

FRAN
LEE

Dictated
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By Fran Lee

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*To my own true loves...
John, David, and Christina
You have been my inspiration since forever...*

Chapter One

Adriana Rodriguez flounced into the second floor office her brother preferred to use when he was working at home. Her brother pointedly ignored her as he sat behind the sprawling walnut desk, the phone receiver propped on his shoulder as he riffled through a sheaf of documents. She leaned on the low window sill, arms crossed, and waited to be acknowledged. He shifted the phone and reached for another stack of papers.

"Yes—Antonio Rodriguez for Clarence Damien." He glanced up as his call went through, and his eyes locked with his sister's. "You have something on your mind?" He frowned.

Adriana frowned back. "You know exactly what I want to talk to you about, Tonio, and it is time you took this seriously!" She paced across to the edge of the desk and drummed her scarlet-tipped fingers absently on the satin-smooth finish of the wood. "You know only three eligible females who could possibly make a match for you, Tonio, and two of them you can't stand!"

"Correction," he drawled in a bored tone, "*three* of them, I can't stand." He stopped his sister's indignant retort with a raised hand as his father's business manager picked up on the other end of the line. He said quickly, "Damien! Rodriguez here. I need you to have all of my father's records available so that I can review them when I arrive on Monday." His gaze slid over his sister's livid complexion, and he wondered if she had always been so foul tempered, or if he simply always managed to bring out the worst in her. "Very good. I'll see you in three days, then."

As he hung up, Adriana gave him a narrowed glare that might have withered another man's resolve, and she rasped, "You know very well that Maria Vargas would make you an excellent wife. She has breeding, looks, AND all of Ricardo Vargas' money! She is the obvious choice. She is your perfect match, socially and financially."

He drew a deep breath and frowned at his beautiful, extremely self-serving sibling and wondered if it would be illegal to strangle her. She had been after him for these past eight months to marry that fish-cold, supremely selfish bitch. *Perfect, indeed!* He barely managed not to give a disgusted snort.

Instead, he replied coolly, "I do not wish to spend the remainder of my existence tied to the apron strings of that sour-faced bitch. Perhaps old Vargas didn't mind your dear friend intermittently sharing *his* bed, but I prefer women who are capable of some sort of response. The only time I ever saw Maria Vargas show so much emotion as to smile was when she told us that old Vargas had finally gone to his grave." He rose from his chair and shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "She is about as responsive as a cadaver."

He knew he had pushed her a trifle too far as her eyes flared and her voice rose to a shrill pitch. "Maria Vargas loved her husband! She was a good wife to him! She gave him five years of her life, and she gave him the son his first wife could not! How *dare* you speak of her so?"

Fighting the urge to throttle her with both hands, Tonio shrugged with studied indifference. "Yes, she gave him a son—*whose*, no one will ever know." He shook his head, his voice low.

His sister was livid as she hissed, "Ricardo Vargas was an old man. He cared little who fathered the boy. He simply wanted a son! She did what she had to do to please him. She did her duty as a wife."

He laughed unpleasantly. "How very dedicated. I'm certain she preferred it to the alternative."

"Alternative?" She glared at him.

"Losing his millions," he replied absently, wishing he were miles from here.

"How dare you speak of her this way? You are hardly the one to preach on moral values, dear brother. Isn't this a trifle like the pot calling the kettle black?"

Tonio was not about to get into another long discussion of his lack of morals or the terms of their father's will, both of which he knew all too well already. "I have no time for this today, Adriana. You can lecture me on having no sense of duty or decorum when I return from the states."

His statement made her pause, as did the set of his mouth and the look in his dark eyes. She knew him too well to continue to press him. It would be like butting her head into the stones of the pasture wall. She decided to let it drop for now. After all, their father's will made it very plain that he must marry before the year was out, or lose his inheritance to their cousin, Luis. There was nothing for him to do but capitulate, for there were few worthy choices for a man of his social status and wealth. *He would come around.*

She knew he had no intention of allowing their greedy cousin to take possession of this house, the Coldwater Canyon estate and of all the Los Angeles properties. He enjoyed his lifestyle. He would not allow it to vanish simply because he did not wish to be tied to a wife. She knew he would not allow their fortune to be given away. She made a distasteful face at the thought of having to leave her comfortable home and live on the pittance her mother had left to her. Tonio was obligated to think of her, too! Who could live on half a million for long?

"I think you and Maria would do well together," she said off-handedly. "She would be no burden on you financially, and she would seek her pleasure elsewhere if you could not find it in yourself to want to take her to bed. She is not in love with you, thank God! She sees the joining of the two families as an important thing, and she can rise above her own selfish desires to make certain that she weds well."

Antonio stared at her thoughtfully. Did she really think him totally incapable of finding a female he was compatible with? Was she so desperately terrified of having someone beneath her social station become a part of the all-important Rodriguez family? Or perhaps she was more

worried about Luis taking over this house and losing *her* precious status? All of the above, most likely.

He did not answer her. How could she know why he had no desire to wed? His sister knew virtually nothing about his private life beyond sheer gossip—and he preferred to keep it that way. *Gossip was easier to bear than pity.*

He made a point of ignoring her, walking through the arching doorway to the airy hallway and heading for the library. He wanted to be alone, and the library was Adriana's least favorite room. It contained books, and his sister had no use for books. Her tastes ran to clothes, jewels, and parties—none of which could ever come out of a book. He could hear her raised voice behind him as she told him once more that his time was running out.

As he closed the library doors, he drew a deep breath. He rubbed his temples with one hand, closing his eyes to shut out the thought.

That damned will! His father had begun to despair of his only son ever marrying and carrying on the family name. He had wanted to see a Rodriguez grandson before he died.

Tonio frowned. He had always hated being the only boy—being expected to marry well and to maintain the family traditions. When his young sisters, Lorena and Estella, had both been killed in a tragic boating accident, he had shuddered to hear his father say quietly to a friend at the double funeral, *"Better it was two of three daughters than my only son!"*

Perhaps that was the very reason Tonio had avoided marriage—to punish his father for saying such an insensitive thing about two beautiful little girls who had not deserved his concern simply because they were not male.

No. That was not the sole reason.

His mother had been devastated. And, perhaps it was because of her older sisters' deaths that four-year-old Adriana had been so utterly spoiled. His mother had protected her like a tigress, just as his father had completely ignored her.

At twenty-four, Adriana Rodriguez-Hidalgo was blissfully ignorant of the realities of life, having been kept well insulated by a great deal of money and a great deal of pride against such dreary necessities as working for a living. He certainly hoped Manuel would manage to clip her wings soon and take her off his hands.

He knew that the only drawback had been Adriana's lack of personal wealth. Manuel Guerra's family expected his wife to bring with her a good dowry, and now Adriana had one. How long she kept it might very well depend on the man who finally married her. Guerra had a good head on his shoulders.

Yes. Tonio had been a bitter disappointment to his father. He was nearing forty, and seemed to care nothing for his family's needs. His short engagement to Dolores Hidalgo-Ramirez, a second cousin on his mother's side of the family, had given the old man hope. But then Dolores

had changed her mind and had wed a far wealthier man instead, and Tonio had withdrawn into a shell, avoiding the subject of marriage whenever it arose.

He had begun to seek out women his father heartily disapproved of, women who gave him pleasure without reminding him of his "duty."

"Have your mistresses, by all means, son, but think of your family first. Marry one of Alejandro's girls, or the Jimenez girl, and take as many lovers as you need—but marry." His father's angry words still rang in his head.

But when he had never been so inclined, his father had been utterly furious with him. And so, with his father's death, Tonio had been given an ultimatum. He had to be married within one year of his father's death, or lose the family estates to his eldest male cousin. He would be allowed to keep only the smaller inheritance that had come from his mother's family, half of which Adriana already had received at his request.

His pickle-headed sister had no idea that their father had left her nothing, and that *he* had asked the attorneys to split the money from the trust his mother had left for him with his sister. *She would be left virtually destitute if he did not marry.* He knew his sister's tastes well, and she would manage to run through that half million in less than five years at her current spending rate. He sighed and shook his head. She was so terribly spoiled and self-indulgent. Anyone else could make that much money work for them, and live off the interest, but not his beautiful, empty-headed sister.

He had been thinking of ways to get around the will. He opened his eyes with a sigh of frustration. There were a number of methods, but none of them was practical. If he married one of his sister's choices, he would be unable to free himself at the end of the two years his father's will demanded he remain married. He would, of course, be expected to marry in the church, and divorce was unthinkable in his social circle. He just might end up marrying the Vargas widow after all, if he didn't do something—and soon.

No. He couldn't let that happen. He *had* to find a woman. A special one. One who cared nothing for him, and who would be willing to sign a prenuptial agreement to part amicably when the terms of the will had been met, with no claims upon his fortune, or his person. He would be willing to compensate her well for her help. It must be a business arrangement. He frowned at his immaculately manicured hand with the Rodriguez signet ring resting on his long, lean finger.

Finding a woman who had no designs on his wealth was going to be difficult enough, but finding a woman who would be attractive enough to convince his sister and cousin that it was a real attachment was going to be tougher. Adriana knew his tastes well, and the women he preferred to be with were seldom ones who possessed all of the traits he required. Being deliciously sensuous, full breasted, and a blue-eyed blonde wouldn't come amiss. *But that would prove far too tempting.*

The woman he chose had to be honest, beautiful, and impervious to him as a man. He hadn't met a woman yet, married *or* unattached, who didn't act like a simpering fool around him, or fall all over him when he was alone with her. They behaved like idiots. He shook his head. Where was he going to find such an unusual, highly qualified woman in such a short time?

Perhaps he could place a discreet advertisement. He shook his head at that thought. No. The woman must have a modicum of class and some measure of pride. He could imagine a woman who would be desperate enough to answer a personal ad would have neither.

He crossed the luxurious room to gaze out of the tall windows at the grove of orange trees that flanked this side of the house. He looked out over the estate without seeing the lush beauty and the grandeur that he had grown to take so completely for granted. Nothing seemed to give him much pleasure anymore. What had once seemed exquisitely beautiful to him now seemed to be an anchor tied about his neck—an anchor waiting to drown him in total boredom and “duty.”

Why did he feel so damnably blasé about everything anymore? He drew a deep breath and winced to shut out the thoughts. He knew very well why he wanted no woman to be a part of his life. His personal demon had raven black hair and flashing dark eyes, lips the color of wine, and skin so soft and sweetly scented that his mouth watered at the memory of her. The memory of one night spent in Heaven. Spent buried in a succulent, sweet body. His every wild fantasy come to life.

Damn Dolores to hell!

But enough of unpleasant memories. Memories served no purpose but to tantalize the mind and body. He had to keep those memories at bay. He knew that his best chance of locating such a woman as he needed was to spend a few weeks in the states while seeing to the affairs of the Los Angeles properties. *Yes.*

American women did not seem so set on marrying for life as women in Mexico. Perhaps he would find his salvation in California. He had a feeling about this trip. He felt that he was on the brink of some great discovery. That elusive sixth sense that had always forewarned him of tragedy and provided nuances of great things in his future was telling him that she was there.

All he had to do was look.

He reached automatically for the delicate gold crucifix on a fine gold chain that had hung about his neck since the night his mother had died, and he knew that she would not approve of his plan at all. He caressed the cool metal and shook his head. She had told him he would marry for love. She had told him it was in his future. The woman had been right more often than not, but not this time.

He had thought so too, *once*, but not now. Life had made him a realist. He knew that love did not exist. Comfort, yes—lust, certainly—*but love?* Love was a figment of the female imagination. It existed only in storybooks and in the romantic minds of thirteen-year-old virgins and frustrated old women. Love was a pathetic myth.

He shook off the feeling of his mother's hand on his shoulder, and he said aloud, to no one in particular, “I will marry to keep my fortune, but don't expect me to father a litter of brats to fill this house. I will leave that to Adriana.”

Chapter Two

"But I'll have this month's rent money in just three weeks, Mrs. Allen!" Christine Lange hurried to keep up with her landlady as the woman walked briskly toward her door, a bag of groceries in one arm, and her keys in her free hand. "Just another three weeks? I can catch up the back rent in a matter of two months, once I start this new job. Look, I've been here for five years, and I've never been late once until two months ago. Can't you cut me a break here?" She stopped breathlessly as the woman inserted the key in the lock, and turned to her with a sigh.

"I hate to put you out, Chris. I really do. I know you've been real good in the past, but the owner is insisting that anyone who can't make the rent goes. I've let you slide for two months now, and if I let you go any longer, he'll find someone else, who isn't as nice as me, to run this place." She shoved the door open and set the grocery bag on the little table inside the apartment door before turning to face the younger woman. "I put the apartment in the paper this morning, and the rent is going up \$200.00 a month for the new renters. Sorry."

Chris stared incredulously at her. "*It's going up to \$1250.00?* My God! It's only a one bedroom! It's already overpriced at \$1050.00!"

Mrs. Allen shrugged. "I only rent 'em out, honey. The guys at the top are the ones who set the rent. The owner wants the place rented out within the week."

Mrs. Allen drew a deep breath, seeming to be weighing the possible ramifications of giving in, and then she said quietly, "Tell you what; you can stay until I get it rented, but you have to clean it out good and be out the minute I get a lease signed, got that?"

Chris swallowed hard. "Thanks. At least that gives me another few days." The girl paused, then said quickly, "How about if I vacuum the carpets and dust the halls and clean the lobby? Would that pay for another week?"

Mrs. Allen gazed at her with a sigh of regret. "Too bad, really—you're a real nice kid. And a good tenant! You've been in that apartment for the past five years; no problems, no noise, no blasting music. Haven't missed a single due date until you lost your job." She shook her head and Chris held her breath, waiting. *Oh please ... let me stay...*

Chris swallowed hard. When the company she'd worked for went bankrupt last January. She'd struggled along on her savings and some odd jobs for a few months before she'd finally gotten down to the bare bones and had not been able to pay the rent all at once. The late fees here were \$25.00 a day, and she owed about \$2900.00 in rent and late fees. Mrs. Allen wasn't a mean person, but she realized that her request put the woman in a precarious position.

The older woman chewed her chapped lip and said, "It's not my job here to keep people housed for charity. Mr. Damien keeps telling me I'm here to collect the rent and keep things running smooth." She sighed. "All right. You can have two weeks, unless the apartment rents

before then. *And don't you breathe a damned word to anyone about me saying that, or I'll deny it flat out.*" The landlady shook her head and left her standing in the deserted hallway.

Chris swallowed the lump in her throat. *Two weeks.* She had to figure out what she was going to do. Two weeks gave her very little time, starting her new job on Monday, and not having a car to hunt for a new place. She would be hard pressed to find anything at all in two weeks, but she didn't dare push for any more time. Not when Mrs. Allen was already being so good about it.

She shoved her frazzled copper hair off her face and turned away from the door of the manager's apartment. She would have to get some boxes so she could start packing everything up. Maybe Mrs. Allen would let her store her things in the basement. There was a lot of room down in the basement area. *And a lot of spiders.* She gave a little shudder of revulsion.

When the old coal boiler room that supplied steam heat to the building had been condemned, it had been abandoned in favor of electric fireplaces, so the place was left to catch cobwebs and the occasional piece of broken patio furniture. The laundry room was at the other end of the basement, and her things would be safe enough. Maybe if she cleaned it up good she could put her things there just until she could afford to pay for a moving van.

Maybe she could get a room at the "Y." And if Mrs. Allen would just let her store her things in the basement, she could manage. She walked numbly along the sadly faded, well-worn carpet to the elevator and punched the button. She listened to the clank and groan of the old elevator car as it stopped and the doors slid sluggishly open.

As she stepped inside and pressed three, she hugged herself, shivering at the thought of being homeless. She swallowed hard to prevent tears from welling, but didn't quite manage, and as the door slid shut, she let out a sob of self-pity. It was disgusting how easily she cried. She waited for the car to rise up the shaft and sighed. *Damned elevator.*

She jabbed the button several times with her thumb, and then opened the doors and headed for the stairs at the far end of the hall. *Someday, when this place burned to the ground, someone was going to be stuck in that damned old thing, and they would fry.*

As she hurried up the last flight of worn concrete steps to the third floor and opened the fire door, she stopped to catch her breath. She was getting too tired for this shit. She only hoped she wouldn't have to carry her things down the stairs because that damned elevator didn't work right.

She swallowed hard. Oh, hell! This place wasn't exactly the newest or fanciest, but it *was* a place to live, and it became dearer as the prospect of leaving became more real. She ran her hand along the peeling wallpaper of the hallway as she walked slowly toward her door, and she wondered why anyone in his right mind would pay \$1,250.00 to live in this old firetrap. Then she laughed and gave a shrug. For that matter, why had *she* been paying \$1050.00 since the last rent hike six months ago? Why? Because housing was expensive, and there was a shortage of decent places that rented reasonably.

She unlocked her door and stepped inside the tiny but immaculate apartment she had called home these past five years. Tears stung the back of her throat again as she bit her lower lip and walked into the bathroom to blow her nose. She glared at her red-eyed reflection in the mirror over her sink. The mirror *she had bought* because the old medicine chest mirror had fallen out and had broken.

She turned on the tap and splashed water over her flushed face and puffy eyes, and then she dried her face with a soft towel. "You certainly do have the lousiest luck, girl," she breathed as she folded the towel and hung it over the rack.

What was it her father had always said? Copper hair meant good luck?

Hah! In her recollection, it never had done anything to make hers any better. "*Unlucky*" *should be my middle name*, she thought darkly as she cleaned up the mess from the shower she'd taken earlier, tossing her undies into the wicker hamper by the door.

She had left home nearly six years ago to escape the dead end cycle of life in a small town in Nebraska, and she had headed for the big city—San Francisco. Of course, the school pal who had invited her to come out didn't have room for her, and had conveniently forgotten the offer she'd made to let her stay with her, and so she had struggled for six months to stay alive, too damned proud to call home for help.

And then, she'd met Jimmy. *Gorgeous—sexy—breathhtaking Jimmy.*

That thought made her pause for a moment. She didn't like to think about that. She gave an unamused bark of laughter. Then, after *total* disillusionment in the city by the bay, she had trekked southward to Los Angeles.

Dear God, if I had a dollar for every damned mess that I've gotten myself into, I'd be rich. She drew a shaking breath.

This one wasn't her fault. She'd had a great job, making plenty of money. Then one of the partners had died, and the other one had been unable to carry the load. The company had folded after eight months of Mr. Erlinger's bumbling business practices.

She had, luckily, put away a few thousand while the money had been good. It had kept her going at the rate of \$1,700.00 per month in living expenses over the past eight months while she'd fought to hold one lousy paying job after another. It hadn't been easy for her to compete in a world filled with hopeful starlets working for pennies, waiting for that big break in the movies. The one that never came.

At twenty-nine she wasn't in the first bloom of youth, and despite all that crap about equal opportunity employment, she found herself fighting over scraps with busty young things fresh off the farm, scrambling to get a job until they could get that big break—and she had lost one hell of a lot of the battles. Most likely because she was unwilling to file a job app on her back in some sleazy store room.

She had managed to snag a few temps, a few fast food stints, and one or two short-term accounting jobs that had helped pay the bills and fend off bankruptcy. But the good paying, permanent job had come too late to save her this terribly embarrassing and depressing eviction.

She had managed to convince Mr. Anderson that she was far more efficient, and ten times more knowledgeable than the bevy of busty beauties applying for this particular job, so he had magnanimously given her a try, at half the salary she had been drawing with Erlinger and Dunn. But it was steady work, and the pay was better than she'd had for the past few months. If she could just have three weeks, she would have a handle on this.

Maybe she would try Mrs. Allen again in the morning. If she could only convince her to give her another month, she could catch up the back rent within a few weeks at the pay she would be getting. She drew another calming breath and decided to try again.

Anything worth keeping was worth fighting for, even if it was going to be \$200.00 more expensive next month. It would be terribly hard to rebuild her savings, spending another \$200.00 on the rent, but what choice did she have? Of course, that was assuming that she was a good talker, and Mrs. Allen was a willing listener.

She sank down onto the bed and leaned her chin on her crossed arms. Maybe some miracle would happen to take her away from all of this. She rolled onto her back and closed her eyes. Some wildly handsome knight in shining armor, maybe, whisking her onto the back of his huge black stallion to ride off into the sunset.

Sure. Just like the last one.

She gave a groan and shook her head. There were no knights in shining armor. There were no saviors riding in and carrying the fair maiden away from a fate worse than death. Those guys had all been figments of some writer's imagination. Lancelot and Arthur had been myths—chivalry had only been for the rich, not the poor—and if she had brought any naïve illusions out west with her at twenty three, they were all completely dispelled by now.

There would be no rescuer to save her from this mess. She had been looking for him since she was sixteen, and she was quite certain she would die an old maid because the men she had seen didn't even come halfway up to her slowly evaporating ideal. Of course, the only men she knew were either married but looking, divorced and on the rebound—or gay.

In her age group, the pickings were pretty slim. Oh, there were plenty of opportunities to hop into the sack with someone. But she wanted more than a one-night stand. She had those in her dreams. In real life she wanted more—so much more.

She had decided several years back that she didn't want to get involved with married men, nor was she interested in nursing a sick ego back to health for some other woman. She was doomed to remain unplucked, as it were, rotting on the frigging vine. She flushed at her naïve thoughts, and punched her pillow into submission with an angry fist.

"Wake up, stupid!" she growled. "There is no such animal as Prince Charming!"

Sleep came unwillingly, and only after a long fist fight with her uncooperative mattress and pillow. At least in her sleep Prince Charming did exist. He was a welcome visitor to her restless nights, and as she sank into weary oblivion, he was there waiting in the silken darkness to help her forget.

He was standing where she always found him. He was looking out over the rooftops toward the black, roiling ocean, with the wind blowing his dark hair across his shadowy face, his body hidden in the mists of her dream. Strange, how she never managed to actually see him. Only feel him. Sense his intensity. He turned to face her as she floated from the door of the stairwell, and the only part of his face she could see were his lips, those sinfully wicked, curving lips that did such heavenly things to her body. Why couldn't she see him?

