many relatives in order to free a space for you." His hands went out in a gesture of helplessness. "I can't commit murder, though I am tempted because of your skill."

A smile skipped across her lips. Sadness and doubt returned to her eyes. The same as when she'd lost the competition. "I'm certain your relatives will be grateful. And I do understand. I should go."

He blocked her so she couldn't leave. "You haven't heard my offer."

More color rose to her face. "Unless it involves my cooking for your patrons, I can't imagine I would accept it."

So she did know what he planned to propose, or thought she did. "Hear me out."

Her head turned at the rowdy toast the contestants offered Luis and the show's producers. Again, Alexander's silly laughter rose above the other sounds. Eden shifted her weight. The side of her bronze high-heel sandal touched Rafe's shoe. Face lowered to it, she said, "Go on."

He allowed no uncertainty in his voice. "You want to open your home to vacationers. Very well, I'll be your first customer. I'll book a month with you, your preferred stay, beginning tomorrow. I haven't taken so much as a day off in years. I owe it to myself. My relatives can run the operation. During my month, you'll prove your culinary skills, preparing my meals as you would for any guest. If you please me, I'll

invest in your venture, whether it's this bed-and-breakfast or another restaurant. Whatever you choose, I'll make certain you have the capital you need."

Her head lifted. The light of the torches glittered in her eyes. She blurted, "Why would you want to finance my dream?"

"It's not a matter of wanting to. If you convince me the risk is warranted, I'll be making a sound investment."

"You doubt I'll succeed?"

"Do you?"

She arched one slender brow. "Hell no."

Rafe fought a smile. How fascinating it was going to be to tame her arrogance, at least when it came to their sex games. "There is another condition."

Her brow dropped. She ran her tongue over the edges of her upper teeth and waited.

He cradled the side of her face in his hand, his fingers on her neck. "I want you as much as you want me. We've both known it from the start. Within the thirty days, you'll deny me nothing sexually. I'll have you wherever I want. In any manner I dictate."

Her pulse jumped beneath his thumb. She struggled for breath in order to speak. Neither acceptance nor denial came.

He waited, far more composed than she, fearless in his demands, assured a carnal contract would satisfy. She knew better. She'd seen the bitter results with her mother who'd fallen for too many men.

"Yes or no," he said in an even yet firm voice. "I want your answer now."

Caution warned her to hedge. Rafe's direct gaze told her she could not. He wouldn't play games, he was too honest, insistent, expecting her to gratify his every appetite in whatever way he commanded, while she'd be busy protecting her heart.

Another chorus of toasts rang out. Scattered applause followed. One of the torches sputtered and flared, illuminating the area behind him. His fingers eased through her hair, his thumb caressed.

Eyes closing, her heart soared and sank, uncertain of its direction.

Fearing she'd regret it, sensing her life would never be the same, she gave him her answer.

Chapter Two

The following morning, Eden's cozy kitchen smelled of vanilla, cinnamon and eggs. Comforting aromas she needed, considering her doubt about the previous night's events.

Seemingly unaware of her turmoil, Eden's next-door-neighbor and BFF, Trish Luna, sat cross-legged on a chair, devouring a plate of *torrejas*. The Cuban French toast swam in sugar syrup. Drops of the treacly liquid ran over Trish's bottom lip. She moaned and shivered like a teenage boy during his first orgasm. "Wow."

Slumped in her chair, Eden pushed her *Huevos a la Habanera*—fried eggs with rice and plantains—from one side of her plate to the other. "You always say that. You like everything I cook. You eat everything I cook. How do you stay so thin?"

At twenty-nine, Trish was remarkably slender with pubescent boobs and a slightly rounded belly, the only indication she ate so much. She had dark red hair, cut boyishly short, and a ghostly complexion that made her an anomaly in sun-drenched Florida, forcing her to wear a floppy straw hat whenever outside. Marriage to Chris Luna, a successful personal injury attorney, gave her the opportunity to work from home on her artsy fixtures and accent pieces.

Her crystal chandelier, a prism of color and dainty tinkling sounds, hung in Eden's dining room. Upstairs, Trish had suspended beads of brightly tinted glass at the entrance to the bedroom closets where the ornamentation substituted for doors and depicted sparkling stylized designs. One was of the man in the moon surrounded by stars, the other of the smiling sun. Enchanted with the effect, Eden had gone wild, buying several more of her pieces to grace this house.

Trish swiped her pale pink lips with the back of her hand. "I wasn't commenting on your food." She speared a thick wedge of the dripping toast, folded it into her mouth and spoke around it. "Don't get me wrong, it's great. But him—god." She actually bent her head to her plate as if bowing to Rafe's unmistakable virility.

Heart racing, Eden slanted a glance at the portable TV. The DVR played week two of the competition. Trish had muted the sound and stopped the recording on Rafe. His sensuous face filled the screen as he prepared to give Eden his pronouncement on the seafood *paella* she'd prepared. Several dark locks of hair hung over his forehead, no doubt increasing ratings. His beard-roughened cheeks were certainly what the female audience wanted scouring their inner thighs.

Eden pressed hers together to stop the sweet anguish he always awakened. Didn't help. Blood thickened in her cunt, producing a sensation somewhere between an itch she couldn't reach and a throb she couldn't refuse. Too many times, she'd imagined herself facing him at the judges' table, stripped to skin, arms behind her back to lift and

fully expose her breasts. In her mind, his hooded eyes had raked her naked form. His deep, musical voice ordered her to touch herself and masturbate so she'd be juicy and wet when he drove himself inside.

Her hand stalled near the remote, not quite ready to turn off his image. She rubbed her bare legs, desire snaking through her.

Trish cleared her throat. Lingered sugar graveled her voice. "When's he coming?"

Eden's gaze shifted to her. Last night when she'd returned home from the party, she'd called Trish and told her everything, even the X-rated part of the contract she'd agreed to. Panicked she'd said yes, Eden had finished a half bottle of cabernet in the hopes of blocking out her anxiety.

Giggling, Trish backhanded her arm. "You know what I mean. What's his ETA?"

"Why? Please don't tell me you're going to take pictures of him."

"I can't. Chris borrowed my camera for one of his cases." Finished with her breakfast, she pulled Eden's in front of her and scooped up a spoonful of rice. "I thought if I was around—you know, outside getting the mail or picking up the paper—I'd ask for his autograph. He did convince me to buy that wine he's been advertising on TV."

"Give him the chance and he'll convince you to grow a third boob." She leaned up in her chair. "Trust me, he's that persuasive."

Trish's skin went from eggshell-white to a pale rose. Her eyes turned glassy at what it would be like to have him corner her. "So what do you think is going to happen when he shows up? Is he going to make you wear one of those French maid uniforms that you can buy online? You know, the black satin ones cut down to your nipples." She gestured to her own, easily covered by her lemony tank top. "They usually have a white frilly apron and a really brief skirt." Her hands hovered at the edges of her dark green shorts-shorts to show how abbreviated the skirt should be. "Or do you think he'll want you to wear your chef's coat with nothing underneath and black high heels?" Her reddish brows lifted. "What if he brings cuffs? Oh my god, what if he brings a blindfold and one of those spanking paddles and—"

"Stop!" Eden drooped in her chair. Her body was limp from asking herself the same questions, coupled with last night's sporadic sleep and the dream she'd eventually had.

In it, Rafe's body and hers were gold and gleaming against a black backdrop, not unlike the light of the torches reflected in Luis' pool. Their limbs, supple as the water, moved sinuously, legs and arms entwined, their heads positioned at each other's sex. His breath had stirred the delicate curls on her mound. He parted her engorged lips with his tongue. A tortured cry escaped her throat, silenced by his cock and weighty testicles. She licked the short, dark hairs on the glands, easing one and then the other into her mouth. Above them, a large clock loomed. Instead of one to twelve on its face, the numbers one through thirty marked each day they'd spend together. The timepiece ticked so loudly, its noise competed with Rafe's moans, and the annoying screech of her wake-up alarm. In her dream, he disappeared at the crack of thirty without a backward

glance, the same as her mother. In her bed, she'd flung her arm over her eyes. Her other hand went to her clit, working it until she came, all while wondering just what she'd agreed to.

She tugged the hem of her oversized tee, what she generally wore around the house along with panties. Rafe's arrival would definitely put an end to that. She'd greet him in shorts and a tank top. If he didn't like it, there wasn't a whole lot she could do, recalling his words about not denying him anything sexually, having her wherever he wanted, in any manner he dictated. Her body grew sluggish and yielding, but her throat squeezed, rasping her voice. "Whatever he has planned, I'll find out at one." Five hours away.

"Keep sweating like you're doing now and you'll be too slippery for him to catch."

"He doesn't have to catch me, that's the problem."

Trish ran her forefinger down the length of the gargantuan dildo she'd brought over as a joke, topping its head with a chef's hat she fashioned from a paper napkin. "I don't understand. He wants you and you obviously want him. You're both great cooks. Together, you'll never be sexually frustrated and you sure as hell will never starve."

Eden crossed her arms over her chest, her hands gripping her elbows. "If it were anyone but him, I'd be as excited about this as you are."

"Hey, I'm not excited, I'm jealous. Why would you want it to be another man?"

She fought a groan. "I respect him professionally. In my book, he's a freaking god. I also like him as a person. He had to fight for what he has. He's given back to his community for supporting him in the early years. He's a good, fair, awesome man and I really like him, and I don't want to, I shouldn't. I can't let him fuck up my life. I don't intend to."

Trish pulled off the dildo's chef hat and dipped its rubbery head into the syrup on her plate. Bringing the fake cock to her lips, she licked off the sugar. "You're not planning to get pregnant, right?"

"What?" Eden's arms tightened. "No freaking way. Not ever."

"Don't say that. There will come a time. I just know it."

"Uh-uh, I'm not you." She envied Trish's effortless trust in people, especially her husband Chris. Never did she have a doubt he'd come home to her every night. She knew she'd never be alone. "Not even close."

Trish rolled the dildo in the syrup. "You're not like your mom either, Eden. You have to give yourself a break and take a risk."

Her face lifted to the ceiling. She closed her eyes and growled, "You sound like Rafe. That's why he turned down my last dish in the competition. He accused me of wanting to be safe."

"Smart man."

Jaw clenched, Eden opened her eyes and lowered her head.

Trish talked fast. "Look, you're not going to have a kid then run after some guy who's not the father and dump the kid because the guy doesn't like it. Good for you. So

why beat yourself up over this? Enjoy these thirty days with a man you want and like. If anyone deserves it, you do."

"And what happens after it's over?"

She licked syrup from the dildo's shaft and pulled in her tongue. "Did it ever occur to you there's more to this than lust? That it might not end?"

Eden shook her head. She'd had her mother for twelve years, loving her as only a child can love a parent, but no matter what she gave or how she pleaded, she lost her. She'd had her grandmother until she was twenty-five, adoring the sweet woman, doing everything she could to make up for her mother's foolish lifestyle and to be the best granddaughter possible, and she lost her too. She'd have Rafe for thirty days, pleasing him as he demanded, giving what he expected, and at the end of it he'd also take off.

Fine, her mind said with a conviction she was determined to maintain. She'd welcome his control, allowing him to use her as ruthlessly as she craved and envisioned in her fantasies. She'd impress him with her culinary skills and earn an investment. But she would not take an emotional risk as Trish advised. She would never give up her heart, her good sense or her control.

* * * * *

Unbroken clouds blanketed the late June sky. The oppressive humidity bore down on the banana trees, ferns and sago palms surrounding Rafe's domed pool and spa, creating a greenish cast that smelled of damp soil.

Cup to his lips, he sipped his *café Cubano*, barely noticing the coffee's strong, sweet taste or the spa's bubbles frothing over his nudity. His thoughts were on Eden, as they'd been all of last night. This morning, he imagined her kneeling before him in the churning water, wearing nothing except the topaz in her left nostril, hair spilling over her shoulders, head bowed to his eager cock, one hand claiming it, the other his fleshy sac.

"Tell me you want this," he asked her in his fantasy.

In answer, her lips hugged his shaft, parting to take him deeply inside.

His toes curled. The heels of his feet scraped the concrete. Back arching, he stretched, his hips jutting forward toward her phantom mouth.

Without warning, the clack of shoes echoed down the enameled walkway to his left, murdering the vision and his peace. Dropping back to the stone seat, he thrust out his legs, grumbled a curse and finished his coffee.

The footfalls stopped. Rafe lifted his head to meet his older brother's questioning gaze.

Four years his senior, Victor treated Rafe as he would a child, forever offering unneeded and unwanted advice. Married for thirteen years, with three daughters and a boy on the way, Victor believed he knew everything. "So," he said, "Mama and Papa tell me you're taking a month's vacation."

"They told me you may be able to manage matters in my absence. Being a good son, I didn't dare argue with them."

Victor's indulgent smile lifted the corners of his mustache. Rafe suspected his brother had grown it to prove his superior age, wisdom and machismo.

"Papa believes you're leaving because you need a rest," Victor said. "Mama wasn't fooled. Neither am I. So who is she? What's her name? Where are you taking her?"

Rafe brought his empty cup to his lips, pretending to drink. Hardly duped, Victor chuckled and went to the glass-topped table, taking one of the *pastelitos* Rafe had made for breakfast. With Victor's hearty bite, flakes of puff pastry flew away from the treat. He licked sweetened cream cheese from the corner of his mouth, missing a bit on the edge of his mustache.

Rafe smiled. "You should shave that thing off or stop eating like a pig."

Victor cleaned his mustache with his fingertips. "You should try to grow one so women know you've finally reached puberty."

One woman knew very well how much of a man he was and would soon learn so much more. He grinned.

"It's Barbara, isn't it?" Victor's light brown eyes narrowed. "I've seen how you look at her during staff meetings."

"She charges four hundred dollars an hour for her legal services. If I stare at her, it's to make certain she stays awake and earns her fee." He placed his cup on the royal blue tile. "She's also as homely as you and fifteen years older than me."

"Little boys need a mother, no?"

"I'm not telling you about her, Victor. Now go away." He gestured in dismissal.

His brother shoved the last of the *pastelito* in his mouth, chewing quickly. "So Mama and I were correct, it is a woman. Is she Cuban?"

Eden could have been from another galaxy and Rafe wouldn't have cared. Hell, she could have been Castro's former lover and it wouldn't have diminished her allure in the least. So where had this fierce yearning come from? He'd never been close to love. He'd left infatuation behind as a schoolboy. The women he slept with were lovely, intelligent, passionate and willing.

Was Eden's resistance the draw? Had sex become so easy and plentiful he needed a challenge? Perhaps. Though it hardly explained the sum of it. He recalled the haunting hopelessness in her eyes when she'd lost the competition. It reminded him of his parents' faces prior to the escape from Havana. He'd seen her intense competitive streak and brash assurance so like his own. He'd also witnessed her fear of taking too many risks during the contest and her caution with others, especially him.

Who had hurt her so badly she willingly led half a life, denying herself reckless joy no matter the consequences or outcome? Should he even care? Shaking off his ambivalence, he realized Victor had continued to speak or question. "You're still here? Why?"

"Answer my question and I'll go away." He bit into his second *pastelito*.

Rafe glanced past Victor to the banana plants. The broad wavy leaves shivered in a sudden rush of wind. "What does it matter if she's Cuban or not?"

"We want to be prepared for what happens when you return from wherever it is you're going. Thirty days with one woman is a long time, little brother."

"You've managed thirteen years with your wife without the world coming to an end."

"I'm in love. Are you?"

Rafe stared at the foliage, no longer seeing it. His mind pictured Eden immediately after their kiss, her eyes on him, in that moment willing to trust. An odd mix of pride, tenderness and animal hunger consumed him. Could this be the beginning of love? Had Victor experienced the same as he grew to know his wife Nina?

Not about to ask and give his brother something more to share with their mother or pester him with, Rafe left the spa, not attempting to hide his hard-on.

Victor handed him the plate of remaining pastries. "Go on. Finish these so you can maintain your strength. You don't want to disappoint the poor woman, whoever she may be."

Chapter Three

Eden's house, a relic from the 1940s, sat back from the street, its spacious front yard carpeted with lush grass and crowded with a variety of palms, some tall and slender, others squat and fat. Rafe lowered his duffel bags to the walkway, pausing to take in the white Spanish-style façade, Cuban barrel tiled roof and forest-green awnings over the arched windows.

As a seven-year-old new to the United States, he'd delivered morning papers to homes like this, his young eyes staring, his heart hoping one day he'd be able to live in such a palace.

His current waterfront estate, purchased after his endorsements reached several million dollars annually, boasted eight-thousand square feet of living space in the main house and two guest houses on the grounds, each the size of this home. His parents lived in one, Victor and his family in the other. Rafe had an indoor and outdoor pool, tennis court, wine cellar, gourmet kitchen, dock and yacht, countless bedrooms and more bathrooms than a single man would ever need. His dream had taken him well beyond his wildest aspirations. However, the seven-year-old boy in him couldn't help but smile. His estate was a showpiece, almost too perfect. This pleasant place felt like home.

To the left, a car door slammed. He looked over. An older man, possibly in his sixties, carried bags of groceries into his house. In the yard next to this one, Rafe saw a very pale young woman partially hidden by a tall palm, her bony hands on the ringed trunk. A floppy straw hat shaded her face. Her eyes jumped from his luggage to him.

It seemed Eden had nosy neighbors. The sight of a man moving into her place probably enlivened an otherwise boring day or was so uncommon it warranted notice. Preferring the latter scenario, Rafe grabbed his things and went to her front door, ringing the bell.

The gentle chimes reminded him again of his paperboy days, waiting on porches for the homes' owners to give him their payments. Back then, his young heart had beat wildly. He feared making a mistake and angering his customers.

His pulse quickened now at the sound of light footfalls nearing the wooden door, ornately carved in the style of Spanish architecture. The click of metal signaled Eden turning the deadbolt and the beginning of their thirty-day adventure.

Even before she'd opened the door fully, Rafe caught her fragrance of cool fruit and sweet flowers with a suggestion of musk that went well with the cinnamon and vanilla aromas coming from the kitchen. Her cheeks glowed with heat...not from the oven, from him. As if she were helpless to stop it, her eyes softened beneath his appraising gaze. She'd changed her nose stud from a topaz to a diamond. The gem winked in the

day's gloomy light. Her stretchy white tank top worked to contain her breasts. White shorts hugged her honeyed thighs. A delicate silver chain circled her left ankle.

Bursts of warmth journeyed from his chest to his crotch, lodging there to feed his swelling cock. Damn near breathless, he looked up.

She murmured, "Welcome."

Rafe dropped his bags. Hand on her throat, he eased her against the door, his chest, belly and thighs molded to hers. Her heightened color said she felt his erection. Her tattered breaths said she liked it. He whispered, "*Buenas tardes.*"

In synchrony with her parting lips, her lids slipped down. An encouraging reception no sane man could refuse. His tongue touched hers, then pierced deep, compelling her to relax her jaw, to submit.

On a whimper, she obeyed.

His chest bumped hers with his sharp breath, her firm nipples stirring him further. She tasted of mint, toothpaste no doubt, having prepared herself for his arrival. Pleased, Rafe took possession. For thirty days she was his in every way, he wasn't about to delay a second. His relentless kiss mirrored his savage appetite. With their bodies pushing against it, the door hit the stop, its wood shuddering briefly. His tongue explored her teeth, the silky insides of her cheeks. She suckled hard, pulling him more deeply inside.

Not good enough.

He bunched her top to her breasts, tunneling his hand beneath the cotton, seeking skin. Instead, he reached the edge of her bra. His kiss faltered at the obstruction.

She took over, pushing his tongue aside to plunge hers into his mouth. *It won't be as easy as you expect*, her actions warned. *I may be yours to take, but if you want my full submission, you'll have to win me.*

Did she have any doubt?

Her determination couldn't match his. His discipline would be absolute. When the time came, he'd warn her against wearing underwear. While they were together, he wouldn't have it.

He suckled her tongue, not about to let her end the kiss. Impatient, he pushed the bra's sheer cup past her left breast, freeing it to rest on his palm, reveling in its feminine weight, flicking the long nipple with his thumb.

Subdued, her body relaxed, its weakness telling him he could do whatever he pleased.

Later, once he made her desperate for it. For now, he'd proven his will and released her breast, settling it back in its cup, easing down her top. She moaned softly as his mouth left hers. The back of her head rested against the door. Her eyes fluttered open.

Holding her gaze, Rafe's hand slid down her arm to the large socket wrench she held in her fist. "Is this how you greet all of your guests?"

A smile danced in her eyes. She lifted her free hand to cover his on her throat. "Do you greet all of your hosts this way?"

He laughed. "You're the first." His lips sought the fine hair at her temple. Damping it with a tender kiss, smelling her melon-scented mane, he whispered, "Why the weapon? Were you expecting someone other than me?"

Her labored breathing didn't allow her to speak immediately. Her sweet, quick breaths glided past his ear. "The pipe under my kitchen sink is leaking. I thought I could fix it before you arrived."

He left a path of kisses across her cheek and jaw prior to looking up. "Give me the wrench. I'll take a look at it."

"No." She put the tool behind her back. "You're supposed to be enjoying your stay, not working."

She didn't want him doing anything nice for her. She didn't trust him to do something kind. "Very well." His body crowded hers, allowing no movement as his hands went to her ribs.

"Aw god, don't," she breathed. "Stop it!" she shrieked.

He tickled her into submission. Head hanging down, chest pumping, she smacked his belly with the wrench, releasing it. "Happy?"

He was. Hearing her laugh, having her flirt and tease charmed him completely. "I'll let you know after I fix your pipe." He kicked his duffle bags into the living room and backed up so she could shut the door. Before it swung closed, he put his hand on the edge of the wood, stopping it. He stared at the pale and skinny young woman from earlier. She stood on the sidewalk to the side of Eden's house, her straw hat quivering in the muggy breeze. On tiptoes, she craned her head to see better when she noticed him watching.

He waved at her. She looked horrified. After a moment's indecision, she waved back. He turned to Eden. "Do your neighbors usually watch what goes on in your doorway?"

She cleared her throat and shot the woman a frown. A cattle prod couldn't have worked faster. Hand holding her straw hat, she hurried down the walk and into her own yard. "Trish and I are close," Eden explained. "BFFs in fact. She's good people."

"Does she ever sneak over here and look into your windows?"

Laughing, Eden shut the door and locked it. "Of course not."

"Because you tell her everything?"

Her face reddened. "Not everything."

"Good." He held her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "What happens in this house during the next thirty days is between us, no one else."

A blush stained her throat and chest. She dropped her eyes to his jeans, his cock and balls bulging behind his fly. Her voice became husky. "What's going to happen?"

"Nothing if I don't get your pipe fixed." He leaned down to her ear and murmured, "Where's your kitchen?"

With her left hand on his chest, her right swung generally east toward the wall facing the neighbor's yard. He took her fingers and brought them to his mouth, kissing the tips. "Perhaps you should show me."

She swallowed and nodded, apparently incapable of speech. Cocky with what he'd already managed with her, Rafe nevertheless stayed serious. His proud grin would happen soon enough. With her fingers laced through his, she led him across the living room. Instantly, he held back. "Wait." The seven-year-old boy in him had returned. All the times he'd spent waiting on porches, he'd never been privileged enough to glance inside the homes.

He noticed Eden's front room was more than lovely, it invited. A Bahama ceiling fan with an old-fashioned light fixture hung from the middle of the high ceiling, its copper blades turning lazily. Arched windows dressed in lacy ecru curtains took up most of two white-washed walls. The others wore framed portraits of 1940 scenes and people, the images yellowed with age. A marble fireplace, the color of oatmeal, faced the burgundy leather sofa and chairs. Off-white accent rugs lay beneath the cherry cocktail and end tables. The furniture and glossy hardwood floors smelled faintly of lemon polish. Feathery ferns, parlor palms and philodendrons rested in large clay pots near the windows. Despite the murky afternoon light, the room appeared bright and airy.

"It's all right, isn't it?" she asked.

Captivated, he nodded. "Are those photos of your relatives?"

"My great-grandparents and grandmother. Come on."

She led him past the curved doorway into the formal dining room, equally attractive with numerous windows, plants and a sunroom just beyond the finely crafted table and chairs. There, he stopped once more, touching the edge of the chandelier hanging above the furnishings. Its countless crystals created a waterfall of light on the table, floor and walls. The small pieces of glass jingled beneath the air-conditioning's rush of air, sounding like wind chimes. "This is amazing."

Eden's arm bumped his. "It's Trish's design. I'll tell her you like it, if that's all right with you. Or will I be giving away too much?"

Amused at her sarcasm, liking her goading, he swung his face to hers, his manner deliberately somber. Without the heels she'd worn last night, the tip of her nose barely reached his shoulder. Haltingly, her eyes ticked upward from it, her expression distracted, disoriented. The look a woman wears in bed after being fucked good and hard by a man.

"No, it would not," he answered.

She closed her eyes slowly, breathed deeply and looked at him again. "What?"

She'd lost track of their conversation. Poor girl. After today, she'd have trouble concentrating on anything except him and their pleasure. "Your kitchen, where is it?"

Again, she gestured generally east. "Through the doorway."

The room was an eighth the size of his mansion's gourmet kitchen with a thousand times the appeal. Dark brown Spanish pavers graced the floor, complementing the pale mustard walls. Two more ceiling fans were above the kitchen table and prep area, their shiny copper blades turning slowly. A series of gourmet cooking utensils hung from a pot rack over one of the counters. The cabinet below the kitchen sink yawned open. Beside it lay a metal box as big as a suitcase, crammed with every gadget imaginable. "Are those your tools?"

"Some of them. This place is really old. I have to repair it on a daily basis."

His brows lifted at the C-clamp in the center of one of the pavers. He didn't know any woman Eden's age who would've been able to identify, much less use the device. "Before you bought this place, didn't you have an inspection done of the plumbing, electricity and other structural matters?"

"I inherited it from my grandmother when she died. I've been fixing this stuff since I was a kid so I could save her some money."

Pride and sadness rang in her voice. He put the wrench on the counter and looked at her.

She'd crossed her arms over her chest just as she always had in front of the judges' table during the competition. Unlike her voice, her expression held no emotion. "You lived with your grandmother?"

Her eyes moved past him to the window by the kitchen table, its view of the backyard and pool. "My mother dropped me off when I was twelve. Mitch, her boyfriend at the time, wasn't into raising kids and wanted me gone." She lifted her narrow shoulders as if to say she couldn't have cared less. The slight tremor in her voice said otherwise. "Grandma was so happy to have me she decorated the spare bedroom in all this frilly pink junk a fairy princess would've gagged on." She smiled at the memory, her eyes sparkling with tears. "I lied and told her I loved it. I would've died for her. She gave me my first real taste of home. She was always here when I got back from school. She sat with me after dinner to help me with my homework. She even took out a loan on this place to send me to the culinary institute. That was before the housing boom caused the house to appreciate. I paid her back within a year of graduating. I worked three jobs in order to do it. I didn't want her to struggle or want for anything." She sighed deeply.

Compassion flooded Rafe, urging him to take her in his arms and comfort. He didn't move, suspecting empathy wasn't what she required. She needed his respect and had it. Her story awakened memories of his own childhood, wanting to succeed so he could make life easier for his parents. Here was the soul missing from her dishes during the challenge. Here was the real woman buried beneath the confident I-have-to-be-perfect chef. "When did you lose her?"

She fingered the corner of her eye and looked at the tears she'd wiped away. "Five years ago. A stroke. It was very sudden. She hadn't even been ill. She lasted only a few days before it was over."

"I'm sorry."

She dropped her hand and shrugged, then added softly, "Thanks."

"Do you ever see your mother?"

She exhaled loudly, more a complaint than a weary sigh. "She manages to come around when she needs money."

"Do you give it to her?"

New tears brimmed in her eyes. Her voice was whispery, belonging to a twelve-year-old child who still missed her mom. "If I can spare it. How could I say no? She's my mother."

He moved closer but didn't touch her. He wondered what type of a mother could willingly give up her own child. And what of her father? Had she known him or even met him or was he a shadowy figure her mother seldom mentioned? "Eden, are you certain you want strangers to live in your house?"

She stepped back, arms across her chest again, no sign of tears in her voice. "I don't have a choice. In order to open my restaurant I took out several home equity loans. Grandma left the house to me free and clear. It kept appreciating and the restaurant was doing well. Until the economy tanked, I didn't think I'd have any problem meeting the payments."

He now understood the depth of her financial situation. She surely owed more than the home's current worth and bankruptcy would forestall the inevitable for only so long. "Is the bank threatening to foreclose?"

"Not since you wrote me the check last night for your stay. Even if you end up hating it here and decide not to invest, I've bought myself a few months, more than enough time to get new vacationers. And no way am I losing this place. I couldn't do that to Grandma." She inclined her head to the sink, her voice stiff. "That's not going to fix itself. If you've changed your mind, I can —"

Patiently, he interrupted. "I haven't changed my mind." He grabbed the industrial-sized flashlight from the counter and handed it to her. "You do know what to do with this, no?"

She tapped its head against her palm, making small thwacking sounds. "If you fuck up my plumbing, I get to whack you over the head?"

He laughed. "You're going to pay for that."

The tapping stopped. Her skin pinked up nicely. She looked at him from beneath her lashes. "How?"

"That would be telling. Time for me to fix your leak."

"Wait." Her free hand went to his upper arm, her moist fingers hugging it. "It's dirty down there. You'll mess up your clothes."

Heart pounding, he studied her fingers on him. "You want me to work in the nude?" His eyes slid to hers.

She stared at the dark hairs on his forearm, his navy tee and faded jeans. Her voice dropped an octave, becoming throaty. "I was thinking about putting a sheet down there for you to lie on. It's what I usually do. The pipe's hard to reach."

He preferred working in the nude. Of course, for him to stay dressed, at least as far as his jeans were concerned, would increase her curiosity and arousal, defeating her control. "Very well."

She didn't respond or leave to get the sheet. Her thumb had reached the bumpy skin on his biceps, halting on the uneven flesh and then investigating again. "What's this?" She lifted his tee's sleeve. Air hissed through her teeth at the brutal scar. "How'd you get this?" Her dismay matched his mother's and Victor's whenever they found his behavior questionable. "Were you in an accident?"

Rafe regarded what he could of the discolored wound, eleven inches total, stretching from his upper arm to his shoulder blade, the surface craggy, ugly. "You find it disgusting?"

"What? Of course not." Indignant, she slapped his forearm with the back of her hand, a lover's blow.

He leveled his gaze on her. "Ouch."

She laughed. Her features relaxed. "What happened, Rafe? Were you riding a motorcycle? Did a drunk driver hit you?"

"No." He smoothed down his sleeve. "The edge of the wooden raft my parents used to escape Cuba tore my arm and shoulder when I fell from it."

Her mouth formed a shocked O. "How old were you?"

"Seven." He smiled. "A long time ago. Completely forgotten. Not worth mentioning again."

She chided gently, "Liar."

His smile fell away. At the sorrow in her eyes, his heart skipped several beats. "You want to know about it?"

"Do you mind telling me?"

He didn't and did. Once more, she had him questioning his feelings. He ached for her to know him, to accept his past no matter how harsh it had been. On the other hand, he dreaded her pity.

Her steady, accepting gaze gave him the courage to continue. "The raft was little more than several doors nailed together, though big enough for me, my mother, father and older brother Victor. At the last possible moment, my mother's only brother Gerardo begged us to take him and his family. It wasn't a question as to whether we'd do it, but how we'd succeed in getting to this country. With the addition of him, his wife and three children, ranging in age from an infant to five years old, the raft was too crowded." He recalled the waves jostling it. His thin shirt and pants drenched from the water's spray. "My cousin Javier, the five-year-old, fell against me as the raft hit a swell. I lost my balance and tumbled over the side. The water was cold, yet I was strangely

calm going under. It was so quiet. Never have I heard such an absence of sound. When I bobbed to the surface, a pain ran from my arm to my shoulder. It felt as if I'd been burned. I learned later the raft had hit me. In addition to the wood, several nails ripped through my skin. Uncle Gerardo reacted first, diving in to save me. He managed to get me back on the raft, but he wasn't a well man. Too many years of poor nutrition and hard work had made him old. My father tried to reach him, but the next wave washed him away. He drowned."

Eden heard the shame in his voice, his guilt for having caused such a thing. She rested her free hand on the side of his face, feeling the bite of his beginning beard on her thumb and palm. The bristles were so adult and male while his heart still grieved like a child's. "It wasn't your fault. You were a little boy."

Although he nodded, his eyes said he didn't believe her.

"Your first restaurant here was *Querido Tío*—beloved uncle. For him?"

He put his hand over hers. "You think me too sentimental, no?"

