

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



*Cherry
Amor*

MARDI BALLOU

Sherry Amor

Mardi Ballou

Francisco Reyes can deal with dying. He can't deal with leaving Elena Sandoval, his forever love, or ruining their last Christmas together with the truth of his illness. Instead, he hires Rafe McMaster to film a wine commercial for their Sherry Amor and, unbeknownst to either Elena or Rafe, to become her new lover.

To the beat of flamenco music, Elena and Rafe fall into each other's arms—while Francisco films them. Aghast at what they've done, Elena and Rafe can't believe Francisco not only accepts their lovemaking but also joins them.

Francisco aches seeing his beloved Elena with Rafe, but he believes his plan to provide Elena with a new lover once he is gone is working—until Rafe and Elena take charge and show him neither one is ready to let him go so easily. After all, Christmas is a season of miracles.

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Sherry Amor

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SHERRY AMOR

Mardi Ballou

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Chapter One

On a frosty New York night less than a week before Christmas, people hungry for a break from city stress filled the trendy Café Espana. Actually, overfilled. People, stuck in the long line outside, glared with envy at those who lingered at tables or competed for attention at the bar.

“Let’s finish our drinks and get out of here,” Rafe McMaster muttered to his brother Nate. Though he realized the people freezing outside thought he was lucky, he knew different. Luck was a commodity in short supply.

“What’s the rush?” Nate asked. “Got any place better to be?”

Rafe scowled. “Gotta pack my gear. Early morning flight.”

“Where’re you off to this time?”

“Gig in sunny Spain. That’s why I wanted to meet here. Figured it would get me psyched.”

“Has it?”

The sour expression on Rafe’s face must have been enough answer to that stupid question. What had Rafe been thinking to drag his brother out for a drink tonight?

Nate whistled. “Working this close to Christmas? I can see how thrilled you are. Maybe you can get out of it.”

Rafe shrugged. “Client wants the filming done now. It’s an infomercial-type ad he wants me to turn into high art.”

“I thought you decided to keep away from that stuff. Devote yourself to your art.”

Rafe chose to ignore the sarcasm in his brother’s voice. “Most of the time. But I’m short on cash, which makes this deal look real good. I’ll work one day and make enough to fund my own projects for a month.”

Though Nate looked skeptical, he raised his glass. “Here’s to paying the bills – and to new starts. How’s your love life?”

“Don’t go there.” A month after Rafe and his ex-fiancée Terri had called it quits, all he wanted was to be left alone. Every member of his big Irish family, on the other hand, appeared committed to not letting that happen.

Seductive flamenco music drowned out whatever response Nate was about to make. Rafe found himself moving to the infectious beat, a momentary distraction from the gloom that had dogged him since Terri... Just then, a man and woman sprang up in a spontaneous dance. Conversations stopped. All eyes were riveted on the gorgeous couple. He had to clamp himself to his chair to keep from leaping up and joining them. If only he had his camera...

The music was incandescent magic, but what really grabbed him and wouldn’t let go was the woman. Tall with rounded breasts and hips his fingers ached to touch. She wore her dark chestnut hair in a traditional bun gracing her long neck. Dark eyes flashed fire and promised ecstasy and agony, full red lips, perfect nose and chin. Hell, every man in the place had to want her, had to be jealous of her partner. Bewitched, Rafe stopped thinking and gave himself up to pure sensation. He squirmed, painfully aware of an inconvenient hard-on – and the way the dancer had grabbed hold of his soul.

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The music, always the passion of the music. The music compensated for so much that had gone wrong. When she danced, Elena Sandoval could imagine herself home, far from this cold, foreign place. Home, where she longed to be at this most beloved time of the year. She stamped her feet and threw her head back in time to the reverberating beat, reveling in each click of her heels. For the first time since arriving in New York, she felt warm and alive. *Gracias a Dios*, just one more night until she returned home.

She locked eyes with her dance partner, the man who'd brought her to New York, Francisco Reyes. Her partner in work and play, her lover.

So caught up in the music and the dance were they both that Elena had just about forgotten where they were until an explosion of applause burst her dream bubble. Following Francisco's lead, she nodded to their impromptu audience and let him whisk her back to their awaiting friends at a crowded table.

"A fitting prelude for making love tonight, *mi amor*," Francisco murmured so only she could hear.

She flashed a sardonic smile. "Maybe, but only because we are going home tomorrow. If we had to stay in New York any longer, you'd be sleeping with your friends' dogs." She sat down and turned her face from Francisco.

"Perfect. You two must dance together again." Lorenzo, their New York business partner, toasted them both.

"Back home in *Sevilla*. That's the only place we will dance." Elena took a sip of her drink.

"Our star has grown homesick," Francisco said.

She swallowed her sherry and cast a sour look in his direction. "Homesick would be an improvement. *Ay, Dios*, why didn't you tell me how unsympathetic this place is."

"Unsympathetic? Hardly. Look at this wonderful new bistro, opened a scarce few weeks ago, just in time to welcome you." Lorenzo's gesture encompassed the large room and the crowd. "And, after your dance, I wager there are plenty who would be more than happy to proffer a very personal welcome. Let's make sure to extend that interest to *Sherry Amor*."

Everyone at the table laughed before moving on to other topics. Other dancers rose to take the floor and the spotlight. The general consensus was that none came close to the perfection of Elena and Francisco.

Perfection. What a joke on him, on all of them. Francisco would pay dearly for his energetic display. He'd had to dredge up the strength and will to dance with Elena, and he'd carried it off. The triumph of modern medicine. Too bad it had such finite limits.

He didn't want to think about this right now, tonight, when he was with Elena in this glittering place, enjoying good friends and food – pleasures he'd so often taken for granted. Pleasures like being with Elena.

In the coming days, the memory of tonight would keep him warm, bring him comfort and courage. Would that the same memory could also comfort and encourage Elena in the harsher times to come.

Basta! No more maudlin thoughts...

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"Wait a minute, bro," Nate said after Rafe had thrown down enough bills to more than pay his share of their tab and risen to go.

"One minute, that's it." He sat back down.

Nate swept a hand over his brow. "Look, no point in trying to keep this from you."

"What?" Rafe steeled himself.

"It's Terri. Word on the street is that she's hooked up with another guy and they're getting married."

"What?"

"I figured you didn't know."

"That can't be right. It's just been a month since we called it quits. That's not enough time –"

Nate held his hands up for Rafe to stop. "Look, who cares about any of that? Terri Prince is not your problem anymore."

"We broke up, but that doesn't mean I want to see her screw up her life."

Nate rolled his eyes. “Repeat after me. *She’s* not your problem. *You’re* your problem. You’ve gotta get a life.”

“Trust me. I have exactly the life I want right now. I’m making money so I can make films. That’s what makes me happy and keeps me warm at night.” Though he wouldn’t have minded being with that flamenco dancer... Jesus, maybe his brother was right about him needing to get a life. Not that he was about to admit so.

Nate raised a skeptical brow.

“I mean it, Nate. I’m really okay, better than okay. I’ve got an assignment for big bucks. Which is why I’m out of here now.”

“Okay.” His brother sounded dubious.

“How about I call you when I wind this up and get back to the city? In the meantime, you can tell everyone I’m really okay.”

“Sounds like you’ll be back in time for Christmas dinner. Then you can tell everyone yourself.” Nate smiled.

That was all Rafe needed. Much as he loved his family, they came on too strong sometimes. At the thought of Christmas with them this year, he was tempted to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge. Not that he’d admit it. “Don’t count on it. I figure once I’m over in Europe on someone else’s ticket, I might as well take advantage—spend some time.”

“Stay in touch. You don’t want Mom to worry on Christmas.”

As if he’d be able to stop that force of nature. Rafe was finally able to tear himself away to leave. On his way out, he surveyed the room from a filmmaker’s perspective. Of all the times not to have his camera with him. It would have been amazing to get the magical flamenco on tape—especially the woman.

* * * * *

Morning came fast, gray and cold. Rafe made it to JFK just in time to board his plane and squeeze into the last available middle seat in coach—after which takeoff was

delayed. With snow forecasted and the day growing gloomier by the minute, he didn't exhale until the flight from New York to Madrid took off. There would be a short layover before he caught the connecting flight to Seville for his assignment.

Once they were in flight, he checked his laptop to review his notes. He'd been hired by a Spanish exporter hot to grow his business in the U.S. and beyond. But the product was sherry. *Sherry*, for cryin' out loud. He grinned, thinking of his Irish granny and her little old lady friends with their sherry and biscuits as a Sunday treat. God love 'em, but how the hell would he make a hot video out of that?

He'd probably be working with an old dear or two, granny types who'd devote themselves to being helpful. Of course they'd be the Spanish version of little old ladies, dressed in severe black, maybe with lace mantillas covering their white hair.

Rafe looked online for info about Seville. Southern Spain. Andalusia. He was headed to the part of Spain that sherry came from. No big discoveries there. Also the home of the flamenco. He could definitely get his mind around taking in more of that dance. Last night had whetted his appetite – for what? – more than anything since Terri had disappeared from his life. Not that he missed her.

Funny that he'd never gotten to Spain before, considering everywhere else he'd traveled for work. He still needed to accept commercial assignments to fund his indie videos. Along the way, he'd managed to see the places that drew him. Except Spain, until now.

He'd been to Ireland, ancestral home of the McMaster clan. Not all the ancestors, though. One lone Spaniard, Manuel Morales, had worked his way up to the Emerald Isle and enthralled Rafe's great-grandmother sufficiently to leave a permanent mark. That was why Rafe had Black Irish coloring and was named Rafael instead of the more typical Sean. His brother Nate was really Fernando, a secret he'd commit murder to guard.

The flight attendant threw down what passed for a late breakfast, a paltry pseudo croissant and a small tub of strawberry jelly. Amazing what a hungry person could eat. He practically inhaled the crummy coffee then sat back and closed his eyes.

* * * * *

Elena knew she should try to sleep, a simple act she'd never mastered on an airplane. Even in the relative comfort of the first-class cabin, she could not rest. She had so much to get done in the days before Christmas. Why had she allowed Francisco to drag her first to New York then into making the commercial video for their sherry now? Another partner, Juan Pablo, had insisted they start their next campaign at the birth of the new year. The only trouble was, she'd already committed herself to helping prepare the family feast for *Nochebuena*, Christmas Eve. And then gifts for her nieces and nephews, not to mention the adults and Francisco. He'd promised her a shopping paradise in New York then kept her too busy with appointments for her to shop. Three days before Christmas, two since she would lose a day flying, nothing was done.

"This trip to New York was a terrible idea. And now you expect to complete the videos in time for us to enjoy the holidays? I must have been mad to agree..." Hearing Francisco snore, Elena jabbed him with her elbow. Why should he be able to sleep when she couldn't?

He warily raised an eyelid then glared at her. "Eh? What is it now, Elena?"

"You know I can't sleep on airplanes. Talk to me, keep me company. It's your fault I'm stuck here."

He flashed his lazy grin, a gesture that still made her heart flutter. "Let me make it up to you, *querida*."

"How?" she asked. His dark eyes were flashing a message of pure mischief.

He extended the thin blue blanket on her lap to cover his. In moments he had insinuated his talented fingers between her legs, trying to coax them open.

“Are you insane?” She clamped her thighs tight, trapping his fingers, which he determinedly wiggled. Closing her legs might have been a mistake because the delicious sensations he produced made it a challenge not to writhe.

“*Mi amor*. You can’t sleep, I can. I understand orgasm guarantees restful sleep. Even on an airplane.”

She bit her lip not to moan. “You have to stop this...now.” No matter how she tried to move her legs, to escape his touch, he managed to tantalize her through the layers of raw silk slacks and her silk thong. She writhed with discomfort and shameful pleasure. “Please...”

“Let me do this for you, to compensate for your great sacrifice in coming to New York with me at this time.” He rubbed his palm back and forth across her very moist, hot pussy, each touch a master stroke.

“Francisco, you are a beast,” she whimpered, regretting now that she’d woken him. She could just picture the attendant figuring out what they were doing and— What? Throwing them off the plane? Escorting them each to a different seat on this very packed flight? “Why do you have the blanket across your lap too?”

“Just picture the erection touching you has brought forth.”

The final straw. She groaned. It didn’t take much imagination for her to form a mind portrait of his cock, hard and ready to fill her. What torture to have him so near and yet so far. Despite years of convent education and dealing with Francisco, she couldn’t ever resist. As he kept up his divine friction, she snaked a hand under the blanket and palmed his warm, hard length.

Had he and Elena never before flirted with membership in the Mile High Club? Francisco couldn’t believe he hadn’t initiated her on an earlier flight. So many missed opportunities. Given what a grumpy flyer Elena was, Francisco appreciated finally having found a way to improve the quality of their time in the air. At this juncture, he

needed to make sure all their time together was of the highest quality. Their very limited time together...

Elena, trying to keep a neutral expression on her beautiful face, was thrusting her hips back and forth in perfect rhythm to meet his fingers and direct his hand exactly where she wanted him. "Mmm," she whispered, her eyes darting heavenward. "Like that."

He was enjoying her reactions so much, her hand on his erection was almost too much. Not that he was going to complain or ask her to stop any time soon. "*Querida*," he murmured. "It's been far too long since we played this way. You've not lost your touch."

"Nor...you...yours," Elena gasped. Judging from her rhythmic contractions and the way she'd clamped his hand between her legs, she was at the peak of her climax. Much as he wanted to get his tongue and cock deep in her moist, pulsing warmth, the configuration of the damn seats, not to mention the spectators they'd attract, argued for restraint. Thank heaven the airline still provided blankets.

Elena subsided for a moment before turning on him with gleaming eyes. "Now it is your turn."

His erection burgeoned at the sound of her voice and the scrape of her manicured nails along his shaft. The lightweight wool of his slacks and silk boxers enhanced rather than distracted from her touch.

"I want to suck your cock," she whispered.

He groaned. "Unfair. I did not provide provocative commentary while I played."

Her response was to lick her lips then trace a circle over their bright red perfection with her little pink tongue.

So much for equality. He bit his lip to keep from making a very loud, inappropriate noise. They really didn't want the attention of their cabin mates at this precise moment.

Talented Elena managed to squeeze his balls before returning her attentions to his cock and glans. Her fingers traced a path of willful mayhem, stimulating him beyond all endurance.

“You must stop,” he hissed, “or there will be hell to pay.”

She fastened her vixen gaze on him. “You know what I want.”

He grunted. “You know that I cry out like a savage when I come. The attendant will race to rescue me from your evil clutches if I let loose...”

His threat earned him a squeeze that almost brought matters to their end.

“My evil clutches? Ah, my dear Francisco, you haven’t seen anything yet. But be warned. If you indeed make the horrible noise that heralds your climax, I will disavow any acquaintance with you.”

“Hardly credible when my cock print is impressed on your hand.” Surely he had to have left a permanent mark with the way he was pressing her. But, *Dios*, it felt so amazing.

She batted her long, dark eyelashes in mock coyness. “I will be believed. So, I suggest that you keep your sounds to yourself. Because, my darling Francisco, I will have your total surrender. You will come for me. Only then will I be able to get some sleep – and I’ll let you sleep too.”

“Mmmfff,” he replied after she’d manipulated his erection in a slow, sensuous circle.

“I love an articulate man,” she crooned. “Come to me, baby. Come. I want to hear the terms of your full surrender. But look, the attendant is headed our way.” That said, she gave him a squeeze that nearly had him levitating out of his seat.

“Is everything all right here?” the tall young attendant asked.

“We’re fine,” Elena said.

“Can I bring you something to drink?”

Elena looked at Francisco, who'd been forced to bite down hard on his lip. At least the vixen had stopped stroking him for the moment, though even staying quite still, her hand was magical.

"Maybe come back in a few minutes," Elena asked.

The attendant nodded and moved to another seat.

"So, Francisco, do you surrender?" She had such glee in her voice.

"I do," he ground out, "as much as I ever can."

"Cryptic. I suppose that's as good as it will ever get from my macho man." She applied the *coup de grâce* that sent Francisco over the edge into a large, messy orgasm. He'd probably soak the blanket in addition to his trousers. All worth it.

"Yesss." He allowed himself the slightly elongated English syllable as he exploded in a whole-body release orgasm that left him feeling hollow and yet totally fulfilled.

Once he had subsided, Elena moved her hand from its sexy niche.

"So, was that good for you?" she purred, her good humor evidently returned.

"I'd ask the same of you, *querida*. Did I hit all the right spots?"

Her eyes and smile sparkled. "Oh yes, for me." She yawned prettily, her hand over her mouth. "You were right. I think you have found the secret for how to induce sleep on a plane. No drugs or alcohol, no hangover. Perfect." In moments, she'd closed her eyes and seemed to have fallen into a restorative sleep.

Now he was the one wide awake. His climax had relaxed him, so he should have slipped easily back to sleep. Instead, he took these moments to immerse himself in the beauty of his Elena, for once at rest. He adored her, loved her, gave thanks every day that this perfect woman was his life mate.

He wouldn't allow himself to think right now of how very few of those days remained...

Chapter Two

Rafe kept dreaming of the super-sexy flamenco dancer. Only in his dreams, she'd shed her partner and pointed to him to join her. Not even the discomfort of being squooshed into a middle seat cooled his resulting hard-on.

Despite his current situation, his hand went under his blanket. What the— Since he always slept buck-naked, encountering the fly of his jeans jolted him awake. His eyes flashed open enough to see it was dark in the cabin and everyone around him appeared to be asleep. He wriggled in an effort to get relief, rubbing his hand across his bulge then along the length. If only he could slip his hand inside his pants without waking anyone. He groaned softly.