As always, he said nothing. Reaching out to her, he pulled her close with lean, strong hands and took her mouth savagely, needfully, hotly. His tongue was strong, hot, decadently delicious, tasting of delights she desperately wanted to know. There was heat in his kiss. Deep, sizzling heat. Devouring her. Building within her an aching hunger as his mouth and tongue left her faint and desperate for more.

His hands—oh, those marvelous, strong hands. Hands that moved slowly, decadently, torturing every place they moved, making her hot and greedy for more. Hands that cupped her barely covered breasts as he demanded everything.

He was naked. He was always naked. His smooth bronzed skin hot against hers as her own virginal white gown melted beneath his searing touch. She desperately wanted to see all that seductive, sweat-sheathed skin. She could never see his body clearly, and it was so hard and strong, so completely masculine and hot. She could not see his rippling muscles—only feel them as her own hands frantically moved over his chest and shoulders. Her palms caressed the hard nubs of masculine nipples, and when she tried to look at his body, he kissed her again, passionately, hungrily, preventing her from looking her fill.

He smiled down into her face as he held up the black cloth that he invariably wrapped around her eyes, and she shook her head. No! She wanted to see him! And then she was lost once more in the black folds of cloth as he ran his mouth down her body to her navel, his hot tongue swirling over her skin as she clutched his thick dark hair and begged him to finish this time—just once—so that she would know what it felt like. Her body was aflame, her lips trembling as she begged him to take away the cloth so that she could feast her eyes on him.

He laughed softly at her cries, ignoring her breathless need to see. His mouth moved over her trembling lips then tracked lower over her aching throat as she moaned and clung to his shoulders. His fingertips trailed over her aching nipples, to be replaced by his hot, wet mouth suckling, teasing—his tongue swirling seductively around her breast's puffy tip, his hot breath making the painful tightness of her nipple even more desperately unbearable.

"I want you to—oh, please—touch me! Please, let me see you," she sobbed as her hands dragged his body closer. Oh, the enthralling feel of his body beneath her fingers—under her aching palms. Her mind swirled in a miasma of unsated passion as he laughed and moved to the other nipple, tugging it deep into his hot mouth as his hands—oh, God! Those wonderful,

talented hands—cupped her breasts as he licked, nipped, and nibbled until she wanted to die of the pleasure. Don't stop! No! Please don't stop.

He moved downward, his lips and tongue leaving a trail of devastation in their heated wake as he slipped down her body, his hands cupping her ass and lifting her hips to press a wanton kiss above her wet coppery curls. Oh, please! Yes!

He was pressing her thighs apart—seeking, teasing—until she lifted her hips and threw her head back, panting in desperation. She felt his delicious fingertips slip into the wet, swollen cleft between her legs—felt the heat swelling—that hot, sensuous beginning of ravening passion. She felt his long, lean fingers dip and swirl over her clitoris and into her throbbing center, felt the sweet, hot torture of his mouth as he kissed her wet sex, his tongue swirling, dipping—offering paradise! Almost—there—please—oh, please—oh—yeah...

Oh, shit!

The alarm brought her up from her bed with a strangled curse. Damn him! Even in her dreams, Prince Charming was just a frigging tease! She calmed her raging pulses and closed her eyes, falling back onto her damp pillow with a groan.

How many times had she felt him in her dreams? How many times had she so *nearly* felt the explosion she desperately craved? Oh, yeah, he was a damned tease.

But at least he wasn't gay.

Chapter Three

Tonio glanced over the papers slowly. Everything seemed to be in order, yet he had a feeling that everything was not what it appeared to be. *That old sixth sense again.*

He settled the sheaf of documents into his briefcase, and glanced up into the eyes of the man who had been managing his father's business interests in Los Angeles for the past several years, and said, "You do excellent work, Mr. Damien. I appreciate your taking this time with me to go over these things." He smiled in a pleasant manner. "I would like to see the properties firsthand, if possible."

The man agreed almost too quickly. "Anytime you wish. I will be happy to show them to you."

Tonio nodded. "I would appreciate that very much. However, I plan to spend the next few days visiting friends. Can we begin the tour on Thursday morning?"

Damien nodded. "Fine. Just call me around 8:00, and I'll come pick you up."

Tonio rose from the chair. "Very good. Thursday then." He shook the man's hand and snapped the case shut, noting the man's uncomfortable glance at the papers he was taking with him. He walked from the office, deciding quickly that he did not wish a guided tour. He would learn far more about the state of affairs here if he went touring by himself. Damien would hand pick the best sites and avoid the others.

He had no real reason to mistrust the man, except that damned inner sense he got about people. It was telling him that Clarence Damien was not an honest man, and it had never been wrong yet. His father had been far too ill to oversee his business for a number of years now, and there was something about this man Tonio didn't like.

Jose was waiting for him by the car, and as he stepped out into the late afternoon sunlight, the man sprang to life, hurrying to open the rear door of the vintage black Mercedes limo with a respectful nod of his head. "Home, *señor*?"

"No," he breathed. "I would like to drive to Torrance. To the first address on this list." He handed the man a sheet of paper with the addresses of several of his father's rental properties scribbled on it, and the man nodded. "Yes, *señor*."

Jose and the other servants spoke only English in his and Adriana's presence, just as they had spoken only Spanish when in his father's or mother's presence. It was merely an affectation of his sister's. She liked to practice her English when she was in Los Angeles. She had always secretly yearned to become an American movie star, and one had to speak fluent English to be one—or so she had thought. But, beautiful as she was, the movie industry had passed her by.

He sighed. Such a waste. Her father had made certain no movie producer would ever approach *his* daughter. *No innocent flower of the Rodriguez family was going to flaunt herself on a wide screen.* He shook his head. She didn't know half of the things that had been pre-planned for her, simply because she was a girl. He had talked his father out of forcing his eighteen-year-old sister into a marriage with a fifty-year-old friend of the family. It had been a narrow escape for her. She had detested Raul Hernandez. Adriana knew nothing of her big brother's many intercessions on her behalf. He preferred it that way. He had grown to prefer her antagonism to any display of insincere gratitude.

As he watched the scenery slipping past the dark glass of the car, he rubbed the back of his neck slowly. Damned headaches. He couldn't seem to get rid of them anymore, no matter what he took. *It had to be the stress.* He would have liked to have found a beautiful woman, a good bottle of brandy, and a quiet place to enjoy both.

How long had it been—ten months? Adriana thought him a philanderer and a lecher. He sometimes wished to hell that he deserved the titles. Screwing a different woman every night might be extremely pleasant, far more preferable than the reality of his existence.

He had heard all the gossip. He gave a snort of unamused laughter. If even a fraction of it were true, he would be far too tired to even move. His name had been linked by the gossips with this beauty or that, half of whom he had never even met. He had ceased worrying about his reputation years ago. Let them all think he was a good for nothing. He could not have cared less.

If only he hadn't been foolish enough to begin that ridiculous affair with the mayor's beautiful but bored young wife, there would be no gossip. He smiled to think of the silly creature and how easy she had been to please. The simpering little idiot had blurted out the fact of their affair one night after consuming a bit too much champagne. After that, every frustrated wife in Mexico City insinuated to her friends that she, too, had shared his bed. *He had become a fad, of sorts.* Nonetheless a notorious one.

True. He did prefer married woman with inattentive husbands. They were so much easier to be free of when the affair ended. No weeping innocent crying on her father's shoulder for justice to be done. He had always been completely honest with his lovers, and extremely discreet. And extremely generous.

He had never promised what he could not give. All of the ladies he had spent time with had been rewarded lavishly with gifts and baubles. He never became involved with unmarried women, and never within his own social circle.

He had his own set of ethics, and he never crossed the fine line between a discreet, enjoyable flirtation and a more serious relationship. He chose only those whom he was certain of, those he knew were experienced and not apt to take his advances more seriously than he intended. He closed his eyes and shut out the memories once more. Sometimes they became too painful.

If only it had not been for Dolores—beautiful, sensuous, cruel deceiver that she was—with a body created for a man's hands and mouth to savor.

Dolores had been everything he had dreamed of in a woman. His fantasy. Thank God, he had completely gotten her out of his mind and out of his thoughts.

Most of the time.

* * * *

Chris threw her jacket over the back of the chair and kicked off her high heels. She had promised Mrs. Allen that she would vacuum the lobby and polish the first floor paneling after she got off work, and the bus had been terribly late. She tore off her silk blouse and her skirt and dragged on a rather ugly looking old T-shirt and a pair of well worn Levi's, jamming her bare feet into her ratty old sneakers. She hurried through to the bathroom, dragging her hair up off her neck with her hands as she looked for a scrunchy to secure it with.

She glanced at her watch after securing her flyaway mop, and hoped Mrs. Allen wouldn't be too upset about her vacuuming after 6 p.m. It shouldn't disturb anyone. Mrs. Abbott was deaf as a post, and Mr. Delayne worked afternoons. They were the only ones who complained all the time. She grabbed the utility room key off the hook by her door and hurried along the hall to the stairs, not wanting to wait for the elevator. *It probably wouldn't work anyway.*

She hoped she had made a good impression on Mr. Anderson today. She had worked through her lunch hour to get her office set up. The previous person in the position had left a stack of work that dated back seventeen months. It would take her weeks to get it all sorted out. She was hungry and tired, and she still had to do the cleaning she had promised to do.

She hurried down the steps and through the fire door on the first floor and headed for the utility closet across from the manager's apartment. She wouldn't have a spare minute to check the paper for rentals until after eight, and nobody liked to be bothered by phone calls that late. She had tried valiantly to look through the ads on the bus, but standing and hanging onto a damned strap had made it impossible.

As she dragged the ancient Kirby from the closet and plugged it in, she wondered if she might be able to get an actual *seat* if she left a half-hour earlier in the morning. The trip was pretty lousy standing in the aisle. It was a five block walk to the bus stop, then a thirty minute bus trip on her feet, then another three block walk to the office. Her feet were killing her. Tomorrow she would wear her sneakers and carry her heels in a shopping bag.

She jabbed the switch on the vacuum with her toe, and as the vacuum whirred to life, she quickly and efficiently worked her way along one end of the main hallway, then the other, before heading for the entryway and lobby. She backed around the corner and avoided knocking the antique lamp off the hall table, working her way toward the main entrance.

If she hurried, maybe she would be finished before Mrs. Allen even got home.

* * * *

The car slid to a halt before the steps leading up into the lobby of what must have once been a rather elegant apartment building. As Jose opened the door for him, Tonio stepped out, frowning at the untrimmed shrubbery that half-obliterated the uneven, broken concrete of the sidewalk. The place had been utterly neglected for what appeared to be quite some time. He knew that his father had always insisted on his properties being kept up, but this one had somehow been missed. He glanced at the peeling paint on the wood around the front entryway, and he glanced at his driver. "I won't be long."

He climbed the cracked concrete of the front steps, and removed his leather glove to push open the sadly neglected oak and glass doors. The sound of a vacuum cleaner met his ears as he stepped inside and glanced about, and he paused as a woman appeared around the corner from the right hallway, her back to him as she negotiated the turn, jabbing the whirring edge of the Kirby into the corner and under a table.

He noted how quickly she was moving, as if in a hurry, and he wondered if this could be the manager. He glanced at the paper in his hand, and as he lifted his eyes, the darting vacuum attempted to eat the toe of his hand-made Italian shoe! He stared down at the offending machine, irritated that its operator had been so careless. He drew a deep breath as the vacuum was shut off, and a startled voice gasped, "Oh, my God! I am so sorry!"

"No terrible damage done," he breathed in a well controlled voice, lifting his eyes up the worn jeans, over a baggy T-shirt to meet a pair of horrified green eyes, and he had to stop himself from laughing aloud. She looked so utterly stricken he found it difficult not to smile. He inhaled slowly, noting the smudge of dirt across her nose, and the way her mouth had dropped open wordlessly as she stared up into his face.

He lifted one brow and asked quietly, "Mrs. Allen?"

She shook her head jerkily and stammered, "No—no—I'm not. I mean, I'm not her. Mrs. Allen, that is." He noted the high color staining her cheeks, and sensed that she was fighting some inner battle as she seemed to struggle to calm herself. She tore her eyes from his face and looked down at the scuffed shoe. "I'm really terribly sorry about that. I hope it isn't ruined." He found himself trying very hard not to smile.

He glanced at the toe of his shoe and shook his head. "It will survive," he drawled. He lifted his eyes back to her face and wondered what it was about her that reminded him of a Renoir painting. She was not what he might call beautiful, yet there was something in the way she held herself. A touch of sensual elegance, despite the shabby clothes and the tousled coppery hair, that made him sense there was far more to her than met his practiced eye. His eyes rested thoughtfully on the agitated rise and fall of her rounded breasts beneath her well-worn T-shirt—his cock jerked to instant attention.

He unwillingly lifted his eyes from her chest, inhaled deeply, and caught the light bouquet of a delicate floral fragrance. He noted the way her eyes would not lift above his chin when she looked back up, as if she were afraid to meet his gaze.

"Is Mrs. Allen here?" he asked softly, noting the fresh wave of brilliant pink that flooded her cheeks.

She seemed to force herself to smile politely and reply in a calm tone. "She will be back in about an hour. Have you come to look at the apartment?"

He lifted one dark brow again. "Yes. I am here to see it." This was an excellent opportunity to look the place over. He noted the way her face fell a little at his reply, and he wondered why she seemed suddenly unhappy to show him this apartment that was available.

As she hesitated, he said softly, "Perhaps I should wait for Mrs. Allen."

She drew a shaky breath. She shrugged and shoved the Kirby out of the way, fishing in her pocket for the key. "It's on the third floor. I'll show it to you." She seemed upset for some reason. "Come on." She headed for the elevator.

Tonio followed her along the faded carpet that had obviously once been very expensive, but was now worn badly, and in need of replacement. His eyes slid over the oak paneling that had long been left un-oiled, and the dingy wallpaper of a bygone era clinging forlornly to the walls and ceiling. This Mrs. Allen was certainly not a very good manager.

He was sure his father would never have allowed this place to run down so. His eyes shifted once again to the woman walking ahead of him, and he was mildly surprised to notice that under those loose, unattractive jeans and that horrible shirt there was an uncommonly well made female body. He let his gaze move over the swaying bottom appreciatively, recalling those succulent breasts, and then he drew himself up.

No time for those kinds of thoughts. There was far too much to be done. She couldn't be much over twenty-five, yet her eyes told him she was older. Bad experiences perhaps. He watched as she pushed the button for the elevator, and as she turned to him with a polite smile, he noted that the smile did not quite reach her green eyes.

She cleared her throat, and said quietly, her voice low, "The elevator is pretty slow—when it works."

He wondered why she seemed irritated with him so suddenly. It was as if *he* had run over *her* toe! It was unusual to see antagonism in a woman's eyes. He was used to quite a different reaction. Her reaction to him at first had been what he expected. What had made it change so rapidly? Why the hell did he care? She was nothing to him, personally.

He gave himself a mental shake. *She was no one—an unimportant female working in one of his apartment buildings.* Obviously paid to clean the place, and doing a very poor job of it at that. Yet the feeling that she did not seem to find him at all attractive made him instinctively want to test the depths of these waters. Perhaps it was simply a matter of male pride. Then he smiled to himself. She had no idea who he was, or how rich he was. That could be the problem.

She glanced up at the elevator light, which indicated that the elevator was still on the fifth floor, and she said off-handedly, "Sometimes it won't budge until you get inside and pound on the control panel. Maybe we'd better take the stairs." She turned and headed for the stairwell at the

end of the hall. She hurried up the stairs, almost taking them two at a time in her rush to get to the third floor.

When she reached the third landing and pushed open the fire door, he reached out past her and held it for her, and she seemed to lean just a bit away as if the brush of his chest against her shoulder were unpleasant. He followed her along the hallway to apartment number 310, and paused as she fumbled with the key. She opened the door and swung it inward, standing back to let him precede her.

Tonio lifted his brows as she stepped back, seeming to be angry for some reason. He paced forward, and stopped in the center of a small living room where boxes stood packed and ready to be moved. His eyes moved over the neat living space, surprised to note the difference between this warm, lived in little apartment and the rest of the building. Obviously, the person who was moving out had taken great care of the premises. This showed what the place could be like if cared for properly.

Tonio frowned as he walked about the tiny apartment. It was beautiful, unlike the rest of the place, and it was immaculate. Someone had obviously taken great pains to repaper the apartment, and there was a very attractive, if inexpensive, Persian rug set on the scrubbed and polished hardwood floor. Whoever lived here was obviously getting ready to move out. He glanced from the comfortably arranged furniture to the mantle, and his frown deepened.

He crossed the room and looked at the photographs in little silver frames of a man and a woman with a little girl. There were several other photos there, but his eyes were drawn to the face of a teenage girl smiling into the camera. A high school photo, judging by the innocent youth, but nonetheless recognizable as the woman who stood in the doorway behind him, glaring at his back so evilly.

No wonder she was so irritated—*this was her apartment*. He lifted a small porcelain lamb and smiled slowly. *She was afraid he was going to take the place*. He understood now her reaction when he had asked to see it. But why was she leaving? Most people left an apartment for a nicer one. He had the distinct impression that she was not leaving willingly.

He set the delicate lamb down and moved to the door of her bedroom. He was curious now. He stepped through the open door and smiled at the comfortably situated room. He instinctively knew this was her special place. He noted the old, well-worn books piled on the bed, ready to be packed into waiting boxes. He glanced at the dresser and stepped across to lift a tiny flagon of scent, noting that it was definitely the one she wore. *Inexpensive but most effective*.

He pursed his lips as he set it back onto the scarred but well-polished wood, and turned to look into her bathroom. He noted the discarded business suit, the silk blouse, glimmering nylons that had been hastily dragged off in favor of her current unattractive garb. He drew a slow breath. He certainly didn't need to feel his body responding to a woman's discarded clothing! He noted the delicate scrap of underwear that lay on the edge of a wicker hamper, and he frowned as he resisted lifting it, and moved on to look into the bath.

A utilitarian, threadbare terry cloth bathrobe hung on the door, smelling incongruously of roses, and he noted that her hand-washing still hung in the tub on the drying rack. *Surprising*

underwear for a woman who wore such casual attire to vacuum halls. He felt a jerk somewhere south of his belt and fought it down. She was quite an enigma.

He turned and noted that she was no longer in the bedroom doorway glaring evilly at him. He stepped out of the room and saw her perched like a recalcitrant child on the arm of her sofa, her eyes on her sneakers.

Strange how things seemed to fall into place when you least expected them to.

He crossed the room to the mantle again, and turned to face her, hands shoved deep in his pockets. She refused to look at him. "Why didn't you tell me this was your place?" he asked in a quiet, husky voice.

Chris swallowed hard, her eyes lifting to his. She tried not to let the shimmer of tears show as she shrugged. "It isn't mine anymore. I'm moving."

"Why?" The single word made her blink. She frowned across at him, irritated that he was so damned curious about something that was hurting like hell!

"Does it matter? Do you like the place or not?" She sounded angrier than she was, but she didn't trust her voice not to crack.

"It might matter. And yes, I do like it." He answered each question in its turn.

She swallowed hard. His dark, intense eyes were enough to make her swallow her damn tongue. A woman could definitely get lost in those eyes, and the man had such a finely made body! Even an outrageously expensive suit couldn't camouflage that six pack and those powerful shoulders. She inhaled slowly and rose from the arm of the sofa, hugging herself as she paced to the open door. She didn't want him in here anymore. She wanted him to leave. He seemed to take up all the oxygen in the place.

"It shouldn't. It's my problem. If you've seen what you came to see, I have work to do downstairs." She was agitated, her voice gruff.

He seemed to sense that she was desperate, yet he refused to be driven away. He casually leaned into the wall beside the fireplace and gazed at her thoughtfully. His eyes made her shiver.

"I take it you aren't exactly happy to go." The deep rumble of his voice set her nerves on edge.

She wanted to yell at him, but stopped herself. "Look, my personal life is not your problem. Mrs. Allen will be here in an hour or so. You can come back and talk to her about renting it if you like it. Now, could you please leave so I can get my work done?" She winced inwardly at her unwarranted rudeness.

He shrugged. "Have you been evicted?"

Her shoulders stiffened as she turned away and said, "What if I have? There are other places." She lifted her chin a bit defiantly. "*Cheaper* places," she added spitefully.

So, she was unable to afford to stay, which meant that she was experiencing personal difficulties—financial problems. His thoughts moved rapidly. She wasn't unattractive. In fact, she had a quality to her that would definitely work. He didn't usually find red-heads attractive, but this one had distinct possibilities.

"Are you out of work?" he asked softly.

She swung around to glare in indignation at him, and he inhaled slowly. Something primal and hot grabbed his gut and twisted, and the feeling was definitely unexpected. She was rather impressive when she gazed at him like that. He pursed his lips and lifted his brows. *Amazingly impressive.*

"I am sorry if I seem to pry into things that are none of my business, but perhaps I can help." Gently—he didn't need to scare the hell out of her by being too pushy.

The woman seemed about ready to tell him to go to hell and get out of her apartment, but his words stopped her. She frowned at him. "Why should you help a total stranger?"

She must be wondering if he had something kinky in mind as his gaze moved over her from head to toe thoughtfully.

Tonio stepped across to stand a couple of paces from her, and he noted the way her cheeks grew bright pink and her eyes lowered to his top button again. Was she experienced enough not to become involved? She appeared not to like him much, yet he sensed that she found him attractive. "How much rent do you pay here?" *Keep on track—don't rush your fences.*

"\$1050.00—or it *was* \$1050.00, but the owner just hiked the rent to \$1,250.00 now that I'm leaving. \$1050.00 was too much in the first place. They don't keep the place up at all anymore. I had to fix this one up with my own money," she mumbled, her eyes darting to his face. "Look, it doesn't matter. Unless you know about a job where I can make one hell of a lot of money, I would have to look elsewhere anyway." She shrugged and backed a step away, seeming to feel uncomfortable standing so close to him.

