



Casa Rodrigo

Johnny Miles



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eISBN 978-1-60737-582-1

Editor: Judith David

Cover Artist: Anne Cain

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 425960

San Francisco CA 94142-5960

www.loose-id.com

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Chapter One

Andalusia, Spain

July 1647

Gasping, her body slick with sweat, the naked woman raced through the forest, then stopped dead in her tracks, unsure of which way to go. But any direction had to be better than where she'd come from. There was no way the cruel white devil with his foreign tongue would ever touch her again. She would rather die. And she would have already welcomed death in despair but for the newborn she clutched to her breast.

Her eyes enlarged, as if trying to capture whatever light they could. If only the cloudy sky would part and allow the moon to guide her.

And then the woman saw the faint glimmer of a light through the branches. Was it possible? Were the gods listening to her prayers? What if the light turned out to be her pursuer's torch?

Behind her, she heard rustling, a horse snorting. She could ill afford hesitation now. She raced toward the light. Anything had to be better than being recaptured like an animal.

The woman was barely aware she had emerged from the forest and was now in a wide field, an open target. Her mind played a funny trick, and there was an odd moment where she wondered if this was how a hunted animal felt.

No! I'm not an animal. I am a woman. Not a piece of meat. She sprinted onward. In the near distance was the silhouette of a house. The light she'd followed

came from one of the rooms inside. She could make out an open window. She could see a shadow. Someone moved inside.

She gave a little moan of gratitude and hoped they would give her refuge. Hoped she could get there in time. She tried to run faster but stumbled and nearly lost her balance.

A grunt escaped her as she stubbed her toe on a rock. Then she whimpered, realizing the sound had given her away. She ran even faster. The house loomed closer. Just a few more feet. She could just make out the courtyard, the large wooden door.

“Help me!” she cried out in her native tongue. But no one heard. Her voice cracked, and the words came out like a croak.

Behind her, that horrible sound thundered.

She tried to find more speed. Instead she felt an odd sensation as if something was coming close to her, faster than she could run. A prickling sensation spread up and down her sweating back, sending a chill down her spine that expanded to her limbs.

And somehow, she knew it was coming for her.

The baby in her arms began to complain about the jostling, the irritation of being disturbed from his sleep.

“No, no! Sssh,” the woman moaned softly.

As the bullet entered her flesh, the woman screamed, finally finding her voice. She only hoped it would mask the sound of her crying child.

The scream echoed in the night air. Several dogs responded, which in turn alarmed the roosters.

The woman fell, her arms wrapped around her baby. She screamed again as the bones in her arms snapped, and she rolled onto her back. She continued moving, though everything seemed so much slower now.

Using her feet and long, powerful legs, she managed to push herself along the ground until she was in the courtyard of the house.

She didn't know how long she lay there. She only knew there was the sound of a door opening, and she thought she heard a gasp, thought she saw light even as blackness threatened to overtake her.

"Please! My baby!" she moaned. Then, realizing they might not understand her, she tried to lift her arms, offer her son to the family living in the house. But her arms didn't respond. She winced in pain and wrapped her lips around her teeth to keep from screaming again.

As she began to fade, she thought back to her life in her homeland. Her village had been peaceful. Simple. She thought of her family, the other villagers. She wondered if she would see any of them again on the other side. Was there another side?

She was barely aware of someone pulling at her. Her eyes fluttered open briefly, and she thought she saw her baby fly through the air. *Fly*. She hoped he would be well.

That powerful beast of a man from her tribe had given her this wonderful baby. She couldn't regret *all* of it. But oh, if only she hadn't walked away from her people just to lie with him, the man who made her legs go limp and her *poonani* flow like a river. She had been unable to resist him. He had such a beautiful smile and knew how to please a woman. And he had been such a gentle lover.

And then the slavers had found them.

But she clung still to the sweet memory. It pleased her—made her feel good. The pain seemed to ebb as warmth spread through her body. It felt as if she were experiencing him all over again. He had done things to her no other man had done. He had made her see the gods when they came together. She knew it was wrong, knew she was now spoiled for any other man, but it had felt so good. So right. And the sensation had moved the earth beneath her writhing body. It was as if she

would surely die at that moment, with a portion of the powerful man's spirit, his very life, inside her. Surely that was worth some sacrifice?

Unable to sleep, Bernardo de Rodrigo sat at his desk with an open book. He was rereading *El Abencerraje*, author unknown, included in Jorge de Montemayor's pastoral novel, *Los siete libros de la Diana*. It was a tumultuous story recounting the tale of Abindarráez, the valiant, beautiful, and noble Moor captured by Rodrigo de Narváez, a Christian soldier. The honorable Rodrigo lets the Moor leave to marry Jariffa, the Muslim woman he loves, provided he return three days hence. It never failed to move Bernardo, and he wished there had been a great love in his life, not the woman chosen for him by his father.

That was when he heard the scream.

Bernardo was on his feet in an instant. He picked up the lantern, raced across the room, and threw open the door.

As he was halfway down the stairs, a voice called out to him.

"Bernardo? *Qué pasó?*" It was his wife, Adelina. He saw her long black braid tossed over one shoulder as she clutched at her nightgown, a look of worry on her face.

"I don't know what happened, Adelina. Go back to bed. I'll go check," Bernardo replied. But he knew his wife; she would no doubt follow him. There might be no love between them, but they were good friends. In some ways he thought that was sometimes better. Loving someone only led to heartache.

Another scream pierced his ears as he put the lantern down on the side table and readied one of the pistols hanging on the wall.

A warning voice inside him cautioned Bernardo to stop. To turn around, return to bed. Whatever was happening outside was none of his issue. Lately, odd things had been happening through the countryside.

But curiosity got the best of him. He unbolted the door and pulled. It creaked open and he stepped out.

Stunned, Bernardo gasped at the sight of the naked African woman dragging herself through their courtyard. There was something in her arms. He lifted the lantern and saw the bones through the skin, saw the blood smeared on the ground.

“*Dios mío!*” Adelina muttered behind him. “Is that a child?”

Bernardo was aware of Adelina crouching beside him to pick up the baby. He stepped forward, covering her. No doubt, if the woman was being chased, someone would want the baby as well.

Raising the lantern higher, Bernardo saw the shadow of a man in the distance. He approached, mounted on a horse and carrying a torch. Without seeing his face, Bernardo knew who it was instantly and bristled. Raúl Ignacio Velasco.

“*Adelina, adentro. Ahora!*” Bernardo cautioned his wife to go back inside. He only hoped the darkness cast enough shadow to cover them.

As Bernardo watched, Adelina rushed inside, clutching the baby tightly. She handed him over to the elder of their twins, Alonso, who had come running down the stairs with his brother, Fernando, shortly after the second scream.

Then she turned back around, closed the door behind her, and stood beside him just as the man on horse came into view.

“Velasco,” Bernardo said warily. “What are you doing?”

“Stay out of it, de Rodrigo,” the man warned, carefully dismounting.

Bernardo and Adelina could see their neighbor had been drinking, as he nearly set the horse on fire with his torch. The animal flinched and stepped sideways.

“Who is she?” Adelina demanded.

“She's mine. One of the slaves I brought back with me from *La Española*,” Raúl said absentmindedly.

The tall, wiry man with the scrappy beard approached the woman and crouched beside her. He placed a hand on her chest, then leaned farther to listen to

her heart. Bernardo was both appalled by her nudity and aroused at the same time. And yet this was not how he wanted to see a naked woman—dead or dying, let alone in front of his wife.

Raúl made a sound of disgust as he stood.

“Goddamnit! She's dead. Lucky shot,” Raúl bragged and sniffed airily. But Bernardo knew better. Raúl was the best marksman in all of Andalusia. As he had proved repeatedly, drunk or not, with almost every man—and sometimes every boy—who came to challenge him for his title.

“Where's the baby?” Raúl asked suddenly.

“What baby?” Bernardo replied, cautious.

“The baby in her arms! The newborn! Surely she had it with her. You couldn't miss it. Although”—he looked around—“in this dark night, it would be easy to miss.” He chuckled as if he had just told the most amusing joke.

“Perhaps she dropped it,” Adelina suggested.

“Adelina, please,” Bernardo muttered. “I'll handle this.”

“No matter,” Raúl continued, ignoring her. “If you see the filthy beast or hear it, make sure to let me know. You'll be well rewarded.”

“I think you should leave now,” Bernardo suggested, his voice tight. Raúl was not the type of man to be offended. He was armed, and no matter how much advantage Bernardo might have with his pistol already loaded, he knew he wouldn't stand a chance against Raúl.

“You're a brave man standing up to me, Bernardo. One of the many things I've always admired about you.” Raúl smiled crookedly and eyed him appreciatively. It made Bernardo nervous.

“*Que te vayas ya!*” Bernardo took a step forward and hollered at Raúl to leave immediately. Raúl flinched in surprise. Even Adelina jumped. Bernardo had never raised his voice that way before in front of them.

Raúl glared at Bernardo, then at Adelina. He chuckled and laughed lasciviously, looking from Bernardo to Adelina and back again.

“I’m asking you as a gentleman, Raúl. Leave my house now, and take the dead woman with you.”

“*Está bien*,” Raúl said with a grin and raised his arms in amusement. “She’s no good to me now, you know. She died on your property. But since I’m such a good neighbor and we’re such long, dear friends...” Raúl trailed off with an odd look on his face. Bernardo thought he resembled a wolf. He watched Raúl stoop down and grab the woman by an ankle. He dragged her just outside the courtyard and lowered his torch to her.

“Animal!” Adelina cried, moving out from behind him. Raúl stopped and looked over his shoulder at her.

“Fine. I’ll spare you your sensitive, aristocratic tastes,” Raúl said and spit at the naked body of the dead African woman. “You dispose of her. At least she’s not in your courtyard anymore. If you like I’ll even come back in the morning and say a prayer for her.”

Bernardo and Adelina watched as Raúl mounted his horse, then raced off into the night with laughter. As he rode, the light of the moon followed. It was almost as if Raúl’s horse were pulling some invisible line that made a rift between them.

“I hate that man,” Adelina said with a ferocity Bernardo had never heard before from her. “I wish he were dead!” They looked at each other. Quietly, he handed his wife the lantern and went off in search of a shovel.

Upstairs in their bedroom, Fernando stood at the window peering out while Alonso sat in bed and cradled the little black baby. He had never seen anything so tiny before, so dark, its hair sparse and standing up.

“He’s leaving!” Fernando whispered harshly. “Father must have scared him off.” He ran out of the room, more interested in the excitement and danger than in the oddity Alonso held in his arms.

As his brother raced down the stairs, Alonso looked down at the baby and said, “Don't worry, little one. You're safe here with us. As long as I'm here, nothing bad will happen to you. I promise.”

The black baby opened his eyes and blinked at Alonso as if he had understood. He then yawned, stretched, and turned his face into Alonso's chest as he went back to sleep.

Chapter Two

October 1652

Adelina pretended to listen to the latest gossip from one of the wives she disliked but had to put up with since she was married to one of Bernardo's business associates.

Adelina furrowed her brow and looked around as if searching for someone. "So very sorry, Marianna. Will you please excuse me? I just remembered something urgent that I need to talk to my husband about."

As she stood, the other women made room for her, while the one talking simply continued, nonplussed.

Adelina sighed. What was happening to her? Most of these women were her friends, people with whom she'd grown up. Why did she feel more distant from them with each passing year? Was it truly as simple as their views growing more and more apart?

Sometimes she really disliked the women in her social circle. They were starting to sound like vindictive cats, their tails swishing back and forth, lashing at whoever wasn't there. God only knew what they were going to say about her now that she had gotten up and left the group.

No matter. Adelina looked around the room. As always, the men had gone off and gathered in a separate room to discuss business and politics as if their wives were brainless lepers.

“Well...” Adelina muttered and smirked. She picked up her skirts and poked her head inside her husband's study. Pipe smoke filled the room with a bluish haze. The conversation, loud and boisterous, stopped when the men saw her.

“Such excited conversation,” Adelina said with a cough as she walked in. She waved her hand before her face. The herbalists believed the tobacco plant had curative powers, but did the men have to smoke so much of it?

“We were just talking about the moral implications of slavery,” one of the men said.

“Oh?” Adelina stopped and turned toward him with a great deal of interest.

“Yes. I don't like the idea personally, but it seems I'm in the minority. Most of our friends seem to think it's the premier commodity keeping our economy afloat,” he finished somewhat sheepishly.

“But surely there are other ways, don't you think? There must be, I don't know... Perhaps products, crops, services that...” Adelina started excitedly, eager to have someone else with whom to express herself. Not that Bernardo wouldn't listen. He always did. But he would grow weary sometimes and refuse to speak further once he grew tired of the subject.

“What the hell would you know?” A deep, gravelly voice seemed to boom across the room. “You're just a woman.”

“Excuse me?” Adelina cleared her throat, her eyes burning at Raúl. A nervous tic made her left eye twitch as Raúl leered at her. He stood just outside the group of men, almost like an outcast, swirling his cognac.

Adelina felt her neck go crimson from the brazen stare Raúl gave her, but was more angered that he had insulted her, to her face, in her own home. It was no wonder he was never invited to events and social gatherings. No one wanted anything to do with him. Except he was one of the richest men in Andalusia and not a man to be ignored.

“I might have known that would come from you, Raúl Ignacio,” Adelina said quietly and sniffed airily. “But then, I wouldn't expect anything less from you.”

“Gentlemen.” Adelina turned her attention to the rest of the men. “Please excuse me. I did not mean to...interfere with your...man talk. I was only looking for my husband, but I see he is not here.”

“He said he would be right back,” the first man said, an almost helpful tone in his voice. “He said he wanted to finish packing.”

“Packing?” Adelina flinched. A palpable discomfort suddenly filled the room, and every man but one shuffled his feet, cleared his throat, or pretended to cough as if trying to avoid what would come next.

Only Raúl stood still and glared at Adelina with a grin.

Stupid little boys. Adelina glanced about the room. *Just boys pretending to be men. They'll destroy us all someday with their ridiculous bravado.*

Adelina turned and swept out of the room.

Insufferable sons of bitches. Adelina fumed beneath the grandest and most gracious of smiles as she passed more of her guests in the hallway.

She hurried toward the stairs as fast as her feet could carry her under the weight of her heavy dress with its stays and two skirts, the layered petticoats, and the ruffled lace about her neck.

She was breathing heavily by the time she got to Bernardo's bedroom. She knocked insistently, but there was no answer.

“Bernardo!” Adelina opened the door and looked inside. The room was immaculate. At the foot of the bed was his trunk. A travel bag lay on top.

A sound of displeasure escaped her throat as she closed the door and walked down the hall. She threw open the door to her sons' room.

Bernardo froze before the smaller trunk, the boys' clothes in his hands. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then Adelina broke her paralysis and burst inside. She forced herself to shut the door quietly behind her. No point in making a scene or adding fuel to the fire of the women's gossip downstairs.

“What do you think you're doing?”

"Adelina, *por favor*," Bernardo said in a placating tone. "We've been through this before."

"Yes, but I didn't think you were going to go through with it!" She looked down at the clothes in his hands, and she snatched them from him. "And what are you doing with these?" Adelina hissed, feeling her blood boil.

"I'm taking the boys with me," Bernardo said quietly.

"Not while there's breath in my body!" Adelina turned and put the clothes back into the chest of drawers. "They're just children, Bernardo, not explorers in the New World. You can't take them with you! I can't believe you would do this behind my back without discussing it with me first!"

"Behind your back? Adelina, how can you say that? We talked about this! At least, I tried to. But every time I broached the subject, you never wanted to listen!"

She stopped and turned to him.

"You know how I feel about slavery, Bernardo!" Adelina said heatedly. "Why would you even think of going on this horrible venture. And with such a despicable man as Raúl?"

"Come now, Adelina," Bernardo said, trying to laugh it off. "He's not as bad as all that."

"Have you now become his defender? Have you forgotten the woman he killed and almost burned in front of our own home? The man is foul, has no taste, and he is vulgar. Not to mention a bastard."

"*Querida*," Bernardo reached for her, but she pulled away. She went back to the trunk and pulled more clothes out, then stuffed them back into the drawers as quickly as she could. There seemed to be some frantic animal inside her trying to crawl out, to break free.

"Adelina," Bernardo said again, this time more loudly. "It's because of your beliefs that I've tried to maintain our stance of not importing goods from the slave owners."

“What exactly are you saying?” Adelina asked with a huff.

“The goods provided by the slave owners cost far less than those that we do import. We're losing money, and we're overextended on credit. I see no other way around our circumstances.”

“So now it's my fault, is it?” Adelina said reproachfully, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Of course that's not what I'm saying,” Bernardo said with a sigh. “Adelina...” But she did not answer.

“Adelina!” Bernardo growled. She stopped on her way to the chest, her shoulders hunched as he approached. He put a hand on the small of her back and turned her around to face him.

“My love,” Bernardo said gently, a hand beneath her chin. He lifted her face to his. Silent tears flowed down her face. “Please. I need you to understand.”

But Adelina simply stared up at him.

“There must be another way, Bernardo. This...this can't...”

“This is the only way. Look around you, Adelina! Take a really good look. Before our very eyes, the walls of our home are crumbling down around us. The servants' rooms leak when it rains, and it won't be long before the damage is irreparable. I was born in this house, and I don't want to see it fall apart.”

“But, Bernardo...La Española? They say it's lawless. That you'd have to be crazy to go there now. It would be like taking your life into your own hands!”

“We've let go of more than half our staff. We're nearly broke, Adelina. There are no buts about this. I cannot pull away now.”

“Oh, Bernardo,” Adelina said with a resigned sigh. Her voice quavered ever so slightly.

“I respect your wishes,” Bernardo continued. “I really do. I understand how you feel. But we simply cannot compete. All the discussions I've had with other

merchants... It all leads back to this. And I promise you...I will not be cruel to those poor creatures. Not like..."

Adelina took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Outside, she could hear the children shrieking with laughter. She dropped the clothes in her arms and stepped over them as she made her way toward the open window. She looked down into the courtyard at the long table in the center covered with colorful cloths, at the once-large cake that was now all but devoured. The old servants struggled to rein in so many children and keep them from running wild.

It had been so long since they'd thrown a party. They rarely had people over anymore. In part to save money, in part to keep Arbol from view. If Raúl ever found out... Adelina shuddered and pushed the thought away.

"You can't take the children," Adelina said quietly. "You just can't."

"Adelina." Bernardo came up behind her, placed his hands on her shoulders. She shrugged them off, then turned and looked up at Bernardo. For the briefest of moments, she felt detached, almost as if she didn't know him. As if her husband, the father of her twins, were no one more than a stranger she had just met.

"I don't know why you must involve the children," she said and stepped away to pick up the clothes. She folded them carefully, then placed them gently into the chest.

"They're coming with me because I must interest them now. While they're still young. One day they will inherit Casa Rodrigo. They will inherit this house, the new land on La Española. I want them to know how to manage and run the plantation, the fields and crops, the slaves. Do you want them to go hungry?"

Bernardo reached for the clothes, and she let him take them without protest.

She lowered her head, conflicted. Her mind told her that what Bernardo said was true. This opportunity *was* the right thing to do. But her heart told her it was wrong. And to take the children—to teach them such a horrible thing as keeping another human being enchained...

"I feel like you're taking them away from me." She admitted defeat.

"But I'm not!" Bernardo laughed, rushing to her side after he had returned the clothes to the trunk. "*Cariño*, it's only for six months! Well, maybe a little more. It'll take three months to get there, three months to get back, and I'm not certain how long to get the plantation up and running. And of course we don't want to chance sailing during hurricane season."

"It might as well be forever." Adelina sat at the side of one of the beds. She watched her husband go back and forth between the clothes on the floor, the ones she'd put back in the dresser, and the trunk, tossing them all in unceremoniously.

"Promise me one thing."

"Anything," Bernardo said, closing the trunk, then locking it. He walked over and sat beside her.

"Promise me you'll be fair. That you'll make sure our children won't turn into that...that horrible man."

"I will do everything within my power," Bernardo agreed and closed his hand over hers.

"Remember when we were younger? Before the children came? Life seemed so much simpler then. When did it become so...adult?"

"Times are changing, Adelina. And we must change along with them, or we shall surely fail our children."

They sat in silence a moment.

"Well," Adelina said finally with a sigh of resignation. "At least Arbol will remain here with me. He's not my son, but I suppose that's some consolation."

Bernardo stiffened.

"What?" Adelina pulled her hand away.

"Arbol is...at the top of the list," Bernardo said quietly, avoiding her gaze.

"At the top of the list?" Adelina repeated, weighing the words as they rolled off her tongue. She looked at Bernardo suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

Bernardo stood. He looked as if he were searching for the proper words.

“By law, the boy is Raúl's rightful property. We can no longer afford to hide him. Especially after today. Someone might see him. Raúl might hear and grow suspicious of why we have a black child in our home. One who is the same age as the one who supposedly went missing.”

“What if you said you found him in the village?” Adelina hated herself for it the moment the words left her mouth, for thinking that way.

“Raúl will know we've lied. No matter how horrible he can be, he is still very well connected. Besides, in business, it's a good practice to remain close to those you consider your enemies. Keeps you...informed.”

Adelina pondered a moment. “What are you going to do with him? With Arbol, I mean.”

“I plan to hide him in the one place Raúl will never think to look. The one place where he can remain invisible yet never have to hide again.”

* * *

Alonso asked one of the servants for another piece of cake. A big one.

“Still hungry are you?” Antonietta asked with a warm smile. Alonso grinned. He took the plate handed to him, grabbed a fork from the table and walked away.

“*Oye! Adónde vas?*” Fernando called out after him and followed.

“Sssh!” Alonso said as they disappeared around the corner. “I thought Arbol might like a piece of our birthday cake.”

“But, Alonso, you know what Father said! We can't bring attention to him!”

“I know,” Alonso replied defensively. “But that doesn't mean we can't take a piece of cake to him! It's not fair that he has to stay locked up when people come over.”

“Or when the servants are here,” Fernando pointed out. “Don't forget that!” The boys seemed to remember that, once upon a time, the servants had always been there. Day or night. But over the past few years, as they started to become aware of

the world around them, the twins realized the servants all seemed to leave just after dinner.

“That’s because they want to have dinner with their own families,” their father had explained when the boys asked. His answer had made sense to them, and they never brought the subject up again.

Once out of the courtyard, the twins turned to make sure no one was following them or had noticed they were gone. They then raced behind the house and reentered through the servants’ door. Luckily no one was in the kitchen. The remaining servants were either in the courtyard or in the dining room passing out tapas.

“You stay here and keep watch while I go upstairs,” Alonso said. Fernando nodded.

Alonso quietly made his way up the stairs. He tiptoed past his father’s room, his mother’s, and their own, where he thought he heard his parents talking very excitedly.

Alonso continued up the rickety steps that led to the servants’ quarters. No one had slept up there for several years. Just in front of the stairs, Alonso knocked at the wooden door, then pushed it open.

Arbol stood in front of the window looking down into the courtyard. He was only five, but already tall for his age. Their father had joked once that he was as tall as a tree, an *arbol*, and the nickname had just stuck.

The black boy turned to Alonso and grinned suddenly. But Alonso could see that he had been crying.

“I brought you a piece of cake,” Alonso said, shutting the door behind him and stepping farther into the small room.

“Oh, thank you!” Arbol rushed toward Alonso. He took the plate and looked into Alonso’s eyes. Arbol grinned widely, flashing white teeth. It was the type of grin that made Alonso feel good. Like he had done the right thing.

Without a word, the boys sat side by side on the tiny cot Arbol had long ago outgrown, and shared the piece of cake.

“Happy birthday!” Arbol said when they were done, and threw his arms around Alonso's neck, then started to cry again.

“What's wrong?” Alonso asked, worried.

“I'm never going to have a birthday party, am I?” Arbol asked and buried his dark brown face in his pink hands.

“Of course you will!” Alonso exclaimed. “I promise.” Then thought, someday. With a sigh, Alonso put his arm around the boy who had somehow become his best friend.

Chapter Three

Atlantic Ocean, west of Puerto Rico

January 1666

Bernardo stood on deck of the large galleon and looked out over a playful ocean. The salt air rushed at his face and ruffled his thick hair, still mostly black. Feeling exhilarated, Bernardo took a very deep breath and exhaled, as if exorcising his demons. There was a certain freedom that flowed through his veins. It was almost as if in the Caribbean he could leave his life—and the world he came from—behind him. Here, he could be someone else.

From his very first trip fourteen years ago with his children and Arbol, Bernardo had felt a calling. Every subsequent trip thereafter made to ensure the plantation was running smoothly and at its most efficient, or so Bernardo told himself, only served to solidify the desire he had to one day retire to the island. Instinctively he knew there was something about the mixture of wind flow and ocean currents that was adventurous, intoxicating. Even the element of danger on the island thrilled and excited him in ways that his quiet and otherwise dull life in Spain did not.

Whether it was truly the island, the Caribbean, or perhaps the distance from Mother Spain, it didn't matter. Bernardo knew only he liked the feeling that came over him. Here, he could forget he was nearly fifty years old and just enjoy the feeling of being untethered, as if he had no responsibilities, cares, or worries in the world. There were no pressures. No duties. No obligations. They all simply melted away in the Caribbean. It was exhilarating and made him feel young again.

Of course, the fact that the water was an inviting greenish blue, the sea air warm and balmy, and the sun hot and prickly on his skin might also have had something to do with it.

Oddly, there was also a sense of belonging.

Curious how I never really felt out of sorts in my own home until I came here, Bernardo thought.

But his business trips would soon have to end. He would have to make a decision about the rest of his life, and it would not be easy.

Would he be able to leave Adelina? They had been married for so long. So much had transpired between them. They had a history together. Two young, handsome sons. But was a marriage still a marriage if one had stopped loving the other? Had they ever truly loved at all?

Adelina hadn't been the warmest woman in the world, even at the best of times. At least, not with him. Bernardo had his suspicions that she might have been with someone else since his first trip to the island, but he also was not without sin.

An annulment? A separation? Bernardo wondered. But those things had a way of interfering with business. If people didn't share his views, they would take their business elsewhere. After all, hadn't his support of Adelina's views interfered with business before? It was only when he had gone against his wife's wishes that they not get involved in slavery that their business had boomed and become profitable once more.

In fact, if it hadn't been for the considerable sum of money Raúl had floated in his honor, Bernardo and his family might not have survived. He shuddered to think where they might be now, and found it strange the very thing that saved his family from hunger, kept them clothed, and fixed the roof over their heads was the very thing that drove Bernardo and Adelina further apart.

Despite that rift, Bernardo was still grateful to Raúl. No matter how much of a monster he could sometimes be, he had his moments. Especially when they were together.

Bernardo pushed Raúl out of his mind, praying Adelina never found out about the loan, the arrangements, or the things he and Raúl did together—part of the conditions—that sometimes left him satisfied but ashamed.

No, certainly best that she never know.

He had tried, on several occasions, to persuade Adelina to join him in La Española. Just to see what she thought of the island. But Adelina was not willing to leave Spain. She was adamant that travel was for men only, and refused to sail on a ship where dirty, smelly, foul-mouthed sailors with no manners scurried about like monkeys in trees.

Still, he had to do something. Soon. He was growing weary. The voyages took a long time and wore him down.

What would it be like? Bernardo fantasized about year-round life on the island, as opposed to coming every few years. His sons were more than ready to handle the company on their own if Bernardo decided to step back and be a silent partner—with the occasional meddling, of course.

Fernando was a wizard with numbers and ledgers.

And Alonso was... Well, Alonso was special. He was, it seemed, the heart of Casa Rodrigo Importers. Anyone who met with Alonso liked and trusted him immediately. The boy looked people in the eye, never flinched, and most importantly, treated them like they were his only clients.

The boy. Bernardo was half amazed that time had gone by so quickly. *Hardly a boy. He's a full-grown man now.*

He was proud of Alonso. But it was a pity Fernando had chosen to stay in Spain instead of coming to the island. He would have preferred Alonso stay at home with his mother. But perhaps it was best that way. Surely Alonso would win the slaves over and work them more fairly and justly than Fernando would have. Bernardo just hoped it wouldn't cost Casa Rodrigo in the end. Sometimes Alonso gave away too much to keep their patrons happy.

Bernardo turned around suddenly, sensing someone near.

“Ah! Good morning, Alonso.”

“Good morning, Father,” Alonso said. He rubbed his eyes against the bright light.

“You're up late this morning. But then, you came to bed late last night. Where did you go?”

“I couldn't sleep, so I went for a walk on deck. Looked at the stars for a while,” Alonso said dismissively, then changed the subject. “Did I miss that slop they call breakfast?” Alonso stretched and yawned. His incredibly thick black wavy hair curled from the salty breeze of the ocean, and there was dark stubble on his face.

“You did,” Bernardo replied, looking into his son's piercing blue eyes. The twins had both inherited their mother's eyes, and they were identical in appearance, but any similarities between them ended with their looks.

“And I'm just heartbroken about it,” Alonso quipped. His stomach growled. “But I *am* hungry.” Alonso tucked the billowy, wrinkled white shirt into his coarse brown pants. He had abandoned conventional Spanish dress at the start of their trip and had made every attempt to fit in among the sailors. They had taken to him as if he were one of their own.

“If you can hold out a few more hours, we'll probably make landfall sometime this afternoon.” Bernardo pointed toward the horizon.

“I can't believe we're almost there!” Alonso exclaimed, perhaps more excitedly than he would have cared to admit. A smile spread across his face. “The last time we came here was...what? Ten? Eleven years ago?”

“Fourteen.”

“Fourteen? Are you sure?”

“You and your brother were just barely eleven. We left a few days after your birthday party.”

“That was...another person ago. I barely remember. And what I do remember seems like it was so long ago, I wonder if it ever happened at all.”

"You might feel that way now," Bernardo joked. "Just wait until you're almost fifty like your old man."

"I don't understand."

"The things I did last year, last month, last week, even—they're all but forgotten. I have to fight to remember them. But the things I did as a child, in my youth—even in my twenties—they're more alive in my mind than any other memories."

"Then I guess I'm just going to have to find a way not to get old," Alonso teased.

"Who do you think you are?" Bernardo laughed. "Ponce de León in search of the fountain of youth?"

"Pardon me." A small voice interrupted them. Father and son turned and looked down at a boy of mixed race, the ship's musician. His feet were filthy, his clothes were disheveled, and his hair was matted as if he had not washed in weeks. He held a wooden flute.

"Good morning, musician." Bernardo greeted the boy, who could not have been much older than ten. "Are you here to play us a song?" he asked pleasantly.

"Oh no, sir! I'm here because Tocino sent me." The boy half turned and pointed with his flute. Bernardo and Alonso followed the boy's arm to the open door a few feet away.

Normally surly, the bald and burly man with big arms, tattoos, and hoops in his ears and nose grinned like a little girl and waved at Alonso.

Bernardo raised a curious eyebrow, looking from the ship's cook to Alonso, who blinked in surprise. His son chuckled nervously.

"Tocino said to tell you he was making a special breakfast. But just for you, Señor Alonso," the boy added hastily, leaning in so no one else would hear. "He's using the last of his eggs. Seeing as how this is the last day of your voyage and all."

The boy suddenly turned and left, playing his flute as he went. On the other side of the ship, crew members picked up the pace as they swabbed at the deck with their mops. Overhead, seagulls screeched.

“What was that all about?” Bernardo asked suspiciously.

“Oh, I'm sure it was nothing,” Alonso said dismissively. “You know how some of these sailors are.”

“Well, in that case,” Bernardo said quietly, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “best not leave Tocino waiting. Seeing as how it's a special breakfast. Just for you and all.”

Alonso shrugged with a grin and, stomach growling, jogged the length of the ship toward the still-smiling Tocino.

Bernardo watched as Alonso clapped Tocino on the shoulder. The big man grinned more widely, if that were possible. Bernardo wondered if there was more there than just friendship. But then he remembered how easily Alonso pulled people into conversation. The boy seemed to be able to make friends no matter where he went.

With a sigh, Bernardo turned back toward the horizon. He took a deep breath and exhaled, anxious to be on land again walking about their property.

Tomorrow he would worry about making his decision. For now he would simply enjoy the view, the wind, and the thought that later, he and Raúl would meet at *el Puerco Sucio*, the Dirty Pig, and share a bottle of rum. It was the only way Bernardo could endure the incomprehensibly pleasurable yet remarkably embarrassing things they did together. But the agreement had been necessary, hadn't it? Part of a debt to be repaid. Yes, without Bernardo's agreement, his family would not have been where they were today. Casa Rodrigo would not have been one of the top importers in all of Spain.

But after tonight, Bernardo thought, his cock twitching despite his shame, the de Rodrigo family would finally be free of all debt to Raúl Ignacio Velasco.

* * *

Casa Rodrigo stood at the top of a hill, facing south toward the harbor. The two-story home was still made from the original mustard-colored stucco but barrel tile had replaced the previous thatched roof, and the windows were now protected by wooden shutters.

Arbol stood in line with the other slaves just outside the arched veranda that ran the width of the house. His back was straight, shoulders back, head lifted. He wanted to stand out from the others, to be chosen as a house servant and spared the arduous fieldwork he had performed since he had been brought to the island. He only hoped don Bernardo remembered him. It had been so long ago.

Señor Perez, who doubled as overseer for the de Rodrigo and Raúl Velasco plantations, paced back and forth, anxiously awaiting their arrival. From where he and the slaves stood, they could all just make out the mast in the distance.

It wasn't long before they heard the horses.

Arbol held his breath as first the two horses pulling the uncovered wagon came into view, then Augusto, who was in charge of the stable. Sitting beside him was Don Bernardo, and behind them, holding on to the wagon, was one of the sons.

But which one? Arbol wondered and hoped that whichever son it was, he had not changed. Life had a way of doing that to people. Oftentimes for the worst.

The wagon came to a stop, and several slave boys scrambled en masse to take care of the trunks and traveling bags. Don Bernardo jumped down and shook hands with señor Perez. The overseer began talking animatedly.

Arbol looked away and stared instead at the tall young man in the wagon. He watched the Spaniard stand, stretch, and walk toward the edge, then jump down smoothly and solidly.

He was not at all what Arbol had expected or what he remembered. This was a young, handsome man with thick impossibly black curly hair. He had a long, graceful neck and broad shoulders that tapered down to a thin waist. He was slim in the hips with a round, sculpted rear and long, shapely muscled legs.

Arbol's breath caught in his throat as the young man bent over to adjust his boots. Arbol sighed and licked his pink lips. And then the Spaniard stood and their eyes met.

Even from that distance, Arbol was hypnotized by the penetrating gaze and the slow, easy, sensual smile that spread across the young man's face.