He stroked himself several more times, but all he accomplished was to get harder and more frustrated. *Great. How the heck was he going to get back to sleep?* He needed to banish the flamenco dancer from his mind or he'd be walking around with blue balls to complement his bloodshot eyes. He needed to be sharp tomorrow when he began working with his new client.

The dancer haunted him. Well, at least he hadn't thought of Terri in hours. What a time to remember that. With a grimace and a supreme effort of will, he forced himself to review baseball statistics. Boredom at last did its trick and he fell back into a fitful sleep.

Right before the plane's descent into Madrid, Rafe next awoke, desperate to stretch his legs and forget about his aching balls. He raised his arms, yawned and tried to find a comfortable position for the landing. "Coach is such a bitch."

The guy sitting by the window grunted agreement.

With a three-hour layover in Madrid, Rafe would have time to grab coffee before his next flight. He'd get through immigration, deal with his luggage and find out how to get to his gate. Then coffee.

Thank goodness the landing went well. As usual, he jumped out of his seat, retrieved his stuff from the overhead compartment and waited with extreme impatience to deplane. Since first and business got off before coach, he had no choice but to wait. Watching the exit with increasing agitation, he caught a glimpse of two people who looked familiar. Who—

The woman was so hot, just standing in line, she nearly revived his erection. She was with a guy. Of course she was with a guy. A hot chick like her would never have to be alone. She was strictly first class, not coach. But who the hell were they? A quick memory flash of the club he'd been in with Nate. The two people who got up and did the amazing flamenco. Hell, after dreaming of her all night, he should have recognized her immediately. His twitching cock sure did.

As coach began to inch forward, he reflected on what had happened. Weird that the dancers were on the same plane to Madrid as he was. He felt almost like a character in a mystery movie. Since he wasn't, he would take a page from his granny's book of signs and view the coincidence as a good omen for his trip. It would be a great trip if he got to capture images as rich as those dancers' flamenco. Maybe that's what the dream and the sighting were meant to convey.

* * * * *

"You promise we'll be able to finish the filming before *Nochebuena*?" Elena asked Francisco over coffee.

"*Mi amor*, don't worry so." He stroked her hand in a sexy way that was meant to soothe her nerves. "We should be able to. If not, the videographer will stay until the new year. He's not going to wrap up the film until we're thrilled with the campaign. Are you afraid he will leave us in the lurch?"

Elena took a good swallow of her hot drink. "No. I know you and Lorenzo did careful research. He has a good reputation and the samples we've seen of his work are excellent. But what's going to happen if he's stuck here over Christmas with nowhere to

go? Surely he has family in America. He'll miss going home to them and he'll be lonely."

Francisco smiled. "The Christmas season has gotten to you, I see. I love how excited you become for the holiday, but you forget. Not everyone is such a big Christmas lover as you." He picked up her hand and planted a kiss, which he knew turned her on. "Also, *querida*, keep this in mind. He's a grown-up, responsible for himself. He can read a calendar and is aware of the time of the year."

"Still," she whispered. "He is a stranger here. Do you know if he even speaks any Spanish?"

"I haven't met him, so I don't know. But we are paying him quite well, plus which, our job will be a professional coup for him. It behooves him to satisfy us, just as it behooves me to satisfy you."

She wouldn't let him sidetrack her with sexy talk. "You're not satisfying me now when you shrug off my concerns."

He stopped smiling. "Never. I will never allow you to go unsatisfied in any way. My love, trust me in this. I have been very thorough. We have the right man for the job."

She did trust Francisco. That was part of the magic of loving him. "Okay. I'll stop doubting you. If the videographer had insisted, I suppose we could have shot the ads in the States."

"If we had gone that route, we'd really have been in danger of missing out on Christmas in our country."

"Then I'm glad we've been able to make this work. But, Francisco, never again."

* * * * *

As it turned out, after a slight luggage mix-up, Rafe barely made the second flight. He got on the plane about two minutes before the pilot ordered the door shut—still in need of that elusive cup of coffee.

At least he'd be arriving in Seville—*Sevilla*—in less than two hours. Evidently the whole southern section of Spain, called Cadiz, was home to the product he was going to shoot—sherry. Also the home of the flamenco. Hard to believe the little old lady drink and the sexy dance came from the same place.

As he trudged back to his seat, Rafe could have sworn his flamenco twosome were on this plane too. Okay, that would be too spooky. On the other hand, given his exhausted, caffeine-deprived, jet-lagged state, maybe he was hallucinating. Or maybe everyone was starting to look alike.

He finally managed to get a cup of very fine coffee from the attendant once they were airborne. And then he conked out in the relative comfort of the roomier seats on the small plane. In no time at all, they were landing in Seville.

He deplaned, got his luggage and looked around for a driver carrying a large card with his name. It didn't take long to find him. More than glad he'd soon have a chance to shower and change, Rafe rushed over to the man with the sign.

"Senor McMaster? I'm Jose Flores. Welcome to Seville."

"Thanks. Are you driving me to the hotel?"

Jose shook his head. "I'm sorry, *senor*. My instructions are to take all of you directly to the studio."

Rafe was so disappointed about having to wait for his shower that it took him too long to register the words "all of you". Then he did. "Who else is coming?"

"Elena and Francisco. They're already waiting in the car."

Maybe they'd just be meeting to touch base. It would be cruel and unusual for anyone to expect him to work before he had a chance to rejoin the human race.

"I know Francisco and his partners are anxious to get started, which is why he asked me not to take you directly to the hotel. But don't worry, there are facilities in the studio for you to clean up and have something to eat."

"Great."

“Here we are.” Jose had led Rafe to a black Mercedes stretch limo. Seated, engaged in a very animated discussion complete with hand gestures were Elena and Francisco. He now had names for the couple, the man he’d seen before and the woman he couldn’t stop from seeing.

He had to pinch himself to get through the haze and believe his eyes. Suspecting these two were a dream image that could disappear at any moment, he slipped into the car and braced himself for an eventual return to reality. If this were a fantasy, he might as well enjoy it until it vanished.

In love with and devoted to Francisco as Elena was, she’d have had to be half-dead not to notice the third passenger. Tall, dark and intriguing as hell, he had an instantaneous effect on her sex—not that she would want Francisco to know. But looking at the new man, her nipples grew quite stiff and her clitoris quite moist. He had thick black hair she wanted to run her hands through, truly piercing blue eyes and the classic features of a movie-screen Romeo. Thank goodness Francisco couldn’t read her mind or, she hoped, her physical reactions. “I’m Elena Sandoval,” she murmured in his direction.

He nodded. “Rafe McMaster.” If he didn’t stop gazing at her, Francisco would growl and worse.

But Francisco surprised her. When he spoke, he was polite—and strangely oblivious to the current of attraction between her and the videographer. “Francisco Reyes. You are the videographer McMaster.”

“Guilty as charged. Are you two involved in the video I’m here to film?”

“Guilty as charged,” Francisco echoed.

The other man’s eyes widened in surprise. “We’re talking about the sherry promotion, right?”

“Of course. We chose you for the filming because of your great reputation.”

“And your availability at Christmas when everyone else is on holiday,” Elena added. “Why aren’t you?”

“Why aren’t I, what?” he asked.

“On holiday now that we’re so close to Christmas? We were amazed that you were willing to travel to a foreign country and miss out on being with your loved ones.” Elena couldn’t believe how personal she was getting with a total stranger moments after meeting him. On the other hand, her body didn’t regard him as a stranger at all—not that she’d allow herself to think about that much longer. She could always blame inappropriate reactions on jet lag.

He laughed, showing even white teeth she wanted to feel on her breasts and lips. “This limo ride is going to be tougher than my interview for the job.”

Francisco rolled his eyes. “You might as well humor her. She’s been on my back for days for scheduling the filming so close to Christmas. I’ve had to swear on my soul that the results will justify the sacrifice.”

Was it Elena’s imagination or had a longing expression flickered across Rafe’s face when Francisco said she’d been *on his back*? She licked her lips. “Francisco, I’ll deal with you later. But answer me please, Rafe. It will do much to restore my humor after the long flight. By the way, I’ve never heard this name before. Rafe. Where does it come from?”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “Short for Rafael.”

She clapped her hands with delight. “A Spanish name. Is this not an unusual combination with your last name?”

“Not in my family. The McMaster clan is Irish. But several generations back a Spaniard wandered up to Dublin and caught my great-grandmother’s fancy. That generation started the tradition of Spanish names for the sons. So my brother, who we all call Nate, is really Fernando. He’d kill me if he knew I told anyone. And I’m Rafael.”

“Then Spain is not such a strange destination after all.” Elena was delighted.

He stifled a yawn and stretched. "I've always wanted to get over here, maybe look up Great-granddad's people, but this is my first trip."

"You see, Elena, it's not a hardship for him. To the contrary. Maybe he will reunite with a long-lost branch of his family." Francisco looked at her as if she should be placated.

"I'm glad, Rafael, that you have this chance. But that still doesn't explain why it's okay for you to be away from your loved ones now." Elena watched him very closely.

"I'll catch up with my family after Christmas. We have such a large brood, one more or less in the crowd doesn't make a difference." He pursed his full, sensuous lips.

"I can't believe that. And what about your sweetheart?" Her voice trembled as she asked.

Though he shrugged, she could sense that the question irritated him. "I'm not seeing anyone."

"Surely a hot young guy with a camera..." she started. What had gotten into her? Maybe it really was the effect of crossing so many time zones.

"Just broke up. Great timing, eh?"

"So, you're free?" she asked. Francisco watched her with a bemused expression.

"No, I'm expensive. Which is why I'm sure you, Francisco and your partners will want to get to work fast. I thought I'd need some recovery time from the jet lag, but I'm starting to feel lots better. Tell me what you envision for the video?"

She shouldn't have felt disappointed by his willful effort to not answer her question, but she did—especially because Francisco flashed a triumphant smirk. Which meant what? She loved him, but she also would have loved to find a way to shake him up. Lately he'd become too complacent about her being in his life, too sure of himself. On the other hand, he seemed more capable than ever of shaking her up.

"And so we want to show that sherry is a drink of passion," Francisco concluded.

“That is not the image I have, and I expect that most people in the U.S. share my opinion.” Rafe raised one perfect brow.

“Exactly. So you see, we want our video to strike the first blow in our campaign to educate the public, to strip away the tired old impressions. When you think of sherry, what is your image, Rafe?”

“Certainly not a drink I’d ever get excited about. It’s what Granny and Auntie Colleen and their peers indulge in with Sunday dinner.”

Francisco was nodding. “I appreciate your honesty. You’re exactly the kind of guy whose mind we want to change. It goes without saying that we want to keep our traditional customers. At the same time, we want to, as you Americans say, grow the market. Show that sherry is a drink people of all ages can indulge in with great pleasure.”

“Interesting goal. What’s your approach?”

“Pairing sherry with the most passionate of dances. The flamenco. Coming from the same place, they are natural together.”

Passion. Passionate dances. Rafe didn’t want the few functional remnants of his tired brain to stumble there.

Why couldn’t he escape from his surreal dream? Ever since he’d heard the first strains of the distinctive music and seen the couple dance, Rafe had been obsessed. The flamenco stalked him and refused to free him from its grip.

Talk about grip. If he tried to find words to express what he was experiencing, people would think he was nuts. Even crazier was his desire to throw himself at the beautiful Elena and bury his aching head in the sweet space between her amazing breasts. The prospect had his cock perking up. Not what he needed right now.

His feelings were wrong on every level. First of all, the big rule was not to get involved with clients. He kept business and pleasure separate. Then there was Elena’s

relationship with Francisco. They were obviously a couple in every sense of the word. He did not go after other men's women. Period.

He must have zoned out. Next thing he knew, Francisco was asking him something – evidently not for the first time. “So, you are up to coming to the studio for a preliminary reconnoiter.”

“Yeah.” Rafe couldn't have said why, but he'd sensed a challenge in the other man's words. Stupid macho stuff, but Rafe had the macho gene as much as Francisco. “I understand I can grab a fast shower and something to eat at the studio. How long will it take to get everything set up? I'd like to meet the dancers as soon as possible.”

“They'll be at the studio tonight,” Francisco said. “We can do a run-through. If everything goes right, you can film tomorrow. Maybe you can make it back home for some of the holiday.”

“Or maybe you'd like to spend time here? We have wonderful Christmas customs in Cadiz.” Elena's smile could break his heart. Was she inviting him to spend time with her? But no. He saw the way she looked at Francisco when she wasn't yelling at him. Elena was being hospitable. The kind of hospitality he wanted from her though was not on the table. And he wouldn't let his mind wander in that direction. His body... Well, he couldn't shut off his senses or his purely physical responses, but he was resolute that he wouldn't act on them either.

“No professional commitments until the new year. If something here catches my eye, I might just aim my camera and follow the trail.” He couldn't help grinning at her. He wondered if the female dancer he'd be shooting was going to be even half as alluring. Elena had a face and body that could sell anything.

“It must be nice to be an artist,” she said with a hint of wistfulness.

“Dancers are artists too,” he pointed out.

Elena and Francisco laughed. “We're not dancers,” she said.

“Wasn't it you two I saw at the Club Espana?”

"You were in the crowd the night we danced?" Francisco asked.

"Yeah."

Francisco laughed some more and shook his head. Bright red suffused Elena's cheeks, making her look even more beautiful. Rafe itched to shoot her. The camera would love her.

"That was just, how do you say it? A pastime, a hobby. Elena and I love to dance. It's in the blood, you know?"

"You didn't look like amateurs."

"Thank you," Elena said. "The owners had invited us to dance, to liven up the atmosphere. Since they've made a point of featuring our sherry, we wanted to thank them. But connoisseurs of flamenco would have recognized us for what we are."

Francisco clamped a possessive arm around on Elena's shoulders and drew her closer.

Chapter Three

While Rafe took his shower and ate a takeout meal they'd picked up along the way, Francisco and Elena made contact with their dancers—or tried to. According to the recorded message at all the relevant phone numbers, the dancers were off for the holiday. If they really wanted the video done in time for the start of the new year, Francisco and Elena would need to go to Plan B. "I told you this wasn't go to work, Francisco," Elena hissed. "It was just stupid, stupid, stupid to schedule our shooting so close to Christmas. Even the dancers have started their holiday."

He glared at her. "They probably canceled due to a family crisis," he growled right back.

"Right. The same one I'm having about getting ready for a perfect Christmas." Elena nodded toward Rafe, who was busy setting up lights and trying different angles for his shots. "What are we going to tell the videographer? He should entertain himself until after the new year?"

Francisco eyed her with his super-macho, I'm-in-control expression, which made her crazy. "No, we're going to shoot right on schedule."

"How?" Where was he going to find qualified, available dancers now?

If anything, Francisco looked more determined. "You heard Rafe. He thought we did a great job in New York. Everyone said the same. We'll do the flamenco. We may not be professionals, but who could be more passionate about our product? That will come through. He can film us and be on his way. All will be done in plenty of time. I don't know why I didn't think of this sooner."

"Are you crazy? We impressed him, a man who's never seen an authentic flamenco before. That does not qualify us to create a high-quality video marketing tool." Elena muttered a stream of words in Spanish that temporarily wiped the smile off Francisco's

face. Good. He had to realize her days of cooperating in his *loco* schemes had come to an end. Likewise the time when he made plans without consulting her. They were *partners*—in life and in work. He had to learn what that meant—and she would be the one to teach him.

“I’m set up. Where are the dancers?” Rafe asked.

What a great question. Elena was fuming. If Francisco made a single complaint to her about going over budget for Christmas or spending too much time on her preparations—

Francisco cleared his throat then threw his arm around Elena’s shoulders. She had to resist the impulse to push him off. She found the masculine need to assert ownership tiresome at the best of times, and this wasn’t one of those. She shrugged off his arm, turned to glare at him and folded her arms in front of her. “Yes, Francisco,” she murmured in a deceptively honeyed tone that her lover would know exactly how to interpret. “Rafe is set up and eager to get moving. Where are the dancers?”

To her disgust, Francisco stayed calm and confident. “There’s been a change of plans, Rafe.” Just like that, he rolled over all her objections and concerns. Her list of what she had to teach him grew each moment.

She opened her mouth to express her feelings, but Francisco moved away from her and was already outlining his plan to Rafe.

He’d won again. Having to dance for the video strained her nerves more than Francisco’s behavior. If the video turned out to be the disaster she fully expected, they would have lost money, but even worse, their campaign would be seriously delayed.

She did not want to have to think of such things ever—but most emphatically not at Christmas. She would give him a bit more time and dance in the video, hoping that they weren’t about to waste their precious time. But he would pay later.

* * * * *

Maybe Rafe had inherited more of his old ancestor’s spirit in him than he’d

suspected. Though he couldn't have said why, something essential had clicked for him the moment he arrived on Spanish soil. In a fundamental way, he felt at home—as a man and as an artist. He'd planned to make the video, take the money and run, but now his gut told him he needed to be exactly where he was—for who knew how long.

Though he should have been wasted from jet lag, he'd sprung back to new life—thanks to the shower and food, but more he suspected, to the presence of Elena. Beautiful, passionate, intelligent—he'd gleaned all that in a short time. What he'd give to have more time with her, to get beneath all her layers to the essential core. But she was Francisco's woman. End of possibility. He needed to stop mooning over Elena and pay attention to Francisco.

"What we want is to have the viewers associate the experience of drinking sherry with the passion of the flamenco," Francisco told him. Dressed now in tight black pants and a purple silk shirt, his hair slicked back and leather boots on his feet, Francisco had morphed into the quintessential dancer.

"So, the two of you will make a toast, drink the sherry and dance?" Rafe asked.

