



*Lynda
Sandoval*

*Look
of
Love*

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Lynda Sandoval

AN [*e-reads*]BOOK

New York, NY

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*For my Mom,
Neva Elaine Sandoval,
who has supported every dream I've ever entertained.
And in loving memory of
my Dad, Carmel Enrique Sandoval, 1937–1989,
and my Grandma, Maria Amada Perea Sandoval,
1911–1997,
who both would have been so proud.*

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One

Esme Jaramillo wiped her damp palms down the side seams of her slacks and wondered, briefly, if the taupe pantsuit her friends had insisted she wear had been the proper choice for her first — and probably only — television appearance. They'd fussed through a mountain of clothes in her hotel room that morning, while she sat in the corner and reviewed her notes, amused by their fashion plate antics. She supposed the tailored silk ensemble they'd settled on exuded a conservative enough image to offset her controversial topic: human cloning.

Now, if only she could be cloned from Jennifer Lopez for this talk show appearance, life would be just peachy. A smirk lifted one corner of her mouth as she glanced around the cramped make-up studio backstage of the set of *The Barry Stillman Show*.

Four beige walls, adorned with framed photos of previous guests, surrounded the beauty parlor chair she occupied. A filing cabinet claimed one corner, with a CD player perched on top. Rolling metal racks behind her held a mishmash of garments, perhaps for guests who had fashion emergencies before they were due on stage. Along with the rescue clothes hung a few smocks smeared with makeup streaks. Before her stood a long counter top stacked with more pots and jars and bottles of cosmetics than she'd ever seen, and above the counter was a huge mirror which framed the reflection of her un-made-up face.

The hot bulbs circling the mirror glared off the lenses of her large wire-framed eyeglasses and melted the creamy cosmetics piled before her. If the makeup lights were hot, Esme could only imagine what it would feel like beneath the strong stage lights in front of All Those People. She shuddered, suddenly nervous. At least her parents and

her best friends, Lilly and Pilar, would be out there for moral support. She reminded herself to look for their smiling faces in the audience the minute she got out on stage.

Speaking of faces. Esme pushed her glasses atop her head and leaned forward to squint at her own mug. *Ugh.*

Bland. Boring. That's how she looked.

It was *always* how she looked. And her hair — she twisted her head from side to side and arranged the limp, shoulder-length locks. She sat back in the chair until her reflection was nothing but a myopic blur, and sighed. Oh well. No one expected female scientists to be attractive, anyway. Still, she was grateful a professional would be applying her makeup for the show. A woman could be vain once in her life, couldn't she?

She glanced at her watch and wondered where the makeup person was. The producer had stuck her head in the room earlier and told Esme she'd go on in fifteen minutes. That didn't leave them much time.

As if on cue, the door opened, and in walked — Esme plunked her glasses back on the bridge of her nose and turned. Her breath caught. Lord, he had to be a Greek god. Broad-shouldered and bronze-skinned, the man wore faded, form-fitting Levi's, low-heeled black boots, and a tight black T-shirt emblazoned with *The Barry Stillman Show* in red lettering. And, if her mama only knew what images the man's shiny black ponytail brought to her mind, there'd be a chorus of Hail Marys uttered in her soul's defense within minutes.

"Dr. Jaramillo?"

"Yes?" Her hand fluttered to her throat.

"I'm Gavino Mendez, your makeup artist," said the man, his deep voice smooth as creme de menthe. "You're the brilliant scientist I've been hearing so much about, yes?" He flashed her a movie star smile and extended his long-fingered hand toward her for a handshake.

Esme nodded slowly, ignoring the heated flush she felt creeping up her neck at his compliment. Disconcerted, she glanced from his face to his hand, then back at his face before she did her part to complete the handshake.

"*Dios mio,*" she whispered more than spoke, as his warm palm slid against hers. If men like Gavino Mendez were commonplace in Chicago, she'd clone the whole darn city and become the hero of the female population. The thought curved her mouth into a smile.

Gavino released her hand and asked, "Nervous?" He turned his back to switch the CD player on, filling the room with hot Celia Cruz tunes, then began assembling brushes and pencils and pots of color, his focus on the tools of his trade.

"A-a little," Esme admitted, content just to watch him move about the close quarters they shared. His movements were skilled and confident, masculine but graceful. This was probably her one chance in life to have a man like Gavino Mendez lay his hands on her, and she was thrilled by the prospect.

"It always seems to hit people once I come in to do their makeup." He winked at her.

Esme's heart plunged before snapping back up to lodge in her throat. That wink should be classified as a lethal weapon.

"You have my sympathy," he continued, seemingly oblivious to her admiration. "I much prefer remaining behind the scenes."

Esme pulled herself out of the hunk-induced stupor and cleared her throat. "I've, ah, never been on television before." *He probably knows that, silly*, she chastised herself. This focused male attention was rattling her composure. She wasn't used to it. "It's not too often a scientist has such an opportunity. I'm really very flattered." She nudged her glasses up with the knuckle of her pointer finger. "My parents and friends are in the audience." She cast her gaze down briefly, not wanting to appear too prideful.

Gavino peered at her, his expression darkening for an instant before he turned away. Esme wondered if she'd said something wrong, but the moment quickly passed.

"Tell me about your research, Esme — may I call you that?"

"Of course."

He faced her, crossed his arms over his chest, then leaned back against the counter, a position which accentuated the sculpted muscles in his arms. The bright lights shadowed the angles of his jawline and glinted off the single diamond stud in his earlobe. Esme forced her mind from its slack-jawed awe of man and back onto his question.

"Research? Research. Yes. Human cloning, that's what I research." She laughed lightly, shaking her head. "And, well, it's a touchy subject."

"How so?"

"Lots of moral and religious implications. My grandmother prays daily for my soul. She thinks my colleagues and I are trying to play

God. If I ever actually clone a human being, I'll probably be excommunicated from the church." Esme ran her fingers through her hair and shrugged one shoulder.

Gavino chuckled, holding several different colored lipsticks next to her cheek. "Sounds like my grandmother. Let me guess. Catholic?"

"But, of course," she told him, her tone wry. "So, I continue to do the research, but I feel guilty about it."

He leaned his head back and laughed, giving Esme an excellent view of his muscle-corded neck, his straight white teeth. *Talk, Esme. Stay on track.*

"We're not necessarily trying to create people, though," she blurted, averting her gaze from his seductive Adam's Apple. "There are a lot of other medically plausible reasons to clone human beings, but it's still a little too sci-fi for most people to swallow." She wondered when Gavino would get to the part where those long fingers of his touched her face. She was prepped and ready to file away that particular sensory memory for frequent replays.

"Well, I'm sure there are medical reasons. But, it *is* kind of a scary thought, having little duplicates of yourself running around," Gavino conceded. He inclined his head. "Forgive my ignorance if that's a misconception. I don't know much about cloning."

"Don't apologize. There's no doubt Hollywood has put a skewed impression out there. It'll be hard for the stodgy science community to overcome."

Gavino made a rumblingly agreement sound deep in his throat, then said, "Take your glasses off for me, Esme."

Anything else? she wanted to ask him. Her cheeks heated. She didn't usually have such wanton thoughts in the midst of a normal conversation. Then again, she'd never had a conversation with Gavino Mendez before.

She watched, mesmerized, as he picked up a large makeup brush and dipped it into one of the containers. Poofs of face powder launched into the air around the brush, tiny particles dancing in the light. He raised his eyebrows at her, reminding her of his request. *Request? Glasses. Oh, yeah.*

"I'm sorry," she murmured. She removed her frames and folded them in her lap, then closed her eyes while Gavino tickled her face with the powder brush. The sweet fragrance of the talc reminded her

fondly of playing dress-up as a child, back when she still had hope she'd grow up beautiful. She wanted to smile, but didn't, fearing she'd get powder-caked teeth.

When Gavino finished, she put her glasses back on and waved her hands to fend off the cloud that still hung in the air. "I just hope the audience is open-minded about the topic and not hostile with me."

Gavino stilled. "I . . . uh, yeah."

A thick pause ensued, prompting a seedling of discomfort to sprout in Esme's middle. Was she missing something here?

"Well, you'll knock 'em dead, I'm sure."

"I hope you're right."

He made careful work of capping the powder container and lining up the compacts before looking back at her. "Can I ask you something, Esme?"

"Sure."

"Do you ever . . . watch *The Barry Stillman Show*?"

"Oh, you would ask me that." She twisted her mouth to the side apologetically. "I'm ashamed to say that I've never seen it. I just don't have much time for television."

Gavino pressed his lips into a thin line and nodded.

"Why?" Esme asked.

"I'm . . . no reason. Just wondering."

It sure sounded like there was a reason behind his "no reason," but Esme didn't want to push the man. Maybe he was just having a bad day. A fight with his wife at the breakfast table, perhaps. An ugly pang struck Esme at the thought, and her gaze fell to his left hand. No ring. No ring mark. She sighed with relief. Like it mattered. *Get a life, Esme.*

"I must say, I'm impressed, though," she told him. "I didn't know any of the talk shows still dealt with legitimate topics these days."

Gavino didn't comment, so Esme went on. "If it's not people beating each other up or transvestites in love triangles, it never seems to make it to daytime TV. At least, that's what I thought until I was asked on the show." Esme glanced at her reflection, which jolted her back to the matter at hand. She pressed her fingers to her cheeks and pulled down slightly. "Aren't you going to do something with my face? I look awful."

Gavino moved in between her and the mirror and spread his legs until he'd lowered himself to Esme's eye level. Esme folded her hands

in her lap as her heart thunk-thunked in her chest at his proximity. Wasn't breathing supposed to be automatic? she wondered, as she reminded herself to pull in air.

Gavino reached for her face slowly. His fingers danced along her cheekbones, her temples, then he smoothed the pad of his thumb over her chin. "No, Dr. Jaramillo, you don't look awful. You look anything but awful." His voice was a gentle caress. "You look beautiful just as you are."

Her heart triple-timed. "Well . . . thank you, but — "

"Remember that." He touched the end of her nose. "Okay?"

She frowned, a little confused by his words and spellbound by his touch. "I — sure. But, I don't get it. Does that mean you aren't going to make up my face?"

The look he gave her was almost apologetic, Esme decided. "Right. I'm not going to make up your face. But, it's okay. You don't need warpaint"

So much for her moment of vanity. Disappointment drizzled over Esme before she shrugged it off and decided Gavino was trying to tactfully tell her it wouldn't make much difference. Splashing color on her features would have probably just drawn attention to their plainness. Eh, well, it didn't matter, and she wasn't going to pout about it. At least he'd touched her face. She inhaled the heady mingled scents of makeup and heated masculine skin, and decided a change of subject was in order. "How long have you done this kind of work, Gavino?" Was that relief she saw on his beautiful face? Why?

"Three long years I've worked on this show." He leaned against the counter again, hands spread wide and braced on the edge, and crossed one foot over the other.

"You make it sound like a jail sentence."

He tilted his head to the side in a gesture of indifference. "It pays the bills, but my first love . . ." Doubt crossed his features. "You want to hear all this?"

"Of course" Esme assured him. "Your first love?"

"Is painting," he finished.

Esme watched in wonder as the smile lit up his face. His gaze grew distant, dreamy. She hadn't thought he could get much better looking. Boy, had she underestimated him. "Warpaint?" she teased, glancing back at her bare face in the mirror.

He chuckled. "No, not face painting. Oil painting. Art."

"An artist. Hmmm. I'm not surprised." He had the hands of an artist, hands that made her wish she were a fresh, new canvas ripe for his attention. She swallowed. "It's wonderful, Gavino. What do you paint?"

"Later." She watched a muscle tick in his jaw for several moments as his eyes grew more serious. With a quick glance at the door and back, Gavino squatted before her and took her hand in both of his. "Esme, listen to me. About the show — "

Before Gavino could finish, the harried producer knocked sharply, then opened the door a crack and poked her head in. Tendrils had sprung free of her lopsided French twist into which she'd stuck two pencils and apparently forgotten them. "Dr. Jaramillo, time to go on."

Gavino stood and moved away from her, sticking his hands into his back pockets. Regret socked Esme in the stomach, and she pinned him with her gaze. What had he been about to say? Absurd as it was, she didn't want to leave him. He was so comfortable to talk to, and so easy on the eyes. Men like him didn't usually give her me time of day. "I — "

"Now, Dr. Jaramillo. Please," the producer urged.

"Go on, Esme," Gavino told her, treating her to another devastating wink.

"What were you going to tell me?"

"Nothing. Just, break a leg," he said, his voice low. "That means good luck." He flashed her a thumbs-up. "I'll see you again in a few minutes."

She looked at him curiously as she got out of the chair and smoothed down the front of her suit. A few minutes? Hope spiked inside her. "You will?"

"I mean, I'll watch you on the monitors."

"Oh." Long awkward pause. "Well. Thank you," she told him, fluffing her hair with trembling fingers and stuffing back the wave of disappointment. What did she expect from the guy, a pledge of undying love? With one last smile for Gavino and a deep breath for courage, Esme turned and trailed the producer from the room.

"Damnit!" Gavino exclaimed as soon as the slim, softspoken professor was out of the makeup studio. He slumped into the chair and held his forehead in his hands as guilt assailed his gut. When the door

squeaked open, he looked up to find the stage manager, Arlon, peering in at him.

Arlon raised a brow. "What's up?"

"That poor woman has no idea what she's in for," Gavino muttered. "She honestly thinks she's going to talk about human cloning."

"Ah, you soft touch." Arlon snorted, leaning against the door jamb with his clipboard cradled in his beefy arms. The remote radio headset nestled on his bald head looked like it had grown there, it was so much a part of the man. "Anyone who agrees to come onto *The Barry Stillman Show* deserves what she gets. You'd have to live in a cave to think this show bore any resemblance to legitimacy."

"She's never *seen* it, Arlon." Gavino lunged to his feet and stalked across the small room. He punched the stop button on the CD player then braced his palms against the wall and hung his head. Esme Jaramillo had infiltrated his domain all of what — ten minutes? And already his music reminded him of her. He could still smell her lavender scent in the air.

God, he felt like a heel.

That sweet woman with the heart-shaped face and trusting eyes didn't deserve this. He'd expected a renowned young scientist to be arrogant and aloof. Haughty at the very least. Instead, Esme Jaramillo had turned out to be one of the most down-to-earth, reachable women he'd met in a long time. From her inquisitive brown eyes hidden behind those endearingly large spectacles, to her joking manner and wide smile, Esme was nothing if not genuine.

"Sure, she's seen it." Arlon's skeptical voice cut into Gavino's thoughts. "Everyone's seen *The Barry Stillman Show*."

"Not everyone spends their days propped in front of the boob tube, Arlon. She's a scientist. She has a life."

The stage manager whistled low. "She's got you all worked up, Mendez. Must've been some looker. No wait — " the man turned his attention to the clipboard he held " — she couldn't be a looker if she's on *this* particular show. My mistake."

"She looked great." Gavino growled, whirling toward his colleague. He stopped and ran his hands down his face, willing himself to relax. "Doesn't it ever get to you, Arlon?" Gavino blew out a breath. "Lying to these people just to get them on the show?"

Arlon shrugged. "It's just a job, bud. Television. Mindless entertainment. Besides, you were just the makeup man. She can't blame you."

"But she will. She'll think we all lied to her, Arlon, and we *did*. To her — " Gavino pointed in the general direction of the stage — "this will be a public shaming." He clenched his jaw, fighting back those familiar bully feelings from his past. If anyone in this world did not deserve to be bullied, it was Dr. Esme Jaramillo. "We're sending an innocent lamb to the slaughter. How can we live with ourselves?"

"Don't be so melodramatic. So she gets embarrassed on television. Big deal. She'll get over it."

Gavino burned him a glare, annoyed by his cavalier attitude.

"Besides, there's nothing we can do about it now," Arlon added, pressing the earphone tighter to his ear. "Looks like the good professor just went on."

The whoops and hollers from the audience surprised Esme as she walked on stage and took a seat in one of the two chairs centered on the carpeted platform. She'd expected a more demure group for a show about cloning, but at least they seemed welcoming. Behind her, an elaborate set gave the appearance of a comfortable living room. Lights mounted on scaffolding glared in her eyes, but she could vaguely make out the faces in the tiered crowd seated in a semicircle before her.

After settling into her chair, she gazed around the audience searching for her family and friends. There they were, front and center. Mama, Papa, Lilly, and Pilar, all in a row.

She smiled at them, but they looked odd.

Pilar's hands were clasped at her ample bosom, her eyes wide and serious. And Lilly? Esme could swear she looked flaming mad. Come to think of it, her father looked a little angry himself. Was Mama crying?

Perplexed, Esme squinted out at them. Yes, Mama was definitely crying. She hoped nothing bad had happened since the last time she spoke to them, and fought the urge to get up and walk over to them. Her adrenaline level kicked up a notch. Before she could worry further, the raucous cheers died down, and Barry Stillman smiled at her from the aisle where he stood.

"Dr. Jaramillo, welcome to the show."

"Thank you," she murmured, pushing up her glasses with her knuckle. Laughter rippled through the audience, which confused her.

"Tell us a little about your research, Doctor."

She crossed one leg over the other and leaned forward. Her confidence always jumped when she discussed her studies. She favored her host with an enthusiastic smile. "Well, I'm a professor of Genetics Engineering at a private college in Colorado. We're leading the country's research in cloning. Particularly, human cloning, though the procedure is still illegal in the United States."

"Sounds like a job that could keep a woman pretty busy."

Apprehension began to claw its way up her spine. She glanced at the empty chair next to her and wondered who should be sitting there. They hadn't told her she would be part of a panel. And what was with Barry's inane questions? She licked her dry lips, wishing for water. "Yes, it's exhausting work."

"Probably doesn't leave you too much time for pampering, Dr. Jaramillo, does it?" More laughter erupted from the crowd.

Suddenly defensive, Esme sat back in her chair and crossed her arms to match her entwined legs. Her skin flamed, and a rivulet of perspiration rolled down her stiff spine. "I thought we were going to discuss human cloning." This time, the audience remained silent, but the pause seemed packed with gunpowder and about to explode.

"Well, Dr. Jaramillo, we aren't going to discuss human cloning. We actually have a surprise for you."

Esme blinked several times, trying to grasp what was happening to her. She glanced off into the wings and saw Gavino standing there, his dark eyes urgent and pained. Their gazes met momentarily before he hung his head and turned from her.

What in the hell was going on?

"A surprise?" Esme finally croaked out. "I don't understand."

"Maybe we can help you understand. Listen to this audio tape, Doctor, for a clue about who brought you on today's show."

Everyone fell silent, and soon a deep, accented, patronizing voice boomed through the studio. "Esme, I know you want me. But, I'm here to tell you, before we have a chance, your bookworm looks have got to go. I'm doing this for your own good."

Realization washed over Esme like acid burning through her flesh. The lilting voice belonged to none other than Vitor Elizalde, her flamboyant Brazilian co-worker. She covered her mouth with her hand as the words slithered through her brain. *I've been duped!*

Esme had gone for coffee with Elizalde twice in the past month as a gesture of friendship. He was a visiting researcher, and though she found him a bit arrogant and conceited, she'd tried to make him feel welcome on the team. Of course he would assume she wanted more. Macho jerk.

As the audience roared their approval, the host asked her, "Recognize that voice, Doctor?"

She couldn't even nod, let alone speak. Bookworm looks? Mortification froze Esme to her seat as her heart sank. Hot tears stung her eyes, and as her chin started to quiver, the audience burst into applause, chanting, "Bar-ry! Bar-ry! Bar-ry! Bar-ry!"

She glanced out at her supporters, who looked as horrified as she felt. Lilly mouthed the words, "I'm so sorry."

Stillman's obnoxious voice cut in with, "Audience, what's your vote?" after which a hundred or more black placards were thrust into the air. SHE'S A BOOKWORM, most of them read, in neon yellow lettering. Belatedly, Papa lifted his sign to its neon yellow flipside with shaky, liver-spotted hands. SHE'S A BEAUTY, spelled the stark black lettering. Esme was so ashamed for putting her parents into this position. If only she'd known it was all a trick —

"Audience? What do you have to say to Dr. Jaramillo?"

A hundred collective voices yelled at her, "Don't worry, Bookworm. We're going to make you over!"

Esme saw stars, and gripped the chair arms so she wouldn't faint. This was a nightmare. No wonder Gavino didn't make up her face. She wasn't beautiful, like he claimed. Rather, he wanted her to look her very worst when she walked onto this stage. Esme choked back a sob. For some reason, Gavino's deception cut to her core. He'd seemed so sincere. *Fooled you, Esme.*

"Welcome Professor Vitor Elizalde to the show!" Barry hollered. Out of the wings opposite where she'd seen Gavino sauntered smug, pompous Vitor Elizalde, his black hair slicked back. He raised his arms to the audience like a reigning king as they clapped and cheered for him. He even took a bow.

How could he do this?

How could he bring her on national television, in front of God and her parents, her friends? Everyone. Her staff, their colleagues. What the hell was wrong with him?

Before she could stop them, hot tears burst forth behind her glasses and blurred her vision. As Vitor took the empty chair next to her, Esme lunged unsteadily to her feet and backed away from him, smearing at the tears rolling down her make-up free face. She laid her palms on her flat, trembling abdomen.

"How could you?" she rasped before wheeling on her sensible heels and running from the stage, trailed by the audience's loud booing.

Off-stage, the producer with pencils in her hair caught Esme by her upper arms and held her back. "Come now, Esme. They're going to give you a makeover. It won't be so bad."

Her tears had escalated to sobs, which had prompted hiccups. Were these people for real? "Leave me — " *hiccup* " — alone, I'm not going back out — " *hiccup* " — there."

She tried to push past the woman when another man arrived to assist. The producer glanced at the man for help. "Arlon?"

"Don't, uh, cry now, miss," the man said, his stilted words proving him ill at ease with the role of comforter. He patted her upper arm and cleared his throat. "It's not so bad. We'll just get you some ice for your puffy eyes and — "

"Let. Her. Go," Gavino's dead serious voice said from behind her. Both the producer and the man called Arlon diverted their attention to Gavino, and Esme took advantage of the moment to push between them and run through the cables and scaffolding to the hallway which would lead her out. Behind her, she heard the producer say, "Stay out of this, Mendez."

She wept freely, never so embarrassed in all her life.

She'd worked so hard to make her parents proud. They'd brought her to this country from Mexico when she was a toddler, hoping to provide her with better opportunities. They'd given up everything familiar — their family, friends, the language they both spoke so eloquently, the country they loved — for her. Her entire life was geared to show them she was grateful, that she'd made the most other opportunities to become a success, a daughter they could be proud of. Now this.

Sure, she was a well-educated woman, a leader in her field, but she couldn't help thinking Mama and Papa had seen her in another light today. As a homely thirty-year-old woman who couldn't even get a date with an overblown, cocksure jerk.

She shoved against the bar spanning the metal door and pushed her way into the exit hallway and wondered how she'd ever live this down, how she'd ever make it up to the parents who valued their dignity so.

"Esme! Wait!"

Gavino. She tried to keep running, to get away before she ever had to see his face again, but he caught her and snaked a hand around her forearm.

"Let me go," she said, staring at the ground as she tried to pull free. Part of her wished he would just hold her and tell her everything would be okay. The stupid part of her.

"Esme, please. I'm so sorry. Listen, let me ex—"

"Sorry?" Fury mixed with her humiliation as she hiccupped again. "Leave me alone, Gavino, okay?"

He'd pretended to be nice to her, when all the while he'd been part of the lie. She lifted her chin, pushed up her glasses, and glared at him, trying her best to mask the hurt with a look of indignance. She wrenched her arm from his grasp and rubbed the spot he'd held with her other hand. Her chest heaved as she stared up at him.

"Just, let me go. After all this, can't you — " *hiccup* "— at least do that?" She turned and stumbled down the long, stark corridor slowly. Her limbs felt leaden, like all the energy had been leached out of her. She just wanted to go home and put sweats on and curl up with a glass of —

"I meant what I said, Esme," Gavino called after her. "You are beautiful."

Her heart clenched. *Another lie.*

Esme never even turned back.

Two

Telling the Barry Stillman people to take their job and shove it hadn't been difficult for Gavino. But, packing up his worldly goods and driving across the country in search of a woman he'd met but once, a woman who haunted his dreams — and probably hated his guts — was the biggest risk he'd ever taken.

No matter. It felt good. He'd been on the road for at least twelve hours, and as the evening skyline of Denver loomed into sight, Gavino glanced down at the directions he hoped would lead him to Esme. She deserved an apology, and for once, Gavino would have a chance to make things right with a person he'd hurt who hadn't deserved it. Gavino steered his black pickup onto Speer Blvd. South, and moved to the center lane. He rolled down his window and breathed in the cool, dry summertime air that was so different from the stifling humidity in Chicago where he'd grown up. Then again, everything about growing up had been stifling for him.

It was almost as hard for Gavino to remember himself as an angry young bully as it was to remind himself he wasn't one anymore. He'd transformed, and he had his high school art teacher, Mr. Fuentes, to thank for his changed demeanor. Though rail thin and none too masculine, Fuentes wouldn't be bullied. He'd never flinched when he faced the angry young Gavino toe to toe, yet he never made him feel worthless. On the contrary, Fuentes made him believe in his painting, in his talent. He'd shown Gavino how to channel his pent-up rage into his art and made him understand that true happiness came from inside a man, not outside. And, even though Gavino hadn't gotten to the point where he could fully support himself with his painting, he'd

had a couple of shows, made a few sales, and, at age thirty-four he still believed in himself.

Fuentes had won Gavino's respect, and later his admiration. Gavino had thanked the man on more than one occasion over the years, but he'd never gone back and told any of the people he'd hurt that he was sorry. Perhaps his turned-around life was penance enough, but the open-ended guilt of his youth hung around his heart like a lead weight. He may not be able to assuage it with one apology, but at least it was a step in the right direction. And any steps that carried him closer to Dr. Esme Jaramillo were ones he definitely wanted to take.

If he was honest with himself, it wasn't just the chance for an apology that led him to the slight professor with the fine, silky hair that just begged a man to run his fingers through it. Something far more instinctual pulled him as well. It had taken one fitful night of remembering her gentle lavender scent, seeing images of her bright, dark eyes behind those glasses, and hearing her wind-chime laughter, before he knew he had to see her again. If he didn't, her memory would be with him forever, like a war wound. Reminding him now and then, with a stab of pain, what could possibly have been.

He glanced back down at the crinkled map in his passenger seat, brushing aside the wadded Snickers wrappers covering it. If his navigation was correct, he should be knocking on Esme's door in no time. And, if fate was on his side, she'd be willing to hear him out.

Three hellish days had passed since the ill-fated appearance on *The Barry Stillman Show*. Esme — bundled in a voluminous sweat suit and feeling like lukewarm death — slumped cross-legged on the floor of her living room across from her best buddies, Lilly Lujan and Pilar Valenzuela. Between them, on the dark brown carpeting, sat serving dishes filled with various comfort foods: enchilada casserole, mashed potatoes, chicken mole, and a Sara Lee cheesecake. Not to mention the pitcher of margaritas. Their forks hung limply from their hands as they took a collective break from gastronomically comforting themselves.

Esme leaned back against her slip-covered sofa and laid her hands on her distended abdomen with a groan. If only Gavino Mendez could see her at this moment, she thought. How beautiful would he claim she was now?

Her eyes were still tear-swollen, and she'd broken out in a rash on her neck from the stress. She'd spent most of the last two days lying listlessly on the couch, channel-surfing to kill time between her crying jags. Now she was bloated, and she just didn't care. The entire universe already knew she was ugly. No sense trying to hide it.

Oddly enough, a memory other than being humiliated on television kept popping into her mind, squeezing her heart. She'd been just a little girl who loved playing dress-up and watching the Miss Universe pageant on TV. She would close her eyes during commercials and picture herself accepting the crown for USA. At that point, she still believed it could happen.

But one summer afternoon, her Aunt Luz and her mother were sharing iced tea on the front porch while Esme played with dolls in her room. Her window was open, inviting a breeze which carried the voices of Mama and Tia Luz.

"Look, Luz. Photographs of the children from the church picnic last week."

The sounds of Tia thumbing through the prints came next, and Esme's ears perked when she heard, "Ah, there's little Esme." A pause. "Such a smart girl."

"Gracias," murmured her mother, and Esme could hear the smile on Mama's face.

"Thank God for her brains. She certainly didn't get the looks. With those skinny chicken knees and thick glasses, she may never find a husband, but she'll always find a good job."

Esme froze, a crampy feeling in her stomach like when she'd eaten too much raw cookie dough the week before. She set down her dolls and curled up on her side on the floor, hoping her tummy would stop hurting. It made her want to cry. She tried to stop listening, but she couldn't help herself.

Her mama tsk-tsked. "Don't be cruel, Luz. Not everyone can be beautiful. She'll grow into her looks."

"We can only hope she's a late bloomer," Tia Luz added.

But, she hadn't bloomed at all, no matter what Gavino claimed about her looks three days earlier. If she had, she wouldn't have ended up as a guest on Barry Stillman's bookworm makeover show. Pushing the painful memory out of her mind, Esme scratched at the red bumps below her ear and hiccuped.

"You still have those?" Pilar asked.

"I get them when I'm under — " *hiccup* " — stress." She nudged up her glasses then took to scratching the other side of her neck. "They've come and gone since the — " *hiccup* " — fiasco. I'm probably just gulping — " *hiccup* " — down my food too fast."

Pilar got up, stepped over the smorgasbord, then plopped herself onto the couch behind Esme. "I'm gonna plug your ears, and you drink your margarita. It may not get rid of 'em, but after all that tequila, you won't care."

Esme let out a mirthless chuckle, then did as she was told. It worked. She smiled up at Pilar, who'd begun playing with Esme's unruly hair, and absent-mindedly brought her fingernails to her neck again.

"Honey, don't scratch your rash. You'll make it worse." Lilly told her softly. "Did you use that cream I gave you?"

Esme nodded and rested her hands in her lap. If anyone knew what being judged for your looks felt like, it was Lilly. She and Esme understood the concept from different perspectives, though. Lilly, a natural beauty with wavy, waist-length black hair and huge green eyes, had gone on to a great modeling career after being named "Prettiest Girl" in high school. At thirty, she was one of America's most recognizable Chicanas, having graced the pages of *Cosmo*, *Vanity Fair*, *Latina*, *Vanidades*, and *Vogue*, to name a few. In looks, she and Esme were polar opposites, always had been. But in their hearts, along with Pilar, they were soul triplets.