Tonio frowned. *The rent was \$1050.00?* The records showed that the most expensive three-bedroom apartment in this building was only \$850.00.

"Tell me," he murmured quietly, and he knew she would tell him as her lips quivered slightly and her eyes slid away. "I am a very good listener."

She swallowed and shook her head. "Look, thanks anyway, but I think you don't really want to hear my problem."

He drew an irritated breath. She wasn't making this easy. Typical American—never trust a stranger. Of course, she was right, but he wasn't just any stranger. She had no way of knowing

what his reasons were, so he said quietly, "Would it make it easier if I said that I own these apartments?"

She blinked, jerking her head up to stare at him. Her face went red, and she put her hands to her cheeks. "You're joking, right? What's your name?"

He smiled. He bowed gallantly, his eyes never leaving her face as he breathed, "Antonio Miguel Rodriguez-Hidalgo, at your service, *Miss...*" He made a point of waiting for her to furnish her name in return. He watched warm color flush her cheeks, then vanish as she put her hand to her throat and fought to reply. *Madre de Dios*, but she had the sexiest blushes. He felt his cock grow thick with the pumping of his pulses.

"Um—Chris—Christine—Christine Lange," she blurted. As his eyes slid over her face, and his smile deepened, she flushed even more. She said quickly, "Okay. So what happened to the silver-haired Mr. Rodriguez?"

His smile faded as he murmured, "My father died eight months ago. I take it you have met him?"

Her voice was low as she spoke. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea. No, I never really met him. I just saw him once from a distance." She shoved her hands into the back pockets of her baggy Levi's and bit her lower lip. Her unselfconscious movement stretched the thin T-shirt tightly across her delightful breasts, and she seemed not to notice how it was affecting him. Seemed not to notice the amazing erection he was trying to conceal.

Tonio inhaled and swallowed. She wore nothing beneath that T-shirt. And she didn't *need* anything beneath it.

He calmed the sudden shot of lust that ran from his cock to his brain and managed to speak in an almost normal tone. "So, now do you think you can tell me why you are moving? After all, I need to know if there is a problem with the way my building is managed." He gently slipped his hand under her elbow and led her to the sofa where he moved a box of books, gesturing for her to sit. It took more strength than he cared to admit to touch her so platonically at that moment. She obeyed, her eyes looking oddly gray when he could have sworn they were green. He wondered how they could change color that way.

She chewed the corner of her lower lip. "I don't want to sound like I'm looking for charity, but I was out of work for the past seven months, and I used my savings up paying rent until a couple of months back, and now I have a job, and Mrs. Allen told me I can't stay because the owners, I mean, *you* wanted to raise the rent again, and she said you wouldn't wait another couple of months for me to catch up the arrears."

She was out of breath when she finished, and she glanced up into his face to see his reaction. He couldn't keep his eyes from moving slowly over her, assessing her. She swallowed hard and folded her arms self-consciously over her chest. She cleared her throat.

"Anyway, I have to move as soon as the apartment is rented." Her eyes flared in resentment. "It really isn't worth another \$200.00 a month, but I'd be willing to pay it if you would just let me stay until I got caught up." Her words were desperate as she chewed her lower lip.

"Your rent has gone up how much since you first moved in?" Tonio frowned. He had to get information, and he had to keep his thoughts in line. It was not easy, with her squeezing those mouth-watering breasts tight together and nearly presenting them to him on the platter of her crossed forearms.

"It was \$550.00 when I moved in five years ago. It went up to \$690.00 three years back, and then to \$880.00—and last January it went up to \$1050.00. When I move out it'll go up to \$1,250.00." She saw his eyes flicker slightly, and swallowed. "I mean, don't get me wrong. It used to be a really nice place, but since you hired Mrs. Allen, nothing has been done to keep it up. It's not her fault, really, she just does what she has to." She waited nervously as he seemed to be considering her statement. But his eyes were glued rather disconcertingly to her chest.

"How many apartments in this building?" he asked softly, fighting the urge to reach out to see if those deliciously erect nipples felt as tight and sweet as they appeared as they jutted impudently out of the disreputable T-shirt, teasing him unmercifully.

"Sixty. Six on each floor" she whispered. She shifted as if aware of his thoughts, her arms tightening over her chest. That only served to lift her nipples higher. He fought to drag his eyes back to her face.

He lifted his brows. "A great deal of work for one woman to keep up, I should say. I will have a word with Mrs. Allen later." The air between them practically sizzled with something hot and undeniably intense. He sank casually into one of her armchairs and gazed at her. And then he dropped the bomb she had been dreading—or possibly, anticipating.

"However, I have a proposition which may be the answer to a large problem for both of us, if you will just take a moment to hear me out. How about it?"

Chapter Four

She stared as he sank onto the chair opposite her, and crossed one long leg negligently over the other. "Um—what *kind* of proposition?" she asked warily.

Tonio eyed her quietly, assessing her intently as he spoke, watching her expression. She was obviously thinking he meant to ask for sex. The red cheeks and the wary eyes told him that much. Had he allowed too much of his thoughts to be seen? He inhaled deeply. She was no total innocent if she recognized that possibility. Good.

Or perhaps not so good.

But he had to find out just how far she would be willing to go to solve her problem. How much "help" would it take for her to agree to his suggestion? He definitely liked what he saw. She seemed honest enough. And desperate enough. And she was not eager to fall into his bed. She seemed to be avoiding his gaze. Not flaunting her assets as most women would have. *And the woman had undeniable assets.*

"You are not the only one to be faced with a seemingly insurmountable problem, Miss Lange." His words were carefully chosen. "I have a problem as well, and if you will help me with mine, I would be most happy to assist you with yours." He tried to appear nonchalant as he continued, despite the heat that flared in his groin and the inexplicable lust that he was tamping down even as he spoke. "But before I tell you what my problem is, I must ask you a few rather personal questions. Are you willing to answer?"

She eyed him thoughtfully, as if noting his open expression and his quiet demeanor. He tried to appear less ready to pounce on her. She seemed to sense that her answers were important. She seemed to be thinking over his reasons for asking.

"Ask. If I don't think I want to answer, I'll let you know."

"Are you married?"

She gave a bark of laughter without amusement. "Do all married women live alone in a small apartment?"

He smiled. She had a wry sense of humor. "Some live separate from their husbands for certain reasons. Have you *ever* been married?"

She shrugged, frowning at him. "Once. Why are you asking me these questions? What does my marital status or lack of it have to do with your proposition?"

He inhaled deeply. She was giving him all the right answers here. "You'll understand in a moment. Bear with me, please. Do you have any children?"

"No."

"Do you have a current relationship with anyone?"

She frowned more. "This is getting rather too personal, but I'll give you this one. No." Her expression told him he was treading on thin ice.

"I have only one more question," he murmured. He noted her hands tightly clasped in her lap—a firm refusal if he were any judge of body language.

"Are you religious?"

She laughed in embarrassed amazement. "My God! You'd think you were asking me to marry you or something. These questions are utterly ridiculous, and I don't have to answer!"

He waited. "*Do* you have a religion?"

She stared at him. "You are *serious*? What does that have to do with the price of peanuts?"

"What does the price of peanuts have to do with my question?" he asked quietly.

"I haven't gone to church in years! I can't imagine why the hell I am even answering you!" She shook her head. "Are you the devil? You offering some sort of contract for my immortal soul?"

"Why would you think that?" he asked with a lift of one devilishly winged brow.

"You said 'one more question.' That makes two more. I'm through answering." She glared at him. "What is this 'proposition'?"

Her face was set, and he knew he had gotten all the answers he would get.

Tonio drew a deep breath. He maintained a carefully calm demeanor as he spoke. "Thank you. Now, I will tell you something about myself, so you will understand my own dilemma better." He saw the wary look on her face, but he knew that she was not going to be terribly difficult. She hadn't expected him to tell her anything personal in return. His explanation would show her that she could trust him. He prayed to God that he could trust himself.

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "I am the only son of a very wealthy family. I have a sister fourteen years younger than I. Both of my parents are gone. My mother died four years ago. My father died recently, as you already know."

She was listening. Relaxed.

Tonio spoke quietly, knowing that she would be astonished by his proposition, but hoping she wouldn't bolt before he had the halter on her. "I am 38 years old, and I have not married, and my family has been extremely upset by my single state. So upset, in fact, that my

father stipulated in his will that I had to marry within one year of his death or suffer disinheritance."

He watched her face. The light hadn't dawned yet. She was being obtuse—perhaps deliberately. "I have no wish to marry, but in order to keep that which I have grown greatly accustomed to, I must find myself a wife and rather—*quickly*." He met her green gaze, and waited patiently for her to reply.

She frowned warily. Was she at last realizing that he was leading up to something?

"So? I'm pretty certain someone like you would have no problem finding a wife. What's this got to do with ... " she stopped, her mouth obviously refusing to work. Her eyes went wide as she seemed to realize that he might just be asking her to fill in the blanks here.

"Run that past me again—slower." She seemed to barely get the words out.

He sighed with relief, knowing he had succeeded in capturing her interest. Now all he had to do was convince her that it was in her own best interest to help him. He spoke carefully as if to a child he didn't want to mislead.

"Of course, the woman I marry would have to clearly understand that it was to be a very temporary and totally platonic arrangement." He watched her dawning realization. "I would have to remain married for two years to meet the requirements of my father's will, but being married does not necessarily mean that we would be obligated to live under the same roof." He watched the color flood her face, then recede. "It is not unheard of for a man to allow his wife to maintain a separate apartment, perhaps one like *this*." He glanced about at the room.

Chris knew her mouth was hanging open, but she didn't care. *He was nuts. He was absolutely frigging bonkers.* Then it struck her. *No—no—no!*

He was gay!

For some reason, he had to prove that he was straight. She drew a deep, shaking breath and closed her eyes. *Not another one.* Hadn't *one* been enough in her life? *Why was it all the really good looking men seemed to be gay?* Her thoughts flew back to Jimmy, and she wondered if maybe she had some kind of internal defect that made gay men ask her to marry them. Maybe a sign plastered on her forehead that read "*Pathetic loser searching for sexy gay man to share condo.*"

James MacNeil had been handsome, witty, charming. And oh, so well built! She had been fresh out of college in Omaha when she had met him in San Francisco. He had been warm, and fun, and he had made her feel wonderful. He had seemed to like her for herself. Of course, now she knew why he hadn't seemed to be looking for external beauty and big boobs, but back then she saw him as Sir Galahad, a true gentleman who did not press her for sex because he understood that she was saving herself for marriage.

Hah! What a joke!

Of course, he had assumed, when she didn't seem to want to crawl into bed with him right away, that she led an alternative lifestyle, too, and that here was his opportunity to get his Irish Catholic mother off his back. He could marry her, and they could room together and have their own little individual relationships with whomever they chose. The perfect, respectable façade.

Too bad she hadn't been as wise then as she was now. She would have noticed that he seemed to enjoy the company of his drop-dead gorgeous buddy, Keith Loughlin, far more than he enjoyed hers. When he had asked her to marry him, and she had been so utterly thrilled, he hadn't considered that she really wanted to be married to him. He had thought she was happy because it was the answer to both of their needs. He hadn't realized that she didn't know the marriage was supposed to be a false front for both of them—until their wedding night.

Poor Jimmy. The wedding was planned, and the banns were published, and he went through the entire affair as if he were in seventh heaven. His mother was thrilled that he had vindicated himself and had stopped his sinful ways. Her parents even came out for the wedding. The entire affair went down perfectly, all the way through the rather exuberant yet sexless kiss he gave her at the end of the ceremony.

But when they were alone in the hotel room together, and he saw that she was actually expecting him to go to bed with her, he realized his mistake. Stupid, naïve, virginal Chris Lange had dressed in her see-through nightie, soused herself in a perfume he had admired, and had stepped out of the bathroom expecting to find a happy, excited, horny husband waiting for her in their bed. She had watched his eyes move over her slowly, thinking that the look of shock on his face was actually a look of love. She had been so frigging naïve.

And Jimmy had just stared at her as if she had just stepped off a spaceship from Jupiter. He had recovered his senses quickly—and had faked a happiness he certainly hadn't felt. He had cuddled her gently, even had tried to kiss her convincingly. Until she had slid her timid hand toward his limp cock.

He had been too horrified to tell her the truth—too embarrassed that he had misread her. He had held her in his arms, and had kissed her gently, and told her that he really cared for her.

Jimmy couldn't bring himself to do more than hold and kiss her for a while. Luckily, as a virgin, she had been too completely naïve to know why. She accepted his statement that it was the excitement—too much wine. And the next night, he was too tired from a long day. And the next night, there was another excuse. It had taken her six frigging months to discover the truth. A normal female would have known on her wedding night, but Chris, the Ever-Clueless, hadn't even had an inkling. Until she'd come home to find Jimmy and Keith on the living room couch, en dishabille.

She had been mortified. She had cried, and hit him with her fists (and a lamp)—and then she had sobbed for an hour into the front of his shirt as he had soothed her and told her how sorry he was, how he had thought she knew he was gay from the first. He had kissed away her tears, and had told her he loved her more than any other woman he had ever known. And then he had gone on a date with Keith, and she had packed her things and was gone before he returned.

Chris shook off her memories as she recalled that the younger Mr. Rodriguez was sitting there, patiently waiting. She opened her eyes and swallowed hard. Now that she understood his problem, she felt considerably less nervous. She laughed shakily and shoved her flyaway hair from her face. "Well—I take it this is supposed to be some sort of—*proposal*." Her lips twisted into a wry grimace.

"It is." His voice was quiet. He seemed to notice her inner turmoil.

She calmed her irrational anger slowly. It wasn't his fault that she seemed to be so desperate that she would agree to help him out. And he obviously wasn't particular about compatible personalities and all that crap, just a name on a dotted line to get his money.

She eyed him warily, and then asked bluntly, "Are you one of those illegal aliens who want to get married to an American citizen to get a visa?"

His look of indignant surprise was comical. His lips twitched slightly. "I was born in Los Angeles."

"Oh." She frowned. Maybe he *was* telling her the truth. One thing was certain. He didn't expect her to say no. That much was obvious. With a resigned sigh, she let her gaze move freely over his amazingly beautiful, angel-devil face and down his exceptionally fabulous body. He was one of those men you drooled over in hot dreams but never dreamed of having right there in your living room asking you to marry them.

And his hands—God, she loved strong, lean hands on a man! No longer afraid she would offend him by appearing too affected by his looks, she took in everything about him. He was a damned good-looking man. *It was too frigging bad he was gay!* She sighed and shrugged. "Exactly what are you offering me in return for these two years of devoted wifeliness?"

He had won, yet he didn't feel the least bit thrilled by her sudden shift. The look in her eyes was rather disgusted, as if she had just made an unpleasant discovery. The sizzling tension had melted away as if he had imagined it. Odd. He should be happy. *So why the hell did he suddenly feel cheated?*

He lifted one brow and replied quietly, "I will see to it that you have a five year lease on this apartment—fully paid, of course." His eyes searched her pale face for signs of the irrepressible spirit he had thought he'd seen just a few short minutes ago. Her expression was blank. "You would be given a sum of money at the end of two years which should make it possible for you to live very well for some time without having to worry about being evicted in the future. And, of course, I will take care of everything you need while you are married to me." He watched her eyes shift to some point beyond his left shoulder.

"And I would be asked to sign a prenuptial agreement, I assume, just in case I got greedy?" She sighed, her eyes shifting to meet his squarely for the first time since he had first seen her.

He drew a deep breath. Her eyes were a beautiful jade green. A sultry, sexy, mossy green that seemed to dart straight through his mind to his very soul. He brought his wayward thoughts up sharply.

She was extremely quick. Why that should bother him, he hadn't a clue. He had somehow preferred the breathless ingénue to this cold, emotionless creature. But she did fit his needs, and that was all that mattered. Right?

"Of course." His voice was carefully calm.

"And all I have to do in exchange is pretend to marry you?"

He shifted uncomfortably. He shook his head slightly. "Not *pretend*. It would be real—as real as it could be in the circumstances. Of course, there would be no requirement for you to live with me as husband and wife, if you get my meaning." His eyes sought hers.

She nodded stiffly. "I get your meaning perfectly. So, after our 'marriage' I would simply go on as I have been, except that you will pay all the bills for this place, and you will go back home to wherever it is you live until two years are up?"

"Not exactly."

She frowned and drew a deep sighing breath. "I want to know *exactly* what is expected. I hate surprises."

He found himself feeling irritation that she was viewing this strictly as a business arrangement—and yet that is exactly what he had intended it to be. What it had to be. He inhaled slowly. *Be convincing...*

"It may be necessary for you to spend an indefinite amount of time at my home in Coldwater Canyon, and in my company." His casual shrug belied the tension in his body and mind. "My sister and other members of my family will insist on visiting me to verify the fact that you—and this marriage—are, indeed, real." He noted her clenched hands and twisting fingers. "After all, there is a considerable amount of money involved." He gazed at her quietly—reassuringly. "My cousin, who would inherit if I did not meet the terms of the will, and also, my father's executor, would want to see you with their own eyes and verify the marriage."

She nodded slowly. "So I would have to be around at those times, just for show, of course."

"Of course."

"I suppose I could handle that. I would want to see the legal papers before I said yes." She spoke in a quiet voice without emotion.

Tonio rose from the armchair abruptly and extended his hand. She took it and he pulled her up to stand before him. He gazed at her with a questioning frown. A rather intriguing, madly

aggravating woman. But a good choice, nonetheless. She seemed to have absolutely no desire to impress him. No desire to please him. And most important, she had no desire to even be with him. He had wanted to find such a woman. He had succeeded.

In the back of his mind, he thought he heard his mother's soft laughter, and he frowned.

Why wasn't he thrilled with the prospect of his carefully thought out plan becoming a reality?

Her hand was slim and her grip was surprisingly firm. He nodded. "I will have everything drawn up by noon tomorrow. I will send it for you to look over. If there is anything you disagree with, just let me know." He drew a business card from his inner pocket, and she took it slowly, her lips compressed.

"I will see myself out. Good evening, Christine."

She stared after him as he walked to her door and stepped out into the hallway, nodding politely back at her as he closed her door behind him. She looked numbly at the business card in her hand and swallowed hard. *Had she really just agreed to even consider this completely absurd and ridiculous proposal?*

Yes!

She was getting senile.

No—she was getting desperate.

What woman in her right mind, who had even a shred of pride to her name, would even consider such a demeaning agreement? She sank down onto the cushion again and pressed her forehead to the card as a tear slid from between her tightly closed lashes. What self-respecting female would scramble for crumbs from a wealthy, handsome man's twenty-four karat gold plate like a dog diving for a juicy bone? Just because he had asked? Just because she happened to be on the verge of losing everything? Of becoming homeless and even more pathetic?

"I would," she breathed wearily to the walls.

She returned to her cleaning, her mind on the stunningly attractive, decadently sexy male she'd just agreed to marry. Marry. M-a-r-r-y. Her heart pounded in fear. Would she live through this stupidity without the ugly scars left on her heart by her fiasco with Jimmy?

She had no illusions about this one. No expectations. Why not do this? It was a great opportunity. Except for the fact that for the second time in her ridiculously unlucky life, she was pathetically attracted to a man who had no use whatever for her as a female.

Welcome to my world.

* * * *

She stepped from the stairwell doorway onto the dark, mist-shrouded roof. She floated toward him, her body aching with desire. He turned, and her stomach knotted—it was him! She could see all of that sinfully wicked face, not just those twisting lips. Beelzebub. She stared into those dark eyes—glittering dark eyes that undressed her, as her ratty T-shirt and baggy jeans faded off her body.

T-shirt? Jeans? Hmmm. She had always worn a thin white gown before.

He didn't speak as he dragged her naked body against his—she felt the heat rippling off that stunning body, and as he claimed her lips in a ravening kiss, his hot tongue swept into her mouth, and a shot of lust swept through her body like a bolt of white-hot lightning. Wow!

His lean hands lifted the black cloth ... then with a laugh, he threw it aside. She could see him—that hard, rippling body with its powerful muscles. She stared as he ran his mouth over her open palms, and then drew them to his sleek, defined chest. Oh, how marvelous he felt as her hands slid hungrily over his body.

His own hands were hard and possessive on her as he lifted her from her feet and crushed her tightly against his chest until she couldn't breathe. His palms cupped her butt and dragged her against the bulging heat of his cock—cock? He had never had one before—at least—she'd never felt it before!

Oh. My. God!

She moaned against his hot mouth, her legs clamping about his waist. He groaned against her lips—a deep, tortured groan that startled her, since he never made a sound—usually.

He reached between their clamped bodies and slowly, deliciously slid his fingers into her wet pussy, teasing and caressing her throbbing, eager clit.

His free hand moved to mold and tease her breast.

His hot breath branded her mouth. She arched achingly into his palm. He gently pinched her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and then gently squeezed her breast in his lean hand.

Oh. My. God.

Why was she constantly repeating herself?

That felt so good! But when his hot mouth left hers and drew one of her nipples deep, she whimpered, clutching his dark head against her breast as he suckled deeply, his fingers still buried seductively inside her wet, hot cleft. He swirled his fingers deep—in and out—touching her clitoris with each sensual, heated stroke into her. Her hips rose to meet each sweet, hot thrust—craving, needing—something.

Dear God! Her body was clawing toward something hot, delicious, devastating, thrilling, and...

Damn it!

Foiled again! She felt like screaming with frustration as she dragged the pillow over her head to shut out the noise of her alarm. *Damn—damn—damn!*

Chapter Five

Blake frowned worriedly at the prenuptial agreement Tonio had handed him to review. "You know absolutely nothing about this woman ... nothing about her background, nothing about her history. You accepted her story of whether or not she is free to marry you without question." Blake lifted his eyes from the document and drew a deep, careful breath.