Does he recognize me? Arbol dared to hope so.

But it was his heart that responded.

This man was the boy who had brought his very own toys to Arbol when they were children, who had played with him. And he knew just by the feelings coursing through his body that this young man, this handsome creature who now approached striding slowly and confidently, was the very same boy who had shared his birthday cake.

Arbol's heart lurched as if with a mind of its own, then stopped as the world around him slowed down dramatically. The only thing that existed at that very moment was the beautiful man with the warm smile standing before him. Arbol's knees went weak, and he grew dizzy. He was sure he would faint.

And then the young man spoke. His voice was deep and resonant. Rich and textured.

"Why do you look familiar?" the young man asked, head cocked to one side. And then his eyes lit with recognition.

"Are you Arbol?"

"*S-sí, señor,*" Arbol replied awkwardly, lowering his head. And yet he could feel the young man's gaze.

Alonso leaned in and whispered, "Good to see you." Then he gave Arbol an unexpected, powerful hug. Their eyes met as Alonso pulled away, and Arbol suddenly felt lost in the most wonderful of ways.

Uncertain of what to say, Arbol nodded and grinned sheepishly as Alonso clapped him on his arm and squeezed.

Even as the young man moved away and introduced himself to the next slave, Arbol could still feel the warmth of Alonso's hand on his arm and the hot breath in his ear.

He had to think of the most horrible, ugly thing he could imagine to keep from growing hard, lest anyone notice just how excited Arbol had become.

Chapter Four

Alonso stood in his darkened bedroom completely naked. It wasn't something he normally did at home. But here, in the Caribbean, things were different. All he had to do was breathe the air into his lungs, and he was aroused. There was a certain energy, like a charge. Something he could feel more than touch. It was almost as if lightning had struck in that part of his mind where sexual desire resided.

It had been one thing, on the ship, to allow Tocino leeway, let himself be lured down a path he had never followed. In fact, late the night before, they had been most indiscreet while on deck. They had been in shadows but could still have been seen if someone truly had bothered to look. It was part of what added to the excitement of their hurried encounter.

And what sensations he had felt!

First Tocino's hands had been all over his flesh, burning him. Then the man had hurriedly freed Alonso's cock from his pants and undergarments and hungrily wrapped his lips around the head. Even after repeated attempts on their three-month voyage, Tocino was still unable to take Alonso all the way down his throat. It thrilled Alonso tremendously.

The excitement of being serviced the way he had been, only semihidden from the others on duty had been thrilling enough. But now that he was finally on the island, especially after having seen Arbol again, after touching his hand, feeling him near, Alonso felt as if a large fire were burning brightly and roaring somewhere inside him.

But where was Arbol? Where did he live?

Looking through the window in his room—beyond the barn and beyond the forest of trees to the clearing where the slave quarters had been built and were now lit by the waxing moon—Alonso thought to search for him. He wanted to take Arbol's hand and share with him the wonderful pleasures of the flesh, show the tall, handsome slave all the things he had experienced.

If only he were here now. Alonso groped himself.

Unfortunately there had been no assignments left for Arbol. And despite the smile on his dark brown, almost black face, Alonso knew Arbol had been gravely disappointed.

Alonso had tried to persuade his father, to no avail. The man refused to budge from his decision that Arbol was best left in the fields for his own protection.

In private, Alonso had argued that after all this time, Raúl would have forgotten about the lost baby, assumed him dead. But his father still refused him, finally confessing that due to Arbol's strength and size, he could do the work of three men. That type of field-worker would be a tremendous loss. Then his father did something he had never done before. He abruptly ended the conversation.

Still irritated by that, Alonso leaned into the night air and looked up at the moonlit sky. He spread his arms wide on the sill made from thick wooden timber. Feelings he had forgotten, memories that were all but a whisper, came flooding back.

Perhaps I should not have hugged him, Alonso thought, then pushed the thought aside. He was the master's son. He would do what he wished.

But what of that strange feeling when I touched and squeezed his arm? Alonso could feel a tingling coursing through him, numb yet still there. Like the memory of a burn. It was as if Arbol had made an impression that lingered, one that was still very much alive despite how many hours had passed.

Alonso had never felt that before. It was an odd sort of tension, something he could almost put his finger on and touch. It felt similar to what he had felt that first

night with Tocino. Only much stronger. All he could see in his mind—all he could smell—was Arbol.

Alonso was sure Arbol would welcome his advances. He briefly wondered if Arbol had been with another man before. If he had, all the better. And if he hadn't, how exciting it would be to show him how it felt to have another man do such pleasurable things to him.

As he thought of it, Alonso stroked his groin with his palm. He curled his fingertips around his pubic hair and tugged while his cock—thick, long, and tumescent—bobbed in the night air, seeking much-needed attention.

He closed his eyes and imagined Arbol, lips wrapped around the head of his cock, a hand around the base of his shaft, cupping his balls.

A lone drop of clear liquid flowed and dangled several inches below the head of his cock. It sparkled in the moonlight.

Alonso reached for it, brought it up to his mouth, and sucked on it. The salty taste only aroused him more. With a sigh, he knew he had to find a way to bring Arbol out of the sugarcane fields and into the house, into his bed. But first he had to find him.

Turning from the window, Alonso hurriedly reached for the clothes he had worn earlier that day. He dressed, walked across the room, and opened the door.

Then stood there at the threshold.

What if I'm getting the wrong impression? What if I'm just imagining Arbol wants the same thing as Tocino? I'm sure he already has a girl—or a boy. Someone to take care of his needs. Why would he want to be with me?

And then another thought popped into his head.

What if he expected to be friends?

He might not be able to be as free with Arbol as he would have been in Spain, as they once had been. Things were different here. They were a bit more...complicated.

Confused, Alonso sighed and closed the door. He undressed slowly, then went back to the window. He stared up at the moon.

Unable to stop thinking about Arbol or to stop imagining him on his knees, servicing his cock and swallowing his seed, Alonso grabbed hold of his erection and stroked it. Fully aroused, he closed his eyes and threw his head back as he thought of Arbol and his big, pink, thick lips. He saw them wrapped around the head of his... In fact, he could almost feel them...slowly, lovingly caressing the entire length of his shaft.

Alonso imagined himself coming onto Arbol's face, then smearing his lips with fresh, hot semen. The promise of erupting like a volcano while another man swallowed his ejaculate was a sensation that shook Alonso to the very core.

Alonso moaned, trying not to make noise as his body shook and convulsed from the force of coming. He envisioned Arbol's dark brown muscled body, slick with sweat, entwined with his own as they rolled around his bed.

When he regained his composure, Alonso opened his eyes and looked down at the puddles where his seed had splattered. He was surprised to see so much.

Alonso squatted and dipped his fingertips into one of the puddles. He sniffed his fingers, then brought them to his mouth and sucked on them. Pretending it was Arbol's cum he was tasting, Alonso soon grew hard again.

If Father won't assign Arbol a job here at the house, I'm just going to have to figure out a way to spend time with him. He lay on his bed and masturbated a second time.

Before long, as the second load of cum dried in the dark hair on his belly, Alonso slowly drifted off to sleep.

Bernardo lay on his back in the middle of Raúl's bed. He was still feeling the effects from the nearly two bottles of rum they—but mostly Raúl—had consumed. He looked up at the ceiling and watched the shadows move with the moonlight.

He tried to close his eyes, tried desperately to sleep even for a little while. But his mind wouldn't let him. Even with the rum, every time Bernardo closed his eyes, all he could see was the image of himself rutting like an animal behind Raúl, fucking him. One hand clasping his shoulder, the other entwined in his hair as Raúl shouted, "*Harder! Harder!*"

In fact, everything Bernardo had been commanded to do, he had done. From the deep, hurried kissing to the desperate licking and biting of Raúl's neck, sucking on the flesh until Bernardo left marks.

But had he really been commanded? Or had he done it out of habit, knowing it was what Raúl liked, what he wanted?

Or what *you* now want? a voice inside his mind teased. Bernardo squashed the voice.

Even when Raúl, who still looked like the long-haired, blue-eyed demon he had been in his thirties, wasn't begging Bernardo to fuck him harder, deeper, to treat him like a whore, Bernardo still craved to dominate the one man who could drive him to that sexual frenzy where nothing mattered but the animalistic grunts and groans—the slapping of skin on skin, the smell of their sweat.

And the two of them coming together, spent.

Ashamed of the way his body and cock always betrayed him, sick of the desire welling inside his veins, Bernardo shifted and tried to get out of bed. Slowly, carefully, he pried apart Raúl's long fingers, which had wrapped around the length of his now-hardening cock. Bernardo gently moved Raúl's dark blond head from his chest so he could slip from beneath the man's weight.

He sat up at the side of Raúl's bed. The room seemed to sway and Bernardo felt as if he were still on the ship. He tried to stand, but as he did so, Raúl grabbed his wrist and held him.

"Where do you think you're going?" Raúl asked playfully, his voice husky with sleep and desire.

"I...I really should be going home. It's very late, and I'm tired after such a long trip," Bernardo said sheepishly.

"And?"

"And"—Bernardo thought a moment, surprised he could still do so—"I really think this needs to stop. We've done what you wanted. The loan is paid in full. I don't think we need to do...*this*...anymore."

Raúl was silent. Bernardo held his breath. He knew the alcohol had loosened his tongue.

"Do you really think this is about the money I loaned you?" Raúl said quietly.

Bernardo thought back to all the times they had met—all the times they had ever argued. There had always been a tension between them. Sparks had always flown in some form or other. He had never been able to understand why he could detest such a man yet be so attracted to him at the same time.

"If it's not about the money, then why have we been...?" Bernardo could not bring himself to say it.

"Fucking?" Raúl finished for him. There was a certain perverse pleasure in his word. Silence crept between them before Raúl spoke again, his voice barely a whisper. "Let's just say...I enjoy your company."

"I...I need to go home," Bernardo said, rubbing his temples. "I need to get some sleep."

"You're more than welcome to sleep here," Raúl teased, releasing Bernardo and stroking the hair on his forearm.

Goddamn this man! Bernardo closed his eyes and yelled loudly in his mind. He wanted to stand, get dressed, and leave. He wanted to walk out of Raúl's house and never come back. Financially, Casa Rodrigo was free. Tonight's encounter had been the last installment of a loan payment, their agreed-upon conditions. Nothing more. Wasn't it?

Bernardo did not see the point in furthering their sexual encounters. Yes, there was a part of him that enjoyed debasing himself by treating Raúl like the prick he was. But Bernardo always wound up feeling disgusted for giving in so easily.

And yet he enjoyed it so.

Bernardo told himself to stand but was too dizzy to move.

That, and his cock, foreskin now pulled back with excitement, had a mind of its own.

"Come back to bed," Raúl whispered. "Lie down beside me. I'll help you fall asleep." Raúl sounded as if he was almost pleading.

Bernardo wished he could say no, he even tried to, and wondered why Raúl's will always seemed to overpower his own.

Was that why Adelina detested Raúl so much? It couldn't just be the slavery issue, could it? Or did she perhaps see the sexual attraction in his eyes for the man she could not stomach?

"Bernardo. How long have we known each other?" Raúl lay on his side, propped up on his elbow.

"At least thirty years."

"In that time...have you...ever seen me with a woman?" Bernardo thought Raúl sounded almost hesitant. "Let me rephrase that," Raúl added. "Have you ever seen me with a white woman?"

Bernardo shook his head.

"Did you ever stop to wonder why?" Raúl reached out for his hand, but Bernardo pulled it out of reach.

"The women I like are submissive," Raúl explained, reaching farther to place a hand over Bernardo's. "I like my men with...some *fire* to them. A little spunk and bravado. Even if it's forced. And I especially like you."

Bernardo looked at Raúl. His body was illuminated by the moonlight streaming through the window. His toned legs, fat cock, large balls, flat belly, and sinewy arms all seemed to shimmer in the white light. But his face was in shadows.

“What are you trying to say?”

“I...” Raúl started, then trailed off as if he had changed his mind. The silence between them was growing intolerable. “Nothing, Bernardo. Just...give in. You know you want to.”

Raúl's aching voice worked on Bernardo like a soft, wanton caress. It all but consumed him. Bernardo's breath caught in his throat. He allowed himself to be pulled gently back to bed as if he were in a trance. Raúl was instantly on him. Bernardo gave a little gasp and spread his legs, giving Raúl full access to his cock, his balls, his hole. He sighed as Raúl luridly ran his hands over the tops of his thighs, caressing him, even as Raúl's lips encircled the head of his cock.

Greedily, hungrily, Raúl swallowed Bernardo to the base of his shaft and forced his hands beneath Bernardo's buttocks, cupped them.

Bernardo groaned. Raúl pushed Bernardo's hips up as if encouraging him to fuck his face. He grabbed hold of the back of Raúl's skull and gave him what he wanted.

No, Bernardo. Not what he wants. What you want! the voice in Bernardo's mind teased once more.

No! I don't! This is the rum talking. It was part of the deal—part of our contract—I had to do it, Bernardo shouted in his mind.

Did you?

Bernardo knew better but hated to admit, even to himself, how much he had grown to look forward to their escapades. The rum took over and pushed reason aside.

“Yes!” Bernardo whispered, giving in to the pleasure of being with Raúl. “Oh yes!”

“Yes, what?” Raúl asked absentmindedly as he lifted Bernardo's legs into the air.

“Nothing!” Bernardo moaned as Raúl's tongue found that most sacred part of him and licked. Bernardo bit his lips to keep from crying out.

Raúl chuckled lewdly and released the cock that had been buried down his throat.

“I know at times you protest. You act like you don't like what we're doing. But there you are, holding your own legs up for me.” Raúl moved one hand to Bernardo's tailbone. With his other hand he held Bernardo's cock up in the air. He licked at the head and teased it, tasting the clear, thick liquid on his tongue. Raúl slobbered over the head of Bernardo's cock.

“What is it...you do to me?” Bernardo gasped, feeling the other man's drool dribble down his shaft to his balls and his hole.

“Does it matter?” Raúl replied and rammed his middle finger up Bernardo's ass. “The point is that I do it to you—whatever it is—and that you like it.”

Bernardo's lean, still-well-muscled body went taut as he writhed and tried to wriggle away from the pressure he was suddenly feeling in that spot, that wonderfully magical spot just behind the base of his cock.

“Say it!” Raúl commanded quietly but firmly.

But Bernardo couldn't—no, wouldn't.

“Come on. You know you like it. Say it. I want to hear you. Admit to me, Bernardo. Admit you enjoy having sex with me. That you enjoy all the wonderfully disgusting things we do together.” Raúl fingered Bernardo crudely, roughly.

Bernardo mewled like a kitten as Raúl put even more pressure on that spot and shoved yet another finger inside him to join the first one.

“Just let yourself go, Bernardo,” Raúl said, his voice working on Bernardo's mind like a drug, like another shot of rum. Bernardo felt hypnotized, following the sound of Raúl's voice just as he followed him down the path to temptation.

Bernardo's hunger had taken possession of his body and was now in control. The only thing that mattered was that their bodies join and become one.

"Oh God!" Bernardo cried, lost in his pleasure. "Take me, Raúl!" There was a moment where he was stunned to hear his own voice echoing in his ears. A moment where he was surprised that he had grabbed hold of Raúl's fist and clamped on tight so he could move his hips up and down. Just so long as that magical spot was once again being tapped and pushed.

Bernardo pushed all fear, shame, and doubt aside and allowed himself to do exactly what Raúl wanted. To give in. To admit he loved the sex between them. The incredible exchange of energy that flowed like molten lava through his veins, his flesh, his brain even.

His heart raced as Raúl rolled him over. The blood pumped loudly in his ears, and Bernardo was glad the teasing little voice was blotted from his mind, even if only for a short time.

He felt more than heard Raúl's spit land on his hole. He felt Raúl pry his ass apart, felt the man's face as he buried it deep in his buttocks. Felt that magnificent tongue drilling wildly into him, as if possessed with a mind of its own.

The head of Raúl's cock, much smaller than his own but thick, pressing against him. Bernardo buried his face in the pillow and screamed as Raúl unceremoniously pushed as far as he could, without regard for the pain he was causing, and buried himself balls-deep.

"You thought...we were finished. Didn't you?" Raúl said between gasps and grunts. "You thought...once you paid me...that you could go...never have sex with me...again."

"No," Bernardo heard himself say. He responded by lifting his ass to greet every one of his forward thrusts. Despite what he wanted, Bernardo was amazed once again that his body had a will entirely separate from his own.

Moments later, Raúl howled. Almost instantly, Bernardo moaned, his body shivering and convulsing as he came, untouched, writhing beneath Raúl.

As his breathing normalized, Bernardo heard the voice taunting with its little laugh. Raúl pulled out and Bernardo gasped, stunned as always at the dull, throbbing ache that followed.

"You came without touching yourself," Raúl observed, feeling the head of Bernardo's cock, his shaft, his balls. "Like a whore." Raúl felt the damp spot on the bed between Bernardo's legs.

In the moonlight, Bernardo watched as Raúl brought his hand up to his mouth. He watched as Raúl, his neighbor in Spain, his wife's mortal enemy, and Bernardo's very own weakness and cross to bear, licked and sucked on each of his fingers, then his palm.

Bernardo watched as Raúl then lowered his hand to Bernardo's face and made him lick as well.

"You know I own you, don't you?" Raúl said as he curled up against Bernardo.

"What?"

"I own you. Like I own my plantation. Like you own yours. Like we own our slaves."

"What are you talking about?"

"We belong to each other, Bernardo. Just think about it! Buying out all those other dumb sons of whores in our joint venture. With our products and your business, we could become one! All the profit would be ours," Raúl hissed.

Bernardo could clearly see the other man's eyes. They looked as if they were glowing.

"You're crazy, Raúl."

"Am I? Then why do you not leave? I don't see you getting out of bed and putting on your clothes."

Bernardo said nothing, and Raúl chuckled malevolently.

"Now that you've realized how much happier you are with me, how much more satisfied—now that you've admitted how much you enjoy sex with me—you'll never

be able to go back to your pathetic little life or craving that whoring, self-righteous woman you call a wife.”

Bernardo sat up and slapped Raúl's face.

“Don't you dare!” Bernardo whispered hoarsely as Raúl rubbed his cheek.

Bernardo hurriedly climbed out of bed and searched for his clothes while Raúl laughed harder. He dressed while watching out of the corner of his eyes as Raúl stopped long enough to reach for the second nearly empty bottle of rum. He lifted it to his mouth, tilted his head back, and drained it.

In a fit of anger, Bernardo strode to the opposite side of the bed and yanked the bottle away from Raúl's lips. He tossed it into the air deftly. The bottle spun, and Bernardo grabbed at the neck, clutching it tightly.

He wanted so desperately to pull back and smash it down on Raúl's grinning face. He lifted his arm.

“Do it,” Raúl taunted, his eyes glazed

For the briefest of moments, Bernardo thought he saw relief in Raúl's eyes.

“Do it!” Raúl hollered. Bernardo lowered his arm, appalled by what he had wanted to do. He flung the bottle across the room where it smashed against the dresser at the opposite end.

“You piece of shit!” Raúl laughed once more. “You think you have the balls to kill me?”

But Bernardo didn't let him speak. He was tired of hearing the man's voice. Tired of being pushed around, walked on, and forced through hoops like some little dog performing parlor tricks. No more. Those days were over.

Without realizing what he was doing, Bernardo made a fist, pulled back, and punched Raúl in the face. Something crunched, and despite the sudden pain in his fingers, an almost sexual satisfaction filled him as he stormed out of Raúl's room, out of his house, and out into the night.

Chapter Five

Alonso knocked on the door of his father's bedroom. There was no answer. He opened the door, expecting the room to be empty and the bed made.

But his father lay draped across the bed, still dressed, one leg on the floor.

Perturbed by the unusual behavior, Alonso entered the room and closed the door behind him. He walked to the far side of the bed and looked down at his father. The smell of rum on his father's breath wafted up at him.

Alonso wrinkled his nose.

He crossed to the other side of the bed and took off his father's boots. He then lifted the man's legs onto the bed and repositioned him so he at least looked a bit more comfortable and not like a rag doll that had been shot.

"Well," Alonso said with a sigh, hands on his hips. "I guess we're not going to visit the fields together like you said we would." He turned and headed for the door.

"Don't you dare!" his father shouted suddenly.

Startled, Alonso stopped. He looked over his shoulder at his father, who had turned and rolled to his side and begun to snore.

Alonso's brow was furrowed when he stepped into the kitchen. Cook and his wife, Cosita, stood instantly. Dante, a small, spidery man who seemed to be all legs and arms, rushed out of the pantry and clutched at Alonso's sleeve.

"*Buenos días, señor!* Come. Sit in the dining room. I'll bring you your breakfast." Dante tried to steer Alonso away from the kitchen table but he pulled his arm from Dante's grasp.

"No, thank you," Alonso said and sat. The three slaves exchanged glances as if uncertain how to react.

"Is...everything...all right?" Cosita asked, stepping cautiously toward her young master.

"Yes, it's just..." Alonso trailed off, then looked up at them. "My father went out last night. Did any of you hear him?"

They all shook their heads.

"He smelled of rum. Is there a bar on the island he might have gone to?"

Dante shuddered and made a face as if repulsed.

"What?" Alonso asked, turning from one to the other. "What is it?"

"Perhaps don de Rodrigo went to el Puerco Sucio?" Cook suggested.

"A most *disgusting* place!" Dante chimed in. "I don't think he went there. I cannot picture don de Rodrigo there. Surely he went somewhere else."

"Where could my father have gone, then? We don't make rum here, do we?"

"No, señor," Cosita replied. "Only Velasco makes rum on the island."

I might have known. Alonso gave a little smirk, then turned his attention to Cook.

"Very well. Cook! Whatever you're making smells delicious. I would like some, please."

"Uh, señor? Wouldn't you rather have your breakfast in the dining room," Dante coaxed, "where I can bring it to you?"

But Cook had already piled a plate high with layers of fried ham, coddled eggs, and several large biscuits. Cosita took the plate, laid it before Alonso with cutlery, then pattered about to get him a large mug of fresh, hot coffee, and butter for his biscuits.

Stomach growling, Alonso dived in with gusto while the others looked on in obvious confusion.

“Oh, Dante! Will you please go to the stable and have Augusto ready my horse? I'm going to pay a visit to the fields. I want to see for myself how things are done at Casa Rodrigo.”

* * *

Only a few hours past sunrise and already the sun was blazing. Sweat dripped from every part of his body, and his pants clung to him. Arbol stood, stretched his back, and wiped at his brow with the backs of his hands but more sweat soon beaded on his forehead. It fell into his eyes and made them sting. It only served to remind him of the tears he spilled the night before. He had been so sure that this morning he would be working as a house slave instead of toiling in the fields with the other slaves. And yet here he was, his heart full of disappointment.

A long shadow fell on him as he bent over and tied the bundles of chopped sugarcane together. Arbol looked up and saw señor Perez on his horse. There was a nasty grin on the overseer's face.

“Didn't pick you, did they?” Perez sneered. “Thought you could escape working in the fields?”

Arbol felt the heat of embarrassment prick up his neck and into his face. But he did not reply. He turned his attention back to the bundles of cane.

“I told you there was no room in that pretty house for you,” Perez continued. “You don't belong there. A dirty, ugly African like you belongs in the fields. Don't know what you thought you were aspiring to.”

Arbol stopped what he was doing and stood with his back erect. He looked up at Perez. There were so many things he wanted to say, so many things he imagined doing, one of which was wrapping his very own whip around the man's neck.

“*Qué pasa, Arbolito?*” Perez teased. “Or perhaps we should start calling you *Arbolita?*” Arbol's rage rose as the overseer wrung more pleasure from emasculating him in front of the others.

“Someday,” Arbol muttered despite himself. Around him, the other slaves grumbled as if in warning. But Arbol was seething and could barely contain himself. “Someday I will be in that saddle and prove I’m a better man than you.” He immediately gulped when he realized what he had said. He saw the whip at the overseer’s side and the pistol at the other, ever at the ready. He’d seen what had happened to other slaves when they reacted without thinking when coaxed into a brawl. It was bad enough when they refused to cater to the white man’s whim.

Perez sat, stunned, mouth agape. He shook his head and sputtered.

“You? You? What!” Perez grabbed at the whip, unfurled it, then flung his arm back. Arbol flinched.

“*Oye! Qué pasa aquí?*” What’s going on here?

Arbol was pleased to see a startled Perez turn to Alonso and have to rein in his anger and indignation. The other slaves turned back to their work immediately and lapsed into ignoring what was happening around them.

“Don Alonso!” Perez exclaimed. He chuckled nervously. “This son of a whore was trying to—”.

“Trying to...?” Alonso queried. As he dismounted, he twirled his hand in the air as if trying to pull the words from Perez. Perez remained where he was, a blank look on his face.

Alonso patted his horse, then went to Arbol, who grinned from ear to ear. Alonso was unable to resist grinning back. The joy on Arbol’s face was infectious.

But what was almost as compelling was Alonso’s sudden desire to lick the sweat from Arbol’s glistening body. He could just imagine the salty taste as his long tongue slurped from the base of Arbol’s neck to just below an earlobe.

Alonso looked into Arbol’s face and did his best not to gaze down the broad shoulders, the sculpted, massive chest with areolae the size of gold coins. He tried not to notice Arbol’s broad biceps or the taut, ribbed stomach that led down to...

No! Alonso's erection began to fill inside his pants. This was neither the time nor the place.

But what was that? Was Arbol also getting hard?

Alonso licked his lips and forced himself to turn around. He faced Perez, who was still sitting atop his horse.

"Looked to me like you were taunting this man." Alonso spoke calmly.

"What? How can you say that? This insolent slave was trying to provoke *me*! He was—" Perez continued, but Alonso put up his hand.

"No need to lie. I'll be speaking to my father about this. He has a strict policy against mistreating our slaves. Or baiting them," Alonso added when he saw that Perez was about to protest.

"Now, if you'll excuse me." Alonso went back to his horse, picked up the reins, and handed them to Perez. The overseer took them grudgingly.

"I'm learning all there is to know about Casa Rodrigo," Alonso continued. He rolled up his sleeves and stood beside Arbol. "I will need you to take my horse back to the stable."

"But...but..." Perez sputtered.

"That will be all, Perez. Thank you." Alonso held a hand up to blot out the sun. He made sure to maintain eye contact with the overseer. "I know you'll take the poor beast back promptly. No animal should be out here in this heat."

Alonso turned, dismissing the overseer. He looked at Arbol, who was still grinning.

"Now," Alonso said, his tone completely different. He looked at Arbol. "Show me what you were doing." Behind them, Alonso could hear Perez as he rode away muttering, pulling Alonso's horse behind him.

"Tell me why you tie the bundles together." Alonso scratched his head.

"They're easier to carry to the wagons, señor."

“But then you have to walk to the wagons, walk back, and someone has to untie the bundles once they get to the distillery. Is that right?” Behind them, other slaves were stopping. Alonso looked at them and realized they were hesitant to ask him and Arbol to move. He stepped out of the way, pulling Arbol with him.

“I believe so. But I only work in the field,” Arbol said with a shrug. “I have never been in the distillery. I don't even know how they get the sugar out.”

“How would it be if we had wagons moving alongside you?” Alonso continued, ideas starting to turn in his head. “That way you wouldn't need to tie the cane into bundles. You could just toss it up once you chopped it down.”

“But, señor,” Arbol countered. “Less cane would then have to be planted to make room for the wagons.”

“Hmmm. Yes, I see your point.” Alonso rubbed his chin.

Father will not be pleased to lose money by planting less sugarcane. I'll have to show him how much more efficient it would be in the long run. Especially if we add another crop. And if I can persuade him to make our own brand of rum and molasses from the unused portion of sugarcane, the possibilities could be endless!

Alonso grinned absentmindedly, looking past Arbol.

“Señor?”

Alonso snapped back into the present. Arbol looked at him with a furrowed brow. “Is the heat too strong for you?”

“What? Nonsense!” Alonso wormed his way back into the ordered lines of slaves with Arbol beside him. Within minutes, he was working among them as if he had been doing the work all along. Arbol smiled.

Alonso was excited to discuss his ideas with his father. But he would wait until he'd had time to see the entire operation before making any suggestions on improving efficiency, profit, and conditions at Casa Rodrigo.

It wasn't long before Alonso began to sweat profusely. He took his shirt off, aware that Arbol and the other slaves were watching him. Purposely, Alonso

mopped at his body with the soft cotton shirt, then wrapped the sleeves around his head like a Moor.

“*Gracias, señor,*” Arbol muttered after a moment.

“For what?”

Arbol looked around as if to make sure no other slaves were listening. If they were, they pretended not to notice. Arbol leaned in.

“For...defending me.”

Alonso licked at the sweat forming on his upper lip, then gave Arbol a lopsided grin. He cocked his head, snorted with pleasure, then bit his lower lip.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Behind them, other slaves were catching up.

“C'mon,” Alonso said. He reached out and clapped Arbol on the shoulder. He kept his hand there just a second longer than he needed to, then ran it down Arbol's spine to the small of his back. When he pulled it away, he sniffed at the sweat in his hand, making sure none of the slaves were looking.

Except for Arbol.

Alonso licked his fingers and sucked on his palm. Arbol moaned softly, and Alonso could see he had been blessed with a generous cock.

“We better get back to work.” Alonso looked around, tearing himself away from the magnificent tent that had formed in Arbol's pant. The other slaves were doing their best to ignore them and work around them.

Like a loyal pup, Arbol stayed at Alonso's side. Together, they focused on the job at hand and eventually had the bundles all neatly tied and ready to be hauled onto the wagons.

“Señor Alonso. You should leave now. These get very heavy.” As he spoke, he bent and slung one of the bundles onto his shoulder almost effortlessly.

“No. If you can do this, so can I,” Alonso said as he bent over and tried to do the same. “I'm seeing this through to the end.” His knees buckled, and his legs

wobbled. He wasn't accustomed to this type of heavy labor and nearly lost his balance. But the other slaves were watching. So was Arbol. Alonso knew he could not fail. He thought of Arbol, of the two of them together. He could still smell and taste his sweat, and somehow, it gave him strength.

Alonso tossed the bundle onto the wagon while the slaves around him clapped and grinned appreciatively. Strangely, he felt empowered. Tossing Arbol a quick glance before picking up his second bundle, Alonso saw the grin on his face, the look in his eyes, and knew Arbol would be his.

It was only a matter of time.

Chapter Six

Bernardo groaned as he sat up in bed and clutched his head.

He sniffed, snorted, then cleared his throat as he slowly let his legs dangle over the side of the bed. His eyes were slits against the incredibly bright light streaming through the window and the shrill cries from the birds outside. Even the coos of the mourning doves seemed louder.

To say nothing of the aches in his body. It hurt to move, and there was a dull throbbing at his temples that matched his already throbbing rectum. His throat was parched, and his tongue felt like he had slept with cloth in his mouth.

Christ! And what the hell was wrong with his hand? He winced as he touched it. Then it all came rushing back at him. Bernardo closed his eyes and let out a sigh that was half dismay and half disbelief.

Bernardo didn't know which was worse—that he enjoyed having sex with Raúl or that he had punched the man in the face.

And not just any man.

The man who had lent him the money necessary to invest in the plantation. The man to whom he owed his livelihood, the success of his business, and probably the well-being of his family.

And the only man who had ever aroused him to the point that Bernardo would return time and again no matter what Raúl said or did.

Then a mitigating possibility presented itself. They had, after all, been drinking. Quite a lot, as he remembered. Perhaps it had all been nothing more than a very bad dream.

Now you know that's not true. That horribly mocking voice inside his head made its presence known once more.

There was only one way to know the exact events from the night before with any certainty. Now that he was sober, Bernardo would simply have to go back to the Velasco plantation to find out.

Bernardo took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

"First things first," Bernardo mumbled, his voice crackling with the remnants of his drunken sleep. He reached for the chamber pot beneath the bed and relieved himself as he mentally prepared for the things he had to do.

That was when he noticed by the light coming through the window, it was probably already midafternoon if not later.

Bernardo shook his head in disgust as he slammed the pot down on the nightstand. He cursed as some of his urine splashed onto his hand.

And as he searched for something with which to wipe, Bernardo couldn't help but think of how, so far, this trip to La Española was definitely not turning out the way he had expected.

* * *

Raúl grumbled as he rolled over and crawled out of bed. His entire body seemed to hurt, and he felt as if his eyelids were trying to close over gravel. But what hurt the most was his face.

He tried again to open his eyes. The room was out of focus, blurred. And then he realized: only his left eye was open.

Raúl lumbered out of bed completely naked and stepped up to the ornate, full-length mirror.

"*Hijo de puta!*" Son of a bitch. His right eye had swollen shut, and there were bruises along his cheekbone.

Raúl raised a hand to his face, pressed gently, and let out a pained moan. It hurt like hell. He let his arm drop to the side and stared at his reflection. For a

moment, it was as if he could see the events from the night before reflected in the mirror.

Images of the two of them rutting like animals, Raúl being taken by Bernardo. The mirror helped fuel Bernardo's desires, which was why Raúl had gotten it. Bernardo had always been rough and exciting in bed. But last night had been more intense than it had ever been between them. Brutal even.

Raúl grinned and turned slowly. He could just make out the bruises beneath his ribs and on his lower back. But the scratch marks on either side of his spine were clearly visible.

His smooth ass, which was still mercifully round and had not yet sagged, was shockingly pale compared to other parts of his body, but there were still patches of pink from the handheld wooden plank Bernardo used on him. Raúl had pulled out the specially made toys and restraints. There wasn't a single part of his body that didn't hurt because of their sex. Hell, even Raúl's rectum hurt. It throbbed wickedly from the repeated times Bernardo had taken him with that enormous cock. But then Raúl always felt that if it didn't hurt, something wasn't being done right.

Raúl reveled in the pain and torture they inflicted on each other. In fact, anything that Raúl wanted to try, the usually quiet Bernardo would go along with; not that he ever had an original sexual thought of his own. It was more that Bernardo was easily manipulated. Like most men, when desire was high and rum was involved, he thought with his cock. And the demons he harbored, the things he unleashed under the influence of rum, were the very things that kept Raúl wanting more.

Raúl turned his head one way, then the other. The puffiness really wasn't that bad. He'd seen far worse.

A knock at the door pulled him out of his reverie.

“*Quién?*” Raúl hollered.

“Perez, señor.”

"Come in!" Raúl barked and turned away from the mirror as the door to his bedroom opened. A low whistle escaped the overseer as he walked in.

"That must have been some cat you were with last night," Perez joked as he slowly approached.

Raúl could hear the salacious curiosity behind the man's comment.