If only she'd looked like Lilly on stage. Maybe then Gavino would have felt something for her other than pity. Esme closed her eyes against the wave of embarrassment she'd relived repeatedly since the filming in Chicago. On the airplane, she felt like everyone was staring at her. *Look! There's the ugly professor!*

She'd medicated herself with several tiny bottles of cheap, screw-cap wine during the flight, and had finally convinced herself she was being overly-paranoid. Still, it had taken every ounce of her courage to walk through Denver International Airport with her head held up, even with Lilly and Pilar flanking her for much-needed moral support. Of course people had seen her. *The Barry Stillman Show* had ten-million viewers. She just wasn't sure *who* had seen her, and that's what scared her most

It had felt so good to finally walk into her comfortable home in Washington Park and deadbolt the door behind her. And after half an hour of quiet, she'd started to feel better, thinking maybe no one *had* seen the show. Then, her phone began to ring. It seemed everyone she'd ever met in her life had seen the blasted show. Her answering machine had been clogged for two days with uncomfortable messages of sympathy and pity — just what she needed. A local full-service beauty salon had even sent a courier bearing a gift certificate, much to her utter dismay.

The phone rang again, and Esme glared at it. "I could die," she whispered to her friends, chugging down another healthy dose of margarita. She wiped salt from her lips and added, "Who could that be now? The president? I think he's the only one who hasn't sent condolences for the untimely death of my dignity."

Lilly clicked her tongue and cast a beseeching look at Esme while Pilar reached over and switched off the ringer. "When we realized what they were doing, we tried our hardest to get backstage to warn you, Esme, I swear," Lilly told her.

"They wouldn't let us," Pilar added, digging her fork into the cheesecake. "Bastards. Your mama laid into them with a barrage of Spanish cuss words. Made my hair stand on end. I think they didn't know quite what to do with her." She popped the bite into her mouth and chewed, her eyes fixed apologetically on Esme's face.

"I don't blame you guys. It was my fault for walking into their trap." She furrowed her fingers into her hair and laid her head back against the couch. And what a trap they'd set, with a juicy enticer like Gavino Mendez to lure women in. God, she was so stupid.

"It's unconscionable what they do to people, Esme. You should complain," Lilly said, dishing up another serving of enchiladas.

She shook thoughts of Gavino from her mind and graced her friend with a wan smile. "Eh, it wouldn't do any good. Besides, I just want to forget it ever happened." *To forget that I entertained even one thought that a man like Gavino Mendez would look twice at a woman like me.* Miss Universe, she wasn't.

"How much time off do you have before the new semester starts?" Pilar asked.

"A little over a month." A little over four weeks until she had to face Vile Vitor again. The thought of Elizalde made her want to fist fight.

"Ohh, that man," she growled. "Who does he think he is, anyway? Chayanne?"

"That's right," Pilar said, wrapping her arms around Esme's shoulders from behind for a hug. "Like you'd ever give him the time of day anyway."

Esme didn't think she'd go that far. "I've got to think of some way to get back at the arrogant jerk."

"Oh, revenge." Lilly nodded her head. "That's always a good, healthy way to recover from trauma."

Recognizing the sarcasm, Esme rolled her eyes. "In any case, I'm hoping by the time I go back it will be old news to everyone and my own embarrassment will have waned. I want absolutely no reminders of that debacle." *Especially none of a brown-eyed artist with fingers that made a woman scream for edible body paints.*

The doorbell chimed. Twice.

Esme looked from Lilly to Pilar and frowned. "Who could that be? *Hard Copy?*"

"Very funny. It's probably your Mom," Lilly said, standing. "I'll get it."

"No, wait." Esme groaned to her feet. "Let me. It'll probably be the only exercise I get all week." Padding across the brown carpet in a tequila-induced zig-zag, Esme made her way to the dark front hall leading to the door. Lord knew, she needed some fresh air.

July in Colorado heated right up, but the temperature dropped with the sun, bringing cool breezes in with the moon. Maybe she'd sit with Mama on the porch instead of bringing her in. The darkness would hide some of the puffiness around her eyes, and staying outside would prevent Mama from witnessing their little pity party on the living room carpet. The woman would be aghast that they were eating so much food from dishes set right on the floor. Mama was nothing if not proper.

Esme stopped in the dark hallway, leaned against the wall, and pulled in a long, deep breath. Just the thought of seeing her mother brought on renewed feelings of shame. Oh, her parents had handled everything much better than she had. It didn't matter — she still felt guilty. She knew, deep down, they had to be embarrassed that their daughter was known nationwide as a wallflower. No matter how long

it took, she was going to put the incident to rest for all of them, just as soon as her anger at Vitor Elizalde dissipated.

Esme flipped on the porch light before she threw the deadbolt back and pulled on the heavy, carved wooden door. She started speaking as the hinges squeaked.

"It's late. Mama, you shouldn't be ou — " Her words cut off as her mind grasped the realization that the muscular man looming larger than life on her porch bore no resemblance whatsoever to her mother.

She wasn't sure if her heart had stopped or was beating so fast she couldn't feel it. Either way, she looked like hell and had a guacamole smear on her sweatshirt, and here she stood face to face with — "Gavino — " *hiccup* " — w-what are you doing here?" An amazingly calm question, considering her life had just passed before her eyes. Esme hoped she wouldn't fall down, because she could no longer feel her feet. And, physiological impossibility aside, she'd just proven that a person could exist without a heartbeat or the ability to draw air into the lungs. *Gavino Mendez? HERE?*

"Esme. Forgive me for . . . just showing up." He spread his arms wide and let them drop to his sides, as if searching for what to say next. His long hair hung free of the ponytail she remembered, and the yellow glow of the porch light made it shine like a sheet of black gold. He looked just as good in dark jeans and a well-worn University of Chicago sweatshirt as he had the day she'd met him.

Looking at him, Esme fought the ridiculous urge to sit on the floor. Instead, she stood stock still and bunched the avocado-stained front of her sweatshirt into her fist. With her other hand, she poked her glasses up on her nose. "I . . . I thought I made it clear you should — " *hiccup* " — leave me alone."

To her dismay, Gavino flashed her a devastating, sweet smile that pulled a dimple into his left cheek. She hadn't noticed that the other day. "Don't tell me you've had those hiccups since you left Chicago."

She shook her head and hiccuped again.

"Esme, we need to talk." He took a step forward, and she eased the door partway closed, hiding half of her body behind it. He stopped, stared at her.

Her gaze dropped to his Adam's Apple as he swallowed. "No," she told him. "We don't need to talk. I want to — " she held her breath for a moment and staved off a hiccup " — forget everything about that

day." God, she wanted to be angry at him. She didn't want to feel her heart beating in anticipation at the mere sight of him, or worry that he'd noticed her disheveled hair. She didn't want to smell his cologne on the night air or yearn to feel his strong arms around her for comfort, "Denial is my drug of choice. I'm going to pretend it never happened."

"It shouldn't have happened, Esme." He laid his palm high up on the door frame, leaning toward her. "I feel just — "

"Don't" She held out her hand. He'd been a part of the trick; she couldn't forget that. "Don't apologize now, after the fact, because I really, really thought you were a nice man, Gavino Mendez. An apology will only make me want to slug you, and I've had too much trauma and too much — " *hiccup* "— tequila to resist the urge."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take," he said, after pausing to chew on his lip.

His pointed gaze, filled with affection, flamed her cheeks. Esme expelled a sigh and hung her head. How much could one woman take? It had been a long time since her Tia Luz had pointed out her flaws, and though her glasses weren't as thick these days, her knees were just as knobby. She couldn't let a man like Gavino, a man solidly out of her league, affect her. It would only bring her more pain. After a moment, she looked up at him. "Look. You were only doing your job, okay? I understand."

He opened his mouth to speak, and she waved his words away, reminding herself to be angry. He'd tricked her. He'd shamed her. He'd left her face bare. "It's fine, Gavino, please. Just . . . leave me to my life and go back to yours. There are a lot of other ugly women whose faces you can ignore, too."

"Esme?" called Lilly from the front room. "You okay?"

"Fine," she yelled back, a little too sharply, her eyes never leaving Gavino's face.

"Slug me if you want, but I *am* sorry, Esme. More than you'll ever know. You probably don't believe that"

"Did you come here to convince me or yourself? Because you've already told me one lie. You'll have a tough job on your hands if you're working on me."

"Esme," he breathed her name, his gaze imploring.

He didn't try to touch her. She didn't try to move away. Time stilled between them as they stared at one another. Gavino dipped his chin,

Esme raised hers. Crickets chirped from the darkness beyond the porch. A gust of wind rustled the leaves on her old grand cottonwood tree and lifted a lock of Gavino's long hair across his face.

"Why are you here?" she whispered. "You live in Chicago."

"Not anymore." He tucked his hair behind one ear as he added, "I don't work for the *Stillman Show* anymore."

"You don't?"

"You *are* an attractive woman, Esme." The words came out husky. "I mean it."

She ignored that. She had more pressing questions. "Did you get fired?"

"Quit."

Surprise fluttered through her and she let go of the door. "Why?" she asked, moving closer to lean against the jamb.

"Because I never again wanted to see hurt on a person's face like I saw on yours as you left the studio. I can't stop the show from bringing people on under false pretenses, but I can sure as hell remove myself from the situation."

Esme sighed and broke eye contact, focusing instead on his low-heeled black boots. Why did he have to be so nice? So sincere? Why couldn't he leave her to her sulking instead of invading her doorstep with his bulk and his warmth, filling her nostrils with the scent of his masculine skin and her ears with his creme de menthe voice? "I can't feel responsible for you losing your job, Gavino."

"I'm not blaming you."

She raised her gaze back to his. "What will you do?"

He shrugged. "I'll get by. It's time to give my painting a chance, and . . . who knows?"

She shook her head slowly and reached up to scratch her neck. He quit his job. He quit his job and packed up his life, and now he was standing on her doorstep hundreds of miles away trying to convince her she wasn't ugly. Why? Feeling another bout of hiccups coming on, she whispered, "I have to go now."

"Can I come in?"

"No." She started to shut the door.

He held it open. "Esme, wait. I want to see you again."

"To assuage your own guilt? I don't think so."

"That's not why."

So he said. But, really, how would she ever know?

He reached out and ran the backs of his fingers slowly down her cheek. "You have a rash."

"Adds to the whole beauty package, wouldn't you say?"

"Don't, *querida*." His hand slid from her cheek to her shoulder and rested there.

Her eyes fluttered shut, and she choked back another wave of tears. This man could break her heart if she let him. "Leave me alone, Gavino. Please."

"I can't."

"Esme?" Lilly and Pilar peered into the hallway, then looked from their friend to Gavino, their eyes widening in surprise. Neither moved.

Esme glanced over her shoulder. "I'll be right there. Mr. Mendez was just leaving."

"No, I wasn't."

"You are now."

"We aren't finished."

"We never even started."

He pressed his lips together and lowered his chin. His somber gaze melted into hers for excruciating seconds before a smile teased his dimple into making an appearance. He winked. "Tomorrow, Esme? Can I see you then?"

"No."

"Just coffee. No pressure."

"No."

He shifted from boot to boot, then crossed his muscular arms over his chest. "Need I remind you that you said you thought I was a nice man?"

"I also said I wanted to hit you," she countered, in as haughty a tone as she could muster.

"But you didn't."

She faltered and bit her lip, which had started to tremble. "Don't do this to me. Please."

"I'm going to keep trying until you give me a chance, Esme."

Shoring up her resolve, she wrapped her arms around her stomach and sniffed. "You'll be wasting your time."

He brushed her trembling bottom lip with his knuckle, then stepped back. "Ah, but you see, I'd rather waste my time on you than

spend it wisely on anyone else.” He nodded goodnight at Lilly and Pilar, who still hung behind Esme, then stepped off the porch and disappeared into the night shadows.

Three

Esme slept fitfully for the next two nights and spent her waking hours answering Lilly's and Pilar's never-ending questions about Gavino. It was pure torture. She really didn't want to face the answers. *Who is he? When did you meet? Why is he here? Did he ask you out? And, the Bermuda Triangle of all questions — how do you feel about him?*

And, just how did she feel about him? She'd been angry at him and everyone from *The Barry Stillman Show* for a couple days, but she just couldn't drum up that emotion for Gavino anymore. He'd apologized, after all, and she wasn't by nature a person to hold a grudge.

She was attracted to him. Big deal. She was attracted to Armand Assante, too, but that didn't mean she'd ever have a chance with the guy. Her feelings about Gavino were as jumbled and unbalanced as her feelings about herself, and it just wasn't getting much better.

It didn't help that she hadn't seen hide nor hair of him since the night on the porch, and couldn't help wondering if his guilt had dissipated enough for him to just move on. Secretly, the notion disappointed her. She didn't want to get her hopes up, didn't want to think about him, but she couldn't help it. Gavino Mendez had invaded her soul. The worst part was, she wouldn't be with him now even if he got down on his knees and begged. She couldn't, not after the *Stillman* fiasco, knowing she was just a pity date to him and always would be. If they'd met any other way, things might be different.

But they hadn't, and they weren't.

End of story.

Sometime on the second day, Esme had decided hard work was the perfect antidote for what ailed her, and she'd asked Pilar and Lilly to help her tackle a project she'd been putting off: painting her house.

Now here they stood, with the morning sun warming them, covering their hair with scarves and mixing the paint that Esme hoped would help brighten her house as well as her outlook. And, naturally, they were talking about Gavino.

"Of course he's interested in you, Esme, don't be obtuse," said Lilly. She held the paint spraying contraption in her arms like a machine gun, her French-manicured nails curving around the deadly barrel.

Esme eyed her, wondering if she'd chosen the wrong task for them to undertake. "Your obtuse is my realistic. But, no sense quibbling over semantics. Put that paint gun down, you're scaring me." None of them had ever painted a house exterior before, but the old place had been begging for a fresh coat for two summers. If she ever planned on collecting a decent rent for her carriage house apartment, she supposed she'd better pretty the place up.

"Seriously, Es, why else would a man quit his job, for God's sake, and drive across the country?" Pilar asked.

"Guilt is a powerful motivator," Esme reminded them, straightening her scarf. "It's tough to live with."

"That's a cop-out."

"Well, cop-out or not," Esme said, "he hasn't been back. A guy like Gavino Mendez would not base life decisions on a woman like me, so drop it."

Lilly, who'd thankfully surrendered her paint weapon, stopped buttoning a smock over her shorts and tank top and cast a sardonic glare at Esme. "A woman like you. Hmmm. Let's think about that." She propped her fists on her hips, and tilted her head to the side in thought. "You're a successful genetics engineer at the ripe young age of thirty, leading the nation's research in one of the hugest scientific breakthroughs since . . . since —"

"Fertility drugs," offered Pilar, glancing at her two sons. Pep and Teddy, content to be playing with their prized Matchbox cars on the sidewalk. The boys, like their father, were crazy about vehicles and quite knowledgeable about makes and models.

"I was going to say Velcro, but yeah, since fertility drugs." Lilly spread her arms and leaned forward, raising her perfectly arched eyebrows at Esme. "You're right, girl. You are a booby prize."

Esme expelled a pointed sigh. "You know what I meant. I'm not saying I'm not successful, but given the choice between a lab coat and a silk teddy, which do you think most men would choose?"

"You underestimate yourself, Esme, you always have," Pilar said. She gestured down at her very curvy body. "Look at yourself compared to me. You're willowy — "

"Bony."

"And tall — "

"Five-foot-eleven Lilly is tall, Pilar. I hate to tell you, but I'm only five-four, and that isn't tall."

"It is when you're four-foot-eleven and chubby."

"You're not chubby, you're voluptuous." Esme sighed and nudged her glasses up. "You two can't possibly understand. Lilly, well, you're Lilly Lujan. Need I say more? And, Pilar, everyone has loved you since high school. You're Miss Popularity. I don't remember you ever without a boyfriend."

"Big whoop. I've only had one, and I married him."

"At least you had the choice." Esme clasped her hands together and pleaded with her friends. "Please don't feel like you have to sugarcoat things for me, you two. I'm not saying I begrudge you your beauty, Lilly, or your popularity, Pilar. But, I need your honesty right now. I'm not denying I'm smart or successful, but — shallow or not — that's not enough at the moment. You know it's never been that big of an issue that I'm not beautiful. We get what we're given and make the best of it. But I was just publicly outed as a dog on national television." Esme huffed a humorless half-laugh and shook her head. "Forgive me if I wish — just once — that I was known as pretty. Maybe even sexy. Enough to make Vitor eat his heart out"

Lilly expelled a little ladylike snort.

Pilar just sighed. "You underestimate yourself. I'll say it again. Gavino Mendez is hot for you, girl."

A frisson of thrill spiraled through Esme, but she shoved it away. Maybe they wouldn't admit that she wasn't pretty, but they *had* to admit Gavino was out of her league. "Get real. You saw the man, didn't you?"

"Hell yeah, we saw him," Pilar said. "And if I wasn't married — "

"Or I wasn't in a committed relationship," added Lilly.

"We'd be fighting your tall, willowy butt for him right here in the yard." Pilar winked.

Esme smiled back, then bent over to stir the Spring Eggshell-colored all-weather paint, which looked exactly like apple cake batter. She knew two things for sure. First, everyone, including her two best friends, must think she was either gullible or blind. And, two, despite their idle threats, neither Lilly nor Pilar would ever go after Gavino knowing how she felt about him.

Esme stopped stirring and blinked several times. What was she thinking? There was that feelings stuff again. She didn't *feel* any way about Gavino. She had her pride. She would never accept a pity date, which was precisely all she'd ever get out of Gavino Mendez. The man felt sorry for her. Period. The thought made her cringe. She remembered the night before her senior prom, visiting her friends' houses to check out their outfits. She'd been genuinely excited to ooh and aah over Pilar's and Lilly's gowns, but once at home, she couldn't help but feel depressed and left out. She hadn't even been asked to the dance. Her mama, bless her heart, had tried so hard to make things better. She'd cornered Esme's second cousin, Juanito, in the kitchen, and asked him to escort Esme to the festivities since she *couldn't get a date*. Talk about a booby prize. Esme'd never been so mortified, more so when she saw the emotions on Juanito's face move from shock to horror to resignation . . . to pity. She'd faked cramps to weasel out of the mercy date. Never again. Being alone wasn't nearly as bad as being pitied.

Besides, who cared? That was a long time ago, and she had a house to paint. "Let it go," she said, to herself and her friends at the same time. "Let's get going before it gets too hot out here."

Three hours later, with only a tiny section of the front of her house done, Esme, Lilly, and Pilar sprawled on lounge chairs sipping iced tea and resting their tired limbs.

"I didn't know this was going to be so hard," Esme said. Painting was exhausting work. Her arms ached, her calves were cramped, and it seemed like they'd barely made any progress.

"We need help," Pilar added.

"We need to pay someone to finish," said Lilly, voicing what they'd all been thinking. "This is hell."

Pep and Teddy glanced up when a big black pickup truck rumbled to the curb, then six-year-old Pep whipped his head around and announced, "Someone's here in a '97 Ford F350, Auntie Esme."

Esme looked over in time to see Gavino's long, muscular, denim-clad legs stretch below the driver's door. When the door slammed, his V-shaped upper body, looking fine in a fitted tank top, came into view. Esme lurched upright, sloshing iced tea on her paint-spattered overshirt.

Four-year-old Teddy jumped to his feet and bounced across the lawn, stopping at Gavino's boots. He leaned his little crew-cut way back, looking up at a smiling Gavino, and said, "We don't live here, but my Auntie does. Can I sit 'n your truck? Is it yours? Who're you?"

"Teodoro!" Pilar called. "Mind your manners."

Gavino laughed and ruffled Teddy's head. "I'm a friend of your Auntie's. I'm Gavino."

Teddy bolted across the lawn hollering, "Auntie Esme, your friend Gavino is here in his *black Ford Extra Cab four-by-four!*" before a caterpillar on the sidewalk caught his attention.

Esme cast a scowling glance at her grinning, paint-dotted friends, and then tried to decide whether to get up and go meet Gavino or wait for him there. Since her legs felt wobbly and weak, she stayed seated and focused on convincing herself that she wasn't excited to see him. Not at all.

Gavino ambled across the lawn toward them, his sable brown eyes hidden behind a pair of sunglasses. He glanced up at the house and his lip twitched to the side. "Morning, Ladies."

"What are you doing here?" Esme asked, immediately chastising herself for her rudeness. "I mean . . ."

"It's okay. I was in the neighborhood. What's up?"

"They're paintin' the house," Pep told him, not looking up. The boy sat on one leg, and the other folded knee jutted up in front of him, providing a perfect spot for him to rest his chin while he lined up his car collection.

Gavino turned to him. "You helping?"

"No way," Pep said, glancing up. "I'm just a kid."

"That's some shiner you've got for a kid." Gavino squatted and studied the bluish-purple ring around the boy's left eye.

Pep shrugged. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

Gavino stood and turned back to the women. "I'd be glad to help with the painting," he offered.

"No, thanks," Esme said, while Pilar and Lilly echoed, "That would be great." The women glared at each other, before Pilar turned a smile back at Gavino.

"It's Esme's house. I guess it's up to her."

Gavino looked at Esme, raising one eyebrow. "We're fine," she told him. "We can handle it."

"Suit yourself. But I am a painter, you know."

"I don't want a fresco on the front of it." She sniffed. "I just want a nice coat of Spring Eggshell, and we're perfectly capable of doing that."

"Speak for yourself, Superwoman," Pilar muttered.

Gavino took off his sunglasses and smiled from Pilar to Lilly. "I'm Gavino Mendez," he told them, leaning forward to shake their hands, one after another, which provided Esme a clear view down his tank top of his tight pectoral muscles. She looked away to hide the hunger she was sure showed in her eyes.

"Pilar Valenzuela." Pilar gestured at the yard. "Those yard monkeys out there are my boys. Pep and Teodoro — say hello, *mi hijos*."

"Hi," the boys chimed with a decided lack of interest.

"And, this is Lilly Lujan," Pilar finished.

Gavino did a double take at Lilly. "Wow, *the* Lilly Lujan?"

She shrugged, genuine and unaffected as ever. "That would be me. Paint covered and all."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both." He crossed his arms over his chest and smiled politely at Lilly. "My eighteen-year-old nephew has magazine pictures of you all over his room. I hope that doesn't creep you out. He'll pass out when I tell him I saw you in person, though."

Surprise filtered through Esme at his words. Gavino was thrilled to meet a celebrity, no doubt about it. But he wasn't ogling Lilly, like most men did.

Lilly laughed and said, "Nope, not creeped out. Just be sure to stand clear of furniture when you tell him if he's going to pass out. I wouldn't want to be responsible for a cracked skull." She tipped her head and peered down the row at Esme. "That's our rude friend, Esme, down there. But, I guess you guys have already met."

Esme forced a wan smile. What would she do in this situation if it wasn't Gavino standing at the end of her lounge chair casting his cool

shadow over her hot body? Ah, yes. Hospitality. "Can I . . . get you some iced tea, Gavino?"

"I'm good," he replied, shaking his head.

Esme didn't doubt that claim.

"I actually came about the apartment you have advertised for rent." He pointed to the sign posted in the front yard.

"It's been rented," Esme blurted, just as Pilar and Lilly chimed, "It's available." They exchanged another set of meaningful glances.

Gavino smirked. "I know. It's Esme's house, we'll leave it up to her."

She swallowed past a throat that felt like it was coated with drying Spring Eggshell all-weather paint. "What I mean is, it's not, um, ready to rent yet."

"Then why the sign?" Gavino hitched his head back in the general direction of it.

Pilar scrambled to her feet, followed by Lilly. Both of them headed for the house. "Boys, come on. Aunt Lilly and I are going to make you lunch."

"We'll wait here," Teddy said in a monotone, mesmerized by the caterpillar inching its way up the front of his T-shirt.

"No, you won't. Come on, Teddy. And leave that caterpillar out here. Pep? Put your cars away."

Esme sat forward, her heart rattling at the thought of being left alone with Gavino. "Pilar, wait — "

"Now, little men." Pilar ignored her protests.

"Aw, mom!" Pep whined. "It ain't lunch time — "

"Don't say ain't."

"It *isn't* lunch time," the boy added. "We just ate breakfast. I'll barf."

"Listen to your mo-ther," Lilly sang.

Prickly heat clawed up Esme's neck, and out of her peripheral vision, she saw Gavino grinning. He obviously knew what was up. How embarrassing. She imagined this was like being on an unwilling blind date.

Pep continued to protest. Amongst moans and groans, he and Teddy scuffed to their feet and grudgingly followed the two women into the house. For a few moments after they left, Esme sat stiffly in her lounge chair and concentrated on the birds chirping in the cottonwood tree. Or pretended to, at any rate. Soon, Gavino stretched out on

the chaise next to her with a sigh of satisfaction and the ease of a man who belonged there.

"Gotta love this Colorado weather," he said.

She watched an enormous white thunderhead float across the blue sky and took surreptitious glances at Gavino's long legs and familiar black boots. What could she possibly say to this man? *I want you? I don't want you? Stay? Go away?* She'd never been more attracted to or more confused by a man, and she still doubted his motives. But, they couldn't just sit here and ignore each other or she'd go mad. Esme took a deep breath. She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and said, "So."

"So."

A stiff pause. "You're here again."

"You doubted I would be?" His words held a smile. Esme swallowed back her reply. Of course she doubted it. Almost as much as she hoped she was wrong. She couldn't start getting all mushy on him. "What do you want from me, Gavino?"

She felt his gaze on the side of her face for several, long moments. It burned as though he'd touched her. Instead of answering the question, he said, "Your rash is going away."

She lifted her hands to her neck and cut a quick peek at him. "I thought you were gone. Back to Chicago, or . . . wherever." She listened to the rapid beating of wings as several spooked buds took flight from the branches of the cottonwood. Her stomach felt like the birds' wings were beating against its walls as she waited for his response. She tried to focus on the matter at hand and fought not to let his soap-smelling, just-showered male freshness distract her. When she couldn't stand the suspense anymore, she turned to him and found his liquid brown eyes staring at her.

"Why won't you rent me your apartment, Esme?"

His smooth voice cooled her and heated her simultaneously. Everything about this man was distracting and attracting; every word he spoke made her want to touch him. If she didn't stay aloof around him, she'd be in a world of hurt. "Because I don't know why you want it."

He chuckled and ran his hands through his long, slick hair. "Well, for one, staying in a hotel is expensive."

"There are a lot of apartments in the Denver area, Gavino. The housing market is wide open."

"And, for two, you're the only person in Denver I know."

"You don't know me."

"I'd like to change that. That's number three."

Esme shook her head slowly, unable to hold back her mirthless laugh. "Okay, okay. I forgive you for the show. Is that what you want to hear? Will that make you stop trying so hard to work out your guilt? I forgive you," she enunciated sharply. "You are free to leave."

For several moments, nothing. Then, "Has it ever occurred to you, Esme, that perhaps I just like being around you?"

Her tummy clenched. "Ah, no. I'm not that naive. I remember how our paths crossed. Surely you haven't forgotten."

"Oh, no. I remember." He expelled a sigh. "Let me ask you this. In the makeup room, before . . ." She sensed his discomfort and, for a moment, felt bad for him. "Did you enjoy talking to me?"

"Sure, but that was before I realized you were just blowing sunshine up my —"

"Esme, don't," he chastised softly. He reached for her, settling his hand on her leg. Gently. Innocently.

She stared down at the exquisite fingers he'd touched her with, willing them to stay but knowing she should tell him to remove them. She said nothing. Probably didn't even draw a breath. And then he started caressing her leg in small, promising circles, and her world rocked.

"You and I both know we hit it off in that room, *querida*. Despite everything. You were beautiful then, and you're beautiful now. With or without makeup, Esme Jaramillo, you make my mind work and my heart pound. But, that isn't what matters."

She blinked at him, then poked her glasses up.

"Even though you are beautiful, I couldn't care less what you look like on the outside, because you're one of those women who's beautiful on the inside, and it shows." His mouth twisted to the side. "Why can't you believe me?"

Did she dare trust the mesmerizing words of this man? She wanted to. But she couldn't bear to set herself up for more pain. Her skin tingled from head to foot, and when she darted her tongue out to moisten her parched lips, she saw his gaze drop to her mouth and deepen.

Desire pooled low within her. "I won't be your pity date, Gavino. Now or ever."

"You never would be."

"I'm not looking for a relationship. I'm not some desperate . . . single . . . ugly — " she sputtered, though it felt like someone knifed her heart when she said the words.

"You *aren't* ugly, as I've already pointed out. But that's not the issue."

"What is the issue?"

"I didn't come here to put the moves on you, Esme. Not necessarily. We can just be friends if that's what you want." His hand slid from her leg. "I'm cool with that." A beat passed. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes, I . . . I guess." *No. I don't know.* She sighed and turned her head away from him, gathering her wits, gauging his motives. What would it hurt to be friends with him? As long as the boundaries were clear, and they each respected them, things wouldn't get out of control. She needed a tenant, he needed a place to live. She was perfectly capable of resisting him. He was just a man. *A gorgeous, hunk of kissable, hard, bronze male flesh, that is.* Esme nudged her glasses down, closed her eyes, and pinched the bridge of her nose. What was she — lovestruck? No matter what he looked like or how sweetly he talked, she could manage a platonic relationship with Gavino Mendez, makeup artist and painter. She *could*. Wait a minute. Her eyes popped open.

With a rush of anticipation, she realized Gavino possessed talents she obviously didn't. Skills and know-how that could help her regain her pride. Gavino wouldn't dare refuse her, even if he didn't agree with her plan. She'd play on his guilt if she had to. Her brainstorm would meet both their needs.

"There's good light in the carriage house apartment," she murmured, clearing her throat. "I mean, for your painting. I can give you a break on the first couple months' rent so you can get on your feet if — "

"Hold up." Hope lit up his eyes, pulled the corner of his mouth into a half smile. "Does that mean . . .?"

"Yes," she said. "It's yours on a couple of conditions."