"Mr. Rodriguez, I wouldn't be a very good attorney if I didn't point out to you that you are risking a great deal here, and on a woman you have known less than twenty-four hours. I ask that at least you would allow me to run a thorough background check on her—criminal history, medical history—check out her story. Make certain she is telling you the truth."

Tonio pursed his lips and nodded. "You do that, if it will make you feel any better. But I intend to go through with this immediately. I have never been wrong in my first impression of a person yet. I intend to be married before the week is out. You do what *you* feel is necessary, and I will do what *I* feel is necessary."

Married—to a red-headed, maddeningly disinterested, breathtakingly sexy creature with moss-green eyes.

"I ask that you wait before making any commitment here. I am more than certain that your cousin's people will check her out, too, and they will be looking for anything they can possibly find to discredit her, as well as your marriage." Blake tapped his finger on the pre-nup. "If they should discover that she had never gotten a legal divorce from this man you say she was married to once, it could be rather embarrassing, and even more difficult for you to hold onto your property and money."

"Then by all means, check her out, but I will not hold up my plans for your investigation." Tonio frowned. He had no doubts about the woman's veracity or her honesty. He usually knew instantly whether or not he could trust a person. He knew, of course, that Blake was right, but how could one explain something as nebulous and insubstantial as intuition—*insight? Lust?* He shook off that thought.

Let the attorney do what he was being paid to do—protect the interests of his client. Tonio wasn't concerned about making a mistake here. He was concerned about losing her by waiting. She was as skittish as a new foal, and he had no intention of allowing her to slip away because his attorney felt the need to question his judgment.

"I plan to be a married man within forty-eight hours."

* * * *

Mr. Anderson seemed to be quite happy with her work as she handed him several reports she had managed to clean up and print neatly out. "I have three more almost finished. I should have them for you by tomorrow at close of business," she said as she pulled on her jacket and

reached for her bag. It had been a long, stressful day. And the stress was not because of the new job.

Images of Antonio Rodriguez had flitted through her befogged mind at every turn—hot, unwanted images of him naked, caressing her body with those lean, long fingers and that wickedly sensuous mouth; touching her in all the secret places those silly romance books touted to be totally erotic and utterly irresistible. She had struggled through hours of boring, repetitive accounting pages, squirming on her chair and praying for quitting time.

She hurried out of the office, stabbed her time card into the slot, and replaced it in the rack, knowing that she was going to miss her bus if she didn't run. She hopped along on one foot, pulling off her heels and dragging on her tennis shoes without stopping. If she ran, she might *barely* make it.

She reached the door and narrowly avoided a collision with a man carrying a briefcase, as she raced down the stairs to the street. She jammed her work shoes into her roomy bag, and made a dash across the parking lot to the sidewalk, leveling into a run as she hit the curb. She had worn a slacks suit today, thank Heaven. Running in a skirt would just be ridiculous. She glanced at her watch. She had two minutes to get three blocks. *Dear God, was it all worth it?*

Her mind strayed longingly to the thought of supper, and she certainly didn't want to wait another half-hour to catch the next bus. Her carefully constructed hairdo fell from its confines as she dodged around a pedestrian and reached up to catch the comb before it fell out. Without breaking stride, she hurdled a dog on a leash and ignored the indignant gasp of its owner as she dashed across the first intersection between her and the bus stop. She was beginning to tire as she made the second intersection, but she couldn't stop now! It had been quite a while since she'd run so far. Maybe she needed to take up jogging again.

As she reached the halfway point in the last block, she saw the bus at the stop. *It was early!* She waved wildly and shouted, but the bus was already pulling away from the curb, and she slowed to a disgusted walk, puffing and shoving her tumbled, sweat-dampened hair from her face. *Great!* Now she was all sweaty, and her hair was a damned mess, and she still had to wait another half-hour for the next bus to come along.

She flopped down on the bench and caught her breath. She had begun to fan her perspiring face with her bus schedule when she noticed the luxurious black, older Mercedes limo sliding to a stop in front of her. She gazed at it longingly, wishing that she could afford to call a taxi. And when the handsomely uniformed driver stepped out and walked over to her and said, "Miss Lange?" she very nearly lost her ability to speak.

Nodding, she stared up into his politely smiling face, and when he extended his gloved hand, she just stared at it. "What?"

He removed his hat respectfully and bowed. "I am Jose Alvarado. *Señor* Rodriguez sent me to drive you home, but you left your office so quickly, I could not catch your attention. If you please..."

He gestured to the limo, and she followed him to the door which he held open for her. She looked inside, as if afraid to climb in. She looked at the man again, and shrugged. She slid into the deeply cushioned seat and drew a deep breath of awe at the luxury surrounding her. It was not a stretch limo. It was not at all ostentatious. It was truly a classy vintage vehicle.

She watched the smoked privacy window slide down between them as Jose said quietly, "If you would like some ice water, there is an ice bucket and several bottles of chilled spring water in the bar." The window slid silently back up to leave a dark sheet of thick glass between the driver and herself, and she blinked, looking around for the bar.

She heard the glass slide down again, and the man said, "The metal handle on the back of the seat in front of you."

"Wait! Don't roll it up again. I feel like a prisoner back here with that glass shut," she blurted, and she could see him smiling in the rear view mirror. "Thanks," she breathed as she reached for the handle, and turned it, watching a bar unfold before her eyes. "You want something?"

The man blinked. "Excuse me, *señorita*?"

"Would you like something from this bar?" she said. "It has cans of soft drinks—everything you can imagine. Would you like a soda?" She handed him one before he could refuse, and she poured herself a large glass of cold water.

He glanced at the chilled can in his hand, and he shrugged. He popped the top and took a long swallow. "Thank you, *señorita*," he smiled, catching her eye in the mirror. He negotiated the on-ramp to the freeway. "Would you like to stop anywhere before you go home, *señorita*?"

"Oh—I do need a couple of things from the store," she began, then giggled. "But I don't want to cause a commotion by going shopping at the Food Mart in a limo."

She sank back against the cushions and sighed. *He had sent a car for her.* Maybe he had actually been serious last night. She had almost put it out of her mind completely as the day had gone on. "Did he give you anything to give me?" she asked. He had said he would send over the agreement.

"No, *señorita*," he replied.

"Oh." She nodded slowly, feeling oddly disappointed despite her earlier reticence. Maybe he had changed his mind. She sipped the water gratefully, enjoying the cool of the air conditioning as she pressed the cold glass to her hot face. She closed her eyes and sighed. Well, it had been nice to think about for a while—the thought of not having to worry about her future for at least another two years. She sighed at her silly thoughts. And her overheated daydreams.

Last night she had been insulted by his proposition. Today she was disappointed that he might have changed his mind. What a flake she was becoming. Couldn't she make up her mind about what she wanted? She opened her eyes and met the man's gaze in the rear view mirror.

"You'll never know how much I appreciate this lift. The thought of standing for over half an hour on that bus is utterly repulsive."

Jose smiled back. She was certainly not his employer's usual type. He noted the flyaway copper hair which fell in wild disarray about her face, and the wide green gaze that met his so openly and with such sweet friendliness. She was certainly not what he had expected. He sipped the can of soda and decided to stop at the Food Mart on the way since she had not specified any other store she preferred. His employer had given him strict orders to see that Miss Lange had everything she required. And so they shopped.

With everything tucked into the trunk, he drove her back to the dilapidated apartment building in Torrance. As he opened her door for her in the circular driveway of the apartment building, she said, "Can I keep you, Jose?"

He smiled at her, feeling oddly touched by her genuine smile and the way she thanked him for his help. When he had first seen her, she had looked rather plain compared to his employer's usual type of romance, *rápido y caliente*, but after being with her for the past hour, he understood why she had so easily captivated the *señor*. She was fresh and natural and extremely thoughtful. And besides that, she ran like a gazelle.

He laughed inwardly to think of *Señorita* Adriana running in such a manner. He hoped this *señorita* would last longer than the rest. He liked her. He lifted the bags of groceries from the passenger side of the front seat, and he followed her up the stone steps to the entryway.

Chris immediately noticed a man painting the wood around the entryway, and she lifted her brows as she saw half a dozen gardeners at work on the shrubbery along the walk and the gardens beneath the front windows.

As she stepped through the doors into the lobby, she blinked. It had been freshly carpeted! She turned in a full circle to stare at the brightly washed panes of glass in the windows and the fresh oil stain that gleamed on the oak paneling of the hallway beyond.

She saw ladders and pans and heard voices as men worked to finish re-papering the hallway around the corner. The carpeting had not yet been replaced on the bare hallway floor because the men were not finished with that part yet.

As she passed Mrs. Allen's door, she saw that it was wide open, and the woman was talking to several workmen who were busy re-carpeting her own floor. When Chris stopped, Mrs. Allen looked up, and excused herself from the workmen.

"Chris! My God, Chris, look what they're doing!" She shook her head as if in a trance, then said, "Oh, a man dropped this off for you earlier today." She handed her a large manila envelope with her name scrawled on it. As Chris took it, the woman shook her head and said, "I just can't figure them out! One minute they won't even buy replacement bulbs for the light fixtures, then, wham! They come in here and redo the whole place!"

Chris heard little of what the woman said as she stared at the envelope in her hands. Her legs shook.

So, he hadn't changed his mind.

She swallowed hard, and gestured for Jose to follow her to the elevator. The repairman was just finishing putting the control panel back together, and he smiled at her. "She's cleared for use—just in time, it looks like." He glanced at Jose's double armload and he moved aside as they stepped into the elevator.

Chris pressed the button for the third floor and the old elevator slid smoothly up the shaft.

She shook her head numbly. All of this because she had complained to the owner? Or was all of this because the owner wanted to impress on her that he was as good as his word? It was an awful lot of money to spend just to impress someone. *He must be as desperate as she was.*

As they stepped out of the elevator and headed for her door, she noted that the wallpaper was being redone on this floor, too. Rodriguez certainly didn't waste any time when he wanted to accomplish something, did he? The manila envelope practically burnt a hole in her shaking hand as she reached her freshly oiled oak door.

As she unlocked the door and let Jose into the apartment, she dropped her bag onto the sofa and said, "Let me help you with those." She reached for one of the bags he carried without letting his protest stop her. He shook his head and grinned as he followed her into the tiny kitchen where she set the bag down and turned to unload his arms. He held the bags one at a time as she quickly put her groceries into the little fridge and the cupboards, and when she turned to him and smiled so brilliantly, he had to smile back.

"Thank you ever so much. I sort of feel like Queen for a Day." She grinned as she folded up the bags. "I suppose you would be insulted if I offered you a cup of coffee—or maybe an obscenely large tip?"

He smiled, as if hating to refuse. "Thank you very much, but no, *señorita*. I must be on my way." He tipped his hat and bowed politely as he headed for the door, closing it after himself.

She watched him go, and she sighed. He was so nice. He had told her about his own family—his wife Maria and their three daughters. She had asked him why he wanted to work as a chauffeur for his living when there were better paying jobs, and he had laughed. He had simply replied, "My family has worked for the Rodriguez family for five generations, *señorita*, and they take very good care of me. My daughters have the best schooling, and my family and I have excellent medical care. Perhaps I could make more money driving a truck, but why should I give up what I have to earn a few dollars more?"

She drew a deep breath and walked to the sofa where the manila envelope stood beside her bag. Indeed? Why give up what you have to gain a few more bucks? Especially when you live

on a hundred acre estate and take care of a car that costs more than a lot of people make in three years. When you have no expenses and everything is provided for you.

She sat down on the sofa and opened the envelope, wondering what she was going to say after she read his offer. What she was going to do about her amazingly erotic attraction to another dismally gay male. She groaned aloud.

There were five pages in all. There was a hand written note, scrawled in a flowing hand on a single sheet of vellum, paper-clipped to the top copy. She lifted it and read, "Miss Lange. If you have any questions or wish to change anything in the agreement, call me." It gave two phone numbers. The second was obviously a cell phone. She ran her fingertips over the page, almost able to feel his fingers as he had written the note. *Dear God, she was so completely pathetic!*

She set the note aside and her eyes ran down the first page quickly, noting that this was definitely a legally binding agreement—on both sides. In effect she was agreeing to marry Antonio Miguel Rodriguez-Hidalgo for a term of *not less than* twenty four months. It didn't stipulate that the marriage was to end at the end of those twenty four months, but he couldn't say that, could he? She would have to take that on trust.

During the marriage she could expect to be fully supported by her spouse, as well as receive what the paper referred to as "spousal gifts" from her husband during the duration of the marriage. If at the end of twenty four months she did not wish to remain his wife, she could request, and be granted, a divorce by reason of incompatibility.

At that time, should she choose to divorce him, she would have no legal right to make any claim upon his personal or corporate holdings or to ask alimony. He would, in that instance, give her the tax-free sum of \$250,000.00 with which to support herself until she was able to return to the workforce. Her brows lifted. Her throat constricted. *My God!* That totaled \$125,000.00 for each year she was married.

Then her eyes skimmed over the part that made her stop and stare. "Should there be issue of this marriage, the party of the second part (that was her) shall relinquish all claim to custody and support should she wish to end the union. Full custody of any child(ren) born to this union shall remain with the party of the first part (that was him) with reasonable visitation granted to the party of the second part."

Huh?

She frowned. Why on earth was he referring to children here? There would be no "issue" of this particular marriage. She glared at the page, and then realized that it *would* look pretty odd if children weren't mentioned in such an agreement. Anyone reading it would realize that Rodriguez did not even expect a child to be conceived, which would seem odd if it were actually a real marriage.

The thought of doing with the man what it would require to become pregnant sent frissons of heat along every friggling nerve she possessed, and she closed her eyes and fought to

stop such fanciful, torrid thoughts. No. He could not be expecting that of her. He was gay. He was certainly not going to ask her for sex.

She shivered, and then shrugged it off. He definitely wanted everyone to think it was real. It had to be or he wouldn't get the money. And she wouldn't get the \$250,000.00. She set the papers down and sighed, rubbing her throbbing forehead. What the hell had she gotten herself into? Was she such a frigging glutton for punishment to go through this again? But reason rose above fear.

It was amazingly good money, just to use someone else's name for a couple of years. And her expenses would all be taken care of. She would not have to worry about anything at all for a while. And she was pretty certain she wouldn't find Mr. Wonderful anytime soon, so what was there to lose? She picked up the papers and read through them once again then she reached for the phone.

"Rodriguez here."

His husky, extremely sexy voice made her very nearly swallow her tongue. She was terribly glad he was gay. If he weren't, she would never be able to do this.

"Mr. Rodriguez, it's Christine Lange," she breathed, managing to sound almost normal. "I've read through the papers. There are a couple of things here I don't really understand. Can I talk to you before we make any formal agreement?"

"Certainly. I have an appointment in half an hour, but I will be free by eight. Will that be acceptable to you?"

"Um—okay. Where's your office?" She reached for a pen.

Tonio stretched and rubbed his neck with one hand. He glanced at his watch, and lifted one dark brow thoughtfully.

"I will meet you at your apartment." He hung up and drew a deep breath. He was so very close to having everything as he wanted it. Perhaps it had been too good to be true. Meeting her alone in her little apartment was probably not the wisest thing to do in his condition. He found her far too damned attractive for his peace of mind. Just thinking about seeing her again hit him in the groin like a hot fist. Thinking of that sweetly swaying ass—he cleared his throat and swore.

He called Maria and told her to put a hold on supper. He would be late.

Chapter Six

Chris glanced nervously at her watch. It was nearly eight. She poured a fresh carafe of water into her coffee maker and shoved the basket into place with some freshly ground Colombian beans and a few chopped almonds in it. She cleared away the remnants of her late supper, and scrubbed the table down, putting on a fresh cloth and setting out cups and teaspoons and the sugar and cream. She placed the papers on the table beside her own place, and she sighed. Why the hell was she so damned nervous? Why was her heart racing and her belly fluttering?

This was going to be very traumatic, despite how easy it seemed. It was a very big step for her, despite *his* casual acceptance of the situation. She had never in her life ever considered marrying for someone's convenience, even her own. She hadn't willingly married Jimmy for that purpose either. She had assumed she was marrying a man who was in love with her! A man who would make love to her, give her children, and that old 'white picket fence.'

But this wasn't going to *be* a marriage. *Not really*. There would be no cozy breakfasts together sitting cross-legged on the bed. No quiet nights spent in someone's arms watching TV or simply talking. She had never thought of marriage as a means to an end. But in this case, it was only that. She felt suddenly bereft.

She shrugged and cupped her chin in her hand, gazing at the slowly filling coffeepot on the counter top. Maybe she wasn't meant to have a normal life like everyone else. Who cared? At least she would be rich. Well, not exactly rich, maybe, but she certainly wouldn't be poor either.

If she had no expenses, and she continued to work for the next two years, and she saved every dime she earned, she would have a very sizable nest egg to add to the \$250,000.00 he was going to give her. She could live quite comfortably and work wherever she chose.

She might even have a car!

The door buzzer brought her out of her reverie, and she jumped up as if caught in some childish crime.

* * * *

Tonio pressed the doorbell button a second time, glancing at his watch. He ran his hand through his dark hair and wondered if perhaps she had gotten cold feet. He was about to press it again when the door came open quickly, and she stood there, wearing those ratty torn jeans and another very old, very large T-shirt. Her feet were bare, and she looked as if she had just run her own hands through her unruly mop of red curls as she stepped back and gestured for him to step inside. And his gut wrenched with a shot of white hot need that almost made him reach out and drag her into his arms. No woman should have that power over a man. No woman should look so utterly edible wearing such a ridiculous outfit!

He obeyed her gesture, stepping inside her apartment and glancing about at the room. The boxes were stacked along the wall, allowing room to walk. She had not unpacked. He drew a deep breath and turned to gaze at her. She stretched with an oddly catlike movement that made his mouth begin to water, and she rubbed her back.

"The coffee's almost ready. Come on in here." She led the way into her kitchen, and he could not help but stare at that very attractive ass again. She seemed completely unconcerned that she might look less than attractive. No woman he knew would ever knowingly greet a man at her door dressed like that. The fact that she would look incredibly delectable wearing a damned gunny sack irritated him.

He could smell her recent shower, and the scent of her perfume made his head swim. She had simply toweled her hair dry, not bothering to style it, and her face was completely innocent of makeup. A light, delicious scattering of pale freckles invited a man to run his tongue over her skin. He followed her into her kitchen where the aroma of freshly ground coffee beans made him draw another deep, appreciative breath. *Thank God he would have something to do with his hands.*

She pulled out a chair for him to sit on, and turned to pour the steaming coffee into a stoneware carafe, which she carried to the table and set on the pristine cloth before him. He rose as she came back, and she seemed startled that he accorded her the civility of seating her before he sank back into his chair.

Obviously, she was unused to any kind of male courtesy. She had been actually astonished by his simple act of holding the fire door for her the previous day. He let his eyes move over her clear skin, over the neatly trimmed and manicured, polish-free nails, and back up to the freshly washed halo of red-gold hair that appeared to be her true color. It made him wonder what the color at the parting of her thighs would be. Her hair was still damp and clung to her cheeks in small wisps as she poured two cups of the fragrant brew, and he noted again that the baggy T-shirt was all she had on her torso—all that covered those sweetly succulent breasts.

She wore no bra. She didn't seem to be concerned that her nipples were clearly visible through the thin cotton of the T shirt, nor did she worry about the droplets of coffee that slopped onto the inexpensive linen cloth covering her table as his hand shook slightly. He shook away the heated thoughts that invaded his mind, and wiped the hot drops from his hand with the napkin she handed him.

Why he was so affected by this woman was beyond him. She was certainly no great beauty, yet she seemed to radiate something that tugged at him, even when she was out of his sight. He shook off the feeling of not being in control here, and he said quietly, "You had questions about the agreement?" He tried very hard to keep his eyes on her face and not let them wander to her delightful nipples.

She nodded, reaching for the papers. She handed him one, with red circles around things she didn't understand.

He noted the biggest red circle, and he pursed his lips. He lifted his eyes to hers, and he said quietly, "If the contract did not address the possibility of children being born, people would

think the marriage was a sham." And even though he had no intention to consummate his marriage, his cock had its own ideas, straining under cover of the tablecloth.

"Which it is," she said, nodding. She stirred a spoonful of sugar into her cup, and nodded at the rest of the papers. "What about those things there?"

He shrugged, struggling with his body. "Spousal gifts are simply that. If you receive anything from me as a gift over the course of the marriage, it will remain yours after the marriage ends." His eyes slid over her jewelry innocent hands. "For instance, the engagement ring I have for you, any clothing or jewelry you receive from me, any property or money I choose to give you. All would remain yours after the marriage ends."

She swallowed convulsively. "Oh. I hadn't thought about any of that. I didn't expect you to give me *anything*." She looked distraught.

He stared at her in amazement. A woman who didn't think about jewelry or clothes? Was she real? Was she alive? He reached into his jacket pocket and drew out a black velvet box, and set it on the table beside her cup. Perhaps this would show him her true colors.

"As the wife of a wealthy man, you will be expected to possess decent clothing and jewelry for those times when you must accompany me to functions and receptions," he breathed. "Open it and see if it fits. I may need to have it sized." He watched her face casually, and realized he was holding his breath.

She stared at the box as if it were a bug, which totally irritated him for some inexplicable reason, and when she finally got up the nerve to reach for it, she did so gingerly, as if it might bite at any moment.

As the box opened, her mouth dropped open, and her eyes grew large. "Oh, my God. I can't take that!" Her voice was hoarse. "It must have cost a small fortune!" She shook her head quickly and shoved the box back across the table toward him. "I wouldn't dare wear something like that. Someone might cut off my hand to get it."

He raised his brows as he lifted the ring from the box. He turned the ring under the light, and a starburst of fire from thirty-two glittering white diamonds surrounding what was most likely the largest square cut emerald she had ever seen, nearly blinded her. "You don't like emeralds?" he asked, his eyes lifting to her face.

"*I love them*—I mean—sure, I like them. But not one that *big*! It could be a frigging paperweight!" Her eyes were huge. "I don't wear jewelry—at least, not *that kind* of jewelry," she protested weakly as he reached across to lift her left hand and slide the exquisite ring onto her finger.