"I think of those many relatives you have working at your restaurants, your cousin Javier is no doubt among them."

His quick smile pushed his cheek into her palm. "He's the VP of marketing. In high school and college he was the valedictorian."

Eden bet Rafe had been in the first row of the audience, cheering Javier on. She tried to imagine having such a devoted family and pictured Rafe with his own children, daughters and sons he'd adore, children he'd never give up. Perhaps he'd meet their mother after his thirty days here were over. He'd indulge himself in this house, holding nothing back. Eden wouldn't either, but it wouldn't go beyond sex. She'd miss him terribly when he left, she couldn't lie to herself about it, but she'd move on. She'd done so with her mom.

His smile dimmed as though reading her mind or her face. "What is it?"

She lied. "I was thinking about your aunt. What happened to her?"

Gently, his fingers squeezed hers. "A few years after we reached Miami she remarried and had two daughters with her new husband. Her youngest is my godchild."

Happiness for the girl merged with Eden's sadness for children who weren't as lucky. Not wanting to dwell on it, she backed up, removing her hand from his face. "I'll get the sheet." She laid the flashlight on the counter and padded into the utility room. The bed linen was still warm from her dryer. She held its fragrant cleanliness to her nose and mouth. In a little while, the cotton would smell of him.

A shudder ran through her. He'd been here less than an hour and too quickly she'd revealed things he had no business knowing and encouraged him to share his past, which increased her admiration and desire for him. Eyes closed, fingers fisted in the sheet, she ordered herself to get a grip, to stop her control from crumbling.

At the doorway to the kitchen, her step paused. He was on one knee, his head bent to the tool box, his tee slung over the stove's handle, his chest naked.

Anticipation bubbled through her brazenly. Her fingers and toes tingled. Firm, bronze muscles draped his broad shoulders, biceps, pecs and torso. A mewl snagged on the back of her throat. Dark, silky hair peeked from beneath his arms. His flat nipples were nearly as dark as his eyes, his chest smooth, his skin flawless except for his scar and a few moles.

Hopelessly drawn to his male beauty and shocking wound, she stepped into the room, her pulse pumping crazily.

His attention moved from the epoxy putty and C-clamp in his hand to her. He smiled.

Eden sank to her knees and lifted the sheet to show him she had it, relieving her of having to speak or trust her voice. With jittery hands, she smoothed the brown-and-gold striped fabric over the bottom of the cabinet then sat back on her heels, waiting.

Rafe handed her the flashlight. The top of it drooped between her legs like a monstrous phallus. His hooded eyes noted it. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll have this fixed in no time."

Her body recognized his promise as a good thing, grateful she wouldn't have to wait too long for the inevitable, upstairs in her bed. Unconvinced, her heart pounded so hard the base of her throat hurt, scraping her voice. "Watch your head." She leaned forward, her hand on the back of it, her fingers lost in his thick, shiny hair as she guided him beneath her sink.

Rafe's eyes dipped to her breasts. Hers trailed over his taut pecs, flexing deliciously as his hands went to the top of the cabinet and he slid inside, his face to the left of the leak.

Seizing the moment, she allowed her gaze to ride him. His body was in such prime condition, she could count his abs. Dark hairs swirled around his navel and arrowed down his belly, disappearing beneath the waistband of his jeans. A solid ridge rose behind his fly. Her shoulders bunched. It took all of her will not to press her mouth to him.

"Is this the only leak?" he asked, tapping the pipe with the side of his thumb.

She nodded, her eyes journeying past his sturdy thighs to his huaraches. The sandals revealed his large feet and long toes.

"Eden."

A surge of moisture wet her underwear. Her face inched back to his, shadowed by the cabinet. "Yes?"

"The flashlight?"

She looked at it stupidly, then realized what he wanted and directed the beam to where he needed to work. "This okay?"

"A little more to the left. There—stop." He studied the flaw. "Not as bad as I thought. This shouldn't take more than a few minutes. When I'm through you can show me our bedroom."

Her fingers tightened around the flashlight. Its beam jumped, shining in his eyes.

"Eden." Even as he squinted, his tone remained patient and unruffled.

"Sorry." She redirected the beam, hearing the word "our" in her mind. She'd expected to share her bed with him, not the room. At night, she figured she'd go to the guesthouse in back. Upon turning eighteen, she'd moved there. It had given her a measure of independence, while still being close to her grandmother. She hadn't returned to the house until after the woman passed. Now, she was ready for the guesthouse again, to have time away from Rafe, to put their arrangement into perspective. This was nothing more than transitory lust and passing sex. Trish would've accused her of playing it safe and she'd be damned right.

"What is it?" he asked as he had before. "Isn't our room ready?"

She looked at him. His eyes glittered in the beam. "Everything's been prepared." Floors and furniture polished, dresser drawers and closet emptied, bed linen changed.

"Good." He began his repair. "I can't wait to have you."

Chapter Four

The flashlight's beam swept across his face again, coming to rest on the far right wall of the cabinet. Rafe didn't scold. He saw the distraction in Eden's eyes at what he'd said. The ends of her hair brushed her shoulders as she regarded his legs, thighs, groin.

Glutted and ready, his cock hurt for her as much as he knew her cunt ached for him. He wanted more—her trust and heart. Learning her history, sharing his had moved this beyond a mere sexual game. As he looked back to the moment they'd first met, he realized they'd always shared a connection unlike any he'd experienced with other women. One he intended to explore.

Given the constant abandonment in her past, she'd resist, wanting to keep this strictly physical, refusing to allow herself to take a chance on him. With no other choice, he'd have to convince by tempting her as she'd never been before. Removing her illusion of control and freedom, introducing her to sex in ways she'd never imagined, luring her closer, snaring her to the conclusion he'd already reached.

As he worked on the leak, he decided on his first course of action. Satisfied with his plan, he tightened the clamp on the pipe one last time and turned the handle to release the water's flow. "Finished." He extended the wrench to her and pushed out of the cabinet.

Brought back to the moment, she folded the sheet, watching quietly as he washed his forearms and face in the sink. Shaking water off his hands, he glanced around. "Can you hand me a paper towel?"

Her eyes remained on the water dripping from his chin to his chest. Blindly, she reached to the side and offered him the entire roll.

"Gracias."

"De nada."

Rafe grinned. She looked surprised and disappointed when he pulled his tee back on and tucked it into his jeans' waistband. Possessively, his hand went to her breast with a right her longing gave to him. Mouth to her ear, he said, "I'll get my things and we'll go upstairs."

Eden's face tilted to his. Her lids crept down, clearly wanting to close for the expected kiss.

Rafe didn't offer one. His mind ordered him to wait, to force her to ask for pleasure or to take it, along with his heart. Predictably, his body cursed his decision. Being an uncompromising man, he left her side and went to the front door.

She joined him, a slight frown marring her features.

"What is it?" he asked, knowing very well she couldn't figure out why he hadn't kissed her.

Not willing to admit it, she reached for his luggage. "I can take your bags."

"No." He held them away.

"It's my job," she informed. "I'm your host."

"I'm your *patrón*. As your boss, you do as I say while I'm here. You give me whatever I want."

Defiance flared in her eyes even as her body weakened. She leaned against a cherry accent table near the door, her hands gripping its edge for support. "So what do you want, Rafe?"

Her naked beneath him, obsessed, out of control, offering herself as she hadn't to any other man. "To go upstairs to our bedroom." He lifted his bags as easily as he would his young nieces. "These are getting heavy."

Her eyes travelled his biceps. She pushed away from the table and curled her forefinger, directing him to follow. "This way."

Tantalized by her bouncing buttocks and seamless thighs, he didn't realize they'd reached a flight of steps until she stopped. A black, wrought iron railing graced the curved staircase. On the wall to the left, there were three arched niches for statues or plants. Hers held bronze sculptures of Spanish conquistadores on horseback. Flakes of metal depicted the animal's manes. "Did your BFF create these?"

"Trish is very talented."

"Agreed." He leaned close to study details.

From the step above his, Eden said, "I thought your bags were heavy." Her voice goaded. "I thought you were in a hurry."

He was. Being a stubborn man, he examined the pieces as carefully as an art appraiser or a museum curator. When he sensed he'd frustrated her enough, he turned his head. Eden leaned against the railing, one hand stroking her throat, the other running down her fly as she took in his ass.

He straightened, depriving her of the view.

Eyes on his, she murmured, "Ready to roll?"

"I can't wait."

On the landing, she turned to the left and padded over the hardwood floor into the first open doorway. Lavender fabric softener scented the chamber. Though larger than he expected, nearly the size of her living room, it owned as much charm. A high-backed rocking chair had an extra blanket hung over its arm to provide warmth and comfort to a weary traveler. Two large windows with rounded tops allowed ample light to stream in from outside. Diaphanous white curtains rippled over the immaculate panes, stirred by the breeze of the white wicker ceiling fan. Carved wool area rugs in pale blue and white lay on either side of the queen-sized cherry wood bed. A four-poster clothed in a puffy blue comforter with a canopy of a gauzy material not unlike mosquito netting,

which fueled no end of dark fantasies. Rafe pictured Eden's wrists and ankles tied to the posts with the fabric, her eyes recording his approach, her voice begging for his touch, saying the words he most wanted to hear...she welcomed whatever he proposed. Her trust in him, her urgency to have him was complete.

Turning his head, he caught her reflection in the oval mirror above the bulky dresser. Fingers to her lips, she studied him, her expression unreadable.

He'd soon change that. "Which drawers are mine?"

Her attention went to the dresser and returned to him. "They all are, along with the closet." She inclined her head to the left, the dark blue and silver beads hanging over a narrow doorway.

He put his bags on the floor and crossed the room for a better look. The glass globes created a representation of a chubby man in the moon who smiled broadly and winked as stars circled him. "Another design by Trish?"

"She's got a lot of time on her hands. Her husband's gone quite a bit. He's an attorney."

"He should quit law and get into marketing her work." He turned. "Where are your things?"

The change of subject and his direct tone caught her by surprise. Expectation and a trace of caution flickered across her face. "In the guest house where I'm staying at night."

"You're staying in here with me. We'll bring your things back here later."

She hooked her thumbs into her shorts' front pockets, an insubordinate stance.

"Do you want to argue about it?" he asked.

"Would it change your mind?"

"No."

She studied him, deepening submission to his resolve shimmering in her eyes. "Then I guess I don't want to argue. I'll do what you want."

"Good." He stepped closer, his attention fully on her, his tone deceptively mild. "Take off your clothes."

The little finger on her right hand twitched. Involuntarily, her head swung to the bed. Like rivulets of water, the ends of the filmy canopy drifted down the posts, framing the mattress. This morning, she'd thought it looked too small for his large frame. At this moment, it seemed to stretch endlessly while her mind whispered, *It's time.*

Not since she'd lost her virginity after her high-school sophomore dance had Eden felt as electrified or daunted. At fifteen, she hadn't known what to do with a guy's body. There'd been the fear of discovery, pregnancy, being expelled and hurting her grandmother. At twenty-eight, she knew exactly how to please a man, but she also feared liking him too much, of losing control and herself.

Her eyes slid to his. She stalled. "We're going to make love now?"

He smiled. It wasn't one of contentment or amusement. Rather, it held a secret he wasn't ready to reveal. "You're going to undress."

Heat lurked up her spine, sending fingers of warmth to the edges of her body, turning her voice to satin. "While you take off your clothes."

"No. I'm staying dressed while I watch you."

And once she was nude, what then? Eden didn't ask, suspecting he wouldn't answer. Downstairs, he'd distinctly stated he was her *patrón*, the boss. She would do as he said, giving him whatever he wanted.

Her legs went watery. To hide her nervousness and to torment him as he tormented her, she dropped to one knee to unfasten her anklet, forcing him to wait for the real show.

Immediately, he objected, again taking command. "No. Leave the jewelry. Remove your shorts first."

A lock of hair clung to her cheek as she lifted her face.

"While you're standing," he added, his hand gesturing her upward.

Pulse pounding, Eden pushed to her feet.

"Slowly," he advised. "I don't want you to rush."

Her fingers trembled on her shorts' metal button, pushing it through the slot. Head lowered to hide the fire in her cheeks, she eased the zipper past her lacy thong.

Rafe's next directive followed quickly. "Don't watch what you're doing. I want you to look at me."

Her pussy clenched. A pearl of sweat dribbled down the side of her face. Too aroused to voice a protest, which he wouldn't allow during their thirty days, Eden met his eyes.

They hungered, the same as hers. Thumbs beneath her shorts' waistband, she lowered the garment past her hips and thong. Rafe studied the scrap of *café au lait* lace barely hiding her dark curls. A muscle in his neck jumped. She pushed her clothing lower. It snagged on her knees then dropped to the floor with a muffled whoosh.

"Don't move." He approached.

Expectation coiled in her belly and dipped to her groin. She smelled his excitement. It thickened the scent of his male musk, stealing her breath. He slipped his hand between her legs. Pleasure spiked from her cunt to the back of her throat. Her mouth sagged open, imploring his tongue to fill it, followed by his cock.

Ignoring the invitation, his fingers slid over her dampened underwear, teasing her swollen folds. The delight in his voice said she'd pleased him. "You're so plump and wet."

Unable to draw enough air to speak, she nodded. Surely her readiness would compel him to halt this foreplay, tear off her clothes and his, and mount her.

His hand retreated. He stepped back. "Lower your thong slowly. Keep your eyes on mine as you do."

He still intended to have her strip? Damn him. Twice her fingers skidded past the elastic without slipping beneath it. Impatient, she shoved the underwear to the tops of her thighs. The crotch clung to her sodden lips, refusing to peel away until she coaxed it. Instantly, the heady fragrance between her legs wafted up.

Rafe's broad chest pumped with his brisk breaths as her thong fell to her feet. He stared at the thatch of hair between her legs—dark, damp, glistening with her dew. "Step out of your clothes." He offered his hand to steady her.

She refused it, placing her palm on his chest instead, branding him with her heat, driven to give him a taste of his own torture. His heart lurched beneath her fingers. His eyes jumped to hers.

Partially satisfied, she pinned him with her gaze, stepping away from her shorts and thong. His strong body seethed with tension, breaking the little resistance she maintained. She longed to have him drop his jeans and take her where they stood.

His hair scudded over his forehead with the fan's steady breeze. Muscles in his forearms tensed as his fingers curled into his palms. Outside, a horn honked from a passing car. Several dogs barked in answer. Their owner shouted at them to be quiet.

A relative peace ensued, intensifying the sounds of her and Rafe's labored breathing, the harsh pounding of her heart.

He went to one knee, leaving her hand to caress air rather than his chest, his face inches from her cunt. Legs stiffened, she prepared for his mouth, tongue, touch.

His hand sought her thong, not her flesh, scooping the underwear in his palm. The dampened crotch rested against the base of his fingers, the elastic edges hung over his thumb. Eyes on her mound, he brought the fragile, moist lace to his nose, treating himself to her scent.

Her sheath ached dully. A new stream of moisture rushed out.

He stared at her pussy with such intensity, she didn't doubt he'd lick her wetness away. She imagined his hands on her naked ass, his fingers spreading her cheeks, keeping her in place, subdued, obedient, so she couldn't move as he probed her vulva with his tongue.

Unpredictably, his face lifted. His rich skin was a shade darker from need and denial. "Remove your tee."

She tore away the clothing so fast a clump of hair fell over her forehead into her eyes. Mouth twisted to the side, she blew it from her face and dropped her top on his shoulder.

He didn't appear to notice. Her bra held him spellbound. Sheerer than her thong, it exhibited her strawberry-colored nipples behind the *café au lait* fabric. His hand went to her stomach, his palm hugging it, his fingers splayed, two on each side of her navel. Her belly quivered at his touch. She moved into it.

He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. His voice lowered a notch. "Take it off."

Unlike the hasty removal of her tee, Eden was now determined to follow his orders to the letter, to give him the sluggish pace he thought he required. Slowly, she twisted the plastic clasp between the cups, allowing seconds to tick by and his frown to deepen before she released the grip. The cups fell away from her soft mounds, catching briefly on her nipples, tightening them further as the garment moved past and delivered her breasts to him.

Consumed, he focused solely on her wrinkled areolas and long nipples. It seemed more than half a day had passed since she'd agreed to this. Rafe might have always lived here. He so easily took possession of the room and her.

Chilled air pumped from the ceiling vents. Stirred by the fan, the coolish breeze grazed Eden's shoulders and back, magnifying her nudity, the same as him staying dressed. Was that his plan? To peel away her opposition bit by bit until she lost all restraint and took a risk on more than their thirty-day adventure. Trish thought it might be possible.

Rafe didn't say. Nor did his mouth latch onto her breast. To her mounting disappointment, he pushed to his feet and turned his hand over, allowing her thong to fall to the floor. She watched its descent then glanced up.

"Tell me," he said.

With no hesitation, her hands went to the metal button on his jeans. Her voice pleaded. "I want this." She worked the button, trying to free it, telling herself she was committed to the conditions of their contract, nothing more.

He wrapped his fingers around her wrists, stopping her. "Not yet, Eden."

She fought him, running her nails across his tee, scraping his flat belly, the luscious line of dark, silky hair she recalled, deliberately enticing him.

His grip tightened. He moved her hands away.

Her voice dipped to an undisciplined entreaty. "Are you going to take off your clothes or not? Are we going to make love or not?"

Rafe released her wrists. His hand went to her throat, his palm resting against her sprinting pulse. His voice was rough with desire. "Do you actually doubt that I'll have you here and in every room of this house?"

His voice held such promise, she had to force down her swallow. "When?"

"Later. Right now, I'm hungry."

His words took a moment to register. Her brows drew together. "For food?"

"I've had little to eat since waking up, thanks to Victor."

She shook her head, still not understanding. "Victor? Your brother?"

"Unfortunately...at times," he added on a remorseful sigh. "Although we're siblings and I love him dearly, he's also a greedy pig, practically inhaling what I make

for myself. Today was no different." Rafe ran his free hand down his stomach. "I'm starving."

She couldn't believe this. "You want me to put my clothes back on and prepare lunch for you?"

"No." His dark gaze studied her. "Leave them where they are. While you're in this house with me, you're going to be nude. That's why I had you undress."

Her eyes rounded.

Unconcerned with her reaction, the matter undoubtedly settled in his mind, he trailed his fingers from her throat to her chest. He captured her left breast, testing its weight in his palm. She swallowed. He continued, "And yes, I want you to cook lunch for me now."

In the nude? For thirty days, he expected her to prepare his meals, tend to his every whim, strut around this house without a stitch on while for the most part he stayed dressed and observed every inch of her? No way. And not because she hated her figure. She liked her curves.

They went well with her five-seven frame and complemented the strong planes of his body. However, she wasn't into exposing herself or allowing any man to put her into such a vulnerable position. Her face lifted. "I can't prepare a meal like this."

A smile cut across his sensuous mouth. "You need your clothes to work? They help you to plan which proteins, carbs and herbs you'll use?"

She arched a brow. "Get real. I could cook blindfolded with one hand tied behind my back if I wanted. The problem is I don't want to. I cannot work this way."

His thumb dragged over her nipple, stimulating the areola into a tighter circle, culling a breathy moan from the base of her throat. "During my stay, you'll do many things you once thought yourself incapable of. Activities you would never have considered but will come to relish."

Eden's body wilted at his pledge. She recalled Trish's questions about whether he'd bring cuffs, a blindfold, or a spanking paddle. Her eyes sped to his bags, her thoughts already curious, eager to know what he'd propose.

Rafe brought back his hand, gesturing her to the door to lead him to her kitchen.

She tried to move and couldn't. A part of her still bristled at his conditions.

"Are you refusing me?" he asked.

Her chest pumped with her hard, uncertain breathing, the ultimatum she saw in his eyes.

"Yes or no," he said quietly. "You do as I say or we call this off right now. I haven't unpacked. It would be an easy matter for me to return home. You can keep the fee. As you said, it will give you a few months to find new clients. I'll also contact my banker. He'll help you with your finances, so you don't lose your house. I've sent so much business his way, he won't deny me. I'll even find an investor for you. What's your answer?"

Her ears rang and her mouth went dry. He'd just handed her what she needed with no strings. All she had to do was tell him to get lost. That she wouldn't do as he asked. She'd run her own damn life just as she pleased even if it meant being too safe, never really feeling or risking anything.

"Very well." He turned to get his bags.

"No—don't." Her voice didn't sound like her own. It came from a woman she didn't recognize. She cursed herself for being as hopeless as her mother, though it didn't stop her. "I'm not refusing you." She padded past him to the doorway and looked over, reasoning she'd allow her current weakness for the length of their agreement, no more.

His eyes swept her back and ass. She waited submissively, willingly, while he finished surveying her body, which he'd dominate further in the coming days. Joining her, he placed his hand on her buttocks, his blunt fingertips creeping toward the cleft between her cheeks as he gave her an open-mouthed kiss on her throat.

Her hand flung out to grip the jamb for support.

"You're delicious," he murmured.

She whimpered in answer, so lightheaded the room spun.

"Ready?" he asked.

She didn't know, couldn't say. Rafe didn't ask again. Together, they moved down the hall to the stairs, to whatever part of his plan and ruthless seduction awaited her in the kitchen.

He'd chanced everything by challenging her for an answer, but that was his way. He'd learned as a child not to waste his time with niceties. Instead, he fought for what he wanted, pushing everything out in the open.

Her tone of voice when she'd agreed to his newest terms fueled his conviction about what lay in her heart. She might refuse to recognize the strength of their bond. He would not. He'd use it to his advantage.

Once in the kitchen, he leaned against the counter, legs crossed at the ankles, arms over his chest, his attention solely on her, waiting for her to serve him, to feed him.

Her sumptuous body was all he wanted. It nearly undid his reserve. Hazy sunlight slanted across the slope of her breasts, the womanly sweep of her hips. Her dewy skin bore faint indentations from her thong's elastic, the bra's underwires, the waistband of her shorts.

His cock twitched in his briefs, nudging the stretchy cotton, imploring him to let it trace those vague marks with its head, then nestle between her legs and tunnel inside. *Later*, he warned. At the moment, he'd allow himself nothing more than to observe.

She turned a slow circle between the counters. Her eyes darted to cabinets, drawers, the stove, the refrigerator, uncertain of what she should do first, so aware of her nudity Rafe knew she couldn't collect her thoughts. Neither could he. A shaft of sun broke over

her hip, lightening her dark bush to the color of an expensive cognac, the same shade as the two moles on her upper left arm.

Her throat cleared, breaking their silence, though it did little to ease her awkwardness. "What do you want?"

She had to ask? He locked his knees to keep himself from going to her, devouring her. His gaze traced the outline of her moles, the contour of her firm biceps, the way her breasts jounced with each movement and breath.

"To eat," she added with a tinge of sarcasm.

He enjoyed her spirit, grateful for its return. It made his conquest so much more interesting. "Did you buy the items I asked for last night?"

"Only the ones I didn't already have."

He lifted his face from her narrow feet, her tapping toes. "Do I make you nervous standing here?"

The tapping ceased. Chin inching up, her voice purred. "Not at all. You can come closer if you want. You can even take off your clothes. I don't mind."

Though tempted, he remained. "In time. *Empanadas, croquetas, pastelitos* and *tostones* with *mojo*."

The change in subject from whether he unsettled her to his luncheon menu doused her bravado. "You want Cuban finger foods?"

He teased, "You have prepared them before, no?"

She wasn't amused. "For most of my life, including the competition, though not as a substitute for lunch. I'd planned to make you a regular meal with chicken or pork, black beans, rice and *platanos maduros*. Suitable fare for a man."

How true. Nevertheless, as an impoverished child the finger foods had represented a feast he still held dear in his heart. He especially coveted the *croquetas*, made with ham and rich *béchamel* sauce, rolled in breadcrumbs and deep-fried, and the *empanadas*, pastries stuffed with beef. "I grew up with those dishes. Shortly after coming to this country, my mother and father bought their first truck to serve street food to Miami construction workers. When I was fourteen, I operated it after school and during my summer vacations. Too many times, my parents scolded me for eating what I should have sold to the men."

For the first time since coming down here, she seemed unaware of her nakedness, her worry for him evident in her eyes.

Rafe smiled. "I never went hungry, if that's what you're thinking."

"I'm glad." She beamed with relief. "And I swear you'll have your fill of your favorite dishes while you're here."

His smile widened. "I would insist upon it even if you did not. Remember Eden, you deny me nothing."

Her cheeks turned rosy. "I haven't forgotten, Rafe." Padding to the cabinet nearest the stove, she bent at the waist. Metal clanged into metal as she pushed utensils aside, searching for something.

A steady throb drummed in Rafe's groin at the unexpected picture she created. Her ass swayed to the right and the left, giving him an unrestricted view of her puffy vaginal lips and the tight pink ring of her anus. His scheme to seduce her drifted away, along with the tenuous hold on his passion. He pushed from the counter, hand on his fly.

"Here it is." She straightened and turned, showing him what she'd been looking for.

His arms went back to his chest. He sagged against the counter, his attention on the *tostones* press, used to flatten plantain pieces for frying, resulting in chips Cubans revered for their lightly sweet taste.

She put the instrument on the counter, taking in his length and uncomfortable stance. "You all right?"

Brute need sucked all the moisture from Rafe's mouth, rendering him incapable of speech. He nodded.

The mocking smile in her eyes recorded his lie. "Just hungry?"

His arms tightened with his next nod.

Her voice became a mother's, consoling and honeyed, driving him wild. "I'll make the *tostones* first so you can munch on them while I prepare the rest of your meal."

Her nipples bobbed with each word, the tips tastier than any *tostones*, urging him to nibble them first.

She didn't give him a chance. Already intent on her preparations, she held the green plantains, olive oil and a box of sea salt to her chest, bringing them to the press. The orange juice and garlic for the *mojo* dipping sauce followed. "What was it like for you when you came to this country?"

His head turned, following her as she padded past him to the pot rack. Pushing to her toes, she reached for the largest skillet, stretching her supple, succulent body just as he would prior to entering her, imprisoning her arms above her head. "What?"

She held the skillet to her side, hiding none of her nudity from him. "When you first arrived in this country, how did it strike you?"

Overwhelming and magnificent, the same as she struck him. "I'd never seen anything so wonderful." Slowly, he took in her full length, noticing a half-circle of moles below her right breast, the cap of skin pulled tight at the top of her navel, the uniform curliness of her pubic hair, a faint scar on her left knee, most likely from a childhood spill. This time, her toes didn't tap, they splayed and curled as they would at the height of an orgasm. "I was determined to have it all," he continued, his voice distracted, strained, "everything."

"You had no doubt you'd succeed?"

His face lifted.

Not waiting for his answer, she went to the stove, placing the skillet on the burner. His stiffening cock noted the dimples above her fleshy buttocks, the way her cheeks shimmied with her steps. "Everyone has their doubts."

Knife on the first plantain, she looked over.

He grinned. "At least when they're a helpless child."

Her brows lifted. She cut off the ends of the fruit, slit its length and peeled it as one would a banana. The taps of her knife on the wooden board were hurried and expert as she sliced the plantain into precise portions. "You felt helpless as a child?"

Not nearly as much as he did now. Every move she made deepened his awareness of her feminine form, the hold she had on him. His underwear felt too tight. He adjusted himself against the counter. She glanced his way. He offered a shrug, responding to her question. "I didn't know the ways of your people nor was I fluent in your language."

She worked on the next plantain. "Did the other kids make fun of you?"

"Only the ones with nice clothes who weren't refugees."

Her worry returned, coupled with outrage. "That's awful."

"That's life." Although the children had been bad, the teachers were worse, calling him slow and hopeless, putting him in special classes where he didn't have to keep up with the others, expecting nothing but failure. The same happened to Victor.

"You showed them though, didn't you?" she asked.

His eyes stung at her pride in him, her faith, though he didn't allow emotion to color his voice. "I succeeded for myself and my family, not for them."

"Of course." She finished with the last plantain and poured olive oil into the pan to fry them. As she righted the bottle, a drop of the oil flung onto her belly and slid down, heading for her nest of curls. If she noticed, it didn't bother her because she made no move to wipe it off.

Rafe watched the golden liquid reach the edge of her dark muff. Reminding himself to breathe, he cleared his throat to speak. "Do you want to wear an apron to protect yourself from spatters?"

She turned on the burner. "Not unless you want me to. I'm very careful, Rafe."

His eyes moved to hers.

Eden's expression said her comment had nothing to do with her cooking techniques and everything to do with their arrangement.

He offered no retort. His actions during these thirty days would speak for him and would change her mind.

Their silence lingered. She broke it first, her voice striving for lightness and sounding unsure. "Tell me about your climb to success. Start with school. What changed things for you?"

"I met Luis Famosa. He became my mentor." As she fried, pressed, and refried the fruit, her swaying breasts destroying his attention, Rafe recounted Luis' visit to his grade school. The man wanted to know if any of the children were coming to class hungry, if their parents were having difficulty feeding them.

Rafe's parents had done their best for him and Victor, but they were growing boys, always hungry. Luis treated him with respect. He didn't stare at the worn knees in Rafe's pants or the too-large shirts he wore. Nor did he offer charity to the Zayas family.

For Victor there was a part-time job on weekends and after school at one of Luis' many grocery stores. For Rafe there was the chance to cook real food, the very best in Luis' kitchen where the man's personal chef taught him everything.

Finished with the *mojo*, Eden plated the *tostones* around it and brought the treat to him. "What was the chef's name?"

Rafe told her.

Her mouth fell open. Recovered, she blurted, "He's a freaking god."

"Agreed. The next time I see Kirk, I'll tell him you said so while you were cooking for me in the nude."

"You will not." The plate clattered against the counter to his side. Its brief ring filled the room now sweetly fragrant with the scent of tropical fruit. With one hand sliding beneath his chin, her other dipped a *tostones* into the *mojo*. She drew the twice-fried plantain across his lips. "When I'm through with you, you won't be able to speak about anything."

Such bluster.

"Besides, this is between you and me." She tilted her head, observing him critically. "Or have you forgotten?"

In answer, he wrapped his fingers around her wrist, opened his mouth and directed the crispy chip inside.

She wore the look of a cat that just hunted down and feasted on a defenseless bird. "Does my food please you, Rafe?"

He finished chewing and swallowing the delectable morsel, its quality as good as any he'd prepared and better than most chefs. "Feed me another." He licked salt from her fingers, sucking her longest inside his mouth, speaking around it. "Maybe then I can make up my mind."

Her expression said, *liar*. Provocatively, her free hand stroked his throat, interrupting his next swallow. A current of intolerable lust forced the air from his lungs. As she fed him, he had to concentrate on each bite and chew as though he'd done neither before.

Once he'd consumed four chips, she pulled the plate away. "No more until you tell me how good it is. How talented I am."

His hand ran down her arm, brushing her fingers from the dish, bringing it close to him. His voice taunted. "You've yet to show me."

An amused laugh gurgled from the depths of her throat. "Get real." She walked backward to the stove, her step light, her breasts shaking delightfully. "I've not only showed you, I've wowed you. But don't worry, there's far more to come."

His thoughts precisely.

To further prove her artistry to him, Eden hustled from one dish to the other, making certain each finger food was smaller than usual, bite-sized as he'd ordered. Her inner fire engaged Rafe. Here was the uninhibited zest she'd not shown during the competition. Aromas of beef, cheese, garlic and spices filled the kitchen. Mouth watering, he ate the *tostones* and *mojo* slowly so they'd last, irritated there wasn't more. In between bites, he answered her questions about his childhood and the beginning of his career.

She looked up from the *croquetas* in the deep fryer. "Your first restaurant actually got a bad review?"

"I over-fried my *masitas de puerco fritas*. The pork was crisper on the outside than it should have been, dry and tough on the inside. I believe the critic's exact words were, 'Chef Zayas would do well to sell these as doorstops. They are inedible.'"

"They couldn't have been that bad."

"They were worse than he described. In those days I had trouble managing my time."

"Bull. I don't believe it." Her head swung from the left to the right as she surveyed her work. A strand of hair stuck to her moist cheek.

Rafe had a stunning urge to lick it away.

"Everything's ready, I just need to plate." She gestured him toward the kitchen table. "Go on and sit down."

"No." He took the china from her and set it on the counter farthest from the food. "I'll plate."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

Arms crossed beneath her breasts, she rested her hip against the counter and rolled her eyes.

He swooped down and tongued her left nipple. Her shoulders sagged.

With the fare heaped haphazardly on the plate she'd used for the *tostones*, he offered his hand.

She ignored it, staring at the sloppy mound of food. "Surely you can plate better than that."

"I intend to." He curled his fingers around her wrist.

Her head turned to the kitchen table as he led her past it. "Where are we going?"