He crossed his arms, his bare biceps bulging. "Name them."

She angled her head toward their slapdash paint job and rolled her eyes. "One, you finish painting this damned house."

He laughed. "I knew you'd come around on that. No problem there."

"Two, we both understand that we're friends." She fixed him with her most earnest stare. "Just friends. I'm not looking for . . . entanglements." *Not pity entanglements, anyway.*

He shrugged one shoulder. "I'll admit, that rule's a drag, but if that's how it has to be, okay. We've got a deal."

"Not so fast. One other thing." Her morning coffee burned in her gut. She splayed a palm over her torso and pressed.

He urged her on with a nod of his head.

"I want you . . ." She faltered, afraid to utter the words. Her teeth cut into her bottom lip for a moment. "I want you to help me change my image, Gavino. Makeup, hair, all of it. You're a professional, and that's what I need."

He looked baffled. "If that's what you want, okay. But, why? You look great."

She wouldn't fall for that line again. "Not everyone thinks so. Besides, I don't want to look like this anymore. I don't want to be remembered for that show."

A small line bisected his brows. "What do you want, Esme?"

Turning toward him, she hiked up her chin, just daring him to scoff at her. Taking one more deep breath for courage, she told him, "I want to look sexy, like a bombshell. I want you to help make me irresistible to Vitor Elizalde."

Four

Gavino could understand Esme's need to regain control, to make some changes in her appearance in order to recover from the blow dealt by *The Barry Stillman Show*. What he couldn't quite grasp was her desire to become irresistible to a pompous, mean-spirited, slouch-shouldered jackass when here he sat next to her, ready, willing, and thinking she was fifty kinds of irresistible already. Women. Who could figure them out?

He studied her. Tension buzzed just beneath her surface, even though her casual posture belied the fact. Stretched out on the lounge chair next to him, slim and tentative as a gazelle, a passerby would likely think she was relaxing. Gavino knew better. She was waiting for his answer. Sunlight shone on the locks of hair that peeked out of the front of the funny little head scarf she wore, and a dollop of paint had dried right on the tip of her straight, kissable nose. Even dressed in an oversized, paint-splattered men's shirt and cut-offs, Esme looked every inch the brilliant scientist he knew her to be.

And then it hit him.

Perhaps she wasted that Elizalde weasel because they were of the same education level. Maybe his own charms had no effect on her because he didn't measure up where it counted to this woman. He was just a starving artist, a simple man. He didn't stimulate her exquisite brain, and just possibly the smart creep did. The thought made him clench his jaw until his teeth ground.

Elizalde didn't deserve Esme.

Maybe you don't deserve her either. Vino. You hurt her. A sting of sadness hit him. Who was he trying to kid? Esme didn't want him because of what had happened on the *Stillman Show*. In the first few

moments he knew her, he betrayed her. He would make up for that, even if it meant setting aside his desire for her for the time being. No sense trying to sweet talk her. She still thought he'd come to Denver out of a sense of pity.

"Well?" Esme blinked at him from behind her glasses. "Will you agree to all the conditions?"

His mama didn't raise no fool. He'd go along with anything if it meant spending time with her, even this stupid makeover idea. If he had his own agenda in the whole jacked-up plan of hers, well, she just didn't need to know it. This would give him time to redeem himself, and after that, he'd show her he could arouse her brain as well as her senses, no matter their educational differences. But for now, he wouldn't come on too strong with her. Throwing the full Mendez Mack Action would just scare her away. He'd let her take the lead and, with any luck, she'd come around.

"Of course I'll do it. It would be my pleasure to be of service to you." She wanted bombshell; he'd lay it on thick. So thick, in fact, she'd hate it and come to appreciate her own natural beauty. It'd work. It *had* to work.

"Then it's a deal, thank you." Her tone softened. "I really appreciate this." She laid her delicate hand on his leg and squeezed. For a moment his mind reeled. This kind of gratitude, he could get used to. He'd work on giving Esme better reasons to touch his body with those velvety hands, but for now, the thank-you worked well enough.

"*You* appreciate it?" He chuckled. "You're saving me a road trip to nowhere, Esme."

A wrinkle of worry touched her forehead, and her fingers moved to her bottom lip. "I didn't even stop to consider your situation. I just assumed . . . can you stay in Denver?"

Mr. Fuentes always told him, if you don't have anywhere to go, you better start liking where you are. Gavino spread his arms and grinned. "I'm all yours. Two months' free rent might be just the jumpstart my art career needs." And it will give me time to show you I'm the guy you need. He laid back, feeling better than he had in a long time.

"What are you going to do to me first?" Esme asked.

A dagger of desire impaled him, and for a moment he couldn't breathe. Her gaze was clear, her question innocent of innuendo, but he was damn proud to be a red-blooded Latino male. It took every ounce

of restraint not to leap on the double meaning he read into her words. Was he the only one feeling this undercurrent of electricity between them?

Against his natural inclinations, he adopted an all-business attitude. "First off, I need to get moved in. Next, I finish painting the house. Then — " he clapped his palms together, then rubbed them slowly as he fully assessed her "— how much time do we have for this makeover?"

"The Fall faculty get-together is on August sixth, so about — " her eyes shifted up and to the left as she calculated "— four weeks." She looked doubtful. "Can we pull it off?"

"That's more than enough time. We'll do your hair first."

Her hand went to her scarf, and she tucked her chin like a puppy used to getting smacked. "Okay."

He could see he'd have to be extra gentle with her feelings. "Not that your hair needs work, Esme. We have to start somewhere. I figure I'll just start at your head and make my way slowly down your body until I have it all covered. Sound good?" He could feel the wolfish grin begging to make an appearance on his face, but he held it back.

He watched Esme holding her breath, and he knew she was staving off the hiccups. Finally, she answered, her voice breathy and feminine.

"Uh . . . it, um, yes. Sounds good."

The man definitely wore briefs, Esme decided. Or maybe nothing. Or maybe she shouldn't be gawking at his backside with unabashed lust, but she just couldn't help it. She stared dry-mouthed at the skin-exposing rip in Gavino's jeans — just below his muscular rear end — as he descended the ladder to retrieve the ice water she'd brought out to him. When his foot reached the bottom rung, she tore her reverence from his body and focused on the fresh coat of Spring Eggshell paint on her house. Her mind's eye remained on his backside. "It looks *so* good."

Gavino turned to her, a curious smile on his face. He studied her over the rim of the glass as he took a long draw of water, then wiped the back of his hand slowly across his lips. "Such glowing admiration could make a painter wish he were the paint job itself."

"Ha ha," she replied in a tart but playful tone. If he only knew. She shifted her gaze to the ground, but not before it had swept down his bare, muscular, sweat-sheened and paint-spattered chest. She noted

the unfastened top button of his jeans with unladylike interest. "I really appreciate you getting this all buttoned up. Finished, I mean."

"No sweat. It's calming work," Gavino said. "Gives me time to think about my artwork."

With dismay, Esme realized she'd been so focused on her own issues lately, she hadn't even bothered to inquire about Gavino and his life. "How's that going? Are you all settled in?"

He nodded. "After I finish the new painting I just started, I think I may take a few pieces around to some of the galleries in town, see what kind of response I get."

"That's a wonderful idea. I'd love to see your work," she hinted, hoping he'd offer to take a break and show her right then. She supposed she could learn a lot about the man that way.

"Sometime, sure," he said, but sounded unconvincing.

She felt the conversation dwindling to a close and wracked her brain for something to revive it. "What's the new painting? Can I take a peek at that one?"

He hiked up one shoulder, his gaze distant, as though looking inward rather than out. "I never show my works-in-progress until they're no longer in progress." Gavino plucked an ice cube from his glass and ran it over the back of his neck and his chest. A low sound of satisfaction rumbled from his throat, making Esme's lungs tighten. "I needed this," he said. "It's hot today."

Speak Es. Say something. She'd guided technical lectures, spoken before grant review boards with eloquence, yet nothing intelligent came to mind when presented with such brazen masculine appeal. Well, that certainly knocked one job off her list of alternate careers. She could never work as an announcer in a men's strip club. She'd be tongue-tied the whole time. "August," she blurted.

"Excuse me?"

"August is usually Colorado's hottest month," she said, crossing her arms over her torso. "You haven't seen the worst of the heat wave yet." *Weather. Yes. Innocuous and socially acceptable. Let's talk about that.* She didn't want to ponder the image of Gavino running that dripping ice cube over her skin.

Yes, I do.

She was the one to insist they keep things platonic, so why did she want to kick herself for that rule every time she saw the man?

Over these first three days of Gavino's residence in the carriage house, they'd fallen into an easy, polite friendship. They met on the back porch each morning and shared coffee and sections of *The Denver Post*. He'd kept his word by being nothing but a gentleman. Almost brotherly. Yet, here she stood lusting after him like a cat in heat and wishing her feelings were reciprocated. How fickle could she be?

She had probably concocted fifty weak excuses to come outside and gape at him while he painted her house wearing only ripped jeans and tennis shoes. She had to pull herself together.

"But it's a dry heat, yeah?" He grinned.

"What? Oh. Yes." She pushed her lips into the semblance of a normal smile and watched his throat move as he drained the glass. A rivulet of melting ice trickled slowly down his chest, traversed his ridged stomach, and soaked into the top of his jeans. *Dios Mío*, call the fire department.

"What are your plans tonight?" Gavino asked, extending the empty glass toward her.

Esme jerked her gaze to his face then took the tumbler, clutching it to her chest. "Uh, I don't have any. I was going to peruse some lab studies but they aren't pressing. Why?"

He squinted up at the house, then stooped to gather some painting supplies into a neat pile on the sidewalk. "I thought we'd discuss some options for the makeover . . . over dinner, wherever you'd like," he said casually. "Then we could catch some live jazz at El Chapultepec." He stood, hands on hips.

Her lips parted. Was he asking her out?

He raised his palms and winked. "Before you protest, I assure you, it'll just be two friends grabbing a bite and checking out music."

"I — I know." Irrational disappointment fizzled through her.

"My treat."

"Oh. Well. I'm perfectly capable of paying my own way."

"Whatever you'd like."

Nothing seemed to faze the guy. He pulled the elastic from his ponytail and ran his fingers through his hair. Sweat dampened his hairline, ran down his jaws.

"I've heard a lot about El Chapultepec's world-class jazz. It'll be more fun together."

What wouldn't? Esme thought. She'd never even heard of El Chapultepec, such was the extent of her dismal night life experience. Even so, her heart quickened at the thought of an evening out with Gavino. It wasn't a date, but it kind of felt like one. The ridiculous urge to spin in a circle ribboned through her. "I've never been there. But that would be fine," she stammered. "Fun, actually. So, yes. When should we go?"

The low-hanging afternoon sun burnished Gavino's face in warm gold light. He smiled, looking genuinely pleased. "Really? Great. I need to straighten up here, then grab a shower. Let's say, an hour? Will that give you enough time?"

She nodded, firm and businesslike. "See you then. I'll bring a notebook and pen."

"A notebook and — why?" Confusion clouded his eyes.

"So we can take notes, write down our plan." She adjusted her glasses. "For the makeover. You said we'd discuss it over dinner. That's the whole point, right?" *Please say no.*

"Oh. Right. Of course." The corners of his mouth quivered. "Good, uh, you bring those things. That'll save me the trouble of digging 'em up myself." He winked, and the diamond stud in his earlobe caught the sunlight.

Esme turned and took hesitant steps toward the porch, wondering about the look of amusement on Gavino's face. She felt like she'd made some kind of dorky blunder but had no clue what it was and didn't have time to dwell on it. She only had an hour to get ready. Ugh. She dreaded it. She slowed and finally turned back, cheeks burning. "Gavino? I'm sorry. What do you suppose women wear . . . to such a place?" She bit the corner of her lip as humiliation bubbled up inside her for having to show how woefully inept she was at this type of social interaction.

He closed the space between them in seconds and touched her nose with one paint-coated finger. "Whatever you choose will look perfect, *querida*. It's not a fancy spot by any means. Wear what makes you comfortable."

She released a pent-up breath. A smile lifted her lips, and her skin tingled where he'd brushed it. It was a new sensation, being touched by a man like him, and she enjoyed the attention. "Thank you," she said, and meant it. Gavino Mendez was a nice man. He made her feel

less like a scientist and more like a woman. After the *Barry Stillman* debacle, she never thought she'd say it, but she was glad Gavino had come to Denver.

The famous jazz club was nothing more than a minuscule hole in the wall on the corner of 20th and Blake streets in lower downtown. Esme crossed the threshold, welcomed by a door-woman who smiled but didn't check their ID cards. The place was pretty full for a week-night, men and women nursing beverages and bouncing their heads gently to the beat of the music. The black rayon slacks and cherry-red twinset Esme had chosen were on the conservative side, but she didn't feel the least bit self-conscious. Gavino had told her she looked wonderful. That seemed to hold her.

The back room was a brashly lit cantina offering no-nonsense food and a pool table. They'd just finished a meal at the LoDo Grill next door, though, so they scanned the bar area close to the musicians. They spied a couple vacating a wood and vinyl booth halfway between the door and the tiny stage and made a beeline for it. Esme slid in, surprised that Gavino took his seat beside her instead of across the table. She looked at him quizzically.

"You mind? I like to be able to watch the musicians," he explained, propping the heels of his boots on the bench across from them and settling in. "I'm a visual artist."

"I don't mind." Was he nuts? Sitting next to him was a treat. She let her eyes wander around the darkened interior. Photographs of musicians who'd played there lined the walls, frame to frame. Pink bar lights shone off the black and white floor tiles and glinted off the chrome edges of the Formica tables. Up front, four musicians crowded a small, battered stage, filling the club with music through a surprisingly good-quality sound system. ONE DRINK MINIMUM PER SET, a large sign near the stage stated.

An attractive young waitress dressed in jeans and a short-sleeved green blouse approached the table. She briefly glanced at Esme before her ravenous gaze and 300-watt smile rested comfortably on Gavino. "Well, how are you this evening?" Her voice held a whiskey-rasp served up with a side shot of confident sexuality. "What can I bring you?"

Gavino turned from the waitress to her. "Esme?"

"Whatever you're having," she told him, catching the waitress's "notice me" posture out of the corner of her eye.

Gavino ordered them each a coffee with Frangelico as Esme lost herself in the husky tones, ignoring the waitress's blatant flirting with Gavino. She might as well have straddled his lap to take the order. How irksome. What was she, invisible? Sure, she didn't have any hold over Gavino, but how could the waitress know that? Was it so obvious to the waitress that a woman like Esme could never truly be with a man like Gavino? Her stomach cramped. She wouldn't think about it, that's all.

When their coffees came, Esme glanced over and realized with a start how close she and Gavino sat. His body heat felt like a magnetic force field. If she turned her head, she could probably count the whiskers dusting his bronzed cheeks. His arm draped casually over the back of the booth, his long fingers tapping out the beat next to her head. His proximity set her senses dancing, and despite the irrationality of it, she yearned to edge even nearer, to nestle into him. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to fantasize how it would feel for Gavino Mendez to actually be attracted to her. One song ended, and another began.

"It's just my opinion," he said next to her ear, his breath hot, his creamy voice vibrating against her skin until she could hardly bear it, "but there's just something blatantly erotic about saxophone music. Yeah?"

Esme swallowed with effort, her lids fluttering open. It was a simple question. She didn't know about the music itself, but there was definitely something erotic about a lethally sexy man breathing on your neck in a hot smoky jazz club while saxophone rhythms thumped their way into your soul. *That* she could get used to. She brushed her hand against the side of her neck. "Yes. It's . . . it's lovely," she finally managed.

Gavino's soft laughter brought her gaze to his profile. She tried to look indignant, though the coffee and companionship had mellowed her into a great mood. "Are you laughing at me?"

"I'm laughing *with* you, Esme." He squeezed her shoulder.

She crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "Well, considering the fact that I'm not laughing, what's so funny?"

He shifted to face her, so he didn't have to speak into her ear to be heard over the sultry bass pumping through the packed crowd. Pink light caught one side of his face while shadows claimed the other. "I don't know . . . you make me happy."

"How so?"

"Here I am talking about sax music being erotic, sensual, and you say it's lovely." He shrugged. "You're different than the other women I've known. You're just so . . . real."

She arched a brow. "You thought I was an illusion?"

He ran his fingers along her shoulder, studying her face with an intensity Esme could hardly bear. "Sometimes, I wonder."

Esme turned her attention back to the band, feeling light and tingly and alive. He said the nicest things to her all the time. One would almost think the man found awkwardness attractive. Right then, it didn't matter if Gavino was schmoozing her, trying to charm his way into her good graces to make up for what had happened. The flattery felt nice, and she just wanted to enjoy his company for a while. He was witty and attentive, and oh-so-gorgeous. She felt warm and special tucked next to him in the booth, even if it wasn't a "real" date.

Her mind wandered to their earlier discussion about the makeover. They'd shoot for an exotic look, he'd suggested over a dinner of West Texas burgers and home fries. Elizalde hailed from Brazil, Gavino had explained, and many Brazilian women went for that style. For Esme, "exotic" brought to mind fruit basket hats and fuschia feather boas but she was sure it meant something else altogether to Gavino. She certainly hoped so, anyway.

She leaned toward him. "Do me a favor. If you see a woman who has this exotic look we're trying for, point her out."

"Gladly," Gavino said, immediately scanning the crowd. She tried to follow his gaze, but found herself staring at his angular jawline instead, yearning to touch it. Even masked by the smoke in the bar and the enticing food odors wafting in from the kitchen, Gavino smelled soapy fresh and audaciously masculine. She didn't think he wore cologne, not that he needed any help smelling incredible.

"There's an exotic-looking woman." He inclined his head toward a table adjacent to the stage.

Esme tracked his line of sight until her eyes rested on the woman in question, and her stomach plunged, though not nearly as far as the woman's neckline. Maybe she was looking at the wrong person. Esme scanned the booths, but besides Ms. Cleavage, only men occupied the seats. From her poofed-up hair to her garish makeup and painted-on

clothes, the woman looked nothing like what Esme had pictured as exotic. She looked like a . . . a tramp.

"You can't possibly mean her?" Esme balked, resisting the urge to laugh out loud. "In the purple mini-dress?"

Gavino smiled with what could only be interpreted as sloe-eyed masculine approval. "That's her. Looks great, yeah?"

Esme's hand fluttered to her throat, her eyes fixed on the overblown caricature of the stereotypical bar fly. Was this the kind of woman who turned Gavino's head? A little coil of disappointed jealousy sprang free inside her. She could never carry that look. She took a large swallow of her coffee and reminded herself she wasn't trying to interest Gavino, she was trying to get back at Vitor. That was her goal.

Period.

"Well, I guess you could say she looks exotic." She fiddled with her coffee mug. "A bit much, though, don't you think?"

"Are you kidding? If anything, she's a little tame."

"Tame?" Dread surged through her. "No way. She looks — "

"*Qué?*"

Nose scrunched, she tipped her head side-to-side, searching for a kinder phrase, before giving in and saying what had immediately come to her mind. "She looks . . . paid for."

Gavino laughed, leaning his head back. "You won't look exactly like that, don't worry. By exotic, I just mean a style."

"But, *that* style?"

"We're talking about a wealthy, worldly, Brazilian scientist," he reminded her. "The man could have his pick of women. We have to choose a look that stands out from the crowd."

Esme's throat closed at the prospect of standing out like that. She'd look like the poster child for cheap and desperate women in their thirties. Then again, what did she know? Gavino had his finger on the pulse of fashion, and he was a man. She'd have to trust his judgement about what would attract other men.

"Well, she certainly does stand out." Her dubious gaze fell to the woman's neckline again. She'd never fill a dress like that. They only had four weeks, and short of plastic surgery, her pert breasts were doomed to remain virtually cleavage-free. "Miracle Bra" was just a brand name, after all.

"This is what you wanted, right, *querida*?" His tone lowered as the musicians ended one song to a smattering of enthusiastic applause. "To look different than you do right now? To attract Elizalde? 'Make me a bombshell,' I think you said."

Her head nodded as her mind screamed, "No!" She pushed her drink farther away, unsure if she had the stomach for finishing it "I do want that, but . . . maybe she was a bad example. Find another woman who looks exotic."

Gavino glanced around, finally pointing at an in-your-face blonde wearing a royal blue leather bustier and matching miniskirt. "She has the style."

Esme studied her, feeling sick. She couldn't even feign approval of the blonde's immodest outfit. *Mama would have a stroke if she saw me wearing that.* "Anyone else?"

"In the hot pink." Gavino pointed. "Over there."

Three strikes, and I'm out, thought Esme, catching sight of the bottle-redhead he'd indicated. If these examples were any indication of her fashion future, she was doomed to look trashy. Not that she begrudged the three women their choices, but the look just wasn't *her*. Yet, that was how Gavino envisioned her metamorphosis. How horrifying.

Dismay settled like wet leaves in her stomach, and she directed her attention to the street outside the window. She'd instigated the whole plan, so she couldn't back out now. For all she knew, it would work. Perhaps the core of her beauty problem stemmed from a fear of taking risks. Wearing skintight blue leather might actually exhilarate and empower her. She doubted it. But, if Gavino thought it would work . . .

"I've told you already," he said, as though reading her mind, "you don't need to change. If you want to go through with this, that's fine. If not, that's okay, too. You're perfect as you are."

"Is that why I ended up on THE BARRY STILLMAN SHOW?"

He maintained a calm expression, but Esme noticed his fists clench. "You ended up on the show because Elizalde is a no good, deceitful — "

"Don't worry. I'll take care of him." She flicked the words away as though swatting a bug. "As for this makeover, you don't have to coddle me, Gavino. I'm a grown woman. I know I need work."

"We'll have to agree to disagree on that point." He covered her hand with his own, then quickly released it. "But I've already told you I'd make you over. Your wish is my command. So, tell me what you want."

A morose sigh escaped her lips. "I know it's shallow, but I just wish I felt . . . beautiful." Esme wasn't sure if it was the liqueur or the way Gavino's eyes darkened as he stared at her, but liquid warmth surged through her, rendering her limbs buoyant and weightless. When he looked at her, he really looked at her. Like she mattered more than anyone else. She'd never experienced anything like it.

"Don't you worry, *querida*," he said finally. "I've got all kinds of ways to make you feel like the most beautiful woman in the world."

Esme wanted to believe him. She really, really did.

Five

"Purple?"

"Yes!"

"He actually said he was going to dye your hair purple, and you just batted your baby browns and said, 'Okay'? *Estás loca?*" Lilly's disbelieving rasp carried across the phone line.

Esme twisted around to scowl out the window toward the carriage house, tangling herself up in the phone cord in the process. "No, I'm not crazy, and I didn't bat my eyes. I just didn't know how to respond. I seem to have trouble formulating intelligent sentences when I'm around the guy."

Lilly groaned. "You're driving *me* crazy, girl. Just take a breath, back up, and tell me exactly what he said."

Esme tucked the phone between her cheek and shoulder and began emptying the dishwasher to keep her nervous hands occupied. "He didn't say purple exactly. He said eggplant, which is worse. Eggplant, for God's sake. I just don't know if I can go through with something that drastic, Lilly." She hurled a meat fork into the drawer. "I'll look like a club kid. I just know it."

A week had passed since Gavino had pointed out the three exotic musketeers at El Chapultapec. It had cracked her resolve to the point that she'd put him off for several days. But yesterday, he'd tripped her up. He flashed that dimple at her, called her *querida* and asked her when they'd get the show on the road. "How about tomorrow morning?" she'd blurted, eager to spend time with him. Stupid, stupid. Now, tomorrow was today and there was no turning back.

"Oh." Lilly blew out a breath, and her tone softened. "That's different. That's one of the hot new hair colors, Es. It doesn't come out look-

ing purple at all, especially on dark hair like yours and mine. It's pretty. Eggplant's just the name, you know? Is he there yet?"

Esme peered out the window, scanning the carriage house for signs of life. "Not yet." She settled back against the edge of the sink and hung her head, still unsure about dying her hair the color of a bulbous vegetable that very few people liked. "You're sure it'll be okay?"

"Tell him to do temporary color instead of permanent if you're really worried. I think it'll be fine." Lilly hesitated. "Listen, Es, I've been meaning to talk to you about this. If you're making changes that'll improve your self-esteem, if you're doing it for you, that's one thing. But if this is part of your ridiculous revenge plan — "

"Ah, sorry to interrupt, but he's here, Lil," Esme lied, not up for another lecture. Her friends seemed to believe she should just throw herself into Gavino's arms and forget about Elizalde. Like *that* would bring her dignity back. "I'll call you later."

"But Es — "

Esme cradled the telephone handset gently, then peered back at the carriage house again. Where was he? Anticipation bubbled inside her like an unstable volcano.

Despite reservations about her impending dye job, Esme couldn't wait to spend some time with Gavino. Though they'd met on the back porch for coffee each morning as usual, he'd spent the majority of his days in the carriage house working furiously on this new secret project of his. She'd caught glimpses of him through his large north-facing window several times, which made her feel like a Peeping Tom. But, it wasn't her fault the window over her kitchen sink faced his place.

She'd just set the pot of coffee to brew and laid out some crumb cake when Gavino darkened the open back door. "Hey-yo, it's not the Avon Lady calling," he said through the screen, punctuating his playful words with a wink.

"Then it must be the L'Oreal Man, because I'm worth it."

"Funny lady," he replied. "Can you grab the door?"

Esme smoothed her hands down the front of her blue jeans as excitement twined with dread inside her. She crossed the room and pushed open the squeaky screen door, welcoming him with a nervous smile. "C-come on in."

Faded jeans that almost matched hers hugged his muscular thighs, and a black polo shirt molded to the width of his chest and shoulders.

His hair hung damp and loose, and that signature just-showered freshness assailed her senses and filled the room. He smelled so familiar, so alive and vibrant, it made her dizzy.

"You sound out of breath," he told her, carting in a plastic cape and what looked like a fishing tackle box.

"I'm, uh, fine." Esme eyed the tools he'd lugged in with barely masked concern, then wrapped her arms across her torso and shivered. "Okay, I lied. I'm nervous."

"¿Por qué?" He set his things on the wooden dinette and turned back to her, planting his fists on his hips. His eyes narrowed, and a playful smile tagged that delicious dimple into his cheek. "Still worried I'm gonna give you fluorescent hair?"

She blurted a nervous little *heh-heh-heh* and moved to the cabinet, snagging two mugs off the top shelf. The crisp, welcoming scent of coffee filled the air between them. "You know you're a dead man if you do. If anything, you should be shaking in those black boots of yours. Eat some coffee cake." She pointed toward it.

"I won't do anything out of control, I promise." He picked up a square of the cake and bit into it "Mmmm, it's warm."

"That's usually how things come out of the oven," she teased. "I just made it."

"You made it?" he exclaimed, shaking his head and looking at her with laughter in his eyes. "Smart, beautiful, funny, and she cooks, too. You're a catch, *Profé*. No lie."

"Uh huh. Sure." She didn't believe him, but his words still warmed her. She grabbed a piece of cake and took a nibble, setting the rest on a small plate.

"You know, I started to think you'd changed your mind about this makeover." He popped the rest of the breakfast cake in his mouth, then rubbed his cinnamon-coated fingers together while he chewed and swallowed.

"Not at all. I'm anxious for it. I've just been busy getting ready for the semester." Esme turned away to hide the lie and busied herself pouring their drinks. She didn't have much preparation left for the Fall term because, true to form, she'd gotten it all done in the first couple weeks of her break. Being a Type-A personality came in handy now and then.

Without warning, Gavino moved behind her and furrowed his long, warm fingers into her hair, moving slowly from her nape up along the sides of her head. Her heart lunged, her breath caught. Goosebumps trailed down her back. His touch sizzled but she froze, only remembering to exhale when the steaming brew spilled over the rim of the mug she'd been filling and spread in a pool on the countertop.

"Whoops! I . . . oh, darn it." She set down the carafe with a sharp clunk and spun to face him. Too close. She saw the flecks of gold in his brown eyes, and noted with dismay that he'd licked his soft, full lips. "W-what are you doing?"

He blinked innocently. "Just checking the length of your hair, deciding whether I should trim before I color. I didn't mean to startle you." He rested his palms on the edge of the counter on either side of her, boxing her inside his arms. His expression turned devious, and he raised his brows. "What did you think I was going to do? Kiss you?"

"Well . . . I . . . no — " Mortified, she poked her glasses up and tried to keep herself from trembling. Her chin raised, and she used her most professorial tone. "Of course not."

"That's good, because we have our agreement and all. Just friends," he drawled. His eyes drank in her face, settling just long enough to be uncomfortable on her mouth. "You remember the rules, *querida*, yeah?"

It took everything within her not to bite her lip. Or his. But, she had her pride to consider. "Of course, I remember. I made the — " *stupid, short-sighted, infuriating* " — rules."

He cocked his head to the side, a rueful half-smile on his lips. "No arguing there." His gaze dropped to her throat, and his nostrils flared as he inhaled. Next to them, coffee ran off the countertop in a trickle, splashing wide on the linoleum.

Esme noted it distractedly, then croaked, "Excuse me." She pointed toward the sink. "I need the dish cloth." She needed to get away so every breath she pulled into her lungs wasn't filled with the scent of him, the promise of him.

The empty promise.

He pushed away like nothing had happened and walked backward until the table stopped him. Stuffing his hands in his back pockets, he just watched her.

Esme snagged the dish cloth and sopped up the mess on the counter before squatting to swipe at the floor. The air fairly crackled with unspoken tension. Was she the only one who felt the electricity between them?

She managed stammering small talk while she poured them coffee. It wasn't until she was seated on a barstool wrapped in Gavino's plastic cape that her flustered state had eased enough to facilitate normal conversation.

"I have an appointment to get contact lenses on Monday," she told him as he combed through her hair. She clutched her glasses in her lap, the room before her a soft myopic blur. "Maybe we can go shopping for cosmetics sometime after that."

"Sure." He set the comb down and stepped around in front of her. "No rush. Get used to your contacts first. Your skin is sensitive. I won't be surprised if your eyes are, too."

She squinted, watching him mix some vile-smelling concoction in a small plastic bowl. "Okay." She indicated the glop, her words apprehensive. "This is the temporary color, right?"

He nodded. "It'll wash out in about four weeks. Sooner if you really hate it. Stop worrying."