Francisco nodded. "It's simple, another quality we're aiming for. A simple message delivered with simple elegance and passion."

"Sounds good in theory. I don't know if it would be enough to convince me to order sherry, but it would get me curious. Speaking of curiosity, where is Elena?"

Francisco voiced exasperation. "One thing that's never simple is that woman. Though she's the one complaining about how short on time we are, now she is the one holding us up."

Rafe grinned. "Can't say that surprises me. She looks like a woman who would take her own sweet time to do anything." His mind wandered to long, slow kisses. Crap, what the hell was wrong with him?

Francisco frowned at Rafe as if he could read his mind. Rafe supposed Francisco had to be used to Elena being a guy magnet. He seemed like the macho type who'd do whatever it took to "protect" her. None of which mattered. Rafe didn't go after other

guys' women. No way, no how.

Then there she was, shimmery as a moonlit night in tight black silk, her hair in a dark chignon with a perfectly placed rose. Even more beautiful than before. Rafe felt as if he'd wandered into paradise. "I am ready."

So am I. Rafe willed away the stirring of his cock.

A slow grin lit Francisco's face. "One look at you and customers will queue up to buy our sherry." He lifted Elena's hand to his lips for a Continental kiss. Rafe knew he was looking at her like a penniless kid with his face pressed against a candy store window.

With a toss of her head that did nothing to dislodge the rose, Elena said, "Let's get started."

Rafe swallowed hard. "Let's do a quick rehearsal first. I want to watch so I can plan the shoot."

"Do we need to do the whole dance?" Elena asked, a scowl tightening her face.

"No. Just do a mock toast then approximate where you'll be for the dance."

"That's good," Francisco said. "Rafe, I want you to capture our spontaneity. That's easy the first time but a lot harder which each subsequent dance. Ready, Elena? We need to toast each other."

She hissed her response in Spanish too quick for Rafe. Not only beautiful, the woman had spirit. The more he saw and heard Elena Sandoval, the more he found to admire. The more he was drawn. The more he lusted. Damn. He needed to get control of his mind and body, pronto, or this would become the assignment from hell.

Mean though she knew it was, Elena couldn't help, as her American friends would say, messing with Rafe's mind. She knew he was attracted to her, though he didn't come on to her like the smarmy men who thought their attention would thrill. Rafe was so hot she would have been interested if she weren't with Francisco. The big "if".

Though she knew it drove Francisco crazy when she responded in any way to other men, he deserved to be driven a little crazy. Lately he'd grown complacent, acting like the boss of her.

Still, it wasn't fair to mess too much with Rafe. He seemed a decent sort. And she sensed a sadness about him. How strange that such a hot guy would be single. Maybe the story behind that could explain his sadness. She already liked him enough to wish him to be happy – especially at this magical time of the year.

As they rehearsed the toast, she raised her empty glass to Francisco. They laughed, clinked glasses and pretended to drink their sherry, during which time Rafe studied them from various angles. Once they'd "finished" their drinks, the music began. When they really filmed, they'd toss their *copitas* over their shoulders, stare at each other and begin to dance. For the rehearsal, they stepped together for several beats.

"Great," Rafe said. "It would be fantastic if I could get this in one take."

"Is that possible?" Francisco asked.

"Unusual but possible."

"Let's make it happen," Elena murmured, staring hard at Francisco then Rafe. "I have faith in you."

"Then I'd better make it happen," Rafe said in a very low voice.

She smiled at him. She was starting to like this man more and more.

When Rafe signaled that he was ready, Francisco poured their sherry. They'd decided to be authentic even when it came to the detail of having a real drink. Though Elena usually preferred to sip her sherry and enjoy it, for this performance she tossed the drink back and then, eyes fixed on Francisco, threw the *copita* over her shoulder. The small vessel shattered with a satisfying ring. The music welled, drawing her in as always.

Francisco's scheme had not included dancing with Elena for the video. Though he'd

never admit it to Elena, she was right. He should have foreseen the defection of the dancers and planned for it. Now he would have to dance with her, which he would normally have loved. Normally. That word that no longer applied to his life. He shivered then willed his body to cooperate a bit longer. He would need his strength to perform, strength he needed to conserve to get them through the holiday.

Elena looked magnificent. His heart swelled with pride and love, as always. He'd planned to propose to her this Christmas, take the next step in deepening their commitment. He'd bought the ring he'd seen her gazing at the jeweler's. Her Christmas gift.

Now the thought of saddling Elena with his dying body left him with a taste of ashes in his mouth. She deserved better than to be a young widow.

Never sick a day in his life until... Never needed to consult with a doctor until... Until now, he'd never gone to a doctor. He'd had to ask his friends, discreetly, for the name of a doctor. Then came the devastating diagnosis, which he'd managed to hold at arm's length, deny – until it was confirmed by the big doctor in New York.

Some last Christmas he would give the woman he loved more than life.

The chemistry between Elena and Rafe crackled. Normally – that word again – he'd have wanted to kill Rafe. Now he viewed the man as an ally, someone who would be able to care for Elena when he no longer could.

He and Elena wished each other *salud* and tossed back their sherry.

* * * * *

With a single fluid movement, Elena and Francisco threw their *copitas* over their shoulders, their eyes locked in a smoldering gaze.

Something inside Rafe shattered along with the fragile glass. He felt like a genie released from his prison in a lamp as the music enveloped the three of them in a sensuous embrace. The *two* of them, Rafe reminded himself as he positioned the camera to take the best possible shots.

For all Elena's protestations to the contrary, she and Francisco danced together in perfect balance, a harmony that enhanced the sheer abandon of the dance. With their feet in constant motion, they alternately reached for each other and pulled back in a sinuous dance of love. Rafe moved almost as much as they did in his determination to get the best possible shots.

It grew very hot in the studio, or was it just Rafael burning up as he watched Elena move like a goddess through the intricate step and swirls? Though he managed to hold fast to an edge of professionalism, reminding himself that he'd made a commitment to get this extraordinary experience on tape, Rafe became so caught up, he felt as if he were the one dancing with Elena. As if he were the one melding into the music and becoming one with her.

Rafe remained aware at every moment that they were not alone. Francisco was the huge presence in the dance and in Elena's life, but Rafe was the one making love to her with his camera. He knew it. They all had to know it. Francisco and Elena were one unit; Rafe and Elena the other. Elena was the center of their universe.

Resolved to catch the dance from every possible angle so he would have lots to work from on the edits, Rafe tore around the room like a madman. Could he have had any other response? For all that the two dancers were fully dressed and touched only in the ways defined by the rules of the dance, the flames between them burned bright and hot.

Foreplay with a Romany beat. If Rafe had to name what he was witnessing, that's what he'd call it—along with torture. To label his state of arousal as a simple case of being turned-on was like calling the Mona Lisa a good head shot. Though Rafe craved Elena like an addict craved drugs, he was artist enough to channel his sexual tension into the camera work. If he played it just right, his frustration would translate into on-screen magic. Though Rafe fully intended to produce a video Francisco would appreciate, what Rafe wanted most was for the final product to communicate his passion to Elena.

The music ebbed and built, a rising crescendo that fanned the flames between the lovers. Flames—flamenco. Rafe had never before sensed the connection. Francisco wooed Elena with his body, with the fire of his soul, with the promise of a singeing passion. Elena met Francisco's challenge and raised the stakes. *If you want me, her body appeared to whisper and shout, you have to come and get me. Show me you are the man to conquer me, to master me, to earn this victory.*

* * * * *

Elena loved the flamenco with all her soul. Despite the way she'd hassled Francisco about backing her into a corner, once she became caught up in the dance, she forgot about everything but the music, her partner and the passion.

Except this time it was different. This time, despite the heightened emotions she brought to her dance, she couldn't lose herself in the flamenco. This time, though she danced with more intensity than ever, she remained conscious of another presence in the room. Rafe and his camera being there changed everything. Later, when this video and her dance with Francisco became part of their entwined history, she would have to think long and hard about what had happened. At least she was able to turn off consciousness on this score for the time being.

She and Francisco moved in perfect unity, as if their bodies and souls had truly transcended their separate reality to become one. Reaching the climax of the dance, as all-engulfing and enthralling as the deepest orgasm, Elena could no longer contain her ecstasy. So many emotions roiled within her, most especially a new depth to her love for Francisco. The force of that passion possessed her, and she knew by surrendering to its hold on her, she'd just reached a whole new level of vulnerability.

When the last note receded, she and Francisco fell into each other's arms in stunned silence.

"That was amazing." Rafe sounded almost as breathless as Elena felt.

Francisco sat and ran a hand across his forehead, now beaded with sweat she

hadn't notice while they danced. Elena must have been sweaty too, though she didn't feel so. No way would she wipe her hand across her face and break the spell. Her refusal to ruin what was left of her makeup drew her from that enchantment, reminding her of persistent reality. Francisco pulled her down into his lap and nuzzled the side of her neck. She must have been really exhausted not to protest at such affection demonstrated with another person nearby.

Rafe collapsed into the other chair. From the way he was eyeing her, Elena could see he wanted to be in Francisco's place, wanted to be the one holding her. To her surprise and consternation, she wanted the same with him. No way would she'd allow herself to continue harboring such renegade desires. She snuggled deeper in Francisco's lap, savoring the feel of his familiar erection. He groaned and caressed the back of her neck with his strong fingers.

They sat in shared silence for a bit. Then Francisco burst the peaceful moment when he asked, "Do you think you got enough shots? Or should we prepare for a second round?"

Rafe took a moment to respond. "I can't be a hundred percent sure until I review it to do the edits. But I think we got more than enough. You two were fantastic."

Words Elena had expected to hear. She should have been glad to be finished with this chore so she could go ahead and see to everything else, but she found herself reluctant to end this time with the two men. It was as if she'd fallen into some sort of enchantment that wiped her mind clear of all her commitments.

"I've had some experience along those lines, so I can help," Francisco said. "But first, I want to try out something else."

"What?" Both she and Rafe asked the question at the same time. Like Rafe, Elena sounded wary. What in the world could Francisco have in mind now?

Chapter Four

Feeling as drained as if he'd come, Rafe didn't turn off his camera until after the last beat of the music evaporated and the two sated dancers subsided. If Rafe still smoked, this would have been the time to light up. Instead, he sat down across from Elena and Francisco. Though Francisco looked as if he'd been through a physical endurance test, Elena seemed bright and unruffled.

Francisco was eyeing Rafe's camera with something akin to lust. "What model is it?" he asked.

Rafe went through a technical description, noticing that Elena's eyes glazed over.

"Could I see your camera?" Francisco asked.

Rafe winced, as if Francisco had asked to lay hands on his baby. "I'm pretty particular about my equipment... No one else gets to handle it."

Francisco nodded. "I know what you mean. But hear me out because I have a proposition to make. You see, I was watching you, the way you filmed us."

Rafe raised a brow as if to ask what Francisco was driving at. If Rafe had been dancing with Elena, he sure wouldn't have been paying attention to anything or anyone but her. "Though it's a sideline with me, maybe in the future I'll want to explore more videography. I'd like to use your camera in a situation similar to this one."

Rafe shook his head. "I still don't get whatever it is you're asking for."

Francisco appeared to choose his words with care. "I want to experience what you did when you filmed us. I want to use this camera to film the flamenco from the other side." He looked from Rafe to Elena.

"What new insanity is this, Francisco?" she hissed. Evidently this interest was as big a piece of news for Elena as it was for Rafe.

Francisco stroked his chin. "No insanity. On the contrary, I'm being very practical. You see, I've been reading books about business."

"Since when?" she challenged.

"Since forever," he spat out. "According to all the experts, the most successful businessmen are the ones who thoroughly know every aspect of their affairs, who could step in and do any job entailed in their product."

Elena rolled her eyes. "Filming a video ad is hardly a fundamental process in selling sherry. It's exactly an example of when you should do as you have now, namely bring in an expert."

"Humor me in this, *querida*. What do you say, McMaster?"

Rafe's mind scrambled for ways to keep his camera out of Francisco's hands. "I still don't get exactly what you have in mind. Maybe it's the jet lag working on me, but I need you to spell out what you want very clearly."

Francisco eased Elena off his lap, sliding her onto the seat of the chair as he stood. "I want to film Elena dancing. From my experience as her partner, I know how overwhelmingly sexy she is. Now I want to broaden my understanding by viewing her from behind the lens of a very fine, state-of-the-art camera. Yours."

Much as Rafe wished he didn't, he got Francisco. With what Rafe was making on this video, he'd be able to buy new equipment if Francisco really screwed it up. But still. "I'm not convinced this would be okay."

"And I don't dance the flamenco alone," Elena insisted. Though she and Francisco were the couple here, in this latest conversation, she was beginning to feel more like she and Rafe were allies. Maybe it was because, sensing his discomfort, she wanted to ease the situation and get Francisco to back off. She could well understand Rafe's hesitation to let anyone, especially someone with no expertise, use his sensitive, expensive equipment. Though she never had danced the flamenco alone, there was no reason why she couldn't. On the other hand, why should she have to now? Just to give Francisco

some sort of thrill or to fit in with a plan he hadn't discussed with her before?

Francisco continued to stroke his chin, a signal that he was deep in thought. Then his eyes lit up and his lips curved up in an evil grin. "No need to dance alone, *querida*. Besides, it would make the experience so much more authentic if you have a partner."

Both Elena and Rafe laughed at this. "So, Francisco, you are going to dance with me and film me dancing at the same time?" She shook her head. "Evidently, when you kept your mysterious appointment in New York, you must have found out how to transform yourself into a superhero with skills beyond those of mere mortals."

"But you've always assured me I am a superhero, my love." Francisco's voice took on the husky quality reserved for their most romantic pillow talk.

Elena couldn't believe he was exposing such an intimacy to a stranger. Though she could feel her cheeks heat with an embarrassing blush, she willed herself to remain in control and to talk him out of this latest whim. Later, when they were alone, she'd tell him how much his behavior hurt her. "I have heard about the marvels of multitasking. But surely what you propose takes this art to a new and, I must say, ridiculous level."

Rafe nodded agreement. "Francisco, there is no way you could video yourself dancing with Elena. Any film you'd come up with would be a hodgepodge of body parts with no rhyme or reason. Not to mention, you'd be at great risk of destroying my equipment. I don't take kindly to anyone doing that, and I'd be irresponsible to agree."

Francisco held up his index finger as if to provide instruction. "I never said *I'd* be the one dancing with Elena." He inclined his head toward Rafe. "Why not provide this authentic experience of Spain to our video guy? You dance together. I will film you."

Shocked silence greeted Francisco's words. If Elena had not heard them with her own ears she'd wouldn't have believed her lover would ever make such a proposition. She didn't know whether to laugh, cry or summon a team of psychiatric-ward aides.

"No way. I can't even dance a basic foxtrot," Rafael muttered before Elena had been able to so much as squeak her objection. The sound of his voice, which she loved, distracted her from wanting to kill Francisco. Rafe spoke softly, forcing people to lean

close in so as not to miss a single word. Though she found the typical New York accent harsh and unpleasant, she wouldn't use either word to describe Rafe's voice. Masculine. She shivered. She had to find a way to divert Francisco from this latest whim.

"Rafe didn't sign up to dance," she pointed out. "Not to mention the flamenco is not a simple dance one glides into with no experience."

"You two. Where's your spirit of adventure and innovation? People are not born doing the flamenco. They learn. Rafe here is a bright guy, in reasonable shape. No one's saying he needs to be world-class. Just move to the music, keep up with Elena."

The prospect of dancing with Elena, of being close to her, touching her had Rafe's cock rigid in happy anticipation. The rest of his body and mind might be on a siesta, but not Old Faithful. He'd look great stumbling around the floor with a hard-on.

"You would like to dance with Elena, wouldn't you?" Francisco growled.

Talk about being on tricky ground—what would be the bigger insult, saying he wanted to dance with Elena, or saying he couldn't because she was with Francisco? Rafe needed to tread a fine diplomatic line here, not part of his usual skill set. "Dance, yes, if I could. In the right setting, I'd be thrilled to dance with Elena. But even with your permission, Francisco, I wouldn't inflict myself on Elena. You see, my typical style is to lurch around the floor like a Frankenstein wannabe. No rhythm, no musicality. Two left feet. I've never yet met a woman willing to put up with that, and I can't blame them." Rafe had better convince Francisco.

"Hey, man, you are part Spanish. You can count on your heritage to come through when you least expect it." Francisco reached out for Rafe's camera.

"Not the dancing part," Rafe said. "Besides, it wouldn't be fair to the lady, to Elena. Even though she's a first-class dancer, that's not enough to compensate for my lack of any skill." He figured she would join in the protest and derail Francisco's insanity.

But Elena was so intent on glaring at Francisco, Rafe suspected she didn't hear a word. If looks could kill, Francisco would be writhing on the floor in fatal agony.

Great. Just when he wanted to grab his equipment and run, Rafe found himself in the middle of a lovers' quarrel. He did not want to be involved in anyone else's battle—especially when he had such a poor track record dealing with his own. He needed to get her attention, now. "Elena, refuse. Tell him outright you won't do it."

Just when he figured she hadn't heard and was about to say something else, she broke her stare and turned to Rafe. She laid a manicured hand on his shoulder and fastened her smoldering gaze on him, bringing his cock to full attention. "No, Rafe. I *want* to do this. I *want* to dance with you. If that fool *wants* to watch from behind your camera, let him. Please do me the honor of lending him your camera and being my partner." She lowered her lashes.

Rafe reacted as if she'd reached into his soul and touched his essence. Without another thought, he handed his precious camera to Francisco. Rafe's body sprang to full fight-or-flight alert—with flight being impossible. This amazing woman, this goddess had opened her arms to him. He wasn't going to question her motives or his own. For the space of one passionate dance, he'd be hers. And she'd be his. The music began.