He noted that it was a good fit, and he felt the trembling of her hand as she tried to pull it from his. He released her fingers slowly, and watched her as she stared at the ring. In spite of her protests, he sensed that she liked the ring very much.

"I had it set this afternoon. The emerald was my mother's. The diamonds were from a ring of my father's." His tone was off-hand and casual. He didn't want to think about why it was suddenly important to him that she liked his gift.

She swallowed hard. Her voice quivered as she spoke, "Then this won't be included in the bit about spousal gifts. I can't accept something so precious from you. I'll wear it, but it won't be mine. It will be yours."

He gazed at her thoughtfully. *A woman refusing such a gift?* True, it was a good sized, clean stone, and it had been his mother's, but it wasn't terribly valuable. And the small antique cut diamonds weren't that valuable either. He had simply had two old pieces of jewelry combined into one. It had cost him very little—only the setting and the workmanship. He saw the way she looked at the ring, as if it had some spiritual quality about it, and he shifted in his seat as his groin swelled even harder.

His mother had loved her emerald. She had worn it every day of her life. But when he had selected it as the center stone for the ring he would give to his bride, he had two things in mind—making the ring a credible gift which would show his family that he was serious about this marriage, and keeping the cost low. There was no sense in spending a fortune on a ring he would never see again after two years. Yet he had wanted her to appreciate it.

But now, as he saw the look on her face, he wondered if it had been his own hand that had chosen the combination, or another. He heard his mother's soft voice whispering in his mind, *"The gift she gives you will ease your burden."* He shook off the feeling of being a pawn in a vast chess game and he closed the box. It was as if this marriage had somehow been dictated by fate.

He didn't believe in fate.

But his mother had.

"Then it is settled? You agree to my proposal?" He tried not to sound too eager.

Chris swallowed hard. She didn't speak for a moment, and when she managed to make a sound, all she said was, "Yes."

Tonio drew in a deep breath. He felt elation. Victory was his, yet he wondered if he could maintain the façade of a marriage such as he had offered her. It would be best to keep her far away.

"Well, then perhaps tomorrow we can secure a license. If you will leave it to me to make all of the arrangements, I shall do so."

She glanced up quickly. "So soon?"

"You feel uncomfortable about getting married within the week?" He lifted his brow again, and she flushed deliciously.

"I feel uncomfortable about getting married at all." He frowned at the hitch in her voice. "But I suppose it's best to get it over with. Just let me know an hour ahead of time, so I can shoot myself," she breathed, burying her head in her hands.

Tonio resisted the urge to reach out and lift her chin. She might misconstrue his intentions. *He* might misconstrue his intentions. If he so much as touched her, he feared he might blow the deal and do something completely stupid.

He inhaled deeply and swallowed his coffee. He set the cup down. "You are under no obligation to go through with this, you know. The papers have not been signed. You are completely free to change your mind."

He wanted to bite his tongue off. Here sat the perfect woman for his needs, and he was offering her a way out. Was he losing his mind? Was he growing a conscience?

She lifted her eyes to his face, and sighed wearily. "Sorry. I didn't really mean that. Of course I'll go through with it. Like you say, it's the best way for both of us." She grinned and sniffed, and dashed a tear from her cheek. "But I do have one favor I would like to ask."

He gazed at her for a moment, and shrugged. Was she about to ask him for more yet? He tried not to think about what he *wanted* her to ask for. "Ask."

She wet her lips, and she shifted uncomfortably in her chair as if undecided as to how to pose the question. He waited. She drew a deep breath, and she whispered, "Can we at least try to be friends?"

Her question startled him. He noted the tinge of pink that suffused her face, and he drew a slow breath. Could he remain only her friend? Could he trust himself to do that? He preferred to remain aloof, distant ... safe.

"I expect we shall see each other a great deal more often than just *sometimes*," he replied. "It will be far easier for both of us if we maintain some manner of friendship. Is that what you mean?" He wondered why her offer of friendship irritated him.

She nodded jerkily. "Yes. I guess that's what I mean." She sighed, and she looked up into his face, searching his expression. Tonio wondered what she sought as she gazed at him for a long moment.

Her eyes slipped away and she shrugged. "Well, I guess I'd better start unpacking." He watched her as she rose from the table and shuffled the sheets of paper together, handing them back to him. "You'd better have these done over. I don't think these red chicken scratches will look good on a legal document."

He nodded. He lifted his coffee and swallowed the last drop, and he set the cup down gently. He gazed at her for a long moment, then breathed, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For helping me—and for the coffee." He closed his eyes and rubbed the back of his neck and rose from the chair.

She cocked her head sideways, gazing at him thoughtfully. "Have you eaten tonight?" The quiet question and the look of worry in her eyes was a surprise.

He shook his head. "I can get something on the way."

"Sit down. I have some steak that I was going to freeze because I can't possibly eat a whole steak." She pushed him down into his seat, and she headed for the fridge.

"You needn't trouble yourself," he began, and stopped as she glanced at him and scowled.

"It's no trouble." She turned back to the fridge and pulled out the other half of her marinated sirloin steak and some salad greens. He relaxed slowly as he watched her quietly prepare him a quick meal of broiled steak and fresh salad.

She worked quickly. She set it before him ten minutes later, and he sniffed appreciatively. It was done exactly as he liked his steak. He thanked her and began to cut the tender meat as she sank onto the chair opposite to watch him eat.

"You aren't eating?" he asked, taking a hungry bite of the delicious steak.

"I already ate." She watched him as he devoured the meal, her chin resting in her hand.

He *was* hungry, and the rather simple food tasted wonderful. He wondered vaguely if this was how it felt to have a wife. *A wife who cooked for you and took care of you.* He shook off that thought. He had never known his mother to cook a meal for his father. Servants did that. Yet this particular meal, simple as it was, tasted that much better because it had been made for him simply because he was hungry. He wondered if his father had ever enjoyed a simple steak so much.

Chris sighed. Of course, he had no idea how much she enjoyed cooking for somebody besides herself. It had been terribly lonely. She had virtually isolated herself from everyone and everything after Jimmy. And she had always dreamed of cooking something special for the man she would one day wed.

Chris sipped her coffee and poured him a fresh cup, and let him eat in silence. She didn't want to disturb his meal by talking like an idiot. It was nice just to have someone else there. She had no real friends—at least, no one she would care to invite to her home for supper. She was too shy to make friends easily.

And it felt positively sinful to have a man like Antonio Rodriguez sitting across from her, his dark eyes slipping over her face and chest from time to time as a bite of food went into that decadently sensual mouth. As if he were imagining his mouth on her skin. She shook her thoughts back to reality and stared at her coffee cup. *Dumb—dumb—dumb!*

As she sat with her chin propped on her hands, gazing into her coffee cup and thinking how odd all this was to have happened this way, his voice made her jump a little. She looked up quickly.

"Do you have any aspirin?" he asked, rubbing his temples. His plate was empty, and he seemed to be feeling far better.

Chris nodded jerkily, and got up to get it. She set it on the table beside him and asked, "Do you get them often? Headaches, I mean?"

"I can't seem to get rid of this one. I've had it for the past month. Probably stress." He reached for the bottle, and she put her hand over his, shaking her head. He blinked in surprise as she walked around behind his chair and told him to take off his jacket.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, as if wondering what she meant to do.

"I said, please take off your jacket, and I'll see if I can get rid of that headache for you."

He drew a deep breath and leaned forward as she slid the jacket from his broad shoulders. She ran her hands over the hard ridge of muscle along the top of his shoulder, and then she moved her fingertips down the muscle at the back of his neck that felt so damned tight.

"I feel as if I am tied in knots."

"You *are* all tied in knots," she replied. "Loosen your tie, and unbutton your collar."

He obeyed. "Are you a masseuse?"

"Only when I have to be. I used to do this for my dad. Now don't make a fuss, because it's going to hurt some," she said as her thumbs and fingers dug into the thick muscle running from his shoulder blades to his mastoid, and he gasped at the amazingly sharp pain.

He closed his eyes as he felt her kneading the knots from his neck and his shoulders, and as the pain gave way to a definite feeling of relaxation, he groaned with pleasure.

Her hands continued to work away the tightness in the muscles that ran down the rear of his neck to his spine, and he sighed as she pulled his head back against her chest and slowly massaged his mastoids and his temples with a circular motion that made him slightly dizzy. Her round, firm breasts cushioned his head, and he fought the crazy urge to turn and catch one of those tight nipples in his mouth and suck hungrily.

She massaged the jaw joint just in front of his ears, and then she started to massage his scalp, her fingertips buried in his thick dark hair.

He whispered huskily, "Don't stop."

She continued, working her fingertips over his skull and then over his forehead, and when she had finished, she let his head rest against her for a moment.

"Headache gone?" she asked softly.

Tonio opened his eyes and looked up into her amused gaze as she leaned over him. He knew that his head was still resting in the hollow between her soft breasts, and he didn't really want to move, or for her to move. He felt slightly lightheaded, but there was absolutely no trace of his headache left. He was amazed. And his body thrummed with a lust so powerful, he could barely contain it, but he managed to force himself to move.

"It seems to have vanished. Thank you." He tried not to feel a sense of loss when she gently pushed his head back to the upright position and stepped back around to sink into her chair again. He gingerly rotated his head and felt his neck with one hand. *Amazing*. Almost as amazing as the wickedly hot erection he sported.

"I am afraid I could fall asleep very easily. Maybe I should have had Jose drive me instead of taking my own car." He smiled as he tried to cover a yawn and failed.

She shrugged. "The sofa makes out into a queen sized bed."

He lifted his brows. She had extended an invitation to stay—on her sofa. He let his eyes trail over her freshly scrubbed face, and down her body. If he accepted her offer, if he stayed, he would forget his plan completely and do something rash. He could not afford to frighten her. He drew a deep, calming breath and shoved the memory of those soft breasts cradling his head out of his mind.

He could not afford to get so damned deeply involved here. That was the very idea of finding someone who was a total stranger, someone who was not interested in him.

He forced his body into compliance. "I deeply appreciate the meal, and the massage. However, I think it best that I get these documents to my attorney tonight, so that we can move along with our arrangement."

When he was certain he wouldn't embarrass himself, he rose from the chair and reached for his jacket. As he drew it on, he said, "I'll have Jose pick you up again tomorrow. He'll bring you to the judge's office, and we can have the license completed at that time, if that's all right with you?" He could not touch her. He would not touch her.

Chris tried not to look crestfallen at his avoidance of her invitation. At his sudden need to be elsewhere. Of course she hadn't expected him to stay. He probably had someone waiting for him. *She envied the man who waited*. She rose and almost shoved her hands into her rear pockets again, a nervous habit she had when she felt like she had done something wrong. She caught herself before doing so.

"Oh, sure! That's fine. I won't bother to run for the bus tomorrow night, then."

"Well, then. I'll see you tomorrow." He reached out and lifted her hand with the emerald ring, and she flushed. "It suits you. It brings out the color of your eyes."

He released her hand and she followed him to the door, watching him as he left without another word. She closed the door slowly and bolted it, and plodded back to clean up the mess she'd made of her kitchen. She hated the fact that she was always left with the messes. Maybe *he* might be used to servants, but it would have made her feel better if he had at least offered to help with the dishes.

Then she smiled at her own thoughts. Of course Antonio Miguel Rodriguez-Hidalgo would never offer to help a woman wash dishes. How silly of her to hope he might.

Jimmy would have, but then, he wasn't a rich, spoiled, rather self-centered chauvinistic male. Or a heart-stoppingly handsome, devastatingly masculine, delectable male animal who left her shivering with need and hopelessly aware that she didn't meet the qualifications it took to attract him.

What the hell had she gotten herself into here, anyway?

* * * *

She stepped from the stairwell doorway onto the dark, mist-shrouded roof. He was standing where he always stood, looking out over the ocean. She floated toward him, her body aching with desire. She could see his wicked smile—his rising, eager erection that told her he was hungry for her.

He whispered huskily against her hair as he dragged her naked body against his, and as he claimed her lips for a ravening kiss, his hot tongue swept into her mouth, and a shot of white-hot lust swept through her body. His hands were possessive as he slid his fingers into her wet cleft, teasing and caressing her throbbing, eager nub. He laughed as her hands circled his thick, steel-hard shaft, thrilling to the feel of the satin skin that lay between her palms.

She arched into his mouth as he laved her nipples—one after the other, while his hands lifted and squeezed her breasts.

Oh, dear God!

But when his hot mouth left her breasts and moved down her trembling body, downward until he reached her wet curls, plunging his tongue deep, she whimpered in orgasmic delight, clutching his dark head against her as he suckled deeply, his fingers still buried seductively inside her wet, hot pussy. He swirled his tongue over her aching clitoris with each sensual, heated stroke of those talented fingers into her. Her hips rose to meet each sweet, hot thrust, craving, needing something more.

Dear God. Her body was clawing toward something hot, delicious, devastating, thrilling and...

She came awake with a cry of shock as a mind-blowing orgasm ripped through her and sent her whirling into deep space. She was shaking with reaction, her body thrumming with the aftermath. Subsiding, she fell back against her pillow, panting, heart pounding madly.

She had just experienced her very first complete wet-dream.

And it had starred a real man. No. Beelzebub.

And he was depressingly gay.

Chapter Seven

Mrs. Allen was outside in the hallway giving orders to some workmen when Chris stepped out of the elevator to head for the bus. When she smiled at the woman and started for the door, Mrs. Allen called out, "Oh, Chris, wait!"

As she turned to look at her landlady, the woman hurried over, an odd look on her face. Chris waited, wondering what she was going to say. Had Mr. Rodriguez said anything yet?

The woman looked a bit flustered, and she wiped her hands on her overalls, and said in a hushed, rather nervous voice, "I hope I didn't make you think I *personally* wanted you out of that apartment. I would have let you stay until you caught up the rent. It was just that Mr. Damien! He was always here checking up on me and my books. I hope you understand."

Chris smiled at her. He had said *something*. "I know that, Mrs. Allen. I understand completely. Then you aren't evicting me?"

The woman flushed, and clasped her hands in front of her body, looking at her oddly. "Why, no. Of course I'm not. Not now that you paid up your back rent. I thought you said you wouldn't be getting paid until the end of the month. Then I find a check for your arrears, as well as the next twenty four months in advance in my mail drop this morning. Did you have a rich uncle die, or what?"

Chris sighed. He hadn't spoken to her. He had simply paid her rent as he had agreed. She felt a trifle crestfallen. "What makes you ask that?"

"Because the check is from a Roland Blake, attorney at law. I figured maybe you suddenly got an inheritance, or something. My word! With that kind of money, you could have paid a good down payment on a nice condo!"

The woman glanced around at the work going on, and she shook her head. "I just can't believe this is all happening. Just last week, Mr. Damien told me the owners were going to have the place torn down and made into an office building and parking garage in a year. I figured I'd be out of a job in a few months. He said that's why they weren't putting any money into the place. Then yesterday I get this note handed to me by some guy in a uniform, telling me that workmen and supplies would be arriving and to make sure that everything was taken care of. It was a pretty big shock, I'll tell you. After making me scrimp on everything from cleaning supplies to light bulbs, now suddenly, all of this!" She shook her head.

"I really have to get to the bus before I miss it, Mrs. Allen. I'll see you later." Chris ended the one-sided conversation as politely as she could, and she hurried to the door and out into the early morning sun. She had put on her walking shoes today, and she struck out at a brisk walk, crossing the dew-damp lawn and heading for the bus stop six blocks away.

She had gotten halfway down the first block when she heard a horn toot lightly on the street, and she glanced to see the nose of the Mercedes keeping pace with her. She grinned in delight at Jose, who was smiling at her through the smoked glass windshield. She waved as he pulled in to the curb and got out to open the door for her.

"I was afraid I would have to chase you again this morning. You never seem to look around when you start walking," he chided gently as she slid into the rear seat.

"At least I wasn't running!" she laughed as he slid into the front seat, leaving the privacy window down. "This could get to be habit forming, you know. I won't know what to do when it stops."

He glanced into the mirror at her as he drew away from the curb. "I have been given orders to take you wherever you wish to go, *indefinitely, señorita.*"

Chris lifted her brows. "You have?"

He nodded quietly.

"How decadent!" she chuckled, enjoying the comfort of the rear seat.

"Yes, *señorita,*" Jose replied with a grin.

She leaned back and gazed out the window at the passing traffic, and after a few minutes, she said, "This isn't the way to work."

"I am taking you to meet *Señor* Rodriguez at the municipal courthouse on Wilshire, *señorita.*"

"But, I'll be late for work. I'll get fired. I've only been on the job two days. I can't just go in late," she blurted.

"Perhaps you could use the phone to call your employer. I'm sure he will understand." Jose replied quietly.

She blinked. *Phone?* She looked about the back seat and spotted it, nestled in the back of the driver's seat ahead of her, beside the bar. She frowned at it, trying to figure out how it worked. When she managed to dial and send the call, she bit her lip and swore under her breath.

"I thought he meant this afternoon," she growled to no one in particular. "Oh. This is Chris Lange. Can I speak to Mr. Anderson, please?"

Mr. Anderson didn't sound too terribly understanding, and he told her to make her business quick. He had a ton of work piled up, and he had assumed she would be reliable. She told him she was terribly sorry and that she would be there the moment her business was concluded. She hung up with a groan.

"He isn't at all understanding." She frowned at Jose, who merely shrugged, and kept his eyes on the road. "If I lose this job, I'm going to strangle your precious '*Señor*'!"

* * * *

"I can easily have Damien picked up based on this type of evidence." Judge James Wilhoit frowned at Tonio as he glanced over the papers before him. "He's the kind who gives CPA's a bad name."

"You can have him after I have finished with him, if you don't mind." Tonio smiled grimly. "I have given him enough rope. Let's see what he'll do with it."

"Very well, but please don't give the bastard grounds for a counter suit. I want to see him out of practice in California."

"I expect to have him return as much of the money as he can that he has skimmed from my affairs over the last three years. The building in Torrance, alone, has been bringing in close to \$500,000.00 a year in rents. He shows it in these books as around \$250,000.00 last year.

"According to him, the place is never fully rented, and the upkeep is high. According to the woman who has been handling the rentals there, there hasn't been an empty unit there in the entire time she's managed it. He owes me a great deal of money, and I want it back. If he goes to jail right away, I will lose every penny. I would like to play him on the hook for a while."

Wilhoit nodded. "Very well. But whatever you do, don't lose this evidence."

Tonio smiled and glanced at his watch. "My fiancée should be here in a few minutes. I do appreciate your taking time out of your busy schedule to do this favor for me."

Wilhoit slapped him on the shoulder and laughed. "Your father and I were friends a very long time, Tonio. I consider this to be an honor."

"If you'll excuse me for a few moments, I have some legal papers to attend to. We shouldn't be long." Tonio smiled at the man, and nodded at Blake. The attorney followed him from the room and into a conference room a few paces down the hall, where a rather angry young woman sat waiting, glancing at her watch surreptitiously.

She glared at them as they stepped into the room and rose to face them. The look in her eyes told him he was going to hear about his high handedness. Tonio drew a deep breath and decided that he liked her when she was angry. She had a fire about her when she had a head of steam that made his blood move a little faster. And his groin tighten. And his thoughts go wild.

He headed off the explosion by introducing his attorney, Roland Blake, and asking her to sit at the table to sign the papers. She acknowledged the man coolly, and obeyed rather sulkily, frowning as he handed her a pen.

"Is everything the same as it was last night?" she asked pointedly, reading the first page quickly before moving on to the second.

"Exactly, except for the red ink" Blake replied. "You do understand what you are signing, Miss Lange? It's my duty to verbally advise you of the contents of these legal documents, and see for myself that you understand and accept each portion."

She listened to him quietly, and when he had finished, she nodded and signed on the line that was left for her signature. Tonio had already signed.

Blake notarized the signatures, and nodded to her as he picked them up and shook her hand. "My best wishes, Miss Lange—Mr. Rodriguez." He glanced reprovingly at Tonio and left them.

The moment he was out of earshot, she turned on Tonio and hissed, "You are going to get me fired! I can't afford to lose this job, dammit! I need the work!"

"You will be free to return to your job in half an hour." He slid his hand under her elbow and drew her along with him through the door and down the plush carpeted hall to an ornate mahogany door a few paces further along. He knocked lightly, and a deep voice bade them to enter.

She blinked as she realized that the placard on the door said "Judge James Wilhoit." As Tonio escorted her into the room, she swallowed hard, lagging back a little, and forcing him to exert a bit of pressure on her spine with his hand to get her moving forward. *Oh, God! It was really happening!*

The distinguished-looking, silver-haired man rose from behind his desk and smiled, coming around the large desk to reach for her hand warmly. "Miss Lange, my friend has told me quite a lot about you. I can see that he was not exaggerating."

She flushed and gave him her hand, which he shook and then patted warmly with his left. "Thank, you, sir."

Judge Wilhoit offered her a drink, which she politely declined, watching as he reached for a small black leather-bound book lying on top of his desk. He slapped Tonio on the back. "I hate to rush you, but I am in court in fifteen minutes. Miss Lange? Would you step over here by the flag, please? Tonio, do you have your witnesses?"

He nodded, and he stepped to the door and admitted his attorney and Mrs. Harrison, a court clerk. When they were all present, Tonio stepped up beside her and took her hand in his, and the next five minutes were nothing but a blinding blur. The only thing she heard was her own voice repeating shakily after Judge Wilhoit that she promised to love, honor, and cherish—in sickness and in health—for richer—for poorer—*until death do us part.*

She didn't hear Antonio say a single word. Her mind was a complete and total blank. When he took her hand and removed the emerald and slid a slim platinum band over her

knuckle followed by the emerald once more, she felt suddenly as if a noose had been pulled tight about her throat. Tonio handed her a second wider band, and she slid it over his finger, wondering why her hand was shaking like that. The feel of his fingers sent chills through her. Images of those lean, finely-shaped fingers doing erotic things to her left her knees trembling and her heart pounding. *Sweet Jesus—she was going insane.*

She felt Tonio pull her rather impersonally into his embrace. He pressed a light kiss to her lips, which she barely felt. And a moment later, she was being hugged by Mrs. Harrison and kissed on the cheek by Judge Wilhoit. She signed her name a second time and watched as her husband—the word was oddly numbing)—*her husband*—also signed his name.