Raúl stood with his back straight, head cocked to one side, trying to see over his left shoulder. With his good eye, he watched Perez reach out tentatively, then graze the scratch marks and bruises along Raúl's back.

"Unless you plan to take your clothes off for me to fuck you next, don't touch me," Raúl warned, his voice low and threatening.

Perez jumped back.

Raúl snorted and lowered his head, frustrated. *Definitely no fight in the mouse.* What a shame. He could do with a new playmate. Especially since he suspected that after last night's events, Bernardo would no longer be willing.

But no. Perez would never do. It could never be the same as it was with Bernardo. Something seemed to scrape at his heart, and a knot in his throat made Raúl gasp suddenly.

"Who...who was she?" Perez asked, pulling Raúl away from whatever had taken hold of him. "Which slave?"

"What does it matter?" Raúl turned.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Perez muttered, his eyes opened wide and his jaw went slack. "Was it...was it one of the whores from el Puerco Sucio?"

"No, you spineless piece of shit!" Raúl exclaimed. He watched Perez recoil as if slapped, searching for any spark that might show he wanted to fight back. But there was none. Perez was an insipid, spineless ass.

Perez opened his mouth, but Raúl interrupted him before he could ask any more stupid questions.

“And it doesn't matter who it was, because you're never going to be with...her. Now what do you want?”

“I have news,” Perez managed, swallowing visibly.

“What news?” Raúl turned his head slightly to see his overseer a bit better.

“It's about de Rodrigo.”

An odd sound escaped Raúl's throat.

“What about Bernardo?”

“Not don de Rodrigo. *El hijo*—the son—Alonso.”

“Ah yes!” Raúl said, more to himself than to Perez. A wicked grin spread across his face, and he wondered if one of the boys had inherited Bernardo's secret little desire for brutal sex. But he couldn't do that to Bernardo, could he? That was too low even for him. But then again...

“What about Alonso?” Raúl asked as he began to dress.

“We may have problems,” Perez replied. When Raúl winced as he tried to lift his arms, Perez tried to help him with his shirt. All along, he told Raúl what had happened, what Alonso had said, and how Perez had felt in front of the slaves—Arbol in particular.

“And Fernando?”

“Fernando?” Perez seemed dumbfounded.

“Fernando, you idiot! The other one. Was he there as well? What did he say?”

“Oh right. The twin.” Perez shook his head. “Don de Rodrigo said Fernando remained to take care of business in Spain.”

Raúl grumbled and rubbed his scruffy chin gingerly. He needed a shave. Strangely, then he thought back to the night he had chased the female slave through the Spanish countryside. He found it odd the memory should have sprung up so suddenly. He still remembered the thrill of the chase as if it were yesterday. He had paid top dollar for her, knowing he would be getting two slaves for the price of one, but still far less than if he had purchased them separately.

“Hmmm? What?” Raúl looked up, realizing he had been asked a question.

“I said what are we going to do?” Perez repeated. “About young de Rodrigo?”

“Leave him to me,” Raúl replied. “Meantime, keep your mouth shut and your ears open. Now get back to work!” Raúl guided Perez out of his room, somewhat roughly, and closed the door behind him.

“But, señor...” Perez started to protest.

“Not now, Perez!” Raúl exclaimed. “I have more important things on my mind.”

Raúl had questions that needed answers and Bernardo was the only one who could provide them.

* * *

Dante walked calmly to the front door despite what sounded like an urgent knock. He opened the door somewhat loftily, as if he had better things to do with his time, then felt stunned as he looked at the man before him. He had heard of Velasco of course and knew instinctively that it was he who stood on the porch. The man had a notorious reputation on the island, but Dante had never dealt with him. Until now.

Dante understood why other slaves feared him.

“What the hell are you staring at?” Raúl spat. “You’ve never seen someone who was in a fight before?”

“For-forgive me, don Velasco.” Dante quickly recovered and slipped back into his usual airy self. But inside, Dante most definitely did not feel confident. In fact, inside, he trembled.

“May I...may I help you?” Dante asked, hoping he sounded more nonchalant than he felt.

“I’ve come to speak to Bernardo,” Raúl announced as he pushed his way past Dante. He strode into the lobby and looked about as if he would find the man hiding somewhere.

“Don Bernardo is not here,” Dante replied casually.

“You're not...*lying*...are you?” Raúl cocked his head and smiled menacingly.

“No, señor,” Dante replied, standing his ground with an odd feeling of satisfaction at Raúl's obvious annoyance.

“Then I will wait.” Raúl stepped back with a grumble, turned, and sat on the settee by the door.

“As you wish.” Dante bowed. “But I'm afraid I... He did not... I'm not certain when he will return,” Dante offered, feeling his confidence slip once more as Raúl tossed him a look of disdain.

“No matter. The approaching night is young, and I can afford to wait for a little while. Now why don't you be a good little slave and earn your keep. Run and fetch me some refreshment.”

“Of course,” Dante murmured and scurried away as fast as his feet could take him.

Chapter Seven

Alonso was exhausted. He was accustomed to labor back home, in Spain. It was not uncommon for him to help the dockworkers as if he were one himself. He was more than used to lifting and throwing heavy things around to keep things running smoothly and on time. But this entire day had been the most backbreaking work he had ever done. Still, he was glad he had done it. Glad his father had not been there. He would not have allowed Alonso to spend the entire day working like a field hand.

“What do you think don Bernardo will say about your ideas?” Arbol asked.

“I don't know, but I can't imagine he'd say no to bigger profits and higher productivity.”

They were at Rio de Piedras, the River of Rocks, a tranquil and gentle waterfall that pooled into a large lagoon before continuing out to sea.

“Forgive me. I mean no disrespect. But I fear that even if your father makes the changes you think of, life might still be difficult for us.”

“Why? Are things bad here?” Alonso asked, somewhat surprised. “Do they mistreat you?”

Arbol shook his head.

“You don't go hungry, I trust,” Alonso pushed.

Arbol sat quietly beside him.

“You can tell me,” Alonso wheedled. “I won't tell anyone if that's what you're afraid of.”

Arbol appeared about to say something. His mouth opened, then closed. The young man's eyes searched his own, and Alonso suddenly envisioned himself working for someone else from sunup to sundown. Barely clothed, with God only knew what type of housing. No days off except for the Sabbath. And no compensation of any kind except for perhaps food to stave off hunger.

Alonso looked away from Arbol's deeply probing eyes.

"Things are...things are not...bad. Not the way you might suggest. But someday"—Arbol's voice took on a far-away, dreamlike quality—"it would be wonderful to have my own house. My own land where I can grow and harvest my own food."

A long pause came between them. Unsure of what to say, Alonso placed a hand on Arbol's knee and chose the least uncomfortable of his options.

"You know, if Father agrees to implement my ideas, who knows how things might change?" Alonso tried to be comforting. Tried to offer consolation that perhaps there might be something in it for Arbol without actually saying it. He didn't want to get Arbol's hopes up. Just in case.

"I can do Perez's job better than he can," Arbol said in a quiet and confident but pleading voice. "If there is anything I can do, any place where you can use me, don de Rodrigo. I..."

"I'll see what I can do, but...please...can't you call me Alonso the way you used to when we were children? Don de Rodrigo is my father. It makes me sound...*old*."

Arbol looked Alonso in the eye.

"We are no longer children," Arbol said. "And you know I cannot do what you ask of me."

"Why? There's no one here but you and me."

"It would not be right. You're master, and I'm...nothing. Just your slave."

"But that's not true!" Alonso exclaimed defensively, inching closer. "You're..." Alonso stopped and thought a moment. What could he say? What could they talk

about that wouldn't constantly throw in their faces their circumstances? Was it possible to be with someone who was in a different class, let alone a slave?

And yet the only thing Alonso knew was that he had grown very attached to Arbol in a relatively short time. Nothing else mattered but that they were together again.

An old memory, one he had forgotten, rose from wherever it resided and wafted to the forefront of Alonso's mind. It was the two of them, sitting in Arbol's small room, on that tiny cot. They were eating a piece of birthday cake.

"Do you remember...that birthday I sneaked into your room with a piece of cake?"

Arbol chuckled. "Yes."

"Life seemed much simpler then, didn't it?"

"We were children then, don de Rodrigo," Arbol replied, his voice distant and full of melancholy.

Alonso cleared his throat, thinking perhaps it might not be wise to revisit the past. He suddenly felt very uncomfortable, so he did what his brother would normally do and made light of the situation.

"I guess that's it, then? You won't call me Alonso?"

Arbol shook his head.

"Not even when we're alone?" Alonso insisted, finding it increasingly more difficult to sit beside Arbol when all he wanted to do was kiss him. He had wanted last night so desperately to be with Arbol. He had hoped all day for a quiet moment together. But now that they were alone, he wasn't sure where to begin, how to initiate the one thing he yearned for most—to be naked beside Arbol.

Alonso leaned in playfully. Arbol chuckled and pushed back slightly. No matter how obvious Arbol's attraction, Alonso could still sense reluctance. There were so many things he wanted to say, so many things he wanted to ask. But what

was the point? He knew where Arbol had been all these years. He knew what he had been doing. It wasn't as if he'd had much of a choice in his life.

He opened his mouth to speak at the same time as Arbol. They laughed awkwardly.

"Please, don de... Ahhh, don Alonso," Arbol said. "With all due respect..."

"No, please! You first. I wasn't going to say anything terribly important." Alonso looked into Arbol's searching eyes. They were large and deep brown, slightly lighter than the rest of him, with black flints surrounding the pupils.

Alonso could not help but feel as if he were falling into a pool of water, so warm, so open, so inviting that he could drown in Arbol's eyes.

"What were you going to say?" Alonso asked, drawing nearer to Arbol. Or was Arbol drawing nearer to him?

"You...you should not have sent everyone home. Sundown isn't for a few hours yet. Your father will be mad at you."

"Why don't you let me worry about my father? Besides," Alonso added, clearing his throat nervously, "I wanted to spend some time alone with you."

"With me, señor?" Arbol swallowed.

"Yes. Only...now that we're alone...together...I'm finding it a bit difficult to do what I would like." Alonso then turned away, somewhat embarrassed.

"You are not a slave," Arbol pointed out. "Why should you be hesitant to do what you wish? It is you who commands his own life."

"You make me nervous," Alonso blurted, surprising even himself.

"Me?" Arbol pulled back, startled. "I make you nervous? Why?"

"I don't know. You just do."

"It is I who should feel nervous with you," Arbol said. "I...I have more to lose."

"There's no need to be nervous," Alonso said, his voice husky. "And you will lose nothing." Trembling, his cock erect and protesting inside his pants, Alonso leaned forward and kissed Arbol lightly on the lips.

Arbol moaned ever so slightly and relaxed beside Alonso. It was all the signal Alonso needed. He grabbed the back of Arbol's head with one hand and kissed him fervently. Something inside his mind exploded in a million bursts of light. His flesh tingled and his blood boiled as Arbol kissed him back with just as much ardor as he had hoped for.

So this is what it's like. Arbol felt as if his breath had been taken away, sucked out of him by the boy he had never forgotten. No. Definitely not a boy. *A man.* The man who for some reason refused to ever leave his mind. The memory of his face had grown indistinct in the fourteen years Arbol had been on the island, but he could never forget the feeling of Alonso's spirit, his energy. That had always felt very near, very strong, very powerful.

There were times when he thought he was being foolish by clinging to a memory that was barely more than a feeling, something so small and so insignificant, yet gave him hope through the darkest of nights.

And now here he was.

Alonso wrapped his arms around him, encircling him. He felt safe and comfortable in these arms. In these arms, he would never be taken advantage of. In these arms, he would be safe. In these arms, he would find the closest thing to freedom he had ever known. Arbol wrapped his own arms, long and brown, around Alonso's neck. He opened his mouth wider to accept the probing tongue battling his own, rubbing against his teeth, the inside of his lips.

He could feel Alonso's breath, hot and wild as he snorted and became more insistent. Alonso's arms were suddenly everywhere, groping at him, the weight of Alonso's body pushing him back against the large, flattened rock.

Arbol groaned, and his eyes rolled back into his head. He could feel the young master's erection, throbbing fast and furious, so huge, against his very own.

"Arbol!" Alonso whispered harshly, pulling back slightly to look down into Arbol's eyes.

“Yes, Alonso?” Arbol asked, forgetting himself, his place, but uncaring of his audacity.

“You cannot believe how I have wanted you. Ever since I saw you yesterday, since I touched you. Is this wrong?”

“I don't know if it's wrong, Alonso. But I have wanted it too. I have never forgotten you.”

And with that, Arbol pulled Alonso down toward him and wrapped his legs around him, wanting Alonso more than he had ever wanted anything in his young life.

He reached between their bodies and groped at Alonso's cock.

“My God!” Arbol moaned, looking up into Alonso's eyes. “You're...*huge!*”

“Am I?” Alonso laughed, licking at Arbol's neck.

“Oh yes! Very huge,” Arbol said as he traced Alonso's inner thigh. “You must have...many women back home. Many women who want you inside them.” Arbol grasped Alonso's cock. It throbbed hotly in his hand.

“I have no woman back home,” Alonso replied

“Men?” Arbol asked so freely and confidently. Alonso blushed a moment before answering.

“No. No men either. But”—Alonso looked intently at Arbol—“there was this one man, Tocino, on the ship; he thought I was large. He could never take me down his throat. He always tried, but he never could.”

“Will you let me try?” Arbol asked. Alonso shot him a crooked half grin. Arbol gently pushed at Alonso, his fingertips grazing his chest. He hated to have Alonso's slick, glistening body off him even for a moment, but he was anxious to get a good look at him.

Alonso stood and started to take off his clothes.

“No! Let me,” Arbol cried, and Alonso complied.

Alonso enjoyed the thrill on Arbol's face as he slowly undressed and explored his body. Arbol's hands, black and callous, were firm against his own sinewy flesh. Alonso delighted in the sensation as Arbol felt his muscles, stroked him, caressed him. Alonso sucked in his breath as Arbol's thumbs flicked at his nipples, then he bit sharply, softly, his tongue teasing and swirling.

Arbol reached around and traced the curved hollow of his spine, the small of his back, and cupped his buttocks. The slave pulled at his pants, and the pungent scent of sweat and lust rose sharply. Alonso became very self-conscious suddenly.

"Come." Alonso took Arbol's hand in his own. "Let's wash off in the lagoon."

"Not until I've tasted you," Arbol replied with a grin. "All of you."

Alonso watched, mesmerized, as Arbol stared hungrily at his cock. He pulled the foreskin back and licked at the tip, lapping at the clear, slick liquid that bubbled and dripped copiously.

Alonso closed his eyes, threw his head back, and let himself enjoy Arbol's lips, then his mouth as Arbol slowly moved his head back and forth.

Giving in to the pleasure, Alonso felt more and more of his cock disappear down Arbol's throat, until, quite shockingly, he felt Arbol's lips pressed against the very base of his shaft, his nose blowing hot, sharp air into his pubic hair.

Alonso was stunned by the sight and the pleasure of having someone take him completely. He relished the tears welling up in Arbol's eyes. He took pride in seeing the way Arbol's cheeks hollowed and his throat swelled.

But mostly, Alonso felt a rush coursing through his body as Arbol looked up at him with longing, desire, and worship. It was that more than anything that sent Alonso over the edge. He felt the familiar sensation building just behind his belly button and slightly below.

Arbol pulled back to catch his breath; then he reached for Alonso's balls. He rolled their weight in his hand. Alonso raised his hands to Arbol's ears and held him in place as he pumped his hips—gently at first, then increasing in speed until he cried out with a loud grunt.

Alonso came forcefully, furiously, down Arbol's throat. Arbol pressed firmly, just behind Alonso's balls, as he greedily gulped down every drop of his seed.

When Alonso finally stopped convulsing, Arbol withdrew, gasping for air.

“Dios mío!” Alonso's knees weakened. He reached down for Arbol's hand and pulled him up. He held Arbol close, then kissed him full on the lips, tasting his own cum and sweat on Arbol's tongue.

Without a word, Alonso took Arbol by the hand and, still clothed, pulled him into the water with him.

In the lagoon, the two young men, master and slave, allowed themselves to revert to their childhood and play with one another as innocently as they had once done when they were boys in Spain.

Chapter Eight

Even though he would have to face him sooner or later, Bernardo was strangely relieved Raúl was not at home. Not even his butler seemed to know where he had gone, which Bernardo found quite odd. Didn't Raúl keep his people informed? If nothing else, at least the butler should have known.

And yet, after waiting a few minutes to see if Raúl would return, Bernardo couldn't help the nagging feeling that no matter how justified he had been in punching Raúl in the face, it was something that would come back to haunt him.

But he'd had enough of Raúl's taunts and humiliations. It was one thing to insult him personally, treat him like a whore, or worse, pull him into the dirty, filthy games Raúl liked to play. Bad enough to make him admit he enjoyed the type of sex they had together. But to insult the mother of his children?

He had to take a stand somewhere.

Bernardo left the house, mounted his horse, and headed back home.

And so, lost in thought, Bernardo barely even noticed where he was until he came upon the edge of the sugarcane fields that marked the start of his property.

He glanced down, regretting that he had drunk so much and slept so late that he had missed the outing he and Alonso had planned.

But where are the slaves? He stopped the horse and looked around. The fields were completely empty. As far as his eyes could see, there was no one.

"What...?" Bernardo muttered. "It's not even sundown!" He pushed the horse forward a bit, then raced toward the slave quarters. He stopped at one of the first houses he came to, and dismounted.

Nana, the midwife, sat rocking on her porch. The small woman stood when she saw him. As he approached, Bernardo could not help but wonder if the woman, like Raúl, had sold her soul to the devil. She looked exactly the same as she had fourteen years ago.

From the first moment he had met her, she had made him feel as if she were poking about in his mind, searching for something in his heart. She was eerie, no doubt about that. And yet he had taken an instant liking to her and trusted her immediately.

Rumor had it, she had been the previous owner's plaything. He and Adelina had agreed that no slave at Casa Rodrigo would be subjected to that expectation. He had thought of selling Nana, but when he had learned that it was she who assisted the slaves in bringing their children into the world, Bernardo had decided to keep her. After all, who better to entrust a young boy like Arbol to than a woman who helped bring life into the world?

"Don Bernardo!" Nana said, moving slowly toward him. "I heard you were coming! Please forgive me for not coming to greet you yesterday. I took a spill, and I'm still having a difficult time walking."

"Sorry to hear that, Nana. But that's not why I've come."

"Then to what do I owe the pleasure?" Nana asked curiously, a genuine smile spreading across her face.

"Have you seen Arbol?"

"No, señor. He has not come home."

"I don't suppose you know why there are no slaves in the fields?"

"But...don Bernardo, I..." Nana trailed off as if looking beyond. "Of course! I should have known. I thought it was you who sent everyone home."

"I did *what?*" Bernardo exclaimed loudly.

"They said, 'El señor...don de Rodrigo.'"

"*Maldita sea!*" Damn it.

Bernardo muttered furiously when he realized what had happened. "When I find that boy, I'm going to skin him alive." He turned and headed for his horse.

"Ahhh! Señor!" Nana called after him.

"What?" Bernardo said huffily, already mounted.

"Don Bernardo. If you please. I beg you. Do not be too hasty...or cruel...on your son. He meant well. After all, he is your son. Oh! And you should have heard how the slaves talked about him!" Nana clasped her hands together near her ample bosom and seemed to practically glow.

"Be that as it may," Bernardo explained. "Alonso knows better. He should never have sent anyone away from the fields without consulting me first!" Bernardo rode off, leaving a trail of dust behind him.

"Do you remember the games we used to play as children?" Alonso asked with a fond smile.

"Some. But what I remember most was you bringing your father's Bible to my room and pretending to read. And your stories. You told me about a Moor? A Spanish lady?"

Alonso laughed. "It was one of my father's favorite stories. About Abindarraez." Alonso's voice suddenly took on a thoughtful tone as he continued speaking. "A valiant...beautiful Moor captured by a Christian soldier." Alonso moved closer to Arbol. "He loved Jariffa so much, he begged to be released in order to marry her."

"And he promised to return," Arbol finished.

Alonso stood inches away from Arbol. He placed a hand on Arbol's face and kissed him lightly.

"I know it's not the same." Alonso spoke quietly. "Not like in the story. But I've returned."

Arbol's breath caught in his throat. He stood perfectly still, listening, his eyes wide.

"What is it?" Alonso stood as well. He rubbed the water from his eyes.

"Ssshhh!" Arbol put a finger to his lips.

Alonso furrowed his brow and strained to hear whatever it was Arbol had heard, but he could make out nothing over the water falling into the lagoon.

"What did you hear?" Alonso asked, coming closer.

"I'm not sure, but I feel like we're being watched." Arbol scanned the forest. "I thought I heard... I don't know. Branches snapping. A voice."

"What?" Alonso chuckled but looked around all the same. "There's no one watching. And...I don't... No, I definitely don't hear anything."

And almost as soon as he spoke, they both heard it.

"*Alonso!*" a voice bellowed quite near.

"My father," Alonso said.

"Dios mío! He found out! I knew he would. I told you not to send the slaves home!" Arbol said with panic and rushed out of the water. He scrambled up the riverbank toward the rock where his clothes lay, and struggled into his pants. They were still quite wet.

"Don't worry," Alonso said reassuringly as he slowly made his way out. "I'm sure it's something else he's going on ab—"

But Alonso stopped abruptly, standing in water that reached only up to his knees.

"*Alonso de Rodrigo!*" Bernardo boomed. His voice seemed to echo across the lagoon. "Get out of the water. *Now!*"

Bernardo carefully steered his horse to where the river began to swirl away from the lagoon. The horse hesitated, unhappy that it was about to get wet. But

Bernardo did not care. He pushed the horse forward, and the beast stepped in, carefully making its way to the other side.

The bottom of Bernardo's pants became soaked as, in his anger, he clumsily dismounted.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Bernardo demanded through clenched teeth. He struggled to contain an explosive anger, even more so than the night before. In his youth, Bernardo's emotional outbursts had frequently gotten him into far more trouble than he would have liked.

"Father..." Bernardo heard the good-natured derision in Alonso's half chuckle. The boy shook his head and shrugged. "What are you going on ab—"

Bernardo pulled back sharply and swung at his son. His open hand struck Alonso on the face, and Bernardo watched as the boy reeled and fought to keep his footing.

Stunned, Alonso looked up at his father. In all his years, he could not remember a moment where either of his parents had ever struck him. He was shocked. Not just from the force of his father's hand, but from the anger that seemed to flow from him.

"Father, I—" Alonso started but found that he could not speak any more. Tears sprang to his eyes, and his throat suddenly constricted.

"Put your clothes on," Bernardo mumbled and looked away slightly. "I can't talk to you...like this." The man waved a hand in the air toward Alonso, indicating his nudity.

Alonso turned, surprised yet grateful Arbol was behind him. He took the clothes Arbol held out to him, and shot the slave an awkward wink. Alonso dressed slowly, noting that Arbol had the discretion to look away.

"What is the meaning of this?" Bernardo asked when Alonso was clothed. He leaned in, excluding Arbol.

"Father, I was—We—That is..." Alonso faltered.

"Don Bernardo." Arbol spoke up quietly. "If I may...I fell into the water."

"You fell into the water," Bernardo repeated as if he was thinking about what Arbol had said.

"Sí, señor." Arbol nodded. Alonso watched him point to the waterfall. "From...from up there."

"I see. And for that he needed to take his clothes off?"

"I'll handle it, Arbol. Thank you. I appreciate your help." Alonso glanced at his would-be defender. He turned back to his father. "We were just having a swim," Alonso said quietly.

"Is that all?" Bernardo said through gritted teeth, his face inches away. Alonso felt a heat rising from his upper chest, through his neck, and into his cheeks.

"I don't know what you mean, Father," Alonso said, refusing to be bullied and willing his embarrassment to die down.

"I wasn't born yesterday, Alonso!" Bernardo exploded. "You know your mother and I do not condone...*being* with a slave in that way."

Alonso met his father's gaze. For a moment, neither of them spoke. When Alonso finally opened his mouth, it was with a quiet but obvious rebellion in his voice.

"Even *if* anything happened, as you so crudely imply, how is it any of your business?"

"Alonso. Everything you do is my business. Especially here. Things just aren't the same as they are in Spain."

"Obviously," Alonso spat sarcastically.

"Don't take that tone with me, young man."

"And tell me, Father, just how the hell was I supposed to know what you and Mother do or do not condone? It's not like you handed me a book of rules on the ship. You went off last night to God knows where..."

Alonso detected a nervous tic just beneath his father's eye. And was that a blush creeping into his cheeks?

"To do God only knows what," Alonso pressed on, noting the faint look of embarrassment force his father's gaze away from his own for just a split second. "You did not tell me where you went, who you were with, or what I was supposed to do with you when I found you passed out from drink this morning!"

"You will watch how you speak to me. Do you understand?" Bernardo's voice went lower. "You may be twenty-five years old, but you're still my son, and I am still your father."

"And that gives you the right to hit me?" Alonso snapped. "That gives you the right to embarrass me in front of my friend?"

"Arbol is not your friend here. He's a slave," Bernardo added.

"That still doesn't give you the right—" Alonso started, but his father was not about to let him finish.

"We will finish this discussion later," Bernardo said with finality. "For now, I want to know why there are no slaves in the fields. It is not yet sundown."

"It was hot, so I gave them the rest of the afternoon off." The back of Alonso's neck heated with the rising blush. Like a little boy, he looked down at his bare feet.

"It was hot," Bernardo repeated. He seemed filled with disbelief. "So you gave them the rest of the day off."

"That's right," Alonso said, raising his head once more.

His father walked away, scratched his head, then hollered angrily into the air. When he turned back around, his face was contorted in anger.

"You should have...consulted...with me...*first!*"

"But you were—" Alonso tried to explain.

"Never mind where—or what—the hell I was!" Bernardo cried. He stormed back toward Alonso, who flinched.

“What the hell were you thinking? These are slaves, Alonso! *Slaves!* Not...fucking...*dock workers!*”

“Forgive me, Father,” Alonso said quietly and bowed his head. He had never felt so humiliated or embarrassed. He had tried to do something good. Something he thought was only fair considering how long the slaves had been working under such horrible conditions without any compensation, day in, day out. Surely a few hours of one day couldn't hurt profits that much.

They remained in silence for what felt like a very long and uncomfortable moment. Until Bernardo finally spoke.

“Arbol, go home to Nana. Alonso, put your shoes on and come with me. We're going to finish this at home.”

“But, señor!” Arbol moaned. “It's...don Velasco...” Arbol trailed off, his voice overshadowed by Bernardo's horse snorting and grunting. Bernardo and Alonso turned in time to see Raúl step out from behind a tree and walk toward them with a lopsided grin.

Chapter Nine

Raúl walked slowly toward the de Rodrigo men and their slave. As he approached, Raúl lifted his hands and clapped with mild amusement.

“Bravo,” Raúl declared, his throat husky. “Bravo! If it isn't the illustrious de Rodrigo men airing out their dirty laundry.”

“What are you doing here?” Bernardo demanded as Raúl stopped before him. Raúl turned his head slightly to look at Bernardo through his good eye.

“I got tired of waiting for you at your house, so...I decided to go home. On the way back, I heard all this noise. Groaning and moaning. Naturally, I thought...someone must be dying...or having a little *fun*. I couldn't tell. But by the time I got here, all that beautiful noise turned to splashing.” Raúl turned and stared at Alonso and beyond him to the slave.

“Imagine my surprise when I saw your son...naked...with that...fine piece of African flesh.” Raúl savored his glee.

“Like you've never taken a bath naked here,” Bernardo spat.

“You should know.” Raúl turned toward Bernardo. “You took one with me on your last trip. Remember? Or did you conveniently forget?” Raúl finished with feigned sweetness.

Bernardo blushed as he sucked in his breath.

“What do you want?” Bernardo glared.

“Can't I drop in on an old friend to check and see how he and his...lovely...young boy are doing?”

“You stay away from my son,” Bernardo muttered.

Raúl noted how Bernardo's nostrils flared and his pupils opened like drops of ink, spreading. He could almost taste Bernardo's sweat, could almost feel his heartbeat accelerating. He bit his lower lip.

"I wonder if you have any idea how aroused I am right now?" Raúl said, unconcerned about discretion.

Raúl felt a sudden shift in the air. Discomfort, shock, and surprise rippled around him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Bernardo snapped. For a moment, Raúl thought Bernardo would turn away, but to his credit, he held his ground. Raúl felt his cock twitch. He moaned lewdly and shook his head.

"So the boy knows nothing?" Raúl grinned wickedly.

"Raúl. I would advise you..." Bernardo started, his voice filled with threat.

"I know all I need to know about you," Alonso stated, interrupting his father.

"Is that so?" Raúl moved away from Bernardo, aware of the man's gaze as he stepped slowly toward Alonso. "And what is it that you know about me?"

"That you're scum," Alonso replied with disdain. "Not to be trusted, and certainly not the type of man we do business with."

"Oh ho, ho!" Raúl laughed. "Mighty big words from a little boy like you." Raúl couldn't help but grin as he caught the boy's deeply penetrating blue eyes. They seemed to sear right through him.

"I suppose you don't know, then. It must have...slipped your father's mind."

"What are you talking about?" Alonso furrowed his brow. "What slipped his mind?"

"Well...if Bernardo hasn't seen fit to tell his precious boy, then neither will I. But you should ask him when you're alone in your house. Perhaps he'll tell you how business associates can make for the strangest of bedfellows."

Raúl saw the blush creep up Alonso's neck, as if the boy were already figuring things out. He watched Alonso glance behind him and knew the boy was searching his father's face. Alonso looked right back at him and stared him down.

"I already know," Alonso said defiantly.

"I see. I'm impressed. Very progressive of you, Bernardo," Raúl said, his sight never wavering. He cast a sweeping, appreciative glance up and down at Alonso.

"See this?" Raúl turned so Alonso had no choice but to look directly at his closed eye. He pointed at his own face and continued. "Your old man did this to me. Last night. Do you want to know why?"

"Raúl. I'm warning you..." Bernardo cautioned.

"I'm sure you deserved it," Alonso snipped.

"You think so?" Raúl cocked his head and gave Alonso an odd look. "What makes you say that?"

But Alonso did not respond. He merely glared at Raúl, unflinching. Raúl became even more aroused.

"You have more spirit than your father." Raúl leered. "Much more. From what I saw."

Alonso gave a snort. "I don't know what you're talking about. You're crazy. You saw nothing. You said so yourself."

"*De tal palo, tal astilla, ah?*" Raúl chuckled.

"That's right, Raúl," Bernardo replied and moved to be closer to Alonso. "Like father, like son. Now what is it you came here for? You're not the kind of man to pay someone a visit unless you want something."

"You have the nerve to ask me that after last night." Raúl shook his head, then focused his attention on the slave. How was it that such a luscious slave had ever escaped his scrutiny? Perez knew how much he liked to break in beautiful, young brown boys. He would have to have a word with the overseer. Raúl licked his lips suggestively and moved toward Arbol.

"Perhaps you and I should take a walk, Raúl. Talk about things. About what happened," Bernardo suggested calmly.

"There might be no need for that," Raúl said distantly as he rubbed his chin. He was vaguely aware of Bernardo and Alonso as they stood, side by side, just a few feet behind him.

"Where ever did you find this one?" Raúl asked with obvious curious delight as he walked around Arbol.

"What are you implying?" Bernardo replied almost a little too quickly. "He was here. He's the son of our midwife."

"Is that so, boy?"

"Sí, señor," Arbol replied, obviously nervous. He flinched when Raúl reached out and roughly cupped his pectoral muscles.

Raúl grunted and continued inspecting Arbol the way he would a horse. He stopped and asked, "If he was born on the island, why is he not branded? He should have at least one mark on his shoulder."

"The...previous owner. He did it where you can't see it. I guess he did not wish to mar Arbol's beautiful skin."

"I can understand not wanting to damage this beautiful skin," Raúl noted. "But it would be a far worse crime to damage this ass!" Raúl slapped, stroked, then squeezed Arbol's buttocks.

"What's this all about? What are you doing to him?" Alonso demanded. "Father, what's he doing?"

"*Raúl, por favor!*" Bernardo pleaded.

"You really should try going to a slave auction sometime, Alonso," Raúl suggested, then tweaked one of Arbol's nipples and slapped the flat, firm belly. He ran his hands over Arbol's arms, feeling his biceps and shoulders, then ran a hand down the middle of Arbol's back. The dark brown cleft of Arbol's spine made Raúl want to lick him.

"I must have this slave," Raúl declared as he pried open Arbol's mouth. He inspected his teeth, his tongue, searched for open sores. He then searched Arbol's eyes, pulled the slave's head down toward him, and parted the thick hair here and there, searching for lice.

"You can't have him." Alonso stepped toward them.

"Why not?" Raúl demanded.

"Because he's mine. Father, tell him."

"That's enough, Raúl," Bernardo fumed. "Arbol is not for sale."

"Then lend him to me," Raúl countered. "I'll return him in a few days."

"I'm not selling him to you, nor am I lending him to you. Now, why don't we leave the boys alone, go back to the house, and discuss what you came here for?"

"In a moment." Raúl waved his hand flippantly.

"Father, if you don't do something..."

"Raúl..."

"Shhh!" Raúl turned back to Arbol. "Drop your pants, boy!" he commanded, forcing the sound of Bernardo's brat from his mind. He gazed down between Arbol's legs.

"Raúl, please! Stop this nonsense. Now! Leave my slave alone! He is *not* for sale, nor is he up for inspection."

"I said drop your pants, boy!"

Arbol froze when Raúl stepped out into the open. Rooted to the spot, he fixed on a distant point, then set his heart and mind on Alonso. It was that, more than anything, that gave him newfound strength.

Even when Raúl turned his attention to him, when Raúl barked at him to drop his pants, Arbol knew what would happen. With a whimper, he reached for the hook in his pants. But he was too slow for Raúl.

The man reached to yank them down himself. Alonso leaped, grabbed Raúl by the wrist and spun the older man around.

“Leave...him...alone,” Alonso said threateningly. “Arbol is not for sale. He is mine.”

Ashamed, Arbol quickly clutched at his pants and pulled them up. A sound escaped his throat, and he took a step back as Raúl jerked his hand away from Alonso's grip.

“Arbol”—don Bernardo stepped forward—“take the rest of your clothes and go home. Now.”

Arbol was only too glad to do as his master commanded. He picked up his tuniclike shirt with nervous fingers and didn't bother to put it on. He walked away, slowly at first.

“I want him,” Arbol heard Raúl say. “Sell him to me, and I'll forget about last night.”

Arbol picked up his pace, afraid to hear any more. He broke into a trot suddenly and raced home. To the shack he shared with Nana.