She would show Francisco. Once and for all, her lover would learn a lesson he'd never forget. He did not own her. She was not his to treat like a poorly regarded possession to lend at will. Someday, maybe, Elena would be able to look back at this day without feeling on the brink of exploding in a red fireball of fury. Someday, she might view it as the beginning of a new, enhanced phase of their relationship. Someday, but surely not today.

Francisco, oblivious to the passions roiling around him and to her great attraction to Rafe, was fondling Rafe's camera with almost sexual attentiveness. Men and their gadgets. That was okay. Elena now had Rafe, who wore the courageous expression of a man approaching the guillotine. *Come to me*, she mentally invited him. *This won't hurt a bit*. She took his hand, surprised at the jolt of response that sizzled between them. From the way he startled, she could tell he felt it too. More fool Francisco for not taking note.

Maybe she should not be so surprised. After all, Rafe had attracted her from the moment they met. His looks were a turn-on, but there was more. Like many others, she believed the eyes were the windows of the soul. Looking into his, she sensed the bond of their being kindred souls. Being totally monogamous, all she'd done was register the fact of his pleasing looks, their potential chemistry and that bond. Though she'd sworn to be a strictly "take a quick look, don't touch" woman, that was about to change.

He might not know anything about the dance, but clearly the music moved him. There again was their soul connection. She'd start with that and build.

"The flamenco is a dance of passion," she murmured as she took his hand and led him to the spot where she'd danced with Francisco before.

"That's clear. If passion can make up for not knowing a single step, I'm your man." He smiled, the expression in his eyes so sincere Elena felt the last of her anger at Francisco begin to dissipate. "But I'm afraid that not even great passion and this fabulous music can make up for my two left feet." His words and the prospect of his two left feet charmed her.

"Let the music guide you in the beat you keep with those feet." She demonstrated. Though his shoes weren't made for the dance, he moved in a reasonable approximation of what she'd done.

"That's quite good, especially for the first time."

He flashed a heartbreaker of a smile. "You're being really nice. Don't be afraid to protest if I mess up."

Why was this man alone, especially at this time of the year? "I won't hesitate, though I don't expect to need to. Now the rest is the head, the arms, the torso, the hips. As there's no time for lessons, follow me and do the best you can."

He moved with an inherent grace that boded well for any future dancing. But for now, she tried to simplify her movements so he could mirror them. Dancing with him turned out to be an experience of continuing surprises, not only because of the talent he showed but because she found him *simpatico*. As he gazed at her and tried to follow, she

could sense an emanation of who he really was. The more she got to know Rafe McMaster, the more she found to like, to admire—the more she wanted to deepen whatever bond was forming between them. With Francisco right there as their witness, surely this couldn't be wrong.

“You're doing quite well,” she whispered.

He gave her a surprised grin, an expression of wonder. “You're a great teacher. I would like to learn from you some other time, when we don't have all this stuff,” he nodded toward Francisco, “going on. Though I don't expect I'd ever really be a dancer, I sense meaning for me in the flamenco. Maybe it's my Spanish heritage. Though I can't say why, my gut tells me the flamenco will make me a better filmmaker.”

“That's important to you.” She waved a hand in front of him as in invitation.

“Yes. As important as the sherry is to you.” He whirled with unexpected precision.

The music once again was sweeping her up in its poetic embrace. When she'd been a little girl, she'd imagined herself sailing away from the everyday world, tasks, school on magical waves of music.

“You understand me,” she whispered.

“I don't think any mere man could ever understand you,” he chuckled.

He reached out to her then and drew her body tight to his, moving with her as one to the hypnotic rhythm. She gasped at the sheer pleasure of this contact and a shocking hunger for him woke within her. If he hadn't been holding her up, her knees would have buckled and she'd have fallen.

They slowed in the dance, responding to each other's embrace. Inevitable and natural as the flow of the music carrying them away. She wanted him and Elena felt how much he wanted her.

Rafe was tall, graced with a strong, hard body. The dance brought out his scent, an elemental musk that invited her to bury her nose in the warm spot beneath his jaw. How would he taste? Americans were always so deodorized and sanitized, as if

determined to wipe out any remnant of their connection with earth. But now that he was dancing, the real Rafe would break through that barrier and allow her to experience his true being.

* * * * *

Was it the camera or Francisco's heightened senses since he'd learned his fate? Perhaps both. He'd have sworn he could see the emotions and passion swirling around Elena and Rafe as if these were tangible objects he could reach out and touch.

Ironic, wasn't it, that he should make all these wondrous new discoveries when it was too late for him to do more than marvel at all he'd soon lose. His body might soon be worthless, worse than worthless, but at least his instincts were still strong. Rafe would be Elena's man when Francisco was gone... He could die knowing Elena wouldn't be alone, wouldn't be unprotected. From behind his camera, he could see it all.

Dios, how furious Elena would be if she knew the truth. He could hear her protestations and arguments now. How dare Francisco withhold the truth from her. How dare he pick a new man for her, as if she were a piece of chattel to transfer from one man to another. It would almost be worth dying just to escape her wrath.

As if he had any choice. Might as well put the best face possible on his fast-approaching demise. He'd settle business and property matters—those were easy to arrange. Matters of the heart...

The two of them were finding their affinity faster even than Francisco would have predicted. He needed to focus on his videography, yet another art he'd no longer have time enough to learn.

* * * * *

This tidal wave of sensation and emotion was brand new for Rafe. As the music transported them, Elena reached into his soul with both hands and demanded everything he had to give—and more. Irresistible. He didn't want to resist.

They swayed together to the siren call of the flamenco beat. She tilted her face up to him. A tear sat unshed in the corner of her eye. Summoning up more tenderness than he knew he possessed, he kissed her tear away. Then his lips glided down her lovely face, over silken skin softer than a cloud. He'd have lingered over each bit, but a new sense of urgency gripped him to kiss her on the lips.

When his mouth covered hers, the universe shifted. Though his rational self cautioned loud and clear that Francisco would any moment slam him over the head with the camera, Rafe chose to ignore the warning. Elena met his kiss with her own, responding to the pressure of his lips with equal desire.

He couldn't pause, couldn't analyze. His world had transformed to the dimensions of her soft, sweet lips inviting him in, to her lush body with its promise of delights. All the longing pent-up within him since he saw his first flamenco dance—since forever—burst through ineffective barriers and threatened to create a flood.

"Elena," he whispered when they broke the first kiss. "I don't know..."

She sealed off his words with a deeper, more passionate kiss. Tongues, teeth, lips moved together in an inexorable progression. Though a momentary reminder of where they were, who they were and the witness recording every move gave Rafe pause, his hunger for Elena overwhelmed him. Nothing else mattered. As to whatever came afterward, if there would be an afterward, Rafe would take care of later. He'd do anything for Elena, anything to be with her right now.

His cock pressed unabashedly against his pants, his erection rock-hard and solid as his longing for her. He couldn't resist, so he pressed himself against her softness, burying his bulge where he most wanted to be.

Vixen that she was, she ground her sex against him, sending spikes of pleasure shooting through him. Her movements seemed one with the music, a sensuous torment that imprisoned him in its implacable grip. He wanted to fuck her. No, he wanted to make love with her. It didn't matter that her lover was right there in the room with

them, hiding behind Rafe's own camera, filming every traitorous move they made together... Nothing mattered but the two of them.

"Elena," Rafe whispered. "This is spiraling out of control. I need to stop. We need to stop or..." He punctuated his statement by planting his feet solidly on the floor. If only he could close his ears to the music, close all his senses off to the siren call of her eyes, her breath, her oh so tempting body. His hands trembled as he tried to move her away from him.

She resisted. "We cannot stop, Rafe. Not once the music has caught us up. Surely you sense that as strongly as I do."

He groaned with need as she pushed back and wouldn't let him separate them. "What I sense is that I'm with the most desirable woman in the world. I'd have to be made of ice and steel to resist you. I'm not made of either."

She nuzzled even tighter against him. "That is the best news I've heard in a long time. Kiss me again, Rafe. The music demands it. I demand it."

Who was he to say no?

Elena was on fire with the music and the man. Though she'd heard the ancient stories of women and men being so carried away that they began to make love before the dance ended, she'd always believed those were legends. Myths to increase the mystique of the flamenco. But now she was experiencing firsthand the power she'd always doubted.

Her dance became one long invitation to Rafe. Consummation. She'd known desire before, but burning like this for a particular man's touch... Much as she loved Francisco and had pledged her life to him, she couldn't imagine turning away from Rafe. Not now. Not when only he could take her to the next stage of the most essential journey.

"I need you, Rafe. Only you. Now."

He picked her up in his powerful arms and pressed her to him. She opened her legs to him and wrapped them around his hips. Rafe's bulge pulsed with a heat and energy that matched the ardor of the music. Even through the layers of clothing that came between them, she could feel the force of his desire. She wanted that hard cock inside her, wanted him to probe all her secret places and to lay claim to her in the deepest physical intimacy to match the bond between their souls.

"*Mi amor,*" he crooned, his voice a hot breath at her ear.

"You know Spanish?" she asked.

"I'm learning," he whispered back.

He carried her over to the marble counter where the bottle and several *copitas*, the special glasses for drinking sherry, still sat and gently placed her down then bent to kiss her. She rubbed his bulge with her fingers, loving it when he groaned with his mouth on hers and the sound resonated through her.

She was constantly aware that Francisco was there, a silent voyeur with the camera always hiding his face. She stuck her tongue out at him, no longer from her previous anger but to tease him for hiding behind the gadget. Much to her surprise, she felt a certain peace that Francisco was there, a witness to everything happening between her and Rafe. Her love was expanding beyond what she'd ever felt herself capable of experiencing, more than enough to open herself up to these two men and more.

Then she did what she'd longed to since starting the dance. Fingers firm and sure, she reached for Rafe's zipper and lowered it. In moments his long, thick erection jumped free of his pants for her enjoyment—and Rafe's. He thrust his hips forward in response to her slightest touch.

He looked over his shoulder as if to gauge Francisco's reaction. Francisco didn't say anything, didn't even lower the camera. But Elena knew what was going on with him because she could see his erection grow from half to full. Two erections she'd inspired. What a heady tribute. With so much male energy floating around, she'd be a fool to walk away unsatisfied.

She stroked Rafe's hard-on for several moments, savoring her chance to explore. When she opened her eyes to take a peek, she was not disappointed. Rafe's long, thick shaft promised pleasure and fulfillment.

"That feels amazing," Rafe said, "but what about Francisco?"

Elena tossed her head. "As far as I'm concerned, he can play with himself. Anyway, that's what he's doing with that camera. Getting his voyeur kicks. Let's you and I have a good time, put on a real show." Despite these words, she wasn't angry at Francisco. Far from it. How could she not be turned-on? Why did she sense Francisco not only tolerated what was happening but approved? What had happened in New York to bring about such a great change in the man she loved?

Rafe looked around again, only by now Francisco had shifted positions. Instead of standing behind them, he was at the side where he could clearly film Elena stroking Rafe's naked cock. He startled for a moment, but when it became clear that Francisco wasn't about to kill anyone or even voice an objection, Rafe stepped up his movements.

This was too delicious to miss. Elena, well aware of how much clothing she was wearing, got down to essentials. She lifted her skirt, flung aside her red silk thong and took Rafe in hand. With her legs wide open, she steered him to her feminine opening and poised him right at the brink.

"I want you deep inside me," she whispered, wriggling to feel his glans.

"Oh *Dios*, more than anything. But, *mi amor*, I don't have anything with me. I never expected..."

Suddenly a small square packet landed next to Elena. Francisco had thrown over a condom without ever losing his rhythm in filming them. So much for any jealousy.

Elena picked up the packet, tore it open with her teeth and pulled out the condom, which she squeezed Rafe into.

At that point her cautious suitor lost all inhibitions. With a growl, he rammed his cock into her and turned their lovemaking into a wild ride. Hands clamped under her ass, he moved her up and down on his massive staff, his vocal reactions threatening to

drown out the music. “You are beautiful beyond my wildest dreams,” he murmured when he wasn’t busy kissing her.

Though Francisco was an amazing lover with a dream-worthy cock, Elena experienced a new level of sensation and pleasure in Rafe’s powerful arms. From the way he’d plunged into her with a mighty shout, Elena had expected their first mating to be short. It wasn’t. After his initial dive, Rafe appeared to take back control and slow his movements to maximize her pleasure. Yum.

While he thrust in and out, making sure to stimulate all her most erogenous bits, he spoke softly to her, telling her how much she pleased him. Her toes curled as she tightened her legs around his waist, moving ever more to increase his erotic access.

They got more and more into each other. Francisco kept on filming.

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Francisco gritted his teeth and willed himself to do what he had to—namely turn into an automaton until— He was filming the scene. He had Rafe’s lovely camera in his hands. Not at all equivalent to Rafe having his hands and other body parts all over Elena, but Francisco couldn’t let his mind go there or he’d go out of his mind and wreak violence...

Esthetically pleasing. The tableau before him would surpass the most exacting artist’s standards. That’s how Francisco had to look at himself, as an artist in the throes of creation, not as the man whose lover was fucking another man in front of him. He growled, a ferocious noise that would have scared Elena and Rafe had they not been so caught up in each other.

This was what he wanted. This was what he wanted. This was what he wanted. Maybe if Francisco repeated the words a million times he’d start to believe them. Not that he chose to waste the time remaining repeating a lie in the effort to make it the truth. No, he had better ways to use the time and strength he still had. First, he had to see to Elena, had to make sure Elena would be all right without him.

The way Elena moved her body against Rafe. He could have stormed and screamed with frustration. His cock stirred. He wanted to be where Rafe was. At least he could still respond like a man. For how much longer?

Chapter Five

Rafe knew he was in Spain, but he couldn't help feeling as if he'd landed in Wonderland. In a matter of hours, he'd transformed from Terri's lonely ex to Elena's lover. He'd been hot for Elena since moment one—who wouldn't be? Then he'd experienced a sense of bonding, a mystical communication between Elena and him that convinced him they were soul mates.

Except. Big except. There was the matter of her macho boyfriend standing a few feet away from them. Not only did he not kill Rafe, Francisco was filming the entire episode with Rafe's camera. Hell, Francisco had even provided the friggin' condom. What the hell was going on?

Rafe thought all this in the blink of an eye, his last rational impulse before he surrendered to the miracle of being with Elena. Everything about her body and her spirit clicked. Deep inside her he found home, the key to his soul, the mystery of life.

Talk about mysteries, what in the world was Francisco's role? Why did that man continue to stand by in silent witness, intent only on filming the video? What was happening to Rafe, to Elena and him stymied everything he thought he knew about Spanish men and love. Would he wake up and find it was all an amazingly realistic dream?

Elena felt more real to him than everyone else. Though in real-world terms, he scarcely knew her and yet was joined with her in total intimacy, Rafe instantly grew protective and possessive of her. He wanted to pleasure her, bring her to a screaming orgasm, yes. But he ached for their connection to be so much more than one fuck. For this woman, in the blink of an eye, he'd gladly change his life.

Her eyelids were fluttering and her breaths coming more rapidly, sure signs that she was getting caught up in her climax. Rafe thrilled to realize he'd brought her to the

heights of pleasure their first time together—surely a confirmation of how right they were for each other. Along with the mix of emotions heating him on the most basic masculine level, he felt proud. He also intuited that this woman did not easily reveal any chinks in her armor, yet she was allowing him share the peak of her vulnerability.

She began to turn her head from side-to-side, a movement so spontaneous it looked almost involuntary. A smile played on her lips as she began to whisper his name. “Rafe, Rafe. *Dios mio*.” She ran her tongue across her lips and he longed to nip the little pink tip, but he wouldn’t shift their positions now. Not at this moment when she was letting him know with her body, her sounds and the expressions fleeting across her lovely face that she was poised on the brink, so close to letting it all go in a rush of pleasure and emotion. “That feels so very good,” she whimpered. “More, *Dios*, more. Don’t ever stop, *mi amor*.”

“All for you, my Elena, my beautiful one. Show me, tell me everything you want. It’s yours. I’m yours.” His cock had never felt so huge before, as if he’d been holding back until he met her.

“Rafe,” she whispered, repeating his name as she clutched his shoulders and began to shudder with the force of her orgasm.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he muttered as she began to subside and he felt himself begin to sink into his own climax. “So beautiful, so beautiful,” he whispered as she kissed him, urging him on to his own explosive climax. At last.

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Francisco bit down so hard on his lip, he drew blood. Not at all right. He had to steel himself not to let Elena even suspect that seeing her like this was killing him or she’d never let Rafe into her life. Francisco wouldn’t be able to keep his secret forever. He laughed. Forever was no longer a concept with meaning.

Among the few things still within his power was to give Elena a great holiday—his last Christmas gift. She’d been so angry with him for dragging her along to New York

for what he told her were essential business meetings. What he hadn't told her about were the secret appointments, his last desperate attempt to deal with a devastating diagnosis. If only the New York doctor had given him a reason for hope, a victory to share with the woman he loved. That would have made it a Christmas of miracles. Instead... He had such a short time to provide for Elena, to protect her from a cruel future.

He cleared his throat, glad that Rafe and Elena were both still in their own world—oblivious to the torture they were putting him through, a small price if he could give Elena the final gift he envisioned. His beautiful woman was like a child when it came to the magic of the holiday and he would use even his last drop of strength not to ruin this time for her. Just as he would work until he drew his final breath to set her up with life partners for work and the rest, so she would never suffer alone and bereft...