"Here." He stopped at the dining room set drizzled in light from Trish's extraordinary chandelier. Releasing Eden's wrist, he inclined his head to the table. "Climb on, lie down and stretch out, your arms above your head."

She didn't move. "You want me on the table?" Her voice shook. Her face turned a bright red. "Why?"

His free hand went between her legs. He spoke above her sharp intake of breath. "I'm going to plate the food on you, feasting my way down your body to this." His forefinger teased her clit. She pushed to her toes, her legs unsteady. He murmured, "You're going to be my dessert. After I eat you, I'm going to fuck you—good, long and hard."

Chapter Five

Blood pounded in Eden's ears. Powerless to speak or to move, she watched Rafe pull the chairs away from the table so he'd have easy access to her body—orally and vaginally to begin with, anally would surely come later. She tried to swallow and couldn't. Her eyes darted to the sunroom. Its windows faced her wooden fence bordering Trish's property. If Trish came into Eden's yard—as she'd done so many times in the past—and glanced this way, she'd see everything transpiring inside.

"Eden."

Excitement and arousal laced with a bit of fear, gripped her. Rafe inclined his head to the table where he'd soon taste his meal and her, then mount and fuck her, along with whatever else he had planned and desired. During his stay, he would command and she would submit.

Her sweaty palms stuck to the polished wood. Thankfully, her ass scooted easily across the table's top. She positioned herself. The heels of her feet rested at one end, her arms lay at the other, above her head as he demanded.

Rafe studied the speckles of light dancing over her body from the chandelier. His silence was excruciating. Never had she felt as nude or as unprotected. Her belly rippled with her jagged breaths. Her heart stumbled as he went around the table to her legs, spread them wide, slipped his hands beneath her buttocks and pulled her toward him. Her calves dangled over the side of the table. Her cunt, wet and exposed, waited for his entry.

Head bent to what he'd soon have, he examined her opening as his fingers stroked her puffy petals. Torrents of sensations, shattering and welcomed, raced from her mound to her toes. Her scalp prickled. When she could no longer draw enough breath to moan, he went to the chair where he'd left the plate of food.

She recalled his earlier request that she make each piece bite-sized. It had been a carnal challenge, not a culinary one as she'd first thought.

He began plating, placing three beef mini-*empanadas* on the edge of her public hair. Their small size and the air-conditioning pouring down on them allowed the dough to cool sufficiently. The tips of his fingers were far warmer. Intentionally, he brushed them over her skin to prove ownership, to drive her crazy.

"You must calm your breathing," he advised. Lips pressed to her navel, he tongued it.

Her buttocks clenched. The *empanadas* rocked above her mound.

His breath heated her belly as he spoke. "The longer it takes me to plate and eat, the longer your wait for my cock."

She lost what little air she possessed in a strangled laugh. "You expect me to calm down while you're doing this?"

He propped his chin on her pubic bone. His beginning stubble bit her skin. "How badly do you want me inside of you?"

Shit. Eden sank her teeth into her bottom lip and did her best to keep her chest from heaving.

Gratified, Rafe continued. On her navel, he laid a *croqueta* stuffed with ham. Side by side, two *empanadas* followed it, then two *croquetas*, then two cheese *pastelitos*, the double line of morsels marching up the center of her torso to her breasts. Between them, he put the remaining *pastelitos*. On the hollow of her throat, he placed the final *croqueta*.

He'd saved the largest *empanada* for last, slipping one end between his lips and bringing the other to hers. A charge of flavors greeted her first bite—buttery pastry, salty beef, pungent garlic, her special blend of spices. She moaned at its goodness. He did, too, liking it so much he gobbled what remained, not giving her a chance for another taste.

Smug, she whispered, "Tell me how good it is."

His lips shone with the beef's juices, his breath smelled of it, his mouth sought hers. "This is better."

Her lips parted to his tongue. Her body surrendered to his will. She paced her breathing to avoid disturbing the food on her torso and prolonging the agony until her heated passage harbored his cock. She yielded to his rough kiss, enduring him tugging her nipples and driving his fingers through her curly bush, his actions requiring her to be receptive *and* motionless.

Forgetting herself, wanting to touch him, she lifted her hand. Immediately, he captured it. His fingers wrapped around both her wrists, securing them above her head. In further torment, his other hand went to her slippery and congested vulva. He proceeded to masturbate her.

Velvet heat cloaked Eden. Her fingers and toes curled, the only movement allowed.

Lips to hers, his voice rumbled. "If any of the food falls from you, we start over, understand?"

Her mouth hung open at his fingers entering her, his thumb grazing her nub.

"Eden."

She could only manage a gasped "ah".

He angled his head so he could take the *croqueta* from her throat. His surprisingly hot tongue left a slick of moisture on her skin. He chewed and swallowed the tidbit, rewarding her for its flavor by burying his fingers more deeply inside her cunt, and then he licked stray crumbs from her neck and suckled both nipples.

The combination of his mouth, tongue and fingers unglued her. Lewd grunts pumped from the depths of her throat. Her fingers fisted so hard, her wrists hurt. Spasms of pleasure pulsed upward and out. Trying not to move enriched her climax.

At last it flared and receded, leaving her sprawled on the table, scarcely breathing, his remaining food undisturbed.

Rafe didn't ask if she'd enjoyed her orgasm, he didn't have to. Her limp lids and flaccid limbs told him all he needed to know. He proceeded to eat the line of finger foods on her torso, each bite bringing him closer to her navel. His fingers remained inside her cunt. Again, his thumb began to trouble her too-sensitive clit.

"Nooooo, stop," she groaned, unable to bear anything more at the moment. She pulled her legs together and squeezed her thighs as hard as she could to force his hand away.

He spoke with a full mouth. "Enough of this. Spread your legs."

"I can't."

"You will or we'll start over."

"Like fucking hell," she countered. "There's not enough food left. You've eaten most of it."

"Then you'll buy and prepare more. You'll add hours and hours to the time when I'll finally be inside of you." His tone of voice said he meant it. No matter his own arousal, he would make her wait.

Double shit. "Give me a minute to calm down, all right?"

"No. Now."

She opened her eyes and glared at him. Undaunted, his thumb circled her clit, closing in on the rigid nub with each sweep. Her sagging mouth liberated a prolonged whimper. Her vagina submitted to him before her mind could catch up, the walls clutching his fingers, sucking them deeper. Conquered, she closed her eyes and spread her legs.

"Gracias."

She pleaded. "Don't drag it out. Waiting to come drives me nuts, all right?"

"Whatever you say." Purposely defiant, his fingers flicked her clit and retreated, returning only when she'd calmed somewhat. She would have cursed him, if she could've found enough breath. Obviously pleased, he continued his slow masturbation while loitering over his meal, every damned crumb, licking her skin cleaner than it needed to be, pushing her over too many edges.

Her forearms hurt from fisting her fingers, her jaw throbbed from grinding her teeth. Finally, his fingers led her to a staggering climax. Chin lifted to the ceiling, she babbled incoherently. He reached the end of his meal and her musky thatch.

While she fought for each breath, he removed his fingers from her slit, released her wrists and went to the other side of the table, between her legs. Despite her fatigue, she wrapped her calves around his lean hips. Her legs trapped him, giving him a taste of her control.

He protested. "What are you doing? My mouth can't reach your cunt."

She swallowed and spoke on her next gasp. "Deal with it."

"Very well." His fingers ran down the backs of her thighs, heading for her anus, virgin territory and excruciatingly sensitive.

Her back arched. "Oh, oh, oh," she said as his hands spread her cheeks.

"You like?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Good – oh shit." His hands dropped away from her ass.

"What?" Her eyes snapped open.

He'd turned his head to the sunroom's windows. He stared at something or someone outside. Trish? Was she peeping into here? Had she lost her mind? All the blood drained from Eden's face, and then a more horrible thought occurred. Had the cable or phone guy wandered down the walkway to investigate a utility problem? They hadn't in the past. It didn't mean they wouldn't now. Her heart banged into her chest. Quickly, she unwound her legs from Rafe and chanced a look. The yard was empty. Even the sun had deserted it in favor of hiding behind a curdling bank of clouds.

Rafe laughed. "You are so easy to fool."

She gave him the finger.

Not waiting for her to bitch further, he grabbed her ankles and lifted her legs to prop her feet on the edge of the table. His hold challenged her to defy him. When she did not, his thumb stroked her silver anklet. His smile said he approved of it. Next, his hands went to her inner thighs, pushing them apart. He dropped to one knee, his shoulders at the same level as her exposed cunt. He regarded her through the V of her legs. "I trust you know what will happen if you dare move."

Unexpectedly, Eden's thoughts returned to her and Trish's breakfast conversation. Embarrassment burned her chest and face. Arousal thrummed behind it. Her voice rose just above a whisper. "You'll paddle me?"

His brows lifted. "You like that?"

In her fantasies, sure. In real life? Maybe. "Only if it's a sensual game." Her voice shivered worse than her legs. "For pleasure, not pain."

Gently, he stroked the insides of her thighs.

She gasped in delight. Her ass lifted, leaving the table.

He murmured, "No matter what we do, I'd never harm you, Eden. You do believe that, no?"

His hesitation humbled her. A rush of tenderness brought tears to her eyes. Of the few things she'd trusted in her life, beginning with her grandmother's unwavering love, Eden's belief in Rafe continued to grow. She knew he was a good, decent man. Even before he told her about his hard past, she'd known it. Compassion and fairness had filled his eyes during the competition. He was hot, rich, successful and just about owned the world, yet he'd been consistently kind to everyone. And that made him dangerous to her heart and good sense. What would she be willing to give up or endure for the chance to be with him after their time together ended? How would she change

her life to fit more securely into his? Not on his demand. Because of her own neediness, a desire to be safe and loved that ran so deep it might as well have been genetic. It was certainly her heritage. Her mother had too easily succumbed to it, turning her back on her daughter and her family for a man who wasn't a millionth as worthy as Rafe. Frightened by her thoughts, at how much she genuinely liked him, she forced a smile. "Of course. That's why you're here."

Disappointment flashed across his face, saying he hadn't expected her casual tone. Her heart told her to explain, to try to make him understand what she had trouble sorting out. Cowardice kept her from it.

An awkward silence pressed in on them, broken by children's laughter outside, carried on the wind. In here, the chandelier tinkled beneath the air conditioner's chilled breath. His voice pierced the chandelier's delicate music, though his tone matched the casualness of hers. "Then I'll spank you later. For now..." He offered no more words, only his mouth and tongue on her pouty pink folds.

Her lids sank at his first lick, so tentative and loving. Her legs drooped outward on his second lick, bolder and assured. The V between her legs widened steadily, predictably, offering him everything.

Rafe indulged himself as though he faced his last meal prior to a lengthy fast. With a blind man's thoroughness, his fingertips traced the borders of her vaginal lips. He speared his tongue into her opening, his top lip resting just below her clit. The softness and warmth of his mouth on such an intimate area provided pure rapture, easily surpassing the two climaxes he'd already given her.

Panting, she arched her back to lower her hips so she could bring her nub into contact with his probing tongue.

He disciplined her immediately. Her climax was his to offer, the timing of it his to determine. The heels of his hands pressed her pubic bones, obliging her hips to stay still and her sex to remain elevated. Assured of her obedience, he focused on her labia, his fingers spreading the lips so her slit would open farther, while his thumbs settled near her anus.

Restrained so decadently and bared for his use, an odd languor took over, boring so deeply it might as well have reached her marrow. Hands still above her head, one wrist draped over the other, Eden abandoned herself to Rafe's domination.

His tongue lapped her vulva, warming it beneath the chilly air pouring down from the overhead vent. The tips of his first two fingers slid over the hidden areas he'd moistened and went to her opening, penetrating it, slipping deeper and deeper, serving as an anchor, telling her without words she wouldn't move now. He wouldn't allow it. She was his to enjoy at his leisure.

Her too-taut nipples ached in response. Fragile sighs concealed her maddening hunger for him. His thumb brushed the ends of her pubic hair, playing with it, intentionally avoiding her clit. Instinctively, her thighs and calves flexed so she could lift herself to his thumb, in spite of his determination to keep her motionless. Just as

quickly, Rafe's mouth deserted her. Forehead to her inner thigh, his shallow breaths reflected his displeasure at her habitual disobedience. His next move told her what he intended to do about it.

He gave her an open-mouthed kiss on the back of her thigh where it met the curve of her buttocks, an exquisitely sensitive region. For the second time in as many minutes, her ass tried to leave the table, her body's spontaneous reaction to overpowering stimulation.

Rafe didn't stop. His mouth refused to relinquish its prize. He suckled lightly to tease, not please. His thumb glanced over her nub and moved away from it, down her engorged borders to just above her anus, only to return and begin the same journey again and again. Ruthlessly, he played her body, bringing her close to climax so he could jerk her back by withdrawing his tongue and touch.

Unable to tolerate any more, chest heaving, she whined, "Dammit, let me come! I'll do my best not to move—oh god!"

His lips surrounded her clit, his mouth fastened on it, his tongue snaked slowly over the tiny rise of flesh.

Shuddering, she brought down her arms, pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes.

His tongue withdrew, the retreat stating he wouldn't allow her willful movement. Her arms were to remain above her head. She curled her fingers into fists, clenching them so hard her knuckles hurt. Her voice begged. "Don't stop, please."

His mouth left her sex, followed by his fingers, leaving her empty. He whispered loud enough for her to hear, "Why not?"

She laughed shrilly and stated the obvious. "I want this. You know I want this!"

"Enough to obey and do exactly what I say?"

Her fists hit the table on either side of her body, the sharp rapping adding emphasis to her words. "I. Am. Trying."

"Don't try for me, Eden. I have no problem giving up control. Do it for yourself. You may like it."

Her next rap stalled at his comment. She lifted her head to look at him. His beautiful eyes held wisdom gained from suffering too much hardship. He seemed capable of reading her soul. Disconcerted, she intended to keep him from it. He'd never know why she feared giving up even the slightest bit of control to a man, unless he guessed it had to do with her mom choosing Mitch and every other guy over her. Even if Rafe reached that conclusion, she'd never admit it. He'd never know her completely. After their time together ended, his sole interest in her—the only one she'd allow—would be his investment in her business venture, and it wouldn't happen unless things went well during these next weeks. Suddenly, she felt insulted and angry at him for taking her to task. "You don't have a problem giving up control, because it would only be an illusion, you'd still have nothing to lose. You're the one who always has the upper hand. You did throughout the competition. You do here."

He studied her. "You truly believe that?"

She frowned and lowered her head. The back of it hit the table with an indistinct tap. "Why wouldn't I? It's the truth."

"It's your home," he said quietly, straightening for an unrestricted view of her face. "It's your choice. You want to accept the offer I made to you upstairs? You want me to leave?"

Her heart knocked into her chest and raced out of control. Blood rushed to her face, stinging her skin. She wanted to avert her gaze but did not. With more courage than she'd believed she possessed, her eyes remained on his. Her voice sounded steady, unapologetic. "You know I don't."

In spite of his victory, his expression remained neutral. "So which of us has always had the control here, Eden?"

She regarded her nudity, her whorish pose on the table and his fully clothed state. "Is that a trick question?"

He laughed, breaking the tension. His effortless joy stirred Eden more deeply than she cared to analyze.

"Look, I'll do whatever you want," she promised. "For my gratification, not yours," she added, tired of arguing, weary of trying to convince him and herself that her life plan would work. "Go on." She gestured to get him going. "Do whatever the hell you want. Drive me freaking crazy. Make me climb the damned walls."

He grinned. "Do you honestly believe I need instruction on how to please you or that I would hold back in any way when it comes to what I want and expect?"

What arrogance. Tilting her head, she gave him a feline smile. "Right now, I don't know what to believe." She lifted her foot and settled her toes on his stubbled jaw. "Maybe you should prove yourself to me."

His eyes shifted from her foot to her face. His grin faded.

Confronted with his sudden gravity, Eden stopped smiling. She brought down her foot and put it back on the table. His reaction wasn't what she'd expected. She'd been flirting. He, on the other hand, looked downright predatory.

"You're certain?" he asked, his lilting voice holding vague carnal threats as to what he had in store for her.

Part of her feared the unknown. A greater part of her embraced it with him, as long as there was a limit, a time when her submission would end. Rising anticipation shook her voice. "I am. So what are you waiting for?"

"Arms above your head," he ordered. "Don't rush me or plead with me. If you do, we'll start from the beginning until you learn to obey. Understood?"

Forcing down a swallow, she nodded and complied with his first command, gripping her wrists to give her hands something to hold onto so they'd stop shaking. In the watery light, the crystals above her recorded her image a thousand times over. She stared at her tiny reflections rather than glancing at him.

He ran his fingers down her thighs to her clit, wakening nerve endings that fired signals of delight from her groin to her curling toes. Fearful of trembling, sensing he might misinterpret the response and make good on his threat, she dug her nails into her wrists to distract herself.

Purposely, he rubbed her nub just enough to entice. Stopping, he tested her endurance, goading her into lifting her ass to persuade his hand to resume. She tightened her buttocks to keep from moving and sank her teeth into her lower lip so she wouldn't cry out or curse him.

His hands returned to her inner thighs. With a hard grip, he held her legs open, exerting his control. His quickening breaths skimmed her pussy. Neither his mouth nor his tongue reclaimed this part of her.

A frustrated moan gathered at the base of her throat. She didn't dare release it or even breathe too loudly fearing he'd notice and question, which might cause him to start at the damn beginning. She prayed for release, for him to make his next move. He did not. The air conditioner's blower shut off and wound down. With no air sweeping over them, the crystals' tinkling ceased. An uneasy silence settled on them. Only Rafe's aroused breathing filled the oppressive quiet. With cruel calculation, he did nothing, he said nothing, he made her wait.

She pictured him scrutinizing her most intimate area as he inhaled her womanly scent.

Her eyes closed, the lids squeezed tight. She couldn't stand it any longer. A protest rose to her lips.

A sigh spilled from them as his tongue made contact finally, his protracted licks gentle and caressing, his mouth molding to her body as if his lips always belonged there and never wanted to leave.

She filled her lungs and released the air silently, slowly, along with her control. No way could she allow this to stop. No way could she start over. She had to have him. She wanted him to have her.

Her shoulders relaxed, followed by her limbs. Liquid heat oiled her muscles and joints. Peace she hadn't known for too many years, perhaps ever, made her feel weightless.

Rafe must have noticed her surrender. His licks slowed further, his lazy suckles said he wouldn't be through for hours. He'd make her wait all day for completion and his cock.

Prepared to endure, her hands fell away from her wrists. Her toes stopped curling over the lip of the table and splayed instead.

His deep-throated grunt acknowledged her small movement. His tongue and mouth continued, their pace increasing almost imperceptibly. Two strokes replaced one. A lengthy lap became three then four within the same time frame.

Perspiration coated her neck and chest. Pressure mounted between her legs, swells of pleasure crowded out everything else. She grabbed her wrists again. Didn't help. She

laced her fingers and squeezed. Not as a substitute for control. As a testament to what approached, what she couldn't deny.

Her orgasm peaked fast and broke. Mouth hanging open, she released one guttural moan after another. Her breasts and belly jiggled with her cries.

Instantly, Rafe pulled back and stood.

Panicked, Eden's mind shouted, *no*. He couldn't stop now and force them to start over. She'd given him everything he'd wanted. More importantly, she'd given it to herself and wanted to tell him as much. Her gasping wouldn't allow any words.

Nor was there a need. His hooded eyes and sensual smile said he wouldn't stop this time. Gazing down at her, he lowered his fly.

Its metal hiss coaxed a new gush of moisture from her pussy. Enthralled, she watched as he reached inside the placket of his navy briefs and pulled out his rod. Her breath caught. The smooth head of his penis flushed scarlet, pre-cum seeped from the tiny slit, prominent veins twisted up the thick, long shaft. A large cock for a large man. He released himself and stepped toward her, his sex slightly elevated, revealing its rigidity.

Eden smiled.

"You approve?" he asked in a strained, hoarse voice.

She met his dark eyes and murmured, "You know I do. I would have to lose my mind not to."

He grinned with the confidence of a man who didn't need a woman to confirm his masculinity, but appreciated her admiration nonetheless. "We certainly wouldn't want you losing your mind."

"Then don't make me wait any longer. Please."

He made no comment on her breach of his instructions not to rush him or plead with him. Nor did he make them start over. Eden knew her body controlled his as much as his controlled hers. Hands on her hips, he eased her forward until her ass reached the edge of the table and the heels of her feet were about to slip over the side.

Anticipating his next move, she pulled her legs up, drawing her knees toward her torso.

"Hold your legs," he ordered. "I want nothing coming between your cunt and me."

There wouldn't be, as he well knew. Last night at the wrap party, upon her agreement of this, he'd asked her about protection. For the first time since she'd started taking the Pill, she'd been glad of it and told him they didn't need to use condoms.

Dutifully, she wrapped her forearms around her thighs, imprisoning them, though she made certain she didn't pull them back too much. She wanted her sex on the same level as his.

He cradled his penis in his palm. Tauntingly, he drew the silky hot crown over her damp flesh, tracing the length of her cleft. A pulse in her vagina drummed slowly – *thump...thump...thump* – imploring him to enter her, to come home.

Not yet ready, intent on controlling the act, he placed his thumb on her still tender clit and pushed it from side to side.

Her legs jerked at the sweet torture, which she bore in silence.

For a long moment, he played with her nub as if to make certain of her obedience, her submission.

Teeth clenched, her breathing deliberately subdued, Eden withstood his carnal assault and remained open to him, tamed.

Rafe took full advantage. Without further delay, he entered her. In one swift motion, he buried his cock to its root, the head and shaft stretching her inner walls, demanding she contain every inch of him.

Her back arched. She dug her nails into the insides of her thighs. He flexed his rod to open her a bit more. His hand stroked her clit. Her faltering breaths transformed into an indelicate moan. Filled completely, trapped by his shaft, teased by his fingers, she didn't believe she could take much more.

Clearly aware of her state, he gave her no rest. His thumb worked her nub mercilessly. At the same time, he pulled back and released his penis until he'd removed its length from her and only the crown remained inside.

She mewled. He thrust, plowing into her with male privilege, playing the master during this act. Her breasts quivered and the table creaked on his next plunge and those that followed, each penetration building in intensity and animal lust, while his steady pace ensured he would drag out her wait and his own.

Her mind protested. Her vagina contracted and sucked him deeper, hugging him harder, inducing her orgasm closer. His thrusts slowed, so did his thumb on her clit. Rolling her head from side to side, she offered a wordless objection. He saw and reprimanded her accordingly, coming to an abrupt stop.

Seconds passed, an eternity.

During it, his sharp breaths calmed. Hers did not. Agitated and wanting relief, she flexed her inner muscles around his cock and tried to push her cunt closer to him, a mutinous and foolish act. He eased back to pull out of her, to withdraw completely.

"Don't," she gasped.

He didn't ask her why or if she'd obey him, he now knew she would.

Her body lay docile to his will.

His shaft punched into her, taking its due repeatedly. Time softened, minutes melted into each other as she awaited the prize at the end of this journey. At last, his momentum built to the point where he wasn't able to stop or slow. Eyes narrowed in concentration, shoulders bunched, he pummeled her body with his own. Her face scrunched. The sweetness they both sought was a breath away.

Her climax shattered with his thumb's next swipe over her clit and his cock's next dive into her depths. Eden's hands went to the edges of the table, her fingers gripping

the wood. Rafe growled. She wailed. Her sound of blessed ecstasy filled the room, followed by his unashamed bellow.

Wheezing pants pumped from her chest to join his halting breaths. Spanish words, musical and soft, poured from his lips, confessing how much he'd enjoyed this.

Without thinking, without considering what the next hours, days, or weeks might hold or challenge her with, she responded in Spanish, admitting the same.

He pulled his head up from between his stooped shoulders and looked at her through pleasure-slitted lids. Again, he seemed to be reading her soul.

Disquieted, she blushed and fought to keep her gaze on his.

If he noticed, he didn't voice it. He pulled in more air to relieve his huffing. His expression lightened on his next deeper breath. "You're sure you enjoyed yourself? Once or twice, I thought I heard you snoring."

Laughter bubbled from deep within, nearly causing her to push out his cock. She clenched her pussy to keep him inside, not yet ready to let go. "Bull." She giggled, "You were great."

His handsome face flushed uncharacteristically, though his voice sounded wounded. "Just great? Not magnificent?"

Men. Particularly Latin ones. She spoke to him as a much older teacher would. "First times are always rough. I'm certain you'll get better at this eventually."

"Such faith you have in me. Such patience." Bending forward, he ran his palms down her breasts, muddling her thoughts. "Did I do that correctly?" His thumbs flicked her erect nipples. "And this?"

Her swallow interrupted a sigh. "I'm not sure. You may have to do it again."

"Whatever you say." He draped his torso over hers. His mouth headed for her nipple. His lips touched it.

Eden groaned in satisfaction.

The doorbell chimed.

With the sound and her flinch, Rafe's head jerked up, turning toward the archway leading to the living room. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"Not when we're like this."

His head swung to her, his eyes sparkled with mischief. "Like what? I still have all my clothes on."

She arched one brow. "That can be changed. It should be."

"Later. When I say so." He pressed his mouth to her ear and whispered, "Should I call out to your visitor and invite her inside?"

He assumed it was Trish. Eden figured it was the usual suspects—someone selling a product no one wanted or a group of polite twenty-year-olds trying to convince her to try their religion. She turned her face into his. Her insides melted at his soapy clean skin

and the same sun-baked fragrance she'd drooled over last night. Mingled with those scents was her own from him eating her.

Feeling naughty, she purred, "What makes you think it's not a guy?"

His fingers paused on her breast. He pulled back, his emotions hidden behind a placid mask. "You have a male neighbor who's also your BFF?" He pecked her chin and rested his own on it, looking down at her. "Is it the elderly man I saw when I arrived? He was bringing groceries into his house. Would he be coming over here now for one of your recipes?"

"When he could nuke a TV dinner in his microwave and be just as happy?"

Rafe's smile creased the skin at the corners of his eyes. He kissed the sides of her mouth and kept his lips just above hers. "Forgive me. I failed to tell you your finger foods are some of the best I've eaten."

She glowed with pride, yet affected his wounded tone from a few minutes ago. "Just some of the best? Not *the* best?"

"I was comparing them to what I prepare, not to any other chefs' work. They were amazing, Eden."

His praise made her want him even more. Still, she questioned. "You're not just saying that are you? This is important to me."

"And it's not to me?"

He spoke of his proposed investment. She recalled his comment last night about not offering charity. He never gave anything without a fair return. "You haven't seen a millionth of what I can do."

He offered a surprisingly tender smile. "You intend to make me fat?"

"I intend to blow your freaking mind."

"Keep cooking as you did this afternoon and I have no doubt you'll succeed. I'll end up a drooling moron whose only thought is your next dish."

Her broad grin made her cheeks sore. "*Gracias.*"

He ran his fingers over her collarbone, inhaling lazily as she shivered. "The blend of spices you used in the croquetas, what were they exactly? There was one that was quite subtle, almost an aftertaste. I couldn't quite place it."

"Could be you were tasting my perfume."

He chuckled at her reluctance to divulge a culinary secret. The bell chimed again. She placed her palms on his pecs, loving how his muscles jumped beneath her fingers. "Think I should answer it?"

"And give your poor elderly neighbor a heart attack?"

She offered an innocent look. "What makes you think all of my male neighbors are old, Rafe?"

His mask began to crack, though it wasn't evident in his smooth tone. "If any of the ones my age come to your windows, you'll have to introduce me."

"We could invite him inside."

He arched one brow at her outrageous suggestion and the way she'd said "him". She suspected he was onto her game to provoke him into spanking her. Goose pimples rose on her arms at the image slinking across her mind—her nude body slung over his legs, her ass lifted, prepared for punishment.

Her excitement wasn't lost on Rafe. "Perhaps later."

She squeezed his pecs, her voice breathy. "How much later?"

"When I've finished with you. A very long time from now."

Chapter Six

With his promise, her cunt tightened, clutching his cock. A level of longing he'd rarely experienced tore through Rafe, making him want to take her again, to possess and keep her from any other man.

In the end, he simply stared.

How lovely she looked lying on the table, spread before him like an incomparable banquet. Pleasure flushed her skin a shade tawnier than normal. Its tint nearly matched his. The diamond on the side of her nose captured the scant light and twinkled like a faraway star. Thick, wavy hair flowed away from her face as if blown by the wind. Amazing. His soul hungered for her. His eyes roamed, skimming her ripe breasts, the gentle rise of her belly, the russet curls between her legs and finally her eyes. Mischief and fire had replaced caution. He hoped it would last and suspected it would not. She craved control. She feared wanting him.

He wondered if it had to do solely with being abandoned by her mother and losing her grandmother or did it involve something else? Had there been a lover in her past she couldn't forget? A man who'd also turned his back on her? If so, Rafe was prepared to give her new memories of him. To seduce her into seeing no one except him, thirsting for no one but him. Without comment, he stepped back, releasing himself from her heated hold.

Her brows drew together at their parting and the timid rap on the front door. The visitor sounded ready to admit defeat, no one inside would be answering. Rafe went around the table. Eden propped herself on her elbows, her head turning to follow him. "Where are you going? Whoever's out there is knocking on the front door not the back."

He reached the kitchen's archway. "And we'll ignore her, no?" He pointed his finger at Eden. "You're not to move." He left the room, throwing his last comment over his shoulder. "Understand?"

The table creaked in answer. Rafe figured she had already pushed to a sitting position deliberately defying him.

Her voice called out. "What happens if I do move?"

He stopped at her kitchen table to enjoy a much-needed yawn and stretch. Clearing fatigue from his voice, he shouted, "Not what you're hoping for. I can promise you that." He worked his cock back into his briefs, zipped his fly and went to her refrigerator.

Her voice was a bit meeker, though still curious. "What am I hoping for?"

A paddling, what else? She hadn't fooled him with her lie about young male neighbors. She'd been goading him into disciplining her. There would be a paddling, of that she could be certain, though the timing of it was his to know and hers to anticipate.

His shaft squirmed in its cotton prison at the unexpected turn in their sexual play. He was an even-tempered man. He'd never been prone to fits of jealousy or rage. Never had he lifted his hand to a female in anger or as part of a carnal game.

For a woman who preferred control, Eden had definitely surprised him with her erotic tastes.

He opened her fridge, took a quick look at its contents and grabbed two Coronas. Finding the opener, he pocketed it. He checked the stove to make certain the oven and burners were off, unplugged the deep-fryer and glanced around the room to be sure everything was in its place so nothing would distract them or disturb his plans for her.

He returned to the dining room and stopped short of the table, fighting surprise and laughter. Not only had she used one of the linen napkins to dry herself, she now had her feet on the floor, her torso draped over the table, her back arched, ass held high, legs spread and her chin resting on the backs of her hands.

The corners of her mouth turned down contritely. "I had a cramp in my side. I had to work it out. This position is more comfortable."

For whom? In seconds, his cock had gotten thicker, his briefs far too snug. He cleared the tension from his throat. His voice still rasped. "Come here."

Her brows lifted slightly with his unforeseen order. Eyes darting to the beers he held, her gaze grew thoughtful. He could see her mind working, trying to figure out what he would do with the brew. Paddle her with the bottles? Pour the contents over her and lick the drops away?

"Now," he said, his voice brooking no argument.

Her expression went from puzzled to stubborn, her control returned.

He didn't demand again. He simply waited her out.

In seconds, she capitulated and came to him on slightly unsteady legs, so close the tip of her nose just about touched his shoulder. She looked like she wanted to kiss it. Instead, she tilted her face to his.

His knees went rubbery. He locked them and stared at her eyes. Light streaming in from the sunroom accentuated the green in her irises and lightened the beige.

Voice lowered to a hush, she asked, "What did you want?"

To fuck her good and hard for an extended period, then hold her afterwards, protecting her as she slept. With his eyes trapped by hers, he lifted the Coronas. "Hold these."

She looked at them, a question in her eyes she didn't ask. "If you insist." She took the bottles from him, holding them in one hand.

Before she could comment further or anticipate, Rafe went to her side. With one arm around her waist and his other beneath her knees, he swept her into his arms.

Fragrant waves of her hair spilled over his shoulder and brushed the side of his face. She parted her lips on a joyous cry.

He cradled her close, nuzzling his nose in her neck. Her skin smelled of the croquetas and perfume. His ears buzzed. Contentment flooded him, bringing out his playfulness. "Hold on tight, I wouldn't want to drop you."

Her free hand slipped over his shoulders, her fingers fisting in his tee. To avoid contact with her bare skin, she settled the base of the bottles against his abs. His muscles jumped at the chilled bite of the glass. With a sigh, she snuggled into him as if to state her readiness for travel no matter how bumpy.