Bernardo stared Raúl down. He kicked himself mentally, wondering how it was that something so simple as branding could have escaped him. And for so long.

But it had. And now things were about to get worse.

Bad enough his authority as a father had been undermined before his very eyes, that he'd been so stunned he was all but paralyzed and unable to react to Raúl, to make him stop. Now his peccadillos had been all but revealed. The safety and distance that had once protected his family from the truth about his arrangement with Raúl was gone and their affair reared its ugly head. Bernardo realized at that moment he never should have brought his son with him. And for the first time in his life, he wondered if perhaps he shouldn't have listened to his wife so many years ago and found some other way.

"You had no right to do that, Raúl. No right at all."

"No. I suppose not. He is your property after all."

"This is low. Even for you," Alonso mumbled, clenching and unclenching his fists. Raúl turned toward Alonso.

"You think you know me, boy?" Raúl laughed. "You don't. Your father is the only one who comes close. You, on the other hand, have no idea what I'm capable of."

"Why did you do this, Raúl?" Bernardo asked, forcing himself to remain calm. "If you have issue with me, then talk to me. Leave my son and my slaves out of it. They've done nothing to you."

Raúl slowly faced him, ugly with anger. His good eye was red and glassy.

"I'm getting even for what you did to me last night," Raúl replied softly and walked up to Bernardo until their noses were inches apart.

"I suppose now we're even, then." Bernardo cleared his throat.

"You think so?" Raúl said with a glint in his eye. Bernardo struggled to keep from stepping back like he wanted.

"You think it's that simple, Bernardo?" Raúl continued. "To just...end something and walk away because you no longer want to be a part of it? What if I don't want it to end?"

"Raúl." Bernardo chuckled nervously. "You can't be serious. That was...part of the bargain we agreed to so many years ago. That's all." But even as he said it, as he looked at Raúl's face, Bernardo realized it had meant a lot more to Raúl.

Suddenly, Raúl reached out. Bernardo flinched and tried to break free from Raúl's grasp, but the man held the back of his neck tightly. His lips pressed against Bernardo's own. They felt like fire. Bernardo continued to struggle. Finally, heart pounding, Bernardo managed to break away from Raúl. He brushed at his lips with the back of his hand.

"You and I are over when I say," Raúl whispered almost threateningly.

"If you ever do that again, I'll kill you," Bernardo said angrily, his chest rising and falling.

"It's the only way you'll be rid of me." Raúl chuckled. "But I know you. It's an idle threat. You could never kill me. You lack the courage."

Bernardo looked back and forth between his son and the man who had once aroused him. Now he only felt shame for ever having been with Raúl, for ever having thought he would be able to handle him, for giving in to the sins of the flesh, the temptation that had chiseled away at his soul.

"I see you have a lot on your mind." Raúl grinned maliciously. "So I'm going to leave you now. But come to me in a few weeks. With Arbol. I'll pay you handsomely for him. Then you can die with your secrets. I give you my word, no one will ever know or hear anything about...us...from my own lips." Raúl stopped and glanced at Alonso.

"Of course, I can't speak for this one here." Raúl cocked his head toward Alonso.

Bernardo swallowed, his brow covered in sweat as he shook and trembled from the tangle of emotions coursing through him. Anger. Fear. Loathing. He lowered his head in shame as Alonso approached.

Bernardo closed his eyes, feeling as if his entire world were suddenly crashing in around him. He could feel Raúl and Alonso staring at him. He could feel his son's anguish, imagine how Adelina would react if she were to ever find out. The very thing Adelina would never condone. The very thing he had hoped to avoid.

"Father?"

Bernardo felt his son's hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes, and the ground seemed to sway beneath his feet. Bernardo's legs quivered. His head reeled, and he grew dizzy as a wave of nausea nearly overcame him. For a moment, he thought he might pass out. But he refused to do so as long as Raúl stood before him.

Bernardo dug deeper within and somehow found what he needed to hold on a moment longer.

“Come see me,” Raúl said. “I’ll even be generous. One month. Then I expect you at my doorstep with the necessary paperwork to make this an official sale.”

Raúl turned sharply and walked away.

When he had disappeared from view, Bernardo staggered. He could hear Alonso as if from a great distance, concern and panic in his voice.

Bernardo managed to get to the rock where Alonso's clothes had previously lain. It was still wet. There, Bernardo sat with his eyes closed a moment. When he had regained his composure, Bernardo opened his eyes. He looked up at his son who was pacing back and forth.

“Alonso,” Bernardo said quietly, “I think it's time you and I talk. I have...many...many things to tell you. Let's go up to the house.”

Chapter Ten

It was late. A single lantern lit the room and cast shadows that flickered and danced around the hot, damp room. The thick walls that kept the blistering sun cool during the day seemed to emit heat at night. Meanwhile, the shared silence only grew heavier still.

Across from him, on the other side of the desk, sat his father, his face obscured mostly by shadow. Alonso could just barely make out the silhouette. Outside, the soothing rhythm of a steady rain made him feel surprisingly calm, considering the things his father had confessed over the last few hours. But his heart felt heavy.

He'd learned the truth about how Arbol had come to them and why it was important to keep it from Raúl, lest he accuse them of stealing. There was the matter of their dwindling funds as they tried to live by Adelina's idealistic beliefs. And then there was his father's affair with his mother's sworn mortal enemy and the attraction even his father could not understand. And as if that were not enough, there was also the possibility that his father might stay on the island instead of returning to Spain. Although, after what had happened with Raúl, Alonso didn't think—at least, he hoped—his father would be foolish enough to stay.

Alonso kept coming back to Arbol.

Sweet, handsome, loving Arbol, who, being the most innocent in the game of master and slave, would wind up paying most dearly because of another's business negotiations and indiscretions.

"Is that...everything?" Alonso asked after a while. There was a barely perceptible sound from his father.

“Good.” Alonso sighed with relief. “Because I don't know that I can deal with much more.” There were so many things he wanted to say, but there were too many thoughts chasing each other around in his mind.

He lifted the glass in his hand up to the light and swirled the amber liquid. Fascinated by the impurities still floating in it, like remnants of a bad dream.

How could everything have gone so wrong in just a matter of days? They'd barely just arrived. Alonso wished he could just go to sleep and forget the day had ever happened, pretend it had all been a nightmare.

Except for the time he had spent with Arbol. That had been special. It had been wonderful, in fact. And it had felt...good. One of the sweetest, most innocent, most tender moments Alonso ever remembered having with another human being. But why was something that made him feel so elated also so heavily punctuated by events that dragged his heart through the mud?

“Well?” Bernardo asked after a long silence.

“Well, what?” Alonso replied. He shot back the two fingers of rum left in his glass. A burning sensation made him wince, but he poured himself another drink.

“Aren't you...going to say anything?”

Alonso gave an uncomfortable laugh and stood. He paced awhile before turning back to the shadow of his father.

“What would you like me to say?” Alonso asked with something like resignation in his voice. “What's done is done. If you're expecting forgiveness, don't look at me. I'm not a priest.”

There was another silence before Bernardo spoke up again.

“I want to know...how you feel.”

Alonso laughed loudly and began pacing again.

“I feel...confused. Angry. Upset,” Alonso said with a sigh. Outside, the rain was slowing. “What does it really matter how I feel anyhow? Will it make you feel any better to know how disappointed I am?”

“No...but—”

“I looked up to you,” Alonso interrupted, his anger mounting as the initial shock passed. It was one thing to hear blasphemies about his father from another person of dubious background. But to hear them from his father's lips was far worse. It was as if the man Alonso had known all his life as the one to turn to when he had problems, the one to look up to as he grew from childhood into adulthood, had exposed all his weaknesses and revealed himself to be someone other than who Alonso had thought. Alonso was both saddened and almost disgusted that his father had been so...human.

“I cannot believe that a man with your education...a man of your standing and background...could so effectively...and single-handedly...destroy so many people's lives in one fell swoop. And all because you chose to sleep with that abomination of a human!”

“Alonso,” Bernardo pleaded quietly. “Por favor. Aren't you being just a little harsh?”

“A little harsh? This is nothing compared to what you'd get if Mother ever found out! What do you think she would do if it had been she to whom you confessed? How do you think she'd react?”

Bernardo lowered his head.

“I thought so,” Alonso said smugly.

“In all fairness, I really didn't have a choice, Son,” Bernardo said defensively. “There were many factors that—”

“The only factor,” Alonso interrupted, “that Mother would care about is that you slept with Raúl. Not once, mind you, but repeatedly throughout the course of fourteen years. Or however long you've known each other. You've always told me to do nothing I wouldn't be proud of. To set an example. Is this the sort of example you were referring to?”

His father remained silent. Alonso sighed after a moment. He stepped back to the chair he had occupied earlier and sat again.

“Did you...did you at least...or do you...love him?” Alonso asked as he leaned in, unsure he wanted to know.

“It's complicated, Son.”

“Father, please!” Alonso's tone was that of an adult speaking to a child. “It's not so complicated! It's very simple. You either loved him, love him still, or you don't.”

“I-I thought I did. Once,” Bernardo replied eventually.

“And was that before you married Mother or after?”

“Alonso. Understand that any feelings I may have had for Raúl had nothing to do with the feelings I had for your mother. They were totally different from each other! Besides”—Bernardo sighed—“it's what we do.”

“What do you mean by that... 'It's what we do'?”

Bernardo stood and walked around his desk. He leaned on the edge, several feet away from Alonso.

“Sometimes, men can...amuse each other... And it's something that's just pleasurable. Nothing more. No emotions. It's simply physical. Especially when you're young. I had...close friends when I was your age. But then it's time to grow up and realize that we have obligations to fulfill. Duties we need to carry out. Children to sire, business to which we must attend.”

Alonso quickly looked up at his father. He sensed his father was trying to say more than the basic meaning of the words.

“What are you trying to say?” Alonso's skin crawled.

“Just...that I think you might be...a bit judgmental of me at the moment when we're really not so different.”

“Judgmental? Me? What are you talking about? You're the one who wanted to know how I felt! You're the one who asked what I thought about...all this! And you and I are no more alike than you and Raúl are alike.”

“What about...Tocino?”

"Tocino?" Alonso laughed nervously. "The ship's cook? He's got nothing to do with what we're discussing here."

"You can't tell me there was nothing between you."

Alonso swallowed, momentarily stunned and unable to speak. He felt himself flush. He stood and turned from his father, hoping that in the darkness the man could not see his face. "You don't know anything about Tocino. Or me for that matter."

"You know, I may have some years on you, but I *was* your age once. You don't think I had my flings? I had some...very close friends. Long before I ever met your mother."

But Alonso's only response was to roll his eyes and fold his arms across his chest in exasperation.

"What about Arbol?" Bernardo asked quietly. That was a question Alonso had not expected. He spun around and narrowed his eyes.

"What about him?"

"Are you in love with him?"

"In love? With Arbol? Me? What are you talking about? He's just a—my—uh, friend. That's all." But his heart began to pound loudly, and Alonso was left wondering. What was Arbol exactly to him? How did he feel about Arbol? And why, after so many years, did he feel such an instant connection to him? As if in all the world, this was the only man, the only person, who could ever accept him, complete with flaws and imperfections. No questions asked, no excuses, no conditions. A man with whom he could never hope or dream to be—let alone a man with whom he might have a future.

Alonso was silent a moment. He could feel his father's gaze. He cleared his throat, pushed all thought of Arbol aside as best he could, and squared his shoulders.

“That's not a fair question.” Alonso sat and stared out the window behind the desk.

“Isn't it?”

“No. This is about what *you* have done. Not me. My affairs have harmed no one.”

“Neither did mine. At first. And I never thought anyone would get hurt. Just as you probably do right now.”

Bernardo's heart felt heavy. So heavy, in fact, it was a wonder he was able to continue speaking. He imagined how he must look through his son's eyes. Sad? Pathetic? Weak?

How horrible to be confronted with truths about one's own father. Truths that displayed, without mercy, his most egregious flaws and mistakes, his inability to handle some of the most difficult situations life had ever thrown in his direction.

His son's comment, and all that it implied, echoed in his mind: “*This is about what you have done. My affairs have harmed no one.*” It was clear his son had not understood his reasons for confessing his sins. It was clear the justification he was seeking would not come from Alonso. Perhaps the boy was right. Perhaps he sought forgiveness. After all, didn't everyone?

Was it so horrible for a father to seek forgiveness from his son? For all his mistakes, all his decisions that would one day affect his flesh and blood?

Bernardo resented feeling the need to explain himself, but the things Raúl had declared—they all sounded so dirty and sleazy, so vile and disgusting that he felt compelled to do so. He needed Alonso to understand the reasons for his actions when his children had been young. He hated turning the tables on Alonso, but it was the only way to illustrate the message he hoped to convey.

“Alonso.” Bernardo's voice cracked. “All I'm trying to say is that...trysts like yours are fine. Normal. Even healthy for a young man to have. It's when they turn

into what *this* has become—when other's lives become so intricately involved—that it's not healthy. When it comes right down to it, Alonso, men *need* to marry. We *need* to have children. It's what society dictates of us.”

“Are you saying that you loved Raúl but married Mother because you had to? Is that it?”

“It was arranged.” Bernardo tried to explain.

“You could have said no. If you didn't love her, you could have just walked away, forged your own path, and made your way to whatever life you wanted.”

“Son.” Bernardo shook his head. “It's not that simple. Sometimes we don't get to have a say in what we do. We have no choice in certain matters of our life. If we're lucky, there are some things we can control, but in the end we're just floating along, and there is nothing we can do.”

Bernardo reached out to Alonso, but his son flinched.

“Don't.” Alonso put up a hand and shook his head. He stood and turned his back on Bernardo. “You have no idea how angry I am right now with you.

“I thought we came here to talk,” Alonso continued, his voice softening. “To find a solution to this deplorable situation. And all you've done is tell me your dirty secrets and make excuses for yourself by telling me life is complicated! Then you turn the tables on me, and now I feel like I'm the one under scrutiny!”

Bernardo suddenly burst out laughing. He moved away from the desk and poured another drink, unable to stop chuckling.

Ah, the conviction of the young! Bernardo mused. His father had warned him that someday this would happen.

“What's so funny?” Alonso demanded. “This is no laughing matter!”

“Oh but it is!” Bernardo finally said between tears. He took a swig of the rum. “It would just be funnier if it weren't happening here. To us.”

“I don't understand.”

“You think everything is so simple, don't you? Standing there looking at me like I disgust you. I was your age once. I thought I knew everything. I used to think everything was yes or no. Black or white. But you know what? I learned. So will you. You'll see as you get older and have children of your own that life, unfortunately, isn't always so simple. You'll find that in life, nothing is ever as easy as it sounds. You'll find that the answer you seek isn't always clear. And you'll wonder: Am I doing the right thing? Am I saying what I should say? You'll make mistakes, as I did. That's the harsh reality of life. Now, sit down.”

Alonso stood, transfixed.

“I said sit down!” Bernardo raised his voice and spoke sternly. Alonso sat as if he were still a child. Bernardo looked at him somewhat sadly.

“I'm tired of fighting. I don't want to do this anymore.” Bernardo took another swig of his drink before continuing. “I only wanted you to hear my side of the story and not just the filthy accusations from Raúl's mouth. Perhaps I made a mistake in thinking you were man enough to accept and understand the things I told you.” Bernardo held a hand up when Alonso bristled. “Let me finish. I thought you would have sympathy and understand my reasons. But I see I was wrong. So I'll try a different approach.

“You've been learning the business of Casa Rodrigo for many years now. You have a gift for people. So here it is.” Bernardo took a deep breath and plunged.

“I don't like this slavery issue any more than you do. I have not slept properly since I signed the necessary documents detailing our—*my*—business negotiations. But you know what kept me going? Knowing that I was still putting food on the table for my family. Knowing that you, your brother, and your mother were being clothed. That you and Fernando were getting an education. That's how I justified my involvement in this dubious business.”

Bernardo paused and searched Alonso's face for a reaction. When he encountered no resistance, he continued.

"I do not regret it, Alonso. Even with all the unsavory things that have happened, all the unpleasant things I asked you to listen to. Understand that under the same circumstances, I would do exactly same thing over again. Because if I hadn't, we would have been on the streets like so many peasants."

"How would it be if we sold the plantation and got out of this part of the business? We must have enough money saved aside now that we don't have to worry."

"We have some money set aside, yes," Bernardo sat and leaned back, grateful to be moving toward a discussion on how to solve their problem. It was one of the things he had hoped for and was glad to see it happening, even if forgiveness seemed long in coming.

"But that money won't last long," Bernardo continued. "And even if we were to sell the plantation and all the slaves, we would have problems. First, we are our number one client. The products we harvest here and ship to Spain, other parts of the world, make up nearly thirty-five percent of Casa Rodrigo's revenue. So you see the problem?" Bernardo leaned forward. He could tell by the look in Alonso's eyes that it was quite clear.

Bernardo poured more rum into his glass and offered some to Alonso. The boy shook his head.

"Even if that were not the case," he continued, "if we sold the plantation, what do you think would become of the slaves? We can't walk away from them. Could you? We have no way of knowing how they would be treated."

"Can't we free them?" Alonso suggested.

"That, I'm afraid, would be financial disaster. We would have to pay wages, and we're in no position to do so."

Father and son sat quietly in the waning light. The only sound in the room was from the dwindling rain outside.

Bernardo knew his son was thinking as hard as he could, grabbing at straws, as they sifted through ideas, then discarded them. Bernardo recognized the pattern

and the way in which Alonso thought. He was, after all, his own flesh and blood. He was grateful to see that they had moved past the bickering and judgmental accusations.

"I don't see any other way around this, Alonso," Bernardo said softly. "I'm sorry."

"I can't accept that," Alonso replied with something like pleading in his voice. "There *has* to be a way! You're just...giving up!"

"If we don't sell Arbol to Raúl, he will talk. And he will not stop at Adelina. I've known Raúl a very long time. He will make sure every single one of our associates knows what has happened between us. The bad thing, for me, and the business, of course, is that he'll twist it all about so that he is the one made to look like the victim and I the laughingstock."

"But Arbol is innocent. Why should he pay for any of this?"

"Alonso. I don't want to do this any more than you do. It sickens me, but I see no alternative. I have to protect what it has taken me decades to build, so that you and Fernando have something to build upon. Pass on to your children."

"But don't you see you'll have implicated me in your lies!"

"You were implicated from the moment your mother handed him to you that horrible night. We all were."

"Don't you think Raúl will find out Arbol truly belongs to him?"

"Not if we brand him."

"Oh God." Alonso sighed, closed his eyes, and rested his head in his palms.

"What Raúl doesn't know... Besides, selling Raúl something that's rightfully his is ironic. Don't you think?"

"What about Raúl?" Alonso mumbled, obviously ignoring his father.

"What about him?" Bernardo asked, momentarily confused. Alonso locked eyes with him. His piercing gaze seemed to sear right through him.

"Are you going to continue seeing him?"

Bernardo closed his eyes and thought a moment. He swallowed nervously. A certain tightness crept into his chest.

"I—that is, *we*—will *always* see Raúl."

"Why?" Alonso suddenly blurted.

Bernardo did not reply.

"What did you ever see in him, anyway?" Alonso asked. "The man is foul and hateful. He's absolutely despicable. He has no consideration for propriety and what is decent. Not to mention the fact that the man has about as much discretion as a common street whore!"

Bernardo pulled back as if he had just been slapped. There was no doubt in his mind that his son was correct. But to be so vocal and adamant in his convictions. Surprised at himself, Bernardo couldn't help but defend Raúl, for at the same time he was defending himself. He thought back to the very first time he had seen Raúl.

"You should have seen him when we first met. He was handsome. Still is. But he was dashing. A rogue. There was...something about him that pulled me inexplicably. I was attracted to him instantly. I don't know why. We were so different."

Bernardo sighed and continued.

"He was playing cards with a brute of a man reputed to be a pirate. They got into a fight. Apparently the pirate tried to cheat Raúl."

"I'm surprised it wasn't the other way around," Alonso said in a snide tone.

"He was everything I never was. Painfully honest. Strong. Fiery," Bernardo continued, ignoring his son's comment.

"You should have left him alone."

"If I had left him alone, he might have been killed."

"If you had let him die, none of this would have happened."

And now. Here it was. The moment of truth. Would Alonso be able to handle it?

“If I had let Raúl die,” Bernardo said carefully, “I never would have met your mother. Worse yet, I never would have been blessed with two beautiful sons whom I love more than my own life.”

“How is that possible?”

Bernardo looked into his son's eyes. The dying flame from the lantern was reflected as two pinpoints in Alonso's piercing blue eyes.

“It was Raúl who introduced me to your mother.”

“Come now.” Alonso snorted. “Surely you're not saying that Mother had anything to do with this man.”

Bernardo poured more rum into his glass. He put the bottle down, picked up the glass, and threw his head back. The rum burned his throat as he swallowed, then spoke.

“Have you never noticed that those beautiful eyes of yours—the eyes you share with your brother, your mother—are identical to Raúl's?” Bernardo watched Alonso intently. He saw recognition begin to dawn on his son's face.

“That's right, Alonso. Raúl is your uncle. He's Adelina's half-brother.”

Chapter Eleven

Arbol was enchained. Try as he might, he couldn't break free. He wore a belled collar around his neck in case he managed to get loose and run off into the mountains. He would be far easier to find.

Before him, Raúl sneered as he put something thick and round in his mouth. Sugarcane. Arbol could taste the sticky, sweet juice pouring from where Raúl jabbed it into his teeth.

Arbol continued to struggle as Raúl stepped away, knowing that whatever was about to happen would not be a good thing. That's when he became aware of the enormous fire. It seemed to grow larger as Raúl approached again, knelt down, and poked at the embers.

With panic clutching at his throat, Arbol noticed the block of wood in Raúl's hand. At the end was a fiery golden ring with letters in it. They glowed from having been in the fire.

Arbol started to protest in earnest, struggling to break free. He prayed to the God the priests said he should pray to. He prayed to the different gods Nana believed in. But none answered, if they had ever been there at all. He thought of Alonso, hoping he would come and save him.

But the only one who came was Raúl, moving closer, in a maddeningly slow way. Arbol screamed in agony as the man, his new owner, pressed the fiery-hot metal against his shoulder and seared his flesh.

Arbol sat bolt upright, momentarily disoriented. He glanced frantically about the room. Gradually, he realized he was still in the shack he shared with Nana. He

tried telling himself it had been a very bad dream. Nothing but his fears getting the best of him.

But the dream had been so real. He could still feel the heat from the fire, feel his flesh crawl as Raúl came closer with the branding iron.

In his heart, Arbol knew it was no dream, but a vision of what was to come.

It saddened him that Alonso had not come to save him. Arbol wondered what that meant. Would the young man who made him feel safe and protected eventually let him down? He didn't know if he could live with that, didn't know if he wanted to. But he knew the possibility existed. Alonso was a Spaniard, the master, and Arbol a slave. What could he possibly hope for?

A whimper escaped Arbol's throat as he lay back down, his entire body slick with sweat. He closed his eyes, but each time he did, all he could see was Raúl coming at him with that glowing-hot iron.

Arbol tossed and turned on the dirt floor, uncomfortable and unable to close his eyes. It was no use; sleep now eluded him.

The hope he had allowed himself to feel when he had laid eyes on Alonso again after so many years now lay gasping like a dying fish out of water. The joyous feeling that made his heart swell when they spent the afternoon together now felt like some heavy animal sitting on his chest.

Best not to feel. Best not to give my heart to him. And yet just as he knew Raúl would soon be his new master, Arbol knew it was too late to take his heart back. The worst thing was that he didn't even know how or when he had given it to Alonso.

Arbol rolled onto his back gingerly, expecting to feel the pain he felt in the dream. A lone tear trickled down the side of his face. There was only one thing to do, but he was frightened by the urgency he felt.

If only Nana were awake. She always knew the right thing to say, the right thing to do to make him feel better. But she was snoring quietly on the other side of the room.

Arbol got up from the dusty floor and stepped outside, his restlessness making him jittery. He looked up at the night sky. The clouds had dispersed, exposing the sliver of a moon, and the rain had stopped. A wet, earthy scent hung in the air as Arbol stepped off the tiny, creaky porch and onto the dirt path.

His feet started moving without telling him where or why they were going. It was as if they had a mind of their own. But it was all right with Arbol. He had to leave anyway. He couldn't stay where he was. Couldn't just sit and let them come for him. Might as well leave now. It was best not to tell anyone, not to involve them.

He thought of Alonso and the afternoon they had shared. How wonderful to have felt the inexplicable things he had. Even if for a short while. But it was best not to think of that either.

A runaway, Arbol thought. I'm a runaway now. God? If you're out there, please. Please guide me.

A momentary doubt struck him to the point where he was nearly paralyzed. Arbol shook it off and pushed on. He couldn't afford to let his fears take control of him. He would just have to deal with them later and hope for the best. He was going to trust that his feet would take him where he needed to go.

Finding out Raúl was his uncle had been the last straw. He remembered standing, stunned at the words that echoed in his mind. He had hoped, still hoped, he hadn't heard correctly. But deep down inside, Alonso knew what his father said was truth.

Fuming, he had stormed out of his father's office.

Why did no one ever say anything?

The very idea that he and that horrible man were related incensed him. But it infuriated him even more that his parents had chosen to keep it from him, especially his mother. She was so free with her thoughts, her emotions when it came to other issues.

And then it hit him.

What good would it have done? Why should she claim a man like that as family? Alonso certainly wouldn't want Raúl as a relative; why should she?

Still, it was the principle.

Alonso wondered briefly if Fernando knew. A sudden pang of homesickness struck him and rolled through him like a wave. He felt guilty for not having thought of his brother since embarking on his voyage. But now he wished Fernando were near. He needed someone to talk to so badly, to help defuse emotions until he could deal with them. He could always count on Fernando to tell a joke or say some crude thing to make him laugh and forget his worries.

But this confession...

He doubted even Fernando, with his detached approach to everything and everyone, would have been able to remain levelheaded.

Confession, Alonso decided, was definitely overrated. It was good only for the person relieving his guilt. The confessor was then left holding the crown of thorns. What was he supposed to do with his father's secrets? It was as if his father had gone and created one huge mess solely so that Alonso could now clean it all up. But how?

Alonso stopped suddenly and looked around. He had been so busy stoking his anger, he was unsure of where he was. Then he heard the babbling sound of gently running water.

Stunned he had walked so far without realizing it, Alonso found he actually did not care where he was or where his feet had taken him. So long as it was far away from the house, away from his father, and away from his disgusting confessions and ridiculous excuses for the way things had turned out.

If the man couldn't run his life, his own affairs, how was he expected to run the large family business that Casa Rodrigo had become? When Alonso got back to Spain, he was going to make sure he spoke to his brother about relieving their father of his duties. As partners, surely they could at least make the demand?

Alonso didn't see any reason why not. Except that Fernando would probably want to know why. His brother wouldn't just agree to side with him. After all, for all their similarities, there were just as many dissimilarities.

Alonso growled in anger at the position in which his father had placed him. And then, for the man to have had the audacity to tell him that he would understand when he got older! That things weren't always as easy as they seemed, so clear-cut, so black-and-white. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Repercussions? Societal pressures? To hell with them!

Alonso swore on the spot that no one would ever tell him whom to love or whom to marry—least of all the very man who had kept so many secrets from him. He was the last person who had any rights to make such demands.

Alonso approached the edge of Rio de Piedras and was reminded of the afternoon he had spent with Arbol. It had been so peaceful, so erotic. He could still taste Arbol, smell him. It was as if the slave still lingered somewhere in his mind, in his heart. Had it really only been just a few hours ago? How quickly everything had crumbled from that point.

Sitting on the boulder where their clothes had lain out to dry, Alonso tried desperately to figure a way out of the mess his father had created. But the more he thought, the more muddled his thoughts became. Nothing was clear except for one thing. As long as he was there, Alonso would not allow Arbol's sale to Raúl.

"If only he were dead!" Alonso muttered into the night. But as quickly as the words spilled from his mouth, a pang of guilt racked him, and Alonso shuddered. No matter how much he resented the man, the decision to take another man's life was not one to be made lightly.

Alonso closed his eyes and took a very deep breath to calm himself and his mind. It was the only way he was going to clear his thoughts. He exhaled slowly, and the image of Arbol's face swam before him.

What do I do? God in heaven, if you're listening, please show me the way. Send me a sign so I know what to do.

A rustle from beyond the trees made Alonso stand. He tensed as the sound drew near. His skin tingled, and there was a thrilling yet odd feeling running through him. It was something like fear mixed with excitement.

Alonso's mind whirled, no longer on the sins of his father as he wondered who or what rustled in the dense foliage. It was clearly not the wind. The sound was too steady for that and growing louder by the second.

Then it stopped.

Alonso thought he saw the silhouette of a tall man in the distance. As a precaution, he automatically reached for the pistol at his hip—the one he had been advised to carry at all times. With Tortuga, the pirate island, nearby and Port Royal condoning raids on Spanish ships, there were too many unsavory characters traipsing about the island.

Except he'd forgotten it.

"A...Alonso?" a voice called out tentatively.

"Arbol!" Alonso's heart leaped, and he felt enormously relieved. A grin spread across his face. He closed the distance between them in a few strides. Arbol wrapped his powerful arms around him as if he were clinging to life itself. His heart beat rapidly and his breath was hot and fast. And yet it was the sensation of Arbol's mostly naked flesh against the thin fabric of his shirt that aroused him.

"I'm glad to see you," Alonso said and pulled back.

Without a word, Alonso clutched Arbol tightly and sought Arbol's mouth. Surprised by his own urgency, like a man saved from drowning, Alonso held Arbol's face fast. Their lips burned as they brushed together, and their tongues wrestled passionately.

There was something about their closeness, the way they intimately inhaled the same air together that made Alonso feel light-headed. As if they were breathing as one. As if Arbol's very soul had entered Alonso's body.

Alonso knew Arbol needed the same things he did at the moment: solace, a comforting hand, someone he could be with who understood him and returned the emotion.

And yet the young slave seemed to hesitate.

"Alonso, I..." Arbol started.

"You called me by my name," Alonso teased.

"Because I feel close to you," Arbol replied in a hushed tone. Alonso only held him tighter. "Please, we really should not."

"Why?" Alonso pleaded. "You just said you felt close to me. And I need you. Especially after—"

"Alonso, por favor. Don't make it harder than it is. I—that is, we—this cannot go anywhere. No matter how close I might feel."

Alonso held Arbol's face still and forced him to look in his eyes.

"You heard what Raúl said, didn't you?" Alonso said softly. It was half statement, half question. Arbol nodded.

"And that's why we shouldn't do this, señor!" Arbol replied quietly. Tears streamed down his face. "This afternoon...when we talked about that story. I could not help but think that I was that Moor. But that instead of marrying the woman, I discovered it was you who..." Arbol choked back a sob.

"I waited so many years, Alonso. I thought I'd never see you again. I'd almost forgotten what you looked like. I thought maybe I did something to upset your father for him to leave me here all alone, without explanation."

"No, Arbol. It wasn't anything like that. He—We—" Alonso stopped, a part of him feeling guilty for barely giving Arbol a thought until they had met again a few days ago. He wondered if he should go further, if he should explain to Arbol why he was on the island. He looked into Arbol's eyes and decided he had a right to know. But where to begin? Alonso scoured his memory for the scraps he remembered,

added them to what his father had told him, and decided it was best to start at the beginning.

“Your mother died when you were just born,” Alonso began and told Arbol all he knew of the fateful night that changed their lives. From what he knew of the scream that had woken him, what little he had seen from the dark doorway, to the first time he had held Arbol in his arms.

Arbol listened with rapt attention and remained silent long after Alonso stopped speaking. Finally, almost painfully, Arbol spoke.

“I'm grateful...for don Bernardo wanting to protect me. Your father is a good man.”

Alonso did not respond, and the two remained quiet.

“You know, this afternoon was—I never expected...” Arbol trailed off.

“Never expected what?” Alonso probed.

“My heart to feel this way. So heavy and yet so light.”

Alonso felt as if a truth had been plucked from his chest. Even though he had not given Arbol much thought in the time they had been separated, when they met again, there was something like a tug. Something that swelled inside him, and it wasn't just about lust. It was something inexplicable. Something that made his lungs expand and filled his heart with an enormous feeling.

“I understand,” Alonso muttered. He kissed and licked at Arbol's lips, neck, fingers. “Nothing exists but you and me. Here. Now.”

“Not while Raúl lives, señor. Anything that you and I could ever hope to have would never be.”

“I'll talk to him. I'll make him see reason,” Alonso countered. Arbol looked silently at him a moment, took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled.

“Señor Velasco does not strike me as the kind of man who understands love or the feelings of one man for another. And after what you just told me, I'm not so sure anyone can make him see reason.”

Alonso smirked despite himself.

“Leave that to me,” Alonso replied a bit more confidently than he actually felt. He wasn't sure if it would work, but he knew there had to be something. He wasn't just going to sit idly by, like his father, and let Raúl trample all over their lives and do whatever he wanted. Blood relation or not.

“I...I can't stop thinking about you,” Arbol said huskily and bit his lower lip. “I want to be with you...al—”

But Arbol never got the chance to finish because Alonso's lips silenced him.

Chapter Twelve

Nothing mattered at that moment. Not the fear of being sold to Raúl. Not the nightmare he'd had a short while ago, which now seemed like ages. And certainly not their status. Just so long as he had Alonso's lips against his own, his tongue penetrating his mouth, his hands roaming his body.

Alonso's heat brought a certain comfort to Arbol. It made him feel as though everything would turn out right, even if the optimism was only in that moment.

Arbol could feel Alonso's cock throbbing and pulsating against his own erection. A wave of dizziness washed over him, and Arbol moaned. A frenzy of lust, so huge it was almost indecent, possessed Arbol. And even as his desire surged and mounted, he tried to understand the power Alonso held over him. These were all emotions he had never experienced before, but they filled him with such joy, such ecstasy that he dared to hope and believe the feelings might never end. If Alonso said so, then it would be.

And if it wasn't, Arbol would simply disappear.

But he didn't want to think about that now.

Now, all he wanted was to feel Alonso's rough, insistent hands travel from his broad shoulders, down to his narrow waist, burning his flesh as they slipped beneath Arbol's breeches and cupped at the firm, muscled globes of his buttocks.

Arbol moaned as Alonso clamped down where his neck and shoulders met. It felt as if Alonso's teeth would puncture his flesh as he chewed and sucked along the muscled cord. But he didn't care. He went limp in Alonso's arms, writhing in pleasure from the sensations building inside him.

"I want you, Arbol," Alonso whispered, his tongue darting, licking, nibbling at his earlobe.