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Climbing, climbing, flying. Higher, higher, brilliant lights. Elena shattered into a hundred million pieces. Again and again, awash in a sweep of pleasure.

Rafe. He'd brought her to this peak. Just as she began to breathe, Rafe exploded into his climax, carrying her away once more. Thrillingly new yet as familiar as the rhythm of her breath.

She and Rafe clung together, lost in the wonder of being with each other. Only when Elena's senses returned did understanding dawn. She'd reached ecstasy in Rafe's arms. All the while her lover for life, Francisco, never so much as interrupted his filming for a moment. What in the name of all that was sacred had just happened?

On the most primitive level, she and Rafe had fucked each other with her boyfriend as the witness, wielding Rafe's video camera. Huh? Oh yes, and all this took place in the small studio behind their office of Sherry Amor Ltd. If, even the day before, anyone had so much as suggested this as a possible scenario in her life, she'd have accused that person of being drunk or crazy.

Now she was the one who felt drunk and crazy – after a few sips of their sherry and making love with the incredible Rafe. “Are you all right, Elena?” he whispered as they began to disentangle their limbs.

All right? Would she ever again feel that way? But she owed it Rafe to reply. “All right? How can I be? Surprised doesn’t begin to cover it. I’ve always said the flamenco is the dance of passion, but this –”

He raised a brow and cleared his throat. “So, this is not part of the typical flamenco instruction.” His lips turned up in a brief smile.

She looked at him with incredulity before she realized he was making a joke. She did enjoy a man with a sharp wit, one of many things she liked about Rafe. Liked. Could she dare to think about the word love in connection with this man she’d just met, a man who wasn’t Francisco? Even under these conditions, Rafe was a breathtaking lover. She was about to say something in an effort to sort out her tangled emotions when Francisco finally lowered the camera.

“That was not the video I was expecting to shoot,” he said. *What in blazes?* Francisco was not usually a man prone to understatement. Elena had expected his face to reveal murderous fury, but his expression could only be described as calm, at worst neutral. Though she should have been glad Francisco didn’t immediately attack Rafe and tear him to pieces, a frisson of disappointment rippled through her. Why didn’t Francisco care?

“That’s all you have to say, Francisco?” Elena shrugged away from Rafe though part of her wanted to stay warm in his embrace. Instead, she straightened her clothes and put herself to rights as best she could, though her hair and face must have been an unimaginable unholy mess.

Francisco, eyes smoldering, looked from Elena to Rafe. “Amazing footage.”

Rafe put one arm around Elena’s waist and held his other hand up in front of them as if to form a protective barrier. “I know that shouldn’t have happened, man. I never do things like that.”

“Things like what?” Francisco’s voice was soft, but Elena couldn’t help thinking of a shark silently swimming up behind a victim right before a lethal attack.

Rafe exhaled hard. “I don’t make love with women who belong to another man.”

Elena yelped. “‘Belong to another man’? I am not anybody’s piece of property.” Francisco may not have been angry but now she was. She put distance between herself and Rafe then glared at both men. “While you two clowns discuss whatever you’re going to, I’ve got other things to do. The advertising video is made, and Lord knows what else you’ve managed to make, Francisco. Carry on. I have places to go and things to do.”

Both Francisco and Rafe looked at her now. Were these two going to kill each other the minute she left them alone? If she’d had any foreboding that murder and mayhem would ensue, she’d forgo her Christmas shopping plans and keep them separated. But her instincts told her they would be all right. She hoped so. With her emotions in a whirl, not to mention everything she had left to do for the rapidly approaching holiday, she simply had to leave the studio before she went out of her mind.

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Rafe turned to Francisco. “I meant what I said. I don’t know what happened. One minute Elena was teaching me how to dance and the next...”

The other man shot visual bullets at him. Rafe could totally understand any impulse Francisco would have to punch him out or cause other serious bodily damage. If Francisco went that route, Rafe would have to defend himself. But as things stood right now, Rafe was the one in the wrong. He didn’t know if an ordinary explanation would be enough to defuse the tension between them. He’d have to find some way to make things right with Francisco, hell, with both Elena and Francisco. No matter how perfect the connection seemed for him being with Elena, he must have read the signals wrong and gotten carried away. Obviously he was still hurting and vulnerable, so when Elena seemed to fall into his lap from heaven —

Francisco clamped a hand on his shoulder and Rafe stiffened, prepared for an assault. "I used your camera, you used my woman."

Rafe winced. "I didn't use her any more than you *used* my camera. If Elena heard you say that, you'd be toast. And she'd be right."

Francisco nodded. "But what a way to go. *Mi amigo*, let me pour you a drink."

Rafe could use a whiskey right around now.

Francisco was pouring two *copitas* of sherry. Of course. There was nothing else available.

"Sherry? Uh, thanks but no thanks."

"Drink, drink," Francisco said, handing him one of the *copitas*. "*Salud*," he toasted, raising it to his lips.

Rafe put his down.

Francisco drained his then poured another. "You haven't even tasted it."

"No offense, but this isn't my drink." All he kept doing was insulting the guy. Talk about feeling like the proverbial bull in a china shop.

"You may have filmed our ad, but you obviously didn't get the message," Francisco persisted. "Sherry is the drink of passion. That's not just bullshit advertising. Try it." He folded his arms in front of him.

Considering that Rafe had just fucked his girlfriend, Francisco was being amazingly nice. Superhumanly nice. Not to mention there was no way he could have poisoned the sherry. "You've got me on that point, Francisco. I'll try it."

Rafe braced himself for the first taste of an overly sweet drink reminiscent of a slightly sophisticated alcoholic version of childhood cough medicine. The other man watched him like a hawk. "I should film this. Rafe McMaster, active young man, latest convert to sherry."

"Don't count on it," he muttered right before bracing himself. And then he got his first taste. Not at all what he expected. Delicious and, as the ad said, passionate.

"You're right." Rafe lifted his *copita* in a counter-salute. Francisco smirked. The sherry traced a warm path downward as Rafe drained his then accepted a refill. He didn't think he could drink enough to get drunk and maybe forget this bizarre day, but he could certainly take the edge off.

The two men drank in companionable silence.

"This is definitely good stuff," Rafe noted. His voice had the slightest slur. The combination of jet lag, amazing sex and sherry definitely produced a buzz.

Francisco nodded. "It is. You can see some of our motivation for getting the word out. We have to grow beyond our consumer base."

"You deserve to. I hope my video does the trick, well, anyway, helps." He looked down. No time like the present to confront what happened. "Francisco, I honestly don't know what to say about what happened between Elena and me. You're a client, for God's sake. You both are. That makes things worse, or maybe nothing could make them worse."

"She is a beautiful woman, isn't she?" Francisco said.

"You know the answer to that," Rafe growled back. "Are you two planning to get married or what?"

"More like 'or what'," the other man said. "We've been together a long time and we've planned..." He turned away. "We'd planned. I was going to propose to her."

"Shit." Rafe held up his hands. "Don't change your mind about that because of what happened. Man, I'm not looking to break you up."

"Good, because you wouldn't be able to."

Though a part of Rafe questioned the assertion, he kept his mouth shut. Now was not the time to mention the mystical bond he'd felt with Elena. "I have to ask this, Francisco. How come you haven't punched me out yet? Is it coming? Do you figure I'll have my guard down and then, wham?"

"Wham'?" Francisco raised a brow.

“You’ll attack and catch me by surprise.”

The other man *tsked*. “Are you always this paranoid?”

“Hey, sometimes paranoid gets it right.”

“Not this time.”

“I don’t get it. What’s going on here?”

Francisco thought for several beats before answering. “You’ve got a great camera here, Rafe.”

“I agree. You’ve told me so already.”

The other man nodded. “You shared your precious camera with me.”

“Christ almighty. You’re not saying what I think you are—that it was an exchange. You got to try out my camera and I got to try out Elena. If that’s what you’re saying, I’m with her. The lady’s not a piece of property. If that’s what you think, I’ll punch your lights out.” Rafe clenched his fists. Something about Francisco was definitely fucked up and Rafe was going to find out what.

Francisco held his hands up in a protective stance. “Slow down and listen. That’s not what I’m saying at all. Are you listening?”

“Go ahead.”

“Watching you dance with Elena, watching you make love with her—because that’s what it was, not just a simple fuck—it’s like you’ve given me more of the woman I love.”

“What?”

Francisco shrugged. “I saw her in ways I never can when I’m with her. I don’t know how else to say it. And I got to do it with this wonderful tool, your camera.”

Rafe still couldn’t put it all together, and then the light came on. “You’re a stinkin’ voyeur.”

Francisco smiled. “I’ve been called worse.”

Rafe eyed him warily. "Is that what this is all about? A chance to exercise some perv tendencies and get your rocks off?" He shook his head. "Man, I don't appreciate being used any more than Elena."

Francisco hadn't anticipated having much of a conversation with Rafe, but the other man didn't seem content to let things go without an explanation. Francisco had obviously misread him, thinking anyone so skillful in making videos gave most of his attention to surface appearances – and would also be a bit of a voyeur. Now that he had a chance to consider Rafe's deeper nature, Francisco preferred the man of his newer vision. At the same time, Francisco realized he had to revise his original plan. "I'll explain everything on one condition."

"Which is?"

"You can't tell Elena."

Rafe whistled. "Must be big." He thought for a moment. "I don't like keeping secrets, especially from the woman in your life. And I won't agree until I know what we're dealing with here."

Francisco laughed. "I agree with you about not keeping secrets – that is, usually. But this time is an exception. I have the best reason in the world."

"Which is –"

"Christmas. I want to give Elena one last happy Christmas with me." He studied Rafe and could see when the other man began to understand.

"You don't just mean you're leaving her for another chick or –"

"No."

Rafe grasped Francisco's wrist. "You're sick?"

Francisco nodded slowly.

"But you look so healthy. And you're strong. It can't be that bad."

"The wonders of modern chemistry. Wonder drugs and all. They're why I'm not moldering in a bed now. They won't work too much longer."

Rafe shook his head. "You're sure? Can't you do anything?"

"Got the verdict in New York. All I can do now is get everything ready... I want to give Elena this last Christmas memory. And I want her to have the best possible people in her life. Our business partners for that side of things. And to hold her, you."

Rafe flung away Francisco's arm and backed off. "Controlling bastard."

"Yeah. That doesn't make what I'm doing wrong. Promise me you'll honor my wishes."

Rafe looked sicker than Francisco felt. "Promise made, under duress, for now. But we're going to talk more about this. I may have just met Elena, but my gut tells me you've got her wrong. You should tell her. Otherwise she may never forgive either one of us. She may hate me for the rest of my life, but she may hate you for the rest of eternity."

Chapter Six

By the time Elena arrived at the café to meet Francisco for a drink, she'd gotten way more done than she'd thought possible. Fortunately, she was able to find perfect gifts for some of her loved ones on her first foray through the crowded shops. Being back in a normal milieu helped her regain her equilibrium after the shocking experience at the studio. Though she should have been trying to figure out exactly what was going on, her head pleaded for a break. She wanted to be free to enjoy the holiday excitement without having to reflect on hard questions.

Had Francisco said Rafe would be coming with him to the cafe? She winced at the complications Rafe had brought to their lives. Despite this, she wished Rafe could spend more time with Francisco and herself. She would love to see Rafe shed his sadness and experience the full joy of the holiday. She wanted to be the one to break through his grief.

Who was she fooling? She wanted to see him again for any and every reason, this man who'd made such passionate love with her under the strangest of conditions. Her behavior was completely out of character, given her belief in monogamy. Maybe the whole city water supply had been suffused with a strange, personality-altering drug. If she read about it in tomorrow's newspaper, she wouldn't be surprised—just relieved.

An even bigger question had to do with the two men. Surely there had to be a huge wall of tension between them, and she didn't want to have to deal with that.

She'd ordered an aperitif and was nibbling on tapas when they arrived. Both men looked movie star handsome, turning many heads.

"You've started without us," Francisco said by way of greeting. She tried to read his mood, but he seemed shuttered, sealed up and closed off from her. She'd never before seen him like this and, much as she could understand his distance, she didn't like it.

“Sit down and catch up with me. There’s more than enough to go around.”

Rafe looked nervous. “Did you get through all your chores this afternoon, Elena?”

“I accomplished a great deal. I’m not done, but the situation has gone from dire to possible. Ah, here comes the server, gentlemen. Order what you want and then you can tell me about the rest of your afternoon.”

Was it her imagination or did Rafe catch Francisco’s eye and scowl? She tapped her fingers on the table, waiting for the men to finish their orders so they could move the conversation along.

After they’d toasted each other and indulged in more tapas, Francisco began. “Our friend Rafe here thinks I’m a voyeur. Given his profession, though, and all his equipment, I think it’s fair to say he’s the voyeur among us.”

Rafe squirmed in his chair. “I suppose all photographers have something of the voyeur in our makeup, but I’ve never thought of myself that way.”

Elena looked up to heaven. “*Dios mio*, I don’t have enough to deal with? Now two perverts have landed in my lap and want to discuss their deviant ways. You two are seriously *loco*. It’s Christmas. That’s what I want to talk about.”

Francisco drew her hand to his lips for a kiss as he gazed at her with his most feverish expression. He knew what a sucker she was, even after all their time together, for the hand-kissing, smoldering-eye routine. “*Mi amor*, you know I’m always ready to party. Christmas is an occasion for a nonstop *fiesta*.”

“But you’ve permitted work to infringe far too much on our *fiesta*,” she accused.

Rafe looked at her with such naked hunger in his eyes it was all she could do to hold her head up in a proud, disdainful pose. How could she dismiss what had happened between them when he could stir her with just a look? Between Rafe’s appeal and Francisco’s cosmopolitan attentions, her panties were moist with her desire. She squeezed her legs tight and willed herself not to wriggle.

“Tonight we’ll see Rafe’s video,” Francisco said. He broke his gaze to sip his drink.

“I hope you don’t expect us to watch the one you made.” Elena intended to sound strict and determined, but her words came out far too soft.

Francisco cocked a brow. “Perhaps for another time. Once we know the sales video is ready to ship for broadcast, we’ll be free to experiment with all sorts of ways to watch videos.” He practically leered at her.

“I’ll expedite the editing on the commercial. I expect it won’t be too onerous. Then I’ll get out of your hair.” Rafe looked like he wished he were already elsewhere.

Elena wanted to reach out and touch his arm but, considering the live wire of attraction that linked them, she feared the tender gesture would quickly morph into foreplay or frustration. Not fair to him nor, really, to her. Most of all, she didn’t want to lead him on or foster any misunderstandings.

“What’s the rush, Rafe?” Francisco clamped a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sure Elena, who’s a hospitality queen, joins me in welcoming you to share the good holiday times with us.”

She hated when he did that, committed her to something without consulting her. They’d talked about this so many times, and he refused to change. Probably never would. Not being able to take him aside for a talk now, she satisfied herself by aiming a pointy-toed kick at his shin.

“Ouch.”

She tossed her head. “I thought you were too macho to acknowledge pain.”

“Those shoes are lethal,” he muttered. “But sometimes my dear Elena enjoys inflicting pain as a prelude to pleasure. Is this what your Christmas shopping has inspired?”

Rafe looked like he was in pain even without being kicked. Though she knew it was a hazardous way to go, Elena yearned to bring a true smile to his face.

At last their meal arrived, giving Rafe and the others a different focus. Being around

Elena was like being back in high school when he had to walk around with his books positioned to hide his perpetual hard-on. Now that he was older and supposedly in full control, it was far worse. If he messed up, he could torpedo his professional reputation in addition to doing more psychic damage. Though Terri now felt like a long-ago blur, his scar tissue was still fairly raw. Piling on a disaster with Elena would set him back months.

Problem was now that he'd been with Elena, he knew exactly what he was missing. A woman like that... He suspected she could read him like a big print book whenever she looked at him. He'd never before felt so awkward. He didn't know what to do with his hands, his feet, let alone the erection he kept shifting to deal with.

That was complication enough without the bombshell Francisco had dropped. Funny, Francisco had tried to get Rafe to back off, but Rafe kept pushing until he knew what was going on. Now he was sorry he knew, but he couldn't backtrack. He'd promised Francisco to keep the secret for now, but he hadn't committed to being there for Elena when...

On their recommendation, Rafe ordered paella, which turned out to be a mistake. Each piece of seafood required skillful use of utensils and his table manners had just reverted to when he'd been in first grade and had to attend his cousin's wedding. Luckily he wasn't very hungry because he couldn't open a single clam or mussel.

Elena, evidently an expert at freeing each morsel from its shell, daintily made inroads in her large portion. He loved a woman who enjoyed her food. After being with New York women who could spend half an hour pretending to eat a single leaf of arugula, Rafe found Elena a refreshing change.

"Don't you like the paella, Rafe?" Elena asked.

Busted. "I'm not very hungry after all."

She frowned. "How can you not be? Between not having any decent food on the plane, having just the fast food earlier at the studio and your hard work today, you must be starving."

They both reddened at her mention of their hard work. Francisco, his plate practically empty, smirked. Nothing about the way the man acted seemed consistent with his being as sick as he claimed. Was this another weird game he was playing?

“Not so much. I’m okay.”

Seeing the intact shells in his plate, Elena offered to give him some of her freed seafood. “I’ve had more than enough. Besides which, I’m saving myself for dessert. It’s the best.”

Unable to resist her invitation, he took the food she offered, which tasted especially delicious. He really must have been starving. Or was it because she handed him each piece?

“Let’s eat up and go back to our place,” Francisco said. “Don’t protest, Elena. We’ll be better able to celebrate if we’ve finished our work.” He was mopping up broth with a large chunk of bread.