"I'll try." She squinted at it again, then sat back, horrified. "Is *that* the color my hair will be?"

"No, Es," he said with exaggerated patience. "I wouldn't dye your hair deathbed gray. Give me a little credit."

"Sorry." She held out her hands and took a deep breath. "Okay. I'm okay."

"Not that my opinion counts for much, but I think you look adorable in your glasses," he said lightly, setting the bowl on the table and digging neat squares of aluminum foil out of the tackle box. He placed them next to the bowl, then stepped behind her and parted her hair neatly with a yellow comb, clamping one side of it in some kind of big clothespin-looking thing.

His opinion meant a lot, but she couldn't tell him that. Instead she quipped, "Well, you know what they say. Men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses."

"Men like Elizalde, *qué malcreado*, might not, but that's his loss." He lifted a section of her hair and slathered some of the dye on it from the roots out, then folded it in one of the foil squares over the ends.

"And men like you, Gavino?" she ventured. "Somehow I just can't imagine you'd go for the wallflower type when all the best-looking women are throwing themselves at you."

"Men like me?" He laughed. "What do you mean by that?"

What could she say? Drop-dead gorgeous men? Those who should never be more than half-dressed? Bare-chested babes hot enough to star in Diet Coke commercials? Make-me-shiver-and-beg type of guys? "You know." She sniffed, the pungent chemicals stinging her nose. "You're not exactly average."

He deftly painted and foiled more of her hair, his fingers sure and gentle. "If that is your version of a compliment, *Profé*, thank you. And incidentally, just because a woman wears glasses doesn't mean she's a wallflower."

She didn't want to argue the virtues of her spectacles any more. "Tell me about your family." Esme couldn't see his face, but he seemed to ponder her request before answering, taking his time to slather and wrap another section of her hair.

"There's not much to tell. What do you want to know?"

"You know, the usual. Where were you born, where are your parents, do you have any brothers and sisters."

"I never knew my father," he started, dipping the little brush into the metal bowl. "My brother Phillipe and I grew up with my mom in Chicago."

"Does she still live there?"

"She passed away four years ago."

Silence. Hair dye. Foil. "I'm so sorry," Esme whispered, feeling awkward. "How rude of me to pry."

"*No té preocupes*. You weren't prying. We're getting to know each other. Anyhow, I'm sorry, too. She had a hard life, so I don't blame her for checking out early." He paused, resting the heels of his hands against her scalp. "But I miss her."

"I bet she misses you and Phillipe, too."

He snorted with doubt and resumed working on her hair. "My brother and I didn't make life any easier for her, that's for damn sure. Until we grew up, of course. Phillipe was always a pretty good son. Me, on the other hand — " He sucked in one side of his cheek, making a sound of regret.

"Were you a bad boy, Gavino?" Esme teased.

"Actually . . . yes."

His somber tone straightened her up and warned her to move away from the subject. "And Phillipe? Where is he?"

"He's a missionary with the church. Lives in Venezuela."

"¿A *lucero*?"

"Yes, really." He chuckled. "Is that such a surprise?"

"You just don't seem priestly to me." *What a waste that would be*, she thought, waiting for lightning to strike.

"Phillipe's the missionary, Esme, not me."

She leaned her head back. "Yes, but. Well. I guess you're right. Does he look like you?"

"Kind of." He dipped out more dye. "Shorter hair. Why?"

She faced forward again and hiked one shoulder up. "I don't know. Seems unfair for the Venezuelan women. A missionary who looked like you would make them want to sin, not repent." Gavino laughed again, and Esme's cheeks heated. Where were these bold comments coming from? One would almost think she was flirting with the man. Curiosity getting the better of her, she said, "Tell me about this bad boy past of yours."

"Oh, sure, *scandalosa*. Dig out all my skeletons."

Esme clicked her tongue. "I am not a gossip! I'm just making friendly conversation."

"Uh huh." He'd finished applying the color and foil to her hair, and he reached for a timer. Its gentle ticking and the whir of the refrigerator filled the air. "If I tell you about my past, you've got to answer any question I ask you. Okay?"

"Any question? How can that be fair?"

"Take it or leave it," he said playfully, leaning his hip against the counter and crossing his arms.

Her mouth parted. Before she could answer, a knock on the back screen door interrupted them. "Esme?" Pilar sounded teary.

Both Gavino and Esme turned. "Pilar," Esme said, reaching from under the cape to put on her glasses. "What's wrong? Come in." She stood and crossed to the door.

Pilar's puffy cheeks and red-rimmed eyes showed she'd been crying. Pep shuffled in next to her, his head bowed. Pilar's protective hand cupped his tiny neck. "I'm sorry to interrupt. Hi, Gavino," she added, distractedly.

"Hello."

"You're not interrupting, honey, you know that," Esme added, turning her attention to the boy. She softened her tone and squatted to his level. "Hey, Pep. Aren't you going to say hi to your auntie?"

His head came up slowly, and he did a double-take at her foil-wrapped hair and black plastic cape. His pout brightened tentatively. "Cool. You look like a creepy space man."

"Thanks." Esme noted the deep purple bruising around Pep's eye, the fresh cuts over his brow and on his swollen lip. She flickered a glance at Gavino, who was studying the boy's face with a concerned frown. "And you look like a heavyweight boxer, *mi hijo*. What happened?"

"I don't wanna talk 'bout it." Pep's scowl deepened.

"It's okay, baby," Pilar said, her voice wobbly from holding back tears. "You go in the living room and watch TV while I talk to Auntie Esme. Later I'll take you to McDonald's, okay?"

Pep shrugged, then scuffed listlessly out of the room.

"Where's Teddy?"

"I dropped him off at my mom's." She stared wistfully at the doorway through which her older son had gone. "I figured Pep could use some one-on-one time."

"Can I pour you a cup of coffee, Pilar?" Gavino asked.

She nodded before slumping into a chair at the end of the table and dissolving into tears. Her face in her palms, Pilar's shoulders shook as she wept.

Esme scraped a chair over until it faced Pilar, then laid her hands on her friend's knee. "Honey, what happened? The same boys again?"

She nodded. "He's just a baby. Why is this happening?"

Gavino set the mug in front of Pilar, then laid his hand on Esme's shoulder, intending to let her know he'd wait in the other room. His insides knotted whenever he saw a woman cry, and he sensed that he should give the two friends privacy.

Esme peered up at him, her expression disturbed. Before he could take his leave, she covered his hand with her own and said, "Pep's been having trouble with some bullies in their neighborhood. He's been coming home beat up all summer long. This is his fourth — "

"Fifth," Pilar corrected.

"His fifth black eye since school let out."

"And he's six. *Six!* His permanent teeth are just starting to come in, and I'm afraid he's gonna get them knocked out." Pilar sniffed loudly then smeared at her eyes. "He's such a peaceful, introverted little guy. What's with young boys, Gavino? Why do they always pick on the weaker kids?"

A feeling like a steel-toed boot kicked Gavino's gut. He sank into a chair and smoothed his palm down his face. If they only knew they were talking to the grown-up version of one of Pep's tormenters. A tidal wave of guilt engulfed him. He felt like a fraud. "I don't know, Pilar. Has your husband talked it over with Pep yet?" *Good, Vino, pawn it off.*

Her eyes flashed. "That's another thing." She glowered at Esme, flailing her small hands to punctuate her emphatic words. "He has time to solve all the problems in the world, but he can't take half a day to stay home and talk to his son."

Esme glanced at Gavino again, twisting her mouth to the side. "Danny is a cop with Denver. We all went to high school together," she explained, her eyes conveying more than her words did. "His . . . schedule keeps him away from home a lot."

Chipper cartoon voices and zany sound effects filtered in from the living room, oddly out of sync with the gravity of the conversation. If Pilar and Danny had argued that morning, Gavino felt certain he — being male — stood on the wrong side of enemy lines. Esme and Pilar watched him as he geared up to traipse through a verbal mine field in this Mars versus Venus war. Woefully unarmed, he swallowed and took one tentative step, bracing himself mentally for the explosion.

"Maybe he's busy at work. *I'm* sure he'd stay home if he could," he offered, not sure at all. He didn't even know the guy. All he could give her were air-balloons of false assurances, weightless and empty and trite.

No mines blew, thank God. Pilar half-laughed, half-huffed at his suggestion. "Yeah, it's just swell having a tough guy for a dad when he can't even help you escape the neighborhood jerks." She reached for a piece of cake and nibbled at it halfheartedly.

Gavino tiptoed over one mine and faced another. He had no business offering anyone parenting or marital advice. But, Esme — wide-eyed and serious despite the glob of purplish-gray dye meandering down her temple from her berserk silver crown — kept looking at him

like he should bang his fists on his chest and save the day. And, damnit, he didn't want to let her down.

He stood, pointing vaguely at the doorway. "Why don't you two talk for a while? I'll go hang out with Pep." He jerked his head toward the ticking timer. "Call me when that goes off so I can rinse you."

"I will," Esme said distractedly.

"Don't forget unless you want to fry your hair."

"I won't. I promise. Go talk to Pep." She smiled at him like he was a knight riding in to rescue the little prince. Tenderness welled inside him. He leaned toward her, wanting so badly to capture those red apple lips with his own. Instead, he nipped the blob of dye off her temple, then winked.

"He's so kind," he heard Pilar murmur as he left the room.

Gavino's heart pounded an army cadence in his chest as he walked toward the front of the house. He paused in the hallway. What in the hell should he say? *What would you have wanted to hear as a confused six-year-old boy, Vito?* He wouldn't have wanted to hear much of anything from an adult, unfortunately. As a child, he had yearned to be *listened* to more than anything else. He just wanted someone to hear him. With that in mind, he forged ahead. How scary could a six-year-old pip-squeak be?

He stopped in the archway to the living room and leaned his shoulder against the wall, crossing his arms. Pep was slumped on the sofa, enveloped in his stylish baggy clothes. The animated action on the screen prompted no emotion on his innocent face. Bright colors shone in his listless round eyes. His bottom lip jutted out and his shoulders hung. He looked depressed. At six years of age, that was just unacceptable. Pep stole a sidelong peek at him, trying to pretend he hadn't.

"*Órale, chavalito.*" Gavino pushed off the wall and sauntered toward the young boy.

He blinked, solemn. "They kick you out?"

"Something like that."

Pep pursed his lips. "*Chismas* time. No men allowed," the boy added, his tone resigned and knowledgeable.

Gossip time. Gavino grinned at the youngster's assessment of his mother's discussions with her friends. He settled onto the couch next to the tiny boy, mimicking his position. Pep's feet didn't come close to

reaching the floor, a detail Gavino found endearing. He looked too small to be targeted by bullies.

For a few minutes, they just stared at the screen together. Gavino gave the boy time to wonder what the heck this grown-up was doing next to him. "What're we watching?" he finally asked.

Pep's feet bounced three times then stopped. His eyes remained on the screen. "Somethin', I dunno."

Gavino scooped up the remote. "If it's that boring, then maybe we should watch a soap opera."

"No, please no!" Pep whined, reaching for the remote. He wore the desperate look of a boy who'd suffered through one too many of the sappy shows.

"Aw, come on, how about one with girls crying and lots of kissing?" Gavino mimicked a few big loud smackeros in the air.

A grudging smile lifted one corner of Pep's mouth, tugging at an angry-looking cut that had puffed his bottom lip. "No way. I don't like those shows. Let's watch this."

Gavino shrugged and handed the boy the remote. "Your choice, guy." He stretched his arms up, then interlaced his fingers behind his head.

Pep hugged the remote to his bony chest. Pretty soon he set it down, then stretched his arms up and interlaced his fingers behind his own head. He peeked over at Gavino. "Aren't you that guy with the black Ford truck?"

"That's me."

"I forget, was it an extra cab or a crew cab?"

"Extra cab."

Pep pondered this. "You know the crew cab has real back seats' steada jump seats," he said, his tone matter-of-fact. "If you got kids, you should get the crew cab. Got kids?"

"Nope." He angled a glance at the boy. "You?"

Pep giggled at the absurdity. "What's your name again?"

"Gavino."

"Gavino," Pep repeated, as though trying out the sound on his tongue. "Am I allowed to call you that?"

Gavino lowered his arms, then lifted one ankle to rest across the opposite knee. "Sure."

"You got that '97 Ford track here right now, Gavino?"

"Mm hmm."

His interest piqued. Pep stretched his neck up to peer out the front window, then whipped back toward Gavino. "I don't see it parked out there."

"It's in the back," Gavino told him. "I live here."

The boy's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. "You live with my Auntie Esme? Are you her husband?"

Gavino barked a laugh. "Slow down, buddy. I haven't even kissed her yet."

"Yuck." He blinked up at Gavino with pure innocence and thinly veiled disgust. "That's sick. What does kissing have to do with bein' a husband?"

Gavino narrowed his eyes with playful menace. "You want me to turn on that soap opera, buddy?"

Pep's missing teeth gave his grin the look of a seven-ten split. "Naw."

"Then quit flappin' and watch your show."

Pep giggled. A few cartoon-filled quiet moments passed before he lost his ability to sit without speaking. "Are you Auntie Esme's *uncle*?" he asked.

"Nope." Gavino frowned. "Sheesh, how old do I look?"

"I dunno." Pep shrugged. "Just as old as any other grown-up." He touched his swollen lip gently, then checked his fingers for blood. "You her cousin?"

"Nope."

He cocked his head to the side. "Her brother?"

Gavino glanced at him with lighthearted exasperation. "I'll make you a man's deal. Pep, how's that? I'll answer your questions if you answer a few of mine." He offered his palm.

"Deal." The handshake engulfed the little boy's hand. "So, are you?"

"Am I what?"

Pep rolled his eyes. "Auntie Esme's brother."

Gavino sighed and ruffled the boy's hair. "Sometimes it feels like it, *chavalito*, but no, I'm not her brother."

Esme offered a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on until Pilar said she felt a little better. With a long exhale, her petite friend's eyes rose to her foiled locks. "So, wow. Science fiction. What's this gonna look like, Es?"

Esme stood and carried their dishes to the sink, then turned back. "I don't know, but the color is eggplant."

"Ay." Pilar cringed. "What did Lilly say?"

It was a given that she'd consulted their resident supermodel. They generally expected her to know everything about everything having to do with grooming. "She said it will look good, it's the new thing." The timer read ten minutes. "Anyway, anything should look better than my natural drabness."

Pilar tilted her head to the side. "Aw, honey, don't say that. When are you gonna open your eyes? Forget Elizalde. It's obvious Gavino's into you. Having a great-looking man like him on your arm is the best revenge."

Esme closed her eyes and mentally counted. "Pilar, I don't want to get into this with both you and Lilly in the same morning, okay? I have to do what I have to do. Period."

"You still think Gavino is here out of pity?"

"Yes. No. Hell, I don't know." She dropped back into the chair. "He's nice to me. We're friends."

"So, why don't you —"

"Friends, Pilar, that's all," she affirmed. "He's not my boyfriend, and I have to even the score the way I see fit."

"Even the score." Pilar scoffed, but held her hands up in surrender, turning her face to the side. "Look, forget I said anything. I love you, Esme."

"I know. I love you, too."

"You're a genius, you're funny." She ticked Esme's assets off with her fingers. "You have a great career, a nice house."

"That's not the —"

"And I," Pilar continued, "know how beautiful you are."

Esme smiled a little sadly. "Well, if I could see myself through your eyes, maybe I wouldn't be trussed up like a futuristic turkey. But, I can't, so I am. End of story." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Please just support me."

"You know I do." Pilar grabbed another piece of coffee cake off the platter, "I just worry for you."

"Well, don't." Esme checked the timer again. Five minutes to go. "I'm going to get him now. I don't like the idea of having all my hair fall out. Be right back."

Esme could hear the ebb and flow of conversation as she approached, and she slowed her steps so as not to interrupt. She hung back, just outside the living room, peeking around the corner. The two guys sat side by side in the exact same position — one ankle across the opposite knee.

Pep, looking endearingly tiny next to Gavino's bulk, stared with rapt attention at his new friend. "So, if you aren't Auntie Esme's brother or uncle or cousin or husband, what are you?"

"I'm her friend," Gavino said easily.

The boy screwed up his face and pulled his head back. "Huh? Auntie Esme's a girl!"

Esme ducked back and covered her mouth to muffle a laugh.

"So? You can be friends with girls, Pep."

"But who'd want to? First you be friends with 'em, then you hafta buy 'em stuff. Sooner or later you gotta kiss 'em."

Gavino chuckled. "Once you get older you'll realize that doesn't happen nearly as often as you'd like, my pal."

"Sick. I don't want it to happen ever."

"Yeah, talk to me in ten years about that," Gavino murmured, his tone wry. His voice changed when he added, "Okay, my turn for a question." A beat passed. "What's up with the bruises, guy? Who's giving you a hard time?"

"I don't wanna talk about it," Pep groused.

Gavino's voice rumbled smoothly through the room. "We had a man's deal. Pep. Remember? I answered your questions, now you answer mine."

Pep clicked his tongue, sounding dejected. Even at six, he couldn't bring himself to welch on a deal. "I don't do nothin' to those kids, Gavino," he said in a plaintive tone. "They just don't like me and they won't leave me alone."

"You know them from school?"

"Nuh uh, they're way older. Like, nine." Awe laced his words. "They started calling me mama's boy, and now they say I'm a snitch because my daddy is a police officer. They call me bad words I'm not allowed to say."

Esme could hear Gavino's underlying outrage from where she stood. She didn't even have to see his face. His ability to hide it from

Pep was impressive, though. "And you walk away?" Gavino asked, his voice level.

"I try," Pep said, "but they grab me."

Esme peered around the corner again. Gavino had turned toward Pep and rested his long, muscular arm along the back of the sofa. He looked intently at the boy.

"Have you talked to your dad about this?"

"A little. He tells me to stand up to them . . . but I'm afraid," he finished, his voice a shame-riddled whisper. She could see the boy's swollen lip quiver from here, and a bolt of anger at Danny shot through her. How could he tell an innocent little child like Pep to "stand up"? Macho jerk.

Gavino nudged Pep's chin up with his knuckle until the boy looked at him. "It's okay to be afraid, *chavalito*. You hold onto that fear."

"But, Daddy's not afraid of nothing."

Gavino shook his head. "Everyone's afraid of something, Pep. It doesn't make you less of a man to admit it."

"Well, I'm afraid to stand up to 'em, then," Pep muttered. "I don't know how to fight."

"What your daddy is trying to tell you is not to fight back with fists. You fight back with this." He pointed at his temple.

"My head?"

"Your brain. Your smarts."

Pep fidgeted. "Whaddya mean?"

"A lot of bullies act mean because they don't have a lot of smarts, they're empty."

Pep's eyes widened with horror. "They don't got insides?"

Gavino chuckled. "No, I meant they don't have anything in their heart. No love, no feelings. You understand?"

Pep nodded.

"They try to make themselves feel better by pushing around smaller people." Gavino lowered his chin and his tone. "But, you, you're a smart guy, yeah?"

Pep beamed. "Yeah."

"Don't ever let them make you doubt what's inside here." He tapped the little boy's chest. "You have love and feelings in your heart. Pep. Don't let those kids put their anger inside you. You might have to keep walking away for now. But eventually they'll leave you alone."

When they do, forget about them. When they pick on you, it's their problem, not yours."

"Really?" He slanted a glance at Gavino. "You for sure think my dad won't mind if I don't fight 'em?"

"I think your mom and dad will both be proud if you're brave enough to use your wits instead of your fists." He winked. "I know I would be."

"What's wits?"

Gavino pointed at his temple again.

Pep brightened. "Same as smarts?"

"You got it." Gavino laid his palm on the boy's head.

Esme froze to the spot, her chest tight. Was there anything this gentle, sweet, intelligent man couldn't do? She wanted to hug him. She wanted to shower kisses on his face. She wanted to climb on his lap and —

Ding! The timer brought Gavino's gaze to the doorway. Caught. She stepped into the arch and gave a wan smile, forcing back the waves of desire and awe before he noticed. She cleared her throat. "The, ah, eggplant appears to be done."

Six

The first things Gavino had noticed about Esme were her clear intelligence, genuineness, and wit. He respected her more than any woman he'd ever met, and he was drawn to her personality, without a doubt. But the more he was around her, the more his physical attraction to her blossomed, and he'd begun to fixate on his desire to touch her. The woman had no idea how sexy she was. Gavino made no apologies for wanting her, but the forced platonic stipulation in their relationship posed a bit of an obstacle to him acting on his yearnings.

Pep and Pilar had left, and Gavino was doing his best not to stare at Esme's shapely bottom as she bent over the sink rinsing her hair. She wore low-slung Levi's Jeans better than any woman he'd ever seen. Not tight, but clinging just enough to give him a mystery to ponder as he fell asleep at night. Baggy enough to maintain the signature demureness that had begun to drive him blind with wanting her.

The black plastic cape had fallen open, allowing a glimpse of her trim waist. Tiny, almost invisible hairs dusted her lower back. Dumbstruck, he ached to touch her. To slip his hand around to her soft, flat tummy and pull her against him until she understood just how much he desired her, how intensely she turned him on.

"So, how does it look?"

He jerked his lust-filled gaze away. "W-what?"

Esme flipped her head up, wound it in a towel, swami-style, and turned. A delicate blush colored her cheeks. "The eggplant," she replied, as though it should have been obvious. "Do I look ridiculous? Tell the truth."

He swallowed past his tight, dry throat, thirsting for something that wasn't his to fake. From what he'd seen of the hair color, it

looked rich and shiny. She'd love it. But he was too distracted to care at the moment.

"We have to style it first. But I promise you don't look ridiculous. Why don't you go get your blow-dryer?" he suggested, turning away from her to gather his supplies. He took his time, willing key parts of his anatomy to relax so he could think straight.

Gavino didn't know how much more of this pretending to be *just* her friend he could handle. He wanted her, damnit. Was that so wrong? Should fate deny him the possibility of a deeper relationship with her simply because of their unfortunate beginning? He wanted to court and seduce her, to see those bright gentle eyes looking deeply into his own as he made love to her delicate body.

The bitch of it was, Esme didn't even mean to entice him. But her guilelessness only served to intensify his feelings. He liked everything about her, from her seriousness to her wit, her neat-as-a-pin house, the strength of her friendships and the obvious solidity of her upbringing. She was unlike anyone he'd ever met. He wanted to be her friend, but he wanted more, too.

He'd come to Colorado on impulse seeking a woman who'd intrigued him, but he'd found a woman he knew, in time, he could love. Damn, that was scary. He didn't even know if he could live up to the kind of man Esme deserved. Okay, deep breath. He was getting way ahead of himself. Distance. That's what he needed. Space to gather his —

Her arm snaked around his waist, and every rational thought within him ground to a shuddering, mind-bending halt. Her warm, pliant, lavender-scented body molded against his back, and he felt her cheek press against his shoulder blade. He grew vaguely aware of her wet towel dampening his shirt, but didn't care. Was this real or a cruelly vivid mental manifestation of his wishes?

"You have no idea how touched I am by what you did for Pep," she whispered, her breath a warm gush through the cloth of his shirt. He didn't speak, didn't move, didn't want to break the spell of the moment. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, Gavino, but I'm so glad I did. I . . . I have never known a man as kind as you, as selfless as you were to that boy."

I'm no better than the boys who beat him up.

The insidious thought needled him. He pushed it away. "I didn't do anything special, *querida*. Please don't give the credit I don't deserve."

He reached his arm back and pressed her against him, closing his eyes and tilting his head back.

"How can you say that?" She murmured. "He wouldn't open up to his mama, he wouldn't talk to me. But I walk into that room and you have him eating out of your hand."

"My truck." Gavino cleared his throat. "He just likes the truck. It was a guy thing."

She sighed. "Whatever it was, I'm impressed. Thank you. So much. You'll make a great father someday, Gavino."

A raw sensual image of Esme heavy with his child weakened his knees. He couldn't formulate the words to respond.

"And I'm glad we're friends," she added firmly, releasing him from the unexpected embrace.

Friends. The word hung in the air like a funeral dirge, the moment lost. Before he recovered from mourning it, she'd slipped away and out of the room. Gavino whirled around, thinking perhaps he'd imagined it all. But, no. The air cooled the wet spot her towel had left on the back of his shirt. He reached over his shoulder and touched the damp fabric absentmindedly.

She had hugged him.

Now she was gone.

He bent forward and leaned his elbows on the counter, hanging his head. His hands wound into involuntary fists and he clenched his teeth. What a fool. He'd read more into the moment than he should've, and now he felt like he'd been tied to the tracks and run over by a high-speed emotional rollercoaster. Repeatedly. He rasped a bitter oath through his teeth.

Esme wanted to be *friends*.

And he wanted to please Esme.

So, he'd back off and be her friend, but he'd need some emotional and physical distance from her in order to pull it off. Bottom line, he couldn't be around her and not want more than just friendship. He was that far gone.

Damn it. He needed a shower. Cold.

Half an hour later, her hair dried and styled, Esme stood in front of the bathroom mirror. "I love it. I really do." She turned her face side-to-side and admired the subtle berry shimmer. "Eggplant. Who would've thought . . . ?"

"I'm glad you approve."

"You know why I like it?" she continued, trying not to be concerned by the fact that Gavino seemed so distant and eager to get away from her. Did he resent having been pushed into the position of dealing with Pep? Maybe he didn't like children. Maybe he didn't want that much inclusion in her personal life. "I like it because it looks like me, but . . . better," she said, trying to hint about the rest of the makeover. She hoped he'd tone down his version of exotic a bit.

"Yes, it does," Gavino said, not really looking at her. "Look like you, I mean. But, don't sweat it, we'll go a little bolder with the style for the Fall faculty get-together, maybe with some spikes."

Her hands froze in mid-primp. "Spikes?"

He nodded, a muscle in his jaw working as he swept her with an objective, assessing look. "Maybe shimmer spray, too. We want you to stand out so Elizalde can't help but notice you."

So much for the idea of toning down. Clearly, Gavino found these subtle changes in her appearance too boring compared to the va-va-voom women from El Chapultapec he liked so much. Esme stifled a sigh. Ridiculous or not, it irked her to think about him lusting over those overblown seductresses. He might think they looked exotic, but she thought they looked phony. She could never look anywhere near as . . . ripe. She didn't even want to.

It shouldn't matter. She'd already told Gavino she didn't want him, and judging from his current distant attitude, he'd obviously realized he didn't want her either. Well, what had she really expected?

Enough. She had revenge to seek.

Gavino's feelings about her were inconsequential in the scheme of things. Besides, if she just accepted his judgement about the makeover no matter the results, maybe he'd start to see her in a different light, unobstructed by guilt or pity. And he'd stop looking like he'd rather be anywhere but here.

She turned to him, resting her hips lightly on the vanity. "You know what? You're right. I'd love spikes."

His brows rose. "Yeah?"

"The bolder the better."

Suspicion claimed his expression. "Since when?"

"Since, I don't know — " she shrugged " — now. What have I got to lose? My drab, boring looks? I say, bring on the spikes." She grinned. "Show me the leather."

The room fell silent but for the drip in the old sink that she'd been meaning to fix. She'd expected a more effusive sign of approval. Instead Gavino stared at her, his face completely devoid of expression. She spread her arms. "What? I thought you'd be glad I decided to go for it. Don't you want me to look exotic?"

After another moment, Gavino cleared his throat and touched her arm. "No, I do. You just surprised me, that's all." A wry smile lifted one corner of his mouth. "You seem to have a knack for that."

The afternoon sun beat down as Esme marched toward the carriage house with a mission and a goal: to find out why Gavino had been avoiding her and to make him stop. Darn it, she missed his company. She hadn't seen him for more than a couple minutes at a time in the past several days, and he had yet to comment on her contact lenses. Why? What had she done? It seemed ever since Gavino'd gotten roped into the middle of Pep's problems, he'd made himself conspicuously scarce. Instead of hanging out with her, he'd split his time between holing up in his apartment and repairing things around her house. She appreciated all he'd done, but she'd keep her squeaky door, dripping faucets, and loose porch slats just to get inside his head a little bit and figure him out.

Knock, knock, knock. She stepped back from the front door and tried to slow her breathing. Shuffling and muffled Zydeco music sounded beyond the door. She heard his footsteps approach, the deadbolt jangled, then —

"Hey," Gavino said, looking distracted and surprised by her unexpected appearance.

An overpowering odor of paints and turpentine wafted out, burning her eyes. She stepped back and inhaled fresh air.

"Are you okay?" He whipped a glance over his shoulder, then squeezed himself out the door and closed it behind him. "Sorry about the smell. I just get used to it, but I know it can be pretty bad." Barefooted, Gavino wore those torn Levi's jeans she loved so much and not much else, unless paint smears counted as accessories.

"It's okay. I'm fine. I just . . . haven't seen much of you." Her shoulders raised and dropped. "We're neighbors now, so I thought I'd come

over and say hi." Was he going to invite her in? She guessed not and crossed her arms. "So . . . hi."

His eyes warmed and a smile spanned his face. "Hi."

"Are you busy?" Her gaze darted to the closed door behind him then back to his face.

"I'm, uh — " he rubbed at his jawline with his knuckles, then jabbed a thumb over his shoulder " — working."

"I figured as much. How's that going?"

"Great." His eyes sparkled. "I have a couple of gallery owners interested in looking at a few of my pieces. I might get a few showings, maybe some sales."

"That's wonderful!" Esme exclaimed, clapping her hands together. If he established himself in the arts community, that just might give him incentive to stay after the makeover agreement was over. Hell, she'd keep him around however she could. "When will you know?"

"I'm not sure. I've been working like a madman to get everything ready." His eyes darted to the ground. "I guess that's why I've been . . . uh, not around."

"It's okay," she said, not quite believing him. "What better reason? I'm so proud of you."

His eyes searched her face, then he reached out and ran the backs of his fingers down her cheek. The touch was unexpected and brief. "Are we still on for makeup shopping tomorrow?"

Her face tingled and her mouth had gone dry. "Of course, if you have time, that is."

"I wouldn't want to spend the day any other way."

Now she was confused. He didn't seem to be angry with her; in fact he sounded almost happy she'd come by. So, why had he stopped meeting her on the back porch for coffee each morning? It couldn't just be his work. A man had to take a break now and then. "Okay. Good." She hesitated, wanting to say more but feeling unsure. If she'd done anything to insult him —

"Something on your mind?"