A second passed and another. When he didn't move or even adjust his weight, she rubbed her nose against his cheekbone. "Are you trying to figure out how to make love in this position?"

He barked a laugh. She squealed as he pretended to drop her. He scolded. "See what happens when you ask too many questions?"

"I do." She tightened her arm on him, her nails clawing his skin through his tee. "So what are you doing? Where are you taking me?"

He crossed the threshold between the dining and living room. "I'm taking you in every part of this house." He stopped near the leather sofa and turned his face to hers. "I thought you already knew that."

Her eyes dropped to his mouth, tarrying there before moving to the sofa, what she assumed would be their next destination. "I do," she whispered, then added in a small whine, "but only in this house?"

She was bad. "No," he said, his tone grave. "You said you have a guesthouse. I intend to use it. I noticed you have a pool and a fairly spacious backyard. We wouldn't want either to go to waste, or for that matter any other part of your property, now would we?" He bypassed the sofa and crossed the living room to the front door.

"Whoa." Her body curled into itself and him, a modified fetal position to protect her nudity. "Whatever you're thinking, don't. The front yard isn't fenced like the back."

"I know, but you have ample foliage that serves as a barrier so the effect's the same. However, I wasn't thinking about your landscaping or your fences." He made his tone curious. "Why would you think I was?"

"Rafe." Her voice rose a notch, just a shade short of panicked. "You can't bring me out there in daylight. Tonight, if there isn't a moon, it might be okay, but not now. Do you understand?"

"Forgive me, I don't. You never allow yourself to go outside in the daylight? You have to wait for dark? You can't tolerate a full moon? Are you a vampire? A werewolf?"

She growled through her laughter. "You know what I mean. You can't bring me into the front yard while I'm nude. And you sure as hell can't fuck me out there in broad daylight."

"I wasn't planning to. I just wanted to make certain your door was locked." He glanced from the thrown deadbolt to her, offering a shrewd smile. "Just in case one of your young male neighbors decides to visit while I have you beneath me."

She dug her nails a bit deeper into his shoulder.

Pretending not to notice the pain, he turned and headed for her stairway.

This time her body stiffened. "You're going to carry me upstairs?"

"Unless you want to carry me."

She laughed again, though briefly. "I should walk. I don't mind."

He climbed the first step. "You're not that heavy, Eden." At six-three, Rafe figured he outweighed her by at least sixty pounds.

A flush spread across her cheeks and nose. "I'm not a stick, if you haven't yet noticed."

He had, from the moment she arrived for the competition. Her beautifully developed body attracted him first. Next, he'd become enchanted with her personality and talent. "Neither is Jennifer Lopez." He took the fourth step. "Nor was Marilyn Monroe. Or Anna Nicole Smith, when she was the Playboy Playmate of the Year. I haven't heard any men complaining about their bodies."

She stared at him. "You think I'm built like those women?"

"Goddesses," he corrected, turning his face to hers. "Just ask your young male neighbors. They'll explain what I'm talking about."

She arched one brow.

Smiling, he reached the landing and headed to their bedroom.

"Whoa," she said once more as he bypassed the four-poster and went to a door on the right. "We can't go out on the porch. The banister out there is wrought-iron. It's not solid. All the neighbors have to do is look up and they'll see everything."

He studied her. "And that would bother you?"

A stew of emotions passed over her face. He saw excitement at the threat of discovery, fear one of the neighbors might possibly call the police and daring that it might be worth the risk.

Her voice shook with doubt and desire. "We could use it tonight."

"But only if there's not a full moon, otherwise you'll turn into a she-devil and devour me, no?"

The tip of her tongue snuck out of her mouth to lick the line of his jaw. Once she'd marked him, she cooed, "Oh Rafe, I fully intend to devour you, though I have no intention of waiting until tonight."

His cock nudged his fly, wanting out of his clothing and back into the tight heat of her cunt or mouth. He inclined his head to the door. "I thought that was your bath. Where is it?"

Her seduction vanished beneath renewed curiosity. "Why?"

"I'm going to bathe you to remove all traces of your food and perfume. I want to smell your skin, nothing else. Once I've toweled you dry, I'm going to tie your wrists and ankles to our bed so you can't escape what I have planned."

Her words bounced. "What do you have planned?"

"You'll have to wait to find out."

In the bath, Rafe lowered Eden to her feet. Her toes splayed and curled over the enameled tiles, a colorful mixture of terra cotta, dark blue and forest green. Her gaze shot to the bedroom, his bags. Had Trish been correct? Had he brought cuffs—one pair for her wrists, two others for her ankles? Dizzy with expectation, she braced her shoulder against the jamb. Her skin was so hot the corners of her neck and the undersides of her breasts were damp. A giddy giggle tried to burst out of her mouth. To stop it, she lifted a Corona to her lips. Her tongue swept over the rough edges of the cap she'd forgotten was there.

Rafe took both beers from her. He pulled her opener from his front pocket, pried off the caps, tossed them in the small wastebasket to the side and handed her one of the brews.

Vaporous, icy air poured over its lip. She pressed the bottle to her chest, shivering on contact.

He finished a long swallow of his beer and asked, "Nervous?"

"Should I be?" She lifted her bottle, showing it to him. "Will I be needing something stronger than this?"

He placed the opener on the counter, handed her his beer and flicked on the overhead light. Head raised, he studied the etched tulip-shaped shades. "Finish mine too if you think you'll need it." His smile implied he'd offer no more information.

Once he'd put his Rolex on the counter, he lifted the powder-blue shower curtain from the claw-footed tub and turned the porcelain faucets, testing the water's temperature with his hand.

His firm ass faced her. Eden imagined his cheek muscles clenching as he adjusted his weight. It was too much. Heart hammering, she put the beers on the floor, making certain to minimize any noise, and moved toward him with the same need a flower has as it rises toward the life-giving sun.

Satisfied with the water's heat, unaware of her proximity, he put the metal stopper over the drain to fill the tub.

The moment he straightened, Eden wrapped her arms around his torso and pressed her nose to his back, taking in his wondrous scent. Rafe's head jerked to the side. Her fingers dipped to his jeans' button and zipper. Before he could question, comment or protest, she said, "I want you naked."

His hands covered hers. "Later."

"No. Now."

Being far stronger, he easily relieved himself of her grasp and turned. "You're defying me?"

"Fucking A. Bitch at me, threaten me, spank me. I. Do. Not. Care. I'm winning this argument." Her fingers flew back to his fly.

He crossed his arms. "What about our agreement?"

"Consider it a work in progress with this being one of the amendments." With his fly down at last, Eden hooked her thumbs beneath his briefs and jeans, shoving both to his knees. His cock sprang out, harder, seemingly longer than a few minutes earlier and oh so masculine. At its base was a mat of thick, dark hair. A coarse female growl pumped from deep within her chest. She bunched his tee in her hand, pushing it past his navel so it didn't intrude on her scrutiny. Beneath his meaty cock, his balls plumped, tight to his body, the dusky glands lightly covered with short hairs just as she'd dreamed.

She sank to her knees and buried her face in his groin to smell his aromatic musk. Her body trembled. She felt like a deprived dieter who'd come upon a hundred-course buffet and didn't know which heavenly dish to indulge in first.

Rafe didn't allow her one taste of him. His large hands went to either side of her head, pushing it back gently, stopping her from further contact.

Eden muttered a curse and looked up. He struggled not to smile. "If you intend to take a while, then perhaps I should turn off the water in your tub."

The steady splashing and increasing humidity had escaped her completely. "I'm going to take more than a while, so do what you have to." As she spoke, she'd wrapped her arms around his hairy left thigh, holding tight. "But don't go too far."

His shoulders jiggled with suppressed laughter. "Whatever you say." Turning his torso, he planted his hand on the wall for support and leaned over to shut off the faucets.

His position invited and Eden accepted, sliding her hand up the back of his thigh to his taut ass. With no delay, she slipped her hand into the furrow between his cheeks. Her forefinger circled his anus.

Rafe's legs wobbled. Whispered words flew out of his mouth so quickly Eden couldn't translate all the Spanish. His head whipped around to her. Strands of hair swung over his forehead.

Her hand paused in its examination of him. "Need a minute to turn off the faucets?"

He swallowed and nodded.

She smiled sinfully and resumed stroking his tight circle with her forefinger, while her others brushed his balls, not giving him a moment's peace. In other words, doing to him what he'd done to her. "Too damn bad."

Muttering more Spanish, he made fast work of shutting off the water. In those few seconds, his ass moved to the left, trying to get away from her fingers, and then to the right in an attempt to get closer, uncertain of what it wanted.

Poor baby. "Hasn't any other woman touched you here before?"

He turned and looked down at her, his lips parting to answer.

A groan of wonder and rapture rushed from him, along with all of his breath as she took him in her mouth. She tasted a hint of salt and another flavor belonging to him—one of cleanliness, good health, a male in his prime. Eyes still lifted to his, she moved closer to slide his stiff cock over her tongue and down her throat, not stopping until she had most of him inside and her face reached his musky tuft.

The heels of Rafe's hands flew to his temples. His shoulders drew together. Head hanging between them, he clenched his jaw. Eden relaxed, allowing him to slip deeper. On a strangled growl, he did. With his rod imprisoned by her mouth and his anus by her finger, her other hand went to his tightly drawn balls, cradling them in her palm.

He choked out more words, a mixture of Spanish and English, the meaning quite clear. She was driving him crazy.

Her glorious torture had barely begun. She eased back, allowing him to slip out of her mouth until the base of his crown reached her teeth. There she kept him. Gently, her tongue scoured the wrinkled skin at the back of the head, a man's most sensitive area.

Rafe's knees bent, bumping her.

In a forgiving mood, she licked the tiny slit in the head, tasting his pre-cum, so much saltier than his skin. Savoring it as she would the finest culinary dish, she worked his testicles between her fingers, squeezing the hair-roughened sac lightly, while her other hand made certain not to neglect his anus.

His body wriggled. His hands fell to the sides of her head, gripping it. He gasped his words. "I can't stand it any longer. I'm going to come."

Eden wouldn't allow him to push her head away. Instead, she sucked him back inside, her mouth pulling at his shaft as her vaginal muscles would, her tongue licking it.

He moaned. "Do you never obey?"

Not when it came to this. One of the greatest gifts a woman could give to a man she admired and liked was to welcome his climax. Few moments were more intimate. To prove it, she hugged her lips to his rod, swirled her tongue in all the places it could reach and played with his balls.

A male roar signaled his climax. The sounds he produced were stronger, more prolonged than those he'd uttered downstairs. Inwardly, Eden smiled. Willingly, she accepted his ejaculate. Another woman might have been disturbed or frightened by it. She wasn't. She feared abandonment. Of someone she loved choosing another over her.

Don't, her thoughts begged. She didn't want to revisit her past at a moment like this. Those days were over. She could only change her future, and she'd never allow

herself to be in such a vulnerable position again. Nor would she think of anything sad or worrisome while Rafe was here. Their limited time together was hers to enjoy and to prove herself.

Given the way he panted, grunted and groaned, her carnal skills would never be in dispute.

He tried to pull out of her mouth, clearly not able to handle more.

She responded by suckling hard to keep his softening cock inside while she ran her fingers down the backs of his drooping testicles, another *über*-sensitive area.

"Stop," he ordered, his harsh tone confirming the power of her touch. "I'm warning you."

It sounded more like a plea. Mindful of his agony, she tongued him from her mouth and brought both of her hands away from his body, resting them in her lap.

He sank to his knees and ran his palms down his thighs, leaving streaks of sweat in their wake. Eden eased his wayward locks from his damp forehead. "Should I call 9-1-1?"

Though his head remained down, his heavy-lidded eyes did drift to her.

She maintained her innocent expression. "Want me to give you CPR?"

"On my cock?" he asked as she headed for it.

Holding her hair back so it wouldn't fall into her eyes, she studied his flaccid penis. "Looks dead to me." Her face turned to his. "What do you think?"

He forced down another swallow and answered. "That I'm going to enjoy punishing you."

Her fingers tightened around her hair. Shivers ran up her arms. "When?"

Rafe yawned and dropped to the floor next to her, arms flung above his head, feet facing the tub, his jeans and briefs still around his ankles, the hem of his tee on his navel.

Eden slipped off his huaraches, throwing them through the doorway into the bedroom. A noisy *clunk-clunk-clunk* marked their progression across the floor. "When?" she asked again.

Ignoring her, he finished a stretch. His cock rolled over his left thigh and remained there, indifferent to her nudity and loving gaze.

To get his attention and to play with him a bit longer, she ran her thumbnail up the sole of his left foot.

He choked on his next swallow and pulled his legs up. "Do that again and there won't be any punishment, understand?"

"I have to behave or you won't spank me?"

His legs kicked listlessly, trying to rid themselves of his jeans and briefs. "Perhaps."

Eyes narrowed at his evasive answer, she wrapped her arm around his knee. "Keep still, I'll pull your clothes off." The second she did, Eden dropped the garments on his

head. His chest puffed up with his heavy sigh. Sluggishly, he pulled the underwear and jeans from his face. She leaned toward him. "What did you mean by perhaps?"

He stuffed his briefs into his jeans front pocket, rolled the denim into a sloppy ball and tossed it over his head. Rather than sailing into the bedroom, the clothing hit the jamb and fell to the bathroom floor. "I meant you'll have to take a risk on what I have planned for you." His drowsy eyes sought hers. "You'll have to allow yourself to lose all control when you're with me."

She slumped against the tub, flinching as the chilly porcelain touched her back. "Like I did a minute ago?"

He smiled gently. "Did I thank you for what you did?"

Her voice softened. "I enjoyed it completely. Did you?"

"You have to ask?" He laughed, then sighed, his brief burst of energy spent. "Rarely have I experienced such pleasure."

Pride welled up in Eden, though she did wonder if part of his praise was to stop her questions. Much like a woman handles an anxious lover by faking an orgasm. "Seriously?"

Surprise and a bit of indignation simmered in his eyes. "You think I do this every day? That I sleep with every woman who comes along?"

She thought most probably wanted to sleep with him. Being a normal guy, he had to have fallen into bed with quite a few on a regular basis. "I didn't think you were a virgin."

"I suppose I should be flattered."

"Aren't you?"

"Actually, I'm curious." He ran his hand up her calf, his touch so expert it generated an incredible tingle. She shivered in appreciation. He asked, "The first day of the competition when you walked into the room and our eyes met, exactly what did you think of me?"

That he was impossibly gorgeous and self-assured. That he was a man at ease in his own skin. She'd envied his confidence and feared her attraction. She'd done everything she could to fight it. Her fascination with him had continued effortlessly, relentlessly, the same as now. She enjoyed his presence so acutely she found it difficult to breathe.

"It was that terrible?" he asked in a soft voice.

She shook her head. "No, of course not." Her face lowered. She told a partial truth. "You overwhelmed me. I knew of your achievements. I've followed your career like every other chef has. In the culinary world, you're a god."

He made a noise that said he found such a notion pure nonsense. "And everywhere else, I'm simply a man, no?"

Not even close. He was so kind, decent and likeable he could easily unravel her world if things didn't go well. In life and in sexual matters events seldom did go as one

planned. Eden figured she should remember that. “A tired man,” she said, ignoring the true intent of his question as he’d done with so many of hers.

She took his foot, surprised at its weight, and propped it on her thigh. Her fingertips outlined his long toes. They curled. As he succumbed to another yawn, she asked, “Do you want to go to bed and sleep for a little while?”

“Not yet. Later...after.”

Her lips parted to ask, “After what?” Seeing his scolding expression, she simply nodded.

Whatever he had planned, she knew she’d find out shortly and he’d expect her to yield to it willingly, just as she had to everything else.

Chapter Seven

The persistent ringing of Rafe's cell phone intruded on the mood he wanted to set.

He'd lit the blue candles on the bath's counter and turned out the light. Soft shadows bobbed on the white walls, ceiling and over Eden's lavish curves. The candles' fresh rain scent mingled with the clean fragrance of water in the half-filled tub. On the floor nearby, he'd placed their Coronas so they could reach over to take a sip.

"Maybe you should get that," she said, staring at his jeans, his cell phone jangling from the back pocket.

Again, he cursed himself for failing to turn it off, though he made no move to do so now. He shrugged out of his tee, determined to finish with his preparations, to let nothing and no one keep him from his intimate seduction. Not even Eden. He'd watched her hesitation when he asked what she'd thought of him the moment they met. He'd practically snorted at her answer about him being a culinary deity. She continued to fight their connection, allowing herself to feel nothing except the lure of sex even though he knew there was so much more they could offer each other. "This call will roll over to voice mail just like all the others."

"Three so far. In only a few minutes." The ringing ended. She swung her head to him. Her eyes fell to his naked chest, the scar on his arm and to his groin. Candlelight glanced off his thickening erection and the hard planes of his body. Several seconds passed. When she spoke again, her voice was thick with female hunger. "You did tell your family and employees that you'd be away for awhile, right?"

It had been Victor's job to inform the staff. It was probably Victor calling to make a nuisance of himself or to gather more information about Rafe's activities to share with their mother. Now wasn't the time to tell either of them how much he wanted Eden, how she forced him to fight for her trust and heart. "Of course," he said answering her. He dropped his tee on the floor. "They know how to handle things. I'll turn it off."

"Wait." Eden caught his arm, wrapping her fingers as far as she could around his biceps. "What if something's wrong? What if your parents or brother really do need you? What if there's an emergency?"

If it involved Victor, it had better have him at death's door. Rafe's intuition and strong bond with his parents told him everything was all right with them. His mother and father were in excellent health. Neither took unnecessary or foolish risks with the business or their lives. "Would you feel better if I answered the next call?"

"Sure." Her fingers stroked his underarm hair. "Wouldn't you?"

Not if it stopped her from touching him. Not if it was Victor snooping. "I'll bring the phone to the tub."

"You're going to take the call while you're bathing me?"

He held her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "The caller won't know what we're doing unless I take a picture. Would you like me to do that?"

She smacked his hand away. "What do you think?"

"For a beautiful woman you're far too modest."

Her slender brows lifted at his compliment, while her head lowered to her complete nudity. Minutes ago, he'd ordered her to take off the silver anklet. Now, only the diamond on the side of her nose remained, sparkling faintly in the candlelight. "If you take any calls while we're in here, the caller could hear us."

"Not if you don't shriek during your orgasm." He kissed the top of her head and eased back. "Do you think you can manage to be quiet for once?"

Her face lifted. A sly smile tugged the corners of her lush mouth. "I promise to be as quiet as you."

He laughed. "In that case, we're both in trouble." Playfully, he swatted her buttocks and got his phone.

After he sank into the tub, he gestured Eden to join him. She sat between his legs, his hardened cock against the furrow of her cheeks, the snug fit encouraging more blood to pool in his groin. Mouth to her ear, he whispered, "Comfortable?" He leaned forward to look at her face.

Her long lashes fluttered. Slowly, her chin lowered to her chest. Either she found her head too heavy to keep up or she was answering him in the affirmative. He kissed her shoulder. She mewled. Running his hands over her breasts, he scrubbed them with his fingers. Her mewl evolved into a prolonged, satisfied sigh.

His cell phone rang again.

Rafe swore.

Knees pressed together, she pulled her feet to her cunt as if to keep the caller from seeing it. "If you get rid of whoever it is, we won't be bothered again."

If he tossed the phone in the toilet and flushed it away, they'd reach the same goal. Sighing, he reached over the lip of the tub for the damn thing and glanced at the number on the display. Victor's.

Eden twisted her torso so she could look. "Who is it?"

"My brother. It's probably not important."

"He must think so if he keeps calling."

Grumbling, Rafe answered the phone on the final ring before voice mail kicked in. "What is it? Why do you keep calling? Is there an emergency? If not, then why are you bothering me?"

"You're in bed with the woman, no?" Victor asked in a serene voice. In the background *Madrigal* played, a bolero by the Cuban singer Beatriz Márquez. "Have you disappointed her already? Is that why you're swearing?"

Rafe chuckled. "If you call again, I'll fire you."

"Mama would hire me right back and give me a much-deserved promotion and a raise." He spoke quickly, interrupting Rafe, "And I haven't phoned before now. Anna Marie has. Three times in fact. At least that's what she claimed when she called me in tears because she couldn't reach you."

Rafe frowned. "Anna Marie's the one who's been calling?"

The name produced an instantaneous and unwanted response in Eden. Her body stiffened, shrinking from his. Rafe wound his free arm around her waist, just in case she intended to flee. Holding her as tightly as he dared, he interrupted Victor's rant. "Quiet. I have another call. Could be it's Anna Marie." He put his brother on hold and pressed his cheek to Eden's. "Remember when I told you I had a godchild, the youngest daughter of my aunt whose husband saved me from drowning?"

Although Eden's breathing remained somewhat shallow, her body relaxed. She lowered her legs, no longer protecting her cunt. "Anna Marie's your godchild?" She sounded embarrassed. Before he could answer, she added, "She's okay, isn't she?"

"At times, it's hard to tell." He pulled back his head. "She's about to turn fifteen. Everything's a tragedy."

"Maybe you should call her, find out what's wrong."

"Perhaps when I'm through with you." His hand slid from her waist to her belly and beyond...her inviting cleft.

Eden's back arched at his fingers swirling over her swollen bud already primed for his touch. On a sigh, her body collapsed into his, her head against his shoulder. Gladdened, he took Victor off hold. "It wasn't Anna Marie." He stroked Eden's clit expertly, thoroughly. Her legs jerked, splashing the tepid water. She shook her head as if to say no, he shouldn't be doing this while talking to his brother. Smiling, he continued with both activities. "So why is she trying to reach me?" he asked Victor.

"She wants you to speak to her mother. Aunt Carmen hates the boy Anna Marie wants to invite to her *quinceañera* and insists one of the male cousins will escort her and pretend to be her date. Anna Marie's locked herself in her bedroom. She refuses to eat. She's threatening to run away. Call her before she drives her mother and me crazy. Tell her you agree with Aunt Carmen."

"I'd rather have Anna Marie drive you insane."

Victor made a disgusting sound and added what else Anna Marie planned to do if she didn't get her way, then reminded Rafe of his duty as the girl's godparent.

During the lecture, Rafe rubbed Eden's nub, insistent on bringing her to a quick, unrestrained orgasm. Equally determined to fight him, she dug her nails into his thighs, nearly drawing blood. He gritted his teeth and continued. She tried to keep her strained mewl to the lowest level possible so Victor wouldn't hear her or know what went on. Interrupting his brother, Rafe said, "Deal with this yourself. Don't bother me again."

Victor swore in Spanish. Eden's ass scooted back, her body pressing into Rafe's as she attempted to evade his fingers. They followed, hopelessly drawn to her sensitive nub. On his next stroke, her hips lifted. Faster than he would have guessed, she pushed away from him, her body shivering like a wet dog. The water splashed noisily with her efforts to turn so they'd be face-to-face. At last, she succeeded.

Victor continued to speak. Not about Anna Marie any longer, something to do with one of the restaurants.

"What?" Rafe asked his brother distractedly, while he cocked one brow at Eden. She wasn't intimidated at his expression. Face pinched from her workout and near orgasm, shoulders bobbing with her heavy breaths, she leaned forward, her hands slipping beneath the water's surface, her fingers wrapping around his balls and shaft.

Rafe's toes lifted from the tub's floor. They curled as she squeezed and pulled on his rod with more power and control than her cunt ever could.

"So that means the supplier can't meet our deadline," Victor explained. "My thinking is we should —"

"Wait!" Rafe growled at him and Eden.

She smiled wickedly, answering his request by fondling his balls. spurts of warmth followed, dazing and overwhelming him. Rafe clenched his teeth. His chin lifted to the ceiling.

"What am I waiting for?" Victor asked.

Rafe choked out his words. "I have another call." He put his brother back on hold and muttered to Eden, "I am really going to enjoy punishing you."

"Promises, promises."

A new growl, carnal in nature, cut off his next comment. She worked his cock and sac pitilessly. Payback for when he'd ignored her pleas to stop. Her body couldn't take any more stimulation.

His was no different. With a shudder and a shout he came, his fingers fisted so tightly around his cell phone he figured he'd break it.

Eden didn't appear to care. Leaning forward, she licked his Adam's apple. It bobbed convulsively with his hard swallows. Undoubtedly pleased with herself, she put her mouth to his ear and whispered, "Shouldn't you take Victor off hold? The poor man might be wondering what happened to you."

If Rafe tried to speak in his current state, his heaving breaths would tell poor Victor all he wanted to know. His head fell forward. He conceded. "I need a minute...please."

Eden stopped squeezing his pecs. Genuine worry shaded her voice. "You okay?"

What man wouldn't be after experiencing three orgasms in so short a period with a woman he genuinely liked, one who might possibly be leading him to love? "Just a little winded."

She slipped her fingers beneath his chin and lifted it. Even with her help, his head was still too heavy to keep up. He allowed it to fall to the tub's tall back.

The crack of his skull hitting porcelain pulled a gasp from her. "Oh my god. Are you all right?" He didn't respond. She shook his shoulder. "Rafe, answer me. Can you open your eyes?"

Her unnecessary worry touched him so deeply tears threatened. Something he'd rarely experienced with anyone outside his family. His mouth, however, turned up in a sleepy smile. "Relax. I didn't knock myself unconscious."

She countered. "Your eyes are still closed. You're about to fall asleep. You could drown."

"Not if you drain the tub first."

She swore beneath her breath. "Come on, finish your call with Victor, make a quick one to Anna Marie, then go to bed and take a nap."

He finished his loud yawn. "No. I'm—" His words stopped. His arms stalled in mid-stretch. Bringing them down, he frowned.

Eden placed her hand on his chest directly over his heart. "What's wrong?"

"You said I should finish my call with Victor and make one to Anna Marie. Who are they?"

"What?"

Rafe pried his lids open and stared at her. His voice shook with his frightened whisper. "Who are you?"

Her eyes rounded.

He laughed as hard as his weariness allowed. "You are so easy to fool. Hey!"

She slapped the water a second time, sending a new wave into his face. "You're a prick, Rafael Zayas."

He blinked water from his eyes. "I do my best. And you know you love it when I tease you." Not about to wait for her retort, he took Victor off hold. *Me Enamorado*, a popular salsa hit by the Cuban artist Dantes, now played in the background. "Go with the supplier you want. I trust your judgment."

Victor snorted. "Since when?"

Rafe pressed his face into his shoulder to stifle his newest yawn. Back on the phone, he said, "You want the best for me and our family, no? Then how can you possibly make the wrong decision? Make them all in my absence. There's no need for you or anyone else to contact me again."

"Did you enjoy your orgasm that much, little brother? Did it turn your brain to mush while you had me on hold?"

"Adiós, Victor." He ended the call on his brother's sniggering laugh, turned the phone off and frowned at Eden. "What are you doing?"

"Taking care of you, since you refuse to." She stepped from the tub. Water streamed down her belly to her dark bush, the moisture shimmering like dozens of jewels in the flickering candlelight. Padding to the counter, she took a large white bath towel from

one of the overhead shelves. With the thick terry unfolded and held between her outstretched arms, she turned to him. "Come on." Her voice and manner beguiled as effectively as Eve's had when she'd tempted Adam with nothing more than an apple.

Rafe was as weak-willed as that poor bastard, willing to risk anything to be close to Eden again. Clumsily, he pushed his weary body to a standing position and left the tub, dropping his cell phone on his tee. His lids sagged down as she wrapped him in the fluffy, lavender-scented towel. Not since he'd been a very small boy had a woman tended to him like this after a bath. Not since then had he experienced anything as remarkable and comforting.

"I'll have you dry in a second," she promised, patting his chin, cheeks, shoulders and chest where she'd splashed him earlier.

Helpless to stop himself, he teased, "Do you plan to do this for all your guests?"

Her patting slowed but didn't stop. "If they don't have their wives or girlfriends with them, then sure. Might as well have some fun while I'm working, right?" Her casual tone turned serious. "Don't move." She sank to her knees to towel him from the waist down.

Wounded by her answer, disturbed by it, he watched. Damp hair stuck to her neck. Her breasts bounced as she scrubbed his thighs and calves dry. His mind pictured her kneeling in front of another man, a new guest, pretending to be a slave to his demands, willingly taking his cock in her mouth, cupping his testicles in her palms, doing whatever he ordered.

No. Instantly, Rafe pushed the image away along with his anger, a possessiveness he'd never known, jealousy he hadn't faced until now. When he had asked his foolish question, he'd wanted her to assure him no other guest, no other man would ever get this treatment. He was special. She cared for him.

"There." She tossed the towel to the side. Her face lifted. She wore a guarded expression. He knew his was the same.

"You should go to bed and take a nap," she said.

Prior to her hurtful comment, he would have willingly accepted the invitation. Now he wanted to talk, to ask her what she would do once their thirty days were over. Did she plan to turn her back on him as so many had done to her? Would she resume dating other men? Would she treat him as no more than her *patrón* and mentor?

"What?" she asked in a hesitant voice.

Rafe warned himself not to push the matter as he would during business, not to challenge her. She needed time, more seduction and gentle assurance her trust wouldn't be misplaced in him. "While I sleep, will you be joining me?"

Her gaze drifted from him and returned. Even in the candlelight, he saw a blush darken her face. Why the embarrassment? To lighten the mood, he joked, "What's the matter? Do you snore?"

Her uneasiness disappeared beneath indignation. "Do you?"

"I don't know. I've never been able to stay awake long enough to listen."

She smiled weakly. "The kitchen's a mess. I need to clean it up. And you said you wanted my things back in here. I thought I'd get them from the guest house while you rest."

"Don't bother. They can remain out there. You're not to wear clothes during my stay, remember?"

"How could I forget?" She ran her palms down her naked thighs. "I do need my toiletries, though. My comb, toothbrush, lots of other stuff. You know, all the products that take me hours to apply so I look naturally gorgeous and irresistible."

Her unassuming manner softened his previous anger and doubt. He wanted to pull her into his arms and squeeze her until she squealed like a little girl. What he did was offer his hand. She accepted. Her slender fingers slipped over his, allowing him to help her to her feet, causing his heart to thump a little harder.

"Get your things if you want," he said, his voice rough with emotion, "but don't bother with the kitchen. After I rest, I'll help you clean up."

"No way. You're my guest. You've already fixed my pipe."

Recalling the moment and her fascinated perusal of him, he smiled.

She pulled her hand from his and got his cell phone. "While I'm gone, you might want to call your godchild."

A trip to the dentist for a tooth extraction would have pleased him more. "She'll calm down eventually. Surely before her sixteenth birthday."

Eden gave him a mother's disapproving look. "Don't pull that crap on me, Rafe. You know she's counting on you. You'll always be there to help her out, right?"

"Of course. That doesn't mean I always have to like it."

"She's family, so deal with it." She took his hand, slapped his phone into his palm then headed for her clothes still in a pile on the bedroom floor.

He frowned. "What are you doing?"

She looked over. "I can't go outside nude."

"Your backyard's fenced, no?"

"It is." Her gaze turned inward. "And as I remember, my young male neighbors are tall like you. So all they have to do is glance over the top and—"

He interrupted. "Wear this." He tossed his tee.

The garment landed on her head. She pressed it to her nose and moaned faintly at his scent on the fabric.

Her reaction told him more than a thousand loving words. It erased all of her hesitation and evasiveness. Smiling, he said, "It should cover you quite well."

It did. The bottom reached the middle of her thighs, the sleeves to below her elbows. She looked adorable and in a hurry. Backing away, she pointed at the phone. "Call her."

Eden left the bedroom and went down the hall. Rafe's deep voice followed, flinging Spanish curses about needy relatives and a meddlesome brother, only to break off suddenly and become protective as he said Anna Marie's name. Eden stopped on the landing as he spoke to his godchild with love and compassion.

Head lowered, Eden whispered to Anna Marie wherever she might be. "Little girl, you don't know how lucky you are." Swiping tears from the corners of her eyes, she bounded down the steps and ignored the mess in her kitchen to head for the utility room. There she found a box for her toiletries, her excuse for leaving the house.

Out the back door, she wilted beneath the suffocating humidity. It urged her to reach the guesthouse as fast as she could. The thought of Rafe watching her from the bedroom windows or balcony added to her haste. If he'd been observing her now, every part of her would have sensed it. Her legs would have weakened further, refusing to support her weight. Her thoughts would have turned slushy. Her heart would have demanded she return to him.

Flinging open the guesthouse door, she crossed the inviting apricot-tinted room, dropped the box on the brass bed, turned on the air-conditioning and grabbed her cell phone from the cherry nightstand.

Trish answered on the second ring, her tone hesitant and unbelieving. "Eden?"