“Not yet. Let’s show Rafe around tonight. After all, since he has the good fortune to be here during the Christmas season, he should also have the chance to see our city put forth its most beautiful façade.”

Francisco frowned. “It will still be beautiful tomorrow night, by which time we’ll have shipped the video out for distribution and will therefore feel much freer to help Rafe be a joyful *turista*.”

Rafe had to get away from these two or he’d go crazy. Though he did want to spend time here exploring, he didn’t need to be with them to do that. “Much as I hate to admit it, I’ll side with Francisco on this one. Let’s get the work done. Then we’ll all be free to celebrate the season the way we want to.”

Elena turned to him, her large, dark eyes piercing him with a look so wistful, so full of desire he wanted to kneel before her and promise anything she wanted. She made him feel like the modern equivalent of Don Quixote, climbing on his horse for the fair damsel.

What was wrong with him? If he didn’t get away from Elena he’d be spouting

poetry, donning armor and becoming as ridiculous as Don Quixote on his nag. More ridiculous.

“Besides, I want to get the edits done while today’s sequence is still clear in my brain.” The sequence of making love with Elena was permanently seared into all his senses, but he wasn’t about to admit that.

Elena wanted to be out on the streets, with other people. Vulnerable as she was tonight, she sensed being alone with both men would be dangerous. Sitting across from them was like perching on the brim of a powder keg, waiting for the explosion. Even worse, she was the fuse.

Even worse than their power over her was her lack of power. She was not accustomed to feeling incompetent in any arena, but she surrendered to her incompetence when it came to resisting. Francisco had always been able to have his way with her—but now, Rafe was proving equally irresistible. A man she’d known less than a day. What raging chemistry united them?

And what was the deal with Francisco? Though they’d made light of it, she began to fear he really might be a voyeur, a term that made her shiver with delicious dread. How had he felt when she and Rafe made love—all the time watching, plying the damn camera.

So many questions, so much confusion. Did she really want to analyze the situation and arrive at answers?

No, she expected right now what she wanted was for all the emotions and bewilderment to be resolved and disappear. She wanted everything between her and Francisco to be as it had been—before their trip to New York, before their flamenco—most of all, before Rafe.

Francisco gave thanks for every meal he still had an appetite for, any drink he could enjoy in the company of loved ones. Now that these moments had become finite—

they'd always been finite, but now he could no longer escape his heightened awareness—each glowed like a precious gem. Rafe still held back about committing to supporting Francisco's choices. Elena was so distracted with Christmas, Francisco might just be able to keep her in the dark until he was ready to reveal the truth. Would he manage to succeed in his mission to bring Rafe and her together? Maybe he'd never know the answer, but at least he'd started the wheels in motion.

Chapter Seven

Elena loved the condo she and Francisco shared in the heart of old Seville. To her way of thinking, they had everything in their ideal location. They were near the famous Plaza del Museo, minutes from the shopping area. The famous streets Tetuan, Sierpes and Cuna and the enormous department store El Corte Inglés were just down the road.

Ordinarily she loved to show off their home, which she had decorated with great devotion and love, to visitors. After all, they had lots to be proud of in their beautiful city. They were close to the most essential sights—the Cathedral, which was especially crucial to see at this time of the year. Visitors were always impressed to learn it was the largest cathedral in Spain and the third largest in the world.

The Giralda and the Reales Alcazares were a mere ten minutes' walk. Just beyond was the Guadalquivir River. A little farther, those so inclined could visit the Maestranza bullring. Much more to her personal taste was the trendy area of the Alameda de Hercules, another short walk from the condos.

But Rafe McMaster was no ordinary guest, and opening her door to him was far from business as usual. Rafe was the first other man she'd made love with since she'd met Francisco. As far as Elena was concerned, Rafe was the *only* man who would ever have that distinction.

"Welcome to our humble abode," Francisco said, inviting Rafe into the light, airy living room. *Humble?* Elena was amazed Francisco even knew the word and didn't trip on saying it. Nothing about Francisco or their life together, certainly not their beautiful condo, qualified as *humble*.

Elena dashed around, fluffing up a pillow here, straightening a magazine or paper there. Since they'd been away for several days, the rooms had the slightly musty odor of

a place that's been shut up. Despite the staleness of the air, Elena thrilled at being home—especially at this time of the year.

"This is quite a place you have," Rafe said.

Francisco put a proprietary arm around Elena. "We like it. It suits our needs."

Elena wriggled away. "I didn't have a chance to decorate for Christmas and have few gifts for our loved ones. The whole trip to New York came up just when I was going to get started. I should at least get started putting up some decorations now."

"*Mi amor*, let that be for tomorrow. For tonight, we should entertain our American guest. Perhaps an after-dinner drink, Rafe?"

"Let me guess. More sherry." He grinned.

Francisco shrugged. "Why deprive ourselves when the best of the best is readily available?"

Elena brought out the sherry and a cake from the freezer, which she defrosted and served warm under a thick mound of whipped cream garnished with chopped almonds. They relaxed and chatted over their impromptu dessert. Though she should have been hustling to put up the decorations and complete her other Christmas chores, the long day's emotional upheaval was starting to get to her. Maybe she would listen to Francisco for once and take the night off, relax a bit.

"If I drink much more of this sherry, I won't be good to edit anything," Rafe admitted.

"*In vino veritas*," Francisco said. "Wine unleashes truth."

"Not my working style," Rafe responded. He looked at his watch. "Besides, the jet lag is beginning to hit. I'd like to get to my hotel soon, so why don't we get started. If it looks like we won't be able to finish tonight, we can get an early start tomorrow morning. That way you'll still have to time to send the video out and have the rest of the day for your Christmas plans."

“All work and no play,” Francisco muttered. Nonetheless, he quickly set them up to view the video.

But when Rafe began to run the footage, it was obvious he’d chosen the wrong clips. There, in living color, Elena’s dance partner wasn’t Francisco but Rafe. And they weren’t dancing.

What the fuck? Rafe quickly hit *Stop*. Though he’d been sure he’d queued up the right video, Francisco must have made a switch. “Give me a second and I’ll get the right one in.” He had to will himself to keep his hands steady. He did not need any visual reminders of making love with Elena. Not when his flesh still sizzled.

“Hold up,” Francisco ordered. “I want to see more of my camera work. Pretty good for an amateur, eh?”

“Francisco,” Elena hissed. She unleashed such a long, rapid, harsh-sounding stream of Spanish, Rafe was sure she’d blister the walls. Though he could understand basic Spanish enough to get himself around the country without danger of starvation, his limited fluency did not equip him for Elena’s tirade.

Francisco gave her one of his shit-eating grins. “*Mi amor*, such language right before the holiday. Our guest might get the wrong impression. On the other hand, I love it when you talk dirty.”

This comment unleashed another stream. Then Francisco drew Elena to him. To Rafe’s amazement and chagrin, she began to sob. Maybe she suspected more than Francisco realized about what was happening to him? He soothed her, skillfully kissing away her tears. An unwelcome wave of jealousy spiraled through Rafe.

Francisco, one hand still stroking Elena, turned to Rafe and mouthed the words, “Start the camera.”

What the hell was going on? Rafe shook his head.

“I want you to experience what I did,” Francisco said. “Film us.” He then licked her final tear, a trajectory that ended with his lips clamped firmly on hers. Though Elena put her hands on his chest as if to push him away, her resistance soon dissipated.

Though his emotions roiled and bubbled, Rafe got the film going almost as if he were on automatic pilot. He gritted his teeth, wanting to fling the camera aside and pull Francisco away from Elena, but he kept on filming, circling to see them from every different angle. This was the most painful scene he’d ever filmed. So caught up was he in the erotic tableau that he paid scarce attention to his own burgeoning erection.

* * * * *

How had Elena been with Francisco for so many years and managed not to kill him? He had to be the most infuriating man in the universe. Why of all the men out there did she have to love this impossible son of a— But love him she did, enough to get caught up in his mania. Enough to follow him when he so clearly expressed his need to lead. She had to believe he’d do the same for her if she ever became equally insane.

He kicked things off wrong when he insisted on their rushing to get work done, forcing them to cram in preparations for the celebration of her favorite holiday. She’d cooperated, gone along with that mad scheme. What did he do to thank her? First he had stood by like the king of voyeurs and filmed her making love to another man. To add insult to injury, he wanted them to view this video as if they’d agreed to an afternoon at the cinema. And now he directed the other man to film the two of them in their most intimate—

Too much. Unable to decide between tears or fury, her overwrought psyche opted for both. Just when she was sure Francisco had pushed her to the outermost limit of her tortured nerves, he took her in his arms and reminded her why she loved him so much. His tenderness when he kissed away her tears seduced her into erotic oblivion. When he kissed her deeply, demandingly, with some new, unknown element in his embrace, she melted. His erection pressed against her, promising her the moon and the stars. She, fool that she was, wanted it all from him.

But Rafe was there. Switching places with Francisco, now Rafe was the voyeur armed with the video camera. She should have been horrified and thrown them both out. Instead, she found herself more turned-on than ever.

Francisco raised her sweater. For this casual evening, she'd decided not to bother with a bra. His eyes lit up when he saw her breasts, exposed and eager. Her nipples were already hard, anticipating the feel of his soft, warm lips. She wasn't disappointed when Francisco opened his avid mouth and began to suckle. Her pussy clenched in rhythm with the sweep of his tongue around her pebble-hard nipples. Her eyes fluttered closed as she entwined her fingers in his thick, dark hair.

All the while, Rafe stood, a silent witness with his protective camera. What was he thinking? Did he feel the least bit jealous? Turned-on? Though a part of her rebelled against Francisco's obvious plan, she couldn't muster a protest. Instead she moaned. "Ah, Francisco," she gasped when his teeth grazed her tender breast with a bit too much vigor. He swept his tongue around her softness in as much of an apology as Francisco ever offered. In truth, the bit of pain turned her on as much as having Rafe and the camera present.

"So beautiful, *mi amor*. I must possess you," Francisco murmured.

"You do, for always." Her words came out on a sigh.

His hand trembled for just a moment.

* * * * *

What the hell was he doing here? Like a robot on automatic pilot, one with a killer erection, he kept his camera aimed and steady. He'd make a much better robot if he could manage to keep his ears and his emotions closed down. He'd have given his pay for this project not to have heard Elena's whispered comment. Naturally she thought she was Francisco's. For always. Rafe would have to be blind not to realize that, and his visual powers were acute. His soul wrenched with the agony of the truth he couldn't

reveal. This beautiful woman he already half loved was headed straight for a mountain of agony.

But he was caught up in the eternal present. Her words stabbed his heart as much as the sight of them together. Elena and Francisco were locked in such a deep intimacy he might as well not have been there. He could have been a tripod bearing the camera for all the impact of his presence.

His cock stirred, reminding him he couldn't ignore his needs forever. Right. Like his needs even began to figure in the unfolding equation. Both of these people had more at stake than he. His heart hurt worse than his balls.

But his friend the camera continued to give him a modicum of distance from the unfolding scene. Francisco was trailing kisses down from Elena's magnificent breasts. She stood, legs splayed, hands clutched tightly in the other man's hair, pressing his head to her. Watching Francisco fall to his knees to worship at the altar of Elena, Rafe could hardly breathe. He wanted his mouth to be where Francisco's now reigned. Still, even as he seethed with desire, he couldn't forget how little time Francisco had...

Elena sighed with pleasure as Francisco buried his face in her feminine softness. With his mouth covering her pussy, Elena moved her head in sensual delight. Francisco had both hands clamped on Elena's beautiful ass and was holding her tight against him. Even the camera couldn't penetrate all the mysteries of the unfolding scene.

Rafe's mouth watered, and he ran his tongue across his lips. He wanted to pleasure Elena as Francisco surely was doing right now. He circled the twosome, managing to catch the way Elena rotated her hips in response to Francisco's ministrations. Clearly, the man knew what he was doing.

Elena's hips took up a steady rhythm as she rocked back and forth to meet the pressure of his lips. Rafe moved from the couple's side to the back view. Francisco's fingers were never idle. With the finesse of a concert violinist, he played Elena's ass. From the sounds she was making and her moves, Elena was totally there with her lover.

Had Francisco earlier experienced the same mixture of emotions now bedeviling Rafe? Filming the lovemaking before him. As an artist, he knew he had a rare chance. But as a lover— It had to be a hundred times worse for Francisco, knowing he was dying, trying to hide this ultimate secret from the woman he loved, with whom he was locked in the greatest intimacy.

Though Rafe knew he shouldn't be jealous of Francisco, he was. With every fiber of his being, Rafe wanted to be the one loving Elena. He was enthralled with her, as bewitched as if she'd cast a spell. But he had to hold on to reality. The scene unfolding before his camera was the norm. Francisco and Elena were a couple. He, Rafe McMaster, was hired help. Definitely a fifth wheel, no matter what future role Francisco tried to assign.

For the sake of his sanity and to keep his heart from breaking again, he had to get as far from these two as modern transportation could take him.

Chapter Eight

Elena was flying. Their lovemaking was always hot and passionate. But today, it was as if Francisco had caught fire with out-of-this-world inspiration. Much as she'd like to believe he wanted to make up to her for all the difficulties of the last few days, she couldn't fool herself to such an extent. What was different today was the presence of Rafe and his camera. Earlier, she'd called Francisco a voyeur. Now it became clear he must also be an exhibitionist. And, given her excitement and pleasure, she must be one too.

But she couldn't spend too much time fretting over labels and name-calling. Not when Francisco was coaxing her hips forward and her legs open. He sucked on her pussy with his erotic expertise, knowing just how to bring her to a peak of arousal and then pull back. *Dios*. One way or another, this man would end up driving her mad.

Rafe kept circling them, trying to get his camera shots but, thank God, holding back from overt intrusion. Though she'd normally have felt inhibited about making love to Francisco "on camera", given what she and Rafe had done together before, she could raise no protest.

Actually, she must have a perverse streak a mile wide. If not, how could she explain the frisson of thrill it gave her to have Rafe right there, filming each intimate moment? Much as this gave her some covert pleasure, she delighted even more in knowing Rafe couldn't really see or film every little move. With Francisco's head shielding her pussy from the camera's obsessive eye, the actual play between her and her lover remained hidden.

She couldn't suppress a smile as she realized he could have been doing *anything* to her poised there and all the camera could pick up were the movements of the back of his head. For all Rafe and the camera knew, Francisco might have been reciting *El Cid*,

whispering the words of the classic epic into her feminine core. That would be a joke. Of course the camera did pick up on her body's response as she shuddered under the onslaught of Francisco's lips, tongue, teeth and fingers. *Dios*, now he was playing with her ass crack as his tongue swirled around her clit. She had to be careful or she'd let out a whimper that would reveal far too much.

Francisco was relishing his star turn as he expertly explored her pussy. Though Rafe was frowning, this might have been more an expression of artistic concentration rather than a reaction to the unfolding sex scene.

Right. Though Elena might wish to hide from herself some of the feelings Rafe had unleashed in her, she didn't have such a talent for lies. Clearly, what had happened this afternoon was not a simple roll in the hay to be forgotten when the hay was pitched. He'd been affected and so, to be honest, had she.

But she couldn't let herself go there. Couldn't let herself even begin to feel sorry for Rafe with his sad eyes and soul. She and Francisco had pledged to be together forever, and nothing was going to change that. She couldn't imagine her life without Francisco, which didn't stop her heart aching a bit for Rafe.

Francisco bit lightly on her clit and she pressed against him. The throbbing pleasure shot out from her center like a butterfly. She began to stir with the first flutters and swirls of her approaching climax, and clamped herself even tighter to Francisco, molding her hands around his head to hold him exactly where she wanted him. He licked her, a pleasure so intense she sucked in her breath hard.

Francisco breathed their special, secret words into her, a whisper of pleasure that tipped her off the edge of the world into ecstasy. She caught her breath again and again as the sensation of release took hold and spun her around. Francisco's tongue darted back and forth, now quickly, now slowly, touching all the bits that cried for his attention. He grabbed her even tighter, crushing her ass cheeks as the first wave of orgasm pulsed through her. *Yes, yes, yes. Oh yes, exactly like that.*

Concentric circles of exquisite pleasure swept over her, for one perfect moment obliterating all in the universe except them. And Rafe. Thank God no one would ever know her divided thoughts. Francisco was making love to her with his body, Rafe with his camera. Her climax was all the sweeter for having them both.

* * * * *

Rafe had to bite his lip to keep from crying out when Elena did. Did she call out a name? What she said came out so garbled and breathy, it was not recognizable as anything but passion. Seeing another bring her to that point nearly destroyed him, even though it was Francisco, a dying man. Thank Jesus Rafe had his camera, his weapon of choice, his consolation. For the first time ever, he resolved not to watch the footage he'd just made. Despite hearing Francisco's *deathbed wishes*, Rafe had to get away. He had enough grief in his life without getting any further involved...

Then Francisco swept Elena up in his arms and raced with her to a room with a bed. He hollered out, "Come with us, video guy."

Rafe's jealousy ramped up as Francisco lay Elena on the bed. In moments, they'd each stripped off what remained of their clothing. Francisco's cock sprang large and ready for battle from his powerfully built body. No way could this man be sick, let alone dying. He'd been messing with Rafe's mind for some sick reason. Whatever.

Elena eyed Francisco's erection the way a child would a long-wished-for Christmas toy. With a grin and a leer, Francisco climbed onto the bed and stretched out alongside her.

How did porn cameramen do it? Rafe had a moment's professional curiosity before he got caught up in the flow and began shooting from every angle. When Elena opened her lovely legs, he glimpsed a vision of her slick moistness. He ached to touch her, to slide his fingers along her plump pink folds and watch her arch her back to open her delicate feminine core to him. That would be after he'd feasted on her.