"Yes," Arbol hissed, biting his lower lip. He relished the sensation of Alonso's crudely probing fingers. They tapped teasingly at the entrance where precious few had ever been; some against his will.

"I want to possess you. To own you. Body and soul."

"You already own me. You will always be...my master."

"That's not what I mean." Alonso pulled back. "You said you can't stop thinking about me. I can't stop thinking about you either. It's like you've...bewitched me." Alonso grabbed hold of Arbol's wrist and lowered his hand to grasp at his erection.

"Do you see what you do to me?" Alonso asked huskily.

Arbol groaned and sighed with the realization that no matter how hard he tried, he could not resist Alonso. He worked his breeches down past his hips, kicked them away, then dropped to his knees. He caressed the length of Alonso's hard shaft, then looked up as Alonso peeled off his shirt.

He sat back on his haunches and drank in the sight of his young master. From the thick, long hair—pulled back with a ribbon—to the piercing eyes that made him feel so naked and vulnerable. The fine nose, thick, wide lips, sturdy chin. Down to Alonso's chest and the hairy pelt that led down to a flat, taut belly. Then lower still, down to that magnificent cock.

Arbol grabbed it by the root, closed his eyes, and opened his mouth. He lovingly wrapped his lips around the head and slowly moved his head back and forth. He coaxed his throat to expand as he went farther, wanting to feel once more the entire length of Alonso's shaft down his throat. Wanted to look up, see Alonso looking down at him, and know that anything Alonso wanted, Arbol would do. Willingly.

Sucking cock was the one thing Arbol thoroughly enjoyed with another man. There was something about the heat, the sweat and moistness of another man's

privates, something intoxicating about the scent as he felt the weight of a man's balls. The way they moved—as if breathing on their own—as they spilled their seed down his throat, sent a rush of power and excitement through Arbol's body.

Instinctively, he knew the power he felt when taking another man's cock in his mouth, swallowing his seed, was the same the masters felt when exploiting the slaves.

For the briefest of moments, when Arbol held another man's balls in his hands and their cocks throbbed, swelling in his throat, just before that first spurt, Arbol was in control. Oh, the damage he could cause! They would fall to their knees before him!

Of course, he would never...

Still, the visions in his mind of their faces when they realized their manhood had been severed empowered Arbol. Even if only for a moment.

But with Alonso, it was different.

Arbol felt Alonso's hand at the back of his head. His nostrils flared against Alonso's pubic hair. Alonso moaned and shuddered as he gently bit at the very base of the cock firmly entrenched down his throat. Arbol felt it throb inside his throat and marveled that he could still, just barely, breathe.

The suction was incredible. He still could not believe Arbol was able to take his entire cock down his throat.

As good as it felt to be taken so deeply, so lovingly, there was something about giving so much of himself to another man that made him feel vulnerable. And yet that was part of the excitement. To give so freely, so willingly. To completely let go of everything in the world and on his mind. To simply exist in the sensation and relish the incredible rush of having his cock not just sucked but devoured.

Alonso looked down at Arbol, his lips around the base of his cock, throat bulging. He grabbed the back of his head and pumped gently. He could come so

quickly. But that wasn't how he wanted to come this time. He wanted to take Arbol the way he had taken Tocino on the ship.

Alonso pulled out of Arbol's throat and, without a word, indicated for Arbol to rise. He looked into Arbol's eyes. Their lips met, and their palms touched, fingers entwining. He could taste something salty on Arbol's tongue as he suckled, and knew it was his own clear juice. The flavor made him growl, and he licked at Arbol's neck, wrapped an arm around him, and leaned over to suckle and chew on Arbol's nipples until they were hard and firm.

Lower and lower he went, licking at Arbol's navel, until his cock was against his face, insistent and hot.

Alonso had never seen another man hard until Tocino. Even then, though, he'd had no desire to touch a man's privates, let alone put a cock in his mouth.

But there was something about Arbol and the way he made Alonso feel. Plus his cock was stunning. Thick, almost round, uncut like his own, the head a bright pink. The foreskin was loose and floppy while the rest of the shaft was a dark brown, smooth, creamy, and rich.

"I've never sucked a man before," Alonso muttered as he cupped Arbol's hefty balls, feeling their weight. He marveled at the heat emanating from the throbbing shaft.

"You don't have to," Arbol managed.

"And that's exactly why I want to," Alonso replied with a salacious grin. He then closed his eyes and suckled gently at the head, teasing, then biting. Arbol gasped and shuddered. His reaction pleased Alonso and spurred him on.

He worked slowly, eagerly, greedily attempting to take Arbol's shaft down his throat but only managed to take a few inches before gagging. He tried repeatedly, but Alonso was barely able to take little more than a third of the fat brown cock.

Alonso gave up after a while and spun Arbol around. There was something far more to his liking that he wanted to taste. He buried his face in the cleft of Arbol's ass. He inhaled deeply of the musky scent, and something fired in his brain. It was

like tiny pinpoints of light, stars all shimmering at the same time. In that moment, Alonso seemed to understand the hunger and greed with which Tocino had eaten him.

Arbol felt Alonso's strong, firm grip on his thighs as he was turned around. He moaned when Alonso's hot breath seared his flesh, then sucked his breath in sharply when Alonso's thick, wet, probing tongue lapped at the puckered entrance. Arbol bent over farther to allow Alonso's demanding tongue access. It lapped and gently filled his hole with spit.

Arbol moaned louder as Alonso brushed his chin up and down the crack of his ass. The stubble made Arbol tingle and his hole spasm. He dropped to his knees and rested his upper body on his elbows, ass up in the air. He pushed back, groaning as Alonso chewed at the rosebud, teasing him.

Alonso's tongue darted in and out playfully. He reached back and placed a hand at the back of Alonso's head. He pulled him closer, trying to get him to go deeper as the infernal itch of desire rose within him and swelled to the point where he could no longer take it. He needed more. Something bigger, thicker, far more satisfying than a tongue or a few fingers.

"Take me, Alonso!" Arbol whispered harshly, surprised at the depth of his own desires. He felt as though he were on fire.

Alonso pulled his face away and replaced his tongue with the head of his cock. Arbol prepared himself for the onslaught. No matter how much spit Alonso produced and slicked his hole with, it could never be enough. Taking him would be painful no matter what. But Arbol wanted Alonso inside him.

Alonso rubbed the head of his erection up and down Arbol's spasming hole. The juice from his cock, flowing freely, lubricated Arbol's puckered entrance. He remembered how delightful it had felt when he had been with Tocino.

Using his experience, Alonso rubbed the small of Arbol's back in an attempt to soothe him and help him relax.

"Push back when I enter," Alonso mumbled, leaning into him.

But no matter how patient he wanted to be with Arbol, the very nearness of him intoxicated Alonso. He grabbed Arbol by the hips and pushed. He felt Arbol's sphincter yield, and a small, wet, spongy sound filled his ears.

Before him, Arbol grunted painfully.

Alonso pulled back a moment. Arbol was so tight, it felt as if his foreskin were ripping. If it was painful for him, he could just imagine how Arbol might be feeling. He pulled his cock completely out of Arbol's backside, and Arbol all but collapsed on the ground.

Alonso spit down onto Arbol's hole, then buried his face in the deep cleft once more. He reached between Arbol's slightly spread legs, lifted his ass a little, and felt Arbol's soft cock. He groped and pulled down at it, slightly squeezing as though he were milking a cow. Within seconds, Arbol was as hard as before. His own clear juice slowly oozed.

Alonso pulled Arbol's cock back and suckled on the head, tasting his precum. It was sweet and salty at the same time. He pulled Arbol's cock back even farther and tried to bend it so the head touched his hole, but he was too hard for that. Alonso rubbed the head of his would-be lover's cock against his palms. Arbol convulsed, and he moaned uncontrollably.

Alonso rubbed the thick liquid oozing from Arbol's cock onto his own. He then smeared some of it along Arbol's hole with his thumb and added his own spit to further moisten his shaft.

After a moment, he pressed the head of his cock up against Arbol's hole again. He pushed, and it popped in with an audible sucking. Both of them groaned.

Alonso grabbed Arbol by the hips and felt a greedy power overtake him. He pushed and kept pushing, until he could go no farther. As if from a distance, he could hear Arbol growling. He opened his eyes and saw him clawing at the dirt.

Drunk with desire as he was, the image only fueled Alonso. Sweating profusely, he barely managed a few thrusts before a familiar sensation gripped him.

“Ay, Dios mío! Arbol! I'm going to...” Alonso finished with a series of loud grunts that echoed in the night. As he came, Alonso felt as if more than just cum spilled from his balls. It was as if he had emptied a portion of his spirit into the slave. Along with a part of his heart, his fears, his frustrations.

Chapter Thirteen

At first he was confused. What was he doing sleeping outside? He was accustomed to sleeping on a dirt floor, but to see greenery when he opened his eyes?

He quickly remembered as he felt the warmth of Alonso's body behind him, along with the soreness from the repeated times his young master had taken him throughout the long night.

But he couldn't dwell on that. The sky grew lighter, and he should have been miles away by now.

Quietly, gently, Arbol pulled away from Alonso's sleeping body. He delicately extricated himself from the weight of the heavy, possessive arm and leg pinning him down.

Alonso stirred as Arbol gathered his clothes and put them back on. He held his breath as Alonso muttered something he did not understand.

But then Alonso rolled over, and Arbol sighed with relief.

Arbol turned his back on Alonso and took a few steps before faltering. Something in his chest ached and brought tears to his eyes even as a sense of dread and sorrow filled him. He stopped and glanced over his shoulder at Alonso.

The sight of Alonso's naked backside, the curve of his spine, and the ass that was so magnificently round filled Arbol with longing. He wanted to snuggle up behind the virile young man just once more, but he knew that if he did so, he would never leave. And yet knowing he shouldn't, knowing it would only delay him further, Arbol found his feet leading him back to Alonso, where he dropped to one knee, kissed the young master on the cheek, and held him fiercely.

"Forgive me," Arbol whispered, stood, then hurriedly ran before he could change his mind. Already he missed the warmth of Alonso's body against his own and the musky scent of his sleep. Briefly, he wondered what it would have been like to fall asleep beside Alonso at night, to wake up with him without fear that he would be missed anywhere but in his arms.

Arbol pushed the thought from his mind as he wiped the tears from his eyes and pressed on.

* * *

Bernardo sat in the large puffy chair in his bedroom. Beyond his window, the black sky grew gray, and a rooster confidently announced the rising of the sun. The soft light allowed Bernardo to see his reflection in the mirror set into the doors of his armoire. His hair was loose and tangled from his running his hands repeatedly through it. His eyes were bloodshot, and there were dark circles under his eyes from lack of sleep. He rubbed at his face, his jaw, and felt the scratchy stubble.

Strangely, he thought of Adelina.

It's a good thing she's not here, or she'd reprimand me for looking like this. I'm a fright. Bernardo looked away from the mirror.

He found it odd how deeply one person could affect and influence another; but then, after so many years, she didn't need to be physically present to be with him. She lived in his very soul, it seemed, despite the lack of love in their marriage.

And that, more than anything, was perhaps the single best reason why he knew he had to do what was best—and right—for everyone. But what? His son was right of course. He hated to admit it. There *had* to be a way.

The memory of the dying black woman so many years ago—with the tiny black baby clutched tightly to her chest—had played itself over and over again in Bernardo's mind. Definitely one of the larger cruelties of life, he decided, was the inability to forget.

He thought he had done the right thing. Knew in his heart that if he had a chance to do it again, both he and Adelina would still have taken the baby from the dying woman's arms if only to keep him away from Raúl and a life of mostly endless torture. And yet a simple act meant to do good now mocked him. Yet another cruelty of life. Sometimes good deeds worked against him.

He hated himself for thinking the only solution to his problem was to sell Arbol to Raúl. Yes, there was a certain sense of satisfaction in taking the man's money for something that rightfully belonged to him. But at the same time he was revolted by what Raúl might do to the young man. After all, hadn't he witnessed Raúl's peculiarities firsthand?

And yet if he didn't sell Arbol to Raúl...

The very thought of his family in financial ruin, socially outcast as well—not to mention lost to him—was unacceptable.

No. There simply was no other way.

Arbol must be sacrificed to save Bernardo's family.

And your own skin. The voice in his head spoke truth.

Bernardo pushed the voice aside with a quick sigh, firm and resolute—if uncomfortable—with his decision. Suddenly weary and tired, Bernardo nodded, and his eyelids drooped.

“God forgive me,” Bernardo muttered, “for my own son may not.” He tilted his head. His eyes were gritty, and his tongue felt as if he had licked the brocade pants he still wore from two days ago.

But the look of shock and disgust on Alonso's face when he'd learned Raúl was a blood relative haunted Bernardo.

Sadly, Bernardo realized that no matter what the choices, he would lose something. Sadder still was the fact that losing the elder of his twin sons would hurt far fewer people. His best hope was that someday Alonso would forgive him.

Perhaps when he's older. Bernardo wondered when he had gotten so old himself. When was it exactly that life had run away from him?

Bernardo felt a huge wave of regret wash over him. He knew, finally, and understood how his son must see him. Briefly, he wondered if that was how he had looked when—at roughly Alonso's age—he'd discovered his father had lost nearly all the family fortune on loose women, drinking, and gambling.

Across the room, the warm, comfortable bed beckoned as surely and seductively as Raúl's arms had once done. He stood as if entranced. His body creaked and complained as he stretched and rubbed his eyes.

Exhausted, Bernardo drifted even before his head touched the pillow. But even as he found comfort, his body twitched and jerked, fraught with unwanted dreams.

* * *

Alonso moaned and stirred in the damp coolness of morning. He felt chilled and wondered—even as he dreamed of Arbol's lips softly kissing his cheek, the warmth of his body as Arbol embraced him—why he felt so suddenly overwhelmed with an inexplicable sadness. Even though they were together now, his heart ached. No harm would come to Arbol as long as Alonso was around. He had promised.

Alonso rolled over in his sleep, meaning to throw an arm and leg protectively over Arbol's body. He opened his eyes. He was confused at first, what with all the greenery before him, the sound of the river as it flowed lazily nearby, the loud crow of the rooster.

He sat up with a start and looked around. Arbol was nowhere to be seen.

As he gathered his clothes and slipped them on, Alonso told himself nothing was amiss. That Arbol had simply gone to the fields as he was supposed to. But in his heart, Alonso knew differently. There had been an urgency about Arbol the night before that was about more than just lust. Alonso knew that now in the light of day.

Fully dressed, Alonso slowly scanned the trees. He glanced up toward the mountain range in the distance that separated them from the other side of the island.

A heavy feeling filled Alonso's heart and settled on his chest. He struggled to breathe suddenly, and the effort caught in his throat as his vision blurred.

With watery eyes, Alonso turned and made his way back to the house, praying profoundly that no one had found Arbol.

But even as he climbed onto the porch and saw the frantic panic that lined the overseer's face, as he watched him fighting with Dante, Alonso knew without a doubt that the alarm would soon be raised. He could not let that happen. He would have to stall Perez. Buy Arbol some time. It wasn't much, but it was the best he could do.

"At least it's something," he muttered.

Alonso swallowed back his fear, found a confidence he did not feel, and approached.

"Hear, hear, señor Perez," Alonso said, hoping he sounded more jovial than he felt. "It's too beautiful a day to be in a panic. What's all this commotion?"

"I need to see don de Rodrigo immediately! This insolent piece of trash will *not* let me in!"

"Señor Perez." Alonso struggled to remain polite and swallowed back a sudden mounting anger. "Por favor. I would appreciate it if you did not speak ill of our slaves."

Perez looked at him with disdain but stepped down.

"Now. What is the matter? Anything you need to bring to my father, you can bring to me. What did you need to speak to him so urgently about?"

"With all due respect," Perez enunciated in a biting tone. "I need don Bernardo de Rodrigo."

"Señor. Forgive me, but—" Dante interrupted.

Alonso turned his attention toward Dante, aware Perez was bubbling just inches away. At the same time he was pleasantly surprised by Dante, who—as if emboldened by Alonso's presence—now squared his shoulders, lifted his chin, and addressed Perez in a slow and deliberate voice.

“Don Bernardo went to sleep an hour ago. He left me with *strict* orders not to disturb him. For anyone. Not even his son. Therefore, I cannot imagine he would wish to see you before his own flesh and blood. Do you?”

There was a moment of stunned silence.

“Why, you...insufferable...” Perez grabbed at the coiled whip at his side and unraveled it. He raised his arm, meaning to strike, but Alonso stepped between them and held Perez by the wrist. With height and strength easily to his advantage, Alonso overpowered the overseer and gave him a murderous look.

“Perez!” Alonso half bellowed, half whispered. It was a tone he had never heard come from his mouth before. But his anger was very near the surface. “I told you once before, I'm not going to tell you again. I will not have you speaking ill of our slaves or coaxing them into anger.”

“I wasn't...speaking...ill.” Perez struggled against Alonso. “I was only...going to...*beat* him!”

Alonso gritted his teeth, allowing his anger to come forth. He leaned into the smaller man until their faces were inches apart.

“I suggest you remember yourself...señor,” Alonso muttered. “This is my father's house. You will not treat him, me, anyone in my family, *including* our slaves, with the disrespect you just exhibited. Do you understand?”

“But—”

“I said...do...you...understand?” Alonso repeated and squeezed harder on the man's wrist. Perez winced. In the same instant a vein pulsed in Alonso's head and sent a piercing stab of pain up into his scalp and to the back of the head. He'd had enough of these overgrown boys playing at being men, his father included.

But Perez—he was nothing more than a sniveling, snorting swine pretending to be human.

Alonso felt disgust rise within him, and he fought the urge to spit in the overseer's face. He took the barely audible moan escaping Perez for an answer, gave a grunt of satisfaction, and shoved.

A look of shock lined Perez's face as his arms flailed. He struggled to remain balanced but wound up on the ground on his ass, legs splayed. There was a look of childish hurt on his round face.

"You...you..." Perez stammered and looked as if he was trying to comprehend what had just happened.

"I will thank you to get off my property," Alonso said. "Quietly and quickly. Before I come after you and give you more than just a bruised ego."

Alonso turned brusquely, brushing past a gleeful Dante, who seemed barely capable of suppressing his laughter, as he darted into the house. Alonso heard the door slam shut behind him. He turned toward Dante.

"Do not, under any circumstance, open that door to let that despicable man into this house, or I will beat you myself," Alonso warned and strode toward his father's study. He needed a drink.

There was much commotion somewhere in the distance. Loud voices. Words. Yelling. A banging. He told himself he was dreaming. That he was simply just slipping from one uneasy dream and into another—one in which his son handed him a pistol with a malicious grin and said quietly yet somehow loudly, firmly, almost accusingly, "*If you had let him die, none of this would have happened.*"

But there was a part of him that realized something else was indeed happening outside his dream.

Bernardo opened his eyes with a calm mind and dread in his heart. But at least he knew what must be done even as his son's accusation resonated in his ears, then sank deep into his soul.

"If you had let him die, none of this would have happened."

Then a different voice demanded his attention. He realized who it was the moment he heard it, and he cringed.

"Madre de Dios," Bernardo muttered, almost in prayer. "Grant me the strength."

"Don Bernardoooo! Wake up! I need to speak with you! It is urgent! Don Bernardo? Don Bernardoooooooooooo!"

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The pounding on the door echoed throughout the house. And though his body hummed and vibrated internally, protesting its lack of sleep, Bernardo climbed out of bed.

Irritable, he stormed across the room, threw open his bedroom door, and called for Dante.

But the slave was not quick to respond.

"Goddamnit!" Bernardo mumbled through gritted teeth, then bellowed, *"Danteeee! Por dónde andas, negro hijo de puta?"*

Dante did not know what to do. He stood trembling in the kitchen with Cook and his wife. He adored don Bernardo, but don Alonso was the breath of fresh air—the hope—he had never even expected. He didn't have it hard at Casa Rodrigo. Frankly, none of them did in the house.

But to have don Alonso threaten him with a beating? And now to have don Bernardo call him a black son of a whore?

"They're just upset," Cook said, trying to console him. "You know how our master is. He doesn't mean it."

But Dante remained unconvinced even as he heard a tinkling crash followed by a loud stomping that sounded as if it came from don Bernardo's study. The stomping made its way down the corridor and toward the front door.

"*Dante!*" don Bernardo called from above a moment later, his own footsteps unusually loud as he made his way down the stairs.

Alonso had grown tired and weary of the sniveling, whiny man on their property. With great disgust, he kicked back the last of the rum in his glass and hurled it toward the fireplace, where it shattered. Then, reveling in the burn of the liquor that spread across his stomach, Alonso stood and crunched shards of glass beneath his feet as he made his way across his father's study.

As he stormed down the hall, toward the front door, Alonso thought he heard his father moving hurriedly about upstairs.

Alonso flung the door open. Perez stopped pacing. He looked small, frightened, yet determined.

"You have one last chance." Alonso made every attempt to remain civil, yet his voice grew louder and deeper. "Tell me what you came here for. What is so *damned* important that you're making such a spectacle?"

Perez shook his head.

"I'll speak only to your father," he mumbled.

Alonso huffed and, with a growl, charged at Perez like an angry bull. He grabbed Perez by the shirt with one hand while his other turned into a fist. Alonso pulled back and smashed into Perez's face with great satisfaction.

Carajo! That felt magnificent! Alonso grinned, wishing he'd had the foresight to get into a brawl the night before. It would have made him feel so much better.

The overseer struggled to free himself from Alonso's grip, to no avail. Blood spurted from his nose as Alonso pulled back and connected again, this time in a direct hit to the mouth.

Perez fell from the force, a piece of his shirt tearing in Alonso's hands. He looked at it with an amused detachment. *Look at that!* Then he flung it to the ground.

Alonso turned his anger back toward the overseer, who now struggled and scrambled to get away. Alonso charged toward him again with every intention to kick him and to keep kicking until his anger subsided.

There was a part of him that was appalled at what he had turned into. But there was another, more beastly side of him that relished being released from its cage. It pulsed through his veins, pushing aside the calm, otherwise civil young man he was supposed to be, hungry for more and needing to feed.

But several hands pulled at him and kept him from going at Perez once more. He struggled against the constraining hands and felt more than saw his father nearby.

Alonso could barely see; his vision had grown cloudy and blurred. He could barely hear. A maddening, echoing silence made the voices sound as if they were at a great distance. It was as if his entire mind had been stuffed with cotton.

And then he gasped as someone doused him with water.

Gradually, he became aware of his father standing before him, looking more disheveled than he remembered ever having seen him.

Cook pinned Alonso's arms back, and Dante, looking small and ashamed, held an empty pail. Beyond his father's shoulder, Perez watched and finally managed to stand.

Alonso looked into his father's searching eyes. He both detested and admired his father's calm anger. His fiery eyes and the rise and fall of his chest were the only signs he was agitated in any way.

How could he be so—

"Take him inside!" Bernardo barked. Cook pulled, but Alonso freed himself from the bigger man's firm grip.

"I'm not going anywhere. Not until he"—Alonso pointed his chin at the overseer—"speaks and says what is so damn urgent."

"Not one...more...word," Bernardo warned, a finger inches away from Alonso's face. Alonso licked his lips and nodded, sensing his father was at his limit.

Bernardo turned toward Perez. The overseer, still holding his nose, flinched ever so slightly but stood his ground.

"Speak. What is so damn urgent?" Bernardo demanded.

The overseer hesitated but a moment. He mumbled something unintelligible.

"*What?* Speak up, man, or I'll let my son finish the job!"

The overseer pulled his hand away from his face. Droplets of blood spattered across Bernardo's crotch.

"Arbor," Perez managed to mumble, despite the cuts on his already swollen lips where they had sliced against his teeth.

Alonso suddenly felt queasy at the sight of the damage he had caused. He could still feel the impact on his hand and was ashamed at how much he had enjoyed the sensation.

"Arbol?" Bernardo repeated, puffed out his chest, and looked as if he was bracing himself for the worst. "What about Arbol?"

"Heath...heath ethcaped."

Bernardo felt as if someone had punched him in the gut. He was aware of a sudden retching behind him.

"Are you sure of this?" Bernardo pressed. Perez nodded.

Bernardo closed his eyes and swallowed. His Adam's apple bobbed repeatedly before settling down.

"Who did you leave in charge of the slaves?" Bernardo asked.

“Rowando, theñor.”

“Rolando?” Bernardo asked, making sure he'd heard properly. Perez nodded. “Very well. Get on your horse and head to the Velasco plantation. We'll meet you there.”

Bernardo then turned to Alonso, who was getting up from the ground finally, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. He truly hoped Alonso had had nothing to do with this, or the boy would surely pay.

“Dante. Get down to the stable and have Augusto ready some horses. Cook, you go back inside. I no longer need you. And you...” Bernardo approached his son and grabbed at the scruff of his neck with strength and agility. He half pushed, half pulled Alonso a few feet away so they wouldn't be overheard.

Bernardo released his son, and Alonso rubbed at the back of his neck with a hurtful look.

“Did you have anything to do with this?” Bernardo glared at Alonso with a quiet yet seething intensity.

“No, Father,” Alonso whispered vehemently. “I swear it!”

Bernardo searched his son's eyes for any shred of evidence to the contrary. When Alonso did not look away, Bernardo cleared his throat and took a step back.

“You're absolutely sure?” Bernardo cocked his head. An eye twitched. “You're not...getting back at me for...all you learned about last night?”

“Oh I *want* to get back at you,” Alonso replied boldly, almost defiantly. “But you asked if I had anything to with Arbol's disappearance. The answer is no.”

“Very well. I believe you,” Bernardo said cautiously. “But I want you to understand the severity of this issue. And of what you've done to Perez.” Bernardo stepped away and turned, stopped, then turned back. “And by the way, if I find out you're lying, things will not go well for you. Just want you to be absolutely sure before I stick out my neck and reputation for you. Understood? Now, come with me.”

“Wh-where are we going?” Alonso exhaled.

“We have to investigate. And I want to make sure you're there to witness everything, because so help me, if you know something, this will plague you for the rest of your life.”

Chapter Fourteen

Bernardo and Alonso arrived at Raúl's plantation just moments after Perez. They remained mounted and watched as Raúl opened the door, drink in hand.

"What the hell happened to you?" Raúl cried out at the sight of Perez's injuries. "Mind you, it's a hell of an improvement." Raúl giggled. Alonso exchanged a look with his father. He could tell this was not Raúl's first drink of the day.

Perez tried to explain through drying blood and swollen lips but only managed to make Raúl laugh.

"You sound like a member of the Castilian court!"

"God help us," his father muttered. "Never send a fool to do a man's job. Wait here. Don't even imagine riding back home to get out of this one!"

Alonso absentmindedly shook his head and watched his father dismount. As nervous and somber as he was over the fury that was about to unfold, Alonso couldn't help but pull back and wonder about the man walking toward Raúl. Yes, the man looked like his father. But Alonso had never seen him before. At least, not this confident, unbowed man with an erect back and a sure step. Despite the possibility of Velasco's unleashing his anger at him, his father still gently wedged himself between Perez and Raúl, something Alonso would never do. He had to admit that the man deserved respect for sheer decorum and bravery.

Alonso was fascinated and frightened at how quickly the drunken, glassy-eyed hilarity left Raúl's face, only to be replaced by a sober, glassy-eyed, calculating hunter.

As his father informed Raúl of the scuffle, the man looked toward him with his good eye. The other eye was hidden by a patch of black silk. Somehow that made the piercing blue eye fixed on him even worse. The glare made his skin crawl.

"Why?" Raúl asked. "What's this all about?"

And then the bomb.

"It seems Arbol may have escaped," his father said without hesitation, excuse, or apology. Raúl glanced from Alonso to Bernardo, then back to Alonso again.

A moment went by. Another. Then another. And somehow the silence was worse than the expected, furious explosion.

Alonso felt as if he couldn't look at anything or anyone but Raúl. There was a coldness on his face that made Alonso shiver. The man licked his lips, pushed Bernardo aside, and made his way toward Alonso.

Still mounted, Alonso's first reaction was to flee. But his legs and arms seemed powerless.

Alonso could see the stubble on Raúl's face. Felt his excitement as he placed a hand firmly on Alonso's thigh. Raúl's one good eye remained fixed on him the entire time. His voice was slow, quiet, and deliberate.

"Your father is the *only* man I've ever trusted. But if I find that you had any part in this slave running away, I'll be happy to sever my friendship with him immediately. Just so I can have the personal satisfaction of stringing you up beside that dirty African boy and beating you both to within an inch of your lives." Raúl smiled insidiously.

"My father will never allow you to do that. He'll see you dead first," Alonso replied, feeling braver than he felt.

"Will he now?" Raúl cocked his head and peered at Alonso. The man chuckled, patted Alonso's knee, and walked away, leaving Alonso to shudder.

"Perez! Fetch my horse," Raúl hollered and stormed into his house. "Tobias!" Raúl disappeared with a slam of the door.

"Wh-where is he going?" Alonso asked almost hesitantly as his father approached and remounted his horse.

"To his personal armory," Bernardo replied without looking.

"His...*personal* armory? How do you know?"

"It's the first thing he does when he hears of a slave escaping," Bernardo said simply.

"Why would he have his own armory?" Alonso mused. The longer his father refused to look him in the eye, the more his irritation rose. He understood his father's anger. Could appreciate it, in fact. But what game was he playing? Was his father toying with him? Was this some lesson he was supposed to learn?

"Raúl is a man who sees a conspiracy behind every tree," Bernardo explained quietly, still not looking at him. Alonso got the feeling his father was choosing his words carefully. "Raúl has also made a lot of enemies. There have been"—Bernardo stopped to think—"at least a dozen attempts on his life that I'm aware of. I suspect there will be more before long. Besides, he likes his...uh, hunting."

"I still don't understand why you felt compelled to involve him," Alonso demanded.

Bernardo finally turned to look at him, and Alonso almost wished he hadn't. There was something in his father's eyes—or rather, something missing from them.

"Raúl is head of the cooperative and in charge of helping plantation owners with any slave issues—particularly runaways."

"You all just...*gave* him that much power? What were you thinking?"

"He was the only one capable and willing to get his hands dirty," Bernardo explained. He looked pensive a moment, then added, "Besides, I had to involve him because the man *you* assaulted is also Raúl's overseer, the only man we could find who would take both positions for such a low wage. And now, thanks to this...unfortunate incident..."

"You're going to place more importance on one man's wages over the life of another?"

"It's not about that. It's about telling Raúl before he finds out from the overseer, who will twist everything. Coming to Raúl quickly was about ensuring his trust."

"But I don't understand. He trusts you! He said so himself."

"Did he?" Bernardo asked with amusement. "Trust is easily revoked. Especially by him. And once lost, it cannot be reearned. I need to make sure we stay on his good graces, or he'll start watching Casa Rodrigo like a hawk."

"Whatever for?"

But his father never replied.

Raúl appeared suddenly, a pistol in each hand, two others tucked into the waist of his pants. Behind him, a startled young black boy—Tobias—struggled with pouches of musket powder and torches.

Raúl tossed a pistol to Bernardo, another to Alonso.

"What's this?" Alonso asked in surprise.

"What does it look like?" Raúl snapped and glared.

Alonso had never before felt so naked beneath one man's stare. It was a discomfiting feeling, and he understood why his mother would have despised Raúl. Why she would never lay claim to their true kinship and preferred to keep it a secret.

"I know what it is." Alonso spoke with some bite in his tone. "I meant, what's it for and why are you giving it to me?"

"So you can shoot that filthy negro coward if we should happen to run into him," Raúl mumbled and distributed the rest of the supplies to Bernardo and Perez.

Uncomfortable, Alonso swallowed, trying to catch his father's eye. But the man had retreated again into the world of ignoring.

Alonso, despite his experience and bravado, suddenly felt very much like a child.

On horseback, the four men hurried back to Casa Rodrigo. They crossed Rio de Piedras and made their way to Nana's house, where Bernardo questioned her.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Raúl growled when it appeared that no information would be forthcoming. "That's not how you interrogate a slave!" Raúl stepped past Bernardo and placed the muzzle of his gun against the black woman's forehead. Nana screamed in horror and wet herself.

Without thinking, Alonso stepped up from the back of the small shack and aimed his pistol at Raúl. But Bernardo already had his own pistol pressed against Raúl's temple.

"What do you think you're doing?" Raúl spoke to Bernardo as if he were a child.

"Reminding you that this is our property and that I will not allow you to torture my slaves."

"Fine," Raúl spat impatiently and lowered his pistol. He then turned to Alonso. "You realize if you'd shot me, you'd be dead as well."

Alonso remained silent, almost afraid to speak for fear of what might emerge from his mouth. He lowered his pistol, then followed Raúl's nod. Perez stood several feet away. His own pistol was raised, held between both hands. His arms were shaking.

"I think," Bernardo started, "we all need to calm down."

"I agree," Raúl said, surprising everyone. "Perez, lower your weapon."

They left Nana alone, whimpering and sobbing, and went off to search the other slave quarters. Most of them were at the fields. The few who were not were made to stay out of the way until they were done looking.

From there, they scoured the cane fields. Every row. Every corner. Up and down. They even searched the small cabin Perez had built at the bluff overlooking the point where Casa Rodrigo ended and Raúl's property began. A little girl ran out screaming at the sight of the men with their guns.

"Now *that's* disgusting." Raúl turned to Perez and spoke in an almost approving tone. Alonso's stomach turned at the thought of what Perez might have been doing with the girl.

Alonso could feel Raúl staring at him from time to time, as if expecting Alonso to produce the runaway slave at any moment. Alonso had never felt so dirty or uncomfortable in all his life.

Long seconds dragged into even longer, more uncomfortable minutes as they searched the island in the usual places slaves would hide.

There was a moment of detachment when Alonso thought, What are we doing? Is this really happening? All this for one person?

The reality of what could actually happen sank deeply into Alonso's heart. It horrified him to the point where he withdrew even further into himself. He prayed desperately that Arbol was dead, dying, or already off the island. He hated himself for thinking that way, but it seemed the only way Arbol would be spared from Raúl's increased thirst for blood.

At sundown, heading back, Raúl lit his torch.

"So!" Raúl exclaimed suddenly. "No Arbol. But I'm not discouraged. He's still near. I can feel it. I'm confident he'll turn up sooner or later. And when he does, we'll be there to capture him." Raúl turned toward Perez. "I suggest you look sharp. Wouldn't want to have him slip past your fingers again."

"What? But he—I didn't..." Perez protested. He too had been silent almost the entire day. He huffed, sat up straight in his saddle, and pointed at Alonso. "It was him. I know it was him. He probably gave him money or...or food...or clothes. Then saw him off himself."

Alonso, too tired for words, glared at Perez.