Her throat froze up, refusing to allow speech. At the same instant, her gaze shot to the open door. Once closed, she sagged against it. "I shouldn't be calling you."

"Well, I have to admit I am kind of surprised you are." A faint scraping noise told Eden Trish had pushed back her stool in the garage where she did all her fantastic designs. "What's going on?"

She chewed the side of her thumb. "I'm in the guesthouse."

"The what? Why? Alone?"

"Would I be talking to you if I weren't?"

"What happened?"

"I can't tell you. Rafe said what happens in the house is between him and me. No one else."

Trish's voice huffed as though she were pacing the length of her garage. "Okay, so don't tell me, I'll guess. Just grunt if I get it right, okay?" Without waiting for a response, her questions whizzed out. "Did he handcuff you to the bed? Did he paddle you? You didn't like it? He didn't like it?"

Frustrated, Eden pushed away from the door and cried, "Why am I doing this?"

"Doing what?" She sounded equally frustrated. "Where is he? What's he doing now?"

"Talking to Anna Marie in the master bedroom."

She gasped. "He asked another woman to join you?"

"No, of course not." Laughing, she sank to the bed and explained. "Anna Marie's still a kid. She's about to turn fifteen.

"She. Is. His. Godchild," Eden added to Trish's next gasp. "She's been calling his cell phone at two-minute intervals and I'm guessing leaving hysterical voice mails. Rafe's brother Victor just called, presumably because she's now contacting him. Rafe had to call her back and calm her down about something. She doesn't know how lucky she is."

"That he's not screaming at her instead?"

"No." That she had a freaking family. No matter how obnoxious Rafe found his godchild at times, he'd move heaven and earth to help her out. His love was unconditional as it should be. Anna Marie didn't have to earn it or hope for it every single day of her life. Nor did Rafe have to work for the devotion he received. Despite the way he'd snarled at Victor, Eden knew the brothers would die for each other and their many relatives. "This is a mistake."

"What is?"

"I should ask him to leave."

"No, don't!" Trish cried.

The guesthouse door flew open.

Eden's head jerked up. Her heart jolted then beat frantically. To her surprise Trish, not Rafe, stood centered in the doorway. The overcast sky backlit the woman's slender body. She'd left her garage so quickly she'd forgotten to put on her ever-present sunhat and to take off the rubber apron she wore when she created stuff. Cell phone to her ear, she said, "You can't."

Eden forced down another swallow and captured more air to calm her sprinting heart. "Can't what?" she asked, speaking into her phone, then shook her head and turned it off.

With the dead air, Trish did the same with hers. "Ask him to leave." She closed the door and went to the bed. "What about the guest fee he's paying and his promise to help you with your next business?"

Hands on her knees, Eden rocked like a five-year-old during time-out, wanting to escape. "He's told me twice that if I preferred he leave, he would. I could still keep his fee. He'd even set me up with his banker so I won't lose my house, and with an investor for my new business."

"Wow." Trish had already removed her apron, dropping it on a rocker near the curtained window. She sat cross-legged on the carpet next to Eden's legs. "He's really nice. So you're upset why? He's that awful in bed? Can't he get it up? He looked perfectly capable when he was kissing you in the doorway."

"That's because he is," she snapped, wanting to defend him, not wanting to know why. "I've already had several orgasms and we haven't even made it to the bed yet. For your information, he's just about always up and hung very nicely."

Trish slumped over, knees to her chest, hands pillowing her head. An adult ready to hear a sexy bedtime story. "How nicely? Eight inches? Nine? Ten?"

"Get real. I'd be hemorrhaging if he were that long. At the very least, I'd have a very bad sore throat."

Trish's pale green eyes widened and moved slowly over Rafe's tee on Eden. "So what's the problem? He wants you to wear his clothes so he can wear yours?"

She kicked her friend's foot. Trish giggled. Eden sighed. "I shouldn't have allowed myself to get in this position. I like him too much. Way more than I did last night and he hasn't even been here a full day. When we were in the bathroom and Victor called, Rafe said Anna Marie's name and asked Victor why she was trying to get in touch with him. I didn't know she was Rafe's godchild. I thought she was some woman he's dating. I got so immediately and insanely jealous I would have left the tub if he hadn't put his arm around my waist and stopped me."

Trish nodded sympathetically. "You guys made love in the tub?"

Eden rolled her eyes. "Will you focus?"

"Answer my question and I'll try. Really. I swear."

Groaning, Eden rested her forearms on her thighs and hung her head. "I masturbated him. What else can you do in a tub? Mine's not big enough for regular sex."

"Especially if he's ten inches or more. Sorry," she said in response to Eden's glare. "I couldn't resist. So you two haven't actually done it yet?"

"Of course we have." She flapped her hand in dismissal. "On the dining room table. By the way, he loves the chandelier you made."

"No kidding? How cool. I mean about you guys making love on the table," she added quickly. "So were you eating lunch and he couldn't wait to have you and he threw you on there and —"

Eden interrupted. "I'm a little too big to throw. If he had, I would have broken the table and possibly the floor."

"So how'd you get up there? How'd he do the deed?"

"I can't tell you," she growled. "I'm not supposed to be talking about this, remember?"

Trish stopped giggling. "I'm sure he won't mind you telling me everything, especially if he never knows."

Eden covered her face with her hands, pressing her fingers into her eyes. Trish pleaded for more. To move this along and because she just needed to talk about it, Eden told her how Rafe plated the finger foods on her body and what happened after. Every delicious moment of it right up to the second she'd come out here.

With her tale ended, their heavy breathing sounded too loud.

"This man really likes you," Trish said, totally serious for once.

Eden countered. "For sex. He's normal. He's on vacation. He's having a good time. Good times always end."

"No. He really likes you." She interrupted. "I've been married for five years, I was engaged for two and not once has Chris done anything that romantic or crazy."

"He's an attorney."

"Rafe's a chef, not a male escort or an X-rated film star, and he came up with all this stuff. So why the hell hasn't Chris? Even attorneys carry their wives up the stairs. But not once has he done that for me."

"Your house is a one-story."

"Our condo wasn't." She sounded pissed, envious. "You can't ask him to leave. You'd be nuts if you did."

She'd be screwed even more emotionally if she didn't. "I have to. I'm not Anna Marie."

"The snarly kid? What does she have to do with any of this?"

Eden dropped her hands. "I heard how his voice sounded when he spoke to her, the affection, the commitment. No matter what happens, he will be there for her and not because he really likes her, but because she's family. She's blood. Do you think that little girl knows how lucky she is to have parents who want her and relatives to protect her and a godfather who'd do anything to make certain she'll never have a crappy day in her life? Hell, I still don't know who my father is. To this day, my mother claims it's too painful for her to talk about the so-called love of her life. My guess is she was partying so hard she's not certain whose genes I carry. That's what I've grown up with. And believe me, I'm not complaining. I had Grandma. But to hope for a guy to want me so badly he'd do anything to keep me for the rest of our lives—uh-uh. I don't believe in that fairytale. I can't. I'd get so damned hooked, I'd promise him anything. I'd do anything so he wouldn't leave. And I'd end up just like my mom."

"Oh sweetie, that's not true." Trish pushed to a sitting position. She wrapped her arms around Eden's calves, hugging them. "Even if you did go temporarily crazy, I'd be here to slap you back to reality."

She laughed. Tears spilled from her eyes. "I'm so scared."

"Of course you are." She rested her head on Eden's knees. "We all get that way. I threw up minutes before my walk down the aisle to Chris and we worked out just fine."

Eden wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. "He doesn't carry you up flights of stairs."

"Yeah, that is a bummer. But he does come home to me every night. He oohs and ahhs at my designs even when they suck. And he tells me I'm hot when we both know only a man who's been in prison too long would say such a thing."

"Stop it." Eden gave her friend's head a gentle slap. "No more talk like that."

"Or about telling Rafe to leave. See this out. See where it leads. It might surprise you."

A dull pain in the center of Eden's chest said otherwise. Given all the unwanted and unpleasant surprises in her life, she didn't think she could bear one more.

Chapter Eight

Toiletries in hand, Eden trudged back to the house, promising herself to return for the rest of her stuff the moment Rafe left. At the pool, she stopped to glance up at the master bedroom's balcony and windows. Empty. She wasn't certain whether to be disappointed he wasn't looking for her or worried he'd be in the kitchen awaiting her return while he cleaned up the mess she'd made.

Please god, not that. It would be too nice, too thoughtful. She'd find it impossible to tell him she'd changed her mind, this couldn't continue, he'd have to leave with her check for his fee. No way could she keep his funds. No way could she allow him to help her with her house or her next business venture. This had to end now.

Teeth clenched, she opened the back door, expecting to hear his rich baritone calling her name.

The whoosh of the air-conditioning mingled with the whirr of the refrigerator and the hum of the ceiling fans. She cleared her throat and waited. He didn't say anything. Stepping into the kitchen, her gaze darted from the messy prep area to the skillet and pot on the stove and then to the grease stains surrounding the deep fryer.

So, he hadn't cleaned up. Was he still trying to reason with Anna Marie?

Eden's face lifted to the ceiling. She didn't hear him pacing the upstairs floor, nor did she hear the hum of his voice muted by distance. Was he listening to Anna Marie crying? Couldn't he get in a word edgewise? If Eden went upstairs now, how long would she have to wait until the girl shut up, allowing him to end the call so she could tell him the bad news about his stay?

Oh god, his tee. Her head dropped to it. She ran her free hand down the soft cotton. He'd want the garment back before he left, right? He certainly wasn't going to allow her to keep it as a souvenir. Should she take it off now and hand it to him with her decision? Would he even be listening if she spoke to him in the nude?

She dragged from the kitchen to the formal dining room and stopped at the table—the scene of their carnal crime. Leaning over, she saw faint smudges on the polished wood from where her ass had rested as Rafe took her orally and vaginally.

A wave of renewed longing hit so hard she gripped the table's edge for support. Head down, chest pumping, she relived every wonderful moment—his touch, smell, the vibrancy of his voice, the feel of his powerful body plundering hers.

Had it been more than just great sex? Had there been an honest-to-god connection between them that meant something?

See this out, Trish had advised. See where it leads. It might surprise you.

Eden's apprehension returned. She imagined herself months from now, a younger version of her mother. Crying, pleading, throwing her arms around Rafe to keep him from leaving—just as her mother had done with her many boyfriends—begging him to stay, promising to do anything no matter how wrong if he'd only love her.

No. Hell no. That wasn't love, it was crazy, sick. She shook her head and moved to the stairway, each step hardening her resolve. She craved Rafe as she had no other man in her life, but she wouldn't allow herself to want him or any guy that badly. As soon as he finished his call with Anna Marie, she'd tell him the score, thank him for his offer to help, give him back his tee and wait downstairs while he got dressed and left. She wouldn't allow herself tears or regret. She had to do this.

On the landing, she put the box of toiletries to the side so he wouldn't think she intended to share her room or even another minute with him. Smoothing down her hair, fingering the hem of his tee, she stepped toward the master bedroom as quietly as she could, not wanting to startle him. At the door, she listened intently but didn't hear him saying "uh-huh" to whatever Anna Marie might be crying about, or reasoning with her in a patient voice.

Torn between waiting out there to work on a stomach ulcer or going inside to tell him they had to speak, she settled on the latter.

Her gaze shot from the cell phone in his limp hand to his beautiful body sprawled over her bed. The outside light touched the scar on his upper arm, magnifying its destruction. One leg hung over the side of the mattress, his long toes touching the floor. Steady, untroubled breaths lifted his chest. Eyes closed in sleep, he looked so young suddenly, reminding her of a little boy exhausted after a busy day.

Eden's hands flew to her mouth, covering it to quiet her mewl. Immediate, insistent tears welled in her eyes at her urge to protect him, to comfort. Consumed with her own worries in the guesthouse, she'd forgotten about his fatigue, her telling him to take a nap. She was surprised he'd lasted long enough to even say hello to his godchild.

She recalled his calm, loving voice as he addressed the girl. She imagined Anna Marie's response and demands, her fourteen-year-old mind unaware of her godfather's need to rest, to enjoy himself for a little while, to have someone care for him.

Against all she'd decided, Eden knew she couldn't wake him and ask him to leave just yet. It would be too heartless. When he awakened on his own, she'd deal with it.

Fingering tears from her eyes, she ordered herself to leave the room and go downstairs until he came looking for her. A minute passed then another and another with her unable to depart.

He breathed especially deep. His toes splayed over the floor.

It broke her inertia. She went to him and slipped her hands under his calf, lifting his leg to the bed so he'd be more comfortable.

Instantly, he stirred. "*Qué haces?*" he asked in a lilting, muzzy voice, reverting to his native Spanish, asking what she was doing.

Eden didn't have a clue and didn't want to explore her actions. For the moment, she went with her foolish heart and smoothed his tousled hair. "Shhhh. Go back to sleep."

Blindly, he reached for her while he stretched. "Join me," he said, his fingers fisted into the hem of the tee she wore.

Panic flared beneath her desire. "No. I can't."

Eyes still closed, his dark brows drew together. "Why not?" He lost his frown and smiled gently, capturing another piece of her heart. "If it's because you do snore, I don't mind."

"I do not snore!" she snapped.

His eyes opened at the venom in her voice.

She averted her gaze, angry at herself, not him, for prolonging this. "I just can't. I...that is...you...I thought—" At last, she clenched her teeth to stop her babbling.

His hand dropped from the tee to touch her thigh instead.

Ribbons of heat coursed through her, turning her inside out. She fought her reaction to move closer to him or to run away. She was losing her mind.

"Join me," he asked again. His voice caressed. "Please."

A frustrated cry rose to her throat. If he'd ordered her to join him, in accordance with the terms of their contract, she could have started an argument and told him to get his arrogant ass out of her house. For him to ask so nicely, to be so patient with her indecision made her waver. "I should clean up the kitchen."

"It can wait, no?"

He wanted her to decide. She brought her eyes back to him. His tranquil expression said he knew she'd make the right decision, the one they both wanted. God help her, she couldn't resist, though she did hedge. "Why not just order me to do whatever it is you want. That's our deal, correct?"

"Would you obey?"

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. "If I didn't, you could punish me."

"Later." He slung his arm over his mouth to hide his yawn. "After."

She laughed. It sounded aroused and scared—in other words, on the verge of hysteria. "After what?"

Grunting to a sitting position, he wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his hands on her buttocks and his face against her torso. "Join me and find out."

He stripped her gently and made love with more tenderness than passion, knowing she required it.

Rafe wasn't blind. He'd seen the confusion and fear in her eyes, along with her building passion for him. To feed it required patience. For a man who'd had to fight for

everything he owned, to convince the world he was worthy of its notice, he had perseverance in ample supply.

Throughout the night, he woke her with sweet kisses, mounting her after prolonged foreplay. They made love twice more, sleeping between each act. Only once did she leave the bed—to fetch the *flan* she'd made prior to his arrival. They devoured the custardy treat in bed, washing it down with icy beer. Their conversation settled around their love of cooking, Anna Marie's problems with her mother, Trish's amazing talent and other matters, while also avoiding any serious topics. Bellies filled, their thoughts at ease, they molded their bodies together again.

He slept better than he had in months and might have slumbered for days if not for the obnoxious racket of a lawnmower in one of the neighbors' yards, punctuated by barking dogs and their owner ordering the animals to quiet down.

"Shit." Rafe ran his hand over his face and opened one eye. Morning sun streamed through the gauzy curtains, bathing the room in a gold haze. He smiled at the hominess of this place and reached across the sheets for Eden.

She wasn't in the bed.

He glanced at the bathroom. The door gaped open to show a darkened interior. He'd just got his legs over the side of the mattress when he noticed the pungent aroma of *café Cubano*, the sweet scent of fried onions and the wondrous fragrance of *chorizo*, a pork sausage seasoned perfectly with garlic and paprika.

Stomach growling, his head swung to the doorway as Eden padded into the room carrying a breakfast-in-bed tray. It held a small cup of Cuban coffee, a stout glass of orange juice and two plates covered with metal toppings to keep the food warm. Their breakfast? Or just his, given the solitary cup and glass of OJ?

She stopped as she saw him half in, half out of her bed. He stared at the shimmery green robe she wore, tied at the waist, the hem reaching her knees. With a flick of his forefinger, he gestured her closer.

Her attention strayed from his chest to his lengthening cock. Upon reaching him, she murmured, "*Buenos días.*"

"Good morning." He took the tray, placed it on the floor near the foot of the bed and returned to sit on the mattress. "Did you sleep well?"

Face turned to the dismissed tray, expectation coloring her voice, she said, "Very. And you?"

"Until the lawnmower, dogs and their owner woke me." He fingered the sleeve of her robe. "What is this?"

She looked. "Silk." Her voice was unexpectedly playful.

He wrapped the robe's tie around his hand, using it to bring her closer. Her knees bumped the mattress between his legs. The peach tint in her cheeks deepened, proving her interest in their coming game, the reason she'd worn the garment in direct defiance of his demand she always be naked around him.

Rafe's attention moved from the silk to the emerald on the side of her nose, replacing the diamond from yesterday. She'd also showered and washed her hair, the scent of shampoo and perfume lingered on it and her skin. Though she looked and smelled amazing, he liked how she'd been last night—her hair wild, her flesh fragrant with his kisses, his musk. So had she bathed in a downstairs bathroom or in the guesthouse so she wouldn't disturb him? Or had she wanted to avoid him while she decided on whether to take another risk, especially when it came to what would happen during the next few minutes?

Unwilling to ask, he unfastened the tie, his movements deliberately slow, adding to her expectancy. The ends of the cloth slipped from his hands. Her robe fell open, revealing a slice of her nudity, the valley between her breasts, her navel, the fluffy bush between her legs. It took all of his willpower not to touch her. His voice recorded the strain. "I'm not referring to the fabric as you well know."

The accusation hung heavy between them, charging the air. The lawnmower shut off. One dog continued its wild yelps, despite its owner's scolding. Eden whispered, "You want me nude at all times."

"And you're not." His face lifted.

The long column of her throat bobbed with her swallow. The morning light heightened her natural coloring and the rosy stain spreading across her chest. "Are you accusing me of defying you?"

"You know I am."

"I can easily take off the robe and obey."

"Too late."

She inhaled sharply as he grabbed her upper arm, pulling her down. The mattress bounced with her elbows and torso hitting it. The bed frame creaked. Rafe brought his legs together to trap hers so she couldn't move her ass. The robe had slipped up to expose the backs of her thighs. He trailed his fingers over the left one.

She wiggled and fisted her hands in the sheets, preparing herself for the first crack of his hand.

He made her wait. He made her want. His fingers moved beneath the silk and traversed her female geography. His thumb circled her anus's tight pink ring while his fingers dipped to her engorged, wet cunt.

Now, she cried out. A guttural, wanting sound, her voice and body aroused by his actions and the thought of punishment.

Rafe's heart beat out of time, its rhythm too fast, then too slow, trying to adjust. His throat closed with the frenzy going on in his body, making him hoarse. "Tell me you want this."

She nodded, the side of her face rubbing the linens.

"You're certain?"

"Yes, dammit!"

If she expected her loud consent to spur him to immediate action, Rafe knew she was going to be disappointed. He removed his hand from between her legs, resting his palm on the back of her thigh.

A moan interrupted her unruly pants. "What are you doing? Get on with it. I told you I want this."

She had, though Rafe knew the mounting suspense would thrill her more than the actual act. "Quiet," he ordered.

"Or what?" she countered, goading him.

Unmoved, he kept her as she was, not going forward with the punishment, not speaking.

Immediately, she understood the error of her words and behavior. She fought for control, losing her sass, making her body as still as she could, subservient to whatever he planned. To reward her, he folded her robe inch by inch to expose her ass so when the time came she'd feel his palm against her bare skin.

The same thought must have been unwinding in her mind. Her buttocks clenched as he finally uncovered the soft swells above her thighs. Her noisy breathing matched the sounds she made during a climax.

Reaching the halfway mark between the bottom of her cheeks and the dimples above them, he paused. Face to the mattress, she grunted indelicately. He smiled, running his index finger down the crease between her cheeks.

She whimpered something unintelligible.

"Quiet," he ordered again.

She stiffened as if she wanted to argue, though all she did was nod.

Intent on his task, Rafe folded the last of the fabric across her waist. Her succulent ass lay before him like a sacrificial offering, the skin unbearably smooth, plumped with youth. He could do what he willed with it. She'd given him the privilege. She trusted him that much, at least for this act and nothing else.

Disappointment threatened. He pushed it away. With her, he'd have patience, he'd take small steps, he'd persuade her to believe in him, he'd do all he could to convince her to love. "Now," he said to warn her.

Despite his signal and restrained slap, she let out a startled cry. On its heels she produced a gruff moan, telling him she liked it and to continue. Again, his hand came down, this slap slightly harder. It wasn't enough. She pushed her ass up, wordlessly begging for more.

He punished her until his palm stung and he'd reddened her cheeks slightly. Done with this, he rolled her off his thigh and onto her back, guiding her body onto the mattress. With her robe's tie in his hand, he wrapped the silk around her wrists and secured the ends to one of the headboard's posts.

Confined, she regarded him through slitted eyes, her face ruddy from lust and her harsh panting, her lips parted so she could pull in as much air as possible. Contrary to

last night's gentle lovemaking, this morning his kiss was impassioned, punishing. He gave her no chance to calm her breathing or to prepare for his cock. He thrust inside, mounting her with a right he wanted, one she had to give to him and no other man.

Her taut heat gloved him so beautifully, so miraculously, a groan vibrated deep in his throat. She responded by tightening her inner muscles around him.

Pulling his mouth free, he gasped, "You won't defy me again."

Her chest knocked his with her sharp intake of breath. She lost it in a prolonged sigh. "Or what?"

His brows lifted at the renewed challenge in her voice. His body responded with male strength and resolve, fucking her, taking her, loving her. The bed's legs scraped the floor with his vigorous thrusts. Her breasts bounced. Their eyes remained locked, their souls nearly touching as he brought them both to climax.

Eden's hearty wail did more for Rafe's ego than a thousand orgasms, a million words of praise. The uncivilized sounds he made reflected it and depleted the last of his strength.

In danger of collapsing, he struggled to support his weight so he wouldn't crush her. His arms trembled with the effort.

She wound her legs around his lean hips, which allowed his body an even better angle of penetration. Her cunt's hot inner walls pulsed rhythmically, pulling at his cock.

He kissed her temple and whispered, "Thank you."

She swallowed and teased, "For making you breakfast?"

For capturing his heart. If he wasn't in love with her already, he was damn close. Not that she was ready to hear such an admission. He made his voice as light as hers. "For knowing what I like to eat in the morning. You've made me a traditional Cuban tortilla with potatoes, onions and *chorizo* and some Cuban toast on the side, no?"

She kissed his neck. "You'll have to lift the metal covers to find out."

Right now, he could barely lift his head. "Will you feed me?"

Her legs stopped squeezing him. Her inner walls relaxed. He imagined his guileless request and the wistful tone of his voice had told her how much he wanted her loving care. A matter she might find too intimate and difficult to embrace. Even so, she gave him the answer he sought. "Of course."

"Good." He pressed his face into her clean hair, luxuriating in its delightful melon scent, and brought them back to their games. "Afterwards, we'll move on to my other demands."

Her lips paused on his bristly jaw. "What else do you have in mind?"

"You'll have to wait to find out."

Chapter Nine

Eden had no idea what else he could demand of her. Thus far, she'd given more than she'd intended and kept worrying about it. Too many times last night, her urge to flee had returned. As if reading her thoughts, Rafe gentled his kisses even more, his caresses assured, his lovemaking entranced. Her body couldn't resist. Her heart, on the other hand, had wavered between concern and hope with neither winning out.

His eyes never left her as she speared bite-sized pieces of the Cuban tortilla, an egg dish, slipping the tasty morsels into his willing mouth. He made appreciative sounds and ate faster and faster, telling her without words he found her dish beyond compare. Pride and gratitude brought tears to her eyes. If he noticed them or her slightly trembling hand as she fed him, he didn't comment on the matter. His gaze wandered over her nudity, possessing it. Never had she felt as female, as wanted by a man.

With half of his meal finished, he took the fork and fed her. She didn't taste a bit of her cooking. She allowed her mind to run wild, to imagine what life would be like to wake up each day with him at her side. Just as quickly, she dismissed the thought as ludicrous. Rafe was a good man and a skilled lover. What he would never be was forever. In her life, no one had been, no matter how long or how sincerely they promised.

She swallowed the last bite. He put the tray to the side, stretched and yawned.

Eden fisted her hands in the sheets so she wouldn't throw her arms around his shoulders, hugging him as she had her mother the last day they lived together, and her grandmother just hours before she passed.

Bringing his arms down, he studied her. "How worried you look. Are you afraid my next demand will be more than you can give?"

If he captured another chunk of her heart, it would be. "What is it?"

* * * * *

He told her to shave him.

In the sunroom, he closed the shades and directed Eden to the chaise lounge. Its back was up fully, its seat long enough and wide enough to handle them both. Still nude, they faced each other. With her straddling his body, the head of his thickening cock probed her entrance.

The mound of shave cream in Eden's palm wiggled in her quivering hand. Its menthol smell stung her nose. "I'm not sure I should do this."

Gently, Rafe pinched her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. She whimpered. He murmured, "Within a few weeks, you're going to be surprised at what you'll willingly do."

His promise didn't help. Her heart beat wildly, not allowing her to take a full breath. "I meant my hand's shaking. I don't want to cut you with the razor."

"You won't." Lips to her throat, he tongued her skin. Her hand drooped. The cream slid from her palm and dropped to the pavers with a faint plop. Its sound went unnoticed by Rafe. Eyes closed, Eden slumped into him as he continued his heavenly ministrations, suckling her neck and running his fingers down the full length of her back.

She'd never sighed so much in her life. When her breathing returned to normal, he brought his mouth to her ear. "Relaxed?"

More than she'd ever believed likely, considering their nudity and her hunger for him. The moment felt so freaking good, she whined, "Not yet. Rub my back some more."

"After you shave me."

Disappointed, she smeared a new tower of cream over his throat, chin, cheeks, upper lip and brows.

His eyes went upward. His voice cautioned, "Shave my eyebrows off and you'll have to wait until they grow back before my cock's inside you again."

He knew how to tame her. "I'll be good." Reaching down, she wrapped her fingers around his cock and guided it inside her opening. Joined, they bowed their heads and breathed harshly.

His hands cupped her ass. He pushed forward on the chaise as if to leave it. "Fuck the shave. It can wait 'til later."

"No. Let's do it now – unless you think you can't take it while we're like this."

Stirred by her taunt, he settled back and flexed his cock to stretch her a bit more. "Can you? Without nicking my face?"

"We'll see." Contracting her inner walls, squeezing his cock rhythmically, Eden drew the razor lightly over his right cheek.

His lids sank, apparently too heavy for him to keep them up. Nostrils widened with his prolonged breath, he murmured, "More."

She knew he wasn't referring to her shaving skills. "Yes sir." Headstrong, she stopped tightening her vaginal muscles around his rod as she moved the razor carefully on his cheek.

Rafe's fingers dug into her ass. He swore.

"What?" she asked, feigning innocence. "Did I nick you?"

He growled, "Tighten your cunt around me right this minute or I'll –" His words transformed into a sigh as she obeyed.

"Like this?" she asked, her inner muscles really squeezing.

He lifted his chin to the ceiling. "Sí."

In between his excited swallows, she shaved his throat. Once she'd finished, his head slumped forward, his smooth right cheek resting against her shoulder. In that position, she tended to his bristly left cheek. His upper lip and chin were last. By then, he'd become so hard and she was so wet, they both grunted.

"Enough," he said, taking the razor from her and flinging it across the room. It flew into the dining area, hitting the wall. On the floor he took her, with neither of them willing to delay orgasm.

Wheezing from its force, Eden lay spread-eagled over the smooth pavers.

True to his earlier promise, Rafe stroked each part of her body while she purred like a spoiled cat and wondered what else he could possibly have in store.

* * * * *

The rest of the day passed without him asking anything surprising or daunting of her. She sensed he didn't want to push her too hard or thought making her wait would heighten her curiosity.

It did. Several days followed with nothing unusual happening. Just exceptionally good sex interrupted by her preparing their meals, which they enjoyed while discussing the restaurant business and their culinary mishaps. They laughed easily and teased each other as if they'd been friends for years. A few weeks ago, it would have been enough, more than she'd ever expected. To her surprise, she began to crave something hedonistic, though she hadn't a clue what it might be. One evening, when she felt particularly ballsy, she asked what he had planned that would make her do anything willingly.

His smile answered for him.

* * * * *

By the middle of his second week at her house, she figured he'd forgotten his boast or didn't know how to top what they'd already done. She surely didn't and an odd restlessness ate at her. Pushing it aside, she prepared a lunch of black beans, rice and *masitas de puerco fritas*, cubes of deep-fried pork. The dish Rafe had prepared early in his career which garnered the nasty review.

It wasn't until his brows rose at her choice of a menu that she realized he might think she was trying to show him up. She considered he might want to punish her for being so thoughtless and rude.

The notion set her heart cantering. An image unfurled in her mind of him paddling her with one of her large wooden spoons and fucking her ruthlessly on the kitchen table, then enjoying his meal in the dining room as she puffed and tried to recover.

Expectantly, she looked at him. He went to the fridge, took out a Corona and headed for the back door.

Was he leaving? Was he pissed? "Hey," she called, hurrying to the kitchen door. "Lunch is ready. Where are you going?"

He swallowed his sip of beer and pointed the bottle's lip in the direction of the backyard. "Your pool. It's a nice day. Hardly a cloud in the sky. Finish your plating and bring our food to the patio table."

"Wait." She padded to him and pointed out the obvious. "I'm nude."

His throat bobbed with his next long swallow of beer. He leaned toward her, his breath fragrant with the brew. "I know."

His tone of voice, the mischief in his eyes reminded her of what he'd said days ago—*Within a few weeks, you're going to be surprised at what you'll willingly do.*

Already she'd grown so used to being nude clothes seemed a nuisance around him...in this house. A rush of exhilaration fluttered in her belly followed closely by a knot of anxiety. After a brief tussle, fear won. "I can't go out there like this in the daylight."

He leaned against the jamb, arms across his bare chest, his expression saying she would do what he wanted and so much more.

Eden's gaze fell to his shorts' fly, the meaty ridge behind it. Surely, he didn't plan on them making love out there. The grass was too wet from the sprinklers, the patio pavers uncomfortable to lie on in addition to being hot from the sun. The numerous palms or fruit trees might work if he propped her up against one of the trunks and entered her while standing. Was that his plan? Or did he intend to use the guesthouse? Of course. How could she have forgotten about it? However, getting to the structure from the patio table while nude wouldn't be easy. "I shouldn't," she amended.

"Because of your young male neighbors?" His eyes raked her nakedness. "I checked the height of your fence. Unless your neighbors are a head taller than I am, they can't see over the top. Nor can they see from their homes. The houses on either side of yours are one-story structures."

His tone said he'd settled the matter. She'd do whatever he demanded. The room seesawed. Eden closed her eyes to stop her dizziness caused by a weird combination of misgiving and longing. "If by chance someone does see, let's say from their roof or a plane, and they call the cops, you will bail me out if I'm arrested, right?"

"Do you trust me so little, Eden?"

No. She was beginning to trust him far more than she wanted and that was the problem. One she could hardly explain. She shook her head.

He cupped her breast, enjoying its weight in his palm as he flicked his thumb over her nipple. "Don't keep me waiting." Releasing her, he grabbed a freshly washed towel from the top of the dryer and lifted it as he explained, "So the chair doesn't burn your skin."

Incapable of speech, she nodded at his thoughtfulness. The screen door whapped shut with his exit. Eden returned to the kitchen, glanced at the food without really seeing it and grabbed her cell phone from the kitchen table.

Trish answered on the fourth ring. "Hey, how are you doing? I haven't seen you in a while."

She might now, and in a way she'd never planned. "That's what I'm calling about." Eden returned to the back door, watching Rafe through its window. He was at the pool. The sun sparkled across the clear blue water, leaving faint patterns of light on his strong calves and thighs. "Is Chris home by any chance?"

"During a workday? Not since two years ago, and it only happened then because he was recovering from his appendectomy. Why?"

Eden didn't want him strolling over here to borrow one of her hammers or wrenches for Trish's art projects and seeing more than he should. Padding back into the kitchen, she plated the food. "During the next hour or so, even if it's an emergency, do not come into my backyard for any reason. Understand?"

"Oh my god. Are you guys going to do it back there?"

"I don't know. I am going to be nude while we eat on the patio."

Trish made choking sounds and coughed briefly. "What about Rafe?"