"No. Well, actually, yes." She laughed a little. "I just thought you might like to come up to the house for dinner."

For a split second, he looked stricken, then it passed. "Oh, you know, I've got so much work . . ."

"Come on, Gavino. Pilar and the kids are coming over. Lilly was going to join us but she had to cancel." She studied his face, but he didn't seem put off by the idea of a group get-together. In fact, his features fell into something that looked like relief. "I know Pep will be disappointed if you aren't there. You're his new superhero, you know."

He scoffed. "Trust me, I'm no superhero."

She lifted her chin, ready for disappointment, but her words barreled forth. "We could rent a movie afterward. It's probably not a night on the town like you're used to, but — "

He laid his fingers across her lips to stop her words, then said, "Stop convincing me. I'd love to come."

"You would? Really? Great" She fought to tamp down her enthusiasm. No sense looking like she was used to rejection. "Okay, then." She started to walk away, then turned back. "Seven o'clock?"

He reached up and braced his arm at the top of the door jamb, his eyes boring into her. "How about six?"

"Six? Oh. Well. I won't have everything ready by then. Everyone else is coming at seven." She moved to nudge her glasses up. They weren't there. Instead, she wound her hands into a clasp behind her back and pasted a wan smile on her face.

"Even better. I'll help you cook."

"Cook?" She balked. "Are you sure?"

"Esme . . ." he said, the word sounding more like a sigh.

She wasn't quite sure what he meant by breathing her name out like that. She only knew she needed to get away and do a little breathing herself. The man really disconcerted her. "Okay, you win. Six o'clock."

"Great. Can I bring anything?"

"Just . . . you." *That's all I need.* She started back up the path toward her house, feeling giddy-to-bursting, like she'd won a prize and was trying not to gloat. Her body wanted to break into a run but she wound tight fists at her sides and concentrated on measuring her steps.

"*Querida.*" The word, his caressing voice, stopped her. Her heart began to pound. "The contacts look great"

She turned slowly and their eyes met and held. If she didn't know better, she could swear Gavino looked like he wanted to kiss her. But how could that be when he'd been avoiding her like a communicable

disease for the past several days? Her heart revved, urging her to flee before she threw herself at him. His compliment wrapped around her like a hug. "Thanks," she said finally, reaching up to tuck a lock of hair that didn't need to be tucked behind her ear. "I like them, too."

Gavino rubbed his palms together and glanced around the kitchen. "All right. Sous Chef Mendez at your service and ready to cook. What can I do?"

Golden light softened the edges of the room and Celine Dion's melifluous voice permeated the air. Esme wore a long, fluttery wine-colored skirt covered in little blue flowers and a matching blue T-shirt. A flour sack apron covered most of the outfit, and the "homeyness" of it cheered him. Her sandals exposed shiny clear-polished toenails, and the whole room smelled like her signature lavender scent. The situation — and the company — was so conducive to romance, Gavino thanked God that Pilar and the boys would arrive soon to act as a buffer.

"You can pour us each a glass of wine, and then it's your choice." She gestured with a chef's knife. "Season the steaks, chop the carrots, toss the salad, or fix the potatoes. Dessert is already finished."

"I make a killer glazed carrot," he said, opening one cupboard then another until he happened upon the wine goblets. He slipped two stems between his fingers and lowered them on the countertop. "How about I make those and the steaks; you take care of the salad and potatoes?"

"Deal."

They worked in companionable silence for several minutes until most of the prep work was done. Esme picked up her wine glass and sat gratefully in a chair, rotating her ankles. "Nothing else to do until they arrive," she said. "I don't want to overcook the meat."

Gavino took the chair across from her. "It feels good to relax." He glanced around. "I like your house."

"What a nice thing to say." She smiled. "I like it, too. Especially since you've fixed all the little irritations lately. You know, you didn't have to do that."

He shrugged off her compliment. "It wasn't a problem."

Esme glanced at the clock, hoping Pilar had gotten the kids hustled into the car without much trouble. "I have to warn you, Pilar's boys are picky eaters." She twisted her mouth to the side. "I never know from one day to the next what they'll like."

"Eh, kids. I was one once." He sipped from his wine glass, studying her over the rim. "How's Pep, by the way?"

"Well, I know you don't like praise, but Pilar says he's more upbeat than he's been in a long time — " she paused " — ever since you talked to him."

"I'm glad," he said, but a shadow crossed over his expression and he changed the subject quickly. "Tell me about Pilar's husband. Danny is it?"

"Yeah." Esme flipped her hand and leaned the back of her head against the wall. "Not much to say, really. Danny and Pilar have been together since we were all in eighth grade. They were the perfect couple, you know? We always knew they'd get married." She crossed her legs, rustling her skirt.

"But . . . ?" Gavino urged.

She sipped, wondering how he'd known she had more to say. "It's just my opinion, and I would never say anything to Pilar, but Danny just doesn't pay attention to her like he used to. I know he has a busy job — "

"He works the street?"

She nodded, eyes focused on her wine glass. She twirled the stem in her fingers thoughtfully. "He probably always will. Likes the adrenaline rush, I guess. Anyway, if you ask me, he takes Pilar and the kids for granted."

"That's a shame."

"They'll work it out." She set her glass aside and met his gaze squarely. "They always do."

He reached across the table and covered her hand with his own. "What about you, *querida*? Why haven't you married?"

A deep flush rose to her face. Where the heck had that come from? "I guess I haven't found the right person."

A smile invited his dimple. "The standard answer."

"Okay, the truth?" She sniffed and withdrew her hand, a little self-conscious but not wanting to hide herself from him. This was her: a wallflower. If he was truly her friend, it wouldn't matter. "I've never been in a serious relationship, Gavino. In high school . . . no one asked me out. Then there was college and graduate school I just . . . got busy. Or, you know, that's my story and I'm sticking to it." She huffed a

humorless little laugh and couldn't quite keep her gaze locked with his. "Pretty pathetic, huh?"

He scooted his chair closer to hers and lifted her chin. "If you're pathetic, I'm pathetic, Esme."

She blinked several times. "What do you mean?"

"I'm saying, I've done my share of dating, but I've never been in love, either."

"I don't believe it." She gaped.

He shrugged. "I have no reason to lie to you about it."

"But . . . but, why haven't you fallen in love?" she sputtered. "There's no reason a guy like you —"

"There's that 'guy like you' stuff again." He shook his head, playfully stern. "You know what I'd like, Esme? If you could stop putting me in some mental category and just see *me*. Gavino. For who I am, not who you think I should be."

Heat rose to her neck, and she almost hiccupped. She was a stereotyping jerk. "You're absolutely right. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. All I'm trying to tell you is, we all have our reasons for avoiding intimacy. You have yours, I have mine." He paused and took both of her hands in his. "Stop thinking you're so different, *Profé*. Not everyone finds their true love in high school like Pilar did. I didn't and you didn't, and we're okay in my book."

Before she could delve into his profound revelation, the sound of her front door opening broke the mood.

"Auntie Esme!" screamed Teddy from the front room.

Esme and Gavino moved apart as tiny footsteps pummeled toward them. They shared a private smile when they heard Pilar hollering at the boys not to run in the house. Moments later, they found themselves wrapped in Pep and Teddy's exuberant hugs.

A whirlwind of greetings, laughter, and exclamations of hunger ensued. By the time Pilar had the boys settled around the table, the house was fragrant with the mingled scents of grilling steaks and savory side dishes. Esme had just poured herself and Gavino a second glass of wine. She offered one to Pilar, as well, then poured milk for the boys. Gavino put the finishing touches on the steaks and carried them to the cloth-draped table. Pilar led grace, then they began passing dishes around.

"I'm not eatin' those," said Teddy. He stared with abject disgust at the bowl of glazed carrots before him. A recalcitrant cowlick stood up from his crown when he bent forward and scrunched his nose. "Betchtables make me sick."

"Yuck. I don't want 'em either," Pep added, stretching up from his seat of honor next to Gavino to peer across the table into the serving bowl. His bruises had faded to nothing more than flat yellowish reminders of his problems.

"Teodoro, that's rude," Pilar scolded, her cheeks red with parental embarrassment. She glanced apologetically at Esme. "You'll eat what your Auntie cooked, young man, or you'll go hungry." She fixed a death glare on her older son and flicked her hand toward the Corningware. "Pep, I expect you to set the example for your brother. Now take some carrots."

Pep's small chin quivered with the horrific burden of having to set such an example. "Mama, please don't make me. They're *orange*."

"Actually, I didn't cook them," Esme cut in, hoping to aid Pilar in the battle. She smiled at the boys as she smoothed her napkin on her lap. "Gavino did. They're glazed, which means they have butter and brown sugar on them."

"Did you really cook 'em, Gavino?" Pep asked, his tone grave. He clearly disbelieved that the man he'd come to revere would stoop so low as to cook the offensive items for dinner.

"I sure did."

"They're still betchtables no matter who cooked 'em," muttered Teddy, slumping back in his chair and pulling his feet up onto the seat.

"Feet down, young man." Teddy did as he was told. Pilar's eyes blazed. "You boys should be ashamed of yourselves acting like this. Apologize to Gavino and Aunt Esme right now."

"So-o-orry," they chimed with a distinct lack of sincerity.

"It's okay. Could you please — " Gavino motioned for the bowl. Esme reached in front of Teddy and passed the carrots to Gavino. He sneaked her a conspiratorial wink. "Thanks." He turned his attention to the boys' mother. "Carrots are man's food, Pilar. I don't guess these guys are grown up enough to have any, which means more for me. Mmmm mmmm mmmm," he added, dishing up a large serving.

"What? Oh. Right," Pilar said, catching on quickly after a moment of confusion. "I'd almost forgotten." Her eyes tracked Gavino, unsure of his next move.

Esme slanted a glance at the boys who watched Gavino with a rapturous combination of worship and horror. "But you didn't eat 'em when you were a kid, right, Gavino?" Pep asked in a please-don't-burst-my-bubble tone.

Gavino raised his eyebrows while he finished chewing, then swallowed. "You kidding? I ate them all the time. Of course, I had special permission to eat man's food because I wanted to grow up to be a strong man." He flexed his arm, drawing every eye in the room to his toned, cut biceps.

Pilar gawked with unabashed female pleasure, then stared pointedly at Esme, who only scowled in return. Pep's jaw dropped, and he peered into the carrot bowl with renewed interest. "What do they taste like?"

"You'll find out once you're old enough to try them." Gavino popped a couple more carrots in his mouth, making yummy noises as he chewed.

Pep pondered this, then asked, "When's that?"

"You have to be at least ten, don't you think, Esme?"

She bit her lip to hold back the smile and nodded. Gavino Mendez was an absolute genius.

"I'm almost ten," Pep said, his gaze fixed longingly on the carrots. "I'm six an' that's pretty close to ten."

"Mama, do you really hafta be ten to eat 'em?" Teddy stage whispered, his tone plaintive. "That's not fair. Pep's not ten."

"Not close enough, *chavalito*," Gavino said to Pep, pretending not to have heard little Teddy. "Sorry."

Pep clicked his tongue and pouted.

Gavino adjusted in his chair. "But, I guess if you really want some, we can give you a couple on the sly."

The boy's face brightened. "For real?"

Gavino pretended to ruminate. He sucked in one side of his cheek and shook his head. "On second thought, I don't want to break the rules."

"Aw, c'mon, Gavino." Pep bounced. "No one'll know. Mom and Auntie Esme won't tell, will ya?"

They both shook their heads.

"Please?" came Teddy's piteous voice.

"You want some, too, little buddy?"

"Yeah," Teddy said, his eyes round. He sat on his hands.

Gavino pulled a shocked face before glancing from Esme to Pilar.
"What do you ladies think?"

Pilar couldn't speak; it was obvious she needed to laugh.

Esme cleared her throat. "Well, Teddy's four and Pep's six. If we add those together, that equals ten." She shrugged.

"I hadn't thought of that. Guess that's why you're the scientist, Es." Gavino twisted his mouth to the side and toyed with the idea while the boys sat still as statues. When the tension was sufficiently high, he relented. "Okay. Just this once, you can have carrots."

"Yay!" Pep and Teddy cheered in stereo, as Pilar dished carrots up on their plates. She cast him a wry glance. "Gavino Mendez, I don't know where you've been hiding yourself, but you are a G-O-D. I bow and scrape in your presence."

He laughed, jerking his chin toward the boys. "Naw, I was just one of them once. I know what it takes."

"Well, you can eat with us any day."

He cut into his steak, then cast a glance at Esme. There was that rescued-by-a-gallant-knight look again.

The dinner had been a complete success. After Gavino pulled the brilliant reverse-carrot-psychology trick on the boys, endearing himself to Pilar, he completely won Pep and Teddy over by taking them outside to sit in his truck. He even revved the engine. He was the perfect guest and a wonderful friend. She liked him more now than she ever had.

Pilar had taken the kids home early, leaving Esme and Gavino to share coffee on the back porch before calling it a night. The full moon cast a silvery glow over the yard and a cool breeze swept over them. Esme closed her eyes and reveled in the near-perfect moment, wrapping her palm around her warm mug. "That was fun. It turned out good."

"I'll say. I'm stuffed," Gavino said, patting his stomach. His lawn chair creaked as he adjusted his position. "I never should've had the second slice of chocolate cream pie."

She rolled her face toward him, feeling more relaxed in his company than she usually did. She liked being with him like this, without the

makeover or Elizalde or memories of the *Barry Stillman* fiasco getting in the way. "What's a little self-indulgence now and then?"

"True, but I'll never be able to sleep feeling like this." He grimaced. "Don't tell me you're one of those irritatingly self-controlled eaters who always leaves your last bite on the plate."

She laughed, deciding not to answer his playful question. "We could go for a walk, if you'd like. God knows I could use the exercise."

"Yeah? I'd love to." He stood, adjusting the waistband of his black jeans as though they barely reached around him. "Let's do it before I burst."

After locking up the house, they meandered down the shadow-striped sidewalk talking about this and that, nothing important. They reached a particularly dark corner and Gavino glanced around. "How safe is this neighborhood?"

"Relatively," she answered. "I wouldn't walk at night alone, but I feel pretty safe with you."

He smiled and wound his arm around her shoulders, pulling her toward him. "You always say the right things, *querida*".

It didn't bother Esme one bit when he let his arm remain. "I always say the right things? What about that whole 'carrots are a man's food' action you came up with? How brilliant was that? Did you see Pep and Teddy gobbling those vegetables?"

"Betchtables," Gavino corrected.

Esme chuckled.

"That was a good ploy, if I do say so myself." Gavino blew smugly on his fingernails and buffed them on his shirt.

"I'll say." She reached up to adjust her phantom glasses, but stopped halfway and dropped her hand. She chuckled again. "I can't get used to not having glasses on my face."

"You can always go back to wearing them."

She chose to ignore that, rather than launch back into the you-look-good-in-goggles conversation. "I know you don't like me praising you, Gavino, but I can't help it. Thank you for tonight, for showing the boys the truck, everything."

"*De nada*. I like them. They're weird little creatures, children."

She peered up at him. "I know. That's what makes them so fun. How'd you get to be so good with kids?"

He shrugged. "I didn't know I was. Like I've said before, I haven't really been around them much. I suppose I just — " he paused, run-

ning his palm slowly down his face “ — remember growing up, how hard childhood was. I sympathize with them.”

Esme navigated the cracked and buckled sidewalk, perplexed by his winsome words. She didn't understand. Her childhood had been wonderful, her parents doting and supportive. But she wasn't so naive that she believed everyone's youth had been idyllic. She wanted to ask Gavino to tell her what he'd meant, but didn't want to pry. They crossed the street and came upon the deserted elementary school campus.

“Is this Pep's school?”

“No. Danny and Pilar don't live in this neighborhood.” Esme studied the playground through the chain-link fence. The loose tether ball chains clanged and pinged against the poles, their song eerily desolate. Swings drifted gently, and children's footprints still marred the sand at the bottom of the slide. Childhood shouldn't be difficult. The thought that it may have been for Gavino made her sad.

Before she could say anything, Gavino grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the equipment. “Come on. It's been a long time since I've gone down the slide.”

“Are you serious?”

He grinned. “Last one to the slide is a rotten egg.”

“No fair, I'm wearing sandals.”

“Chicken!”

Esme's jaw dropped. “I know you are, but what am I?” She shoved him, taking advantage of his stumbling to launch into a full sprint. He took off after her, eventually passing her up.

They paused at the slide, and she bent at the waist, sucking air. He did the same. “You cheated,” he told her.

She pointed to her open toes. “I evened the field.”

“And I still won,” he said smugly, his eyes smiling.

She snorted. “Oh, please. I let you win. Didn't want to damage your precious machismo.”

Leaning his head back, he guffawed over that one. Their breathing back to normal, they ran from apparatus to apparatus laughing freely. Gavino swung from the monkey bars while Esme tackled the slide. She got dizzy when Gavino spun her on the merry-go-round, so they took a break and sat side-by-side on the swings. Esme let her feet dangle and drew shapes in the gravel with the toe of her sandal. She won-

dered again about Gavino's upbringing and decided to broach the subject tactfully. "I bet you had a lot of fun as a boy."

Moonlight caught the side of his face, illuminating the movement of his temple as he clenched his jaw. Finally, he looked at her. The chains of his swing were nestled in his elbows. His forearms crossed in front of him, each hand grasping the opposite chain. Slowly, he swiveled. "Esme, I have to tell you something about myself."

Everything in her tensed. His grave tone put her on guard. Was he an ex-con? Or married? *Or gay?* "O-okay. Go ahead."

He blew out a breath and stared off at the lonely monkey bars for a moment. Without looking at her, he said, "When I was growing up, I wasn't . . . a very nice person."

The mildness of the statement after all she'd suspected made her want to laugh, but she didn't. The wary look on his face told her this confession clearly meant a lot to Gavino. "What do you mean?"

He struggled to get the explanation out "We all have roles as children . . . just like Pep and Teddy have theirs now. They shape us."

She inclined her head in agreement. "And your role was?" His eyes met hers directly, and the shame she saw in them made her stomach drop. "I was a bully," he said. "A pushy, cocky tough guy without a conscience or remorse. So filled with rage over whatever . . . I couldn't see straight. I was no better than the boys beating up Pep."

The admission surprised her, and she didn't quite know what to say. She'd never met a gentler man than Gavino Mendez. "Gavino, small children are notoriously cruel to other kids." She bit her lip. "You know that."

"It didn't end in childhood." He kicked up an arc of gravel. "I was cruel and bitter and mean until I turned eighteen. I was . . . a horrible person."

"Don't say that." She reached out and touched his leg, sensing he needed the contact. "The Gavino I know is kind and —"

"No. Don't give the credit where I don't deserve it, *querida*." His body stiffened. "If it wasn't for one man, a teacher, I'd probably be the same way today."

"But that's absurd."

His face jerked up.

"You are giving this man way too much credit for the person you've become, Gavino —" she held up a palm — and I don't mean to

downplay how much he contributed to your personal growth. But does he control you? Are you his puppet?"

"No, but — "

She leaned in and took his hand. "Honey, people change. They transform." She paused to swallow thickly, realizing she'd just called him *honey*, but forged ahead before he could deny her words. "Anyone who knows you now knows what a good, gentle person you are. The only person you're beating up now is yourself."

The moment stilled so profoundly, even the tether ball poles fell silent. He stared at her, myriad emotions crossing the angles of his face — wonder, disbelief, gratitude, relief.

Esme had never felt so close to another person. She reached out and smoothed her palm down his cheek. "You can't base your adult self-image on the child you may have been. Angry or not."

His Adam's apple slowly raised, then dropped. "I could say the same to you."

She sat back and blinked. "Meaning what?"

"Who told you you were ugly, Esme?"

She scoffed, raising her eyebrows and looking toward the moon. "Ah, you mean other than Vitor Elizalde, Barry Stillman, and two hundred live audience viewers holding signs?"

He shook his head once, not backing down. "You had to have already believed it, for it to have hurt you so badly."

Her eyes traced his face for a moment before she sighed and leaned her cheek against the chain of her swing. "No one told me, I overheard it."

"Who said it?"

"My Tía Luz." To her abject horror, tears rose to her eyes and one rolled down her cheek. Just like that, he'd cracked her protective shell.

"What happened? Tell me."

She regaled the awful story, unmindful that the first tear's faithful followers began to plink-plunk on her lap. When she finished, Gavino lifted her chin. She sniffed, but didn't meet his gaze.

"Look at me, Esme. Please."

She did. Grudgingly.

"Baby, when will you believe me about how beautiful you are?" His voice whispered, caressed. "When will you listen to your best friends who think so highly of you? Ah, Es, you more than grew into your looks."

She sniffled, feeling somehow secure with him. It didn't scare her to say what she felt. "I don't know about that, but you make me feel good about myself, Gavino."

A sad smile lifted one corner of his mouth. He wiped a tear off her cheek. "Then my life is complete."

Her heart expanded, and she pressed her face into his palm, "Now you tell me, Gavino Mendez," she asked in a tremulous voice, "was that the statement of a bully?"

After a brief silence, Gavino grabbed the chains of her swing and pulled her closer. He trapped her with his legs and wrapped his arms around her, holding her in an odd suspended embrace. The bolts above them creaked as the breeze swayed them, and the rest of the world faded into nonexistence. "Don't speak," he told her when her lips parted. "I'm locking away this moment in my heart."

Seven

Gavino stepped back from the easel, assessing the wet canvas with a critical eye. The mood was perfect now; the changes he'd made were exactly what the piece had been lacking. Pleasure surged through him. A glance at his watch told him it was almost time to meet Esme. He stuffed rags into the paint-spattered coffee can he'd inherited from Mr. Fuentes and capped it. The familiar odors of linseed oil and viscous paints tickled his senses.

Red sable brushes and palette knives lay scattered like Pick-Up Sticks across his worktable. With a frown, he began to gather them. He wasn't usually this haphazard, but he'd been so excited over finally figuring out the painting, he'd wanted to get the brainstorm from his imagination to the canvas as quickly as possible. He had gotten the major work done, and the finishing touches could wait until after their trip to the mall.

Careful not to drip too much paint, Gavino crossed the drop-cloth-shrouded hardwood floor, then dunked the tools in Mason jars of turp he'd lined up on the small kitchen counter. The pungent, almost spicy chemical scent permeated the room.

He'd known where he wanted to go with this painting from his first charcoal sketch, but something had been off. Try as he might, he hadn't been able to breathe life into it. *Until now.*

Wiping his hands on the tattered apron he wore, Gavino turned back to the portrait of Esme and smiled. Yes. The eyes had been wrong before; he just hadn't pinpointed it until last night while sitting on the swings with her. They'd shared so much of themselves beneath the harvest moon, Gavino felt like he really saw her for the first time. Saw *into* her. And, when she'd looked at him that certain way . . . beautiful.

He'd added a luminescence to the portrait's eyes, a deepness to the expression, until looking at it felt like coming home. It was sure to draw the attention of the gallery owners. Even if they weren't turned on by the portrait, he hoped Esme would love it. He wanted her to see herself through his eyes. Maybe then she'd realize the power of her own gentle beauty.

Gavino cleaned his marble palette then quickly tossed the crinkled paint tubes he'd used into a large Tupperware container, noticing he was low on Titanium White and Viridian Green. As he stowed the plastic tub in the refrigerator, he made a mental note to ask Esme if she minded stopping by an art supply store while they were out. He'd pick up a few fresh linen canvasses, extra stretcher bars, more gesso, and a spare drop cloth while he was at it. He'd need the stock, as a multitude of new ideas had begun to whirl through his brain. He couldn't believe how inspired he'd been since he moved here. Everything about Esme stoked his fire.

Clock check. Time was running out. Yanking the apron, then his T-shirt over his head, Gavino stood at the sink and scrubbed paint from his hands and arms with Lava soap, then headed for the shower. He needed to call and confirm his appointment with the gallery owner, but it would have to wait. If last night with Esme was any indication, they were headed in a very intriguing direction. He didn't want to miss one single moment he had to spend with her.

"'Meow'?" Esme gaped in disbelief at the tiny letters printed on the bottom of the twenty-five-dollar lipstick tube. For one, she couldn't believe they charged twenty-five smackers for something so small and frivolous in the whole scheme of life, but more importantly, "What the hell kind of color is 'Meow'?"

Gavino moved around the glass counter and took the lipstick. He uncapped it and checked, then replaced the cap and handed it back. His eyes sparkled with mirth. "It's red."

She scoffed, planting one fist on her hip. "So why not call it red? What pretentious idiot came up with *Meow* as a color name?" A distant part of her brain registered admiration that Gavino — a man who defined the word masculine — had no ego issues in shopping for cosmetics. Even so, she couldn't get past the fact that some retro-Cro Magnon jerk had named a women's product something so base-level offensive. *Meow*, of all things. "My feminist core feels like it should be outraged by the implication."

He chuckled, giving her a patronizing little pat on the shoulder. "Well, we're staying away from straight reds for you anyway, so pull in your claws, Miss Kitty."

A monosyllable of disbelief escaped from her throat as she stared at him. One corner of her mouth, then the other quivered into a smile against her will. "Gavino Mendez, please tell me you did *not* just say what I thought you said."

"Okay, I didn't." He lifted his hands to resemble claws and made a cat-fighting noise that sounded something like, "Ree-owr!"

"Oh-ho-ho, you are treading on dangerous ground, pal." She set the gleaming black tube on the counter with lighthearted disgust and smacked him in the chest with the back of her hand. The shopping excursion had been enjoyable so far, their friendship having reached a new level. Gavino seemed more comfortable with her, and she knew she felt more at ease with him. Just being around him raised her confidence. "'Miss Kitty,'" she sputtered. "Jerk. I ought to —"

"I'm only teasing you." Gavino hooked his arm around her neck and pulled her toward him playfully as they ambled down the department store aisle toward the next cosmetic counter. "Start looking for a nice, non-threatening shade in the burgundy or wine family, *querida*. With your new hair tint, I'd like to stay with that color palette. Think your feminist core can handle that?" he asked against her temple before releasing her.

Her stomach fluttered when she pulled away, but in a wholeheartedly good way. In fact, she was in better spirits than she'd been in . . . forever. If nothing more, after the previous evening, she knew she and Gavino shared a special friendship no one could ever breach. They'd confided in each other, and she'd gotten the impression he'd never opened up to anyone else about his checkered past. But he'd trusted her enough to share it with her, which meant they truly were friends in the best sense of the word. She'd take that if she couldn't have all of him.

Despite her warm, fuzzy feelings, she scowled at him for good measure. "Don't change the subject. I'll get you for the Miss Kitty comment. When you least expect it, watch out."

"I'm shaking in my boots." He winked.

A beautiful plum-colored, silk and satin cocktail dress in the adjacent department caught Esme's eye, and she approached it, reaching

out to run the fabric through her fingers. The bias cut made the dress drape the mannequin in a subtly sexy way, and the brief hemline lifted it out of the ordinary category. It was exquisite. Powerfully feminine. Exactly the kind of dress Esme always wished she were daring enough to wear.

"Hey, we're shopping for cosmetics. Remember?" Gavino came up beside her and shot a brief glance at the dress.

"Sorry. I was just . . ." She lifted the hem once again then let the fabric drop and turned to face him. "I'm sorry, where do you need me?"

Gavino gestured to a chrome and white vinyl stool next to a pristine cosmetic display. The back-lit sign boasted the line's gentleness to sensitive skin. "Have a seat here. Enough fooling around. I'm going to ask the rep if she'll let me test some of the products on you."

Esme wiggled into the stool, hooking her low heels over the rung near the bottom of the chrome legs. An absurd Muzak version of Will Smith's "Gettin' Jiggy Wit It" piped through the air. All around her, shoppers eagerly handed over their hard-earned cash for the privilege of taking home promises of beauty and better sex disguised as overpriced tubes of lipstick.

Glancing around at the various cosmetic reps, Esme came to the disturbing conclusion that she wouldn't want a makeup job like any one of these purported experts. She understood they were in the business, but many of them looked like they applied colors with a putty knife beneath bad lighting. A clear case of oversell. Esme watched with amusement as shoppers walked in a wide arc around an overzealous perfume demonstrator, then set her purse on the counter with a clunk.

Her eyes sought and found Gavino as he crossed toward an adjacent cosmetic display. He caught the attention of a white-jacketed aesthetician with come-hither eyes and a propensity for leading with her pelvis as she walked. Or perhaps it was only because she undulated toward Gavino that her pelvis ran pointman for the rest of her body; Esme couldn't be sure.

When the woman's swishing hips reached Gavino, she stopped, her smile lending a whole new layer to the concept of customer service. While Gavino explained and gestured, the woman batted her lashes and nodded. She leaned closer than necessary when he extracted some document from his wallet for her to inspect. After studying the item,

the woman thrust out a hipbone and glanced toward Esme, her cool assessment and blatant envy zinging like an electrical bolt.

In an uncharacteristic move, Esme squared her shoulders and bestowed a bet-you-wish-YOU-were-with-him smile on the makeup lady. Her misplaced bravado both cheered and jolted her. Yikes, when had she gotten so catty? Could Gavino's Miss Kitty comment have a basis in fact? *Reeowr!* The thought made her laugh.

With Ms. Pelvis gyrating at his side, Gavino approached. "What's so funny, Es?" he asked.

"Ah, nothing. Just sitting here amusing myself." Esme smiled at the woman, this time genuinely. She reached up and patted her own face. "So, any hope for this?"

Ms. Pelvis, whose real name according to the rectangular silver tag on her jacket was Inga, beamed back. "Of course." She snaked a hand tipped with Meow-colored claws around Gavino's bicep and squeezed ever so slightly. "I'm going to set up our makeover tray and give Gavino here, free reign. Since he is a licensed professional, and all." *Bat, bat.*

"Fabulous," Esme replied, surprisingly entertained by it all. She was completely out of her element but didn't feel the slightest bit inferior because of it. She glanced at Gavino and gave a few strategic bat-bats herself. His brows furrowed in confusion, but he managed a private little wink.

Inga rounded to the business side of the counter, gushing and fawning while she laid out the accoutrements of beauty making. Gavino made polite conversation, but didn't succumb to Inga's coquettish banter, a fact that raised him immeasurably in Esme's esteem. After lingering longer than necessary, Inga swished reluctantly away and Gavino got to work.