Francisco evidently thought the same way. He touched her there—at first almost tentatively then with more deliberation. Elena closed her legs around his hand, trapping it there. Rafe's hands caressed his camera, but he wanted to be touching Elena. He wanted to have her close her legs around his hand, searing him with her sweet, moist warmth.

Side by side, Elena and Francisco lay entwined in a long kiss. Francisco had one leg possessively poised over Elena's hip. One arm cradled her and he used his other to stroke her back, massaging her ass. From the way Elena moved, each of Francisco's touches evoked a passionate quiver.

Rafe closed his eyes for a moment, remembering Elena's exquisite responsiveness. He'd never before been with a woman who appeared to feel every nuance with such depth. Now Francisco, the lucky bastard, was the one who could savor each tiny movement. Jealousy didn't begin to describe Rafe's burning emotions.

But he couldn't let himself forget the essentials. Elena was Francisco's woman, not Rafe's—and, despite Francisco's weird tale, that would always be the case. For whatever reason, Francisco had had his jollies. Rafe had had one taste of paradise and would have to be satisfied with that for the rest of his life.

He couldn't think about the rest of his life. Like a recovering addict, he'd have to get through a day, through an hour without Elena. Right now, he had to get through filming their lovemaking. Hell, he probably looked forward to their orgasm more than they did. Thank the universe for his camera—his lifeline.

He summoned forth his inner professional to take charge. How could he photograph this passionate, erotic interlude to bring out its full artistry? He couldn't adjust the lighting or rearrange the set. It was his challenge to cope with what he'd been dealt.

If he carried this off, he should win the sex video equivalent of an Oscar. The thought brought a welcome smile to his face, which abruptly disappeared when

Francisco reclined on his back and Elena climbed aboard and embraced him with her open legs. Despite his determination to be a silent witness, Rafe groaned aloud.

* * * * *

Francisco was such a masterful type. Elena remembered how resistant he'd been at first to having her on top—the female superior position. Fortunately for them both he'd allowed himself, and her, the pleasure of being straddled.

She was so hot to have him inside her that she had to force herself not to jump on him. His cock, stiff, long and full, beckoned like a beacon on a dark night. She allowed herself to run her tongue over his glans, replete with a drop of pre-come, before she sat herself on him. His hard-on tickled her left cheek. She rubbed her clit once against his belly as he rolled on a condom and grunted. Then she gave up her last vestige of resistance. Humping her ass up, she lowered herself on his hot cock. They both moaned with the pleasure of their intimate connection.

Francisco's eyes fluttered closed. She loved seeing him in this rare pose, one of the few times he ever allowed his vulnerability to show. Only to her of course. Though she had to wonder now, with Rafe and his camera there, was that vulnerability on display? Francisco wouldn't tolerate anyone else viewing this side of him. He could scarcely tolerate Elena having such knowledge.

Things to puzzle out later. Judging from the expression on Rafe's mouth, making this video had become a struggle. His full, sensuous lips formed a grim, tight line. What expression would she see in his eyes if they weren't hidden by the camera?

With Francisco deep inside her, Elena could no longer think. Not when sensation and physical pleasure so overwhelmed her. Each time they made love, Elena found something new and exciting. She couldn't imagine sex with him growing stale and predictable, as she'd heard happened to others. His touch continued to thrill her, and she knew he felt the same about her.

She sketched out a rotation around Francisco's cock with her hips, a move that made him moan. His voice resonated in her, setting off a delicious spate of goose bumps. She loved that he was so vocal in his response.

"*Mi amor,*" he half whispered, half shouted. "What you do to this poor man. You are out to conquer me, to achieve my total surrender. Nothing else will ever satisfy you, will it, my violent vixen?"

She threw her head back and laughed, which opened her up more and thrust Francisco's penis deeper into her. Enjoying this victory, she wriggled her hips to massage the sensitive tip. Her clit throbbed with ecstasy at each point of friction.

"You and your big, hard battering ram satisfy me, *mi caballero*, my knight. Let me ride you now, take me to the mysterious realms of delight only you ever have shown me." His hands grew more powerful, gripping her tighter to him. The heat between them flared as if to take them over and consume them.

"I am your *caballero*, riding to your rescue on my big white horse," Francisco gasped out. Elena smiled at this evocation of his favorite fantasy. The knight and the damsel. Only what was Rafe's role? Not the jester. Was he Lancelot to their Guinevere and Arthur? Surely not. Had Guinevere ever experienced in Arthur's bed what Elena felt with Francisco, would there ever have been room in their lives for Lancelot?

Francisco manipulated her hips as he thrust in and out of her, stroking her pleasure places with each move, lingering just long enough to open her up before moving her higher. Even under her, with her straddling his thighs, with his manhood buried deep inside her, Francisco remained her master. Silly her to lose sight of that fundamental rule.

A rule she cherished. She wanted Francisco to be her master, always. To show her again and again how surely he could lead her to her soul-shattering climax. Francisco, so powerful, so potent. He proved it again and again as he moved in and out of her, building with her to the orgasm that lay before her like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

What about Rafe? Why was she thinking about him now when she was about to—

Chapter Nine

Once again when Rafe heard Elena cry out at the peak of pleasure, she was in another man's embrace. Francisco was the one feeling her hot sheath vibrate around his shaft. Francisco was the one thrusting intimately into Elena's most secret places. With an oath of anguish, Rafe, for the first time ever, thrust the camera away. He could no longer stand, even with the camera as a partial shield, and witness the couple making love. His soul recoiled with his agony.

Since his revolt coincided with Francisco's orgasm, Rafe doubted his reaction had any effect on the lovers. He hoped they wouldn't notice him. Maybe he should just slink off into the night and find his hotel. They'd booked him somewhere nearby. He'd settle himself in, phone them later to arrange finishing his work.

One thing he knew. He couldn't stand being so near to Elena and yet so far from her. Despite the aberration of their lovemaking earlier and Francisco's weirdness, Rafe knew he would never be important to her – and she'd become far too important to him.

With the couple wrapped tightly in their afterglow, he tiptoed to the door.

"Where are you going, Rafe?" Elena's voice commanded him to stop.

Willing his expression to look neutral, he turned to face the couple who wore their intimacy like a proud badge.

"Been far too long a day. I figure at this point, we won't get anything done until tomorrow, so might as well call it a night." He shrugged.

Elena and Francisco looked at each other for a moment. Jealousy sliced Rafe again in the face at the powerful bond between the lovers. That's what he wanted in his life. It's what he'd never had with Terri and what he would have given his left arm to have with Elena. Too bad there was the matter of Francisco popping up any time his fantasies wandered to Elena. Francisco of the mind games – even a bigger reason for him to run.

Hell, Rafe should be grateful to the universe that he'd had a single shot of being with Elena. That would have to sustain him in the lonely weeks and months to come. He turned the doorknob and –

“Don't go,” Elena said, her voice a soft wraith of persuasion.

Francisco added his agreement. Rafe let out a pent-up breath. Okay, he had to know. “The way you two are together, I'd think you'd want to be alone.”

Francisco propped himself up on an elbow in the wide bed he shared with Elena. “Under ordinary circumstances, you would be right. But you see, tonight is not ordinary.” He winked conspiratorially.

Nothing in Rafe's life had been ordinary since he'd first caught a glimpse of Elena doing the flamenco in New York. Though a warning voice told him to keep moving, keep to his plan and leave, some mysterious inner force won out and kept him rooted to the spot. He took his hand off the knob. “What is it you want tonight that can't be better done tomorrow?”

“You have been generous, allowing me to live out a fantasy I've always had about video, sex and Elena.” He grinned. “In a sense, her allowing me this is her Christmas gift.”

“*Part* of your Christmas gift, Francisco.” Elena put her arms around Francisco from behind and laid her head on his shoulder. Jealousy continued to radiate through Rafe and worse. His and Elena's lovemaking this afternoon had been part of Francisco's Christmas gift? Francisco thought Rafe would even pretend to go along with that bullshit? On the other hand, what if Francisco had told him the truth?

“So glad to oblige,” Rafe muttered through gritted teeth.

“But there's more. Give us a minute to put on our robes. Come, have a sherry with us.” Francisco went into genial host mode. At this point, Rafe had just about had all the hospitality – and sherry – he could handle. But Elena's eyes pleaded with him to stay, and he could not deny her anything.

Faster than Rafe would have considered it possible, the couple, clad in matching silk robes, were walking him back to their kitchen. Elena got them sherry, *copitas* and a platter of cheese and olives along with a baguette.

The gurgle of his stomach reminded Rafe he was hungry for something besides Elena. Exhausted and riddled with jealousy, he drank more sherry and put away prodigious amounts of food. So far, they'd only exchanged small talk. Then Elena fastened him with her eyes. "You are probably wondering why we are not letting you go get your well-deserved rest."

"Okay," Rafe said. "Not exactly the way I'd put it, but that's the gist. There's something you want from me besides my professional expertise. What is it?"

More intense gazing between Francisco and Elena. This was getting old. Then Francisco cleared his throat. "As I said before, filming you with Elena, then having you film the two of us has fulfilled my fantasy."

Rafe nodded his head. "Glad to oblige."

"Now it's Elena's turn. You're the first one she's ever wanted to fulfill her particular fantasy."

Francisco's words hit Rafe with the force of a punch to the midsection. His cock stirred at the prospect of being in any way connected to fulfilling his fantasy woman's fantasy. Was there anything short of murder and mayhem he could deny her?

Elena swallowed her sherry for an extra burst of courage. She'd only confessed her fantasy to Francisco under duress, never believing it would ever become reality. Francisco started to describe what she'd confided to him and, at first, she'd wanted to hide. But then Elena realized she needed to take charge. Her fantasy, her words. She held her head high. "Rafe, you must already know you are very special to me."

He looked at her with questioning eyes and always that profound sadness.

She took one of Francisco's hands and one of Rafe's. Already she felt her vital link between these two amazing men as jolts of energy passed through her. "It is no secret that Francisco and I are mates for life. I love him now and forever."

Rafe ducked his head, but not before she glimpsed a flash of his pain.

"But," Elena continued, "it has always been my fantasy to have two lovers at the same time. Two passionate men to pleasure me at once."

Though Francisco looked a tad green around the gills—a symptom of whatever was killing him?—he nodded as if in perfect agreement. "This of course is not a reflection on my ability to please my woman."

"It goes without saying," Elena added. Expressing her desire to Francisco had turned into a precarious tightrope walk over his emotions—over hers too. "This is my fantasy, one Francisco is generous and loving enough to participate in."

Rafe looked from Elena to Francisco and back. Rafe's face mirrored a heady mix of emotions—confusion, the perpetual sadness, hope and desire. Elena forged on. "But you see only the most phenomenal of men could meet my needs—our needs—in this." She paused. "Until we met you, Rafe, I had despaired of ever having the right chemistry for my love triangle to work. Now we've met you—"

Suddenly she grew shy. What if she and Francisco had read Rafe wrong and he was not at all the man she thought him to be? Hot waves of emotion suffused her cheeks at the prospect of their having opened themselves so much to a man who was in many ways still a stranger. To have exposed herself and made herself—and her relationship with Francisco—so vulnerable frightened and distressed her. Could she—could they—have been completely wrong?

Could Rafe really be hearing what he thought Elena was saying—with Francisco right there? And all the while Francisco guarded his explosive secret. The sense of having landed in Wonderland increased.

These two people were inviting him to be part of a *ménage à trois*. Not that he was a prude or anything. Until this moment, he'd considered himself a guy who'd gotten around. Now he truly felt like the country bumpkin come to the big city—which he wasn't about to admit. "Elena, you want me to make love with you to fulfill a long-standing fantasy?"

She nodded, her cheeks still red from a blush that must have raised her temperature five degrees. "You and Francisco. At the same time. What do you say?"

"Hell yes." He'd have preferred to be alone with her on a desert island, but Francisco wasn't going anywhere. Yet.

Elena fluttered her eyelids with a modesty at odds with Rafe's expectations. "I'm so grateful."

Francisco looked less than grateful, but obviously he was a guy who wouldn't renege once he'd agreed to a deal. And if what he'd told Rafe was the truth, Francisco would quickly have to come to terms with the reality of his approaching death. What a secret to keep from an intimate lover. Jealous and resentful as Rafe felt about the man, he also had to admire him. It couldn't be easy sharing a woman like Elena—hell, any beloved woman. On the other hand, Francisco had managed to get Elena for life. He had to have a lot going to keep a woman like her interested. And he had to prepare himself to lose more than most men ever tasted even once.

Rafe smiled. For this strange interlude in his life, he'd take what he could get. He didn't want to admit his inexperience with *ménages*, so he bit back questions about who, where and how. Instead he said, "You two have just made love, so I guess you need some recovery time."

Elena pointed to the sherry and the snack. "We've just had that. Both Francisco and I are good to go."

Rafe certainly was too. His arousal during the videotaping burst back to life. "Lead on, folks."

Francisco held up a hand in a stop gesture. "Just one more thing."

No surprise there. Rafe had to figure Francisco wasn't going to just go along. "What's that?"

Francisco nodded to the video camera. "With all of us occupied, there won't be anyone to take the video."

"True," both Rafe and Elena said simultaneously. For once Rafe's brain hadn't even paused over the possibility of taking footage.

"We hadn't talked about a video of this," Elena said.

Francisco shrugged. "It would be an extra refinement, no? At this point though, there's no way we can bring in another person."

"True," Elena said. She narrowed her beautiful, big brown eyes. "I hope this doesn't mean you're backing out. You can't back out after we've gotten this far."

"Do you know me so little, *mi amor*?" He cupped Elena's chin in his hand. "No, I have another idea. Rafe, do you have a tripod where we can mount the camera?"

Rafe recoiled a bit. "Yeah. With my other equipment. But I don't think perching the camera on the tripod will produce very effective footage. For the best shots, it's really important to move around, which obviously can't happen with a tripod."

"How could we get the most effective shots?" Francisco asked.

"Without a live camera operator, the second most effective approach would be to set up several cameras on tripods in different locations so we can get multiple shots from different angles. But right now I have only one camera and one tripod with me."

"Okay, we'll set it up. We know the limitations and will live with them." Francisco rose to help Rafe set up the equipment.

"This really is a poor second," Rafe murmured. He left the camera primed so all he'd have to do was press a start button when they were ready.

Elena smiled at both men. "Then we'll know better for next time —"

Chapter Ten

“You’re the only one who’s still dressed,” Elena accused Rafe.

“That’s easy to fix.” In moments, he’d stripped and put on a silk robe that matched those of the other two.

“After our long day, I’d love to take a bath in our sunken tub. The water jets are especially invigorating,” Elena purred.

Both men followed. Francisco drew the bath, inviting Elena to pour in her preferred fragrance. Since it was Christmas, she chose a sexy scent that reminded her of traditional incense with an extra kick of spice. Soon, steamy, fragrant clouds rose from the tub and enticed them in. Elena lit three pillar candles of the same scent while Francisco dimmed the overhead lights and pressed a button to bring music into the room. A classical guitarist played love ballads, the perfect antidote to too much commercial music.

The three bathers lounged along the sides of the huge circular tub, each sitting by a water jet. The heat and fragrance of the soothing waters both relaxed and stimulated her. Being like this was almost as good as making love. Almost. Sitting alone with these two handsome, powerful men in her hot tub was almost enough to bring her to climax. Almost. What woman wouldn’t enjoy being able to feast her eyes on two such gorgeous specimens? Elena had to be the luckiest woman in the world.

Licking her lips, Elena turned from one to the other. Her forever love and the man who threatened to find a space in her heart. Each man in turn had eyes only for her. Each spread his long legs out from the vee of his crotch, and of course her legs grazed theirs, setting off bubbles of excitement from her toes to her hips.

Francisco, who so readily relaxed in the bath, closed his eyes with an expression of sheer bliss. She poked him with her toes, making him startle. "Don't go to sleep just yet, Francisco. This night is far from over."

"That's exactly why I'm resting," he muttered. "After a bath like this, Rafe, Elena becomes a ravenous, sex-crazed maniac."

Rafe raised a brow. "I like that in a woman."

Elena, lips in a faux pout, kicked both men, who retaliated with a two-against one splash fight. This was clearly not turning into the sensuous, romantic interlude she'd envisioned. She did not like the fact the two of them were teaming up against her. Even worse, she was getting so turned-on—

"Judging from the look in her eye, *mi amigo*, this will not be a long soak after all," Fernando said.

Assuming her steeliest look, Elena barked out orders. "You, Rafe, wash my back. Francisco, my breasts require your attentions."

In moments the men complied, their big, powerful hands soaping her and rinsing her with extra caresses and rubs until she was very clean and very horny. Though she was more than willing to reciprocate and wash them both—funny how their penises kept getting bigger and bigger the more she washed—both declined for now in their rush to take her into bed.

Though Rafe was normally a shower guy, tonight's experience might convince him to convert. But this was just a preliminary. Though he'd never done anything remotely like what Elena and Francisco were proposing, his gut told him to go where they did. Elena had that effect on him. Only for her would he consider—

They made short work of drying off and racing to the bed. Elena lay down and stretched her arms to the sides. "I want one man for each arm," she growled.

Francisco scrambled to her right side, so Rafe took the left. For several moments the three of them lay together. Rafe did not want to check Francisco out to see if the other man also had a hard-on. Rafe's cock pointed to the ceiling, not his first choice of what to do with it.

"*Mi amor*, what is next?" Francisco asked. "After all, we are merely studs here to provide your desired service. Tell us what you wish. I'm ready, willing and able. What about you, McMaster?"