"He's currently wearing shorts and huaraches. How long they stay on is anyone's guess."

Trish panted into the phone. "This is so exciting."

"Yeah. It's got me in a cold sweat."

"Oh hey, you'll be fine. Your privacy fence is really tall. You've got single-story homes on both sides and a foreclosed one behind you. As long as you don't make too much noise while the realtor's showing it, who's gonna know?"

Eden's head fell forward. She'd forgotten about making noise. In these last days, she'd wailed so loudly during sex, she'd been afraid someone outside might hear. "Now might be a good time for you to run your pool cleaner."

"It's broken. Sorry. I'm using the metal parts for this sculpture I'm making."

Figures. "I have to go."

"Have fun. Tell me about it later, okay?"

"I can't. I shouldn't."

Trish giggled. "You will."

She had her there. Eden closed her phone and glanced toward the back door, the outside world beyond. Images flashed in her mind of a new worry—the sun shining on her nudity, revealing every flaw the soft indoor lighting hid, and Rafe's expression when he saw how imperfect she was. She sank her teeth in her lower lip, wanting to be like the women in the Dove commercial who celebrated real beauty. Wholeheartedly, she believed in the concept except at this moment. Looking down at her body, she saw a

dimple in her belly she hadn't noticed previously and a too-prominent vein on the side of her breast. Aw god, she didn't think she could do this.

And yet she wanted to. Her damp cunt proved it, along with the blood pooling between her legs and her erect nipples.

Within a few weeks, you're going to be surprised at what you'll willingly do.

A few minutes later, tray in hand, she opened the screen door.

A neighborhood tabby eyed her from one of the avocado tree's low-lying branches. The cat's unblinking eyes and unwavering stare reminded Eden of a demon she'd seen in a recent horror flick. No doubt, her food's aroma had drawn the animal. She threw one of the pork cubes at it and missed. The morsel sailed past her lemon tree with the cat dashing in hot pursuit. Holding the tray tightly, she left the house.

At the slap of the screen door, Rafe's head lowered from the sky, the plane he'd been watching. Seated at the glass-topped table, long legs stretched out in front of him, he looked from her naked breasts to the gold lame bikini bottom she wore, the only item of clothing she kept in the utility room just in case she wanted to go to the pool. In the end, she'd left the top inside while also chickening out and wearing the bottom, wanting some measure of protection.

His gaze took in the ties on each side and her gold espadrilles, which she always kept with the bikini. Conscious of each step she took in the wedged heels, Eden reached the table. The edges of the large forest-green umbrella flapped in the warm, gentle breeze. Rafe's face lifted to her breasts. Going to his other side, so he couldn't see the vein she'd just noticed, she prayed for a steady hand and didn't get it as she delivered his food and a fresh beer, then put her meal in front of the chair where he'd laid the towel.

He took the empty tray from her, tossing it on the grass. Leaving his seat, he pulled hers out.

Her pulse jumped at the metal legs scraping the rough pavers. A rush of moisture streamed from her sheath. Her voice shook. "*Gracias.*"

"*De nada.*" He stopped her from sitting. Arms slipped around her, he pulled her buttocks into his bulky erection. His hands covered her breasts, warming them more quickly than the sun ever could, protecting them better than any clothing.

Her mouth fell open on a vulgar grunt. Mouth to her ear, Rafe whispered, "Quiet. You want the neighbors to know what we're doing?"

Currently, she didn't care. Her next grunt told him so.

He released her breasts. Before she could ask if her disobedience had caused him to do so, his hands moved to the bikini's ties. Two small tugs and both came free. The glossy fabric dropped away from her pubic hair. The wind licked it.

Shocked back to her senses, intimidated by her full frontal nudity, she pressed her legs together and tried to cover herself with her hand.

"No," he warned, his arm snaking around her waist. He brushed her fingers aside and settled his hand on her cleft. His two longest fingers slipped into her slick passage. His thumb nestled against her nub.

Fevered sensations arrowed from her groin to her thighs. Eden's heels left her shoes. She stood on tiptoes, her nails digging into his forearm for support, her teeth clenched to stop even the smallest moan.

Far more sedate, he murmured, "No clothes out here, understand?" Not waiting for her answer, he withdrew his hand from her damp portal and grabbed her bikini bottom before it slipped past her buttocks to the pavers. Tossing it on the table, he held the back of her chair, his head gesturing her to it.

She dropped into the seat like a sack of stones, her thighs trembling, her passage empty and wanting.

He pretended not to notice her staring at him as he ate his meal.

Clearing her throat, she leaned toward him and spoke in a low, aggravated voice. "Why'd you stop? Why didn't you finish?"

His chew stalled. His eyes drifted to her face, noting the gold stud on her nose worn to match her discarded bikini bottom. Although he hadn't allowed her to move her clothes back inside, he'd wanted her to have her countless studs available, liking the ever-changing colors.

He finished his chew, swallowed and said, "I will finish, you can be certain of it."

The backs of her thighs bounced on the terry towel. "When? Where? Out here? In there?" She flung her hand in the direction of the house.

He enjoyed a forkful of beans and ran his linen napkin over his lips. "No. Not in the house."

"The guesthouse."

Tapping the side of her plate with his fork, he spoke in time with the faint clinks. "Eat. You'll need your energy."

"For what?"

He speared one of the pork cubes and brought it to her mouth. She intended to refuse until he ran his long fingers under her chin, down her throat and to her right nipple. Dutifully, she took the food inside, chewed twice and swallowed.

He licked cumin-scented sauce off her lips. His breath brushed against them. "You should savor the taste. What you've made is some of the best *masitas de puerco fritas* I've ever had."

Her confidence skyrocketed with his praise. She grinned harder than a just-crowned beauty queen or a porn star who'd actually enjoyed her latest on-screen fuck. "I tried out a new blend of spices."

"I know. I can taste the difference from the classic recipe, though I can't place them all." Chewing another mouthful, his brows drew together. He swallowed. "Tell me what they are and we'll continue with what we started a few minutes ago."

Eyes on him, she speared one of the cubes, brought it to her mouth and spoke around it. "Not a chance." She chewed slowly, relishing the exquisite taste, and washed the food down with a long sip of the crisp, light beer. "You'll just have to wait to have me. Maybe after our meal. If you're a good little boy." Her fingers stroked his cheek, still smooth from the shave she'd given him this morning.

His eyes slid to her hand. "So you believe this will be on your terms."

"I know it will be."

"After we finish eating."

She brought back her hand. "If you can wait that long."

He lowered his fork. Way ahead of him, Eden had already heeled off her espadrilles. She pushed her chair away from the table and stood. Rafe was on his feet in a second. Palms sweating, heart walloping, she turned and sprinted across the toasty pavers to the pool and dove into the deep end.

Blessedly cool, the water embraced her like a loving womb. Silence also greeted her, though not for long. As she broke through to the surface, she heard a bird cry and the faint sound of a lawnmower on another street. Clawing hair from her face, she watched Rafe removing his last sandal. Still wearing his navy cargo shorts, he knifed his body into the water and swam toward her with impressive speed, brutal determination.

She gulped air and forced herself to tread water until he'd just about reached her. He smiled smugly. *You can't escape me*, his expression said. *I'm bigger, stronger, better.*

Like hell. She arched her body away from his and swam toward the bottom. Looking up, she saw him trying to compensate and follow.

In a timed release, air bubbles flowed from the sides of her mouth. Again, she waited until he neared, then pushed as hard as she could from the pool's bottom, propelling herself to the surface.

Water splashed around her. She headed for the shallow end, thinking she'd wait for him at the steps leading into the pool. Instead, he caught up and swam past, walking the final distance to reach it. Arms crossed, feet spread wide, ass settled against the concrete wall, he waited. Water streamed from his dark hair to his face, neck and chest, the moisture winking in the sunlight. He looked incredibly virile and ready to devour her.

She stood in waist-deep water, panting heavily.

"Come here," he ordered.

"Make me," she replied.

In a blur of movement, he reached her, grabbing her wrist, hauling her close, giving her no chance to fight. She let out a giddy squeal. He cupped her face and whispered, "Are you going to force me to gag you?"

Brows lifting at the thought, she giggled. "Maybe."

His torso bumped into hers with his suppressed laughter. He spoke in a quiet voice. "Then what will I use to tie your hands so I can fuck you in here?"

She sobered. "In the pool?"

"Where else? Come." He walked her to the steps. There, he pulled her bikini bottom from his shorts' front pocket. "Give me your hands."

She regarded them, the gold lame fabric and the railing. As a teen, during her grandmother's infrequent absences, she'd snuck her boyfriend here. They'd screwed in her bedroom and in the guesthouse. Not once had they had sex in the pool. Seventeen-year-old males were horny, not imaginative. Thirty-three-year-old men weren't much better—look at Trish's husband Chris. So did Rafe behave like this with every woman he dated? Was he trying to impress her? What did it matter?

Palms up, wrists together, Eden offered him her hands and breathless willingness, her previous hesitation dismissed.

His smile thanked her. He worked quickly, securing her wrists to each other then to the railing.

The sun beat heavily on her shoulders and back. She swallowed at Rafe's hands positioning her body so he could mount her from behind. Head hanging down, fingers gripping the railing, she pressed her toes into the concrete for further support.

And waited, listening for the rasp of his zipper, the wet *whap* of his shorts as they hit the pavers.

Didn't happen. Water sloshed against the sides of the pool. A bird's wings beat furiously as if the poor creature was trying to escape the tabby. Grass-scented wind rustled leaves and flapped the edges of her awnings. Her pussy thrummed, begging Rafe to come closer, to sink his cock inside.

He denied her. Arm looped around her waist, chest against her back, his hand headed for her slit. His water-chilled skin molded to her, bringing goose bumps to her arms, producing a shiver. Her flesh warmed his as he masturbated her, his fingers inside her channel, his thumb where it should be.

Eden's body responded predictably, her vulva congesting with blood, her sheath growing slicker by the second.

Suddenly, a dog barked. Another canine's yip followed, then both went quiet. Her next-door neighbor's screen door banged shut. The middle-aged man said, "It's over to the right." A young male voice answered, "Let's take a look."

At what? One of the trees? Eden's mind panicked at the thought of a gardener climbing the thing and being able to see into this yard. Her body didn't care. Sweet agony built between her legs.

Equally oblivious to any distraction, Rafe's fingers stretched her opening while his thumb stroked her nub. Pleasure hushed through her, building to a spark then a flame. She released a prolonged, gravelly moan in concert with a plane rumbling overhead.

"Shhh," Rafe scolded in a voice loud enough for her to hear. "You sound as if I'm killing you."

He was...in the best way. Face pressed to her upper arm, Eden whimpered out the last of her climax, too spent to shudder, scarcely able to breathe.

Her next-door neighbor explained the problem he was having with his outdoor grill. The guy with him, apparently a repairman, kept saying, "I see."

Rafe kept his fingers in her, while his other hand fumbled with his shorts' button and zipper. Eden's body registered him pushing the garment past his hips. No. It was too soon, she needed time to recover, to calm her speeding heart.

He demanded release.

On a new warning to be quiet, he pulled his fingers out and filled her with his fully erect cock, his entry commanding, confident, softening her previous objection, overtaking her world. She no longer heard her next-door neighbor's complaints or the repairman's lame comments. Her mind focused on Rafe's muted huffs, his smothered growls, his practiced and unrelenting thrusts.

Their bodies slapped the water, making intimate music. The angle of penetration allowed him to stroke her most sensitive spot. Hands on her hips, he concentrated on taking what he wanted and delivering more in return.

To thank him she tried to hold off and couldn't. Neither could he. They came too quickly, though together, breathing forcefully rather than vocalizing.

Used up, Rafe kissed her spine and rested his head on her back. "Enough?" he asked.

Eden swallowed and pulled in more air. She tightened her cunt around him and whispered, "No."

He waited only a moment then asked, "You're saying I can have whatever I want?"

Hesitation returned to war with her increasing trust. With each day, her certainty increased about the rightness of this, fueled by what lay in her heart. Her mind resisted, cautioning against going too far, falling too deep, giving up even more control, becoming a woman she no longer knew or liked.

She had to stop this and would. On his final day here, she'd let him walk away without regret or a promise to be exactly what he wanted, rather than who she should be. For now, she bowed to the terms of their agreement and her body's cravings for closeness, completion. "Yes...whatever."

Chapter Ten

Rafe had two requests in mind. Given his nature, he wanted to get on with them, to settle everything, to know she could be a part of his life. Prudence warned otherwise. Her hesitation remained. She still feared taking a risk on him.

Impatiently, he waited until the beginning of his third week with her before putting his first plan into motion, with a trip to her guesthouse. On the walk there, he thought about his second request. Tonight, he'd propose it to her, hoping she wouldn't refuse, sensing she might. What he wanted might prove far too intimate for her to bear.

Now comfortable with her nudity, even outside, Eden faced him as she turned the knob to the guesthouse door and eased it open. Warmed air poured from the abbreviated space, meeting today's balmy breeze. She murmured, "Want to leave this open until the air-conditioning cools the room?"

"And have the neighbors hear you moan and whine?"

She trailed her finger down his naked chest to the waistband of his khaki shorts. "You planning on paddling me again?"

"Later...after."

Her finger stopped on his fly. Her lids closed as if she absolutely hated his response. On a deep breath, she opened her eyes and asked, "After what?"

"Is that your closet?" He pointed.

"Yeah. Why?"

The interest in her voice told him she'd pictured him tying her wrists to the rod and taking her in there. How easily he could fool her. He opened the closet door, noting the pleasant fragrance of clean garments, and pulled the chain to turn on the light. Resolved as to what he wanted, he pushed her chef's coats, jeans and shorts aside to get to her summer dresses.

Joining him, she leaned against the jamb. "What are you doing?"

"Choosing the dress I want you to wear when we go out."

Her eyes flicked over the one he'd chosen. It had thin straps, a square neckline, snug midriff, flared skirt and a bright floral pattern on a pale green background. He imagined her wearing it on his yacht, the wind slapping the fabric against her thighs and calves.

"Out?" She took the sundress from him and ran her hand down the shiny cotton. "To where?"

"De Cocina Foods."

Her brows arched slightly. "You're not going to have them deliver the groceries like always? We're going to shop for them?"

"Among other things." He pointed at the dress. "Put it on. We're leaving as soon as I put on my tee and huaraches."

She backed toward the nightstand. "Why the hurry?" Her smile widened with mischief. "Hungry?"

"You have no idea."

His husky voice tamed her teasing smile. Eyes on him, she opened the nightstand's top drawer.

He spoke immediately. "No underwear. Just the dress and shoes."

Blood drained from her face, lightening her skin until her blush followed. "Do you have any idea what you're asking?"

He did. "The cotton's thick and colorful enough that no one will see the shadow of your nipples or bush."

The faint pink stain on her cheeks turned a bright red. "What do you have planned?"

"Do you trust me? Yes or no?"

Her throat bobbed with her swallow. In answer, she pulled the dress off the hanger and stepped into it.

Rafe's heart leapt at his conquest. Certain to keep it from his voice he spoke in his easiest tone. "Turn around. I'll zip you."

The edges of the dress wiggled with her rough breathing. He had to stop himself from gathering her in his arms and staying here where she felt protected. Today he wanted her to take an even bigger risk, one leading to tomorrow and the days beyond, for her to feel the safest with him. He eased the zipper toward the top. Finished, he rested his palms on her biceps.

The ends of her hair swept her silky shoulders as she looked over. Her complexion now wore the rosy look of arousal. Happy, he said, "Change the pearl on your nose to the emerald and wear high-heels."

Her nostrils widened a bit with her deep breath. "Anything else?"

"I'll let you know when we get there."

* * * * *

They took Rafe's black Jaguar convertible, a sumptuous car Eden had dreamed of purchasing prior to her financial ruin. With one hand pressed into the doughy leather seat, she tightened her other around her hair, twisting it into a ponytail to keep the wind from causing too many tangles. Relaxed, Rafe let the breeze do what it willed with his locks. Expertly, he maneuvered his vehicle through city traffic, arriving at the food warehouse quicker than Eden expected. Strangely enough, she felt more naked now

than if she'd been fully nude. Her gaze sped around the nearly filled parking lot. Mothers struggled with rowdy kids. Young adults hurried past. Retirees with too much time on their hands walked slowly and paused to chat. No one seemed to notice her or recognize Rafe despite his TV commercials, lines of cookware and various charitable pursuits.

Comforted by the anonymity, she looked at him. He'd taken off his sunglasses, the same as she had. His dark eyes asked, *Do you trust me?*

If she told him no, insisting on going home right now, she knew he'd do so without argument or pause. He wouldn't shame her. He wouldn't harm her. That alone gave her the courage to unsnap her seatbelt.

He came around the car and opened her door. His hand felt too warm around her much colder one. She exited the vehicle gingerly, acutely aware of the wind pushing the soft cotton against her rigid nipples, whipping the skirt around her bare legs and lapping the moisture flowing from her cleft. Her body was preparing for his even though good sense said there was no way he'd make love to her in this place. There were too many people, no quiet area to offer even a shred of privacy unless he planned to take her in the manager's office.

Would he? Were he and the manager friends? Would that man or woman leave the office at Rafe's request?

Eden's step slowed at the thought even as her heartbeats accelerated with distressing desire.

"Come." Rafe tugged her along to keep pace. "We have a lot to do."

"Such as?"

Smiling, he selected a cart and rolled it inside.

Cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg and lemongrass spiced the air, along with the tangy-sweet scents of tropical fruits and the decadent aromas coming from the bakery. Something rich and chocolate stood out. She sighed.

"You like it here, no?" he asked.

The smells, bright lighting and activity reminded Eden of her grandmother. Twice a week, until she passed, they'd shopped for groceries, a simple, homey task begun when Eden was twelve, which provided structure to her previously chaotic world. "I have fond memories of Grandma every time I come here."

Rafe slipped his arm around her waist, his fingers trailing over her hip. "Let's make more."

Her body flushed with heat. "How?"

"Follow me."

Up one set of aisles and down the others they went, zigzagging through the cavernous space with Rafe choosing only spices so far, many unknown to Cuban cooking, as though he were trying to replicate her secret ingredients. *Dream on.* He entered the soup aisle. She trailed behind, admiring his firm ass and muscular calves,

trying to figure out where this would lead. The overhead signs indicated the manager's office was in the front of the store. For the last few minutes, they'd been heading toward the back.

When he picked up yet another can of overly salted and crappy tasting consommé, Eden said, "You're stalling or waiting for something. What?"

Feedback from the store's intercom created a brief, piercing wail. A young female voice followed, full of pep and joy. "Shoppers, our noon specials have started at the bakery and deli counters!"

"That," Rafe said, answering Eden's question.

She looked in the direction of the bakery and deli then at him as he continued to roll the cart toward the back of the store. Catching up, she told him what he should have already known. "You're going the wrong way."

"Not for what I want." He tarried a bit longer, glancing at packaged dinners she knew he'd never buy or eat, then pushed their cart next to a display of expensive cheeses from around the world and out of the way of the other shoppers. Hand on the side of her neck, his thumb stroked her throat. "Hungry?"

Her mouth watered at the sin in his voice and eyes, the heat of his palm. The drone of rolling carts, shopper's voices, children's frustrated cries and the announcement of more specials quieted beneath her thumping heart. "Very."

His hand slid from her throat to her biceps, down her forearm to her fingers. He curled his hand around hers, his firm grip declaring she was his, she would follow, she would obey. "Come."

With his free hand, he punched open the double metal doors leading to the employee area and loading dock. In a room off to the side, Eden heard animated conversations in English and Spanish, men laughing loudly, women giggling. All seemed to be enjoying their lunch break. A bead of perspiration ran from her temple to her cheek. Had Rafe called his friend Luis to set this up, to make certain no one would be too close to this area while he took her? And he would, Eden had no doubt.

Rafe led her through a maze of boxes containing rice, beans, flour and cereal, some of the cartons stacked as high as a two-story house. She brought her face down at the outside light in her peripheral vision. Surely the loading dock. The day's breeze, scented by the sun, wafted inside, carrying men's voices with it. The workers conversed in Spanish, complaining or boasting about the lunches their wives had packed.

Her head snapped to the left as Rafe pulled her to a shadowed area, a wall of cardboard boxes, which separated them from the others. Breathing hard, she whispered, "Did you set this up with Luis?"

Rafe's breath warmed her ear. "And give my dear conservative friend a heart attack?" He chuckled. "Remember when I told you Victor worked here after school?" His hands found her breasts, covering them. A mewl caught in the back of her throat. Her lids closed. Rafe continued, "He brought me back here to keep me out of trouble

when my parents were too busy to do so. I got to know the store's manager. She and I are very good friends."

Eden was about to ask him if the manager knew what he planned to do back here with her but could not. Rafe's mouth claimed hers, his tongue thrusting inside. Submissive and wanting, she suckled him deeper, loving his clean flavor.

He offered it for a very long time, necking with her as if they were teenagers. He didn't seem to care about anyone discovering them, unless he wanted to test the limits of what he would eventually do—take her as the men's lunch break neared its end. Heighten her arousal by the threat of them coming upon the carnal scene.

His kisses went from savage to tender and back again with her following his lead. At length, he tore his mouth free for a much-needed breath. "Don't make any noise," he warned, then paused to pull in more air. "The men are just outside."

Again, she heard their chatter interrupted by bursts of laughter. She glanced from Rafe to the boxes he turned her toward. These were stacked waist-high and surrounded by others twice as tall as him. He bent her at the waist. Eden's hair spilled over her shoulders. She gripped the sides of the carton, resting her forearms on it. Teeth gritted to stop her whimper, she waited for their coupling, knowing it wouldn't happen quickly.

In no rush, he spread her legs, making certain he'd positioned them properly. All too slowly, he bunched the back of her skirt, moving it to her waist, exposing her dewy cunt.

He whispered, "Arch your back. Lift your ass."

Conquered by the defenseless position and her longing, she did.

The sound of his huaraches scraping the concrete floor told her he'd stepped back to observe her. She sucked her lower lip. Her mind urged him to free his cock, to take her now. Not only so they wouldn't be discovered but for completion.

Seconds elapsed, turning into unending minutes. He made no move. She turned her head to see what he was doing. At the same moment, a piece of metal outside struck concrete generating a hollow, tinny sound. Eden flinched. The men muttered admonitions at one of their coworkers to be more careful. On the man's sheepish apology, Rafe stepped close and entered her passage, his cock solid and stiff, penetrating as deeply as possible. Their bodies touched.

Eden's head fell forward. A pleased whimper and a cry gurgled in her throat with Rafe's rhythmic thrusts, his fingers rubbing her clit. Her body tensed at her struggle to be quiet, to avoid shaking the boxes. As a consequence, she clenched her inner muscles, narrowing her sheath.

His heightened breathing and quickened pumps affirmed his approval.

Mouth on her upper arm, she silenced vocal evidence her orgasm neared. Ruthlessly, he delayed it, slowing his repeated penetration, removing his fingers from her nub. Her head sank to the box. Her cheek rested against it. Unable to protest, her

body stayed subservient to his, willing to take whatever he gave at the pace he demanded.

He began again and didn't stop. Minutes later, the heel of her hand went to her mouth, keeping her from crying out. Only her pulsing vagina told the truth—she'd reached climax.

Without coming, Rafe pulled out of her. Surprised, Eden bit back a groan and lifted her head to look at him. His hand went to her shoulder, wordlessly ordering her to remain as she was. Why? Had he heard one of the employees returning to work and heading this way? Was he afraid any movement on her part would alert the man to investigate the sound?

Eyes wide, head jerking in the opposite direction, she expected to hear the heavy slap of work boots against the concrete floor. Instead, the store's intercom whined briefly, its shriek softer here. The same young voice reminded shoppers of the store's specials. Wind brushed against the building, bringing with it weary laughter and mellow voices. The men were still outside, no one came this way, there were no unusual sounds. Until she noticed the faint crinkling of cellophane. Her mind tried to place the noise.

Rafe's movements solved the puzzle. Turned to the side, his arm tapped her ass as he rolled the condom over his rigid length. He'd had protection all along and brought it here? Why? Did he fear his ejaculate would embarrass her? She had a handkerchief in the pocket of her skirt and would have told him as much but never got the chance.

The slick of lubrication he now spread on her anus was surprisingly cold and unexpected, stealing her breath. His palm rested heavy and hot on her hip as he directed his sex to her tightest opening.

Instantly lightheaded, certainly not anticipating his intent, she closed her lids.

He leaned down and whispered, "Tell me you want this."

The sheer wickedness of the act precluded her from speech. Lifting her hand, she cradled his face and nodded. He pecked her cheek prior to straightening.

With all of her will, Eden compelled her body to relax, to accept his organ, knowing it would dominate and thrill.

The crown entered more easily than she'd expected, the pressure noticed but bearable. He took his time, giving her body a chance to adjust to his girth. Carefully, lovingly, he guided his shaft farther inside. A small bit at a time until he knew success, sinking as deeply as a man could, glutting her to capacity. Her chest heaved with her rasping breaths, the sounds muzzled by her mouth held firmly against her shoulder.

His fingers clasped her hips. He pulled back until the cap of his penis seemed in danger of slipping out and then he plowed inside, producing a sensation in her like no other. One of complete vulnerability and subservience with an odd sense of power beneath, because she'd agreed to this moment. Without her assent, it wouldn't exist.

Her body shook and her knees tapped the box with each of his thrusts. The small sounds must have reminded him of her pleasure. His fingers sought her clit. He coordinated the strokes with his pumps.

Eyes squeezed tight, jaw clenched she delivered her body to him, along with another slice of her heart. In time, her climax answered, leaving her feeble, weightless.

No different after his orgasm, he draped his torso over hers, his face in her hair, the waves hushing his uneven breaths. Minutes passed as they both regained strength and control. He reacted first and pushed her hair aside to expose her neck, kissing it and her cheek.

She spoke as softly as she could, asking him what he had of her that day in the pool. "Enough?"

His cheek rubbed her shoulder as he shook his head, his beginning beard scraping her skin. "More."

"Here?"

His quiet laughter vibrated their bodies. "I think not. Lunch is almost over." He allowed them to remain joined a moment more. With a restrained grunt, he straightened and released himself from her. Lovingly, he blotted her dry with what felt like a wad of tissues, no doubt from one of his many pockets, and pulled down her skirt.

Sore and happy, she turned to him and smiled at his heavy lids, the boyish look of peace and fatigue on his face. "Want me to push you in the cart while I finish shopping for our groceries?"

Yawning, he removed the condom, wrapped it in the tissues and stuck it in his back pocket. From his front pocket, he pulled out a rectangular packet, tore it open and scrubbed his hands with the moist towelette. "No," he answered her as he glanced around to make certain they hadn't disturbed anything. "But you may have to drive my car. While you do I have something more to ask of you."

Her bliss vanished at the hesitation in his voice, putting her mind on immediate alert. After this, what more could they possibly do? The only thing left was really public sex, which she didn't think he was into and she certainly was not. And then she had a truly awful thought. What if he wanted them to engage in a threesome? The thought of him with another woman, especially in her presence, brought a sharp pain to her chest. "What?"

His face lifted at her abrupt tone. Thick strands of hair drooped over his forehead. She had no urge to finger the locks back into place. She liked him looking sex-mussed, as long as she'd been the cause of it.

"After we finish shopping, I'll tell you." He took her hand. "Come."

She held back. "Tell me now."

"The men are returning."

Eden heard what he most likely had—several footfalls clanging against metal steps surely leading up to the dock. Hurriedly, she followed Rafe through the cardboard labyrinth. They passed the lunch room where employees still conversed, their moods subdued by the food they'd eaten or at the thought of returning to work.

Back at their cart, Rafe smoothed her hair. She left his exactly as she liked it. "Okay, we're out of there. Tell me now."

"No." He pushed the cart away from the cheese display and spoke over his shoulder. "When we're back in the car."

There was no arguing with him. The shopping took forever. At the meat counter, he asked about the butcher's son, a freshman at the University of Miami. The man couldn't boast enough or talk enough about his kid. Rafe didn't rush him in the least. A half hour later, with no new tales for the butcher to relate, Rafe selected the proteins he wanted Eden to cook tonight. Next, he headed for the bakery counter. The ladies there knew him well. Two of the new hires wanted an autograph and for him to pose with them while their fellow workers took photos on their cell phones. The activity compelled several shoppers to drop by. They asked for his advice on certain recipes, which he provided graciously, endlessly.

At their checkout aisle, the young woman manning the register purred his first name as if she'd used it often and well and in the most intimate situations. Again, he responded graciously, not seeming to notice her obvious flirting.

Grateful for that and his arm around her waist as they left the store, Eden kept her tongue until they reached his car. "While I drive, you can tell me what more you have to ask of me." She had to know now even if it had nothing to do with another woman. If it was going to disappoint or hurt in the slightest, she wanted it over with and to move on with her life as she'd planned before she'd met him.

He put their purchases in the trunk, slipped on his sunglasses and opened the passenger door for her. "I can drive. I've recovered fully." He grinned. "See what hero worship does for a man? I want you to remember that."

She didn't move. "I'll make a note of it. You're certain you want to drive? I wouldn't want you to be distracted while you ask me whatever it is you're planning to ask."

His smile faded. He spoke in an even tone. "Get in. Please."

Although she wanted to run, she did as he asked, turning to him as he got behind the wheel and started the car. *Y Es Verdad*—And It Is True—a romantic Cuban instrumental with light strings, piano and the rich sounds of a trombone, poured from the radio. Eden sighed. She hated being jealous, she hated being needy and just wanted to go back to being nobody's fool, the way she'd been before knowing him. "What else do you want me to do, Rafe? What's this about?"

He looked from her to the radio as it went mute unexpectedly. Glancing at it, she saw a phone number displayed on the dash. "You have a call? Is it Anna Marie? Victor?"

"No. It's Bernardo, one of my cousins. Forgive me, I have to take this. Bernardo," he said answering the call, "what is it? What's wrong?"

The man's voice came through the radio, his tone hesitant. "Rafe, I am so sorry to bother you during your time off, but Dolores went into labor this morning."

Rafe leaned up in his seat, his voice showing immediate and intense concern. "What happened? Is she all right?"

"Surprised, as we all were, considering it's too soon. But the doctor says she'll be fine, so will the baby. However, Hector won't be able to work tonight."

"Of course, he won't," Rafe said, sinking back into his seat, obviously relieved. "He needs to be with his wife. Will one of the other chefs be able to fill in for him or do you need me?"

The man's sigh said it all. "Victor tried to adjust the schedules, but with some of our staff already on vacation and others with their own family problems, we have no one."

"Then it's settled. I'll come in as quickly as possible."

"*Gracias*, Rafe. And again, I'm so sorry to have bothered you during your time off."

"It's not a problem, Bernardo."

With the call ended, he turned down the radio's volume and explained. "Hector, another of my cousins, was taking my place at Z during my absence. I'll drop you off at your house and then I must go."

"No."

He looked from the gear shift to her and frowned. "Didn't you hear? I have no choice."

"That's not why I said no." She rested her hand on his arm, stopping him from putting the car into drive. "Please, wait a sec."

"I have no more than that," he warned. "I have to get to the restaurant to prep the food."

"I know. That's what I wanted to talk to you about." Her voice shook with emotion. Unable to calm it or her racing heart, she continued, "You need an executive chef, right? What about me? I'll do it. You won't have to lift a finger. You don't even have to pay me. I'll take care of everything. Please, Rafe, give me this chance. Let me prove myself."

Chapter Eleven

He heard unmistakable yearning in her voice. It reminded Rafe of the many times he'd begged his mentor Kirk to allow him to prepare Luis' meals.

Hands wringing, Eden continued, "If I fuck up, I'll take full responsibility. I'll start with an ad in the *Herald* explaining everything and apologizing to your patrons. I'll reimburse you for any costs, even if I have to sell my car. And you'll definitely get back your full fee for your stay."

Rafe was grateful for his sunglasses. They hid the tears burning his eyes. How he loved this woman. He was certain of it now, even though he'd had little doubt before. Keeping tenderness and amusement from his voice, he spoke in his gravest tone. "Are you afraid you'll fuck up?"

She stopped babbling and lifted her head. "No, of course not." She frowned. "I'm the best damn chef you'll ever know."

In the past two weeks, she'd shown him repeatedly. "Prove it. Tonight."

Her frown disappeared, replaced by a look of amazement. It brought to mind the faces of his young nieces on their birthdays when they saw their countless gifts, the clowns, ponies and fantastic cakes.

Voice trembling with gratitude and excitement, she said, "I will."