Esme dismissed the urge to quip about Inga's flagrant flirting. Instead, she closed her eyes and lost herself in the feeling of Gavino smoothing moisturizer on her skin with his soft, warm fingers. Her mind wandered back to the playground and a smile lifted her lips.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"Nothing." She paused. "Well, actually, I was thinking about last night I had a great time. Thank you."

"Don't thank me. I enjoyed it, too."

"I'm glad we talked, Gavino," she said in a low tone.

His hands stopped moving, and he flipped his fingers over to caress her cheek with the backs of them. "Me, too."

They shared a lingering glance that plunged Esme's stomach. Tremulously, she said, "Don't let me interrupt what you were doing. It feels good." Her eyes drifted shut.

He continued. "I'm not going to do a full face here," he said. "I just want to test some colors and make sure your skin doesn't react to anything, then we'll take the products home."

"Thief," Esme teased.

He chuckled, grabbing a white foam triangle from the tray to dab at her face. "Oh, believe me, no law breaking involved. You'll be whipping out your platinum card before we hit the road." He lifted her chin and tickled her lips with the sponge.

She squinted one eye open. "On that note, any chance you can try to select a lipstick that *isn't* twenty-five bucks?"

"I'll try," he said wryly, continuing to touch her face. "But I have this thing about quality products, so beware."

She reached up and grabbed his wrist, narrowing her eyes at him in what she hoped was a threatening, all-business look. "You might have champagne taste, pal, but I've got a beer budget, so frugality is the key."

"Yeah, yeah." He grinned. "Close your eye before we irritate your contact lenses."

She obeyed.

A few Muzak-laden moments passed before Gavino murmured, "You have really good bones."

"Said the undertaker to the cadaver," she replied.

He snorted. "You know what I mean. Bone *structure*. Nice high cheekbones, a good forehead."

Her eyes popped open and she gripped the edge of the vinyl seat. An unfamiliar feeling of pride rose in her chest. "Really? No one's ever said anything like that to me before."

"Does that mean I get points for originality?"

"You have enough points, Gavino."

"Is that so?" His brows arched. He held swabs of different colored foundation next to her cheek and neck, turning her face this way and that. He chose one, applied it with his fingers and a sponge, then selected a matching powder. Picking up a huge brush that looked like

a guinea pig on a stick, he said, "Keep your eyes closed tight while I powder you."

She did, but halfway through the process, an unsettling thought popped into her head. "We don't have much time before the faculty get-together, Gavino. I don't feel like we've made much progress with my new look. Puh! Puh!" Grimacing, she blew powder off her lips, reaching up to smear the back of her hand across her mouth and swipe particles from her teeth. "Yuck."

Gavino laughed. "Makeup artists' rule number one. Don't open your mouth when you're getting powdered."

"Sorry. You're forgetting I'm new to this." Esme watched Gavino's hand hover over a lovely pale blusher before he selected a darker shade that reminded her of Pep's purple bruises. Great. A needle of anxiety pricked her.

"Then I'm sorry, too." He plucked a brush from a clear Lucite holder. "I'll keep you more apprised of what I'm doing."

She crossed her legs and sat back in the chair. "Start by explaining how we can possibly transform me from dull to drop-dead in the few days we have left."

"Don't worry, *querida*, we have plenty of time." He dipped the glossy brush in the cheek color, tapped off the excess, then tested it on her cheek. After studying the color from the front and side, he nodded, then wiped her face with a tissue. The bruise blusher went into the to-buy pile, much to her chagrin. "It's just a makeover, you know. Not plastic surgery."

"Uh huh." Esme eyed the stack of cosmetics she was doomed to purchase. Assessing each one the random value of twenty-five bucks, she figured she was one-hundred-dollars in the hole so far, not counting tax. "What else do we need to do?"

"Well get all this and hair products today and look for an outfit tomorrow." He paused, sifting through a cup of pencils. "By the way, do you mind if we swing by an art store on the way home? I'm low on supplies." He plunked a tube of raccoon-black mascara and a grape eyeliner stick in the purchase stack.

Ka-ching! Esme swallowed. "Of course not. Whatever you need." In went an eyebrow pencil, a pack of makeup brushes, and a lip-liner that reminded Esme of the 'razzmatazz' crayon in Teddy's Crayola 96-count Big Box. Gavino topped it with a bag of foam triangles. Esme

pointed. "Um, I hate to spoil your vicarious spree, but I'm not independently wealthy, you know."

"Don't worry. I'm only getting the basics." He smirked.

"This is the basics? How do women afford to keep themselves up?" Esme couldn't help but think he was enjoying the heck out of her fiscal discomfiture.

Gavino skirted around the money vein. "I was thinking we'd do a trial run of the hair and makeup this evening, just to make sure we have everything we need before the big event." He slanted her a wary glance. "We'll make a night of it. Maybe we can order in Chinese, if you'd like."

"Okay." She eyed the product mound. "Is that all?"

"Nope. We still have to get the most important thing."

"What's that, an off-shore account to pay for it all?"

He laughed. "The lipstick, *querida*. Nothing sexier on a woman than a bright, pouty mouth."

"How could I forget?" She grabbed his arm. "Please *don't* pick a lipstick called Meow or anything equally repulsive."

"Esme?"

"Yes?"

He chucked her chin with his knuckle and shook his head slowly. "Are you always this bossy?"

She sniffed. "I just know what I *don't* like."

Gavino softened his question with a wink and a dimple. He picked up a gold-tubed lipstick, uncapped it, and smiled. "Here we go. Perfect And it's called — " he flipped it over and read the tiny label " — Midnight Bordeaux. Can you handle that?"

She reached for the gleaming case and peered inside. Her jaw dropped. "Bordeaux? It's *black* Gavino!"

"Deep wine," he countered.

She double-checked. "No, black. Pitch black. Geez. Midnight Bordello would be a more accurate name for this horrific color." Jab, jab went the anxiety needle, drawing blood this time. "You can't possibly think that'll look good on me."

"Of course it will." He took the lipstick back and added it to the tally.

"Wait. There's no talking you out of that lipstick?"

"Nope. It's dramatic. It makes a statement."

"Yeah — I'm a terrier — I have black lips," Esme grouched, extracting her credit card from her purse. "Not my idea of a great fashion statement."

He chuckled. "Hey, I'm good, but I can't pull off a cat joke and a dog joke in the same shopping trip."

She jammed her arms crossed and glared at the offending lipstick. "I am so not amused by you right now."

"Well, it's nice to see you've got the pout down pat." Gavino scooped the pile of cosmetics against his chest and smiled. "Come on, *Profé*. You'll get over it." He held out his palm for her credit card. "Let's go max out your plastic."

"What do you use that for?" Esme asked, pointing at the gesso Gavino held while they waited for the clerk to bring out the canvasses. Customers swarmed through the art supply store, and though the employees seemed attentive, there were only so many of them to go around.

"This?" He plunked it on the counter. "It is applied to ground the bare canvas. Prepare it for the paint," he added, when her quizzical frown told him she didn't quite get it.

"Oh, I didn't know you had to do that," she said, chagrined. "I figured you just kind of . . . slapped the paint on when you had a creative brainstorm. I'm afraid I don't know much about your profession. But I'd love to learn more."

"Some artists coat the canvas with rabbit skin glue before the gesso," he told her, "but a lot of curators frown on that practice now." He leaned in and lowered his tone. "Critters think rabbit skin glue is a delicacy."

"Ew." Her nose crinkled at the thought. She waited patiently until the clerk had handed Gavino the canvasses and a few tubes of paint. As they walked to the cash register, she glanced over at him. "Tell me more about oil painting."

"I'm tired of talking about me. Tell me about *your* job."

Her face came up, surprised. "Really? No one ever wants to talk about what I do."

"Why? Cloning is much more interesting than painting."

She laughed, and they piled the goods on the checkout counter. "Well, what do you want to know?"

He spread his arms in a gesture of helplessness. "I don't even know enough about it to ask a proper question. I just keep think-

ing about evil duplicates of people storming the planet and wreaking havoc."

She rolled her eyes. "*Dios Mio*, Hollywood. The bane of my existence." A gum-popping clerk began listlessly ringing up their purchases. She wore the vacant stare of a disillusioned minimum wage earner. "We're working on the medical advances human cloning may provide rather than on the sci-fi aspect."

"Like what?" He extracted a credit card from his wallet and handed it to the checker after she monotoned his total to him.

"Well, hmmm. There's so much." She pondered it, then flipped her hand over. "One example would be the possibility of being able to clone a heart disease sufferer's healthy heart cells and then inject them into the damaged areas. We do a lot of studies with embryonic stem cells, too."

"Which means what? In plain English, please. Or Spanish," he added, with a smile.

She crossed her arms and leaned one hip against the counter. "We're researching whether stem cells can be grown in order to produce organs or tissues to repair or replace damaged ones. Skin cells for burn victims, spinal cord cells for quadriplegics. Like that. If the tissues were cloned from the patient rather than donated, the rejection rate would plummet."

Gavino grabbed his bags absentmindedly, engrossed in what she was telling him. "And that's cloning? I never knew. How do you grow these cells?"

She pressed her lips together and considered the question as they walked out to the truck, then tried to explain the procedure in as non-technical terms as possible. She knew that scientific babble put most people off.

Gavino slammed the tailgate and wiped his palms together to brush off the road dust. "So, as long as the technology isn't banned by people who think it's all a science fiction ploy to take over the world, a lot of people with diseases and conditions could benefit from cloning."

She nodded, as always energized by the topic that had fired her blood since high school. "Potentially. A lot more research needs to be done but it's exciting." She shrugged. "Problem is, we need grant monies and governmental support, which is difficult to secure when

every special interest group in the world protests the research. They just don't understand the potential."

"What wonderful and fulfilling work you do."

She sighed. "I love my career, but it has its negative aspects. You know, I'm the only woman on the research team, and the only person under the age of forty, too. Combine that with being a quote-unquote minority and I'm quite the oddity."

"You should be proud."

"I am. Don't get me wrong. It's just burdensome sometimes to be the frontrunner. The token Latina, some people think. I must be there because of a quota, not my brains." She huffed. "I've worked damned hard to get where I am, ever since I first learned about human cloning in my high school genetics class."

"I'm sure you have."

She bestowed on him a smile of pure gratitude. "Not to mention, the field is packed with arrogant, prima donna men who puff up their chests at the thought of a thirty-year-old woman working on a level commensurate with their own."

Like Elizalde, Gavino thought. That Esme showed even the slightest interest in the man completely rankled him. He didn't want to think about it.

"If we had kind, intelligent men in the field, I'd probably be much happier. Men like you," she added quietly.

Gavino warmed at the compliment and averted his gaze. And here he'd been thinking she'd be bored hanging out with a simple painter. Maybe he was wrong. God, he wanted to hold her. She made him feel so incredible, so special and . . . gentle. His swelling emotions told him to get back on track, and quick. "What about things like injured joints or amputated limbs?" He held her door open while she climbed in the truck. "Could cloning possibly regenerate those for a person?"

Her face brightened. "Exactly! Wow, it's so wonderful to talk to someone who just gets it. *That* — " she poked her finger softly in his chest " — is the type of human cloning research we do. We're not out to re-create emotionless human duplicates."

He raised his hands like a heavyweight who'd just won the world title. "And Mendez chalks up another point for catching on. The crowd goes crazy." He cupped his hands around his mouth and imitated crowd cheering noises. It was a feeble attempt to lighten the inti-

mate mood before he gave in to the impulse to gather her against his chest and rain kisses on her face.

She shook her head and laughed a little, then studied him intently. "Ever thought about going into the sciences, Gavino? You've obviously got the mind for it."

He pulled a skeptical face but pleasure from the compliment swirled through him. "No. I'll leave the hard work to experts like you. I'm perfectly happy painting."

"Which is a perfectly brilliant contribution to the world."

"Ah, sweet Esme." He caressed her arm slowly from shoulder to wrist. "A man sure could get used to being around you."

Later that evening, Esme perched on the edge of the bathroom vanity while Gavino applied the promised "full face" on her. She hadn't seen it or her hair. She could only wonder what effect the glitter spray had on the whole look, God help her.

"Quit touching your hair."

"Sorry." She folded her nervous hands in her lap. An idea struck. "You getting hungry yet? We could take a break and order dinner." She really just wanted an excuse to turn around and get a sneak preview of her face.

"No, you can't peek but nice try." He glared. "We're almost done. And in answer to your question, I can wait to order unless you're going to die of starvation."

"I can wait, too," she muttered, grumpy that he'd pegged her amateurish ploy.

Gavino had been firing off questions about her job since the minute he walked in the door, which pleased her. Most men she'd encountered had either been bored by the topic or intimidated by her expertise. He seemed genuinely interested. As though reading her thoughts, he deftly turned the conversation back to the topic. "How does Elizalde fit into the research team?"

Oddly enough, thinking of Elizalde didn't infuriate her as much as it had right after the *Stillman Show* disaster. She found him rather pathetic, though she still wanted to get him back for what he'd done. "He's on a two-year faculty exchange from *Universidade Federal de São Paulo*," she said. "He's actually a medical doctor and he's part of the embryonic stem cell project. Hot stuff in his country. In the whole field, really."

"Hmm," Gavino said, sounding unimpressed. "Stare at my throat and don't blink." Gavino applied mascara to her lashes in silence. When he finished, he stuck the brush back into the tube and cast her a sidelong glance. "Can I ask you a question that's none of my business?"

"Great opening, really sets a person's mind at ease." She gave him a droll smile. "But, sure. Go ahead."

"What do you see in that guy?"

Her forehead crinkled. "Vitor?"

Gavino turned his back on her and took a moment to rifle through her new cache of cosmetics. "Yeah," he said through clenched teeth.

She shrugged, confused. "Well . . . I don't know what you mean. I respect his work, his contribution to the field of genetic research . . . and we're lucky to have him on the project."

"But, is that enough of a reason — " The ringing phone interrupted his question.

"I should get that." *Yes!* Now was her chance to catch a glimpse of her makeup.

"Fine, but *no peeking*."

"Okay," she fibbed, jumping off the counter. She *had* to see it so she could control her reaction in case she hated the way it looked. Not that she was a pessimist. "I'll run downstairs and order the food while I'm at it. It will be at least forty-five minutes before they deliver."

He held up his finger. "I'm serious, Es, don't look."

She ignored him, pummeling her way down the stairs to pick up the phone on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"Hey. It's Lilly."

"Lil! We haven't talked in forever." Slowly, with trepidation squeezing her lungs and horror flick background music playing in her head, Esme turned in measured increments to face the hall mirror. She cajoled herself: Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe Gavino decided to go for subtlety. Maybe —

The first glimpse was like a punch in the gut.

Dumbstruck, she sucked in a breath. The only thing that could make her look more gruesome was the addition of black lipstick, *which came next*. "Oh. My. God."

"What's wrong, Es?"

"This can't happen. You have to see this," Esme gasped. She wadded the phone cord in her fist and glanced behind her to make sure Gavino wasn't within earshot.

"Why are you whispering? See what?"

Panicked, she searched her brain for a feasible escape route from this nightmarish makeover plan. Sleazy was one thing, but she never expected it to be this macabre. Somehow she had to convince Gavino this wasn't the way she should look. An idea struck her. "Are you busy?"

"No, that's why I called." Lilly sounded mystified. "I thought I'd stop by and chat later if you're free."

Esme licked her lips, her head bouncing like a frenzied dashboard Chihuahua. "Good. Yes. Excellent. Holy crap. Come soon. Come *now*."

"Esme Jaramillo, you are jabbering. For the last time, what's going on?"

She sucked a breath and blurted it all in one jumbled exhale. "Gavino did my makeup and hair, kind of a dress — " *hiccup* " — rehearsal for Friday's party. Anyway, do you remember that song, 'Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves'?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I look like all three of them rolled into one ridiculous — " *hiccup* " — caricature. Mixed in with a little science fiction glitter for good measure." The description was an understatement. No way could she show her face in public looking like this. She glanced into the mirror at the unrecognizable hooker-slash-vampire staring back at her. Her stomach cramped. She fought back a whimper.

"Uh oh. You're hiccupping. It can't be good."

"It isn't!" she half-rasped, half-slurred.

"Okay, wait," said Lilly, ever the voice of rationality. "Did you somehow give him the impression it was a costume party?"

"No, of course not." Panic bubbled inside Esme. She bounced, shaking her hand with urgency. "Stop asking stupid questions and come — " *hiccup* " — over. You have to convince him this looks ridiculous. Maybe if he hears it from you — "

"All right, all right," Lilly soothed, sounding apprehensive. "But what if you're wrong and I like it?"

"Trust me." Her throat clenched. "You'll *hate* it."

A sigh. "I'm on my way."

Esme hung up and ordered their food, adding an order of Kung Pau chicken — Lilly's favorite — in case she hadn't eaten. She took the sympathetic restaurateur's suggestion to order her sesame beef extra hot because the chile supposedly cured hiccups. After arranging her expression in a semblance of casualness, she pressed a palm to her trembling torso, and headed up the stairs to meet her black-lipped fate.

In the bathroom, Gavino blocked the mirror. He cupped a hand next to her face like a horse blinder while she got situated on the sink. "You didn't look, did you?"

How could she lie without flat-out lying? "I, um, caught a glimpse in the hall mirror but — " *hiccup* " — didn't get a close look." She changed the subject before he had a chance to dig deeper. "Lilly's going to join us for dinner, do you mind?"

"Of course not. We're almost done here." His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why do you have the hiccups?"

"Medically, I think it's when you swallow air."

"That's a belch."

"Whatever." She licked her lips. "Let's finish before she gets here. What do we have left? Just the terrier lips?"

He flattened his mouth into a line and chastised her with a glance. "Just the lipstick."

Gavino rummaged out a tiny brush and began to blacken it with the offending lip color. Esme watched him with mounting stress. Did he really like this look?

"So," she posed gracefully, "h-how do I — " *hiccup* " — look?"

He stood back and grabbed his chin, turning his head this way and that as he studied her. "Definitely exotic."

She blurted a nervous laugh. Her palms began to sweat. "Well, good, that's what we wanted." She toyed with the flyer that had *come* in the lipstick box while Gavino held her chin and painted the funereal shade on her mouth. "Finished," he grinned and began gathering the products. Esme focused on reading the lipstick flyer, which listed instructions and marketing claims in English, German, French, Spanish, and an Asian language she didn't recognize. *Who'd need instructions for lipstick?* she wondered. "Can I look now?" she asked.

"Not yet. Let me, first." He breached her personal space and scrutinized her up close. "You look great, Es."

Was he insane? Her eyes read faster. "Oh, thanks."

His knuckles moved to rest on either side of her, effectively trapping her in. His musky male scent, like warm leather, surrounded her. Something moved between them with the power of the earth's tectonic plates shifting. Oh, God.

"I personally think you always look great."

Uh huh. Sure you do.

"But, this is good, too," he murmured.

"Are you sure?" She tensed, inadvertently squeezing his hips with her thighs. His eyes smoldered, and he moved, closer until his face was mere inches from her own. *Dios mio*, he was going to kiss her. She knew it, could feel it like a déjà vu, like it had already happened and she was reliving it in TechniColor and Surround Sound. They'd just managed to get their friendship on track. He couldn't kiss her. *God, please kiss me.*

Unable to stop herself, she raked her newly blackened lips through her teeth.

His gaze dropped. "Hey, now," he teased. "You're going to chew all that lipstick off, *querida*."

She held up the accorded product flyer. "Uh, it's chew proof, according to —" she held her breath and staved off a hiccup — this. Though, I'm sure they didn't do a scientific study to prove such a claim." Wow. And, she'd always thought the concept of a person's heart being *in* her throat was metaphorical. She swallowed — barely.

"Know what else it says, Esme? That it's kiss proof."

An airless chuckle strangled past the heart blocking her normal throat function. "Definitely no scientific studies to prove that one, I'd bet."

His gaze rested on her mouth. She could see his pulse in his neck, could feel his warm breath tickle her lips. "Probably not," he drawled, "but, baby, there's definitely something to be said for testimonial evidence."

She reached out, intending to press against his chest and prevent the kiss, but her heart had other plans. Before she could stop herself, Esme had gathered a fistful of Gavino's shirt and pulled him roughly against her. Their mouths came together with a passion so innate it was inevitable. A moan tore from her throat, guttural and spontaneous.

His tongue explored her mouth, and her hands snaked around to his nape, releasing the ponytail from its rubberband confines. God, she'd been wanting to do that for a long time. She drove her fingers into his shiny hair and scrunched it in her fists, indulging herself in the feel of him. The position raised her breasts into his chest and she pressed them harder, knowing nothing beyond her blinding need to rub the tingling tips against his solidity. Everything in her throbbed. Her libido switched her brain on autopilot and sat back for the wild, sensual ride.

His mouth lifted. "Sweet God, *querida*, I want you." His words shook with wonder and surprise. He palmed her hips and pulled her closer until the insides of her thighs made contact with his hipbones, until nothing separated them besides clothing and moist heat. And he captured her mouth again. He traced her lips with his tongue, plundered and pulled back. His urgent hands caressed her upper arms, her back, her thighs, and when her tongue made a tentative approach, he sucked it gently into his mouth. She gasped.

Their eyes met. Held.

Time stopped. Breathing ceased.

Then another wave of passion rolled over them.

She never imagined it would be this good, this right. He felt so big and warm, so brazenly male, she couldn't get enough of him. She yanked impatiently at his T-shirt, pulling it from his waistband. Her hands sought the bare, hot skin she'd admired from afar for what seemed like forever. When she smoothed her palms up over his hard, rippled stomach and flicked the pads of her thumbs over his nipples, he simultaneously sagged and groaned. She dug her fingers into the width of his back.

He pushed her back until her head met the mirror — a little harder than planned. Her hand went to her head. She chuckled.

"I'm sorry." He laughed, too, but Esme quickly stifled the sound with her ravenous mouth over his.

She clambered closer to him none too gracefully and knocked a hairbrush off the vanity. It clattered on the tile, followed quickly by the soap bar and toothbrush holder. She didn't care. He didn't seem to, either. His long fingers found their way to her breasts. He cupped and lifted her. She arched into his palms and tipped her head back to allow his hot lips and rough whiskers access to her neck.

The doorbell rang.

Who cares? Go away. Busy. No one home.

It rang again.

Esme's eyes flew open. Oh no, Lilly. Lilly, who had been instructed to convince Gavino that Esme's Mistress of the Dark look was unacceptable. But Gavino obviously liked the way she looked, and she definitely approved of the way he felt. Change of plans. She had to get to Lilly before Lilly got to Gavino.

"Stop!" Gripping Gavino's shoulders, she pushed him back and managed to knock a few more toiletries to the floor. He looked stunned, distracted. "But, I — "

"I h-have to — "

"Wait, I — " he whispered, in a husky tone.

He leaned toward her again, but she gripped his shoulders to stop him. She was panicked, thinking Lilly might use her spare key and inadvertently ruin things just when they'd started to get good. "No . . . just let me get off the — "

She half-fell off the vanity, straightened her clothing, grappled for her bearings. Feeling lust-drunk and crazed for him, she smeared at her mouth with the back of her hand. She couldn't find words to explain. "It's Lilly." Her gaze dropped for fear he'd see the truth in her eyes. *I'd do my face this awful way just to have you want me.* "I have to . . . go."

She brushed past him, out the door, down the hall.

Just like that, she was gone.

The stillness sucked him in like a vacuum. Blood raced in Gavino's veins. His brain buzzed with painfully acute desire. With shaky hands, he stooped to pick up the items scattered over the bathroom floor, willing his uncooperative body to return to its normal state. He situated the toothbrush holder on the vanity, aligned the hairbrush neatly next to the basin.

Hard as he tried to ignore it, a sense of spiraling disaster swept through him. Remorse. He closed his eyes and rested his forehead on the front of the vanity. He shouldn't have kissed her. Hell, he'd practically devoured her, and he knew how little experience she had. What ever happened to gentleness? Taking his time? He'd clearly pushed too hard, too soon. The panic in her eyes as she'd escaped from the bathroom said it all.

*You screwed up, Vino. She wanted your friendship
You took advantage of that.*

Gavino stood and braced his hands on the countertop. He hung his head, letting his hair fall like a screen around his face. "Damnit." He wanted her to know he'd take her any way he could get her. Neighbor. Friend. Lover.

Lover. Desire surged.

No. She didn't want that. "Damnit," he bit out again, raking his hair roughly back from his face. He straightened and stared at his reflection in the mirror with revulsion. Pushing people around to get what he wanted. Still. Who the hell did he think he was?

He'd fix this if he had to apologize, grovel, beg. He'd tell her it shouldn't have happened and assure her it would never happen again. He'd make it up to her. He would.

No matter what.

Esme fumbled with the deadbolt and yanked the door open. "Come in," she barked. "Hurry up."

"What a lovely greeting," Lilly quipped. Her features morphed from amused to mortified with one glance at the makeover results. "Lord have mercy, girl, you look like Night of the Living Dead." She crossed herself hastily.

"It's awful, I know. But I don't care."

"Huh?"

"Shhh. Just come on." Esme grabbed Lilly's forearm and dragged her into the house. They stumbled through the living room toward the guest bathroom off the hallway. She shoved Lilly in, slammed and locked the door, then pressed her back against it. "*Dios mio*," she exhaled, closing her eyes. Her hands curled into fists. "I can't believe that just happened."

"Quit freaking out and let me look," Lilly said, her mind obviously on a different track. She grabbed Esme and centered her in front of the mirror, then stood behind her staring over Esme's teased hair at their reflection. Lilly chewed the inside of her cheek, a disturbed wrinkle marring the perfection of her forehead. "Okay, first off, the lipstick should be *on* the lips, not spread around them."

"I don't care about the makeup," Esme rasped, peering guiltily at her confused friend while smearing the black from around her mouth. She glanced in the mirror again. It looked like she'd been cleaning out

the fireplace with her lips. So much for kiss-proof. "I knew they couldn't prove that scientifically," she muttered.

"Scientifically? What — ?" Lilly asked.

"Nothing. Never mind." Esme whirled, steadying herself with her palms on the sink edge. "Listen. New plan. You have to tell Gavino you love it. That it looks great. I don't want him to know how much I hate it."

Lilly's jaw dropped and her green eyes rounded with shock. "Girl, have you lost your mind? You can't go to your office party looking like this."

"I know, but — "

"No, you obviously don't know." Lilly gripped Esme's chin tamed her face toward the mirror. "Look at it, for God's sake. I thought you told me Gavino was a professional. What happened?"

"He is a professional." Esme batted away Lilly's hand and started to gnaw her lip, before deciding against it. She didn't want black teeth as well. She slumped onto the toilet lid, toes and knees pointing inward. Elbows on her knees, chin in her palms, she said, "I don't know. I can't explain it."

"Try."

Esme inhaled. "All I can tell you is . . . Gavino and I have managed to become friends."

"Yeah, Pilar told me that part. What's that got to do — "

"Just listen. Everything was working fine between us. Then he made me up to look like this — " she framed her face with her hands " — and all hell broke loose."

"Hell?"

"Well, good hell."

Lilly clicked her tongue and frowned at Esme. "Don't let your mama hear you say that."

Esme ignored her. "He kissed me, Lilly. *Really* kissed me."

Lilly pulled her head back in shock. "And, that's hell?"

"Good hell, remember?" Esme swallowed, sensual excitement ribboning through her as she remembered just *how* good.

Lilly busted into a Colgate grin. "But, he kissed you?!"

"Hoo-boy, did he ever." A feeling of wild passion reeled back and slapped her, and it took her a moment to gather her wits enough to go on. When she could speak again, Esme reached up and clutched her T-

shirt at the neck. "He kissed me," she said again, "just before you got here. Hence the raccoon mouth."

"Es, that's so great. I don't know why you're looking so glum. I'm sorry I interrupted." Lilly gripped her wrists and shook them, grinning. "Told you he had the hots for you."

"Yeah, for *this* me. Not the real me." Esme's words sounded morose to her own ears, as well they should. "He has the hots for Vampira. What am I going to do?"

Lilly slid down the wall and sat crosslegged on the floor. "Es — " she uttered a sound of disbelief " — don't be an idiot. He can't possibly want you to look like that."

"Uh, are you forgetting he created this look? He told me I looked great. He doesn't even know I've seen it yet. Besides — " Esme spread her arms wide and spoke in a sarcastic tone " — did he kiss me in my natural state? No."

"Did you encourage him to do so? No," Lilly countered, mimicking Esme's snideness. "Just the opposite. You told that hottie you wanted to be friends."

"Because he came here out of pity for how ugly I am!" Esme hollered, scooting to the edge of the toilet lid. She pressed her lips together and struggled to lower her voice. "What am I supposed to do, Lilly? Be grateful for the charity?"

"You're not — " Lilly growled in frustration " — Esme, wake up. God, you can be so irritating. Tell Gavino you don't like the makeover. Tell him you like a more natural look. Tell him you want his bod. End of story. Happily ever after."

Unbidden, tears rose to Esme's eyes. Her chin quivered, and a sob escaped. "It's so easy for you to say that, Lil. You don't get it. Science nerds don't even look at me. No one does. They never have." She sniffed then yanked a tissue out of the box on the toilet tank. "And you honestly think a man like Gavino Mendez would be interested? Forgive me if I don't share your confidence."

Lilly softened. "Aw, honey — "

"He probably has Frankenstein Syndrome," Esme croaked. "A twisted lust for his creepy creation."

Lilly unfolded her long limbs around until she could kneel. She scuffled across the floor on her knees and wrapped Esme in a hug. "I

didn't mean to sound flippant, Es. But you aren't giving yourself enough credit with this man."

"I don't know how." Her entire body trembled. She was scared of losing something that wasn't even really hers. "I've never felt this way before. All I know is, if he likes me this way, why would I want to change back to the way I looked before? To be alone? To be the object of ridicule on national TV?"

"But if he truly cared about you, he wouldn't want to change you." Lilly rubbed her back.

"Thanks a lot," Esme said wryly.