"Careful what you say," Bernardo said, his voice deep and throaty from exhaustion. "If my son says he had nothing to do with Arbol's disappearance, then he didn't."

Perez, whose face was a horror of dried blood, looked as if he wanted to retort but fought to remain silent. In the shadowy light from the torches, his nose and lips were an angry purple and black, swollen as if a fist were emerging from the center of his face. He consoled himself by hawking up a gob of bloody spit and projecting it to one side.

"Gentlemen." Raúl chuckled. "It's been a long day, and we all need some rest. Tomorrow will be just as long, and it'll be here before we know it. Come, Perez. Let's see if we can't clean up some of that face and make you look pretty." Raúl turned his horse around and disappeared into the night.

Perez remained a moment, shot Alonso a look of disgust, then trotted off.

"Well," Bernardo started, his voice light, as if amused. "I'd say you've made an enemy."

Alonso silently turned his horse around and started the trek back to Casa Rodrigo. He really didn't feel like talking, not even to acknowledge his father's poor attempt at humor.

* * *

Neither of them spoke the several miles to the house. Even after Augusto had taken the reins from them and they made their way wearily to the house, Bernardo's son still seemed subdued and withdrawn.

Bernardo was well aware of the heavy silence between them. But it had been necessarily so.

"Alonso," Bernardo said finally as they stepped onto the porch. "Sooner or later you're going to have to say something. You can't ignore me for much longer."

"You mean the way you ignored me all day long?" Alonso asked reproachfully. He clicked his tongue and huffed. "What's the point if you and I talk or not?" Alonso

turned with tears in his eyes. "I've messed everything up somehow, and it wasn't even all my fault! Arbol's a runaway now and hunted like some animal. Perez can't stand me, which is fine because I really don't like the sniveling little rat, and you..." Alonso stopped and choked back a sob.

"What about me?" Bernardo asked quietly, his heart aching. No matter what, Alonso was still his son, and it hurt to see him agonizing. He put a hand on Alonso's shoulder.

"You probably hate me," Alonso muttered and began to cry in earnest. He looked up at his father.

"Oh, Alonso!" Bernardo hugged his son and clutched the boy tightly. "I don't hate you. I could never hate you," Bernardo continued, his eyes turning watery. "You're my son."

With an unexpected whimper, Alonso clung to him. Bernardo closed his eyes against the tears that threatened to show themselves. He wondered briefly where they had gone wrong. Was it simply that Alonso was now an adult and their relationship had changed? Was it that they now needed to reacquaint themselves as two grown men, not just father and son? But how could he ever stop being a father?

Bernardo sighed softly as Alonso pulled away. His son wiped away his tears with an embarrassed chuckle.

"Sorry...I..." Alonso trailed off, sighed, then yawned.

"No need to apologize," Bernardo replied, disappointed that he couldn't be father to his son for just a moment longer, the way he had once been. In that brief moment, holding Alonso, it was as if he had once again been holding his little boy. Bernardo had felt needed. Funny how he hadn't even realized just how much he missed the boys who had grown into men.

"Father," Alonso said and hesitated. "I—About yesterday... I'd like to apologize. I was...a complete buffoon."

“No, Alonso. It is I who should apologize to you. I should have told you long ago. I meant to, but your mother would rather die than admit the truth. It just...never seemed important.”

“It doesn't matter. As far as I'm concerned, Raúl is a stranger to me. It's better that way.” Alonso turned and started for the door, but Bernardo stopped him.

Bernardo stared at Alonso and searched his eyes in the dim light. A moment of understanding flashed between them, then slipped away quietly into the night.

“I'm going to bed now. Good night, Father.”

His son walked away and disappeared into the house. Bernardo stood by himself a moment, wondering if he'd read his son correctly. Then he remembered the late hour and that they were both tired; under those circumstances, anything was bound to be misconstrued.

Stifling a yawn, Bernardo stepped into the house a moment later. He didn't agree with Raúl on much of anything, but the man was right about one thing. Tomorrow was going to be another long day.

Chapter Fifteen

In Raúl's bedroom, Perez sat back in a chair and babbled angrily while Raúl tended to his wounds. A pail of water sat on a table with a needle and thread beside it, just in case. Behind them, a fire roared as Raúl dabbed none too gently at the overseer's face. As he wiped away at the blood, he realized it had looked far worse than it was, and felt almost disappointed. He had looked forward to stitching the man's skin together.

Still, there were other things. The smell of blood had aroused him. Perez's backbone, beginning to show, his temper flaring, had made Raúl's cock and balls tingle. He had a feeling there just might have been a spitfire growing somewhere inside the overseer after all these years.

His mind, however, was playing tricks on him, and he didn't know why. He needed to focus. To remain alert now that a runaway, one who he wanted, was going to occupy his time. Still, he kept going back to Bernardo. To the night they first met. He'd almost lost his life to the pirate he'd been trying to cheat. Only he had told Bernardo it was the other way around.

The naive always wanted to believe so much.

"As pretty as you're going to get." Raúl tossed the wet cloth into the pail, pushing the thought of Bernardo aside. This will not do, he thought. Not at all. What he needed was a distraction. Raúl readjusted the erection in his pants.

"Rum?" Raúl asked casually, his cock now so blatantly hard that Perez was staring at it. He was a poor substitute for the man with whom Raúl had enjoyed such wonderful sex with, a man whose company he had actually enjoyed. A man who...

Again, Raúl stopped himself. What was it about Bernardo that still lingered in his mind? Raúl took off one boot, then the other.

“Ummm... Ahhh... What?” Perez stammered, taken aback.

“I asked if you wanted some rum?”

Perez gulped, unable to keep his gaze off Raúl's pants.

“Qué pasa, Perez? You're acting like a little girl,” Raúl teased and chuckled. “Like you've never seen an erection before.” Raúl stood and pulled his dress shirt from his pants, then up and over his head. He stood bare chested and let the shirt flutter to the floor.

“No. I mean, yes.”

“Which is it?” Raúl drew near, his erection inches away from the side of the overseer's face.

“Yes. I would like some rum. Please.”

“Good. You're going to need it.”

Raúl patted Perez's face, and the overseer winced. Raúl could see the man's cock bulging despite Perez's obvious pain. An excited fear rolled off him in waves.

Raúl walked across the room and filled two glasses.

“What are you—Are you...seducing me, señor?”

“Seducing you?” Raúl laughed. “Don't be ridiculous!” He walked back to Perez and handed him the full glass. “Only women and virgins are seduced.”

“What?” Perez thought about this a moment and then stood indignantly. “But I never—No man's—I've never been taken like a woman!”

Raúl chuckled and put a hand against Perez's chest. He shoved him back down into the chair so hard, rum spilled.

“What's so funny?” Perez demanded, licking at his hand.

“You,” Raúl said and took a swig of rum. “Acting so innocent. You don't think I know what you do? In the rooms over el Puerco Sucio?”

"I don't know what you're talking about," Perez said and slammed the glass down on the table, spilling even more rum. Raúl took great delight in seeing the overseer's face turn crimson.

"Oh, but I do. I've known for some time about your...*gatherings*. How you take the most beautiful brown boys from various plantations, the ones with the biggest cocks. How you take them to el Puerco and invite everyone to come and watch as you tease those big brown shafts to full erection. Throbbing. Leaking. Then charge them for a taste of fresh black meat."

"I don't want to be an overseer all my life," Perez protested.

"Understandable. And frankly, I don't care what you do." Raúl put his glass down, undid his pants, and let them drop to the floor. His erection slapped against his belly and pointed straight up. He approached Perez until he was but inches away.

"Open your mouth!" Raúl's voice was low but firm.

"What?" Perez's gaze darted from Raúl's dripping cock, up to his face, and back again.

"I said open your mouth." Raúl tugged on his own balls and aimed his cock straight at Perez's lips.

"No!"

"Don't be so prudish." Raúl grinned. He liked the way this was going.

"I said no! You're not putting that thing in my mouth after you stuck it up someone's ass. God only knows when was the last time you washed."

At any other time, under any other circumstance, Raúl would have gladly pursued the little game Perez had started. It was obvious he wanted to be forced. The game would have distracted him.

But Raúl's heart just wasn't in it. He turned, picked up his clothes, and dressed, then slipped back into his riding boots.

"Get out," Raúl said quietly.

“What?” A small, meek sound escaped Perez.

“I said *get out!*” Raúl hollered, noting the look of disappointment on Perez's face.

Raúl watched as Perez fought to remain composed and, without uttering a word, left the room and closed the door behind him.

Something Raúl had never felt before, a sensation he was unfamiliar with, suddenly shook him, and without realizing what was happening, Raúl gave a single sob, quelled a maddening rush of tears that threatened to eat away at his soul, and poured himself a double shot of rum. He kicked it back quickly, as if his very life depended on it, then caught his reflection in the mirror. He noted the disheveled look, his closed eye a souvenir from the only man he'd ever come close to having feelings for.

Raúl picked up the glass and flung it hard at his reflection. The glass shattered, fell to the ground in shards, and long, spidery lines appeared on the mirror from the impact.

* * *

Bernardo leaned against his bedroom window, arms outstretched. He thought he heard a shriek in the night air and was reminded of that night, so many years ago, when a scream split the night—interrupting his reading—and changed their lives forever.

Bernardo thought of Arbol and hoped it wasn't him.

With a sigh, exhausted, Bernardo turned from the window and crawled into bed. Slowly, from his toes up to the rest of his body, he willed himself to relax.

Except that his cock refused to cooperate.

He couldn't stop thinking of Raúl. Despite everything, the man still aroused Bernardo in ways he did not understand. He knew he should not. In fact, the intensity was no longer nearly as powerful as it had once been. But it was still there.

And it filled Bernardo with shame.

Bernardo closed his eyes and remembered the night they had met. He could still feel the rush coursing through his veins after they had fought the pirate gambler and tossed him into the ocean. He could still feel the two young men tumbling about in the alley, lips locked, erections pressed together, hurriedly trying to free themselves from the constraints of the varied layers of clothing—jackets, shirts, silk pants.

And that glorious mouth on his cock. That wonderful mouth that had brought him so much pleasure throughout the years.

Then being spun around and feeling Raúl's tongue, hot and moist, as it probed deep into him. No other man had ever done what he had allowed. No other man had ever made him feel like the rutting animal he had turned into. And no other man had ever taken him the way Raúl had taken him that night.

Bernardo could still feel the splinters in his palms as he had fought to remain standing, an orgasm ripping through him, without touching himself.

Bernardo had tried to keep his head from banging against the wall of the seaside bar. He had tried to remain silent. He had not wanted witnesses to see him being taken like a woman. And yet...he had never come so hard before either.

Writhing in bed, Bernardo stroked his cock as he thought of that first time, and he came all over his belly, disgusted that once again he had given in to a temptation he knew he should resist. A temptation that in all probability needed to be erased.

Bernardo let the memories go, feeling in his heart that it would be for the last time.

Somehow, Bernardo drifted off to sleep, uncertain if the heaviness in his heart was due to the guilt he felt for plotting Raúl's murder or sadness at the thought that he would soon be without a partner with whom to share those perverted games.

* * *

Despite his exhaustion, Alonso couldn't sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Nana's contorted face, heard her scream, when Raúl held the muzzle of his pistol against her forehead. Alonso knew he would be haunted for the rest of his life.

Never before had he been so ashamed and disgusted to be a slave owner as he had that night. Anyone—and that included his father—who could not, did not, or would not see that the scared people they questioned were fellow human beings—not property—was surely missing a heart. Without humanity themselves. How else could they turn a blind eye? And at what cost?

His mother was right. Slavery was wrong. But how could he affect it? He was only one man. And an inexperienced one at that if the day's events were any indication. How could he possibly hope to put a stop to something that was measured by the money it produced instead of by the humanity it crushed?

But he had also begun to see his father's point.

What would happen if the slaves were all freed? They would need homes. Food. Wages.

From the little he understood of the world, Alonso felt everyone involved in slavery—the Spanish, French, Dutch, and English, even the colonials in the new Americas—would have blood on their hands for generations to come.

He did not understand an economy that consisted so largely of human bondage. Not only was it enormous foolishness. Humanity had created its own noose. Sooner or later, the slaves would have to be released. There was no other choice.

Already there were more Africans on the island than there were Spanish.

And if the slaves ever chose to revolt...

Alonso shuddered. He got up, strode to the window to close it, and stopped in his tracks. Below, in the shadows, something was lurking. It crouched like an animal. Even as he watched, Alonso was sure the shadow was growing taller the closer it came to the house.

But what was it?

Then a pebble struck his forehead with incredible accuracy. Alonso cursed and rubbed his brow while he observed the shadow's stance. He suddenly hurried away from the window.

Struggling into his pants, Alonso managed to cross his bedroom at the same time. He grabbed his shirt and ran down the hall barefoot. He made his way down the servants' stairs and raced to the opposite side of the kitchen, where he unbolted the back door and stepped out into the night.

The shadow came toward him. Slowly at first. Then sprinting. And Alonso found himself with a familiar pair of arms wrapped around his neck. They held each other a moment before Alonso pulled away and kissed Arbol with all the desperation he'd been harboring.

"What are you doing here?" Alonso whispered worriedly.

"I had to see you," Arbol replied.

"You shouldn't have come. It's too dangerous!" Alonso said, his hands on either side of Arbol's face. He reached for Arbol's mouth with his own lips.

"I had to see you again before I go."

"Before you...? Where are you going?" Alonso asked.

"The men hiding me said they could sneak me onto the next ship out of the harbor. In a few weeks' time I'll be far, far away. In a new land. Perhaps someplace where I can be free."

"Arbol. You must leave now. We—they—went looking for you today. They're going back tomorrow. They're going to search the dock and go up into the mountains."

Arbol was quiet a moment.

"I'm not worried. They won't find me," Arbol replied and pushed Alonso back against the side of the house.

“At least tell me where you are, so I can come see you. That might be less dangerous than having you sneak around and coming to see me.”

In the darkness, Arbol reached for him.

“What are you doing?” Alonso asked as Arbol dropped to his knees. He grabbed at Alonso's crotch, outlining the length of the shaft and squeezing the hefty cock with hot, eager hands.

And despite the danger, or perhaps because of it, Alonso let himself be mauled by Arbol. The slave's urgency aroused him, and Alonso leaned his head back. He closed his eyes, surprised when he became so hard, realizing there was a certain thrill in their possible discovery.

Alonso could feel Arbol's hot breath searing his flesh, his hands on his ass as he took the entire length of Alonso's rigid, dripping cock. He felt Arbol's throat working on him as one hand tugged roughly on his balls and the other insistently fingered his hole.

Alonso gasped and flailed against the side of the house as he came suddenly, without warning. Arbol swallowed until he taken every drop.

Above them, through the window, a flickering light appeared and grew stronger.

“Arbol!” Alonso murmured a warning. Arbol stood and kissed him fervently. Alonso could smell and taste his own cum on the slave's tongue. He moaned, wishing they could stay that way.

But Arbol had already disappeared, blending into the night.

Alonso had barely managed to pull his pants up when the back door opened, and a head poked out. Cook held up a lantern.

“Señor?”

“Ah, Cook! Did I wake you? I couldn't sleep so I went out...for a walk.” Alonso smiled sheepishly at the man and strode up to the house.

“Barefoot, señor?” Cook asked as Alonso went up the steps and entered the kitchen.

Alonso looked down at his feet. He wiggled his toes in response, and Alonso giggled nervously.

“How about that? I didn't even realize. Well. Good night.”

Alonso hurried across the kitchen and took the stairs two at a time. Upstairs in his room, Alonso stripped naked and slipped into bed.

He wasn't sure what was worse: not knowing where Arbol had run off to or seeing him again and now having to worry whether he would make it off the island alive.

Chapter Sixteen

It seemed sunrise came all too soon. Alonso barely opened his eyes as he crawled out of bed and dressed. He fumbled down the hallway and knocked on his father's door. Bernardo was already up, dressed, and shaved.

“Good morning, Alonso. My God! You look terrible.”

“Your enthusiasm is contagious,” Alonso said sarcastically as he walked into the room. “Thank you for the encouragement.” Alonso collapsed into the chair opposite his bed. He yawned. “I didn't get much sleep.”

“I'm not surprised. Is that why you went for a walk in the middle of the night?”

“What?” Alonso exclaimed. His eyes flew open, and he was definitely awake if not alert. His heart accelerated, and he felt as if he had been splashed with a pail of water.

“Last night,” his father explained. “I heard you leave your room. I figured you couldn't sleep and went for a walk.”

“Oh. That. Yes.” Alonso settled back into the chair. “I thought a walk would do me some good. Clear the mind and help me sleep. I didn't disturb you, did I?” His heart slowed, but his mind still raced. Was there anything else his father had heard? Had Cook told him anything?

“No. You didn't disturb me,” his father replied. “I just rolled over and kept on sleeping. Why don't you go back to bed? I'll tell Raúl you're not feeling well.” Bernardo stood in front of the full-length mirror and tucked his shirt into his trousers.

For a brief moment, Alonso almost spilled his secret. It was too huge and too much to bear. But something kept him quiet. He wasn't sure how his father would take the news that Arbol had come to him in the very early hours of morning.

No. Best not to say anything. And then he wondered, Is this how it starts? The untold secrets that turn into lies? What will my children find out about me? What will I have kept from them? What disappointments will they experience?

"I can't stay here." Alonso watched as his father somberly gave himself a final once-over. "I'd be too much of a nervous wreck not knowing what was happening."

From outside came the sound of a horse. Bernardo looked out the window.

"We'd better go downstairs," Bernardo said solemnly. "Ask Cook to make us something to eat while I let Raúl inside."

"Father?"

"Yes?" Bernardo turned around, a hand on the doorknob.

"Thank you for believing me. About Arbol." Alonso looked into his father's deep brown eyes.

"Why wouldn't I believe you?"

"Because of...everything that happened," Alonso said with a shrug and a dismissive wave of the hand. "That day at the river. It seems so long ago now. Plus, we said some foul things to each other."

"Well..." Bernardo walked to the foot of the bed and sat at the edge, across from his son. He smiled and said, "It's all forgotten."

"But you *do* believe me," Alonso insisted. "You're not just patronizing me."

"What is this all about, Alonso?"

"I don't know. I just keep thinking... What if Raúl were to...disappear unexpectedly?"

"Alonso." Bernardo lowered his voice and leaned in toward him. His father scanned his eyes. "You're thinking things that are best left alone."

It began to drizzle as they rode out silently, nearly an hour later. Bernardo rode side by side with Raúl. Alonso followed quietly behind them.

“Where's Perez this morning?” Bernardo asked.

“Back in the fields. Where he belongs,” Raúl replied in a tone that was quieter than usual. They rode on in silence awhile longer before Raúl spoke again.

“When this is over”—Raúl leaned in, his voice just above a whisper—“when we find Arbol, will you come back to me?”

Bernardo cleared his throat. He looked over his shoulder, but Alonso seemed rather preoccupied with his bag of gunpowder.

“I don't think so, Raúl. *Lo siento.*”

Raúl grunted and dropped the subject, but Bernardo could not help but wonder what deviousness was hatching in Raúl's odd, twisted, and deranged mind.

* * *

As sundown approached, so did a heavy rain. A nervous, jittery overseer paced back and forth on the porch of Casa Rodrigo. From the quiet, subdued manner in which the three wet men approached, Perez could only assume the runaway had not been found.

Which would only make matters worse.

A coldness clutched at Perez, and he almost felt as if he had to run to the latrine from nerves. How he hated adding any more fuel to the fire. But what was he to do?

Perez watched Bernardo lean toward his son and speak into his ear. The boy looked at his father, then looked forward. Perez could feel their eyes boring into him, and he gulped. He stopped pacing as the horses drew near.

Behind him, the door opened, and a houseboy ran out to take the horses.

Perez forced himself to stop fidgeting. He noted the curious looks that crossed don Rodrigo's and Alonso's faces.

"Shouldn't you be out in the fields?" Bernardo asked as he dismounted. Yet Perez couldn't bring himself to say it. Couldn't even bring himself to look the man in the eye as he stepped onto the porch, let alone find the words. Bad enough he had to live with the memory of what had almost happened between him and Raúl the night before. Surely he didn't expect...

"Something else has happened," Bernardo said abruptly. Perez looked up and saw the realization on Bernardo's face. Perez nodded.

Bernardo spun on his heel, a hand on his forehead.

"What is it?" Alonso asked, stepping up behind his father.

"Another one's escaped," Bernardo replied in disbelief, burying his face in his hands.

"What?" Raúl exclaimed as he too climbed onto the porch. "*Qué demonio...*? How is it another one escaped?"

The silence was overwhelming. Alonso watched the three men and could almost see their thoughts. One here, one there—from different plantations—was not unheard-of. But two runaways in two days? From the same plantation?

"Who was it?" Alonso asked, surprised to hear his own voice.

"Dante." Perez spit and winced from the pain still flowing through his battered mouth.

"What?" Alonso and his father exclaimed simultaneously.

"Why the hell would *he* leave? He has it better than any of the other slaves you pamper on your plantation!" Raúl glared at Bernardo. "This is what you get for treating them like people."

Why, indeed, would Dante leave? Alonso wondered.

It suddenly dawned on him that Dante knew more about their family than any other slave. Perhaps even more than anyone in the world. He knew when they got up, what they ate, where they were going, and when they slept.

He might even know with whom you've been sleeping! A tiny voice poked at Alonso and made him shudder. He hoped Dante had not been awake last night when Arbol showed up.

For all Dante knew about them, Alonso realized he knew nothing about Dante. He was just there to serve.

"I don't understand. Where do they go when they run away?" Alonso asked out loud. "It's not like they can go far."

"There are people on the island who wish to abolish slavery. They work with runaways and hide them until they can be shipped elsewhere," Bernardo explained.

"Some join pirate ships," Perez chimed in.

"Others are found dead," Raúl added morbidly.

"Dead?" Alonso looked at Raúl.

"Don't look so surprised. Slaves are like children. They have no idea how to take care of themselves in the wilderness. Granted, they're usually shot dead," Raúl mused. "Which is why it's imperative to act immediately. The longer we wait, the longer they have to get away. And that's an investment you'll never get back."

Alonso felt a certain amount of anger bubbling near the surface. How could this man be so callous? So unconcerned with the lives of the slaves? Didn't he see that if they were mistreated the potential for retaliation was there? What did his father ever see in him?

"You're talking about people, don Velasco." Alonso managed to contain himself. "Not animals or property." Raúl ignored Alonso and gave a snort. There was a dazed look in his one uncovered eye. "They're going to murder us one day, you know. Mark my words. This is just the start of what will happen. The beginning of a revolt. Too many of them have disappeared over the last year."

"God no!" Perez went white and crossed himself.

"Dante and Arbol would never—" Alonso started, but his father cut him off.

"Where would they get weapons? Who would dare arm slaves?"

"With the way the seas have been lately? Anyone! I wouldn't put it past the British. Or the French. But mostly pirates." Raúl looked wild, even wilder than he had last night.

"But there were no signs." Perez began to wail. "There are always signs. And there certainly were no pirates. None that I saw. Everything was calm today!"

"Perez's only responsibility is over the field gangs," Bernardo reminded them all. "He couldn't have foreseen Dante's disappearance any more than he could have foreseen Arbol's. All the same, I'm afraid I can no longer afford to keep you on as overseer, Perez. I'm sure you understand my concern. You can stay the night, but I want you off the property first thing tomorrow morning."

"What? But...but..." Perez stammered.

"One more runaway and you'll be off *my* property as well," Raúl warned. As an afterthought, he backhanded Perez. The man staggered back, silenced. Fresh blood spewed from his lower lip.

Pirates, Alonso thought. Was that really to whom Arbol had run? Kind, gentle Arbol? He had been evasive when asked where he was headed. But who else would flout the laws of the island, of the Spanish, and harbor not one but two runaways?

Alonso licked his lips, surprised he wasn't more panicked. But then, he suddenly felt very weary. The anger he had felt earlier had dissipated with the lull of the rain, the sounds of their voices, and his own thoughts as they chased themselves round in his brain. He placed his hands on either side of his neck. He felt as if he were coming down with a fever.

"There must be something I can do," Alonso said out loud, forcing himself to stay focused and ignore the chill that crept up and down his spine.

"What can you or anyone do right now?" Bernardo replied.

"So you're just going to throw your hands up in the air and give up. Is that it?"

"What would you have me do, Raúl? If they *have* gone to pirates..."

"You're a fool." Raúl glared at Bernardo. "We've already wasted too much time. Doing nothing sets the wrong example, and I've grown tired of your rhetoric. I plan to recapture Arbol."

"And *how* do you propose to do that?" Bernardo's voice rose sharply.

"Simple," Raúl said as he pulled a wicked-looking knife from his boot. He picked at his nails with it and slowly moved toward Alonso.

As if from a great distance, Alonso felt himself grow weak-kneed as Raúl moved quickly and pinned him against his own sinewy body. Alonso struggled, but Raúl was unbelievably strong for one so thin.

Alonso's father leaped forward, then stopped as Raúl placed the tip of the knife against Alonso's throat. Alonso's skin went clammy, and he swallowed repeatedly, stunned into silence as he shivered.

"We set a trap and use your son as bait."

Bernardo took another step forward.

The tip of the knife dug deeper into his throat. He whimpered. His father stopped.

"Let him go," Bernardo said quietly.

"I don't think so," Raúl taunted.

"Father," Alonso said hoarsely as Bernardo stepped toward them again. "I don't feel well." He looked up to see his father's nostrils flare. There was a rumbling in Raúl's chest as he laughed low and deep.

"You don't think I know what's happening here? At Casa Rodrigo?" Raúl said with a tone that was frightening and playful at the same time.

Raúl squeezed him harder. The tip of the knife pierced his flesh. A part of him was scared for his own life, while another, the part that felt a fever coming on, simply didn't care. Something warm trickled down his throat, and Alonso forced himself to remain calm. He might be scared and might be coming down with fever, but he was damned if he would allow Raúl to see his fear.

"This isn't funny," Bernardo said, his voice nearly a whisper. As Alonso watched, he noticed his father's eyes never left Raúl. "Stop this madness."

"Or what?" Raúl countered. "You think you can take me? You've tried. You've stood up to me. But you've never been able to best me."

"Please," Alonso whispered harshly. He closed his eyes, surprised to hear himself pleading.

"Let him go," Bernardo said softly, calmly. "I'll do whatever you want. Just...set him free."

Raúl suddenly released him. Alonso gasped for air and nearly fell to the floor of the porch. He would have fallen if his father had not reached out to keep him from hitting the floor. Alonso clutched at his throat.

"Dear God! Alonso, you're burning with fever!" Bernardo exclaimed. Alonso swallowed visibly.

"Perez." Raúl turned his attention to the overseer. "Go and tell Arbol's dear grandmother that if he doesn't return two days hence, his...*friend*...will be beaten and left for dead."

The overseer practically flew off the porch, nearly slipping in the mud.

"Raúl," Bernardo started. "This is my son. My flesh and blood. You lay one finger on him, and I swear to you, by God, I *will* kill you."

"Don't be ridiculous. I already told you it's a trap. You think I'd hurt your precious boy?"

"Out of all the horrible things you've ever done, this is the most despicable. I've stood by you in the past. Defended you. To my wife, even! But this is heinous."

"Nonsense. It's brilliant!"

"But Nana said she didn't know anything! She's probably still frightened from—" Alonso started, then stopped at the look on Raúl's face. Alonso felt another shudder and trembled.

"If she truly doesn't know, she'll spread the word to someone who does. He'll turn up."

"What if he doesn't?" Bernardo asked weakly. But Raúl did not reply. He patted Alonso on the face, eyed him lasciviously, and said, "He *is* hot. Better take him upstairs and get him out of those wet clothes. Need any help?"

"You're despicable," Bernardo said disgustedly.

"Flattery, my dear Bernardo." Raúl turned away from Alonso and toward his father. "Will get you...anything you want from me."

Alonso watched, stunned, as Raúl grabbed the back of his father's head and forced his mouth on his. But a moment later Raúl stepped back with a short outburst, pressing his fingers to his lips. They came away covered in blood.

"I warned you about that," Bernardo started. Alonso felt his father stiffen as if expecting a blow, but Raúl only laughed and stepped off the porch. He mounted his horse, turned the animal around, and cackled as he disappeared into the mist from the driving rain.

Bernardo held him a moment longer, almost as if expecting Raúl to return.

"You know, Father?" Alonso muttered. "I wish he were dead." And then he faded.

Chapter Seventeen

Bernardo watched Alonso with great worry. In the shifting shadows and dim light of the lantern, he could just make out the shallow rise and fall of his son's chest. Alonso slept, but he seemed restless. His forehead was slick with sweat, and from time to time his lips moved as if he was trying to speak. Beneath the lids, his eyes followed some fevered chimera.

What the devil is taking them so long? Bernardo scratched at his forehead, exasperated. It had been a long time since either of his sons had fallen to illness. And even then, it was his wife and the servant who took care of them.

Bernardo felt helpless. He had no idea what to do for his son. Out of nervousness, Bernardo began to pace. A moment later, the door opened, and Nana hobbled into the room with a small wooden chest in hand. Cook followed, holding up a lantern as Nana placed the chest on the nightstand.

Finally! But Bernardo said something else instead. “*Gracias*, Nana. Thank you for coming.”

Nana held a hand up to Bernardo, and for a moment he was taken aback. Then he realized that she wasn't being rude or obstinate. She seemed to be listening—no, not quite listening—perhaps *feeling* the room. Her face looked grim as she rolled her head a few times, then muttered things that sounded to Bernardo like incantations.

He watched her shuffle up one side of the bed, then the other, her arms slowly moving back and forth as if she were stirring the air. The back of her hand went to Alonso's wet forehead, then to the sides of his neck.

Unsure of what was happening, Bernardo felt a certain discomfort as he continued to watch Nana work. Nonetheless, he kept quiet and left her alone.

He watched Nana shuffle back to the nightstand and open the chest. Inside it were things that looked like dried leaves, twigs, and shaved bark. A few rocks of different sizes, shapes, and colors. There was also an assortment of roots and other things with which Bernardo was unfamiliar.

Since he'd first met Nana, Bernardo had known she was different. Some of the slaves swore she could see inside them. He had to admit there were times when he felt unusual around Nana but was never certain why. Still, there was no doubt she possessed an ability he could neither see nor understand.

"I need boiled water." Nana turned to Bernardo and spoke quietly. "I will also need rum and a glass."

"You heard her." Bernardo turned to Cook. "Once you've started the water boiling, go to my study. You'll find a bottle of rum still on my desk. Go. Quickly!"

Cook hurried from the room, leaving the lamp.

"Will you... Can you...?" Bernardo asked when he had turned back to Nana. But she had already laid out a handful of oblong leaves. She then pulled out something from the chest that looked like a large, fat stick made of smaller twigs. She lit one end of it with the lantern, and it began to smoke. It released a pungent scent that was not unpleasant.

"May I ask...?"

"To clean the room of bad energy," Nana said without letting him finish.

"And the leaves?"

"For the fever tea your son must drink." She spoke in a tone that made Bernardo feel as if his questions were unwelcome. He bit his tongue and sat in a chair while Nana went to work.

* * *

Arbol made his way quietly through the kitchen. A fire was lit, and a pot hung suspended, unattended. From somewhere within the house, Arbol could hear a man and woman talking excitedly in hushed tones—Cook and his wife from the sound of it.

Arbol stopped a moment to get his bearings, remembering from Dante's conversations that Alonso's room was at the back of the house, just to the left of the servants' stairs.

He had been stunned when one of the boys from Casa Rodrigo had come to alert him in the basement of el Puerco Sucio, where he had been hiding. But would don Bernardo be cruel enough to let don Raúl beat his own son? Arbol didn't think so. Still, he couldn't take that chance. He had to see for himself. Had to make sure.

As Arbol climbed the stairs, he tried to convince himself nothing was wrong. That he wasn't walking into a trap. Every nerve in his body screamed at him to turn around and leave. He was risking so much. The ship that would take him away from the island would dock tomorrow morning and leave the following day. If he lost this opportunity, he would endanger his life. And if he were caught...

Leave! Go back! a voice in his head sounded the warnings.

And yet Arbol felt compelled to move forward.

He placed a foot on the first step and winced as it creaked under his weight. The voices he'd heard earlier stopped. In the silence, Arbol could feel the blood pulsing through his head, his heart tripping loudly. He heard a door creak, and taking a deep breath, Arbol rapidly crept up the stairs, lest he be discovered.

Arbol stood just outside Alonso's room a moment, listening. Here, too, he thought he heard soft voices, footsteps. He placed his hand on the knob, his ear to the door, and tried to listen, but the voices were hushed. Then he realized someone was coming up the stairs.

Arbol took a step back, his heart pounding. There was an urgent pressure inside his body, and he felt as though he might relieve himself from fear. But he

held it. He licked his lips, which had gone quite dry, and stepped away from Alonso's door just as it opened.

Stifling a gasp, Arbol hurriedly ran diagonally across the hallway, opened the door, and stepped into a darkened room. He closed the door as quietly as possible and leaned against it, trying to listen. Only his heart was pounding so loudly, he couldn't hear.

Leaning against the door, Arbol sank to the floor. His heart felt heavy with sorrow, and his eyes began to sting.

I will not cry, Arbol thought. But even as he did so, tears welled in his eyes and fell down his cheeks. He choked back a sob, rested his forehead on folded arms, and silently wept.

Nana stood, rubbed her hands clean of the poultice she had just rubbed on Alonso's chest, then closed her wooden chest.

"What happens now?" Bernardo asked. He gently let his son's head fall back onto his pillow with one hand while holding an almost empty cup in the other.

"We wait. There is nothing else we can do."

"But it will help him, yes?" Bernardo asked hopefully. "My son *will* get better."

Nana nodded.

"How long will it take?"

"That, don Bernardo, I do not know." Nana looked solemnly at her master, glanced at Alonso, then back at Bernardo. "We must wait. There's nothing more we can do for him now."

Bernardo looked at his son a moment longer, then down into the cup he held. He walked to the cluttered nightstand covered with Nana's medicine chest, the open bottle of rum, and the remnants of chopped roots used for the poultice. He poured some of the rum into the glass and offered it to Nana.

She looked at it a moment. Hesitated. She looked up at don Bernardo.

"For a job well done. And to his health," Bernardo said with a smile. Nana smiled back and took the glass.

"Thank you," she said and swallowed the liquid in one shot.

"I will leave the chest here so I don't have to carry it back and forth," Nana said as she handed the glass to Bernardo. "I think it's time now for you to go to bed."

"I'd rather say here," he replied as he poured another shot of rum into the glass and downed it just as neatly as Nana had done. "I want to keep watch over him."