Rafe swallowed hard. "Rafe McMaster, reporting for duty." He sketched a mock salute with his right hand.

"Finally," Elena murmured. "Finally, my wish will come true."

"And what is that, Elena?" There was no chandelier in the room for either of them to swing from.

"At the same time, one man in front, one in back." Elena's words came out in a rush, which surprised Rafe because she now seemed nervous, in contrast to her usual self-assurance.

"You've never taken it in the back before, Elena." Francisco spoke with the assurance of the longtime lover. "Previously you've always said you didn't want to even try. Or am I misremembering?"

"Previously I never considered really being with two men at once either. Not until Rafe..." Elena ran her hand down Rafe's arm.

Rafe's heart constricted as Elena spoke. "Elena, you've awakened a whole new side of me. But enough talk. Let's make love."

Now she got to make the delightful decision. Which man where? It didn't take long to decide. Rafe, her new guy, would initiate her in a new practice all the while she and Francisco made traditional love. With each man's whispered concurrence, she turned to face Francisco and yield herself to his feverish kisses.

Both men were rock-hard, no doubt as turned-on as she was by their novel lovemaking. With condoms and lubricant handy, Elena allowed herself to be swept away. Knowing Francisco's machismo and his possessiveness, she kept waiting for him to derail their lovemaking, but he showed as much gusto as always. In his mind he had probably set up their ménage as a sort of competition. He'd give his all—a considerable all—to proving himself the best man. She smiled to herself. She could only benefit.

Rafe, on the other hand, came to her with the fresh ardor of a new lover. She shivered as he lifted her hair and kissed the nape of her neck, his lips hot. Then he began a long, slow exploration by tongue of her back. She adored having her back kissed. His tongue and teeth set off delicious shivers, pleasure spasms that shot straight to her clit.

"*Mi amor.*" Francisco breathed the affectionate name against her breasts, unleashing goose bumps in front.

The sensations and emotions both men evoked aroused Elena to a level she'd never before experienced. With her two magical lovers, she climbed the pleasure mountain to the highest peak and beyond. Francisco covered her mouth with his and she kissed him back, matching fire to flame, all the while her back wriggled beneath Rafe's passionate lips. Lovely, luxurious kissing. Could she ever get enough of having two men vying to kiss her everywhere?

Then two big, hard cocks nudged her, one in front, one in back. Her pussy creamed with her excitement as she braced herself for wave upon wave of pure erotic pleasure. Francisco lightly touched her nipples, which pebbled in response. His fingers stroked her with the confidence of a master, a man who knew how to delight her with the slightest touch.

To her amazement, Rafe showed his own mastery. "You are so beautiful," he murmured, his English words in counterpoint to Francisco's Spanish. Bilingual loving—each man putting his tongue to great use.

Francisco turned his attentions to her pussy, already creamy and moist to receive him. His fingers readily slid into her, playing with her folds and her clit. Rafe's fingers joined in the exquisite sweet torture.

Writhing in fevered response to both men, she froze when Rafe touched her in back. He stopped instantly, and Francisco did the same. "Did I hurt you?" Rafe's voice was full of concern.

Elena exhaled. "Hurt? No. More like startled. Silly of me, no? After all, this is what I want."

"But it's new. Elena, I don't ever want to hurt you. Promise you'll tell me if anything feels wrong and I'll stop." Rafe's voice was full of concern.

"I promise." She felt silly. Now hyperaware, she prepared herself. Though she hadn't known Rafe long, her gut told her she could trust him with such intimacy. Having Francisco with her felt like triple insurance... She was safe and yet not...

Moving with exquisite care and attention, Rafe touched her, his finger well moistened from her juices. One finger slid along her crack, not pressing, just lightly awakening her as he rubbed. It felt strange at first, but she quickly relaxed and began to anticipate each new move.

"I want to come in you, *mi amor*." From the tone of Francisco's voice, Elena knew he'd been holding back. "Are you ready for me?"

Was she ever. She opened her legs wider to accommodate his huge cock. Francisco played at the surface of her vulva before slowly easing himself in, allowing himself and Elena to savor each bit. Rafe adjusted his fingers to her shift. He sucked in his breath, hard, when Francisco entered her.

"Oh *Dios*," Rafe muttered, surprising her with his use of Spanish. Poor guy was probably getting blue balls back there, though he continued his patient stroking and lubing. With Francisco filling her in front, Rafe's finger probes began to feel amazing. She moaned, wanting more.

He darted his moist finger in and out of her hole, all the while rubbing his cock along the tender skin inside her thigh. Between that and Francisco thrusting slowly in and out of her sex, Elena could have swooned with pure pleasure—except she didn't want to miss a beat.

Every step of the way, Rafe told her what he was doing. His whispers turned her on. Heck, everything turned her on.

"I'm going to put my cock where my fingers have been," Rafe said. "Slowly."

"Thank God, man. I don't know how you've been holding out." Francisco stepped up the pace of his thrusts.

Elena would have laughed at Francisco's comment, but she was too busy feeling and being.

Rafe couldn't allow himself to lose sight of Elena's needs, not for a moment.

He could almost forget Francisco was there, though in the back of his mind he'd set up a kind of competition with the other man. Who could pleasure Elena the most? Hardly an equal match here, which didn't stop Rafe from giving it his all.

He groaned as sensations from the first moment of contact coursed through him. With the head of his sheathed cock wedged just inside Elena's tight, tight opening, he felt at the edge of paradise. "Are you all right?" he whispered hoarsely.

Elena panted her positive response. "More."

The lady had spoken. Steeling himself to move with infinite care and slowness, ready to pull out if she voiced any concern, Rafe eased his aching cock into her opening, which he'd moistened so attentively.

"You will tell me if you want me to stop."

"Sí. Don't stop." Elena exhaled the words.

Rafe adjusted his careful thrusts to Elena and Francisco's rhythm. Their movements were becoming stronger and faster, which made his efforts all the more challenging. But he would not hurt Elena, would never hurt her, no matter what.

"Mmmm," Elena murmured. In response to which man? Both?

Faster than he'd have considered it possible, Rafe's cock was buried deep inside Elena. Her warm tightness massaged his shaft as he thrust into her, his balls hitting her sensitive skin. "How is that for you?" he asked again.

"*Dios,*" Elena breathed. "So much better—" Her words trailed off into a whimper of erotic delight. "I am going to come so big, I'll explode. You'll be picking up pieces of Elena from the ceiling, you big, macho lovers."

Francisco laughed, a deep leer of a laugh. Then his voice caught and he began a frenzied movement. Elena was right there with him. And so was Rafe.

* * * * *

The musky scents of sex kept Elena rooted on earth as she shot up into the heavens, floating among the stars and the planets as she joined with her two men in a high, piercing climax. Though accustomed to lusty lovemaking and orgasms that shook her universe, with two men pleasuring her, Elena had just ascended to a whole new world.

She'd always before refused to experiment with anal play. Now, with the way Rafe had opened this new world for her, her sex life had become much richer. For Elena, if things were good in bed, the rest of life sang.

The three spent a rapturous night together, trying out different positions, creating a loving bond beyond anything Elena could ever have imagined.

But morning came. December 24 and she had far too much to finish for Christmas. Tempting as it would have been to stay in the warm bed with her two studs, Elena booted everyone out so she could accomplish miracles. More miracles. Looking at the two men, she knew she'd already made a start.

* * * * *

"Can you get through the edits today, Rafe?" Francisco asked over a breakfast of coffee and rolls.

"It's Christmas Eve," Elena protested.

Francisco glared at her. "You're going to run around today, to pull everything together."

"That's for Christmas," she reminded him. "Which is tomorrow. I have a deadline."

"So do I," Rafe said. "It's the way I work." The warmth and special bond between them had all but vanished. Or maybe he'd just imagined it? Though he fully intended to take some time off while he was here in Spain, he'd better keep busy today. Much as he wanted for Elena to be part of that busyness, he was getting the distinct impression last night had been just as he suspected. Once in a lifetime. And the moment had come to its end. He needed to regroup, pronto, or he'd be in more trouble than since Terri split.

"Great. Edit the video and get it back to me." Francisco shrugged. "You can messenger it over so you don't have to go out of your way."

Elena looked at him. "Where is he going to find a messenger today?" She shook her head. "Besides, Rafe can bring the video when he comes with us for *Nochebuena*. That's our special Christmas Eve." She turned to Rafe. "Unless you think tonight is too soon a deadline."

From behind Elena, Francisco stood looking Rafe right in the eye and shaking his head *no*. "We have dragged this man into our life long enough," Francisco said. "You're ready to move on, go to the next project, right, McMaster?"

Wrong. What was going on? Had Francisco changed his mind about having Rafe in Elena's life? Or was this another of Francisco's mind games? Whatever. For the sake of his sanity, Rafe had to get out.

Except Elena looked at him with those eyes he could drown in.

Only he couldn't. She was Francisco's woman. "Of course I'm moving on. That's me. The original rolling stone." He flashed a Marlboro Man smile, finished making their business arrangements and left.

* * * * *

Much as she loved every aspect of getting ready for Christmas, even at the last minute like now, something was off for Elena. She dragged a complaining Francisco with her, his payment for making her have to wait until the last minute to complete her arrangements.

She loaded him with packages, which, thank goodness, she had wrapped in the shops. Though many families still practiced the tradition of giving gifts on January sixth, she and Francisco and their families had begun to exchange presents on Christmas Day. Actually, on both days.

Over a fast lunch, Elena finally spoke of the one topic they'd avoided. "Why did you send Rafe off like that?"

Francisco shrugged. "The night was over."

"But you didn't ask me or him. You just did what you wanted."

He leaned back in his chair. "Yes, so what?"

Elena's face grew warm as the blood rushed to turn her bright red. "Just like that. Why do I even question? Business as usual. Whatever Francisco wants, Francisco gets."

He shrugged. "*Querida*, last night I shared you with another man. I've never asked you to share me with another woman. Nor will I."

"No. At least I'm honest about wanting another man and having you there. You keep your other women secret, and I'm just supposed to keep my mouth shut."

His eyes grew dark. "You don't want to go there, Elena."

He was right about that. Francisco had pledged to be faithful to her as he understood the word. Until now, she'd tacitly accepted. But being with Rafe had changed her mind about that as about much else. What a huge impact this new man

had had on her in so short a time. She couldn't allow anything to distract her from the point she wanted to make. "I want Rafe to be with us again."

Francisco's brows drew together. "What?" Though his face glowed with the heat of anger and he looked as if he were yelling, he spoke softly – giving her goose bumps.

She lifted her chin. "I don't want Rafe to leave. I want him to spend more time with us."

One moment Francisco's eyes smoldered as he gazed into her depths, and then he turned away. "You don't mean just in the business sense, do you?"

"No. Francisco, something special happened for me when we were all together. I don't want to lose that when I've just discovered it."

"I can't have it. People will say I'm not man enough for my woman." He pursed his lips.

She refrained from rolling her eyes. "I thought we were liberated, past that traditional macho bullshit."

"Sometimes tradition has its place."

"Only if we can claim the parts that sustain us and enrich us. Not if we let them enslave us," she hissed. Then she took a good look at him. "Resorting to tradition is not characteristic for you. Tell me, Francisco. What are you really thinking?"

He shrugged. "Maybe it's not so good that you know me so well." He thought for a moment. "How can I say it? Something touched me too. Having the camera and the videos. Excited me. Aroused me. And knowing you were so pleased. How could that not excite me?"

"I'll call Rafe back."

"For how long an interlude?"

Elena was taking out her phone. "Can anyone answer that question?" She put her hand to her mouth. "But what if he won't want to be with us?"

"He'll want it. God help us. He won't say no."

* * * * *

As Rafe had expected, it didn't take him long to get the video ready. Elena and Francisco would have a dynamite ad. Hell, with the two of them dancing, they'd probably sell a ton of sherry. He managed to find a messenger still willing to take assignments this late on Christmas Eve, turned it over and then decided to lose himself in the Christmas Eve crowds.

Everyone moved with purpose. Some were loaded down with gifts or parcels of food. A very few were just loaded, no doubt getting an early start on their holiday merrymaking. He could use a bit of that. Looking at everyone moving purposefully along, he felt as if maybe he were the only single guy in the city. Nothing like the loneliness of being in a strange place on Christmas Eve with no place to go.

He'd stop at a café and order a sherry. Cripes, never before in his life would he have ordered a sherry. From this day forward, the drink would forever remind him of his strange interlude in Seville. When his drink came, he raised his *copita* to toast the unknown future and was about to take a sip when a voice said, "I hope that's our Sherry Amor."

Elena's voice. Startled, he spilled his drink on the table as he bolted to his feet.

She held out her hand. "Rafe. Francisco and I want to invite you to spend *Nochebuena* with us."

He put his hand over his heart. "Any *noche* with you will be *buena*, that's true. But I don't understand." He looked from one to the other.

Elena took his hand in hers. "Understanding is so overestimated. Just come with us."

"Agreed." Francisco muttered. Rafe's eyes locked with his and Rafe understood. Francisco hadn't been playing mind games. If Rafe went with them, he'd be committing to Francisco's plan to be there for Elena. Always.

He took a deep breath. "Agreed."

Ecstatic, Elena kissed both men. Her face aglow with happiness on this magical night, she gleamed for Rafe like the brightest star of love, the star of Christmas. How could he maintain a lie when she looked at him with such trust and love?

Of course Rafe agreed to come with them. Francisco's plan was working better than he could have anticipated. If he hadn't been planning for his own death, Francisco might almost be able to feel smug about his successful maneuvering.

Elena would think having Rafe around was her idea. If Francisco folded too quickly and easily, Elena would be suspicious. She hated not knowing, but in this case, the delay in full disclosure was justified. So he'd put up just enough resistance to convince her she'd persuaded him.

Whatever came next, Elena would always have the memory of this Christmas. With Lorenzo and Juan Pablo for business and Rafe for the personal—she'd be okay. Maybe someday she could even forgive him for this final deception.

When the three of them got back to his and Elena's condo, she excused herself to put together a meal. Though Francisco claimed he needed privacy for business, Rafe insisted that the time had come for them to talk.

"I can't do it," Rafe said.

"Do what?" After they'd come this far, Francisco couldn't bear to have Rafe demolish the plan now. "I thought you were becoming fond of Elena."

Rafe raised a brow. "That's not the problem. Hell, I can even deal with the ménage stuff. But, Francisco, you've got to tell her."

Francisco stiffened. "We worked all that out. I'm not going to do anything else to destroy her Christmas, the last one we'll have. You agreed."

"That was before I got to know Elena. Before I saw that look in her eye tonight. I thought you knew her too, but now I'm not so sure. Don't you see? If you don't tell her,

she'll hate you. She'll hate both of us. She'll even hate Christmas because she'll remember it as the season when you hid the truth."

Francisco wanted to put his hands over his ears and shut out Rafe's words. Hadn't he had all these arguments with himself? He'd come up with the best possible plan. But now —

"What truth?" Elena, wooden spoon in hand, looked from one man to the other.

Rafe nodded to Francisco. "That's your cue, my friend."

He'd lied to her before, not that he'd been happy about it, and he could do it again — now when it was so important. His mind scrambled to come up with something to tell Elena, and then he saw the look Rafe had spoken of. That openness and trust with a special Christmas glow.

He couldn't lie again.

Francisco took Elena's hand and sat down with her on the sofa, Rafe on the other side.

"It's the right thing to do." Rafe's encouraging words.

"When we went to New York," Francisco began.

Elena looked at him. "Yes. For business."

Francisco sighed. "Not only for business. You see, I had an appointment with a world-class doctor."

She squeezed his hand and watched him steadily as he poured out the details of his deadly prognosis. "So you see —"

Elena dropped his hand and jumped up. "No," she said. One simple word.

"No?" That was her sole reaction.

"No," she repeated. "Though I am furious that you have kept this secret from me, I'm not going to stage a tantrum. I have much better use for my energy. So do you. No, I do not accept this so-called prognosis. No, I am amazed that you are willing to take

anyone's word as the pronouncement of doom. No, this is not going to be my last Christmas with you."

Francisco, stunned at this unexpected outpouring, flinched back.

"Rafe," Elena said, "did you know Francisco's secret?"

Rafe sprang up. "He confided in me."

She nodded. "Then you've had more time to think about this than I. Great. Then you are even better prepared than I to fight this – this –"

Warmth pulsed from Francisco's heart throughout his body at Elena's defiant burst of energy. Looking at her, seeing the steely determination in her eyes and the defiant tilt of her chin, he could almost allow himself to believe she could win. Almost allow himself to forget the doctor's words.

"I have my two men now," Elena seethed, "and I'm not about to give either of you up." She glared from one to another. "Are you with me on this? Francisco? Rafe?"

Both men agreed in unison.

"Good. Then let's drink a toast now and for the next fifty years because together we will have a Christmas miracle to celebrate through the ages – the miracle that will keep us together now and always."

More than anything else in heaven and on earth, Francisco wanted and believed. His hand steady now as he prepared for the fight of his life, he raised his *copita* with the others in toast, "To the Christmas miracle."

About the Author

Exploring the erotic side of romance keeps Mardi Ballou chained to her computer – and inspires some amazing research. Mardi’s a Jersey girl, now living in Northern California with her hero husband – the love of her life – who’s also her tech maven and first reader. Her days and nights are filled with books to read and write, chocolate and the pursuit of romantic dreams. A Scorpio by birth and temperament, Mardi believes in living life with Passion, Intensity and Lots of Laughs (this last from her moon in Sagittarius). Published in different genres under different names, Mardi is thrilled to be part of the Ellora’s Cave Team Romantica™.

Mardi welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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