"No, I meant — "

"Forget it. I know what you're saying. But some of us don't have the luxury of choice." Pulling out of Lilly's embrace, Esme tipped her head back. She held tissue-wrapped fingers beneath her lower lashes, not wanting to completely ruin the makeup job since she had to face Gavino again. She sniffed and wiped her nose. "I think I'm falling in love with him, Lil."

"I know you are, honey." Lilly laid her palm on Esme's cheek and smiled. "It'll be okay. What do you want me to do?"

"Just let me deal with it," Esme implored her friend. "Tell him it looks good and be convincing. Okay?"

Lilly sighed. "Okay, Es, if you really want me to, I'll tell him you're the bomb," she soothed. "Whatever you want."

"Promise?" Esme whispered. "Don't think badly of me."

Lilly smacked her in the arm. "Who do you think you're talking to here? I'm your best friend. Now, stop crying or you'll look like *Rainy Night of the Living Dead*."

Esme blurted a watery chuckle, then stood and leaned in toward the mirror. She managed to erase most of the smeared lipstick from around her mouth, then slapped her cheeks a few times, trying to remove evidence of her tears. "Ahhhh," she intoned, releasing her tension. Thank you for this, Lil. I ordered you Kung Pau Chicken," she said, her voice tremulous.

"Oh, good. I'm starving," Lilly said dispassionately. She looked completely worried and out of sorts.

Esme blew out a breath, stretching her neck from side to side. After shaking her hands out like a boxer prepping to enter the ring, she asked, "Are you ready?"

"Me? Are *you* ready?"

Esme's teeth sunk into her black bottom lip as she worried a soppy tissue through her fingers. "No. But, I'm not getting any readier. Come on." She unlocked the door, and with Lilly at her heels, they skulked down the hallway like thieves.

"Shoot, let me grab my purse," Lilly said, turning back,

Esme spared her a fleeting glance but continued toward the living room. She thought about Gavino, and her stomach twanged.

That kiss. Sure, it mostly involved their lips, but she felt it straight down to her toes. It wasn't like your normal, everyday kiss. Gavino climbed right inside and became a part of her, until she didn't know if it was her nerves or his being stimulated to the shrieking point.

Oh, God. She wasn't *falling* in love with him.

She *was* in love with him.

And in lust. *That kiss.*

Turning into the living room, she came face to face with Gavino sitting awkwardly on the arm of the sofa. "Oh!" she exclaimed. Her hand fluttered up to her chest which flushed with heat at the mere sight of him. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry. I — " He stood and crossed to her cautiously, looking peaked and intense. A few feet from her, he reached out, but stopped himself and pulled back. "Esme, listen. We have to talk about — "

"Hi, Gavino," Lilly interrupted. She paused in the doorway.

"Oh. Hi." He backed off and raked his fingers through the length of his hair, his wary eyes moving from one woman to the other. When his heels hit the back of the couch, he sat down. "I forgot you were here."

"I'm here," Lilly said, with fake cheerfulness. She poked her thumb in the direction of the hallway. "We couldn't wait. We looked at her makeover in the downstairs bathroom. Sorry."

A very pregnant pause ensued. No one moved. Inhaled air kept filling Esme's lungs until she thought she'd explode and float around the room like confetti.

"And?" Gavino's Adam's apple rose and fell. "What do you think of it?"

"I love it," Esme blurted, the air whooshing out.

"She . . . loves it." Lilly punctuated the unnecessary statement with a titter of nervous laughter.

Esme shot a staccato glance at Lilly, then turned to Gavino and forced a brittle smile. She wrapped her arms over her torso and didn't speak for fear she'd hiccup. Or cry. Or die.

Gavino's jaw went slack. He blinked several times. His face jerked toward Esme. "You . . . love it? Really?"

Her head jerked up and down in a somewhat nod-like manner.

"But . . . the makeup? The hair? All of it?"

"Yes," she told him. "It's exactly what I wanted. Thank you so much."

"Well . . . great." He gave her a flat-lipped smile but looked vaguely ill. "That's just . . . great. She loves it," he added to Lilly, shrugging. "What about that, Lilly?" Lilly leaned against the doorjamb and sighed. "Go figure."

How could she possibly have liked it? Gavino thought. He felt bereft. So lonely. He'd made her up to look ghoulish intentionally, so she would realize how ridiculous it was to think that makeup or the lack thereof made the woman. But the whole plan had backfired right in his face. Now he'd have to send her off to an important faculty function looking horrid. Either that, or he'd have to confess his whole devious plot. After the blow of the *Stillman Show*, he didn't think she'd forgive him for humiliating her a second time, no matter how good his intentions had been. But, that makeup job. *Hijola*.

And she loved it.

"I absolutely love it."

His eyes moved to the chic young woman standing next to him in the carriage house, Denae Westmoreland. He'd thought about cancelling the appointment with the prominent gallery owner that morning, and now he wished he had. He could scarcely dredge up the enthusiasm to pay attention to one of the most important gallery owners in Denver, a serious career mistake. "Pardon?"

Her perfectly coiffed blond hair didn't move when she swiveled to smile at him with absolute debutante decorum. She gestured at the painting of Esme with a hand sporting so many gargantuan rings, he wondered how she held her wrist up. "I said I love it, Mr. Mendez. The portrait. It's exquisite. My husband will adore it as well, I'm certain."

"Well, the subject is exquisite," he told her, staring at the Esme he loved. Pure, gentle, genuine. Not his. He couldn't forget, she wanted

Elizalde. He should've remembered that last night. Another speeding bullet of regret and sadness pierced his heart. Direct hit. Zero survivors. Rest in Peace.

"I don't believe I've ever seen a contemporary portrait where the subject wore glasses. At least not one rendered so beautifully."

"Thank you." He sniffed the air covertly, hoping he'd fumigated the carriage house well enough. It had gotten to where he hardly noticed the overpowering odor of the paints and oils, but he knew it distracted some visitors. Then again, this particular visitor was in the business.

Ms. Westmoreland tilted her head this way and that, shifting her weight from one three-inch lizard heel to the other. One arm resting against her torso, she cupped the opposite elbow and bent her wrist, gesturing with two fingers. "The composition is first class. But, you know, that's not it either," she said. She gripped her chin and stepped backward, scrutinizing the painting with a narrowed gaze and pursed lips. "It's the emotion in the piece, the life."

In spite of his desolate mood, Gavino's heart began to pound. She really seemed to like it. Consigning with the Westmoreland Gallery could set him on his feet. He wouldn't have to leave Denver. *Or Esme.* He'd start over, make it up to her.

Ms. Westmoreland peered over at him like she'd just figured out the mystery of the century. "I've got it. It's her look."

Gavino swallowed and turned to the portrait. "Her look?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Mendez." She directed her attention back to the canvas as well. "That lovely woman has the undeniable look of love."

Esme padded listlessly into the kitchen and shoved the coffee carafe under the faucet. Her muscles ached and her eyes had burned too much to even consider putting her contacts in. But her glasses felt oddly comforting on her makeup-free face. She felt like herself, four-eyes and all.

She'd cried herself to sleep last night after Gavino had pulled her aside and told her the kiss had been a mistake. *He apologized.* Said he felt awful about it and it shouldn't have happened. He might as well have driven a knife into her heart.

She didn't want to go anywhere when she was feeling so vulnerable, especially not with him. But they had to shop for her outfit today. The faculty get-together was tomorrow night. So, she'd suffer through

the shopping with Gavino when she looked and felt worse than she had since the three days after the *Stillman Show*. What did she have to lose? He didn't want her, and there she'd stood, ready and willing to relinquish her pride and wear freakish makeup just to keep him. What a fool.

The whole thing was a fiasco. Her life was a fiasco.

God, she loved him.

She groaned. Almost against her will, she moved to the kitchen window to peer across the lawn at the carriage house. Dappled sunlight shone on the roof. The Russian olive tree near the back swayed in the slight breeze. With the big north-facing window, what a perfect studio it could be for Gavino. If he lived with her, he could move all the living furniture out and have ample space to create. If only he loved her like she loved him, it could work.

Gavino's door opened. She inhaled sharply and ducked down. Shoot, had he seen her? Her heart pounded out embarrassment in her chest. She rose slowly and moved off to the side of the window, peering cautiously around the wispy white curtain. Gavino stepped out and —

Her extremities went completely numb. Gavino stood in the doorway with a perfect magazine-page blonde. The woman wore a tight suit with a faux leopard-skin lapel and cuffs. She reeked of money. They smiled and laughed with one another, and Gavino looked utterly beautiful, completely carefree. He wore a Mandarin-collared pearl-gray shirt tucked into charcoal slacks. His hair — the hair she'd clutched with unabashed desire and need — hung loose, catching the sunlight and the breeze.

The woman leaned forward to say something and touched Gavino's arm. He didn't look like he regretted *that*. Sharp, ugly talons of jealousy tore at Esme's middle. She white-knuckled the edge of the sink and wanted to hate them both for being perfect and gorgeous and completely out of her league. But she couldn't. Because she loved Gavino Mendez with every clonable fiber in her body. Esme scoffed. And she'd always been so proud of her intelligence. Ha.

Gavino reached a hand out to the woman, and she took it but then pulled him into an enthusiastic hug. As his arms wrapped around the perfect blonde, Esme imagined his scent wrapping around her, too. Of course he'd want a woman like that. Why not? Hot tears of anguish

blurred the image she wished she'd never seen. She wouldn't have, had she not been staring at the carriage house longing for a dream she'd never realize.

As if the day weren't bad enough, now this.

She knew one thing: she couldn't bear to face him now.

Eight

After changing into jeans and a polo shirt, Gavino walked across the back lawn toward Esme's house. Sunshine heated his hair and kissed his skin. His steps felt weightless, and he couldn't keep the grin from his face. The day had started out so unforgivably bad, but it had turned around. A sense of hope imbued him. He couldn't wait to tell Esme the great news and unveil the portrait. Maybe he could convince her that Elizalde was a rat who would only end up breaking her heart. He couldn't quite make himself believe she wanted the cretin. Inconceivable. So he'd confess his feelings, and hope she'd give him a chance. They could start over.

Denae Westmoreland not only consigned "Look of Love," she also selected five other pieces from his collection and intended to dedicate one complete room in the gallery to his opening. The wealthy gallery owner seemed even more excited than he was about their new partnership. She'd even hugged him! She and her husband belonged to the kiss-kiss pretentious upper crust, but he could tolerate that for this big of a coup. In the art world, the Westmorelands were big time, and that's what really mattered.

Gavino jumped in the air and pumped his fist. *Yes!*

His entire body felt energized, alive. All of this was because of Esme. She inspired him, made him accept the man he'd become and forgive the angry boy he'd once been. He didn't need to beg forgiveness from all the people he'd hurt, he merely had to ask for clemency from himself. He knew that now. Because of her. When he was around her, Gavino felt like a good man. That had never happened before. God, he loved her. More than he ever thought he could.

A lump rose to his throat and his stomach flopped. He wished his mother was alive to meet her. God, she'd be so pleased. He could finally do something to make her happy. And, Phillipe — his brother had to meet Esme. Mr. Fuentes, too. They wouldn't believe that Gavino had found such a wonderful woman.

He laughed and lifted his face to the sun. Without even realizing her power, she took the mismatched colors and bare canvas of his life and nurtured him into a *pièce de résistance*.

He would have her. Somehow.

Even if he had to rein in his feelings and wait.

Sobered slightly, Gavino slowed his steps. Things between them weren't perfect, he had to remember that. They might be if he hadn't screwed up so royally last night. His jaw clenched, but he consciously released the tension. *No time for doubt — think positive*. He hoped, after he'd apologized so profusely, that she'd had time to forgive him for the kiss. Boy, had he ever read her wrong on that one. She'd been so responsive, he felt sure she wanted it as much as he had. His mistake. Hopefully, she'd know his apology had been sincere and they'd make up. Go shopping. Joke around again. Life would be good.

A persistent sense of foreboding shadowed his thoughts. Of course, there was the matter of preparing for the faculty get-together and explaining why he had tricked her and gone the ghoul route with her hair and makeup. But . . . he'd figure that out as he went along. She couldn't hold it against him forever, could she? Esme was a reasonable, intelligent woman. She'd listen to his motives before casting him aside. *Please let her listen*. Again, he stubbornly pushed away the negative worries.

Gavino took all three porch steps at once and lifted his knuckles to rap on the door. Before he could knock, something caught his eye. He froze, fist in the air. An envelope.

White. Sealed. Taped at an awkward angle on the glass.

And right in the middle, in Esme's neat drafter's printing, was his name. *Gavino*.

His heart didn't thud, it didn't race. Rather, it seemed to stop dead, and everything in him went cold. She'd left him a note on the door, which could only mean she didn't want to see him. That couldn't possibly be good, could it? Was it an eviction notice? A Dear John letter? Hate mail?

He unfurled his fist and pulled the envelope off the glass. With shaking fingers, he ripped open the top. The unmistakable scent of lavender wafted from the stationary and socked him in the gut. It smelled like her. Something stiffer weighted the bottom of the envelope. He peered in and frowned — her credit card? Baffled, he unfolded the note and read:

Dear Gavino,

I'm not feeling well today, must've been the extra hot sesame beef. I'm not up to visitors and I certainly can't go shopping. Please, go without me. I've listed my sizes below. I've also enclosed my credit card so you don't incur any expenses on my behalf. I'm sorry. Get whatever you think is best. It doesn't matter to me. I trust you. I'll see you tomorrow. I hope you're still willing to do the makeover.

Esme.

Just as he'd suspected, it wasn't good news. Gavino crumpled the letter in his fist and glanced up to Esme's shrouded bedroom window. Bad sesame beef? He didn't think so. Esme couldn't even bear to see him. He disgusted her.

He disgusted himself.

His eyes stung. A soul-deep ache started in his throat and radiated through his body. He hung his head, feeling beaten and desperate. He would beg, he would change, he would die . . . for this woman. Couldn't she see that? He never meant to hurt her. And yet, he had. Not once, but twice. Maybe this was his karmic destiny. It was his turn to hurt.

"Esme," he whispered.

God help him, he couldn't bear to lose her now.

"Gavino?"

Hearing his name, he turned from the Things Remembered window, where he'd been staring at — or rather, through — the wedding display for the last however many minutes. He didn't even know how

long. He blinked at the tall, willowy woman weaving toward him through the passing shoppers.

"I thought that was you," Lilly said, tipping her shades down to peer over them.

"Oh. Hey, Lilly." Even dressed down and wearing dark glasses and a baseball cap, she looked every inch the supermodel. Her attempt at looking incognito would've amused him if he didn't feel like his heart had been ripped from his chest with a meat hook. "What are you doing?"

"Just shopping." She angled her head to the side. "You?"

His mouth opened, but nothing came out. The truth? He'd been scuffling through the mall like a listless vagrant for the past three hours, cursing the person who had written that crap about "it is better to have loved and lost, blah, blah." He had looked at clothing for Esme but hadn't had the heart to buy anything yet. He knew he was a goner when he found himself standing in the Hallmark store reading every single card in the From Me to You line. One of them had even made his eyes blur with tears. What was he doing?

Losing his mind, that's what.

He lifted his arms halfheartedly, then let them drop. "I really screwed things up with her, Lil." The insufficiency of the words that finally tripped off his tongue frustrated him. Even so, a small bit of the weight on his shoulders lightened just for having verbalized the truth.

A quiet moment passed, with stroller moms and mall-rat teens passing them in a blur of chatter and packages. Lilly chewed the inside of her cheek while she studied him. "Look, Gavino," she said finally, "you're a really nice man, but Esme is my best friend. My soul sister. I absolutely won't stand by to let anyone hurt her."

"Neither will I," he said, firmly.

She looked protective. Wary. "What do you want from her?"

"What do I — ?" Gavino moved closer. "I'm in love with her," he rasped, clutching his hands into fists at chest level. "Sick in love with her." When Lilly didn't speak, he huffed and added, "What do I want from her? Everything. All of her. Forever. I want to make her happy."

Lilly crossed her arms and pursed her lips on an exhale. "That's what I thought. But, geez, buddy, I was starting to wonder." She swung her arm over his shoulder and steered him toward the food court. "I'll make you a deal. Buy me a cappucino and biscotti and you can spill your troubles to me."

Fifteen minutes, two coffees, four biscotti, and a jumbled, incomplete explanation later, Lilly raised one perfectly tweezed brow and planted her elbows on the table. "You have no idea how relieved I am to know you didn't really think that freakazoid makeup job looked great."

His mouth twisted to the side. "It was awful, yeah?"

"Ghastly."

"That's what I was going for. At least I succeeded at one thing." Sighing, Gavino ran his hand over the top of his head and let it rest at his nape. He stared at the best friend of the woman he loved. "But she wasn't supposed to like it, Lilly. She was supposed to realize . . . something. I don't know. I can't even remember now and who cares anyway? It's over. She loved it. I can't believe how badly I screwed up." He bit off a swear word and hung his head.

"Gavino," Lilly ordered in a droll tone. "Look at me."

He did.

"Here's the thing you aren't getting." She knocked a knuckle on her temple. "Esme *didn't* like the makeup job."

He blinked. Twice. "But she said —?"

"Get real." Lilly spread her arms wide. "She hated it. She despised it. How could she not? I won't even tell you the words she used to describe it."

Shock zinged through Gavino like metal balls in a pinball machine. Pandemonium broke loose in his brain. *She said — He thought — They made a deal to — But, what about —*

Lilly took advantage of his moment of dumbfounded muteness to sip her cappucino, eyeing him over the paper cup's rim.

"Then . . . why did she say she loved it?" He sputtered finally, aiming his finger at Lilly. He narrowed his gaze. "Love. I distinctly remember her using the word love."

Lilly wiped her lips daintily and looked at him like he was hopeless. "Because, newsflash. She *loves* you, Gavino."

His heart bungee-jumped. Could it be true? Even so, claiming she loved the horrid makeup job didn't make sense. "That doesn't explain why —"

"She somehow got it implanted in her brain that you only became attracted to her when she transformed into Elvira on a heavy makeup day." Lilly zigzagged her hand through the air at the ridiculous notion. "Something about a kiss."

He ground his teeth. "I knew I shouldn't have kissed her."

"Oh, you *should've* kissed her, you just shouldn't have kissed her with her Monster Mash face on. That, brother, was your crucial error."

Gavino fixated on one part of her statement. "You're saying it was okay to kiss her?"

"Yeah. Or it would've been, a couple weeks ago."

"But she said she only wanted to be friends," he said, in a luke-warm effort to defend his lack of action. "She told me she didn't want entanglements."

"Um, forgive my blunt response here, but, *duh!*" She whipped open her palms to accentuate the monosyllable. "Esme said that to maintain her dignity, Gavino."

"Huh?"

Lilly sighed. "It's like this. Esme refuses to believe that a man like you would be attracted to the real her. Which, of course, you inadvertently reinforced by kissing her while she was in full warpaint last night."

He didn't even address the "man like you" comment, though it registered in his brain. "That's ridiculous. I've been telling Esme how beautiful she is since the day I arrived in Colorado."

Lilly softened her tone and gave him a small, sympathetic smile. "Yes, but based on the way you two met, you can hardly blame her for doubting your motives."

He pressed his lips together. The truth stung. Parts of Lilly's explanation made sense, but a couple crucial puzzle pieces were missing. "There's one thing I don't get in this whole fiasco," he said.

"What might that be?"

"If she supposedly loves me, why does she want Elizalde?"

Shock registered on Lilly's face, then she tipped her head back and laughed out loud. When she looked back at him, tears shone in her eyes. "Gavino — God! You're such a man. You and Esme are a perfect match. You're born insane."

He tried for an indignant look, but only managed befuddled and forlorn. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She reached across the table and grabbed his hand, her tone measured and distinct, like she was speaking to a child. "Esme doesn't *want* Elizalde, punkin. She wants him to be attracted to her so she can turn him down flat. Humiliate him like he did her. Get it?" She paused to let

it sink in. "The whole *point* to this ridiculous makeover scheme is so Esme can get revenge. Incidentally, I've never approved of any of it"

Holy — It made sense. One corner of his mouth, then the other, creaked up into a smile. Esme loved him. *She loved him*. They just had to find a way to bushwhack through the rainforest of their combined stupidity and everything would be fine. Right? Except, he still had to make her over for the "event," and how exactly would he pull that off? His smile dropped. She still planned to go through with this revenge scheme, and though he was vehemently opposed to the whole idea, the last thing in the world he wanted to do at this point was boss her around. He frowned. "How am I going to get out of this, Lilly?"

She shook her head. "I've supplied the inside track, Gavino, but you're going to have to dig yourself out on your own. If you truly love her, you'll figure it out."

"But, do you think she'll — " he swallowed past a raw throat " — forgive me? For the makeup job? Everything?" He rested his forearms on the table and wound his hands into a ball.

Lilly leaned forward and patted his hands. "Last tip for ya, big guy. Lose the black lipstick." She stood and hiked her bag onto her shoulder. Donning the I'm-not-who-you-think-I-am sunglasses, she smiled. "Thanks for the Java. Good luck."

By the time late Friday afternoon rolled around, Esme had resigned herself to facing Gavino again. Eh, what the hell? She'd never really expected fireworks between them anyway. She just had to make it through the next hour . . . and the faculty get-together . . . then she could burrow back into her safe, predictable life and forget that this summer ever happened. As for Gavino, she was sure he'd quickly move on to bigger and blonder things.

So be it.

The teapot began to whistle. She whisked it from the heat and poured boiling water over a peppermint teabag. Gripping the string, she dunked the bag absentmindedly in the mug. Her gaze strayed out the kitchen window toward the carriage house, willing him to appear so they could get on with it. Be done with it. No sign of him. Big surprise. She'd long since learned that wishing for something didn't make it come true.

With a sigh, Esme carried her tea into the living room mainly to get away from the draw of that window. She curled up in the corner of the

couch and picked up the latest issue of *Newsweek*, thumbing through it without interest. The blood-red orb of the setting sun dropped behind a stand of cottonwood trees, casting long, dark shadows through the window into the room. She didn't bother to turn on a lamp. She reveled in the darkness. In her next life, she hoped to come back as a bat. Or perhaps a mushroom. Anything that thrived in darkness.

Anything but a wallflower.

Knock, knock, knock.

Gavino. She chuckled the magazine aside and glanced toward the kitchen. Despite direct orders from her brain to the contrary, Esme's heart began to pound in her chest. The really sick part was how much she wanted to see him. Still. She unwound herself from the couch, pulled her bathrobe tighter around her neck, and headed for the back door. Opening it, she looked at Gavino standing there, then dropped her gaze. "Hi."

"Hey." A long uncomfortable pause ensued. "How are you feeling, *querida*?"

Feeling? she thought, glancing back up at him. The reddish light from the sunset burnished his smooth bronze skin and cast a fiery luster to his long hair. The diamond in his earlobe reflected it, too, like a ruby. Feeling? she thought again. Ah, yes. Bad sesame beef.

"Better," she lied, clearing her throat. "Thanks for asking." She stood aside and motioned him in. As he crossed the threshold, she noted the garment bag he held, along with another bulky shopping bag. Curiosity got the better of her. "What did you buy?"

"An outfit —" he lifted the garment bag, then lowered it and raised the other sack — matching shoes, hose, purse, accessories, and . . . some cosmetics." He set both packages on the table.

"Cosmetics?" She frowned, nudging her glasses up. "Don't you think we got enough the other day?"

"Don't worry. This is all my treat," he said, with a small smile. "You've really done me a favor giving me a break on the rent. I just wanted to say thank you."

She didn't have the gumption to argue. "You're welcome."

"Plus, I thought we'd try a slightly different look for tonight and . . . we needed a few extra things."

"Oh. That's fine." But if he got her a tight suit with faux leopard-skin lapels and cuffs, she'd die. "Want some tea?"

"Got a beer?"

She grudgingly smiled as she walked to the fridge. "If you were in kindergarten, you'd get a failing grade for 'gives appropriate answer to a question.'" She lifted a bottle off the refrigerator shelf and handed it to him.

"Well, I never was a stellar student." He twisted off the cap and pitched it into the trash. "And I'm not in a tea sort of mood tonight."

What sort of mood was he in? she wondered. And why? Against her will, the beautiful scent of him — soapy, masculine, fresh — entered her sensory plane and gripped her heart. The very heart he'd stolen when she hadn't been guarding it well enough. Hot tears stung her eyes. She blinked them back and bit her lip.

In one fluid motion, Gavino set his bottle on the table and swept her into a heartbreakingly gentle embrace. One hand spanned her back, the other cupped her head and tucked it against his chest. She reached up and pulled her glasses off her face. They stood like that for a long time, silent, swaying, her arms stiffly at her sides, his wound about her. She felt him press his cheek, then his lips to the top of her head.

"Sweet Esme," he whispered. "I know you're nervous about tonight. And I haven't made it any easier for you. You deserve so much more than that."

"I-I'm fine," she lied. Her arms slipped around his waist, and she let the tears run soundlessly down her face to soak his shirt. Why did he have to be so nice? The jerk. She just wanted him to hold her forever. Was that too much to ask?

"I promise I'll make it better for tonight, yeah?" His lips warmed her hair once again. "I think you'll like how I make up your face this time much better."

"Last time was okay," she muttered apathetically.

"I didn't think so."

"Y-you didn't?" What about that kiss? She blinked against his chest. "I got the impression you liked it."

"It was okay. But — " she felt him shrug "— not you. This look will be you. I promise."

"Not too much me. I have to attract Elizalde, remember?"

"How could I forget?"

She sniffled once deeply, then pulled away and smeared at her cheeks. "I'm sorry for that. I always get weepy when — " *my heart is*

breaking “— uh, when I’m not feeling well. I’ve already shampooed my hair.” Esme spun, picked up her mug, and headed for the front of the house.

“Okay. Why don’t you wet it and wrap it in a towel?” Gavino scooped up the bags and his beer and followed her. “Are you going to wear your glasses tonight?”

She scoffed. “No.”

“Because if your eyes are irritated — ”

“They’re not,” she snapped, then softened her tone. “Gavino. They’re fine. I’ll just go put in my contacts.”

“May I hang the outfit in your room?”

“Yes, go ahead. Second door on the right upstairs. Is it leather?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Great,” she said, her tone bland. “There’s a hook inside the closet door if you want to put it there.”

“Then I’ll meet you in the bathroom,” he said, “and we’ll get this underway. Okay?”

Lifting the bottom of her robe, Esme started up the staircase with listless, heavy steps. *I can hardly wait.*

The lavender scent in her room, though gentle and understated, consumed him from the moment he entered. Gavino hung the garment bag on the closet door hook, then arranged the hose, shoes, purse, and accessories in a neat row on the end of Esme’s four-poster bed. Though he should’ve minded his own business and left, he couldn’t stop himself from looking around.

The room was big, with a slanted ceiling on one side. A thick, red down comforter covered the bed, and multicolored pillows lay scattered against the headboard. A wood fireplace dominated the wall opposite the foot of her bed, and a neat stack of quilts and fleece blankets flanked it.

He moved to the mantle and studied the framed photographs. Her parents, some other relatives, he supposed. Then a series of photographs of Lilly, Esme, and Pilar over the years. *Tres amigas*. He wished he’d cultivated such a strong bond with someone over the years. No sense wishing, though. A smile lifted his lips, and he reached out to touch an image of Esme. So lovely. So sweet.

He walked to her bedside and scanned the nightstand, not really snooping, just trying to absorb the woman through her most private

retreat. Freshly dusted, the nightstand held an alarm clock, several different shaped candles nestled together on a sterling silver tray, and a stack of books for nighttime reading. He tilted his head to the side to read the titles:

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Oil Painting

The Big Book of Oil Painting

The Artist and His Studio

American Painters in the Age of Impressionism

His breath caught. What was this? Touched, he sat on the edge of the bed and thumbed through one of the books. His chest constricted and burned. If he didn't know better, he'd think he was heading for some kind of attack. But, no. It was just love.

He shut the book and smoothed his palm over the cover. That she cared enough about him to immerse herself in his life's passion was . . . so like Esme. She thought of everyone but herself. He thought of the Westmoreland Gallery and excitement bubbled inside him. He wanted so much to share his good news about the gallery showing, but he preferred to make things better between them first. So he'd wait until the time was right. Something he was slowly learning to do, being in Esme's life.

Smiling, he replaced the book where he'd found it and took one more look around the room. In it, through it, he really saw the woman. And, he felt at peace with what he had planned. He wouldn't pressure, force, or cajole. He'd just lay his heart out there, bold and bare, and leave it up to Esme to decide. He crossed to the closet and pulled one more item out of his shopping bag.

A single, perfect pink rose. No thorns.

He hadn't been sure about the gesture until now, thinking perhaps all the Hallmark cards he'd read had poisoned his brain. But, no. He wanted her to have it. Cradling the blossom in his palm, he carried it to the head of the bed and laid it there, where she was sure to find it. Then he kissed his fingertips and touched them to the pillow as well.

Déjà vu.

Before she knew it, Esme found herself perched on the sink with Gavino standing in front of her completely focused on her face. She could barely enter this room without remembering, feeling, reliving that kiss. But in this position, with everything so perfectly replicated, Gavino's bulk and scent suffocating her senses, Esme found it utterly impossible.

She could be a fool once, even twice, but three strikes, baby, and she was out. Forcing her mind from how Gavino had felt and tasted, Esme reminded herself of what she'd seen from the kitchen window. She reached up and touched her styled hair, stunned to find it soft.

"Better than the stiff hairspray, yeah?" He winked.

She lowered her chin. "You're the expert."

"You're going to like this, *querida*." His cheek dimpled with the smile, and he nudged her jaw lightly with his knuckle. "You look beautiful already, and we're not even done."

"Whatever you say," she said, dubiously. Still, the compliment wrapped around her like an embrace. She tried to ignore the feeling. He'd been affectionate before as he made her up to look like someone she wasn't. She wouldn't fall for it again. She glanced toward the new cache of overpriced cosmetics and noticed Gavino had bought that beautiful paler shade of blusher she'd admired at the department store. Upon further inspection, she noted most of the colors he'd selected were subtler. Hope swelled inside her. Had he finally caught on to her true desires? Had exotic gone the way of 8-track tapes? She hoped so, because what she really wanted was elegant, not exotic. She just hadn't known how to express it before.

"I want to tell you something, Es, but I have to get it all out before you interrupt." He pulled a fluffy mascara wand from the tube and held it up. "Okay?"