"Señor, I must insist. You need to rest. What good would it do your son if you got sick as well? No. I think it's best you go to sleep."

They shared a moment of silence, the air thick, as if much needed to be said. Only neither said a word. Finally, Bernardo moved. Slowly. He shuffled to Alonso's bed, placed a hand gently on his son's chest, then leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead.

"My God, Nana. If anything happened to him..." Bernardo blurted with a gasp.

"Nothing is going to happen to him, don Bernardo. Not for a very long while. He has much to do in this world." Nana met Bernardo's gaze steadily, then hobbled behind him as they walked out of Alonso's room and into the hallway.

"Thank you, Nana," Bernardo said, a hand on the woman's shoulder.

And Nana tensed suddenly. A tiny sound escaped her throat, and something prickled in her mind. For a brief moment, it was as if she were somewhere else. A presence, a thought. There was an uncomfortable sensation that made her feel as if she could no longer breathe. The image of don Bernardo's face, twisted with anger, swam before her. There was a sound. A gunshot? Then the image of Velasco falling slowly.

And it was all over. She shook her head and swallowed back an unexpected chill, aware that the heaviness in her master's heart was not just concern for his son.

Bernardo stopped and looked at Nana as she hung her head and looked away. He had never witnessed her go into a trance before, and he found it unsettling.

"Nana? What's wrong?" Bernardo asked, his voice loud in the night, perhaps louder than it needed to be. And then he realized. He had been thinking of Raúl just before he touched her. He had been thinking of the countless opportunities life had given Bernardo, the opportunities he had wasted to rid the world and himself of the one person he was both repulsed and aroused by.

"I—Nothing. I must go, don Bernardo." Nana shuffled off, then stopped several feet away. She turned, a tear in her eye. "If it's any consolation, señor...no one will miss him." She looked at him a moment longer, then disappeared down the stairs.

Bernardo was left stunned. Could she really pick up on those thoughts? The feelings? But it was obvious that she had. He was confused and wondered how those things were possible, but soon decided it didn't matter. After all the humiliation, the insults, the threats to his son and his slaves, Bernardo realized that his life—along with the lives of his loved ones—would be far easier, far less complicated without Raúl Ignacio Velasco.

If only he had possessed the courage to do away with him before. He thought back to the night that Arbol's mother had been killed. It would have been so easy to shoot Raúl then, when he got off his horse or as he inspected the African woman. Perhaps not the gentlemanly way, but Raúl was no gentleman.

But how to get close to him again? Bernardo wondered, then shuddered. There was only way he could think of, only one way that would not cause Raúl to suspect. Once upon a time, though disgusted by the thought, Bernardo would still have been aroused. Now, however, after everything that had happened between them, there seemed to be no desire left. There was only disgust and hatred.

Bernardo prayed that he would be able to do what needed to be done.

* * *

Arbol awakened with a jolt. He had fallen asleep and was momentarily disoriented.

That was when he heard the voice. Don Bernardo. He heard his voice clearly, loudly. "Nana? What's wrong?" There was a moment of silence, but Arbol did not wait to see what would happen next.

Through the windows, Arbol could see the sky getting lighter. The room was coming into focus—a bedroom, his master's clothes.

Dear God! No, please! Arbol thought frantically but felt trapped.

Would he be able to open the door and slip out unnoticed? Did he have time to open the window and jump down? Would he even make it without breaking his legs? Arbol's mind was scrambled as he tried to figure out what to do next. Trying not to panic.

In the hallway, he heard footsteps. They grew louder.

Arbol suddenly realized there was a large gap beneath don Bernardo's bed. A gap large enough even for him to crawl into. Arbol scurried across the floor as silently as he could, wrapping his lips around his teeth to keep from letting out the cry of fear he felt welling up in his throat.

The door opened just as he disappeared beneath his master's bed. Arbol held his breath, then noticed that the chamber pot had been disturbed. It spun around slightly. He stuck a finger out to stop it, praying don Bernardo had not noticed, hoping that his thumping heart and throbbing blood wouldn't give him away.

From underneath the bed, Arbol watched don Bernardo pace back and forth before the man finally stopped and yawned loudly. His master sat in a chair and took off his boots, then stood to undress. His clothes fell to the floor one garment at a time.

A moment later, don Bernardo crawled into bed. The wood frame of the four-poster creaked as his master's weight shifted above him. Arbol winced as he tried unsuccessfully to shrink away from the bottom of the mattress. It hovered just inches from him.

Soon don Bernardo was snoring lightly.

Arbol crawled out from under the bed with some difficulty, stood, then quietly stepped across the room. He slipped out into the hallway and sighed with relief as he pulled the door shut behind him.

Downstairs, he heard noises from the kitchen. Arbol thought a moment. He needed to leave. The ship should be docked by now. He should have been on it, stealing away just before dawn. But he couldn't leave now. Someone might see him in the daylight, recognize him. Plus, he didn't want to leave without seeing Alonso.

I'll leave tonight.

Arbol made his way across the hallway and stepped into Alonso's room.

In the silence of the gray light, Alonso looked at peace, though he muttered. Arbol leaned over and stole a soft, tender kiss from the young man's burning lips. He sat in the chair by the bed and placed a hand on Alonso's chest.

The sun was beginning to set by the time Bernardo got out of bed and looked out the window. The sky looked like it was on fire. Bernardo turned and dressed quickly, wishing he had enough time to bathe. He felt dirty and grimy, but he knew he would feel even worse once he was done with Raúl.

No, Bernardo thought. Velasco. Yes. Velasco. Addressing Raúl by his last name helped give Bernardo some distance from the man he'd known.

Once in the hallway, Bernardo made his way to his son's room and opened the door. He stepped inside, walked up to the side of the bed, and looked down at Alonso. The boy almost seemed to be smiling.

Bernardo reached out and placed the back of his hand on Alonso's forehead, the way Nana had done last night. The boy was warm, but not nearly as hot as he'd been. Hopeful relief surged through Bernardo.

Alonso came awake suddenly with panic on his face. He looked about the room as if he were searching for something and tried to get out of bed.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Bernardo asked, alarmed. He placed a firm hand at Alonso's shoulder, trying to keep him from exerting himself. Gradually, Alonso relaxed and allowed himself to be pushed back into position.

"I...I thought..." Alonso glanced around nervously.

"You thought what?" Bernardo asked.

"Never mind."

Bernardo sighed, his hands on his hips. For the briefest of moments, he thought to tell Alonso everything. But it would be wrong. Bernardo decided to keep his decision to himself. Talking about it would only make matters worse. He might even lose his courage.

But what if you don't come back? A voice inside spoke urgently.

"I'm sorry I woke you," Bernardo apologized and sat in the chair beside the bed. Alonso shrugged and looked at him, his eyes still cloudy and unfocused.

"How do you feel?" Bernardo asked, wondering how to tell his son that he might not return. That there were legal matters he should tend to—just in case. Bernardo felt frightened all of a sudden. Reality was settling in. He had to say what he needed to say—and quickly. But how did a father warn his son about the possibility of his impending death?

"Uh...better. Thank you, Father," Alonso replied.

"Alonso," Bernardo started, licked his lips, and pressed on. "I'm leaving for a short while. But I'll be back. I'm just not sure how long it will take." *With luck, not long.* Would he have to go as far as bedding Velasco?

"Where are you going?"

Bernardo gulped.

“To Velasco. I'm going to...” *No! I can't tell him that!* Bernardo thought a moment, found the words, and continued. “I'm going to talk some reason into him. See if I can...persuade him...to give up on this *maniacal* search. It's like he's fixated on this point and won't give it up because I... Well... You know.”

Neither of them spoke.

“If...if something should happen...” Bernardo continued, “There are some things you need to know.” Bernardo stopped, half expecting Alonso to say something. But when he looked at his son's face, searched his eyes, he realized Alonso already knew.

“There are legal documents in a locked drawer in my desk. The key is in the false bottom of a chest on the mantle.”

Alonso said nothing. He lowered his gaze to his hands with what looked like uncertainty.

Bernardo stood and headed for the door. He stopped just before opening it and turned to look at his son once more before heading out of the house, toward Velasco and what was certain to be an unwelcome situation, no matter the outcome.

“I love you, my son. More than my life.”

In the hallway, Bernardo stopped long enough to take a deep breath and sighed. Gathering his thoughts, his feelings, then pushing them aside, Bernardo hurried down the stairs.

Cook looked up from what he was doing. Beside him, his daughter Anita was chopping vegetables.

“Where's Cosita?”

“Cleaning, señor,” Cook replied.

“Anita? Would you be so kind as to take my son his tea?”

“The water should be boiling by now,” Cook said to Anita.

Bernardo waited for Anita to throw the leaves into the mug, then pour the boiling water inside with a ladle. When she was out of earshot, Bernardo turned to Cook.

“Stop what you're doing and follow me.”

Bernardo turned his back and walked away. He led, without doubting he was followed, until he got to the end of the corridor. When he got to the last door, Bernardo stopped and pulled a small key from the pocket of his waistcoat.

Cook looked at him questioningly. Bernardo slipped the key into the lock, turned it, and opened the door.

Dante sat in the middle of his own bed, a large, toothy grin splitting his face.

* * *

Alonso waited until his father's footsteps receded, then leaned over the side of the bed.

“Arbol?”

A moment later the tall, muscled slave, his black skin glistening, crawled from under the bed and stood beside Alonso's bed.

“You frightened me!”

“Forgive me,” Arbol said and kissed Alonso on the lips.

“You shouldn't be here. It's a trap!” Alonso said. As if he'd spoken prophecy, at that instant, the door to his room opened. He froze, expecting the worst, and relaxed when he saw it was Anita with a large steaming mug.

“Don't just stand there! Close the door!” Alonso said harshly.

The girl did as he asked and took a step toward them, then stopped.

“I—Señor, your father sent me up with your tea,” she explained and made her way toward Alonso, her frightened eyes on Arbol as if he were dangerous.

Alonso took the cup from the girl's trembling hands.

“Anita?” Alonso tried to get her attention. But the girl seemed fascinated with Arbol. “Anita!”

“Señor?” Anita looked at Alonso, glanced back at Arbol.

“At me! Look at me!” Alonso snatched one of the girl's hands and forced her to look at him. “There is no one here but you and me. Do you understand?” The girl whimpered. Alonso pressed her hand tighter. “I said...do you...understand?”

Anita nodded, her lower lip quivering.

“You may go now. Leave us alone. And make no mention of this to anyone.”

“But...señor...” Anita protested. “Nana said you need to drink your tea while it's hot.”

Alonso took a sip to appease the girl and grimaced.

“Nana must have left some of the poultice here.” Arbol addressed Anita.

The girl pointed to the chest on the nightstand.

“How do you know about that?” Alonso asked.

“I've seen my Nana do this many times.” Arbol grinned as he walked across the room to the other side while Anita jumped back as if afraid of being touched.

“You mustn't let them catch you!” Anita's voice was small and soft, almost shaky.

“I won't. Now run and fetch me some hot water. I'll bathe the master.”

Shortly after Alonso drank the last of the cloudy, hot liquid, his eyes began to droop. Arbol took the cup from him. “You should be well by morning,” he said. “And by tomorrow night, it'll be like the fever was never there at all.”

But Alonso had already drifted off to sleep.

Arbol picked up the chair he had been sitting on and propped it against the door so no one could come in.

Standing over Alonso, Arbol then pulled back the sheets and stripped him of his clothes. He needed to hurry before the water cooled.

Dipping the rag into the same substance, Arbol dabbed at Alonso's forehead. He repeatedly dipped, squeezed, and ran the rag over Alonso's face, his neck, his chest. He lifted the strong, hairy arms and rubbed at them tenderly.

As he moved lower, Arbol couldn't help but be aroused by Alonso's helplessness. He stirred as he slowly went over Alonso's genitals, lovingly caressing the shaft, pulling back the foreskin, and washing the head, then the heavy balls.

When he was done, Arbol flipped Alonso over and washed his back, his ass, the inviting crack that promised a delight he longed to experience, the backs of his legs.

As the last of the light died out and the sun settled into place for another night, Arbol rolled Alonso back over and dressed him in a clean, loose-fitting, knee-length shirt. He then covered him with clean sheets and crawled into bed beside him, draping his own body over Alonso's to give him his own heat.

"You really should go," Alonso said unexpectedly. He sounded far-off.

Arbol threw an arm around him and nestled his head on Alonso's shoulder, torn between the anxiety on his mind and the feelings in his heart as the fingers of his right hand laced with Alonso's fingers.

Chapter Eighteen

Raúl stood on his small balcony while Bernardo's soft, steady breathing droned in the background. He walked back into his bedroom and pulled his clothes on. The time had come. He'd received word earlier that Arbol had sneaked back to Casa Rodrigo. But by the time he and Perez were ready to ride out, to demand Arbol be turned over, Bernardo had shown up.

Raúl walked to the side of the bed where his poor, sweet Bernardo was still tied up. Bernardo truly was a kind and marvelous man. Too bad he had to fuck it all up by getting married to Raúl's half-sister, Adelina, and having children.

Smarmy bitch. Doesn't know how to appreciate her man. But none of that mattered now. Bernardo was all his again.

Still, he had to admit it had been sweet of Bernardo to ride out to try to persuade him to call off the search. Sweet, naive, and disturbingly annoying. Did he really think Raúl was that dumb? He had hated knocking Bernardo out, but what else was he supposed to do? How else was he supposed to keep him?

Raúl admired his handiwork on Bernardo's ass, lightly tracing around the scarring tissue where he'd branded Bernardo just a few short hours ago. Then he kissed the nape of his neck. He waited to see if Bernardo stirred. When he didn't, Raúl tugged at the ties that still held a naked Bernardo in place, on his stomach, arms and legs spread wide. Then he opened his bedroom door and walked out.

Bernardo dared to open his eyes as Velasco clomped out of the room. Humiliated, he hated himself for failing to anticipate that Velasco might attack him

before he ever got the chance to pull out his revolver. How foolish he had been! It was like walking into a trap he had set himself.

Then, when Velasco had revealed that Arbol was hiding out in his house, Bernardo had been stunned. If he had known, he never would have left the house, never would have left his son and the slaves alone. Abandoned the people whose lives depended on him for safety.

Bernardo tried not to think about that now. He tried to tell himself that his slaves were resourceful. If nothing else, Arbol was. How else could he have sneaked back into the house without anyone knowing? Or had the other slaves been in on the secret?

Bernardo forced the thoughts from his mind, but they were replaced with the memory of Velasco's branding him. It had been excruciating. In fact, the smell of his searing flesh still burned his nostrils.

Anger welled up within him. Anger at the things Velasco had done to make Bernardo feel cheap and dirty.

No! I will not follow that train of thought. I must focus!

Bernardo tugged at his restraints with every ounce of strength he could muster. When he'd grown drained and tired, he lowered his head onto the pillow, closed his eyes, and did something he had not done in a very long time. He prayed—for accuracy, when the time came to pull the trigger.

* * *

Arbol awakened to feel Alonso's cock, hard, throbbing, and very demanding against his backside. His own cock stirred as he thought of impaling himself on Alonso while he still slept. The rest of Alonso's body had finally stopped giving off heat, and the only truly hot part of him now was the insistent pulsing of his young master's shaft nestled along the crack of his ass.

Now knowing what it felt like to wake up beside Alonso, *his* Alonso, Arbol realized he loved the feeling that washed over him. He felt safe. Needed. Like he belonged.

And he was glad he ignored his initial instinct to flee. If nothing else, if he had to turn himself in, at least he was able to take care of Alonso the way he wanted to. And if Velasco and don Bernardo were truly coming for him, then he would take what he wanted, one last time. He just hoped and prayed that it would be enough to sustain him while he endured the lashing he was sure to receive and lifelong enslavement to a sadistic man he hated more than anything.

Arbol turned and looked at the sleeping Alonso. In the pale light of the waning moon, he looked so peaceful, almost like a little boy. Arbol touched his young master's forehead. Cool, dry. He then ran his hand down his neck, his shoulders, the muscled arms beneath the white cotton of the nightshirt.

A heat began to build inside Arbol. What was it about Alonso that aroused him so much? But it wasn't just arousal. There was something more. Something deeper and far more intense than just sex. It was like a constant burning that made him crave to be in Alonso's company.

Arbol closed his eyes, allowing his entire body to press against Alonso and drink in his energy. He inhaled, aroused by the smell of him, the heat of his body.

And of course, there was that wonderful muscle. That magnificent cock that made Arbol weak every time he thought of it. Every time he imagined sucking on it, feeling it throb, tasting Alonso's cum. The sensation coursing through him as it impaled him the way it had the night before he ran away.

He had never been closer to anyone than he had that night.

Arbol tentatively kissed the sleeping Alonso and moved slowly as he gently pushed him onto his back. He pulled down the sheets and lifted the nightshirt up to reveal the thick, long, dark cock that lay flat against Alonso's belly. The head reached far past his belly button, and the foreskin was pulled back slightly, exposing the bright pink head, already wet and drooling with precum.

Arbol gently nudged Alonso's legs apart and wondered what his young master was dreaming about that had caused him to be so aroused. And as he positioned himself before Alonso, Arbol decided that it didn't matter. What mattered was that he was there, right now, at that very moment in time.

Arbol felt as though something, or someone, had taken him over and pushed all thought aside except for that of pleasing Alonso. He lowered his face to Alonso's crotch, inhaled deeply of the musky scent and, as he closed his eyes, opened his mouth and suckled lovingly on first one, then the other of Alonso's plump balls.

He enjoyed the way Alonso's body reacted, the way his hips pushed up. He loved the sensation of Alonso's thick cock throbbing against his face as he came up for air.

Arbol held Alonso's cock up by the base with two fingers. It felt so heavy. So full of substance and life.

Trembling with desire, Arbol finally reached the head of Alonso's cock, opened his mouth wider, and encircled the tip. He pushed back the skin, and he suckled greedily on the clear, sweet, and thick liquid.

A fire seemed to burst inside Arbol. He wrapped his lips around the head of Alonso's cock and truly began to slurp noisily before licking the rest of the shaft. Up and down. Top and bottom. Side to side. Slicking up the enormous cock with spit until it was completely coated.

Arbol raised up slightly, on his elbows. Using only his lips, mouth, tongue, and throat, Arbol made love to Alonso's thick, veiny, meaty cock as if he would never see it again. He put his entire soul and all his desire into his mouth, into the worship of Alonso's penis as if it were a god. And as Arbol swallowed more and more, he felt his throat expand willingly. He found it easier to take as he continued further and pushed to take it all down his throat.

Until he buried his nose in Alonso's pubic hair.

Arbol worked his throat muscles, one hand between Alonso's legs, just beneath the laden balls. He then opened his hand and lovingly cupped them, wrapping

thumb and forefinger together in such a way that he gently tugged on the bulbous sac.

Beneath him, Alonso began to stir. A moan escaped him as Arbol pulled back and bobbed his head up and down, slowly, teasing. He wanted to bring Alonso to the edge of insanity so that if they never saw one another again, at the very least Alonso would never forget the way his cock felt buried deep down Arbol's throat.

Arbol realized there truly was a sense of power in sucking another man. In taking him, willingly, completely down his throat. It was like taking his energy, feeling his power surge into him. An exchange of spirit.

As Alonso stirred more and more, Arbol felt one of his hands behind the back of his head and knew that the fever was definitely gone from the young man he loved. The man he would always and forever be tied to.

And even as Alonso groaned back to life, cock pulsing rapidly, the first spurt of cum hit the back of Arbol's throat, and he swallowed greedily at the sweet and salty nectar.

Arbol lowered his head until the entire shaft of Alonso's cock was buried down his throat. He planted his lips firmly around the circumference of the base, and his throat muscles worked to milk the shaft of every last drop.

There was a copious amount of cum.

Arbol simply kept on swallowing, rolling Alonso's balls in one hand, gently tugging on them with the other. And in a strange way, Arbol felt as though he had sucked out the very last of whatever it was that had taken hold of his beloved Alonso.

This was a dream. Surely, it must be. It *had* to be. Nothing could ever really feel this good, could it? Alonso thought as he slowly and, as if from a very long distance, came to his senses.

Waves of love filled him, making his heart swell. An incredibly intense energy surged through him as his cock throbbed, expertly manipulated by an incredibly warm pair of lips. There was a warmth between his legs, just beneath his balls. No, he realized. Not beneath his balls, enveloping them. Something tugging on them even as they were cradled.

The warmth spread. His cock swelled, and Alonso groaned as he exploded in a way he'd never experienced before. It felt strangely as if something were leaving his body, slowly draining out of him.

Alonso's eyelids fluttered. He was momentarily disoriented as he gradually became aware he was in his room and not alone. He stirred, still reveling in the peace that followed orgasm.

"Arbol," Alonso muttered. The runaway stopped nursing on Alonso's softening cock long enough to look up at him.

Arbol lowered Alonso's nightshirt. He crawled up to be face-to-face with Alonso.

With a tender kiss, Alonso and Arbol wrapped their arms around one another as best they could and clung to each other.

They remained in perfect, silent stillness.

"You must leave me, Arbol," Alonso said after a moment.

But the only response was the sound of their hearts beating as one.

Arbol struggled with his emotions. In the dim light of the moon, it was easy to forget that others may have suffered because of his actions or that his life was in danger. It was easy to believe that everything was as it had been.

"Just once more." Arbol kissed Alonso. "And then I'll leave. I promise."

And though Alonso protested at first, Arbol insisted, feeling Alonso begin to relax and melt against him, their hands suddenly all over each other.

“Oh, Arbol. Dear, sweet, loving Arbol,” Alonso whispered in his ear. “What are you doing? You really must leave. I don't want you to be captured. I could never live with myself.” And yet his body and cock told a different story.

Arbol pulled away long enough to stand and slowly strip before Alonso. He watched as Alonso smiled sadly and ran a hand over his belly, clutched at his distended brown cock. Then Arbol climbed back into bed and wrapped his arms around Alonso's neck. He pressed his lips against the Spaniard with fervor. No matter what Alonso said, no matter what he did, if this would be the last Arbol would see of him, then he was going to make sure that he took what he wanted.

Arbol tugged on Alonso's nightshirt. Alonso shifted his body, still weak from the fever, and allowed the runaway to strip him. He lay naked, burning once more, but this time from desire. His anxious longing to make love to Arbol grew stronger, except that he wasn't sure he would be able to.

“I don't know if I can, Arbol. I'm still a bit weak.”

“Sshhhh! Don't worry. You just lie back and relax. I will do everything. You don't have to do a thing but close your eyes and enjoy how I'm going to make love to your cock. This sweet”—Arbol clutched at it, brought his mouth down on it, and kissed, licked, and sucked in between his words—“beautiful, delicious cock.”

Arbol's mouth encircled him. He closed his eyes and gave in to the sensation as Arbol noisily slurped on the entire shaft from tip to base.

After a moment, Arbol straddled him. The heat between the slave's legs was incredible. Like walking into a fireplace.

He opened his eyes and Arbol looked down at him sweetly. He smiled up at him and felt as Arbol, without ever breaking eye contact, reached for Alonso's cock, lifted his ass, and held the shaft as he lowered down onto it.

Their eyes remained locked, staring into one another as the look of pain etched itself onto Arbol's face, and he, ever so slowly, continued to push himself down on the head of Alonso's cock.

Alonso's gaze never wavered, and he gasped as Arbol let out a sigh of pleasure when the head of his cock pressed past the first ring. Arbol kept going, sliding farther, taking more and more of the erection until finally Arbol sat fully and rested his entire weight on Alonso's hips.

Arbol closed his eyes for just a moment, and Alonso watched the pain on his face transform into a look of ecstatic joy.

Arbol's ass muscles clamped down on his shaft, milking his cock. A moment later, the young fugitive moved his hips. Slowly at first, then more insistently, until he was rising and falling with loud smacks.

His cock bounced up and down, and his balls slapped on Alonso's belly. Alonso could feel the sticky precum as it splattered on his belly, and he felt compelled to grab Arbol by the base and stroke him with one hand while he clutched at Arbol's balls with the other.

"Oh God. Alonso, I never thought having you inside me would feel so wonderful! I wish you could stay there forever."

Alonso, caught up in the heat of the moment, ground against Arbol's downward thrust.

Arbol leaned over and kissed him deeply, pushing his tongue past Alonso's lips. Arbol moaned, the sound reverberating within Alonso as their fingers sought one another and entwined. Their hands pressed together.

In the distance, Alonso thought he heard a thumping noise. Sure that it was the beating of his heart, he continued grinding against Arbol. There was almost no bouncing now. Just Arbol pressing down on Alonso.

The thumping again, this time louder, as they neared climax. And voices.

What the hell? Alonso thought. And recognized, too late, the one maniacal laugh just outside the door as the familiar sensation gripped him. It was too late to turn back. Too late to stop. There was a loud splintering. Something clattered across the floor as the door burst wide open, and Alonso cried out in the most intense orgasm he'd ever experienced.

Riding Alonso, Arbol thought he heard something that might have been the beating of his heart, the blood thumping in his ears, or the bed banging on the floor. Frankly, it didn't matter. He didn't care. All he wanted at that moment was to take Alonso's very essence and feel it flooding him. The cock, throbbing deep within, was fulfilling in ways he had never experienced. Even when he was with others, and despite that he really didn't like to get fucked, Arbol marveled at how he desperately wanted it from Alonso.

When he leaned over to kiss Alonso, it was as if the world had stopped. Nothing existed but him and Alonso—panting, sweating, growling. Their tongues as they battled lovingly, their fingers entwined, Alonso's bushy pubic hair as it scratched beneath his balls.

Not even the clattering, which he realized was the chair, could stop him from coming. He began to spurt just as Alonso groaned and filled him with his seed.

And with tears in his eyes, even as he felt the hands grab at his arms, Arbol kept coming all over Alonso.

“No! No! Leave me alone!” Arbol cried, flailing his arms, struggling to keep from being pulled off the man he loved, the man who was still coming inside him.

Oh God! How can this be?

Arbol struggled as Raúl and Perez pried him off Alonso's cock.

“Jesus Christ! Will you look at the size of that thing? The boy's built even larger than his father!”

Arbol freed one of his arms. He pulled it in close to his chest, then thrust backward. He heard a *crunch* and a moan as he connected with something.

“No! No! Leave him alone!” Alonso hollered, even as Arbol fought and struggled to keep from being pinned. They pulled Arbol away. Alonso was vaguely

aware of Raúl's saying something lewd. He thought he felt a hand squeeze and pump his cock. But his only concern was to help Arbol.

Alonso closed his eyes against the dizziness that made the room spin. He thought he heard something that sounded like a fist connecting with a face, then a bewildered moan.

Alonso opened his eyes.

"No! Leave him!" Alonso cried, struggling to get out of bed. But the room swayed and lurched as though he were at sea. Tears of frustration welled up, and he thought he saw Arbol clutch at the door frame.

Alonso took a step forward, clutching the sheet as it pulled off the bed, as if it would help him remain standing.

"I'm coming for you, Arbol!" Alonso hollered, but his voice sounded distant and hollow.

"Alonso! Don't let them take me! Please! I love you! I want to stay with you! Alon—"

Alonso took another step forward and fell. His last memory was of the floor rising to meet his forehead. A darkness encroached at the sides of his mind. He tried to fight the echoing silence, the soft shadows that threatened to overcome him. But like a man drugged, the only words he heard were his own as they whispered and became more muted until there was nothing but silence.

And I love you, Arbol.

The sheet from Alonso's bed fluttered to the floor, covering his lower body.

Chapter Nineteen

Raúl, riding erect and holding a torch, intentionally rode his horse through the sugarcane fields.

“Señor?” Perez asked, holding up his own torch.

Raúl grunted in acknowledgment, but Perez could tell the man was annoyed at the interruption.

“Why are we bringing the slave back to your property? Why not beat him at Casa Rodrigo?”

Raúl looked down at the captured runaway. His wrists were tied together, and his long brown legs dragged on the ground behind them.

“Bernardo lacks the proper flogging tools.”

“But he has whips and guns and clubs.”

“Hmmm. Yes. But not what I'm looking for.”

“And why didn't we take young de Rodrigo?” Perez asked. “I'd have liked to see him beaten as well.” There was an excited yet vengeful emotion coursing through him.

“You're aroused by all this, aren't you?” Raúl turned to Perez and grinned.

“I...I never thought it could be like this,” Perez replied somewhat embarrassed.

“Do you want to go back for the boy?” Raúl asked. Perez nodded eagerly.

“What for? To beat? Or to fuck?”

“To beat of course! The whelp deserves several lashings after what he did to me. So does his father!” Perez exclaimed.

"Don't think I didn't see you feel up that beautiful cock! You ought to be ashamed of yourself taking advantage of my nephew that way," Raúl teased and gave a little laugh.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean." Perez feigned shock and surprise.

"I'll need your help hoisting up the runaway," Raúl said. "After that, you can do whatever the hell you want. But I'd rather you stayed and watch me flog the boy." Raúl dug his heels into the horse's belly, and the animal picked up speed. Perez struggled to keep up as they now rode single file through Raúl's plantation.

After a short distance, Perez shouted to Raúl. The man stopped, and Arbol whimpered, his hair, face, and body covered in mud from the heavy rain the night before.

"What the hell is it now?" Raúl asked.

"Your pouch"—Perez pointed, holding his torch lower to see better—"it seems to be leaking."

"Leaking?"

"You're leaving a trail of gunpowder behind you."

"Son of a bitch," Raúl grumbled. "Must have gotten caught on something. What the hell is wrong with you? Get that torch away from me! What do you want to do? Blow me up?" Raúl handed his own torch to Perez and removed the pouch from around his shoulders.

* * *

Cook and Dante looked at one another and, without a word, reached for Alonso's prone body. Struggling with the deadweight, the two men dumped Alonso into his bed somewhat unceremoniously.

"Do you think he'll live?" Cook asked and reached for the sheet that had fluttered to the floor. The other man pressed his ear against Alonso's chest and nodded.

"His heart is still beating," Dante declared. "But it's best we get Nana." He turned and hurried out of the room.

"*Oye!*" Cook called out. Dante stopped dead in his tracks and looked over his shoulder.

"Hurry, Dante. We haven't a moment to lose. He must try to save Arbol. He said"—Cook sniffled and wiped away a tear—"he said he loved him."

Nodding, Dante scurried away.

* * *

Bernardo's eyes flew open. He glanced about in panic. He tried to move, then remembered he was still tied to Raúl's bed. His overstretched muscles shrieked in protest. He winced and let out a little moan.

Gradually, he became aware of his dry lips and parched throat. Judging by the shadows in the room, he hadn't had drink in nearly twenty-four hours.

His stomach growled with hunger, and he thought of the delicious chicken Cook roasted for him every once in a while. How he longed to sink his teeth into a piece of the juicy meat, followed by a generous swig of sangria.

Bernardo shifted, trying to ease a cramp working its way up his left leg and into the small of his back. That was when he became aware of the cold wetness that made his cock, balls, and thighs clammy and sticky. With great disgust, he realized nature had won. He had pissed himself while passed out.

His only consolation was that he'd urinated on Raúl's bed. Knowing Raúl, there would have been much worse spilled on his mattress.

No time to think about that now. I have to find a way to get out of here, Bernardo told himself. But it was another voice that replied.

You have all the time in the world! You're never getting out of this one. And now your son...

“No!” Bernardo shouted, grateful to hear his own voice—no matter how cracked—instead of feeling the panic clutching at his heart and the fringe of his sanity. It was better than the horrible images his mind presented to him.

What dirty tricks! Bernardo raised his head, refusing to be led down a dark path by his uncertainty.

Bernardo looked at the stays wrapped around his left wrist, then his right, the ties that kept him bound and spread-eagle on his stomach. He moaned in frustration. There seemed to be no loose ends. The tips had been tucked in on themselves.

Bernardo tried to move his fingers, but there was no way to reach the ties. He lowered his head and sighed with frustration.

In the stillness of the house, Bernardo became aware of an approaching horse. An anxious desperation crept into his mind and settled in his heart. He worked his wrists, moving them to see if there was any give, any movement at all that he could use to wriggle at least one hand free, but he was tied far too tightly.

Raúl knew his knots better than any sailor.

As Bernardo lay there wondering what to do, he thought he heard moaning, crying. It sounded like someone struggling and protesting. Then came the squeal of what Bernard knew was a pulley and the creaking of a tree. Bernardo lifted his head, straining to hear, but was unable to identify the voice.

“Please God!” Bernardo muttered. “Don't let it be Alonso.” The crying and moaning turned into horrified screams, and Bernardo knew in that instant that Arbol had been captured.

The poor boy. He truly must love my son.

A moment later came a whooshing sound followed by a loud, pained shriek. Bernardo clamped his eyes shut as if that would eliminate the sound reverberating in his head.

Another lash. A garbled cry of intense pain, sounding as if Arbol were drowning. Bernardo remembered the pain he had felt last night when Raúl branded him, and a fearful coldness chilled Bernardo to the bone.

Bernardo watched the lengthening shadows cross the room as the sun set. He thought of his son and how he might be doing. Was the fever any better? Had it broken yet? Would Cook know enough to call for Nana if something went wrong? Anything, just to keep his mind off the sound of the lashes and the bloodcurdling screams.

A choking clutched at Bernardo's throat as the events that had led up to this point filled him with remorse.

As the flogging and screaming continued, Bernardo wondered if he would ever see Adelina again. How could he have been so foolish as to think that he would stay on the island? After this, it would be impossible. Not unless he was able to kill Raúl.

Kill Raúl.

Yes. What I came here to do.

Just then, a noise in the hallway startled him.

"Hello?" Bernardo cried out. "Who's there?"

Footsteps approaching.

"Raúl?" No. Of course it wasn't Raúl. He was still lashing Arbol below. He wouldn't have assigned that task to just anyone.

"Perez?" Bernardo called out, his voice almost a whisper. He raised his head as the footsteps grew louder. And there, in the doorway, a black boy appeared. His eyes were red with tears. His chocolate brown face was streaked as if he had been crying awhile. Dried snot flaked around his nose and on his upper lip. His dirty clothes were ripped and torn.

Bernardo sighed with relief, and tears of gratitude stung his eyes.

“*Oye, muchacho!* Hurry! There's no time to...” Bernardo cried, then stopped when he saw the sharp knife in the boy's left hand. He clutched at the handle, and Bernardo could see the boy was struggling with something on his mind.

No, Bernardo thought. If Raúl wanted me dead, he would do it himself.

“*Cómo te llamas, muchacho?*” Bernardo asked in as soft and calming a voice as he could muster. He struggled to remain calm and encouraged the boy to come closer.

“Tobias, señor,” the boy mumbled as he approached the bed and slowly lifted his left hand.