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They made a quick stop at her house for her knives, spices and appropriate clothing, including underwear. She pulled her hair back into a sedate bun, though it did nothing to tame her exotic beauty. On the drive, she said little, her gaze turned inward as if picturing tonight's fare and her triumph. Her stride was sure as they entered his flagship restaurant, a one-story Spanish-styled structure that might have once stood in Havana, at least in the minds of the old-timers. Stucco walls in ivory and peach wore murals of a Cuba the immigrants still dreamed of but would never have. Enameled tiles graced the floors. Ferns, rubber tree plants, palms and gurgling fountains completed the décor. Tonight, guitarists would wander from table to table, playing their romantic tunes.

With good nature and too many questions in her eyes, his cousin Ynez brought Eden one of the chef's coats embroidered with the restaurant's logo.

Upon entering the kitchen, the staff stopped speaking. Ynez had told them of Eden's role tonight. As one, they awaited her instructions.

Rafe stopped himself from hugging her as a parent would when sending a child to their first day of school. She could handle this without any help from him.

As proof, she shook each of their hands, putting names to faces that Rafe had described while they'd been in the car. She spoke with grace and confidence. "It's a pleasure to work with each of you. Miguel," she said to his youngest relative at the restaurant, "do we have sufficient crab for tonight's guests?"

The handsome young man nodded readily. "We received a new delivery an hour ago for our *ceviche*. With what we already have, it will be more than enough."

Eden smiled. "Glad to hear it." She glanced at them all. "We'll be adding *empanaditas de cangrejo* to the menu."

Rafe couldn't have been more delighted. Crab-stuffed turnovers, a simple dish, were also one of his favorites. Given Eden's fondness for modernizing traditional Cuban fare with her unique blend of spices, he had no doubt her creation would please the most sophisticated palate and might become a regular on his menu.

As the others returned to their stations and she hurried about, forgetting him, he went into the dining area. His father sat at one of the back tables though it would be hours until he began his *maître d'* duties, a job he loved. The pleasant work gave him and the older patrons a chance to reminisce about their childhoods in Cuba and to bitch about Castro.

"Papa." He leaned down and kissed his father's freshly-shaved cheeks, which smelled of Old Spice cologne. Rafe didn't ask if Ynez had alerted the man to Eden's presence, he was certain of it. In his mind, he heard his mother urging his father to come to the restaurant, to see if their youngest son had lost all good sense by letting a non-relative take such an important role. "How's Mama?"

"Worried, as always." Hernando Zayas smiled. It took a decade off his features and made him more handsome than most men half his age. His face was barely lined, his hair full and silver, bringing him too much attention from middle-aged ladies. "So who is she?" He leaned forward as Rafe straightened. "Where did you find her?"

"You need another *café Cubano*." Rafe brought his father a new cup and for himself a *guarapo*, freshly squeezed sugar cane juice. Sitting next to the older man, he spoke in a lowered voice, reverting to Spanish. "Eden was one of the contestants on the show."

His father used their native tongue. "The girl with the jewel in her nose? The one who lost?"

"By the barest of margins." He waved his hand as if to dismiss the defeat. "She's an excellent chef."

"One would hope, given that you've turned your kitchen over to her."

Rafe chuckled.

"Has she been keeping you busy these last weeks?"

He ran his fingers around the lip of his glass. "She's changed my life, much as Mama changed yours when you met her."

His father finished a sip of his coffee, lowering his cup to the white linen draping the table. "So it's serious?"

Rafe wanted it to be. Whether Eden would ever feel the same, he wasn't certain. Earlier at De Cocina Foods, he'd seen the building alarm and mistrust in her eyes when he'd said he wanted to ask one more thing of her. What did she think he planned to propose? Group sex with the men outside? Did she think so poorly of him? Did she have such little faith in his wanting her for his own? Anger flared, urging him to go into the kitchen and demand she admit her feelings. He'd seen the passion in her eyes, the love. He'd been with many women. Not one of them had ever looked at him as Eden had. Nor did he believe she'd ever felt as deeply about another man.

"It is," his father said, answering his own question. "But I see your worry." His voice went down another notch and turned serious. "Are you concerned she's after your wealth?"

Rafe smiled at his father's absurd question, grateful it broke his tension. "After my wealth? She refuses to allow me to pay her for cooking tonight. She offered to sell her car to cover any damages she may cause while she's here."

Hernando's bushy white brows lifted. "Does she plan to start a fire or poison one of our guests?"

"She's going to enchant them with her food, wait and see."

"I have no choice." He took another sip of his coffee and swallowed. "Your mama ordered me to find out all that I could and to tell her what I've learned when I return home tonight."

* * * * *

The restaurant filled up quickly. With so much to do, Eden didn't have a chance to be nervous. Effortlessly, she slipped into the kitchen's rhythm. It awakened how much she'd missed being a chef and having her own establishment.

She was inquiring about the status of one of tonight's desserts—*brazo gitano*, a Cuban jelly roll cake with guava filling—when one of the wait staff came to her side.

"Chef," the young man said, his voice anxious and scarcely audible over the room's din, "table five insists on seeing you."

Despite the kitchen's heat, her face and body went cold. She wanted to ask why they'd sent for her, but wasn't about to disrupt the crew's smooth efficiency with a drama they had no control over. "Please tell them I'll be right there." As casually as she could, Eden smoothed her hair, making certain no locks escaped her bun. She removed her apron and looked down, seeing her chef's coat had remained spotless and her hands weren't shaking too much.

Leaving her station, Ynez crossed the room to Eden. The young woman had beautiful green eyes and a baby bump indicating her fourth or fifth month of pregnancy. "Has one of our guests sent for you?"

Eden nodded.

Ynez whispered, "Could be they like what you prepared."

"Could be. But If I don't return in five minutes, tell everyone I said bye and that you're in charge."

She stepped back. "And take the blame for you?"

Eden smiled at Ynez's teasing laughter, hugging her hard.

The guitarists played *Malaguena*, a classic Cuban song her grandmother had liked. Wait staff bustled between tables. The sweet scent of bread and pastries, pork, beef, garlic and onions pervaded the air. In between bites of their food, not all of the patrons held animated conversations and laughed. Some looked downright intense. Hand on the kitchen's swinging door, Eden glanced over expecting to see Rafe. Instead, she met his father's eyes. The older man had come into the kitchen hours earlier to introduce himself. Now, he wore a kindly expression saying he had bad news he didn't know how to break. She offered a wobbly smile and not only because of the dressing-down she was about to get. In Hernando, Eden saw Rafe years from now—an elegant and handsome man she'd have trouble getting over. Hours ago, she thought they'd have the rest of his stay together. Could be they'd part tonight if his guests were really pissed about the quality of one of her dishes.

Her mind flew over her preparations, the sautéing, the frying, the pastry-making. She'd tasted everything twice, just to make certain of its quality. Never had she performed as well. So what was the problem? Had there been a bone in the fish? Veins in the shrimp? Was her blend of spices so unusual the patrons found them odd and distasteful?

Rafe's father cleared his throat, interrupting her thoughts. "Table five is over there." He gestured.

She saw two couples in their mid-fifties, part of the intense group of diners. Given their stylish clothing and the women's carefully coiffed hair, they were affluent and used to the best.

Eden's stomach knotted as she approached, though her smile came easily because dammit, her food was good. Tonight, she'd cooked with inspiration and soul, what Rafe had said was missing from her competition dishes. Of course, that was his take on it. These people surely didn't feel the same.

"*Buenas noches*," Eden said. "You wanted to see me?"

The women exchanged a glance as if they hadn't expected a female chef or someone so young with a diamond glittering on top of her nostril. The men smiled broadly.

"My *bacalao* is the best I've ever had here," the man on the right blurted. "Pure heaven."

Eden stared. He liked the cod? He liked the *a la vizcaína* sauce even though she'd added a secret twist to its tomatoes, onion and garlic?

The women chimed in, raving about the *alcaparrado*, a mixture of capers, olives, raisins and more of her secret spices that she used in the sauce to accompany their beef entrées.

As they went on and on about the quality of her dishes, the guitarists strolled up and began playing *Solamente Una Vez*, Only Once. A few seconds ago, the song's title would have seemed a portent of things to come, that she'd blown her solitary chance to prove herself and not just to Rafe.

With a young, giddy and reckless smile, she thanked the diners and just about floated back to the kitchen.

* * * * *

She didn't see Rafe until the restaurant closed and the staff began to depart. His broad smile told Eden he'd either witnessed her victory or his father had related every detail.

Hand on her throat, his thumb traced the line of her jaw. "So it's over and you didn't put me out of business. What do you have to say for yourself?"

She arched one brow. "I may have saved your restaurant from mediocrity and ruin."

His strong laughter filled the empty dining area. Eden placed her hand on his. "Where were you all night?"

"Watching you from the monitors in my office." He bent down to brush his lips over hers. "I didn't want to intrude on your triumph."

She giggled. "I did so freaking good."

"Would you like to celebrate or are you too tired?"

Leaning into his touch, she sighed. "I have no plans to sleep tonight."

Eden expected him to take her to one of the nightspots the area was famous for. He passed them all. They weren't going to her house, it was in the opposite direction. Was he driving to the beach? Maybe. He kept heading toward Biscayne Bay.

Its tang permeated the steady breeze. Here, the air was slightly cooler and refreshing against her feverish skin. Eyes closed, she lifted her face, allowing the wind to wash over her.

Rafe took two more turns, slowed and stopped his Jag.

Eden parted her lids and gaped. Gripping the sides of her seat, she pushed up for a better look at the two-story waterfront mansion that sprawled behind the black wrought iron gate. Artfully lit by landscaping lights, the structure was white as meringue with a red-tiled roof and royal blue awnings over the innumerable arched windows. Scarlet bougainvillea flowed over the balconies, the fragrant petals shivering in the breeze. Countless palms, monstrous banyans and towering cypress trees graced the spacious grounds. "My god, you actually live here?"

A motor whirred. The wrought iron gate swung open. "I bought it after the real estate market tanked, paying pennies on the dollar." He drove onto the brick drive

leading into the grounds. "My financial advisor said the land alone was a good investment. The house is nice, but lacks the charm of your place."

She laughed. "You're kidding, right? This is amazing."

"My parents and Victor's family seem to enjoy it."

Her head swung to him. Although he kept his gaze straight ahead, a smile tugged his sensuous lips. "Your family lives here with you?"

"In the guest houses on the grounds. Far, far away from the main house." He looked over. "Why? Did you want to sleep with me here?"

Eden wanted to make love with him anywhere, even his restaurant's office or kitchen. Turning in her seat, she ran her hand down his tee to his shorts' fly, the wonderful bulge behind it. "Only until we pass out."

He inhaled deeply at her fingers stroking his balls. With each flick, he increased the car's speed. By the time she'd cupped his sac, they'd reached the front entrance. Head turning, she noted the intricately carved wood on the front door, its blue-and-white stained glass windows depicting morning glories and herons.

Inside, her face lifted from the bronze pavers to the ornate cabinets and credenzas against the snowy walls. She suspected the furnishings were antiques. Roses and lilies filled the heavy clay vases on top, the petals perfuming the air. Looking up, she regarded the domed ceiling and ornate Spanish chandelier with dozens of lights resembling white flickering flames. Decorative iron banisters adorned the two sweeping staircases. Eden headed for the one nearest her, guessing it led to Rafe's bedroom on the second floor.

On the first step, he stopped her. Taking her hand, he led her from the opulent foyer to a hall. "Your bedroom's down here?" she asked.

"Upstairs."

"Then where are we going?"

"Out back."

"You want to make love outside?"

"To begin with."

How nice it sounded, except for his parents and Victor's family being on the same estate. She held back. "Your family never wanders around here at night, do they?"

Rafe increased his pace, tugging her so she'd match it. "Do you honestly believe I'd embarrass you or my family?"

"No, of course not. I just thought—ohmygod," she said, interrupting herself as they reached the kitchen. The room owned more square footage than the entire downstairs of her house. Mahogany cabinets, shiny and dark, covered two walls. There were three food islands with granite countertops in dark amber. A brick oven stood at the east end of the room. Gourmet appliances took up the rest of the space, their exteriors a warm bronze color to blend with the décor.

Eden pulled her hand from Rafe's and circled the area. She heard her excited breathing, unable to help it as she ran her hands over the huge fridge, the grills, the ovens. Even during industry trade shows she'd never seen anything so spectacular. "How do you ever leave this place?"

"I can't cook all the time."

Yeah right. She heard his awe, as if he couldn't quite believe he'd achieved this. "I bet when you first moved in here your father had to drag you to the restaurant."

"You know me too well." His voice held a smile. "Come." Fingers around her wrist, he pulled her from the kitchen through another hall and out the back door.

Scores of stars and a slice of moon embellished the ebony sky. Insects buzzed, a ship's horn bellowed, the water hissed restlessly. Its scent was stronger here, joined by the richness of the vegetation and earth. Rafe led her to an enormous rectangular area surrounded by tall bushes and lit softly by gas torches. Stone wall fountains shaped like urns took up each end with water trickling from the spouts. Squares of sandstone separated patches of springy lawn to create an unusual checkerboard design. To the side were wrought iron tables and chairs. Their cramped positioning led her to believe someone moved them for the gardener or in preparation of an event. "Who lived here before you did? A rock star? A drug dealer?"

"Mortgage banker." He went to the electric heaters nearest them, turning the units on. "I believe he's in federal prison now."

"If he had anything to do with my current interest rate, serves him right."

"I agree." His eyes sparkled in the faint glow of the torches and heaters. "Take off your clothes."

So, they'd arrived at tonight's purpose. Instantly, her nipples felt sensitive, either from him suckling them too much these past weeks or because they'd hardened considerably with his command and were scraping her bra's lacy cups. Mouth dry, heart pounding, she opted against hurrying, deciding instead to have him wait for her as she'd so often had to mark time for him. Lifting her hands, she pulled hairpins from her bun, one by one, as slowly as she could.

His eyes narrowed. The torches' rosy light revealed his jaw tightened with impatience, the bristly stubble on it and his cheeks.

Chin lifted, Eden worked her fingers through her hair. The wind pushed heated air toward her. She didn't need the extra warmth. Rafe had already stepped forward, his hands on the buttons of her chef's coat.

Her voice hushed. "Am I taking too long?"

"You know damn well you are." He pulled the coat down her arms and tossed it aside.

She held her hands behind her back as he unsnapped her bra. The cups separated, releasing her breasts into his waiting palms. A low, savage growl rushed from the back of his throat. She inhaled sharply at his skin's temperature, far greater than her own,

and his barely contained strength as he squeezed her flesh while his thumbs skimmed her nipples.

Head lowered, he suckled her throat, his hands moving to her trousers' button and fly, opening them then pushing the gabardine over her hips. Before the wind could touch her ass exposed by her thong, he cupped her naked cheeks.

Electrified by his caress, reminded of what they'd done earlier at De Cocina Foods, she pulled at his tee, needing him naked. Happy to oblige, he ordered her to take off the remainder of her clothes while he discarded his, spreading them and the chef's coat over the grass as a makeshift bed. Hand extended, he offered to help her down.

Eden refused. "You first. On your back."

He looked skeptical. "You intend to do all the work tonight?"

"You'll be surprised at what I can do."

Grinning, he sank to the ground, arms behind his head, legs parted, his cock and sac displayed proudly.

Wind ruffled his hair. Light from the torches and heaters spilled over his body's hard contours, revealing the silky hair beneath his arms, the thatch of curls on his groin, his shaft's readiness for her.

Carefully, Eden planted her feet on each side of his body and looked down. Rafe's attention strayed from her moist cunt to her breasts and then to her eyes. In his, she saw hunger that went beyond lust and bordered on need. For how long? Tonight? The remainder of their contract? Then what?

Then nothing, she reminded herself. She couldn't trust herself enough to continue falling in love with him. She wouldn't. It was too intense, veering out of control, changing her in ways she might not be able to accept. She'd enjoy him for now and move on. So would he. With what he had to offer there would be scores of women who would be as eager as she.

Soul aching, unwilling to picture him with any of them, she blurted, "Tell me you want this."

He smiled. It broke her heart a little more, because she'd miss seeing his joy and being the cause of it. "Do you have any doubt?" he asked.

Her doubts would fill his mega-mansion and might ruin tonight unless she drove them away. Shaking off sorrow over what could never be, she lowered herself until her knees touched their clothing and her pussy hovered above his hard rod. "No."

"Then show me what you want."

She did, cradling his sex in her palm, running her hand up and down the shaft to torment him a bit more. The muscles in his forearms tensed, his hair-rough thighs bumped her back. His lids slid down. She had him now. With studied indifference to what he expected – a quick meeting of their bodies – Eden ran his penis's head over her damp curls and lust-swollen vaginal lips.

His chest expanded with his sudden intake of breath.

She ignored it, stroking her labia with his crown, imagining moisture seeping from his tiny slit, mingling with her dew.

Rafe groaned. "Take me inside now."

"After you tell me how wonderful I was tonight."

His eyes opened, his expression betraying his surprise. "You were." He frowned. "Now go on. Don't make me wait."

Where had she heard those words? "Tell me I'm the best chef you've ever known."

His mouth opened. No words poured out as she nudged the head of his penis between her vaginal lips and against her entrance, so close to heaven, yet just short of it. "Go on," she ordered. "Don't make me wait."

A hard swallow caused his Adam's apple to jerk. He spoke on a gasp. "You are. You know you are."

"Tell me I'm a better chef than you."

His laughter rang out in frank amusement. "Never." He brought his hands from behind his head and placed them on her thighs. His eyes pinned her. His voice held a warning that made her skin tingle. "No more demands. I'm far stronger than you and I'll have you on the ground within seconds, your legs spread wide, your cunt welcoming my cock. Understood?"

Her cheeks burned with the image he'd painted. In answer, she lowered her body onto his, pushing his rod inside.

Rafe's back arched. His fingers clamped down on her thighs. He jerked his hips, making certain she contained every bit of his width and length.

The pressure was shocking and welcomed. Face lowered, Eden's hair flowed over her shoulders until the wind snatched the ends, blowing them back. Rafe's hands left her thighs to settle on her hips. Wordlessly, he was ordering her to indulge his every whim, to please.

With her inner walls tightened around him, she began her ascent, pulling away from his body. On his soft groan, she slithered back down, her slick passage consuming him again. His thumbs stroked her hips to indicate his approval while his fingers tightened insisting on more.

Reluctant to tease or draw this out unnecessarily, Eden lowered her hand to her clit. She rubbed it and ran her other hand over her breasts as she rode him.

Captivated, Rafe watched. Quickly, his shaft thickened even more, increasing the friction between them, telling her he approached climax, as did she. Eden picked up her pace. He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, squeezing them.

Head lifted to the sky, her mouth hung open but she wouldn't allow herself a wild cry; the wind might carry to the guesthouses.

Rafe wasn't as concerned or as civilized. The sounds signifying his climax were primal, male, unapologetic.

Gasping from her orgasm, she lowered her torso to his, desperate for his warmth and scent. Arms surrounding her, he stroked her back and kissed her ear. Neither spoke. Words weren't necessary, they weren't wanted. Touch was enough.

A short time later, fully recovered, Rafe rolled her over so he'd be on top. Without comment, he took her missionary style. A nice change to have him do the work. This climax nearly did her in, making it increasingly difficult for her to move or breathe.

He fared no better. Exhausted, he lay next to her, his arm draped over his eyes.

With the torches and heaters illuminating their bodies, she wondered if passengers in a passing plane would be able to see them. Maybe. Would those people envy the scene they saw? Definitely.

On her side, with her arm pillowing her head, she ran her hand down Rafe's belly, claiming it for her own. At least for tonight and those they had left. He sighed loudly as her fingers reached his thick curls and limp penis. "Want me to stop?"

"If I did, would you?"

"No."

His chest quivered with muffled laughter. "You're far too disobedient."

"I did what you wanted at the restaurant. I kept your staff in line and pleased all of your guests."

He yawned.

She pressed. "If I hadn't succeeded, what would you have done?"

"Besides making you sell your car and forcing you to take an ad out in the *Herald*?"

Her fingers circled his navel. His belly quivered. "Uh-huh."

"I suppose I would have had to punish you."

Her heart quickened and her pussy pulsed. "You suppose?"

"Are you challenging me, Eden?"

Hell yes. "What do you think, Rafe?"

His response didn't surprise her, though his renewed strength did. Pushing to a sitting position, he hauled her over his legs and paddled her just enough to warm her skin and arouse her beyond endurance or reason.

Finished, he said, "Now behave, understand?"

"Fuck that."

He spanked her again, harder than the previous time though not enough to harm. "Understand?" he asked again.

Breathless, she nodded.

He sagged to the ground. Sliding over his legs, she pressed her face to his cock, licking his length, taking him into her mouth, tasting his flavor and hers on his flesh.

Beneath her, his thighs went taut. It took little time for her to rouse him to a full erection. Willful as always, she ignored his most sensitive spot behind the crown, licking his shaft instead to make him wait for pleasure, to drive him nuts.

Guessing her intent, he growled, "You want a third spanking?"

She answered as he always did. "Later...after."

He cursed in Spanish then pleaded. "Make me come or let me rest, I can't take any more. As it is, I haven't enough strength to move from here. Come morning, the gardeners will see me and may call the police."

She licked the cap of his penis with the same delight she would a double fudge ice-cream cone. He shivered. She cooed, "No they won't. After I help you to your car, I'll drive us back to my place."

"I'm not going back there tonight."

Her tongue made it halfway down his shaft before his words registered. She lifted her head and looked at him. Suddenly, his expression was hesitant. The same as when they'd finished making love at De Cocina Foods and he had something more to ask of her. In tonight's excitement, she'd forgotten about it.

Her stomach churned. Queasiness followed. She let his penis slip through her fingers. "You're staying here?"

He nodded.

Eden noted he didn't invite her to do the same. No doubt because his parents, Victor and Victor's family would question her presence.

"I have something to ask of you," he said.

Fear made her want to run. Impending pain rooted her to the spot. Was he going to ask her to forget the rest of their contract because he'd had enough of her, he had work to do? Was this his farewell to her? Sorrow tightened her throat. She'd allowed herself to expect the remainder of their month, to welcome it. Now, she'd have to move on a bit sooner. Telling herself it didn't matter, she said, "Go on." Her voice sounded weird, distant.

His expression noted it. His features recorded a mixture of disappointment and determination, though his voice remained neutral. "Anna Maria's *quinceañera* is tomorrow afternoon. It's her fifteenth birthday. Her mother and I have been working on the event for months. I have to stay here today for the last-minute preparations, finalizing the menu, making certain the food's been delivered, prepping what I plan to serve. I hoped you'd understand." He paused then asked, "What did you think I was going to say?"

Not that. A weight lifted off her chest. She avoided his question. "I do understand."

"I can see that. But it's not what I intended to ask of you."

Worry crept back. She spoke quickly, "You want me to help? To be your *sous* chef?"

"No. My cousins will be doing that." His hand cradled her face. "I want you to attend as my guest. I want you to meet my family."

Chapter Twelve

Her surprise and uncertainty were immediately apparent to Rafe. Just as he'd suspected, the thought of meeting his people, of being more than the woman he currently slept with proved more daunting to her, more intimate than the carnal pleasures they'd shared.

Eden cleared her throat. "I appreciate you asking, but surely your relatives would mind having an outsider at the party."

She believed her excuse would work? Rafe trailed his fingers over her cheek to her throat, noting her racing pulse. "Anna Maria's invited most of her classmates. Those girls are bringing dates. None of them is related to us."

Eden countered, "It's her celebration. I doubt she'd appreciate you inviting a stranger to it."

"Whether she would or not isn't for her to say. It's my estate." His fingers travelled down Eden's shoulder to her breast. "I want you there. But it's your choice. So tell me now, yes or no."

On her face, longing warred with unease. Rafe's stomach twisted but he said nothing.

She sighed. "I wouldn't know what to wear."

"Buy something. You have all day today to shop. The stores will be open at ten, eight hours from now. Send me the bill."

"No. I couldn't." She looked past him.

He forced himself to wait, not to push, not to plead. Never in his life had he begged a woman. With Eden, the possibility loomed.

Her shoulders slumped. She mumbled, "I have this silk cocktail dress. Would that be too fancy?"

"I doubt it." He made certain to speak calmly, not to show his growing relief or excitement. "Anna Maria and her court will be wearing evening gowns."

Eden's hand went to the diamond on the side of her nose. "This is too much, isn't it? I shouldn't wear it, right?"

"Not unless your dress matches the color. Is it white? Silver?"

"Black."

His groin pulsed as his mind pictured her in it. "You have a gem to match?"

"A black pearl."

"Wear it."

Still unsure, she bit her lower lip. Before she could conclude it would be best not to attend, Rafe decided to close off her escape. He reached behind himself, pulled his car's smart key out of his shorts pocket and handed it to her. "Do you mind driving yourself home tonight?" Having his Jag would force her to return it, hopefully at the party tomorrow rather than later today. "The celebration begins at two in the afternoon and will go on all night I'm sure." He smiled. "I'd like you here at one so you can greet everyone with me as they arrive."

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She couldn't go, it would be too much. His mother would surely dislike her—that's how mothers reacted when they saw unfamiliar women with their rich, handsome, successful sons. His father had been nice at the restaurant, but there she'd been an employee, not Rafe's date. And Anna Marie would probably have another of her fits if she saw someone at her party she didn't know.

"I can't do this."

Trish rolled her eyes. "Of course you can. I've been telling you that forever."

Thirty-three hours to be exact. Ever since Eden drove herself home in Rafe's Jag and called her BFF, waking her up to talk.

"I am so excited for you," Trish said, squeezing Eden's biceps.

Nauseous, Eden stood in front of her bathroom mirror with her friend behind her, working on her hair. Trish gushed, "You're going to look gorgeous."

Eden turned her head to the side and regarded her nose stud. "Not if I wear this black pearl. It's too weird for his family. I'm sure they're very conservative."

"Then thank god I talked you out of getting that tattoo on your arm."

Eden's head fell forward.

Trish scolded, "Quit moving." She brushed Eden's hair on the right side and held it back with a barrette she'd designed. Tiny gems encrusted the black-and-gold butterfly-shaped piece to create an ornate, glittering pattern. Stepping back to survey her work, Trish pressed her hands to her chest and sighed. "Perfect. Don't move." She hurried to the door. "Let me get your cell phone, I want to take a picture."

"Of me in my underwear?"

She giggled. "I thought I'd send it to Rafe."

"I love him, Trish."

Her friend stopped in the bedroom, pivoted and returned to bath. She seemed uncertain whether she should smile or not, though she did bounce on her heels as if she were beyond excited. "You okay with that?"

Eden shook her head. Her eyes brimmed with tears. "I don't want to be in love with him or any man. I can't be."

"Oh, sweetie." She wrapped her arms around Eden, holding her close. "Sure you can. It's okay. You can't stay alone forever."

Sure she could. Alone felt right, safe. She'd grown used to it. If she became accustomed to having Rafe around and he left her—aw god, she didn't want to think about it. "How did I let myself get into this mess?"

"You entered a cooking contest and lost. Better think twice before you do that again."

Eden smiled weakly, hugging her BFF as hard as the woman hugged her. "I'm not going to let myself love him, Trish. I'll sleep with him for as long as our contract lasts, but I'm not letting him into my heart."

"A big part of him is already there, babe, and has been from day one. How do you plan to keep the rest of him out?"

* * * * *

As remarkable as Rafe's estate had looked the other night, it was magical today with countless white roses and satin streamers decorating the checkerboard area out back. Eden stood on a sandstone square, her eyes lifted to the nearly flawless sky. The tropical breeze did its best to temper the sun's heat. Freshly cut grass and the flowers sweetened the air. A large portable dance floor lay at one end of the rectangle. At the other, long sideboards with crisp tablecloths had been set up for the buffet. Nearby stood the wrought iron lawn furniture where the guests would eat, each table embellished with snowy linen and a centerpiece of white roses and baby's breath. White satin bows decorated the chairs. Everything was perfect, protected, safe for a cherished young girl about to become a beloved woman.

Anna Marie, Eden thought, you don't know how lucky you've been and will continue to be.

"There you are." Rafe's voice cut across the space. He strode from the patio toward her. "Why are you back here?"

She'd needed a moment to calm down, to harden her resolve, to play it light and safe. A pain at the base of her throat marked the strain as she regarded Rafe. Her heart faltered then beat too quickly at how gorgeous he was. He wore an expensive navy suit with a white shirt and a pale blue silk tie. Wind tousled his hair. His eyes travelled her strapless dress' sweetheart bodice, its front shirring, and her black high heels. The hunger in his eyes told her he approved.

Taking her in his arms, he kissed her breathless, making her want him even more. Her body sagged into his, while her mind and heart continued to resist.

With his freshly shaved cheek pressed to hers, he asked, "How'd you get past the kitchen without me seeing you?"

Her lips touched his earlobe. "You were checking your hair in the door of the overhead oven. Knowing how vain you are, I didn't want to disturb you."

Playfully, he swatted her butt.

She hushed, "You planning to paddle me before your guests arrive?"

His large hand stroked her ass. "No, I'm checking to see if you wore underwear. A thong?"

"Maybe."

He chuckled, then stopped abruptly. "What this?" His free hand had reached the small package in her hand. He glanced at the sparkly silver wrapping.

She explained. "It's a birthday present for Anna Marie. I could hardly show up empty-handed."

"Please tell me it's not the key to my Jag."

She laughed. "It's a pair of earrings Trish designed. They dangle, jingle and glitter. In other words, exactly what fifteen-year-olds like to wear. They're selling very well on eBay. Trish's business card is in the box, should one of Anna Marie's friends want a pair. I hope you don't mind the blatant marketing."

"Of course not." He rested his forehead against hers. "I expect a cut of the profits."

"Rafe!"

Eden flinched at a man's booming voice. Rafe's hand dropped away from her. He stepped back.

Looking over, she saw a tall, good-looking man in a dark suit. An impressive mustache adorned his upper lip. Beside him was a very pretty, very pregnant young woman in a pale yellow maternity gown. Behind them were three girls, probably ten, six and four, all in pink chiffon dresses.

"My brother Victor, his wife Nina and their children," Rafe said in a quiet voice to her. "Nina and the girls are wonderful. Victor, I'm not so sure. Pretend to like him. I do it all the time." Arms out, Rafe embraced Nina, kissing both her cheeks. "*Bienvenido*." Turning to the oldest girl, he said, "Dulcie, is that you? How did you get to be so beautiful?" The child giggled. The two youngest squealed and hiccupped as he swung them around, ending their rides with a fierce hug.

Still puffing, he placed his hand on Eden's back. "Nina, Victor, girls, this is Eden DeCarlo."

Victor offered his hand. "Nice to meet you, Eden."

She noticed how he tried to resist staring at her nose stud, but couldn't help himself. For some reason, his nervousness allowed her to relax. "Same here, Victor. Rafe didn't tell me how handsome you are."

Startled at the compliment, he looked at his younger brother and spoke in a lowered tone to her. "Of course not. He's very jealous."

"Do you blame him?" she asked.

Victor laughed and leaned forward to kiss both her cheeks, his mustache tickling them. "Welcome to the estate."

Heedless of her protruding belly, Nina offered kisses and a hug. "So nice to meet you, Eden, though I feel I know you already." She eased back. "We watched you on Rafe's cooking contest."

"Not mine," he corrected, "De Cocina Foods."

"Don't tell Mama that," Victor advised in a low voice. "Here she comes, along with Papa."

If Victor's children hadn't been blocking her, Eden might have run. Even at sixty, Rafe's mother was a remarkably attractive woman. Tall and slender, she walked with a dancer's grace. Her expensive crepe dress, the color of champagne, matched her upswept hair, the waves held back with diamond clips. Strength was evident in her fawn-colored eyes, along with boundless love as the three girls ran to her, showing off their party dresses.

The older woman oohed and ahed as did Rafe's father. Once the children settled, Mrs. Zayas approached.

Rafe spoke first. "Mama, I'd like you to meet Eden DeCarlo."

Eden babbled, "Hi...hello...*buenas tardes*." Pulse hammering, she offered her hand, knowing it and her voice shook, unable to stop either of them. "So nice to meet you."

Unlike Victor, Rafe's mother stared openly at her nose stud and dress, and then she shook her hand, smiling as she released it. "Eden—what a lovely name."

As opposed to her dress and stud? "Thanks...thank you...*gracias*."

Hands raised, the older woman cupped Eden's face, studying her features, in particular her eyes. Resisting the urge to close them, Eden returned the woman's stare, wondering if Mrs. Zayas could see she loved Rafe and didn't want to, she'd fight her feelings every step of the way until he was no more than a painful memory.

His mother's features remained unreadable, though she did kiss both of Eden's cheeks. "I watched you on my son's show."

Rafe sighed. "It wasn't mine, Mama. Tell her that, Papa."