Wilhoit apologized for having to rush off, while Mrs. Harrison went back to her office and Blake vanished with the legal papers. And then she was alone with the man who would be her husband for the next twenty-four months! The man whose very touch elicited horrific, embarrassingly erotic thoughts that could lead nowhere. She felt as if she might pass out. She felt as if all the air in the room had been sucked away, and she couldn't breathe.

"Christine?" Her name didn't even sound familiar. She blinked as he gently shook her shoulder. She looked up into his face numbly, and he smiled. "Are you all right? You look as pale as a sheet."

She swallowed hard and shook her head. "I feel like I'm going to throw up."

"Hardly flattering to my ego," he murmured, slipping an arm around her waist and moving her to the judge's leather sofa against the wall. She sank onto it and drew a few deep breaths.

"I'll be fine—I just wasn't—wasn't expecting this to happen for a day or so," she rasped. "I think I want that drink now."

Tonio found the decanter of brandy the judge had offered before and poured a small amount into a crystal glass, bringing it to her. She thanked him and drank the amber liquid in a single swallow, instantly choking and gasping. He slapped her on the back gently, and she put her hand to her throat, gasping, "My God! What was that?"

"Napoleon. I'd say about \$700.00 worth. Did you even taste it?" His lips curved seductively. *The lips from her heated dreams—dear God!*

She shook her head. "I thought it was wine!"

"It is. Just much older and stronger." He set the glass down and sank onto the sofa cushion beside her. "I thought it would make it easier for you if this happened quickly." He refrained from touching her.

She met his eyes and she frowned. "You could have given me *some* warning. You're damned lucky I didn't faint dead away when he asked me to repeat the vows."

"I appreciate your resilience, and now, you probably wish to get back to your job," he remarked dryly.

She shrugged, staring at her hand with his two rings adorning it. "I suppose I'd better. Mr. Anderson is already furious. If he fires me, *you're* going to have to find me another job. I'm sick and tired of looking for work."

"Jose is waiting downstairs. He'll drive you to your office. I will call you later." He walked with her out the door and down the hallway. "And thank you once more, Christine."

Her name sounded oddly exotic with his slight accent.

"I suppose I'd better start calling you Antonio," she breathed, trying not to react too shamelessly.

"Call me Tonio. I dislike *Antonio*," he replied.

She smiled and said, "Well, I *like* it. I'll see you later, I guess—*Antonio!*"

He wondered why he wasn't irritated that she'd called him that. If Adriana had addressed him so, he would have been. No one had called him his given name since he had declared that he hated it at the age of sixteen. It had always sounded too formal—too stilted. He pressed the button for the closest elevator, and he gave an inner shrug. He wouldn't see her often enough to be worried about what she called him.

But as he stepped into the elevator with her, he realized with irritation that he wanted to hear her say his name again—and again. To cry out his name as he rode her and enjoyed her sweet hot body clamped around him. As he enjoyed her delicious breasts while she writhed beneath him in his bed. He shook himself and quickly decided he needed to be as far away from her as was humanly possible.

But he *had* to keep her close by for a while at least. He expected to have a flurry of visits from relatives and his cousin and the attorneys, but that shouldn't last more than a week or two. Then, he would only be required to have her present at informal parties here and there, and perhaps Christmas—other holidays when his family normally gathered. He simply had to make himself behave at those times.

He saw her out to the car, and as Jose opened the door for her, he said, "Jose will take you home after work. I expect Mr. Blake has a number of questions he needs to ask you. You won't mind if he calls?"

"More personal questions?" She eyed him almost wearily.

"He will need general information—your social security number, date of birth—just legalities," he spoke formally, sounding a little stilted.

"A little late to be checking me out isn't it?" she laughed and slid into the seat.

Jose hesitated, waiting for him to finish his conversation with her before closing the door. Tonio gazed at her for a moment, then shrugged, and nodded to the man to close it. "Take care of her for me. Make sure she gets home by 6:30."

Jose nodded, obviously having noticed the ring on his hand with a well hidden start of shock. He nodded and asked politely, "To the big house, *señor*?"

"To the apartment. I hope you know that I expect you to be most discreet."

The man nodded slowly, and Tonio walked away, leaving his chauffeur to wonder what on earth was going on.

Jose went around to the driver's door and slid into the seat. He glanced into the rear view mirror at the pale face of the woman sitting there so quietly, and he started the engine. "Is there anything wrong, *señora*?" His eyes were concerned as he met her gaze in the mirror.

She shook her head, smiling numbly at the changed title. "No—nothing. Thanks, Jose. But I think I had better get to work while I'm still employed."

As he pulled into traffic, she closed her eyes and tried to calm her rolling stomach. Why did she feel so utterly lost? She should be feeling great. No bills, no worries. A good sized pot of cash waiting at the end of her stint. Instead, she felt *empty*. Like she'd felt when she had discovered Jimmy's secret. Sort of hurt and lonely. And very, very sorry for herself.

Why feel that way? Nothing had changed. She was going to live in the same apartment—do the same things. She sighed. That was the problem. Twice married—never a bride. Two husbands—not even one damn honeymoon! Hell, she would have settled for one quick tussle in the sack, at least once in her life! It was humiliating to have had two husbands, and still be a frigging virgin!

Oh, well. She could treat herself to a world cruise when this marriage thing was over. She might even find herself a hot gigolo to take with her and help her spend some money. That thought made her smile wryly. She shook her head to clear the slight fuzziness caused by the judge's extremely potent brandy, and she secretly hoped that Mr. Anderson fired her so she could go home and throw up.

* * * *

"I hope you aren't going to go off on any more sudden errands, Miss Lange." Her boss frowned as she clocked in at 9:13. "You promised me three more reports before quitting time, and I expect them to be on my desk."

"And they will be, Mr. Anderson. This won't happen again, I assure you."

"I hope not. If you expect to work here, you need to be a bit more reliable," he replied as he turned and stalked down the hall to his office.

Chris drew a long, calming breath. Okay, so what else should she have expected? At least she still had her job.

She headed for her desk and the reports that lay waiting. She slid into her chair and picked up the first one, reading her notes from yesterday. She skimmed over the cover sheets and glanced through the meager material and frowned. There was absolutely nothing for her to make the report up with. Her predecessor had probably done nothing but file her nails.

In order to get those three reports done, she needed to find some important facts and figures on the company, and there was not much time left to accomplish that. She called the steno pool, but there was no one available to do research while she wrote up the spreadsheets.

Okay, so there was nothing to do but research it all herself, and quickly.

She rose from her desk and walked rapidly down the long hall to the elevator. The company research library was on the second floor.

Maybe an earthquake would happen today, and she would get a reprieve.

She punched the button for the elevator and debated taking the stairs. Then the bell dinged, and the doors slid open. She stepped back as a man came out and headed in the direction from which she had just come.

As she was stepping into the elevator, she recognized the man who stepped out as Clarence Damien. He was the same man who had visited the apartment house from time to time to collect the rent money from Mrs. Allen.

She held the door for just a moment as she watched him head down the hall toward Mr. Anderson's office, and then she drew a deep breath and allowed the elevator door to slide shut as she pressed the second floor button.

What was Clarence Damien doing here? Did he do business with Mr. Anderson? Of course, Anderson and Welker was a fairly large clearing house firm. Perhaps he was a client. She shrugged. It was none of her business, anyway.

The corporate library was a huge mess of misfiled reports and accounting ledgers from 1976 to 2008. The records of every client the firm had ever served were here, but the place was such a horrible mess it was amazing anyone could find anything. The librarian, Mrs. Downington, had retired two years back, and because of cost cutting, they had not replaced her. If anyone wanted a certain record, they had to find it without help. She felt like she was about to go spelunking as she stared at the chaos of the shelves. Where the hell were a shovel and a match when you needed them?

Nothing was in its proper place. Nothing was cross referenced. It was a total disaster! She sighed and began to dig into a shelf of ledgers labeled "Statistics." This would probably help with the three she had been working on, but the report she was having the most trouble with was the company profit and loss profile from 1998 through 2008.

One look at this library made her realize why her predecessor, Miss Petty, had quit without notice. The poor woman would have needed a miracle to find a damn thing. Finding a few of the items she was looking for, she carried two of the huge ledger books back to her office, and sat down to begin the laborious task of deciphering the mountain of material she needed to complete the report.

By five, she had three more reports printed and ready. She had another two to do research on, and she had managed to get staffing to assign her one of the temps in the steno pool to help find the reference materials she needed. Mr. Anderson was somewhat mollified by the professionalism of her work, and he said nothing more about her being late that morning. Of course, she didn't receive any compliments for her excellent work, but at least she didn't hear any more complaints. That was a definite start.

As she was dragging on her jacket and reaching for her purse, she told the girl from the steno pool to go directly to the library in the morning and dig out the reference volumes on the 2005 profit and loss statement for the company. Then she hurried out past the time clock, punched her card, and drew a deep sigh of sheer gratitude that she would not be obliged to fight for space on that damned bus again tonight.

Chapter Eight

Tonio stretched wearily, glancing at his watch. It was after eight. He drew a deep breath, shut down the laptop computer he had been using, and rose, flexing his body with a groan. His dinner tray stood untouched on the table by the door where Maria had left it more than two hours ago, and he realized that he had not eaten a bite since morning. He had just finished a complete review of the *real* profit and loss statements for the past three years on the Los Angeles properties, and they did not look good. They looked abysmal. And he was damned angry.

Clarence Damien had run most of his rental properties into the ground, apparently renting them for high amounts, while he skimmed off about fifty percent for himself, without putting anything back into the properties. If these figures were correct, he would not make a penny off them for the next two years if he made the necessary repairs and returned the rents to their prior rates. Of course, leaving the rents at the amounts Damien had them at now would pay off the needed repairs within fourteen months. He had few illusions about collecting his money back from the man and figured that he would be lucky to get even one tenth of the stolen funds back.

He was to meet Damien in the morning to begin a tour of the L.A. properties. He intended to give Damien a choice. The man could pay him back or go to prison for ten to fifteen years on embezzlement and extortion charges. Blake was researching Damien's holdings and should have that information for him before he met with Damien in the morning.

He picked up the cold supper and carried it into his bedroom, setting it on the bureau and stripping off his tie and shirt wearily. A hot shower would not come amiss. He rubbed his chest and scratched his ribs. He was about to unbuckle his belt when the phone beside his bed rang, and he sighed, lifting the receiver.

"Rodriguez here."

"Your sister has left four messages for you regarding Mrs. Vargas' birthday," the answering service operator said in a crisp voice. "And there are two calls from your business manager, Mr. Damien—and a Miss Lange called. She didn't leave a message. We'll be holding any further calls until morning."

Tonio closed his eyes and grimaced. He had completely forgotten Christine. "Thank you." He hung up and rubbed his temples. That he had totally forgotten Christine was proof of his preoccupation and anger. *How the hell could he possibly forget a woman like that one?*

He drew a deep sighing breath and imagined her naked—leaning over him as she sat astride his hips, her succulent breasts brushing his cheeks as he cupped them and brought them to his mouth. He shuddered and swore as his cock grew very hard in his slacks. Now he was dreaming?

Glancing at his watch, he dialed her number and waited as it rang several times. It was barely past 8:00. *She couldn't have gone to bed already.* He let it ring several more times and was about to hang up when she answered, sounding out of breath. "H'lo?"

He frowned. "I rang twenty times."

"I was out jogging," she puffed.

"Alone?"

"Of course, alone." she replied. "Who did you think I would be with?"

"It isn't safe for a woman to be out alone, jogging after dark."

"Well, there isn't anyone else in my building who cares to run, and I need the exercise."

"I will buy you a treadmill to run on indoors," he replied, sinking onto his bed and untying his shoes with his free hand.

"Jogging is free," she said. "I've been jogging around this apartment complex for four years. There's nothing to be worried about."

"I do not want you out alone after dark. Los Angeles is not a place where a lone female jogger is completely safe."

"You are ordering me not to go jogging again?" she asked coolly, and he realized how odd his demands must seem to a woman who had never had to be concerned about being kidnapped before.

He drew a deep breath and said more patiently, "I realize it seems strange, Christine, but being married to me makes you a target for kidnap and ransom."

Not to mention that she was a damn tempting target for any unscrupulous man who saw her out alone. But he couldn't tell her that.

She laughed. "Not as long as no one knows I'm married to you. No one around here knows that I'm even married."

He frowned. She was correct, but he still didn't want her out alone at night. He would have to hire a bodyguard for her if she insisted on doing such things. He was more concerned about his cousin than any common mugger. Luis could sink low enough to harm her to get the Rodriguez fortune.

He changed the subject. "I meant to call you earlier. I'm sorry. It's been a terribly crowded day, and..."

"No explanations necessary. It's none of my business anyway. Oh, by the way, did you leave a set of keys in my apartment last night—on a silver chain with a green lacquered medallion?"

"I didn't realize they were missing." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the car keys, but the office and house keys were missing. "I must have dropped them when I took my car keys out of my pocket," he breathed wearily. "Just keep them with you until Jose picks you up in the morning. He will get them back to me." There was no way in hell that he was going back to her apartment and struggling to keep his hands to himself. The last time had been sheer torture. And after he'd begun to imagine making love to her—*no way in hell!*

"Oh, okay. I won't keep you any longer. Good night." She hung up without another word.

He set the receiver down slowly, feeling oddly frustrated. Why did it irritate him that she'd hung up without any further statements or attempts at conversation? Sweet Jesus—*he was completely obsessed!* He lifted the phone again and pressed redial.

Chris turned and sighed. She hurried back to the phone and picked up. "Hello."

"What are you doing right now?" His voice made her draw a shaky breath. It was deeply husky and a trifle tired. And there was something almost—*needy* in it.

"Getting ready to hop into the shower. I just ran a mile," she replied as she dragged off her T-shirt and flopped down to remove her running shoes. Against all her attempts at calm, his completely sexy voice was giving her chills all over.

"Then what?" he asked.

"Bed." She held her breath.

"So early?" He almost purred into the phone, and she thought his voice alone could bring her to orgasm.

She chewed the corner of her lower lip, propping the phone under her ear as she dropped her shoe onto the floor and pulled off her sock. "By the time I get to bed, it won't be early anymore. It's nearly eight-thirty."

"Do you always go to bed before ten?"

"On weeknights. You forget I'm a working woman." She stood up and dropped her shorts onto her socks, and unfastened her bra.

"Many women in your position would quit their job and enjoy being taken care of," he murmured.

"I can't afford to quit, at least, not until I find a better job."

"You have no expenses. You have no need to work if you do not wish to. There is no reason to have to work a job that pays poorly. You have the time to look for a better one, or to go back to school, if you wish." His voice sounded sexy and deep through the phone.

"I have my expenses paid, but I don't have any money left to pay for school, at least, not until the two years are up. Look, I'm about to hop into the shower. Can we finish this conversation later?"

"And so am I. I will call you later."

"Make that tomorrow. I'll be asleep later."

"Later," he hung up, and she frowned, and then grinned. He was pushy, but she didn't mind. It was nice to have him to talk to. It wouldn't kill her to talk for awhile before falling asleep. She replaced the handset on the base and stepped into the shower.

If only she could stop imagining him naked in her shower with her.

Tonio laughed softly as he hung up the phone and stepped into the shower. He moved under the hot stream, and sighed as the water eased his headache. He closed his eyes, put his face into the spray, and turned to let the water run over his back and down his legs as he wondered if she were doing the same thing. He realized with annoyance that he was thinking a great deal too much about this woman—and *he was enjoying it far too much.*

He thought of her under the hot spray, arching against him as he buried his cock deep in her body and moved her with his hands on her sweet, rounded ass to pleasure them both. He realized that he was stroking his shaft with a trembling hand as he imagined filling her with a hot stream of semen. He had to put a hand on the tile to steady himself as he nearly lost control of his legs as he came hard in his own hand.

Dios! He must be crazy.

She wasn't his type. She had nothing at all about her that he usually liked in women. He didn't like red hair, or green eyes. He soaped his body as he thought of her wearing that baggy old T-shirt with nothing under it, and he shook his head. *Dolores wouldn't have been caught dead in such an outfit. But then, Dolores wouldn't look half that tempting in such an outfit.*

He shook his head to remove the comparison. There *was* no comparison between this woman and the woman he had once loved. *Had thought he loved.* They were as unlike one another as day and night. Dolores had night black hair and dark eyes that smoldered with passion. Christine Lange had a mop of flyaway red curls that never seemed to be in place and green eyes. *Eyes that had inspired him to choose the emerald for her engagement ring.* Eyes that gave him a goddamn hard-on whenever she looked at him.

He rinsed the soap from his body and stood for a long time beneath the hot spray to clear the cobwebs of memory from his brain. He had chosen her for that very reason. She was hardly the type to excite his interest. Yet he couldn't stop thinking of her, fantasizing about her, lusting

after her. He shut off the water and reached for his towel. He moaned as the towel grazed over his still-engorged shaft.

He found her wandering through his mind at the oddest times, and in the oddest ways. *She had a body that set him aflame.*

He drew a deep breath and realized that his thoughts were certainly *not* platonic. He shook his head and toweled himself dry, frowning at his own lack of control here. She had to be attractive enough to convince the others, but he didn't need to convince himself as well. He decided he wouldn't call her again tonight. He didn't want to go to bed with thoughts of those green eyes in his mind. He didn't want to think of her under him in his bed.

Chris stepped out of the bathroom, the towel wrapped about her head and her terry robe pulled snugly about her damp body. *Damn him, anyway!* She had to make herself remember that he didn't like women, and that he was simply being pleasant to her because of the necessity to be around her for the next twenty-four months. She hated it when she was attracted to the wrong men all the time. And she was so pathetically attracted to Antonio. She had even dreamed about him, for Pete's sake! The mere sound of his voice over the phone was enough to send her into a wild fantasy where he was bending her over the kitchen table and pressing his body slowly into hers from behind—his thick cock sliding deep into her as she whimpered and begged for more.

He was gay, for Christ's sake. It was a waste of time and energy to even fantasize. *He probably had a boyfriend as handsome as he was.* She sank onto her chair and began to dry her hair with the blow dryer, closing her eyes as the hot air soothed her. It was stupid to wish for what he couldn't possibly give her.

She finished drying off and pulled her nightgown over her head with a sigh. She had to get this relationship straight in her head, and keep it straight. He would be nice to her because it was necessary. He would have to pretend to like her at least a little. He had to try to convince his family that he was a normal, red blooded, heterosexual male. She groaned and padded back into the bathroom to brush her teeth.

The phone was ringing when she stepped back out, and she drew a reinforcing breath as she stepped across the room to answer. "Hello."

"You're awake. I thought you might be sleeping."

His husky, deep voice made her tingle all over, and she frowned as she instantly recalled her last dream. She shivered slightly and bit her lower lip as memory flooded her. *Dear Lord!*

"Not yet. Just finished drying my hair. I usually hit the sack about 10 p.m. It's only 9:45." Her voice was a trifle breathless, and she hated herself for her inability to hide her emotions. She couldn't let herself fall in love with another man who could not love her back. "I have another fifteen minutes."

Tonio smiled. She was setting her limits. He leaned back against his pillow and contemplated her standing in the middle of her little bedroom, her hair damp and loose about her

face, and her body clad in a flannel nightgown. He decided she was the flannel type. *Yes, definitely flannel.* He would have to do something about that. He needed to introduce her to silk.

"I am afraid I have neglected a few important details, having been in such a hurry to get things into place," he purred seductively.

"What details?"

"Your wardrobe. The jewelry my family will expect to see my wife wearing. Your family background. I will need to know a few important things about you, like where you were born, and when." He stretched against his silk sheets and thought of her small bed with its frilled spread and the huge teddy bear he had seen lying in one corner.

He heard her draw a long breath. "I suppose, but don't go buying a lot of things you can't return. I have a few nice things I can get by with, and I seldom wear jewelry, so don't bother."

He lifted his brows. *A woman who didn't want beautiful clothes and jewelry?*

"I am sure your own wardrobe will do quite well for most of your needs. However, you will be expected to accompany me to the opera, the ballet, and to other black tie affairs at various times. And you will learn to wear jewelry. You are rather adaptable, I believe." He wanted her to come to him wearing nothing but a long strand of white pearls. He imagined pressing each perfect, smooth pearl into her body with his fingers, and then following them with his cock. He shuddered with need.

"I just don't think it's necessary to spend all that money on something that is only going to last a couple of years. One nice dress should be enough. I can wear it more than once, you know."

He shook his head at the very thought of her being seen twice in one dress in the company he kept. She had absolutely no concept of the expectations which were heaped upon one in the social circle she was about to enter. And enter it she would have to, for he had certain obligations to keep, and she would have to accompany him to many places in the evenings. And afterward, she would be naked in his arms—*strike that*. He couldn't go there.

Her days and nights would be her own, but her evenings would be his. That thought brought so many erotic possibilities to his mind that his cock jumped and began to grow painfully hard. He shifted and ran his palm over it to ease it a little.

"We shall have to do a little shopping, nothing for you to concern yourself over, of course, since I will see to the costs. And now, I believe, I should have a trifle more information about my wife to tell my curious family and friends."

"Like what?"

"Like place of birth, date of birth, parents' names—the usual things a man knows about a woman *before* he marries her." He wished he could smell the scent of her hair. He gently squeezed his hard shaft.

"You mean all those trifling details you weren't terribly worried about until now?" she laughed shortly.

"The very ones." He smiled, imagining the look on her make-up innocent face at that moment. Imagining her hair spread out over her pillow as he buried himself in her hot, wet body. His cock responded by lifting completely away from his body like a fucking flagpole.