“Ah! Yes. Of course. Tobias. You're the...uh, Raúl's boy? Right?”

But Tobias did not reply.

Bernardo watched the boy's eyes as they gazed from his wrists to his freshly branded ass to the ties wrapped around his ankles.

“If I set you free...will you promise to kill him?”

Tobias looked into Bernardo's eyes sadly and held the gaze, his voice hushed yet determined. Bernardo snorted with relief and almost laughed. Tears streamed down his face.

“If you set me free, Tobias, I promise to do more than that. I'll set you free.”

The boy sniffled. Without hesitation, he went to work at slicing through the ties that had kept Bernardo in place.

Chapter Twenty

“Forty,” Raúl shouted, his voice now hoarse and his arm growing slower. The strength behind the flogging was weakening, but to Arbol, it might as well have been the same.

Arbol's body swung in midair from one of the tree's thick limbs. His arms were above his head, wrists tied together with thick rope. His ankles were tied together as well, his toes just barely off the ground.

Arbol lifted his tear-streaked face toward the sky. He looked at the softening evening sky, vaguely noticing the red.

“Forty-one!”

Arbol whimpered. But his mind quickly retreated. Between the lashes cutting into his back from the cat-o'-nine-tails, his mind went elsewhere for longer periods of time. To a far-away place. He thought of Dominguez, the owner of el Puerco Sucio. He thought of how the man had promised him safe passage on the next galleon, in exchange for—oddly—nothing.

God bless Dominguez.

“Forty-two!”

Arbol lowered his head. Sweat dripped from his entire body. Through slitted eyes, he saw droplets of blood on the ground and imagined his back would be horribly scarred for the rest of his life. Assuming he survived.

“Forty-three!”

Arbol prayed.

Dios mío. Por favor. Take me into your hands and let me die. Overhead, birds flew home to roost. Arbol's throat worked as he closed his eyes, tears flowing once more.

Even the birds had their freedom. Why couldn't he?

"Forty-four!"

"Por...por favor. Please. I can't..."

"You should have thought of that before you escaped," Raúl grumbled. "Forty-five!"

Arbol's vision glazed over, his body numb with pain. And yet the stinging made him feel as if his flesh were screaming in a pitch so high that it hurt his ears.

A vision of Alonso swam before his mind, and Arbol smiled with a rapture in his heart.

"Forty-six!" Raúl counted and stopped a moment, almost out of breath. "*Hijo de puta!*"

God bless my Alonso.

It was his last thought as his head lolled to one side and the darkness claimed him. The last image on his mind before he passed out was of Alonso. The beautiful, handsome Spaniard with his penetrating blue gaze and the most sincere smile Arbol had ever seen.

* * *

Perez walked out of the armory with a freshly packed pistol tucked into his breeches, a loaded rifle slung over his shoulder, and a pouch filled with gunpowder around his waist.

"Growing tired?" Perez teased, stepping up to Raúl. He spoke with an almost happy lilt.

"*Al carajo contigo, pendejo!*" Fuck you, asshole.

Raúl spit on the ground at the overseer's feet. "Now get the hell out of my sight before I beat you next!"

Perez shrugged and chuckled at Raúl's foul temper. It barely affected him tonight. No. Not tonight. For he was off to give Alonso de Rodrigo his comeuppance. And while he was at it, he just might give him a little more than that.

The overseer shuddered with delight at the image of the boy tied to his bed. He didn't even try to hide the smile that still pained his face. The pup would be unable to fight or do anything except scream. Perhaps he'd shove something in his mouth to keep him quiet.

Perez reached into his breeches, readjusted himself, and looked about for Tobias.

"Now where the hell did that little black runt run off to?" Perez mumbled. He walked around to the front of the house, calling out for the boy.

"Tobias?" He climbed onto Raúl's porch. Perez looked around and harrumphed.

"Maldita sea," Perez muttered. He cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Tobias!" Perez bellowed.

"Señor!" a small voice cried out from inside. It sounded as if the boy were in danger.

Perez turned, hurried for the door, and opened it.

In the expansive foyer, near the foot of the stairway almost directly in front of the door, Tobias stood rooted to the spot. His gaze darted to his right.

Perez turned to his left in time to see Bernardo, glassy-eyed and grinning almost maniacally.

"Don de Rodrigo! But how did you...?" Perez turned his attention back to Tobias. The boy smiled wickedly, then lifted the knife in his hand for Perez to see.

Perez saw the glint of metal and quickly turned, realizing he had been set up. He spun in time to see Bernardo swinging a branding iron. He tried to duck, but it caught him square in the head.

And then there was nothing.

Bernardo watched Perez's eyes cross slightly. The man wavered, blood trickling from the side of his forehead. The overseer's body quivered ever so slightly; then his legs seemed to fold beneath him, and the rest of his body collapsed.

Perez hit the floor with a clatter.

Bernardo felt an enormous swell of exhilaration fill and expand his chest. He never would have thought he would get such a thrill, such a rush and gratifying satisfaction from knocking someone out cold. He looked down at Perez and kicked him. His former overseer didn't move. He didn't groan.

He looked at the branding iron in his hand. The very same one used on him the night before. His right buttock quivered as if it still retained the memory of the searing flesh. Bernardo winced, pushed the thought aside, and let the iron drop to the floor with a *clang*.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tobias run toward him and come to his side.

"Is he dead?" Tobias asked.

"I don't think so. He just passed out."

"You should kill him," Tobias said coldly.

"No," Bernardo replied, though his instinct told him it would be for the best. But he was too aware of the eyes watching them from across the foyer. The house slaves stood as if awaiting orders.

"I have enough things in my life to answer for, Tobias. I don't need this particular dead man on my conscience."

"And if he wakes up?" Tobias asked. Bernardo sucked air in sharply, then noticed the pistol tucked into Perez's breeches.

What a stroke of luck! Bernardo leaned over and pulled out the pistol. He tucked it into his own breeches.

"Help me!" Bernardo grabbed one of Perez's legs. He pulled, but his muscles screamed at him. The man was too heavy. It had been difficult enough getting out of

bed and putting on his clothes, let alone lifting the branding iron and striking Perez with all the force he could muster.

Tobias tucked his knife into a pocket and pulled on the other leg. But Perez still wouldn't budge.

"Goddamnit! Pull harder!" Bernardo said, gritting his teeth. Perez moved a little. Suddenly, several black hands surrounded them and reached for various parts of Perez's body.

Bernardo grinned as he, Tobias, and two other slaves dragged Perez slowly across the floor, down the hall, and into the kitchen, where they propped him up against the wall just behind the door.

"Tie him up!" Bernardo commanded, tearing off one of the sleeves from his loose, dirty shirt. He pried Perez's mouth open and shoved the material inside. He stood and looked at the two women who had come to their assistance.

"Gracias," he muttered. "If he wakes up, hit him."

"*Con qué, señor?*" one of the women asked. Bernardo scanned the room.

"Ah yes. Here. Hit him with this." Bernardo hurried to the wall on his left. Several pots and pans hung from nails. He grabbed a large cast-iron skillet, tested its weight—even though his arms shrieked—and handed it to one of the women.

They looked at one another, then looked back at Bernardo.

Bernardo raced from the kitchen, Tobias at his heels. As he ran down the hallway, he heard a hollow *twang* and a *thump* and knew that the women hadn't bothered to wait.

At the front door, Bernardo stopped and waited while Tobias picked up the branding iron.

"What's that for?"

"You'll see," Tobias said with assurance. Bernardo noted the look of determination on the boy's face. It was clear the boy had a plan of his own in mind.

But there was no time to find out what it was. Bernardo would simply have to trust the boy.

"Very well. Are you ready, then?" Bernardo whispered and clapped the boy on the shoulder.

"Don't be afraid. Be brave. When I tell you to run, run as fast and as far away from here as you can. Follow the main road. When you get to Casa Rodrigo, ask for Dante. He'll keep you safe until I return. Understand?"

Tobias nodded.

Bernardo took a deep breath and opened the door. The boy stepped out, stopped, then turned to look over his shoulder.

"You won't forget your promise?" Tobias asked.

Bernardo shook his head and smiled in encouragement. The boy promptly disappeared.

* * *

Alonso slowly made his way through the brush followed by Dante.

He still felt as if he could sleep for several days, but when he had come to, his first thoughts had been of Arbol.

No one had insisted he stay in bed, which Alonso had found odd. It was as if they all had part of some unspoken agreement and knew what he must do.

Dante had already gathered pistols, powder, and balls, as well as a knife. They had to travel without torches, lest Raúl see them coming from a distance, and by foot.

And while Dante explained how his father wanted to get rid of Perez, thinking that the best way was to say Dante had run away, the still-weak Alonso wondered why his father simply hadn't terminated him. Unless it would have roused Raúl's suspicion. Briefly, he wondered if his father had anticipated Raúl's reaction. If he had planned to use his own son as bait. Of course, even if he had, none of them could have counted on the fever that had overtaken Alonso.

Then he realized there was probably much, much more he did not know about his father.

Alonso sighed and pressed on, stopping only when he heard the sound of Raúl's voice, distant but clear.

"... before you escaped. Forty-five!"

Slash!

Alonso froze in place, his body cold. He knew the sound. He'd heard it before. He shuddered involuntarily, as if it were his own back being flogged. He hurried along as quietly as he could, following Raúl's voice.

"Forty-six!" *Slash!* A moment later, "Hijo de puta!"

As Alonso drew nearer, followed by the spry Dante, who was obviously excited by their adventure, Alonso thought he heard another voice, but couldn't make out the words.

Must be Perez. Alonso pressed on.

"*Al carajo contigo, pendejo!*" Raúl hollered. His voice sounded so near. Just a few more steps.

"Now get the hell out of my sight before I beat you next!"

Alonso peered through the bushes and saw Perez walking away from Raúl. He gingerly pulled back one of the branches for a more complete view and was horrified at the sight before him.

Arbol hung in midair, wrists and ankles tied together. His body was limp, and his eyes were closed. His head lolled to one side, his mouth wide open and drooling.

"Forty-seven."

Slash.

"Scream, you filthy bastard! I want to hear you *scream!*" Raúl cried.

But no sound came from Arbol.

"Do you think he's still alive?" Dante whispered.

"Of course," Alonso whispered back. But inside, he wasn't so sure. Alonso released the branch and stole a glance over his shoulder at Dante. He didn't dare look the slave in the eye.

"Forty-eight."

Slash.

A groan. Soft but audible. Alonso turned his attention back to the scene playing out before him and peered through the gaps in the branches. He saw Arbol lift his head back, eyes closed, attempting to speak.

"Forty-nine."

Slash.

A long quiet moment passed. The silence was unbearable. Alonso sat rooted to the spot, his gaze locked with Dante's as they both waited.

"Ahhhh! Fuck it," Raúl murmured. Alonso dared to pull back one of the branches once again and peered through the bushes. He gasped at the sight of Raúl coming closer, coiling the cat-o'-nine-tails.

Raúl froze. He thought he had heard something. He cocked his head to listen but heard only the sounds of the jungle behind his house as insects tuned up for their nightly orchestrations.

"Perez?" Raúl called out. No answer. He listened more. "Tobias?" Still no answer. Raúl pulled the patch from his eye as if that would help him see. But the eye was still puffy. There was only a thin slit of vision. He sniffed at the air, face to the sky, then turned his attention back to the swinging body.

Raúl ran his dirty fingertips across the fresh cuts, welts, and bruises on Arbol's back. His cock stirred just as Arbol moaned softly, distantly.

The slave's head still lolled to one side. He stepped in front of Arbol and looked up at the angelic, almost peaceful face on the beautiful brown man. He stopped and wondered a moment, reminded of someone. There was something in the boy's face,

something about the way he held his head that looked familiar. Raúl tried to place the image, but the details refused to come to him. So much had happened during his life. He'd seen so many slaves. Still, there was something beautiful about Arbol.

Raúl reached up with his free hand and caressed Arbol's smooth face. He groaned pleasurably, his lust building. His cock stirred even more than it had when he had first started to flog Arbol.

Licking his lips, Raúl cocked his head again and watched almost lovingly as he caressed Arbol's long, sinewy neck. He ran his hand from the slave's collarbone to his shoulder, then down to his chest. Raúl tweaked one of the slave's nipples, then leaned forward, licked, sucked, and bit down. Arbol groaned, his lips parting, a flash of white showing. His eyelids fluttered.

"I can see why young de Rodrigo is so taken with you," Raúl mumbled as Arbol stared at him with glazed eyes. Suspiciously, Raúl looked over his shoulder. Satisfied there was nothing there, he turned his attention back to Arbol's swaying body. His eyes had closed again.

Raúl traced a path down the slave's sweaty, bloodied torso, down the center of his belly, toward his groin. He grabbed hold of the very root of Arbol's cock and squeezed as an odd, appreciative sound escaped him.

With one rough movement, Raúl tore at Arbol's pants and whistled at the sight. He assessed the length and thickness of Arbol's cock as it hung, still soft, away from his body.

"Oh yes." Raúl sighed, his voice somewhat tremulous. "I can definitely see why he is so smitten with you. What a fine, fine specimen you are."

"Jesus Christ!" Raúl stepped back and circled Arbol. He stopped to admire his handiwork on the runaway's wide back, which tapered down to a narrow waist. He noted the swell of the slave's hips and licked his lips as he drank in the sight of the high, round ass that looked as delectable as a summer melon.

But where was the mark? Raúl looked closer. No branding. Bernardo must have lied.

Why? Why would he lie?

He squinted, running a hand up and down Arbol's legs, inside his thighs. He even squeezed Arbol's balls and lifted the pendulous cock, running a fist lovingly along the entire length. Just for good measure.

With a satisfied grunt, Raúl stood erect.

"That son of a whore lied to me! But no matter. The slave's mine now."

Raúl turned and walked toward the back of the house, where a pile of cut firewood had been stacked. He tucked a log under each arm and one in each hand, then came back and picked a spot to start his fire.

A brushing sound made him turn. Tobias was coming around the side of the house with a branding iron in hand.

"Tobias!" Raúl exclaimed. He patted the boy's face when he drew near. "Not so dumb after all."

Raúl took the branding iron from the boy.

"Now go and fetch me a lantern." Raúl kicked at the dirt in the ground and laid the logs in place.

A moment after Tobias had gone, something rustled in the distance. Raúl froze. He looked up and listened, but all he could hear was the whirring of insects. Still, something made his flesh crawl and the back of his scalp tingle.

Slowly, as if nothing were amiss, Raúl approached the runaway's body. He was still unconscious. Raúl turned his attention to the bushes just beyond and narrowed his eyes. He scanned the foliage, but it was too dark to see if something or someone was hiding back there.

Raúl turned as Tobias came back out.

"Make a fire," Raúl commanded. "Then fetch me a bucket of water." Raúl looked around once more, turned, then slowly and deliberately made his way to the armory.

Chapter Twenty-one

Alonso wiped at his mouth with his forearm, embarrassed to have been so disgusted by the sight of Arbol being whipped that he was forced to crawl away and vomit. Luckily he had managed to retch in relative quiet with Dante kneeling beside him, a hand on his back, trying to offer what comfort he could.

When his heaving stomach had calmed enough, Alonso sat up with a grimace.

“Are you all right, señor?”

Alonso thought he saw concern on Dante's face, but couldn't be sure. The image swam a little before him. He felt light-headed.

“Maybe we should go back,” Dante suggested and pulled at Alonso's hand.

But Alonso resisted.

“I'm not leaving until I see Velasco's face staring blankly up at the night sky,” Alonso whispered vehemently. He took a deep breath and exhaled forcefully. “Are you with me?”

Dante nodded. It was now or never.

Alonso pulled the pistol from his pants, held it up, and crept out from behind the bushes. All was quiet before him. For the moment. Raúl was in his armory, and Tobias had gone, leaving the small but growing fire. Alonso stepped farther into the open. His gaze was on Arbol, but he kept glancing toward the armory.

Behind him, Dante scurried toward the tree from which Arbol hung, and the wiry little man began to climb.

Hurry! Alonso stole glances as Dante scrambled along the large branch. He tucked the pistol into his breeches and wrapped his arms around Arbol's thighs to keep him from swaying and spinning.

He was quite aware of the urgency, but it was difficult not to think of their moments together when Arbol's cock whacked against the side of his face. Unable to resist, he buried his face longingly between Arbol's thighs. He inhaled deeply, praying, looking forward to a time when he would soon be able to enjoy Arbol again. Slowly. Lovingly.

Arbol's body suddenly grew much heavier. Burdened by his tall, muscular frame, Alonso collapsed beneath Arbol's weight and fell to the ground. Arbol groaned loudly and muttered as Alonso was pinned beneath him.

Alonso rolled Arbol off him, and Arbol cried out. Alonso froze and looked toward the armory. He thought he saw a shadow move, but there was no sign of Raúl.

Hurriedly, Alonso reached to cut the rope from Arbol's wrists, then realized Dante still had the knife. He looked up, but Dante was already scurrying across the limb.

"Alonso?" Arbol whispered.

Alonso looked down at Arbol and saw the ghost of a smile as his eyelids fluttered. His brown skin was slick and shiny in the flickering of the fire.

"You...you came for me." Tears streamed down his face.

"I couldn't leave you to that monster." Alonso cradled Arbol's upper body. He tried not to touch Arbol's back, but there was little choice. Everywhere Alonso touched seemed to cause Arbol pain.

Alonso lowered his lips to Arbol's forehead as if that might make him feel better.

A soft *thud* made Alonso snap his head up, startled. Fear clutched at his throat and filled him with dread as Raúl came toward him, dragging Dante behind him in a choke hold.

“Well, well, well. What have we got here?” Raúl spoke softly as he approached, a pistol to Dante's head.

Alonso looked up at Raúl and gulped.

* * *

Pressed against the wall, Bernardo crept from the front of the house to the side. He stopped when he saw Tobias.

“What are you doing?” Bernardo whispered harshly as the boy drew near. “You were supposed to distract him!”

“He wants me to fetch a pail of water,” Tobias explained.

“Go and fetch it, then, or he'll become suspicious. Hurry!”

Bernardo watched the boy run away, then continued to creep alongside the house until he reached the back. Bernardo stopped, peered around, and sucked air through clenched teeth at the unexpected sight before him:

Alonso falling to the ground with Arbol on top of him while Dante scurried across the tree limb. And from the corner of his eye, Raúl sneaking toward the same tree.

With a deep breath, Bernardo pulled the hammer back on the gun, when he heard a sloshing behind him. He turned to see Tobias approaching, struggling with the heavy pail.

Bernardo held his arm out. The boy stopped and put the pail down on the ground. Bernardo put a finger to his lips and peered around the corner of the house again. He turned back to the boy.

“Stay here!” Bernardo whispered and stepped into the open.

* * *

A groan caught his ear. Quietly, hurriedly, Raúl raced out of the armory. He glanced about and quickly drank in the sight before him. The runaway, cut down. Alonso, struggling beneath him. Above them, scurrying along the limb, the de Rodrigo butler.

Raúl made a face and dashed into the shadows, racing toward the tree on sure feet. He ducked behind it as Dante dropped the knife with a barely audible *thud*, then jumped down after it.

Raúl leaped out from behind the tree, surprising Dante. He gave out a small cry as Raúl wrapped an arm tightly around his neck.

With a thrilled yet calm fury, Raúl slowly approached Bernardo's son. He gave Alonso a wide berth in case he had a weapon of his own. He had grown tired of the games and longed to put an end to them. It would be so easy to pull the trigger and kill the miserable bastard flailing just behind him. How much pleasure it would give him to aim the gun at Bernardo's brat and pull the trigger. Oh, to see the blood splatter before him.

Of course, I'd then have to kill Bernardo, Raúl thought. He pictured him upstairs still tied to the bed. He had been so wonderful last night. So spectacularly whorish and aroused by the humiliation. Pity. No sport in shooting a man in the back.

Raúl pushed the thought of Bernardo from his mind and brought his focus back to Alonso and Dante. He wouldn't have enough time to do both. What to do? Which one to kill?

Raúl decided to play with them a moment.

"You must really love that *prieto*," Raúl spat. "So what is it? Which do you enjoy most? His cock or his ass?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Wouldn't I?" Raúl arched an eyebrow.

"I love him," Alonso said simply. "And that's something you could never understand."

Raúl felt his face contort as if it had a mind of its own. There was a growing distaste in his mouth, and he spit toward Alonso.

"Love." Raúl let the word roll off his tongue with something like hate. "You must be joking. You can't love another man. Especially a slave. What sort of relationship do you think you can have together? What kind of a future? Besides, you give a man your heart, and you know what happens? Sooner or later he leaves you. He marries some...*whore*...and fathers children, leaving you to sneak around and think of ways to win him back."

"Is that what happened to you?" Alonso said snidely, but Raúl did not answer. "You disgust me."

"I can live with that." Raúl chuckled malevolently. He released Dante suddenly and shoved him hard toward Alonso.

"Kneel!" Raúl shouted.

Dante rolled, stood, and started to run.

"Stop or I'll shoot your miserable ass!"

Dante stopped.

"That's a good slave. Now turn around and walk to your master. That's it. Nice and slow. Kneel beside him!" Raúl cocked his pistol. "Give me the weapon."

Reluctantly, Dante pulled the pistol from the waist of his pants and threw it at Raúl's feet.

"And now, it's time to say good-bye to one of you. Ah! What the hell have you got there?" Raúl cried upon noticing Alonso's slow-moving hand. He was reaching for something. Raúl was sure of it.

"No games or I'll shoot you," Raúl threatened as he aimed his pistol at Alonso's head. He stepped up to Alonso and held out his free hand. With a look of defeat, Alonso pulled out the pistol and handed it to Raúl.

Without looking, Raúl flung it behind him with one hand, then aimed his pistol at Dante's head.

* * *

Bernardo crept silently from behind the safety of the house, toward the fire, his gaze never wavering from Raúl's back. He held his arm out, steadied by his other hand. The muscles in his shoulders still screamed.

Please, God! Let me not give out. Guide my gun so I may rid my family of this man. It was a coward's way to kill a man, and he knew it. But that didn't matter. What mattered was that Raúl be stopped.

Only he needed to be closer. He didn't want Raúl maimed. He wanted Raúl dead. And the only way to be sure of that was to fire at close range.

The fire crackled and spit alarmingly as Bernardo drew closer. Just a few more feet.

Raúl suddenly wheeled. Bernardo didn't wait for him to respond. He pulled the trigger, and a blast rang in his ears. A split second later there was an echo. Bernardo felt something hard hit him in the chest, almost directly over his heart. He looked down at himself and saw the hole, his scorched shirt.

Bernardo shook his head in shock.

"No," Bernardo muttered. "No." He looked up at Raúl.

Goddamnit! A flesh wound. Just a damn flesh wound. *Dear God in heaven, how can you be so cruel?* Bernardo's legs grew weak. He sank to his knees and thought he heard his son, thought he heard Dante, both calling out to him as if from a far distance.

Strangely, Fernando popped into his mind. Then Adelina.

He didn't understand. What was happening to him? Darkness encroached on his vision, a wave of black slowly fading in and clouding his mind.

Bernardo looked up in time to see Raúl coming toward him. Bernardo opened his mouth to speak, but he was sure no words came out.

Dear God. Forgive me. Please forgive my trespasses.

Alonso flashed through his mind. Dante. Arbol. Nana. And then he fell forward.

Alonso flashed through his mind once more, but this time Bernardo could have sworn he felt the elder of his twins very near. It was as if he could feel his son's heart race, his love, his sorrow. A vast well of emotions filled him, surprisingly, and brought him a certain peace.

Forgive me, Son. I love you. I only wanted to protect you.

* * *

Alonso watched in shocked horror as his father fell to his knees.

“*Father!*” Alonso cried. Beside him, Alonso heard Dante cry out as well, then choke back a sob.

“Go to him!” Arbol whispered. Alonso looked down with tears in his eyes. He released Arbol and let him drop gently. Eyeing the pistol Raúl had taken from him earlier, Alonso dived for it, picked it up, and pulled the trigger. The gun fired.

But Raúl spun around.

This isn't fair! It's just not fair! Alonso lunged at Raúl, but the man managed to grasp at the back of his shirt.

Alonso was lifted up and realized too late that his momentum only helped Raúl fling him away as if he were nothing more than a sack of rice or flour. He slammed against something hard, then fell. He opened his eyes and saw his father just inches away. His mouth was moving.

“Oh, Father!” Alonso whispered. “What have we done? It's all gone terribly wrong!” He reached out, touched his father's hand, and thought he saw him smile.

* * *

Dante was shocked. His pulse pounded, and tears blurred his vision. How could this be? This wasn't supposed to turn out this way. Nana had had a vision.

She had said they would all survive. That Raúl would die. How could she have been wrong?

Dante trembled with anger, with the repression of so many years, with fear for his fellow slaves in the fields and in the house. And it was for them that Dante rose.

And ran.

“Maldito!” Dante thought. Only he didn't really think it. He realized he'd actually opened his mouth when he had meant to keep it shut. Sad to see his mistakes the moment he made them and be powerless to stop them.

Their bodies collided.

Dante thought he'd brought Raúl down with him. But he had only managed to tear at his shirt. He hit the ground several feet away and rolled away in time to avoid Raúl's boot bearing down toward his head.

Then he heard Raúl let out an odd sound.

Dante dared to look up and saw Raúl drop to his knees. A small boy, one of the slaves, scrambled away from Dante and he realized the boy must have tackled Raúl from behind, taking him by surprise.

As he watched, the boy stood. He held something in his hand. Something long and black. Dante saw him swing at Raúl and watched as the man keeled over to his right with a frightful howl.

There was a burst of flames, and Dante realized that there was a God.

Shocked at his own glee, Dante heard the bloodcurdling scream and was stunned to see Raúl stand, his hair and his body in flames. In his shock, Raúl staggered about. Fell. Stood. Staggered. Then fell again, shrieking in agony.

Dante managed to stand and saw the boy suddenly turn and run, his face contorted with fear.

The boy screamed as he ran past. Dante then turned to see a smaller burst of fire erupt from just beneath Raúl's body. The flames seemed to chase themselves as they raced in an odd pattern.

Gunpowder. Dante was momentarily paralyzed as the fire raced away from Raúl's body. It reached the small brick building at the back of Raúl's house.

Dante's eyes widened with fear as a fireball erupted and lit the night sky. A moment later, the wind was forced out of his lungs, and he was knocked flat to the ground as if by an invisible hand.

Chapter Twenty-two

The darkening room was quiet except for his father's shallow breathing. Alonso approached the bed and looked down at the sleeping man. His face was peaceful, and he had regained some color.

Hard to believe it's been four weeks since that horrible night, Alonso thought.

"How was he today, Nana?" Alonso asked.

"Much, much better. He drank his broth, and the poultice is coming away clearer." Nana hobbled toward him.

Alonso was grateful his father agreed to remain here. The travel by ship back to Spain would be grueling. Besides, someone needed to stay behind and run the plantation, keep watch over the slaves now that Perez had disappeared. He had offered to stay with his father and assist him, but his father had been adamant Alonso return home. If he had missed the galleon, he would have to wait almost another year now that summer was approaching.

He was also glad his father had agreed to plant less sugarcane and start a crop of tobacco. He was disappointed Bernardo refused to make rum. Still, progress had to start somewhere. Tobacco was a start.

"Your father is a very stubborn man," Nana said. Alonso snorted with amusement and looked down at her. He could feel her gaze boring into him, as if she could read his mind. It made him feel uncomfortable.

"Nana...I..." Alonso started. She shook her head and put her fingers to his lips. She looked for a moment as if she would say something but changed her mind. Her eyes turned watery and she looked away. Slowly, she made her way across the room.

“Nana?” Alonso called as she reached the door. She stopped and turned. “How do you even know what I was going to say?”

Nana smiled. “I felt it. That's enough.”

Confused, Alonso watched Nana hobble out and close the door behind her. Alonso turned, looked down at his father once more and sat at the side of the bed. He took Bernardo's hand in his and held it as he sat quietly in the growing darkness.

It was nearly pitch-black outside when Alonso finally rose. He laid his father's hand across his chest, leaned over, then kissed his forehead.

* * *

Arbol lit his lantern. It had been another long day of learning numbers from Alonso. Long and exhausting, but satisfying. Alonso had said that when don Bernardo was on his feet again, Alonso would suggest that Bernardo teach Arbol to read. He needed to know. Especially now. With Perez gone—no one seemed to know where—Raúl dead, and the changes that would soon be implemented, there was no one to take care of the plantation except for don Bernardo.

With Arbol by his side as his apprentice.

Arbol glanced about the small room in the servants' section of Casa Rodrigo. It was a palace compared to his old quarters. An actual wooden floor beneath his bare feet, not dirt. There were real windows that opened and closed, not some opening in the wall to let in all the bugs, frogs, and lizards when it rained.

And a real bed! No more sleeping on a hard dirt floor.

A knock made Arbol turn. The door opened, and Alonso walked in with a smile on his face and a platter in his hands.

“Wh-what is that?” Arbol asked curiously, somehow knowing but afraid to hope, for fear it might be something else. But then, hadn't his luck begun to change already? Why not hope? Why not dream?

"Do you remember that afternoon," Alonso started, "so many years ago, when I sat beside you and you started to cry because you would never have a birthday party?"

"Yes?" Arbol nodded and felt his heart swell, unable to believe that Alonso had remembered. Already tears formed in his eyes, and he forced them away.

"Well, I promised you someday you would have one. I know it's not a real *party*. There's no one here to help you celebrate but me..."

Arbol didn't let Alonso finish. He flung himself at the man before him, the warm and beautiful Spaniard he had fallen in love with. One arm went about Alonso's neck, the other around his shoulder. He squeezed Alonso so tightly, he wished their hearts and souls could merge.

"Arbol?" Alonso wheezed. "Your arm!"

"*Ah! Perdón.*" Arbol pulled back, embarrassed.

Alonso placed the cake on the small nightstand beside Arbol's bed.

"Cook didn't quite know how to make a birthday cake. I don't know how it's going to taste. But I wanted you to have a birthday. Finally."

"I don't care how it tastes!" Arbol replied joyfully.

"There's something else." Alonso smiled. "Look under the bed."

Arbol eyed Alonso curiously, then dropped to his knees. There, nearly halfway in, was a bundle wrapped with coarse paper and string. He reached for it and pulled it out from under his new bed.

Arbol held the package uncertainly. "What is it?"

"Open it," Alonso replied.

Never having received a present before, Arbol ripped at the package with shaky fingers.

"Alonso..." Arbol's voice barely a whisper. He gently touched the fabric of the shirt—folded neatly on top of a pair of pants—almost as if he were afraid to ruin it.

"I...I don't know what...to say." The tears he had struggled to keep at bay now flowed freely.

"A simple thank-you will suffice," Alonso said in jest. Arbol looked at Alonso, saw the grin on his face, the look in his eyes, and knew that this would be the man he would love for all eternity. This was the man he would die for.

"Thank you."

Alonso stepped close to him and wrapped his arms about his waist, encircling him.

"I wanted you to have a real gentleman's shirt and a good pair of pants," Alonso proudly explained. "That way, when you're on your horse, and you're keeping watching over the other slaves in the field, everyone who sees you will know...*you* are in command."

Arbol tossed the opened package on top of the bed and wrapped his arms around Alonso's neck. Their lips met, and Arbol relished the heat of his lover's body. He felt Alonso's cock begin to respond and rub against his own. Their tongues battled furiously as their breath became erratic, and they stripped each other without ever breaking their connection.

When at last Arbol spread his legs and felt the hard, throbbing shaft pushing fervently, finally penetrating, Arbol gasped and whispered harshly in Alonso's ear.

"I love you, Alonso!"

Alonso's response was to kiss him deeply, his tongue thrusting even as his cock did.

* * *

Later, as the rest of the house slept and the dim light from the lantern flickered, the two quietly shared a piece of birthday cake.

"You never mentioned. How is your father?" Arbol sat up, legs crossed.

"Nana says he's better." Alonso lay on his side.

"And...you don't think so?" Arbol asked cautiously, licking his fingers.

"No. It's not that." Alonso sighed, devouring the last of the piece they shared. "It's just that I want to stay here. With you. We've barely had enough time to get to know one another with everything that's happened. And now that we're starting to get close..."

Arbol leaned forward and kissed Alonso's lips lightly.

"Nothing would give me more pleasure. I would gladly give up this room—the clothes you gave me—if you would stay. But if your father thinks it's best to go home and take care of business in order to set things in motion..."

"That still doesn't change the fact that I'd rather stay," Alonso protested.

"You'll be back in a year or so." Arbol caressed Alonso's face.

"Trying to get rid of me already?" Alonso joked.

"Never," Arbol replied, and they stared into each other's eyes, enjoying the silence, the nearness.

"I'll count the hours until I'm back and we're together once again. In each other's arms," Alonso said after a while.

"Let's not think about that," Arbol said, his voice a low, rasping whisper. "Right now I want you to make love to me." Arbol kissed Alonso, naked and beautiful.

"No," Alonso replied, his voice just as husky. Arbol looked curiously at Alonso even as he felt Alonso's hands pull at his body.

"This time," Alonso explained, "you're making love to me." The slight sheen of sweat on their skin made them stick to one another.

"Like this?" Arbol asked. The two of them were tangled in each other's arms. Alonso was on his back with Arbol on top, and he enjoyed the heat of Alonso's hands, the fire behind his kiss, and the burgeoning erection once more.

"Yes. Like this. So I can see your eyes when you take me."

And as Alonso gave himself for the first time—as Arbol penetrated him with fire in his blood and passion in his heart—they rode each other, hips rising and falling until Arbol felt as if they had fused together.

Alonso was tight. Making love to him was as painful as it was exquisite and beautiful.

Their bodies writhed, the speed of their undulations rising. Arbol felt the familiar sensation. It was so much more intense on top. It sent shivers down his spine, and his body tingled. Even the healed scars on his back seemed to be overly sensitive.

Arbol looked down into Alonso's eyes, and it was as if he could feel his soul entering his body even as his cock entered Alonso.

“Pr-promise me something,” Arbol said almost breathlessly.

“Anything,” Alonso replied, his voice harsh and urgent.

“Promise me...you'll come back.” Arbol gritted his teeth.

“I promise!” Alonso hissed with desire, bit his lower lip, then howled as he came. He thrashed and bucked beneath Arbol. “I love you!”

Arbol kissed Alonso deeply as he came, quietly moaning into Alonso's mouth.

And moments later, as he spooned Alonso, Arbol heard a small voice in his head.

Tomorrow he'll be gone!

But it was all right. For now he still had Alonso in his arms. And that was all that mattered. Arbol cuddled Alonso even tighter and drifted off to sleep.

 THE END 