His words brought her gaze to his face. "Okay."

He moved his finger from her eye level to his Adam's apple. "Stare here and don't blink." He waited until she did, then began slowly stroking mascara on her lashes. "What Vitor Elizalde put you through was despicable. But, my part in the whole fiasco . . . and the aftermath hasn't been much better."

Her lips parted, ready to stammer a denial, but he held up a hand, mascara tube clutched between his fingers, to stop her. He waited until she'd settled back. "I promised to be your friend, Esme, and I fell down on the job. Not intentionally, but because I became so blinded . . . by my desire for you, by how you made me feel."

Her gaze lurched upward to his eyes, and he cringed and reached for a swab. "Whoops — mascara dots."

"Sorry."

He waved away her apology. "Now — " He made the stare-at-my-throat gesture again. She complied, and he went to work on the other eye. "I've had my share of scores to settle in my time, and I don't begrudge your need for . . . tonight. Just as long as you know that Elizalde doesn't deserve you. And we both know you don't love him."

A surprised monosyllabic laugh blurted from her throat and she splayed her palm on her chest. "Whatever made you think I loved Vitor Elizalde, of all God-awful people?"

He tilted his head to the side. "Esme, please — "

"I'm sorry, I'll listen." She made a zip motion over her lips. "Go ahead."

Finished with the mascara, Gavino pitched it into the shopping bag. He sucked in one side of his cheek, seeming to struggle with what he wanted to say. Finally, he picked up the lip-liner — nude, thank goodness — and got to work on her mouth.

"Bottom line is, I saw something I wanted desperately and I went after it. I pushed you too hard, Esme. I know that now. I got it into my head that I knew what was best for you, and all I had to do was convince you however I had to, whatever it took." A beat passed. He sighed. "I was wrong. And, I'm sorry."

She bit her lip to keep from speaking.

"But the whole thing is your fault, really."

"What?!"

He grinned at her, but his expression quickly sobered and grew more intense. "It's your fault, because every moment I spent around you, *querida*, you made me love you."

Her gaze dropped. He lifted her chin.

Their eyes met again, and held.

"But more importantly, every moment I spent around you, baby, you made me love *me*." He held his fist to his chest. "And that's something no one has been able to do for thirty-four years." His thumb brushed over her bottom lip, sending shockwaves straight to her spine. A winsome little smile curved his mouth.

Tears rose to her eyes.

"If you cry this makeup off, Esme, we're gonna have words."

"I'm sorry." She chuckle-sobbed and looked toward the ceiling until she'd staved off the tears as best she could.

"Now that my soul is bared and my chest is weight-free, here's what I'm *not* going to do." He paused to coat a lipbrush with soft mauve lipcolor, then deftly filled in her lips. "I'm not going to tell you not to go through with tonight. I'm not even going to *ask* you not to do it. I support your decision, whatever you want."

He set the lipstick aside and placed his hands on her shoulders. "I just want you to know that you have nothing to prove to Elizalde. Also, I'm not giving up, and I'm not going away. I'll be here for you, whenever, however you want me."

Before Esme could find the words to reply, he'd slid his hands from her shoulders to her wrists and pulled her gently from the vanity. "*Mira.*" He turned her around to face the mirror.

Her breath hitched. She didn't know if it was because of how lovely she looked or because Gavino's gorgeous reflection shared the mirror with her. Either way, the sight rendered her speechless. *This* is how she'd envisioned the makeover. *This* is what she wanted. Understated — she could barely tell she had makeup on — yet polished and elegant.

"See?" Gavino said, his voice husky. "You look like you."

"Only better," she added in a whisper.

He shook his head. "No, *mi corazon*, you look like *you*. Period. It doesn't get any better than that"

"Gavino . . ." Emotion ached in the throat. She met his eyes in the reflection. "I love it."

"I love *you*," he told her simply, touching the tip of her nose. "Now, go get dressed. I'll wait for you on the back porch." Just like that, he turned, and was gone.

But, Gavino, she wanted to ask as the warmth in her heart began to cool, *what about the blonde?*

Nine

Esme retreated to her bedroom, mentally reciting every lyric she could dredge up about being a fool for love. Or *not* being a fool, that is. Yes, Gavino Mendez was charming, sweet, kind, funny, gorgeous, sexy, persuasive —

Okay, this was getting her nowhere.

She'd fallen in love with the man, but the point remained: though he'd said all the right words and made her up beautifully, she'd been hurt by him twice already in the short time she'd known him. She couldn't afford to think with her heart right now if she didn't want to join the ranks of all the other damned fools who made ballad singers wealthy.

But was your pain really Gavino's fault?

"Oh, shut up," she grouched at her opinionated conscience. Squaring her shoulders, Esme marched to the closet and reached for the garment bag, then stopped herself. She was feeling flustered, not thinking straight. She might as well put her hose on first since they were worn *under* the rest of the clothes. Apprehension ratcheted up her spine at the prospect of the evening ahead and her woefully unplanned plan. She hoped to snatch her dignity back from Elizalde, but she really hadn't thought it through. Her mind had been . . . elsewhere. What in the heck was she going to do? She bit her lip, nervous tension dampening her palms. Everyone at the party would know about the *Stillman Show*. They'd undoubtedly watch the interactions between her and Elizalde with bated breath. She hated to be the center of such negative attention. Damn Vitor.

She didn't have to go, Gavino had said. Nothing to prove to Elizalde. Faltering, Esme wrapped her arms around her middle and studied her

worried eyes in the mirror above her bureau. Yes, she *did* have to go. If for nothing else than to make a professional showing to her colleagues. It was the faculty mixer, for goodness sake. It wasn't all about her. She may not have anything to prove to Elizalde, but she had a lot to prove to herself.

Esme Jaramillo may not be beautiful, but she doesn't retreat from a battle with her tail between her legs. She doesn't hang her head in the face of humiliation. She doesn't base her self-image on the opinion of one arrogant oaf.

But wasn't that exactly what she was doing?

Doubt whispered through her. She pushed it aside. "That's not the point," she said to her reflection. "Vitor Elizalde deserves . . ." What? She wasn't sure and didn't care to ponder it. Enough of this. She needed to get dressed.

Esme turned to the bed and smiled, despite herself, at how neatly Gavino had laid everything out. A little zing of surprise fired through her when she realized he hadn't gone for the thigh-high streetwalker boots like she'd feared. Relieved, she eagerly examined his selections. The dove gray suede pumps weren't too high, nor were they dowdy. Little gray pearl earrings and a necklace lay nestled next to a matching suede clutch purse. Lovely. Elegant. Just what she wanted. She had to admit, Gavino was a thoughtful and perceptive man.

Not to mention charming, sweet, kind, funny, gorgeous, sexy, persuasive —

"Stop it!" Esme whispered at herself. She was acting like a ridiculous, inexperienced schoolgirl who would titter and swoon at the attentions of the football captain. How could he claim to love her, anyway, when he'd only known her for a short time? Then again, she'd known him for the same amount of time, and she knew without a doubt she loved him . . .

But who was the blonde?

If only she hadn't seen. If only she *knew*. She should just ask him, get it over with. My God, they weren't even twenty-some-thing, they were thirty-something. This shouldn't be so difficult. But wouldn't he tell her himself if she was nobody? Didn't she deserve that much from a man who claimed he loved her?

Maybe the blonde was . . . maybe she was his . . . cleaning lady.

Esme barked out a laugh. *Yeah*, right. The woman looked like she would vehemently deny the word clean could ever be used as a verb. No way was she a maid.

Forget it. Gavino didn't owe her any explanations. He'd said he loved her — why should she doubt him? Why? Because . . . because . . . oh, hell. She just did. Why *would* he love her? was the real question. She didn't want to get hurt, especially not by Gavino. Was it so inconceivable that she'd want to protect her heart?

Frustration at herself surged. *That's it.* The wheels of fate had been set in motion. She was going to the party. Period. "Just get on with it," she groaned to herself. Time was running out. She glanced at the luminescent green numbers on her alarm clock . . . and that's when she saw the rose. He'd left a rose on her pillow.

The gesture struck her as so utterly sweet, it hurt. Waves of pain washed through her, over her, drowning her. She crossed slowly to the head of her bed and sat. Picked up the flower. Sniffed it. Gavino knew how nerve-wracked she felt about the party tonight, and instead of begging her not to go or scoffing at her reasons, he'd chosen to support her gently.

With a single rose. No thorns.

If only life were so kind.

"Don't even think about it," she warned the burgeoning tears threatening to streak her mascara. She wasn't going to ruin this makeup job. She stood, realizing with wry amusement that she'd been embroiled in a conversation with herself for the past several minutes. Didn't they give people complimentary white jackets and nice padded rooms for such behavior? Chuckling, she carried the rose into the bathroom and placed it in a cup full of water. After standing back to look at it, she decided to bring it back into her room and set it on her nightstand so she could smell it while she fell asleep later.

Another glance at the clock revved her engines. She needed to just go, before she became a shortsighted fool again. *Three strikes, you're out,* she reminded herself.

Pulling the ultra-fine hose from their package, she eased them up her smooth legs. They felt like spun silk against her skin. She turned her ankle side to side, admiring, then crossed to the garment bag and unzipped it from top to bottom.

A small, reverent gasp escaped her lips. Inside she found the plum-colored silk and satin cocktail dress she'd admired the day they went shopping. God. He really paid attention to her, didn't he? The gesture,

like everything else Gavino had done that day, reached in and lifted her emotions, no matter how she struggled to hold them back.

She carefully pulled the gorgeous dress from the hanger and slipped it on. Perfect fit, and she loved it. The fabric swished around her legs and stopped just above knees that really didn't look so knobby after all.

Feeling slightly wobbly, a little teary, and dangerously close to shucking her pride and throwing herself into Gavino's arms, she turned from the mirror. With shaky hands, she slipped on the jewelry and pumps, filled the little clutch with a few essentials, and hastened from the room. In the doorway, she hesitated. The mirror beckoned one last time.

Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?

The answer to that question had never been Esme Jaramillo. But looking at herself in the elegant cocktail dress, with understated make-up and love in her eyes, *Esme felt beautiful*. For the first time. Thanks to Gavino.

And yet, there was still the little matter of the blonde.

And her dignity.

She knew he expected her to say goodbye, but that would be her undoing. Before she allowed her emotions to chose otherwise, Esme switched off her lamp, crept down the stairs, and slipped out the front door without speaking to Gavino. She was going to the party. She had to. She didn't expect him to understand.

Esme had been at the party for an hour, and she had yet to cross paths with Elizalde. Dimmed crystal chandeliers lit the posh hotel ballroom, and well-dressed professors and other university staff members milled about, laughing and enjoying the open bar and generous buffet. Scents of Italian oregano, marinara, grilled asparagus, and succulent roast beef mingled in the air. The festive party atmosphere cheered her. Her angst over the evening dissipated with every passing minute.

Lifting her glass, Esme sipped the last of her wine, then set the goblet on the empty tray of a passing waiter. She'd spoken with many of her colleagues, and though several had said, "Lovely dress," or "When did you start wearing contacts?", Esme never got the impression they were thinking, "And you usually look like such a dowdy hag," as they paid the compliments. Of course not. The notion was

ludicrous to her the more she thought about it. She was a well-respected, tenured faculty member and a scientist at thirty years of age, for goodness sake. Most of the people in her circle were well-educated professionals who respected her for her mind and her contributions to the university. Just because Elizalde had tricked her onto the show didn't mean that the rest of her contemporaries gave a hoot about the superficialities of appearance.

She knew that. When had her perspective gotten so skewed? Shaking her head, Esme picked up her clutch and went in search of the powder room.

Vernon Schell, a colleague up the chain on the research team, caught her arm as she weaved through the tables. "Esme," his voice boomed, as he pulled her into one of his famed bear hugs. "I was wondering if you were here. So good to see you."

"You, too, Vernon." She smiled, noticing the dark sun spots showing through the thinning white hair barely covering his tanned scalp. The deeply etched smile lines around his eyes bespoke of a life filled with joy. "How was your summer?"

"Super! Spent my time fishing for Blue Marlin off the coast of Florida and catching up on my reading." He guffawed. They exchanged more banalities of reacquaintance for a few moments before Vernon's ruddy, jowled face sobered, and he lowered his tone. "I've been meaning to pull you aside and talk to you, Esme." He looked contrite and pressed his lips together. "I should've called sooner."

Uh-oh. Her blood chilled. She'd managed to evade any mention of the *Stillman Show*, but here it came. She braced herself to endure Vernon's sympathy, lifted her chin, and forced an pleasant smile on her face. "What is it?"

"The study you published in the *AMA* journal last spring about cloning's role in infertility treatment? It's been nominated for an award. We're all so pleased."

Her shock must've showed on her face, because Dr. Schell belly-laughed and patted her shoulder.

"Don't look so surprised, Esme. The research was flawless and the article well-written and logical enough to give even our staunchest detractors pause." He beamed, laying a thick freckled finger over his lips as he studied her. "Anyway, that was the good news here's the bad. The University president would like you to travel to Washington

shortly after the term starts to present the data to a congressional task force." He twisted his mouth to the side. "That ought to throw a monkey wrench into your class schedule, which is why I should've called sooner. My most sincere apologies, my dear."

She quickly gathered her scattered composure, then reached out and squeezed his hand. So much for her thinking the stupid *Barry Stillman Show* was foremost in everyone's mind. "Are you kidding, Vernon?" She splayed a hand on her chest. "Don't apologize. I'm thrilled."

Another rich guffaw shook Vernon's notable girth. "Isn't that just like you to adapt to whatever is thrown your way. I must tell you. Dr. Jaramillo — " he leaned in, and his forehead crinkled as he peered over the half-spectacles that Esme always thought made him look like Santa Claus " — you're going to have to learn to be much more of a tantrum-throwing elitist if you want to leave your mark on the annals of self-important professorhood." He winked.

Esme tossed her head with laughter. The thing she'd always loved about Vernon was his absolute refusal to take himself or his position too seriously. If anyone had a "right" to be impressed with himself, it was the esteemed professor, Vernon Schell. Yet he wasn't. She could take a lesson or two from him. "I'll work on that," she said, tongue-in-cheek.

"Please don't, my dear," he implored with a wistful sigh. "If only there were more just like you . . ." Leaning forward, he patted her cheek, then made his way past her through the crowd.

Esme still felt warm and fuzzy from Vernon's genuine compliments as she pushed through the door to the multi-mirrored powder room. She was heading through the tastefully appointed sitting area toward the toilets when a captivating young woman caught her eye. She smiled at exactly the same moment as the other woman. Then she froze. My God, it was *her*. She took a tentative step toward her reflection, then the mirror behind her caught the facing mirror-image and unfurled it to infinity. She'd always thought it bizarre and a little magical when confronted with such reflective tricks. But this time was different. Better.

Feeling as giddy as a child at a carnival, Esme stared at her reflection. She couldn't believe the woman she'd glimpsed — admired, even — was none other than herself. Odd that a simple perspective shift, seeing herself as a stranger for a split second, had clarified far

more for her than all the time she'd spent bemoaning her appearance. What a fool she'd been. She looked like herself. *She looked fine.*

Hadn't Gavino told her that since the moment they met?

Esme didn't blink, didn't draw a breath, didn't move as the moment of clarity rocked her world. All along, he'd been attracted to her. From the beginning. It was she who had put the brakes on his advances, and it was she who ran out of the bathroom after their mind-blowing kiss without so much as an explanation. He'd misinterpreted her panic to get to Lilly as panic about . . . something else. Revulsion? Hardly.

But how was he to know?

Of course Gavino had apologized — he was too much of a gentleman to break her rules. *Just friends.* She scoffed. Had she lost her mind?

What had she hoped to prove to herself through a confrontation with Vitor Elizalde? Why would she try and regain her so-called dignity by manipulating the reactions of a man who didn't care about her instead of listening to a man she loved? A man who loved her?

Esme laughed and shook her head.

For an intelligent woman, she sure could be a fool.

Dazzled, Esme glanced behind her at the mirror then back at the one before her. The repeating reflections looked like a hallway winding off into nowhere. Or perhaps a pathway to a rich, wonderful future.

She supposed it was all in one's perspective.

Why had she doubted him?

Why had she left him?

As though she'd never experienced a moment of confusion in her life, Esme realized what she had to do. Gavino loved her. She absolutely had no doubt. There had to be an explanation for the blond-haired woman, because if she knew one thing about Gavino Mendez, he was a man of impeccable honor. He would never intentionally hurt her by pretending to love her while carrying on with another woman. He would never intentionally hurt her, period. He'd given her the freedom to do what she had to, and now she'd give him the opportunity to explain.

He loved her. That's what mattered.

She had to go to him.

Esme hurried from the powder room and ran smack into none other than Vitor Elizalde as he made his way toward the payphones. They both staggered back, and Vitor's expression flashed with surprise and

even . . . fear? The thought pulled laughter from deep inside Esme. Dr. Vitor Elizalde was afraid of her. What did he think she was going to do? Drive a switchblade into his gullet?

Hell hath no fury . . .

She squared her shoulders and gave a genuine smile. Actually, she ought to kiss the guy and thank him profusely. If not for his stupid little ploy with the *Stillman Show*, she never would've met Gavino. She wished the egotistical boar knew he was merely a pawn in the larger plans of fate. "Hello, Vitor," she said, enjoying his discomfort. "It's nice to see you."

He smoothed his already slicked-back hair. "It's nice to — ? But, of course. Dr. Jaramillo. You, too." His gaze made a furtive dip to the exit and back.

Esme figured he was probably estimating his chances of escaping the blade. She pictured herself as Zorro, cutting a Z-shaped swath through the air before Vitor. The image amused her so much, she couldn't keep from prolonging the conversation. Just a little. "I assume you heard our infertility study is getting some notice?"

He swallowed slowly, seeming to gauge her tactics. Why isn't she pummeling me with her fists? he probably thought. "Yes. Wonderful news. I am thinking the publicity will bring us additional grant monies. You should be . . . very proud."

"I am, thank you." She smiled, feeling powerful and giddy with hope. Enough of this. She felt like the all-powerful cat batting around the pathetic mouse before devouring it. Only difference, she no longer had a taste for blood. "Well, I have to be going. See you in a week or so." She started around him, but his hand snaked out to stop her.

"Esme."

She turned and raised a questioning brow.

"You . . . you look lovely."

"I know." She winked, truly believing the words for the first time. "I'm in love. Does amazing things for a woman, don't you think?" Before he could respond, she eased out of his grasp and headed toward the exit. Toward home. *Toward Gavino.*

Bright moonlight streaked through the picture window casting silvery-blue illumination across the floor of the carriage house. Gavino had pulled his chair over to face the glass, lacking the motivation to do

anything else. He hadn't even turned on a light. Stars spackled the inky sky, and he might have found the view inspiring if he didn't feel so bleak.

Why had she left without speaking to him? He'd thought the new makeover, the surprise of the dress she'd so admired would have melted at least some of the ice around her heart. He'd believed he could get through to her, but perhaps his mistakes had just been too grave. He'd missed his chance with her.

Then Gavino saw Esme round the side of the house, high heels dangling from her hand, and relief flooded through him. Guarded relief. At least she'd come back. Elizalde hadn't latched onto her vulnerabilities and taken her for a ride, something that had worried him since the moment he realized she'd left.

Wearing an adorable, determined look on her fine-featured face, Esme hurried across the back yard . . . toward the carriage house. His breath hitched. Good sign? He hoped so. He stood, cheek to cheek with his reflection in the glass, watching her progress. When she neared his door, he traversed the dark cottage in long, hasty strides. Reminding himself to hold back, not to push, to let her take the lead, Gavino braced his arm against the door frame. Head hung, he closed his eyes and waited for the knock.

Tap, tap.

Gentle. Just like the woman herself. He smiled.

He didn't waste time playing games, but threw the door open to greet her — the woman whom he prayed could learn to love him, imperfections and all. But as she stood there in stocking feet, the breeze ruffling her hair, his heart tightened and stole his words.

The sight of her in the silk dress that had been designed with her gently curving body in mind nearly knocked him flat. The shy little tilt to her face didn't help, but he managed to remain standing. Barely. He couldn't quite get a handle on her expression. She didn't look angry or apathetic, as she had when he'd made up her face earlier. Hope gleamed in her eyes. That, and . . . apprehension? He furrowed his fingers through his hair and said simply, "You're back."

"Yes." She studied his face for a moment, swinging the gray shoes hooked over her fingers, then inclined her head toward the dark room behind him. "Busy?"

"Never too busy for you."

She bestowed a small smile. "May I?"

"Of course. Just let me — " He left her standing on the threshold and navigated through the shadows to the lamp. With a snap, golden light flooded the small cottage. He turned, finding her wide eyes moving around his living and working space with curiosity. She stood awkwardly in the doorway, looking as though she might bolt at any moment.

"Come in." He waited until she'd stepped tentatively forward before asking, "How did it go?" He felt like they were circling each other in slow motion, neither quite sure of the other's motive or next move.

"It was . . . illuminating." She said, cryptically, punctuating the statement with a winsome smile. "Thank you for the dress."

"It's perfect on you," he whispered. The night air felt balmy, but goosebumps coated his flesh. Why did it seem like this moment was the culmination of every second of his life up 'til now? "You're so beautiful in it."

Blush colored her cheeks. She looked down, then up at him again. "I didn't know you noticed it that day in the mall."

He swallowed and spoke slowly, afraid of messing things up again. He couldn't quite get his bearings with her. "Everything that's important to you, *querida*, is important to me." A tight pause ensued, so he changed the subject. "You're home early."

She nodded. "I . . . wanted to be."

He started to reach out for her but stopped, curling his hand back and dropping it to his side. "What happened at the party?"

She trailed her finger along the small kitchenette table near the door and set her shoes on the chair, "Well, I found out I won an award," she said lightly.

"An award?" She seemed almost playful to him. He decided to follow her lead. "Best dressed?"

"No."

"Prettiest girl?"

She chuckled and looked up at him, her voice thick with emotion. "Nope, not that one either. A better one."

The heat he saw in her eyes rocked him. But it was tempered with . . . something. Unable to stop himself, he crossed to her, close enough to notice an eyelash on her cheekbone. He brushed it off, smoothed his hand through her hair, and cupped her cheek in one fluid motion.

"Tell me." *Before being this close to you, this much in love with you, makes me unable to hear a word you say.*

To his surprise, a storm cloud of worry darkened her eyes and she bit the corner of her mouth.

"What is it, *querida*?"

"Sit with me." She pulled out one of the chairs and nestled into it with a sigh. "I'm not used to heels. My feet hurt."

Deep within him, fear sprouted. There was something more, something bad. He could feel it. Had she come to tell him goodbye? They sat, didn't speak. He inhaled deeply and wondered briefly if the chemical smell bothered her. She hadn't said, but he knew she wasn't used to it. Finally, when he couldn't bear the suspense, he whispered, "*¿Qué paso?*"

She sucked in a breath, held it, then whooshed it out. "I won an award for an article I wrote about a study I headed. Published in a professional journal." Her fingers reached out and wound with his on the table. Squeezed. "The University is sending me to Washington in a few weeks to speak before some sort of congressional committee."

A rush of air left him, and he shook his head. "You're amazing. I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you. It really is an honor."

But that really hadn't answered his question. He wanted to know what was holding her back, what put the worry and fear in her eyes. Gavino still felt it. Definitely something she wasn't telling him. So help him. God, if Elizalde hurt her again. "Why did you leave the party early, *querida*?"

"Because I wanted to see you." Tears flooded her eyes.

His alarm compounded. "What's wrong? Talk to me." Gavino rose from his chair and crouched in front of her, gently caressing her legs from knee to hip. "Esme, I beg you. Did Elizalde —?"

"No." She swiped a tear and sniffed. "It's not that,"

His jaw clenched. "I'll kill him if —"

"Honey," she said simply. "He's not worth it, I'm done with Elizalde. He's nobody. Besides, if he hadn't tricked me onto the show, I would never have met you."

Hope whirled through him. What did she mean? If she was happy that fate had brought them together, then why the tears? "What's trou-

bling you?" She bit her bottom lip hard enough that he winced just watching her.

"I-I have to ask you something, Gavino. And . . . it's not going to sound so good. But, I have to."

"Ask, *querida*." He spread his arms and smiled, feeling so much love for her. "My life is an open book to you."

She tossed her head, looking off toward his stretched canvasses and paintings leaning against the walls. "Yesterday, I was making coffee." She swallowed several times and wiped away more tears.

Gavino waited. He couldn't help but notice she seemed embarrassed. Almost apologetic.

"A-and . . . I'm not a . . . suspicious person normally, Gavino, but I — I've been so hurt. It's no excuse." She waved her hand weakly. "I saw you." Her face crumpled. More tears. "Coming from your house. With a woman, and I just —"

Realization dawned, and Gavino nearly laughed with relief. She thought he had another woman! As though he could ever look at anyone else but her. But the best thing about it all was — *she cared*. He felt it now. "Oh, no no, Esme. The hug?"

She nodded, looking weepy and sheepish.

He leaned closer and cradled her face in his hands. "It's not what you think. Why didn't you bring it up sooner?"

She studied his eyes, then shrugged. "Who was she?"

He said he'd wait until the time was right to show her the painting, and the time couldn't get any more right than this. Instead of answering her question, he stood and held out his hand to her. "Come with me. I'll show you."

Esme stared up at him, then rose unsteadily to her feet. He tucked her arm into the crook of his elbow and pulled her closer. Together they walked toward the cloth-draped canvas on the easel. He leaned his head closer to hers. "You remember I told you I had caught the interest of some gallery owners who wanted to view my work, yeah?"

She nodded.

"The woman you saw was Denae Westmoreland, Esme. She and her husband own one of the most prestigious galleries in Denver."

With a sharp intake of breath, she looked up at him. "And?"

He grinned, too proud and excited to rein in his emotions. "And, they love me. My work, that is. They consigned several of my pieces."

"Gavino! That's wonderful." She threw her arms around his neck and he lifted her, swung her around.

Laughing, he set her on her feet but didn't release her. Their bodies, from chest to shin, pressed together and the perfection of her softness molded against his body shook his composure. Drinking her in with his eyes, he whispered, "It's common practice for a gallery owner to visit the artist's studio to view his work, *querida*. When you saw me, Ms. Westmoreland and I had just come to a very favorable business agreement." He took the chance and kissed the tip of her nose. "That's all."

She groaned. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I came to tell you." He dipped his chin. "But I found an envelope on the door instead."

Her gaze dropped and her cheeks reddened. "I feel so stupid. I should've known. I should've trusted you." She buried her face into his chest.

"I never gave you much reason to." He kissed her hair.

"You never gave me reason not to."

"It's over," he whispered. "*No té preocupes*." "If I'd seen you hugging another man, I would have gone mad and ripped him limb from limb."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

"Not really. I'm not that kind of a man — " he winked "— remember? I would've worried, though."

She expelled a breath. "Thank you for saying that."

"Wait. There's more."

"More?"

Gavino reached up and deftly pulled the air-light silk from the painting, then stepped back to allow Esme an unobstructed view. His gaze moved from her profile to the painting and back as his heart pounded wildly in his chest. He wanted her to love the portrait as much as he did.

"My God," she breathed, mesmerized. She clutched her fists at chest level. After staring open-mouthed for several seconds, she licked her lips. "It's me."

"Yes."

Her eyes glistened with raw emotion. "I look . . ."

"Beautiful," Gavino whispered, moving closer to her. "Just as I've always seen you. Just as the world will see you in the Westmoreland Gallery, *mi corazon*."

"Oh, Gavino. I'm . . . speechless."

"This is the piece that made Denae Westmoreland hug me." He reached out and ran the backs of his fingers slowly down her cheek. Her skin felt like silk, powder, rose petals. She was excruciatingly soft and pliant. "So you see, once again, this whole thing is all your fault."

She laughed, inclining her head to stare at her stocking feet. When she looked up again, her gaze sizzled. She reached out and touched his lips. His eyes closed. He wrapped his hands around her wrist and swept her palm with soft kisses.

"You're so gentle with me."

"You make me feel gentle, *querida*."

"Well, you make me feel beautiful. So, we're even." She sighed. He opened his arms, and she went into his embrace, holding him tightly, kissing his chest through his shirt.

"Esme, you feel so right in my arms."

"Then let me stay here," she whispered.

"For as long as you want, baby."

She pressed her cheek against him. "We've made some mistakes, Gavino."

"That's okay." He smoothed her hair beneath his palm. "We have time to correct them. All of them."

Her head came up and her eyes searched his face. "You remember the kiss?"

He snorted softly. Did he remember it? It consumed his every waking thought and most of his dreams. "Ah . . . yes."

"We got interrupted," she reminded him.

A burning arrow of desire pierced his heart. "Yes, we did."

"Well . . ." She nestled closer. Trusting. Loving. She ran her finger from his throat all the way down the front of him, then hooked it in his waistband. "That was a mistake. Don't you think?"

"An unfortunate mistake."

"An unfortunate mistake that I think we should correct," she whispered. "Right now." With a not-so-subtle movement against his body, Esme made it abundantly clear what she wanted.

"Are you sure?" The words came out husky.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

Gavino bent down and swept her into his arms, smiling down at her as he carried her to his bed. He deposited her gently onto the comforter and covered her body with his own.

"Gavino?"

"Yes, baby?"

Her words came out wobbly, passionate. "I love you. So much."

"I know, *querida*," he whispered, lowering his lips toward hers. "I can see it in your eyes."

Biography

Lynda Sandoval

Lynda Sandoval's college psychotherapy professor chased her down the hall after the final exam one semester and urged her to forget her chosen major (Human Services) and write instead. Lynda continued her studies and eventually graduated, but the professor's encouraging words stuck with her. After spending four years living overseas and seven years as a police officer in Colorado, Lynda decided to follow her professor's advice and give her long-time dream a go.

In addition to writing romance, Lynda is the author of a non-fiction reference book TRUE BLUE: an insider's guide to street cops - for writers (Gryphon Books for Writers/1999), writing as Lynda Sue Cooper. She lives in Colorado with her husband and a spoiled Cairn Terrier, and she loves to hear from readers. Write her at P.O. Box 620901, Littleton, Colorado 80162-0901, or visit her on the web at: <http://members.aol.com/PRLynda>