"Okay—you know my first and last names, but my middle name is Adele, spelled in the French, after my grandmother on my mom's side. Got that?" she asked.

"Go on," he urged, his voice raw as his hand stroked his stiffly erect shaft.

"And I was born in Superior, Nebraska on August 29, 1980 to Franklin James Lange and Maude Emma Gant. Shall I keep going?"

He lifted his brows. She was a Virgo. A gentle perfectionist. A totally female woman despite her apparent disregard for fashion and beauty enhancement. Interesting. "Yes, by all means, continue." He closed his eyes as he arched his hips into each stroke of his hand, imagining her body on top of his.

"You get to tell me all about yourself when I'm through. Deal?"

"Deal." His voice was a rasp in his throat. *He was so fucking close to coming.*

"Okay, let's see..." She told him about her education and her decision to travel west. When she was finished, she breathed, "Okay, your turn."

Tonio bit his lip and almost whimpered aloud as he caught his ejaculation with the towel he had dried his skin with. He dragged in a breath and steadied his thoughts. He cleared his throat and calmed himself.

"I was born in Los Angeles on August 10, 1971" His voice was slowly returning to normal. "My mother's name was Maria Socorro Hidalgo-Ramirez, and my father's name was Enrique Hector Rodriguez-Hidalgo. He and my mother were second cousins. My family has always been concerned about good bloodlines. They often marry within their own kin to keep their money in the family."

He frowned at that thought. Dolores had been his second cousin. He had grown up with her. Perhaps that was why she had found him less than interesting. He pushed the thought away and continued. "My sister Adriana is just twenty-four. She is nearly engaged to a man who has been a good friend of the family for the last twenty years."

"Nearly?" she asked.

"He has asked me if he may approach her, but he is concerned that she will refuse him. She thinks of him only as a good friend. I doubt that she's ever considered marrying him. If he doesn't ask soon, she may marry someone else," he replied, rubbing his temples slowly to ease his

nagging headache. "If Manuel doesn't get up the courage to ask soon, he may go to his grave suffering from unrequited love."

"You sound as if you don't believe in love," she said quietly.

She was perceptive. He had to be more careful. "I don't."

"Me neither," she replied. "So, go on."

He wondered why she felt that way. Most women felt that love was more important than life itself, except his money-minded sister that is. *And Dolores*. "Yes, where was I?" He gave her as much information as he felt she needed to present a decent façade. No more.

Too much information could be dangerous. The less she knew about his affairs, the better. He yawned capaciously as he finished and glanced at his watch. "It seems I have kept you up well beyond your bedtime, Christine. Perhaps we should finish trading information tomorrow?"

She turned and yawned, glancing at her clock. It was nearly half past ten. She hadn't noticed the time at all, listening to the sound of his voice. Giving him a rather depressed goodbye, she flopped back onto the pillow and set the phone back onto its base. Rolling over onto her belly, she pounded the hapless pillow into submission as she swore at herself for getting too deeply involved here. Sighing, she buried her face in her pillow, inhaling the perfume she liked to spray on the case each night.

She thought of Jimmy and she wondered what he was doing now.

She hadn't seen him since the divorce. She hadn't asked for an annulment. It would have made it painfully obvious to his family that it had not been real, after all. It was no one's business, really, but she could not bring herself to embarrass Jimmy's mother any more than the poor woman had already been. She shoved the thought of her ex out of her mind.

She was doomed to fall in love with the worst possible men. She thought Antonio's dark eyes and a chiseled mouth, white teeth that flashed when he smiled. She drifted off to sleep thinking of touching that strong neck and those broad shoulders, running her hands up that strong back. Yes. He was far safer—no painful memories there.

He was waiting for her, but this time she realized that she was as ready and naked as he, drifting ghost-like toward him, his glittering dark eyes devouring her body as he followed his gaze with those breathtaking hands.

His hands dragged her against hard, rolling muscles. He caught her lips almost savagely, deepening the kiss instantly, driving his hot, delicious tongue into her mouth to taste her hungrily. She wrapped her arms around his neck and lifted one leg to coil it around his lean hip. He growled in pleasure. God, it sounded marvelous to hear him respond so eagerly. He cupped her ass with his hands, lifting her easily and carrying her backwards onto a bed of mist that had sprung from nowhere. The mist swirled warm and wet around them as he shifted his mouth to her nipples once again, and his fingers began their sensuous assault on her throbbing center.

"Oh, that feels so good," she whimpered. He laughed and moved to the other breast, laving it hungrily, swirling his hot tongue around the puffy nipple until she whimpered with need, lifting her hips to his questing hand. His hands were wicked—delicious—and he knew exactly where to use them to give her pleasure. She dragged his head back up to kiss him savagely, wanting to devour him.

She had never been the aggressor in her dreams before. It felt good.

He was once again moving slowly down her body—his mouth and teeth and tongue teasing as he spread her thighs and settled between them, and then his mouth was on her. His teeth dragged gently over her erect nub. His tongue drove deep into her heated wetness, and she screamed out with a splintering climax that brought her up from the bed of mist as she clutched his hair.

He laughed seductively as he gently pressed her back into the mist, and slid up her sweat-sheathed body to capture her panting mouth. She tasted herself on his lips as she opened her mouth to his tongue and he devoured her. She shoved him off her, pressed him back into the mist and crawled over him to kiss his quivering abdomen. She saw the magnificent erection he had. Reaching for it with her hands, she saw the pleasure on his face as he watched her circle it with her palms—and then...

Damn! She threw her pillow at her blaring alarm.

* * * *

He awoke with a start, breathing as if he'd run a very long distance. He sat up on the edge of his bed, wiping the perspiration from his face with one hand as he calmed his heart and his body. He drew a deep, calming breath, and cursed again. He could almost taste the sweetness of a decadent mouth on his—his skin tingled with the sensation of a body against his own. A delicate hand sweetly curling around his cock. Warm breath on his throbbing skin.

Dolores? Had he truly dreamed of her again after all this time? What other woman had driven him so mad? She had tortured his dreams and made sleep impossible for a very long time after he had lost her. Memories crowded back.

She had driven him mad that night before she had told him she meant to marry another man. She had allowed him to undress her slowly, his hands trembling with his need as he had seen the perfection of that small body, smelled the lushly expensive fragrance she wore so deliciously, felt her hands circle his fevered cock as she had begged him to take her. He had followed her erotic instructions like a blind puppy, so eager to please her. She had asked him to make love to her with his mouth first—and the heady, hot taste of her sweet center had almost brought him to ejaculation without being touched himself. He had given her several orgasms before he had entered her with a groan of need, expecting to plunge through her maidenhead. He had not realized until that moment that there was none to break.

He had thrust into her slowly, unable to believe that she would be his forever. She had clung to him wantonly, whispering things in his ear that he had never hoped to hear, not realizing that she seemed to be far more experienced than he. She had writhed in pleasure beneath him, telling him how good he felt buried deep inside her body, how she loved the length and thickness he gave her.

It had only been much later, after she had told him so coldly of her plans to marry another, that it had struck him as odd that a woman claiming to be a virgin had known so many ways to drive his body mad—ways to make him feel utterly helpless to resist her. Had not felt pain when he supposedly took her virginity.

He had tried desperately to forget her. Yet not one of the beautiful bodies he had lain with had matched hers. Not one of the eager lovers he had since her had wiped out her memory. *He needed to be rid of her.* He needed to be able to rest, to sleep through an entire night without the need of her.

He rose from his bed and went into the bathroom to splash cold water over his face and chest, and as he wiped the drops from his skin with a soft towel, he thought how different she was from his bride of convenience. He thought of green eyes and soft copper hair, and he laughed without humor. It was a very good thing for him that Christine Lange had happened along when she had, for he sincerely doubted that he would have been able to keep his father's wealth any other way. He did not have the strength or the will to seek out another woman to meet his needs. And he would never find one he wanted to live with for the rest of his life. Of that, he was most certain.

He drew a deep, shaking breath and ran his lean fingers through his dark hair distractedly. He thought of his wife, the woman he had hoped to keep at arm's length, the woman he had wanted because she was not his type and would prove no temptation to him. And he thought of the amazing heat he felt every time he thought of her—to the point of humiliating himself by using his own hand while he was simply talking with her on the phone.

It must be because it had been so damned long since he'd had a woman. He was losing it. He stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Of course. Once he felt less needy, he would not see her in quite the same way. Or so he desperately hoped.

Chapter Nine

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rodriguez, but Mr. Damien didn't come in this morning. In fact, I'm rather worried because he hasn't even called." The woman seated at the outer desk frowned. "It's not at all like him to miss an appointment without calling to advise me. I'll call him at home if you want."

"Please do." Tonio had the feeling that Damien had completely skipped with the entire amount he had stolen over the past three years. When he'd had Blake make out that cashier's check to Damien for the next twenty-four months of rent on Christine Lange's apartment, it might have tipped him off that something was amiss. Damien knew that Blake was the family's attorney.

He swore silently and reached into his pocket for his cell phone. He dialed Wilhoit's office as the secretary dialed Damien's home number. When the judge answered, he said only two words. "He's skipped."

"I take it your bird slipped the noose," Wilhoit replied. "I figured he would. That's exactly why I've already had the attorney general's office put a warrant out for his arrest."

"Thanks." Tonio hung up and waited as the secretary let the phone ring a dozen times before hanging up. When she turned and apologized for the inconvenience and offered to make him another appointment, he shook his head and left, his thoughts dangerous. If he happened to meet the man on the street, he would very likely kill him.

He took the elevator down and glanced about the lobby of the building, looking for Blake. His attorney was to have met him before his appointment with Damien, but he was late. He waited another five minutes before he called to check with the answering service to see if he had left a message.

"Sorry, sir, but no one but your sister has called this morning. She asks that you call her back this evening before seven."

It wasn't like Blake to miss an appointment, especially one this important. He was on his way to the parking garage to get his car when his cell phone rang, and he answered tersely, "Rodriguez here."

Blake sounded frustrated. "I'm sorry about missing you this morning, but I have been in San Francisco and couldn't make it back on time. I'm stuck in traffic between the airport and Damien's office right now. How did it go?"

"It didn't."

"He skipped?"

"It appears that way. Why were you in San Francisco?"

"I can't talk about it on the phone. Can I meet with you this morning? I'm afraid it isn't good news."

Tonio drew a deep breath. "Why am I not surprised?"

"10:30, your office?"

"Very well. I'll see you then."

Tonio drew another long breath. What could be any worse than what had already happened? He shut the phone and headed for his parked car. He needed to think. He needed to talk to someone. He glanced about out of habit as he approached his vehicle, making certain he was not being followed. There was no one, of course, that he *could* talk to. This was something he would have to handle alone. Adriana would never know. He didn't wish anyone to know how his father had been taken advantage of. The money was inconsequential. It could be regained within a matter of time, but his father had prided himself on his good judgment.

He slid into his car and locked the door quickly. His brows knitted. Of course his father would have trusted Damien implicitly! After all, his father had gotten Damien's name from his uncle. Both men had trusted Damien completely. Perhaps he should contact Luis and warn him. He couldn't be certain that Damien hadn't fleeced him as well.

He started his car, glanced back to be certain his path was clear, and backed out.

He normally would not bother with his cousin, but this was something the man needed to be aware of. Who knew how much money Damien had managed to siphon off Luis' inheritance, as well? No one deserved to have that happen to them, no matter how much of a total asshole they were.

* * * *

Tonio stared at Blake. "Are you trying to tell me that my new wife is a—*lesbian*?" He frowned in frustration. That could explain a great many things, but he was unwilling to accept that fact. *Impossible!*

Thoughts of his wife using her sweet mouth to pleasure another woman left him weak. And the image of another woman's tongue and hands giving her equal pleasure made him clench his fists unconsciously. *No. He wanted to take her with his tongue—his hand—make her scream with pleasure as she writhed beneath his mouth.* His gut clenched. He felt somehow cheated.

The attorney drew a deep breath and handed him the file containing the information he had gathered in San Francisco. "I can see no other reason for her to be married to an avowedly homosexual male. Many people who live an alternative lifestyle marry another gay person as a cover to protect families from ridicule. It appears she was married to this man for about six months, and then she filed for a divorce. She has remained unmarried and has not dated anyone in

the past several years since the divorce. No heterosexual woman could be married to a homosexual man without knowing it. There may be another explanation, but I'm unable to think of one."

Shaking off his hot thoughts, Tonio glanced through the papers, and then shrugged. "Can this be kept quiet?"

"It won't be easy, but it can be managed."

"Do it." He frowned. "It makes no difference to me that she doesn't like men. I didn't marry her for sex. I married her to keep my inheritance. The fact that she was once married to a homosexual means nothing to me." His statement sounded too calm even to him. In fact, it *did* mean something to him. It made him feel oddly frustrated to know that the woman he had married didn't even *like* men. But he could manage that.

She was softly feminine and attractive, and that was all she needed to be. He was after the look, not the content. If she chose women over men, that was up to her. He should actually feel a trifle relieved. Now, if he had to pretend to be in love with her, he would be far less worried about her taking his attentions seriously. But deep in his mind he was angry that a woman so incredibly sensual and sexy could waste herself on another woman.

He drew a deep, resigned breath and looked at his attorney questioningly. "Is there anything else about her I should know?"

"No criminal history. No history of drugs or alcohol. She doesn't smoke. No children, of course. The only thing I could find that might arouse suspicion or create a problem is in that folder." He nodded at the file.

Tonio nodded. "Well, if this is all, then there's nothing to worry about. Are you finished with your investigation?"

"I am. I'll take care of the loose ends with this thing in San Francisco. I suppose that's all, except Damien, of course. He's covered his tracks exceptionally well. I can't find a thing on him—no stocks, no securities, no property. He has got to be hiding the money somewhere. I wasn't even able to dig up a numbered Swiss account. A man doesn't just keep that much cash around. It's got to be stashed somewhere safe, and we'll find it if he has it."

Tonio nodded.

The attorney left the office, and when he was alone, Tonio swore softly at his own male ego. He had assumed she was simply not attracted to him because he wasn't her type. That appeared now to be a grave understatement.

He thought of her delicious body naked on a bed, wrapped in another woman's arms. His lips twisted. Some men found two women making love intensely exciting. Perhaps he wasn't quite so liberal. He shook his head. The thought held no appeal for him. It was difficult to believe that a woman as softly feminine and as attractive as Christine could be gay.

His ego told him that she had looked at him like a woman looking at an attractive man, but his mind told him he had been foolish. He sighed and decided that this would simply make it far easier to be in daily, close contact with her. At least she would not have the inclination to let him take liberties—or to consummate a marriage that must remain platonic, for obvious reasons. Because he might be foolish enough to try to do just that.

* * * *

"Yes sir?" Chris glanced up at Mr. Anderson and put down her pencil, stretching wearily.

"Have you seen the 2007 cash account ledger?" he asked as he glanced over the stack of books on her desk.

"No, I haven't been able to locate it. I can have Linda look for it on her next trip into the library." She closed the huge 2005 volume she had been going over and rubbed her eyes. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No—no. I just want the rest of the reports within this week. You've been really doing well. We're just trying to round up the last two years' ledgers. If you see them, will you bring them to my office?" He smiled oddly at her.

She watched him go and wondered why he gave her the creeps. He wasn't really the creepy type. She couldn't quite put a finger on the reason for the feeling, but he definitely was not the kind of person she would wish to be alone with. He gave her the chills sometimes, the way he crept around and came up behind her without letting her know he was around. *Watching her.*

She gave a shudder of distaste and went back to her work. She needed the work, or she wouldn't have taken this particular job in the first place. As soon as a better one popped up, she would take it. She was keeping her eyes open for one, reading the paper every morning on her way to work in the limo.

She sighed. *That* was certainly a heavenly perk. She could lean back and read and relax on her way to work. God bless Jose and that wonderful car of his.

She flipped through the pages of the ledger, looking over the cash accounts from January 2005, and she stopped, frowning. She flipped back to the page where she had seen it and lifted her brows. *Very odd.*

Clarence Damien had an untagged cash account with over \$90,000.00 in it. She shook her head and flipped further, looking for the February page. Her eyes widened. In one month the account balance soared to \$120,000.00 and then dropped to \$62,000.00.

She glanced to make sure it was a personal account and not a business account. Property managers didn't make *or* spend that much money in one month. She looked for the March page and her frown deepened. *This was definitely not right.* The account balance went up by about \$30,000.00 to \$40,000.00 each month and then would drop by half again.

She paged through to the end of the year and closed the book with trembling hands as she figured his account had accumulated nearly \$160,000.00 dollars by November 2005, only to drop back to \$80,000.00 in December. She shoved the ledger under her desk and got up to go to the library to find the 2004 and 2006 ledgers for the cash accounts. *Something was definitely fishy as hell here.*

The reports she had been working on sat untouched as she photocopied entries from Damien's account over the three year period from 2004 through 2006. His account had been opened in November of 2003 with a deposit of \$12,000.00. The money was put directly into the company slush fund under the financial umbrella of Anderson's partner, Dean Welker. It was basically a hidden cash account, and she realized with a sick sense of dread what she had just possibly uncovered.

Over three years his balance had risen steadily by monthly deposits exceeding \$30,000.00 each month, with two extremely large deposits in March of 2004 and in December of 2006. She wondered if this was why Mr. Anderson was so eager to get his hands on the 2007 journals. The amounts would have to be astronomical by then.

Perhaps her boss was a party to Damien's theft.

She jammed the copies into her bag and went back to her reports, scrambling to make it seem that she had been working diligently on them for the past three hours.

Antonio's business manager? Embezzling all that money?

She thought back over the last few years, since Mrs. Allen had moved in and Mr. Damien had been collecting the rents, and she felt sick inside.

The man was stealing from her husband!

Each of those huge rent increases had most likely gone into this account. But where was the money going after it came in? He was putting it somewhere else, obviously. She didn't have time to search the records for corresponding deposits in any other account. She had taken up most of the day with this spying of hers. *She would probably be lucky to get out of this alive!*

She finished one more of the promised reports before she left at five, and she clocked out quickly, unwilling to have to talk to Mr. Anderson. She hugged her purse close to her side as she hurried out of the building and slid into the rear seat of the limo.

Jose frowned as he pulled limo away from the curb and headed the car toward Torrance. "What is the problem, *señora*?"

Chris shook her head numbly. How on earth had he been able to get away with this kind of theft during the past three years? Surely Antonio Rodriguez wasn't blind. "Could we stop at a copy shop, please? I need to make some extra copies of a couple of things, Jose." She felt sick inside, and more than a little bit afraid. She had stumbled onto something that could put her in great danger.

People killed for that amount of money.

She wrung her hands as he drove, and wondered how on earth she was going to tell Antonio about this.

Jose drove for a few minutes before saying quietly, "You look ill, *señora*. Should I take you home?"

"No. I really need to make a photocopy of something. I'll be okay. I just feel a little tired, that's all."

"I can take you to a photocopier, if that is what you need."

She didn't pay much attention to where he drove. She was too deeply involved in her own private thoughts to note that he used the car phone. She didn't realize the car had stopped until Jose opened her door, and she blinked, thanking him. But when she emerged from the car to find herself in front of a huge office building, she looked at him and frowned.

"This isn't a copy shop."

"That it is not, but there is a photocopier here. Please come with me." He locked the car and took her inside of the building and into the elevator, where she stood like a statue as the car climbed fifty floors to the penthouse office suite.

"Where in the hell are we going? It would have been far easier to stop at a copy place."

He ignored her as the doors slid open and they stepped out into a lushly carpeted office that took up the entire top floor of the building, and she realized that this was Antonio Rodriguez' Los Angeles office complex. She started to say something to him, but stopped instantly when she saw her husband emerge from the glass-walled office just ahead, having seen them come out of the elevator.

"I didn't mean for you to bother him," she rasped at him, but he ignored her and drew her along toward the approaching figure.

He patted her shoulder gently and said, "He will be able to help you with whatever is upsetting you, *señora*."

She was about to deny that she needed help when Tonio asked, "What is this about, Jose?"

Jose leaned forward and spoke to his employer in Spanish and then nodded to her and said quietly, "I will be downstairs."

Chapter Ten

Chris swallowed hard. She felt a hand slip under her elbow, and she was escorted quietly into the glass-enclosed office. As he stepped inside with her, he hit a switch on the wall, and the glass darkened. She blinked, watching the rest of the office slowly vanish, as the polarized glass shut off the private office from the rest of this lush world. She swallowed hard. He turned to face her.

His dark eyes searched her pale face. "What has made you so very upset?"

She licked dry lips and debated with herself over what to say, and then she shrugged and said hoarsely, "I may be simply chasing a wild hare here, but I found this in the cash accounts files at the place I started working for last Monday." She reached into her purse and pulled out the crumpled sheets, handing them to him. "It just sort of struck me as strange that a business manager could make that much money managing your properties, unless he was doing something illegal."

She breathed nervously as he skimmed the pages quickly, his face unreadable. She noted the way he straightened slightly, and his eyes moved from the papers to her face.

"What is the name of this firm you work for?"

"Anderson and Welker. They have a large clearing house firm where they run cash and merchandise accounts for businesses."

"I know the place." His comment was made with a compressed mouth. "I should have thought of that." He went to his desk and lifted the receiver of his phone. "Get me Blake."

He hung up, and turned back to face her, waving the papers. "Are the ledgers these came out of still in your office?"

"They were when I left. Nobody noticed that I was copying them."

"Where in the office is your desk?" he asked quietly.

"I could show you."

"No!" His emphatic tone made her jump, and she swallowed hard. "You are never to go back there again. You have just quit your job, and you will be moving your things out of your apartment this afternoon. What cannot be moved today will be left."

Chris stared at him numbly. "But, I can't just quit!"

He set the papers on his desk and reached out to take her by the shoulders. "What you have uncovered so innocently puts you in extreme danger, Christine. They will know who

discovered this, and when it comes to this kind of money, these people will do anything they have to in order to cover this up." His eyes were serious, and she bit her lower lip numbly.