The older man lowered his head, his white hair ruffled by the breeze. "Juanita, it wasn't Rafe's show."

"Nonsense. Without our son, it wouldn't have been on at all. Who would have watched it?" She looked at Eden. "You agree, no?"

She couldn't lie. "Rafe was definitely the main draw."

With a triumphant smile, she released Eden's face and eased back. Others began to arrive, leaving no time for further conversation, denial or apology. Several times, Eden felt Mrs. Zayas' eyes appraising her. Each time she glanced over, the woman would smile slightly, almost warmly.

Not knowing how to take it, Eden finally forced herself not to look. Finished greeting the new round of guests, she glanced at Rafe as he squeezed her hand. "I have duties to perform," he said. "Stay with Nina, she'll take good care of you." He glanced past her.

As if on cue, Nina drew near, her stomach leading the way. "I'll return as soon as I can," Rafe said, kissing Eden's cheek.

She opened her eyes as he straightened. "Where are you going?"

Nina answered for him. "Anna Marie's here." She inclined her head.

The guest of honor was Eden's height and nearly as curvy. She wore a frothy white ball gown with an intricately beaded top and a billowy skirt that would have inspired envy in the most indulged bride. Smiling shyly to hide her braces, Anna Marie slouched so she would be shoulder to shoulder with the short young man at her side.

Eden noticed their furtive, adoring looks at each other. She whispered, "Is that her boyfriend?"

Nina leaned close. "The love of her life, at least for the past few months. She threatened to run away from home and starve herself if her mother wouldn't let her bring him today."

Bad move. The poor boy looked quickly terrified at Rafe's approach, as if he were about to face an executioner, not the girl's godfather. His pimply forehead, slick with sweat, shone beneath the unforgiving sun. He kept shifting his weight from foot to foot as though his dress shoes hurt or he was preparing to bolt. "Why was her mother opposed to it? What's wrong with him?"

"He's not perfect enough for her little girl. You know how mothers are with their precious daughters, wanting only the best, reluctant to ever let them go."

A pain, familiar and strong, tightened Eden's throat. She recalled her pre-teen voice, hysterical, filled with panic and outrage, begging her mom not to leave. Forcing the memory away, she offered a smile she didn't feel and lied easily. "Yes, I know exactly what you mean."

In keeping with custom, a priest performed the religious ceremony. The eight girls who made up Anna Marie's court—and were dressed as lavishly in pale green gowns—posed with her for the professional photographer. Hugs from her thirty or so classmates followed, punctuated by animated chatter and giggles. The girls quieted down as the six-piece orchestra played a *Vals Cubano*, a Cuban waltz. Obviously rehearsed for the moment, Anna Marie's young man approached and took her in his arms, though not too closely, to begin the first dance.

Tears stung Eden's eyes as she watched the girl's father and mother, their wistful expressions because they couldn't keep their daughter from growing up. Seconds before the music ended, Anna Marie's father strode onto the platform to claim the next dance with his daughter. As he spun her around, the young girl laughed freely, forgetting her braces. The top layer of her skirt caught on the wind and rose like an angel's wings. Prior to leaving her side, the man exchanged her flats for a pair of satin high heels to indicate her transition into womanhood. Inches taller, Anna Marie stole a look at her boyfriend. His broad smile said for today, at least, it wouldn't matter if she towered over him.

As her godfather, Rafe requested the next dance. During it, the girl talked nonstop. He gave her his full attention, nodding to indicate he'd heard every word. Exactly what all teens want from an adult.

Eden imagined him years from now, behaving the same with his own daughter. A child he'd protect with his life, one he'd never let down. How she envied the girl who was yet to be and the wife he would surely love.

Swallowing hard, she turned, wanting to get out of there, unable to bear another moment.

Unknowingly, Nina stopped Eden, slipping her arm through hers. "Finally," she said as the music wound down. "No more dancing until everyone eats." She whispered conspiratorially, "Here comes Rafe. He's looking for you."

While the adults lingered over an hours-long feast of roasted pork, beef, lobster, shrimp, crab, countless side dishes and a table full of pastries, Anna Marie and her friends gathered around the Mount Everest of gifts she'd received for her fifteenth birthday. Collectively, the teens urged her to tear open the presents as fast as she could.

Gaily colored gift wrapping flew everywhere accompanied by gasps of delight as she revealed the contents of each box.

Rafe glanced at Eden. Earlier, she'd held Victor's youngest on her lap as the child prattled about her pink party dress and the dessert she just had to have. Now, Eden exchanged a whispered comment with Nina that caused both women to smile. Pleased they'd become fast friends, happy she liked his brother's children, he nevertheless wanted Eden all to himself. He rested his hand on hers.

Her gaze darted across the table to his mother and father to see if they noticed. How could they? Even after so many years together, his parents conversed in loving whispers, unaware of anyone at the moment except each other. Leaning toward Eden, Rafe whispered, "Have you had enough of this party?"

Her eyes avoided his. Head down, she spoke in a tone only he could hear. "Why do you ask?"

He wanted to be alone with her and hoped she wanted the same with him. So why was she so cautious? "I thought we might leave."

Her eyes jumped up, meeting his. "It's barely dusk. Don't these things last until morning?"

"Not for us." Lifting her hand, he kissed her knuckles. "Come."

"Wait." Her fingers curled around his to stop him. She whispered, "What will your parents and relatives say?"

"They won't even notice we're missing." With the matter settled, he got out of his chair and helped Eden with hers. No one at their table—not even Victor—looked up or questioned their departure. Good manners precluded it. He was a grown man. His family would never challenge his movements in his own house. With his fingers laced

through hers, Rafe led Eden across the expansive lawn. The setting sun cast long shadows on the dense grass. Behind them, the musicians tried their best to play the newer tunes Anna Marie and her friends liked, mostly rap junk. Children squealed, teens laughed, adults conversed.

Eden looked at the patio door as they passed it. "Aren't we going to take a shortcut through your house to get to your Jag?"

"Later...after."

Her head turned to him. The sultry breeze, humid and far warmer than the previous night, blew her hair back. In her eyes, he saw honest desire and building passion. Gone was the polite façade she'd shown to the others and to him at the celebration. This was the real Eden—earthy, carnal, a woman in love though she still fought it.

Just as determined to have her admit it, to build upon it, he began his final seduction, leading her away from the main house toward the Bay.

Her steps slowed. "Are we going to the beach? Do you have a beach?"

"A small sliver. But no, we're not going there."

"Then where?"

"Come with me and find out." He increased his pace, giving her no choice except to keep up. Minutes later, her steps slowed once more. They'd just passed a series of cypress trees, which had restricted their view of the water, and reached the dock. He looked over and saw her wonder.

Her voice quieted as if someone might overhear. "Is it yours?"

"It came with the house. How could I turn it down?"

She nodded distractedly, clearly not hearing what he'd asked, her attention on his Pershing yacht, eighty feet of sleek beauty, its graceful lines bathed in gold from the sun's waning rays.

Rafe lifted his face to the darkened part of the sky. A sliver of moon and two stars presented themselves, a perfect canopy for what he had in mind. At the mansion, torches and extra lighting pushed back the encroaching dark, leaving it to envelop him and Eden, protecting them from prying eyes. "Come."

She offered no argument. At the boat, she followed his lead, removing her heels as he took off his shoes.

Leaning against him, she asked, "Are you going to take me for a ride?"

"Like none you've ever had." Arm around her waist, he directed her onto the boat and to the sunbathing deck.

She turned a slow circle, the unclipped side of her hair and dress buffeted by the wind. From this vantage point, the lawn they'd crossed was plainly visible though palms and shrubs hid the checkerboard area where the party continued. Voices and music rose and fell. Bulbs from cameras flashed. Eden regarded the activity then met his gaze.

He smelled her perfume and his own lust. It goaded him to hurry, to tear off her dress, to take her quickly without emotion or thought. His growing love prevented it. Well prepared for the moment, he unfurled the foam mattress, placing a soft blanket atop it, anchoring the ends with hooks so the breeze couldn't blow it away.

Joining her, he cupped her face as his mother had earlier and searched her eyes. Seeing her love, sensing it, he kissed her gently. Her body stiffened, telling him she hadn't expected such a tender response. He gave her even more, tending to her heart and soul as well as to her body. Although she tensed again, fighting the intimacy, her struggle didn't last. She released her weight into him, her arms hanging limply at his sides, her hands touching his hips.

He found her zipper and lowered it. The sides of her dress fell away. A breath of wind caught the edge of her skirt, pushing it up. He eased back and slid the garment past her black lacy bra and thong. The gown rippled over her hips and floated to her feet.

Submissive, she said nothing and made no move while he unhooked her bra and untied the side strings on her thong, removing each piece carefully, exposing her nudity. The breeze picked up, her nipples tightened in response. Lightly, he touched his lips to her tips and areolas. Eden answered by arching her back. She cradled his cheek.

Turning his face into her palm, he kissed it in a brief farewell, a necessary action so he could undress. Quickly nude, he rolled their clothes into a ball and tossed them inside the cabin, safe from the wind.

Around them the air whistled, the water hissed, the guests partied. Here, there was a momentary silence as he took her in his arms. Her breath stopped and so did his. They sank to the mattress, their bodies saying what words alone could not—how much they wanted each other.

She allowed herself this instant in time, holding nothing back, giving all she could and expecting the same. Always the alpha male, Rafe met her demanding kisses with patience and respect, resolute they'd follow his tender pace. Tears kept stinging Eden's eyes, some from happiness, a lot from sorrow. She loved him too much. Emotions this intense never led to anything good.

In direct contradiction to her thoughts, he slid his cock into her sheath, the tight fit awakening sensations she'd buried for a lifetime—the need for closeness, to have someone cherish her, to know a man's protection.

Willingly, her lips parted to his tongue. Content that he'd filled her completely, he pumped his sex into hers. His leisurely pace said they had all night. There was no rush.

She wanted to believe it. However, in life there were no promises kept, no assurances of forever. Circumstances changed, people behaved unpredictably. Her hands tightened on his biceps. Beneath her thumb, she felt the cruel scar on his arm. Her mind recorded the lumpy skin so she wouldn't forget it. She inhaled deeply, catching his scent, needing to remember it too, along with his mischievous smile and

his penetrating gaze as they neared climax. He appeared pleasantly tortured. Seconds after she reached orgasm, his crested and he found peace.

Clinging to him, she licked the sweat on his shoulder and suckled his skin so hard he noticed.

He turned his face into her neck. His deep voice vibrated against it. "Are you giving me a hickey?"

Her words held a lightness she didn't feel. "Just keep your shirt on and no one will ever know."

"Fuck that and everyone else." He maneuvered his hips so his spent penis would remain inside her. "I like us nude. I like us like this."

So did she. But it couldn't last.

They napped and made love again missionary style so they could watch each other's response. As Rafe rested, Eden studied the countless stars scattered above them, afraid to look his way. Each glance bonded her to him even more. She listened to the party sounds. The teens had quieted somewhat with only an occasional burst of conversation or laughter. Her heart continued to beat wildly. Blood pounded in her ears. They'd reached the end of another day. Each second drove them closer to the last moments of their contract and her goodbye.

On a brief groan, Rafe snuggled closer, his hand running over her breasts, unsure as to which it wanted to fondle. "It's getting cold out here, no?"

Her body was fevered, the back of her neck damp. She whispered, "You want to go inside the boat?" There, she wouldn't notice the deepening night or the dawn. There, time would seem to stand still at least for a little longer.

Rolling onto his back, he stretched and yawned with abandon then sighed. "No. It's time to go home."

During the drive to her house, Rafe listened to her comments about the party and his family, how wonderful both were. She asked endless questions about Victor's role in the business, where he'd met Nina, how long their parents had been married, what Anna Marie might want to do with her life. Never did she allow the silence to linger. Always she brought up another topic having nothing to do with them in an effort to avoid intimacy.

On the walkway to her house, he stopped to kiss her deeply, unhurriedly, his actions proclaiming his love. She reacted as she had on his boat, wanting to resist, unable to. Holding her close, stirred by the scent of her skin and its warmth, he glanced at her neighbor's house. Was Trish at one of the darkened windows? Did she have binoculars? Would she try to read his lips? Not wanting the woman privy to their private moment or anything he planned to say tonight, he ushered Eden into the house.

She tossed her evening bag on a side table, kicked off her heels and backed away from him. Her smile was strained, her mood deliberately casual. "How about a snack or a beer?" Walking backward, she crossed the living room toward the kitchen. "I think we have some *churros* left and at least one tart. If you'd like a meringue I could make it. Or how about—"

He interrupted, his voice gentle and patient despite the thudding of his heart. "Eden. Stop. Please. The only thing I want is to talk."

Immediately, her expression changed. The fake smile fell away. In its place was caution. "Why?" She frowned. "About what?" She advanced a step then retreated again, bumping into the sofa's arm. Her head swung to it then returned, though she didn't meet his gaze. "Did I do something wrong at the party? Did your parents say something? Did Victor? I thought Nina and I hit it off pretty well. She's very nice. And her daughters are adorable."

Rafe made no comment, letting her talk all she wanted, refusing to let her draw him into a heated discussion about his mother's feelings for her or whether his relatives found the gem on her nostril disturbing. No matter what he said, she would disagree and fight. She wanted an argument so he'd leave. She'd be alone then, just as she'd predicted, just as she'd been accustomed to with her mother's abandonment and her grandmother's death. It would be lonely but safe. He couldn't hurt her as the others had.

An ache settled in the base of his throat for the frightened child she'd been and the guarded woman she'd become. For the first time he feared no seduction, no reassurance would break through. She'd been through too much and trusted so little. Most men would have simply given up. Rafe could not. Tenderness flooded through him, the sensation so deep it hurt. He forced himself to wait until she wound down.

Her unsteady breaths filled the silence between them. She looked scared, tired, sad. "Am I talking to myself?" she challenged, though the bite had gone from her tone. Her voice sounded young, fragile. "Are you going to stand there all night?" Meeting his eyes, she frowned. "Don't you have anything to say?"

He let several moments pass to make certain she'd hear him. He spoke with more courage than he felt. "I love you."

Her face, already pale, went white. Tears filled her eyes, as did longing, softening her expression. Rafe's heart missed a beat at the transformation.

It didn't last. She shook her head as if to clear it or to deny him what they both wanted. "No you don't."

He didn't argue. In her face and eyes, he'd seen the truth of what he'd said. She knew what was in his heart and wouldn't accept it.

His belly hurt, but his resolve hardened. He'd settle for nothing less than her commitment to him. To hell with this fucking arrangement. Casual sex wasn't what he needed. He wanted her in their bed each night and their kitchen each morning without doubt or reservations. "You don't love me?" he asked.

A tear slipped from her right lid and wiggled down her cheek to the side of her mouth. Stalling, she licked it away.

He waited. If it took until dawn, he'd wait for her answer.

Her mouth trembled. "I don't want to love anyone. I can't."

Rafe stepped closer and asked again, "You don't love me?"

More tears spilled from her eyes. Her shoulders tensed. "Why are you doing this? Why can't we just have a good time and then go our separate ways? That's what's going to happen anyway. Nothing is forever! Every fucking thing ends, Rafe!"

As loud as she'd been, he was as quiet. "Do you love me, Eden?"

She cried, "You know I enjoy your company and sleeping with you. You know what I think of your culinary talents."

He warned himself to remain patient and calm when he wanted to shout, to shake her until she revealed her heart then protect her from all the sorrow life could bring. "Answer me. Yes or no. Do you love me?"

Her face scrunched. Arms crossed, she lowered her head.

Frustration and hurt he'd never known consumed Rafe, making him want to be mean and say things he'd never be able to take back. Instead, he pulled his key from his pants pocket and spoke in an indifferent voice to hide his defeat. "Victor will come for my things tomorrow. Please have them ready for him."

Eden's face lifted. Panic at him leaving warred with her fear of asking him to stay, of admitting her love.

He backed toward the door slowly, hoping for what now seemed impossible, stalling as she had. What a pair they made. "I'll contact my attorney in the morning. She'll arrange for my investment in your business, a B&B or a restaurant, whatever you decide. You've more than proven your talent and I want to give you this chance."

"No. I can't accept it."

Anger flared, killing the remainder of his restraint. "Then don't sign the contract. Tear it up. Burn it." He made his voice hard. "*Adios*, Eden. I won't contact you ever again." Without a backward glance, he made himself leave her house and her life.

Chapter Thirteen

On Eden's third knock, Trish opened the front door. Behind her, Chris ran his fingers through his thick blond hair and made eye contact. On seeing Eden's tear-dampened face, his boyish features went from sleepy to alert. He muted the TV, left the sofa and backed away with the speed of a man fleeing a fire. "I have a ton of work to do. Babe," he called out to Trish from the hall. "I'll be in the study."

She nodded. Arm around Eden's waist, she led her to the velour sofa and turned on the table lamp. "What happened?"

Eden sank to the cushion, gripped her knees and rocked, wanting to run but she didn't know where to go to find lasting solace. The only place that came to mind was Rafe's arms and he couldn't promise forever, no one could. She shook with her newest sob, hearing his goodbye, his promise never to contact her. Oh god. The pain in her chest was so fierce she couldn't breathe.

"Honey." Trish sat cross-legged on the carpet next to the sofa, her hand on Eden's foot. "Was someone mean to you at the party?"

She forced down a swallow and shook her head. "They were all very sweet. Most of them tried not to stare at my nose stud."

Trish cleared her throat. "That's nice." With hesitation in her voice, she asked, "Where's Rafe?"

"Gone."

She squeezed Eden's toes as though she'd already guessed as much. "Why? What happened? Did you two have a fight?"

Eden covered her face with her hands. "I tried. He wouldn't get pissed, at least not until the end."

"Uh-huh." She squeezed again. "The end of what?"

"The fight I kept trying to start." Elbows on her legs, she pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. "It's like I couldn't stop myself. I kept baiting him, trying to get him to argue, to get him to leave. All night he'd been so tender, so devoted. When we made love on his yacht, he —"

"Whoa," Trish interrupted. "Back up. He has a yacht?"

Tears dripped from her chin. "He told me he loves me."

"Oh my god." She squeezed Eden's ankle. "He said that while you were out on his yacht?"

"No!" She dropped her hands and made fists. "At my house just now when we came back!"

"Okay, sorry, don't get upset."

Eden laughed. A new sob cut it short. "I'm already upset. Not at you," she added quickly. "At how this turned out. I didn't want this to fucking happen. All I asked for was to have some great sex, prove my talent, save my grandmother's house then be able to move on." She pounded her thighs with her fists. "He kept asking me if I loved him. I kept avoiding the question. The answer would not come out of my mouth. When he said he was leaving and that his brother Victor would come by tomorrow for his things, I wanted to throw up. I kept thinking, 'say something, tell him how you feel—beg him to stay!'" Her fists stalled above her thighs. Panting, she sagged into the sofa. "I wouldn't allow myself to beg. I kept telling myself that this was inevitable, it would end like some day, him leaving, me pleading, so why not let it happen now? This early in the relationship wouldn't be so bad, right? Later, the hurt would really kill me. I couldn't take it. I won't."

Trish cradled her knee.

For some reason, the gesture angered Eden, compelling her to explain further. "I have to protect myself. No one else is going to do it for me."

Trish didn't comment.

Eden frowned. "You think Rafe will, don't you?"

"I don't know him. You do. What do you think?"

She closed her eyes, not wanting to have another thought about anything. Willfully, her mind brought her back to Rafe's face when he admitted his love. Never had Eden seen such naked emotion, such vulnerability. He'd known she'd been trying to push him away since they'd left the party. It was evident in his pained expression. And yet, he hadn't let it stop him. Deep down, she knew he should have. "He's a good man. He deserves better than what I could give him."

Trish made a face. "Bullshit. You'd die for someone you loved. And if you ever have a child, that little girl or boy will be the luckiest kid on the planet, because you'll be with them all the way until your last breath."

Eden rested her chin on her chest. Tears roughened her voice. "You're not making this any easier."

Trish squeezed Eden's knee. "You want me to tell you what to do?"

"Please."

"Will you do it?"

Her shoulders shook with her sad laughter. "Probably not."

Trish let a few minutes pass then asked, "Want to spend the night here?"

More than anything. She'd have several beers or a bottle of wine, lie on the sofa and forget the last weeks of her life until morning came and it all returned with the pain beginning anew. This time, there wouldn't be any escape. Might as well face it now. Sniffling, she ran her hand beneath her nose. "I appreciate the offer, but I can't." Afraid

she'd change her mind, Eden pushed from the sofa and looked down at her friend. "I have to pack Rafe's things. Victor will be by for them in the morning."

Trish grabbed Eden's ankle, keeping her from leaving. "So, you're really not going to see him again?"

Her throat convulsed with a new sob. She forced it down and said the only thing she could. "Sorry I interrupted you and Chris. Thanks for listening."

An hour passed before she could bring herself to go to her bedroom. With the curtains pulled back, she regarded Rafe's things in the faint light coming from the street lamps. Somehow, the shadows made it easier to clear this space of him, to believe she was doing the right thing by purging him from her heart. She wondered how long this misery would last. A few months? A year? Would she ever forget him?

Her heart and body said no, in agreement at last. But she couldn't back down. She believed what she'd said at Trish's house—he deserved better than what she could give. He should love a woman who embraced intimacy, who trusted in marriage, who wanted kids more than anything else.

You'd die for someone you loved, Trish had said. So true. But the nagging worry behind the emotions, the fear it wouldn't last would poison everything else. Best to move on. To get his things ready for Victor's arrival tomorrow.

Messier than she, Rafe had left his clothes strewn about, leaving his shorts on the bathroom floor. Two pairs of Jockeys lay on the nightstand. His black tee hung from the arm of the rocker. So easily he'd made this room his. She smiled at his male arrogance and her heart tore a little more. Lifting his shirt, Eden ordered herself to ball up the garment and pack it with the rest of his clothes hanging in her closet.

The man in the moon smiled at her as she approached. She wanted to give him the finger but didn't have the strength. Moving the beading aside, she caught the scent of Rafe's freshly washed garments. She sagged against the jamb, thinking it wouldn't be right to pack them with the stuff he'd already worn. If she was going to run a struggling B&B, with that being a given since she wouldn't accept his investment, she should at least do his laundry as she would for any other guest. Backing away, she went through the bedroom and bath, grabbing his clothes. With the pile to her chest, she stopped short of the hall, a wave of exhaustion overwhelming her along with the stark reality of what happened tonight.

She'd hurt him deeply with her refusal to admit her feelings. He'd been angrier with her than she believed possible. He wasn't a man to beg or to equivocate. He'd given her a chance and now he was out of her life just as she'd predicted, just as she designed.

Her legs folded. She sank to the hardwood floor, her breath coming in gasps. Unable to get enough air or to slow her racing heart, she slumped over, using his clothes as a pillow.

The fragrance of his body and sex clung to the fabric. Burying her face in it, she closed her eyes and answered his question at last, whispering the words. "I love you more than I've ever loved anyone." Not even her devotion to her grandmother or the bond she'd always wanted with her mother exceeded it. And that was too dangerous. With him, she'd lose all control and become a woman she no longer recognized.

With him, she already had.

Teeth sunk into her lower lip, she wept.

* * * * *

"Run that by me again," Barbara Swartz said.

Rafe stood at the window of his home office, his gaze on the yachts and sailboats dotting the endless expanse of water. How he wished to be out there now, fleeing his fury, his agony at how things turned out last night. "You heard me the first time, Barbara." He glanced over at his attorney, a forty-eight-year-old woman on her second facelift. This one had raised her blonde brows so much she had a look of perpetual surprise.

"That I did." She tapped her pen against the side of her yellow legal pad. "But don't you think it's a bit generous to allow five years before Ms. DeCarlo has to make any payment on the investment you're providing?"

He didn't want Eden to fail. He had to give her the world even if she refused to share it with him. His fingers curled into fists, aching to punch something, to pulverize it. "Make it ten."

"What?"

He ignored her question and looked past, seeing Victor approach the arched doorway. His brother carried Rafe's duffel bags. Anger spiked, coupled with renewed frustration and sorrow. Eden had actually returned his things? She hadn't argued to keep them, forcing him to return to her house so she could see him? So what was she doing now? Preparing her house for strangers so she could serve as their maid? Damn her.

Like a little boy who couldn't control himself, Rafe wanted to call her and shout, to demand she admit her feelings for him. Like a foolish man in love, he needed to ask his brother about her. How had she looked this afternoon? Had she slept after he'd left? He surely hadn't. Had she said anything about him? Had she asked how he was?

Victor lifted the bags, curling his arms as if he held barbells. "Do you want me to put these in your bedroom?"

"Leave them here. Barbara, I need a moment with my brother."

Burdened with four-inch heels and thighs sore from liposuction, she groaned to a standing position and tottered out of the spacious high-ceilinged room.

Rafe went to Victor and spoke in a subdued voice. "How is she? How did she look? What did she say?"

His brother dropped the bags on the antique Persian rug covering the copper-colored pavers. "I didn't speak with her. I didn't even see her."

"What?" Surprise, pain and fury rasped his voice. "She left my things outside her front door?"

"No. When I rang her bell, a skinny, pale woman with red hair answered. She gave me your bags."

Rafe wrapped his fingers around his brother's upper arm and squeezed. "Why did Trish answer the door? Where was Eden? What did Trish say about her?"

Victor rested his hand on Rafe's. "She didn't mention Eden at all, though I think she wanted to." His mustache turned down with his sad expression. "I'm so sorry matters ended like this. I hope you know that."

Nodding at the kindness, Rafe returned to the window and kept his back to his brother, not wanting the man to see the anguish in his eyes. "Please send Barbara back in."

"Would you like for me or Mama to make you some lunch?"

"No. And please don't discuss what happened between me and Eden with her or Papa. I don't want to talk about it. I just want to get on with business."

Three hours later, Rafe finished with Barbara. During their discussion, his mother and then his father walked past his office, sneaking peeks to see if he was all right. He suppressed a sigh, his eyes pleading with them to return to their home or their work and leave him be.

Twice, his mother called his cell phone, her voice gay, pretending nothing was wrong, asking what he'd like her to make him for a snack or for dinner. Always, she thought food would make things better. In Cuba, there'd been so little to eat, a filled belly signified happiness and hope.

Not any longer. Rafe doubted he'd enjoy eating for a very long time. As graciously as he could, he declined and asked her not to come to the main house again. He needed to be alone.

Sagged in his office chair, Rafe stared at his cell phone, desperate to call Eden, to simply hear her voice and know she was all right. He keyed in her number, listened to two rings and broke the connection, not knowing what to say except the truth she didn't want to face.

Perhaps he should go to her house unannounced, lying that he couldn't find his Rolex, explaining he might have left it in her bedroom, bath or in the guesthouse. While they looked, he'd brush her fingers with his, touch her shoulder, take her in his arms. Once they were in bed – and surely they'd end up there – he could begin again with his seduction, convincing her they had to be together.

He pushed out of his chair then sank back into the soft leather, wondering if she'd believe his lie, wondering if she'd even be home, wondering why he was stalling. It wasn't like him. He went after what he wanted, and by god he wanted Eden.

Taking off his Rolex, he dropped it in the top drawer of his desk and flinched with the first ring of his cell phone. Was she calling him? Had she seen his number on the display? He opened his cell. "Yes."

"Are you still at home?" Victor asked.

He slumped over his desk. "Of course. Why?"

"Are you hungry yet?"

Rafe gritted his teeth. "Did Mama ask you to call?"

"She's worried about you. Don't be angry with her."

"For being worried about me? Of course not. I have to go. I'm tired. I want to sleep. Tell her that, will you? And please don't call again tonight." He closed his phone and left his office.

On the upstairs landing, he stopped. The aroma of *croquetas*, *empanadas* and *pastelitos* drifted up the steps. Hands on the ornate banister, he lowered his head and groaned softly, "Oh Mama, why tonight of all nights?" She was in his kitchen, preparing his favorite treats and had told Victor to call to smooth the way for her. Good manners would demand he eat everything she'd cooked and converse with her for an hour or more until she was certain he was in good spirits. Only when she left would he be able to go to Eden's.

Unless he was honest and said he had to leave to see the woman he loved.

Two at a time, he went down the stairs and hurried to the kitchen, his mind rehearsing his speech so his mother wouldn't question and delay him further. Rounding the doorway, he opened his mouth. No words came out. His step paused. His pulse leapt. He stared.

Plated on one of the counters was the food he'd smelled. On the mahogany cabinets to the left were the words *I'm So Sorry*—each letter written in a white flour paste, surely two feet tall. In three foot-high letters on the cabinets to the right were the words *I DO Love You*.

Rafe's head whipped from the cabinets to Eden. She wore nothing more than her chef's coat and black high heels. The brush she'd used to write her messages dropped from her hand, clacking briefly as it hit the dark amber tiles. Her lower lip trembled and her eyes filled with tears.

Seeing him again jolted Eden's heart. Its frantic beating hurt her chest and jiggled her voice. For someone who'd been so tongue-tied the last time they spoke, she couldn't talk quickly enough now. "Please forgive me for not saying what I should have last night. I'm so scared. I don't want to be, but I am. I'm asking you, if you can, to be patient with me so I can be the woman you deserve. I'll give you everything. I won't

hold back." To prove it, she unbuttoned her chef's coat, tossing it on the floor, revealing her nudity. She stepped closer. "I want you, Rafe. From the beginning, I've loved you. Please give me another chance."

In his haste to reach her, he knocked an empty pot and several cooking spoons from the food island. They clanged against the floor, the jarring ring lasting for seconds. Eden inhaled sharply as he took her in his arms, hugging her so hard she could barely breathe, his actions saying he would never let her go. A conclusion she'd reached after Victor picked up his things and Trish lectured, forcing her to understand the magnitude of what she'd done, a loss so acute it made her physically ill and brave. No matter her fear, she couldn't give him up.

Rafe was a man who honored family and commitment, who knew nothing mattered in life as much as love. Without him, she didn't want to survive. With him, she'd build a life based on trust and devotion.

Hands on her hips, he lifted her to the food island. She grabbed his shirt, pulling him between her legs, holding him close with her calves against his ass. "I can't live without you, Rafe."

"Usted mejor no trata." You better not try. He continued in Spanish, saying how much he needed her, that his world was incomplete if she wasn't at his side. Her eyes clouded with more tears when he confessed he'd been on his way to get her, stopping when he'd noticed the aroma of finger foods, thinking his mother was in the kitchen.

With her palms on each side of his head, Eden kissed his temples, ears and beard-roughened cheeks, unable to taste him enough. In between suckles and licks, she explained, "In a way she was. Your mother told me to make these dishes for you."

Rafe kissed her savagely, bruising her lips and his. Minutes later, he tore his mouth away. "Mama said that. When? Why?"

"I called her. Take off your shirt. I want to see your hickey. I want to give you another."

Hurriedly, he discarded the garment, his hand on the back of her head as she sucked his shoulder. Crude sounds pumped from him, saying he liked it. "Why did you call my mother?"

Eden thumbed away the saliva she'd left and smiled at the red stain on his flesh, how she'd marked him again. "I needed the code to get past your gate. I told her I love you. She said, 'Of course you do'."

Rafe laughed, joy releasing tears from his eyes. "You must forgive Mama's devotion to me and try to accept it."

"I plan to exceed it. And Victor's. Your mother said she'd tell him to call to make certain you stayed here so I could feed you since it was my fault you hadn't eaten all day."

"She said that?"

"Not so bluntly, but I got the drift. I apologized profusely and told her I'd make you fat."

"What was her response?"

"She wants you to do that to me."

Rafe studied her. His hand went to her belly. "Do you want that?" he asked, plainly hesitant of her response.

She whispered, "With you beside me, with the support of your family, I'll do everything I can to be a great mother."

His mouth captured and owned hers, the same as his hands trailing over her breasts and down her belly to her cunt.

They both knew how eager it was for his cock, how needy his sex was of her channel, but he made no move to take her. Instead, he suckled and caressed each part of her body as if reacquainting himself with its contours, enjoying his carnal feast.

At last, he entered her, his sex penetrating hers, stretching, possessing.

They made love for hours, parting only to enjoy a bite of her *croquetas*, *pastelitos*, *empanadas*, and to discuss tonight's plans and those for years to come, their bodies and words proving how deep, dark and delicious their future together was going to be.

The End

About the Author

Tina Donahue is a multi-published novelist in contemporary and historical romance. *Booklist*, *Publisher's Weekly* and *Romantic Times* have praised her work; she has reached finals and/or placed in numerous RWA-sponsored contests. She was the editor of an award-winning Midwestern newspaper, worked in Story Direction for a Hollywood production company and is currently the Managing Editor for a global business document concern.

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