"Clarence Damien is going to lose the extremely sizable nest egg he stole from me before he goes to prison, and Anderson and Welker are going to find themselves answering a great many embarrassing questions." He smiled slowly at her. "If it hadn't been for you, I would have lost every penny of that money. Thank you."

She smiled shakily. God! The man was sex on the hoof. His smile was enough to make her swallow her tongue! "No problem. But I admit I was pretty scared after I started digging. When I left the office after work, I was praying that no one had seen me copying those pages. I felt like someone out of a James Bond movie."

"I owe you a great debt," he breathed softly, bending to kiss the side of her cheek. The chaste touch left her heart racing uncomfortably. He seemed about to say more, but his phone rang, and he was gone for a moment, buried in his high powered, high finance world where she could not go. The feel of his lips on her skin lingered as she watched him. Her eyes drifted down his lean, hard body and back to his face, her breathing terribly erratic. And it had little to do with her fear of being found out as she had played super spy.

She wondered where she was supposed to hide from these men. And if she had to quit her job, that meant she had to look for another. *What a mess.*

When he was finished on the phone, he turned to her. "Jose will take you to the apartment. I have some things I must take care of. You pack all of your personal items, and he will help you to load them into the car. Leave everything else. I will have Mrs. Allen lock the place up and everything will be safe enough."

Chris frowned. "Where the hell am I supposed to go? Am I going to be planted in some dinky little motel room until this blows over? I'd prefer to stay in my apartment and take my chances, thank you."

He looked instantly annoyed, but said nothing more. He opened the office door and she found Jose standing there, waiting. He said something in rapid fire Spanish, which even seemed to startle Jose, and Jose escorted her through the office to the elevator.

"What is he so mad about?" she hissed.

Jose shook his head and pressed the button for the elevator, and only after they were inside and the car was moving down the shaft did he speak.

"He is not angry. He is worried. He wants to make certain that nothing happens to you, and he made me personally responsible to see to your safety." His dark eyes told her that was not all that Antonio had told him, and she decided that she had better try to learn some more Spanish if she was going to have to be around that man for two years.

"If you say so, but I know that *"estupido"* means stupid, and *"mujer"* means woman, so don't lie to me about what he says, okay?" She glowered at the man, whose lips twitched as he tried valiantly not to grin. "What did I say that set him off?"

Jose shrugged as the elevator doors slid open, and she was whisked out of the building to the waiting limo. As she sank into the comfortably cushioned rear seat and he started the engine, she said irritably, "Okay, Jose ... take this stupid woman home!"

* * * *

Tonio drew an angry breath as he watched her stepping into the elevator. She had assumed him crass enough to put her into some motel room when she had just done him a great service. Of course, she had little knowledge of him—that was in her favor. But to have thought he would even consider sending his wife to some cheap motel? She had a great deal to learn about him. *And he was going to thoroughly enjoy teaching her.*

He went inside his office and closed the door a bit harder than he usually did, which drew a startled stare from his executive assistant, Mrs. Harris. Then, as he recalled that she wasn't really his wife, at least, not in her own mind, he calmed his anger. He couldn't really blame her for making such an assumption.

He went to his phone and made several calls to make arrangements for her safety, and then he called Blake back.

His mind was not on business here. It was on a woman he should definitely not be thinking about the way he was. He shoved his frustration and irritation aside and forced his thoughts back to the business of retrieving his stolen property.

* * * *

"I can't just leave everything behind. I'll surely need some of my pots and pans, and some food." She started to pack a box of things from the kitchen, and Jose looked at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"I do not think you need to worry about those things, *señora*. You will not need them."

"There's a place to cook where I'm going, isn't there?" She glanced at him worriedly.

"Most assuredly, *señora*, but I am certain that you will not need to take any of this with you." Jose took the box and set it on her table and guided her back into her bedroom to pack her clothes.

Chris stuffed every item of clothing she owned into her three suitcases and her cosmetic case, and as she looked around with a frown, she hoped they wouldn't destroy her stuff if they came looking. On second thought, she dumped some of her clothes out of her small suitcase and tucked her more treasured bric-a-brac into the case, layering them between items of clothing. She

snapped the lid of the case shut and exhaled wearily. She hoped she wouldn't have to be in hiding long. *This was going to be the pits.*

She lugged her cases into the living room where Jose was locking her windows securely and drawing her curtains across the glass. He turned and rushed to assist her, taking all three of the suitcases and carrying them down to the car while she went about finishing the job he had begun. She was surprised at how many of her windows had been left ajar for ventilation. She had never worried about it because she was on the third floor.

She picked up a bottle of shampoo she had missed, tucked it into her purse, and headed for the door, grabbing up her cosmetic case and her gym bag. She took one last, frustrated look around and closed the door, double locking it. As she headed for the elevator, she wondered if all of this was really necessary. Had it all been some crazy coincidence? Would she be laughing about this next week?

Jose met her at the elevator in the lobby and took her case and her gym bag despite her protest, and she followed him through the lobby and out to the car. It was beginning to grow dark, and she shivered a little to think that she might not see her little home, such as it was, for some time. She turned to look back at the now freshly painted façade with a little sigh of regret as he held the door for her to get into the limo. Before she slid into the seat, she looked at the man and sighed sadly, "How do I get myself into these messes?"

He lifted his brows as she got into the car, not seeming to want or expect an answer. He was glad he had not been required to give one. His employer must be a complete fool to have involved this young woman in his machinations without regard to her own feelings. For the first time in his thirty three years of working for the Rodriguez family, Jose Alvarado was angry with the way things were done. He had seen many women come and go, but Tonio had married this one.

He had married her with no intention of being a husband to her and no intention of taking responsibility for his family's needs. He closed the door quietly, frowning as he walked around to climb into his own seat. *The old señor would be rolling in his grave if he could see his son now.*

As he started the engine, he glanced at her pale face in the mirror and wondered if the young fool had any idea of what he was doing here. He had taken a very sweet, very caring woman and had used her for his own ends, without one single bit of concern for her own needs or feelings. He did not see this child as a beautiful woman who could give him healthy, strong children to fill his house. He saw her only as a means to an end.

Jose wanted to tell him what he thought of him, but if he did, he would be endangering the livelihood he had grown to depend upon. He would likely be told to find another job.

He pulled out into the street and wondered what had happened to the Rodriguez family honor.

* * * *

"We can have the search warrant in less than an hour. The night watchman will be the only one there, and he can't refuse to allow the police to search the office. We will have to put a full legal hold on Anderson and Welker, of course, to keep the books in one place and the money from being withdrawn. Of course, they don't know about it yet, but they will when they come in tomorrow. Have you put her somewhere safe so she won't be intimidated or in danger?" Blake glanced at Tonio.

Tonio nodded. "She's going to the house. She'll not be returning to her job. What about Damien? Any leads yet?"

"You're going to have her stay at the house?" Blake lifted his brows. "Isn't that a little dangerous?"

Tonio frowned at his lawyer. "Why would it be dangerous?"

Blake seemed nervous. "Having her under the same roof for an indefinite period of time could jeopardize your attempt to remain uninvolved here, Mr. Rodriguez."

Tonio gave him a quelling glare and said dryly, "She will pose no problem for me. In spite of what my sister thinks, I do have a well-defined ability to resist throwing women down at first sight and ravishing them."

"I am merely pointing out that your new wife is an extremely attractive young woman and has a rather stimulating personality, and if you do not wish to become more deeply involved than you already are, I would suggest that you find other accommodations for her."

Tonio frowned thoughtfully. "You think I'm already involved here?" Blake was stepping a bit over the line as far as he was concerned, but the attorney was only looking out for his client's best interests.

Blake nodded.

Tonio shrugged. "She *is* rather maddening, but I assure you I feel nothing but the desire to keep her from harm. I don't plan to sleep with her. She'll have separate accommodations within my household. After all, there are several guest suites."

Blake seemed about to say something more, but apparently decided against it. He shrugged and let the subject drop.

"Besides—you yourself have informed me that she has a preference for female company, so stop worrying. Now, I asked if you had anything on Damien."

* * * *

The headlights of the limo illuminated a tall stone wall, then a set of ironwork gates which slid aside to allow the car to drive on. Chris had been gazing out the darkened glass window for the past several miles wondering how far away this motel was, but as she saw the

dark shape of a huge building looming ahead in the evening gloom, she leaned forward and asked in a hushed voice, "What is this place, Jose? Where are we going?"

"The house is called San Cristobal, *señora*. It is part of the Rodriguez Coldwater Canyon estate. There are three houses on the estate. This is the largest of the three."

She swallowed hard. "That's a *house*?"

"Yes, *señora*." Jose replied as he negotiated the curve into the main drive, and stopped under the portico to the far left of the main entrance. "It is *Señor* Rodriguez' home when he is in California."

Chris bit her lower lip and sat there staring out of the window at the imposing structure. "My God! It must be bigger than my apartment building."

"No, *señora*, it has only forty-five rooms. I believe the apartment building has sixty apartments with a minimum of two rooms each."

Only forty-five rooms? She shook her head. "He really *lives* here?" Her thoughts were chaotic. No one lived in a house this big. Except maybe the president.

She stepped from the car as Jose held the door for her. She smiled shakily at him as she walked past him and to the bottom step that led to a sizable door. "Is this the servant's entry?"

Jose was pulling her bags from the trunk and he smiled. "There is no servant's entry here, *señora*. This is the utility entrance, used when guests arrive and their bags must go up in the elevator." He closed the trunk and started to pick up the bags. "It is also used when the weather is bad and our guests do not wish to get soaked."

Elevator? She drew a deep breath and took her small bag from Jose, despite his protest. "Well. I suppose if there's an elevator, I won't get massively worn out carrying this—or this." She took her gym bag as well and climbed the stairs to the door, but as she came within a few steps of it, a small woman appeared in the doorway wiping her hands on a voluminous white apron, smiling, and taking the bags she had carried.

"Welcome, *Señora* Rodriguez. I have your bath ready and some comfortable things for you to change into." Maria urged her into the house like a mother hen, and Chris moved ahead of her, feeling slightly like the helpless victim of some tiny whirlwind.

"Jose. Bring her things up. I am taking her on ahead." Maria led the way to the elevator a few paces down the vast tiled hallway, and she pressed the button, smiling welcomingly up into the girl's eyes. "I am Maria. Jose is my husband. I take care of the house."

Chris managed a nervous smile. "He has told me lot about you and the girls. I feel like I know you already."

"My Jose is a good man. He will bring your things up, but you look very tired and hungry. We will not wait for him. You come."

Chris followed willingly, her mind too muddled to protest. *A bath?* She hadn't taken a leisurely bath in years! It sounded wonderful. She noted that Maria pressed the button marked three, and she smiled wryly. *Another third floor apartment.*

The elevator was luxurious. Nothing at all like the one at the apartment house. This one had a smoked mirror at the rear so that guests could make sure their dresses were straight and their makeup on perfectly. There was a cushioned velvet bench at each side, and the floor was thickly carpeted. She noted that the light inside the elevator was a sparkling crystal chandelier, which shed exquisite twinkles of colored light and gave the interior a warm rainbow glow. She hadn't seen anything like it since her parents had taken her to Omaha when she was ten, and she had eaten supper at the Hotel Grand Windsor.

And she had accused him of wanting to send her to some fleabag motel! Her cheeks grew warm and she realized now why he had been so angry. She owed the man a major apology.

As the elevator doors slid open at the third floor, she was surprised. She hadn't even felt the elevator move.

Maria led the way out of the elevator into a spacious corridor. She followed, amazed at the thick, lush carpeting and the antique paintings of various members of the Rodriguez family which hung every dozen feet or so along the wall. They reached the first of five doors on the right side of the hall, and Maria stopped to point at it.

"This is the utility closet, *señora*, where everything is kept for the bedrooms on this floor. If there is anything at all you need, soap, towels, it is all kept here."

She moved along to the next door, which seemed considerably larger than the first. She pushed it open and stepped inside, heading for the far side of what appeared to be a spacious living room. Along one wall were a large fireplace and the French windows Chris had seen from the road as they had driven in. The furniture was all antique. The lighting in the room was provided by a huge chandelier suspended from the high, ornately decorated ceiling, and several smaller antique lamps situated on occasional tables about the room. Chris followed her across the room to the door on the far left side and found herself in a huge bedroom.

"My God. You could fit my entire apartment into just this one room," she breathed.

Maria set her bags on the floor beside the huge four poster bed and turned to open a free standing armoire which appeared to house a huge supply of bath and bed linen. She shrugged out of her suit jacket, and as the little woman pulled out an armload of the fluffiest bath towels she had ever laid eyes on, she sank down onto the edge of the bed and stared about her at the sheer luxury.

Maria disappeared into what she suspected was a sinfully huge bathroom and came out a moment later without the towels. "Please, *señora*, before it becomes cool."

Chris nodded, and as Maria left her alone, she dragged off her clothes and padded into the bathroom to find a decadent looking marble tub in the very center of the bathroom, one you had to climb a couple of steps to get into. And then it sank down into the floor so that you felt like you were in a pool. It was large enough to fit four quite comfortably, and as she stepped down into it, she noticed the whirlpool controls. *This was going to be sheer Heaven.*

She glanced about the room and noted the double vanity with twin sinks against the far wall. There was another door on the far side of the room and a second door which stood open to reveal that it was the smaller section of the room that contained the toilet facilities.

It was unbelievable. There was a corner shower, surrounded by lightly frosted glass, and a skylight. There were heated towel racks and thick, fluffy rugs on the tiled floor to absorb all the drips and slops anyone could possibly make. As she sank into the rose-scented water, she realized that luxury like this could be totally addictive. Even one day in these kinds of surroundings would make it hard to go back to her little apartment. She reached for a bar of pink soap and noted with delight that it was rose scented. She couldn't believe the coincidence. Someone had to love roses as much as she did!

As she lay in the deliciously warm water and soaped her face and arms, she wondered what it would have been like to be born to this kind of money. *No wonder he was fighting to keep it.* She lifted her cupped hands to pour a double handful of water over her soapy face, and she reached for the fluffy wash cloth that hung on a heated rack beside the tub. She intended to enjoy this while she could.

She glanced at the faucets and noted that there was a hand-held shower head with about six feet of hose on it. She could shampoo her hair without taking a shower. She made use of the rich shampoo and used the sprayer to rinse with. Then she reclined in the water and turned on the whirlpool jets, closing her eyes and sighing with sheer pleasure. Oh, yes, this was positively decadent! She must be careful not to fall asleep and drown herself.

* * * *

Tonio glanced at his watch. It was late, and he hadn't checked on Christine's safety yet. He wasn't worried. Maria would be taking excellent care of her. He reached for the phone to make one last call before heading back to the house. There were a few things he had to tie up before he could relax for the evening. This wouldn't take long.

He hung up, and as he reached for his jacket and shrugged into it, he tugged his tie loose and rubbed the back of his neck. Damned throbbing headache. It haunted him always—except once. He thought of the time *she* had taken away his headache, and he drew a deep breath to calm the sudden shot of heat that hit him directly in the groin. Perhaps she would do so again. He smiled to himself as he recalled his attorney's words. Blake had not been so terribly far off. She was very dangerous to his peace of mind.

He realized that it would be very easy to forget that his bride of convenience was a woman who did not enjoy the attentions of men. He drew a sigh and rubbed his temple. He could not be completely comfortable with that thought. It frustrated him. However, having her there in his house would certainly solve the problem of having to have her available at odd times

and hours. It would not be nearly as difficult to deal with his family should they appear on his doorstep without notice. But knowing now that she was—*what* she was—would *she* feel comfortable about it?

What he needed to do now was keep her from becoming nervous about it and flying like a frightened bird. A quiet discussion should ease her fears and make things clear to her. Of course, he *would* be required to pretend to be madly infatuated with her to convince his sister and his cousin. She *would* have to put up with that minor irritation. He frowned at the thought that his presence and pretense at love could be irritating to any woman.

But he would feel far freer to pretend with her than with a woman who might fall in love with him. That could lead to all sorts of unnecessary and rather unpleasant complications. He did not need a lovesick female on his hands when it came time to separate and return to his former life. Why the hell could he not feel happy with the situation?

As he walked from his office through the now-deserted work area toward the elevator, he drew the compact, custom-made 9mm pistol from his pocket and checked the clip. He wanted no surprises in the parking ramp. As he slipped it back into his jacket pocket, he wondered if perhaps he should have one made for Christine. He would feel far more comfortable knowing she could protect herself, regardless of Jose's watchful eye

Yes, he would have to check on that. He would talk to the gunsmith in the morning.

With Damien still on the loose and Christine the only person who could identify him as the man she had seen entering the offices of Anderson and Welker, she was in grave danger. He would have her make a sworn statement in the morning, as well, before Wilhoit, just in case anything should happen to her. He wouldn't put it past Damien to try to get her out of the way.

He scowled. He was not comfortable thinking about her being in danger. She was his ticket to freedom. And besides that, he liked her. *Too much*. She might not be his idea of what he wanted most in a woman, but she had a certain something about her, something that made him think about her often—far more often than he liked. And in ways that astounded him. He shrugged off those thoughts and pressed the button for the elevator.

He wondered what she was doing right now.

* * * *

Maria smiled broadly as she came back into the room carrying a tray. "It is far past supper time, Señora Rodriguez. Perhaps a tray will be good, eh?" The little woman set the tray on the glass-smooth table top beside the window as Chris finished toweling her hair. She tossed the towel into the wicker hamper beside her bedroom door.

She ran her hands through her thick hair and shoved it back from her face. "It smells wonderful!" she sighed as the woman lifted one of the silver covers to reveal a plate of freshly baked chicken, mouth watering asparagus spears, and a potato baked to perfection. "You did all

of this in the time I was in the bathtub? Was I in there that long?" She blinked, glancing at her watch.

"The *señor* called before you arrived. He told me that you were coming, and so I started something. It is not much, just a small meal to tide you over until morning." The woman smiled as she poured Chris a cup of fragrant coffee from a small jug on the tray. "Do you like it black, or do you like light and sweet?"

"Not much? I don't usually eat this well at home!" Chris grinned, sitting on the arm of the sofa. "I like a little cream—one sugar."

Maria was smaller than she had imagined. Jose was not a big man, but this tiny woman would make him appear huge! She was just under five feet tall, and would probably be unable to make the scale even give a shudder of recognition. Chris felt positively *gigantic* beside her.

Sitting on the arm of the sofa, she was about the same height as Jose's diminutive wife. She watched as Maria bustled about the tray, removing the covers and shaking out the pristine white napkin. When the little woman turned to gesture for her to sit at the small table, which was obviously a breakfast set since it had only two chairs beside it, she obeyed with a smile, sinking onto the chair with a deep sigh of anticipation.

"Thank you, Maria! I'm famished!"

Maria smiled at the younger woman as she began to eat hungrily. Jose had been right about this one. She was special. Not like the others. She was polite even to servants. Like the old *señora*. Maria left the girl to eat alone, and as she went into the bedroom to clean up what she expected to be a large mess of strewn clothing and wet towels, she was startled to find that this young *señora* had cleaned up after herself. Amazing!

The clothes she had worn were lying neatly on the side of the bed, and the wet towels were in the hamper. Her own soiled laundry was tucked into a plastic bag, as if she had planned to wash them out herself!

Maria shook her head in disbelief as she gathered the hamper and the bag of under things, and took the rumpled clothes, as well. She clucked her tongue over the poor quality of the material. Bargain basement fashions, pretty enough from a distance, but certainly not what one expected the wife of *Señor* Rodriguez to wear. He would, of course, have to buy her new things.

Maria opened the bed and spritzed rose perfume over the pillows. Then she laid out the only nightgown the *señora* had with her.

She frowned as she shook her head over the soft, old flannel nightgown. A pretty woman like this needed something frilly and silky. What had she worn on her honeymoon? But no, there had been no honeymoon. Jose had told her that, of course. She had forgotten. Then she grinned wickedly. Of course, she might be one of those who preferred to sleep with a man in the nude.

Maria laughed softly and laid out the terry robe on the foot of the bed. If the *señor* was in love with her, she must be doing something right! Perhaps the flannel made him wish to see far more! She might try that with Jose.

Chapter Eleven

Tonio left the Jaguar under the portico. Jose could put it away later. He hung the keys on the rack inside the utility closet and made his way through the dimly lit hallway. He stretched his aching back and neck, and pressed the elevator button, dragging his tie off and draping it over his shoulder. He badly needed a drink.

He rode up to the third floor and stepped out, pacing down the hallway past the staring portraits of his disapproving ancestors and past the door to his own suite of rooms.

She was in there. The thought made his cock jump to life and strain against his slacks painfully. He glanced at his watch as he passed on to the next door halfway down the hallway. It was early yet. She might still be awake. He stepped into the smaller bedroom and began to strip off his suit, sitting to remove his shoes and socks.

He glanced about. Jose had moved his personal items out of the big bedroom to this one as he had asked. He could make do very well in this one. He disliked that huge bed with its ornate posts and the great chandelier above it. He dropped his suit pants and reached for his robe. His erection was still too visible. He gave it an angry shove with the heel of his hand and swore.

He wanted a shower, but the small partial bath attached to this room had only a toilet and sink. This had been the valet's room when his father had been alive. He would have to use the big bathroom. Later he would make arrangements to have a shower installed in this one.

He picked up his shaving kit and his own toilet articles, and he stepped through the walk-in closet that separated the smaller room from the master bath. He listened at the door that connected with the master bathroom and opened it slowly. The bathroom was dark. She was in the other room.

He switched on the light and stepped into the room, moving across to drop his things onto the rack beside the shower cubicle. He dropped his robe and stepped into the glass enclosure, turning on the water. The steam rose about him as he stood under the hot spray, trying to ease his throbbing headache.

Thinking about her in his shower, her mouth wet and warm, and her body welcoming. Her fingers circling his cock as she begged him to take her.

Chris pulled her nightgown on over her head and padded to the vanity to brush out her almost dry hair. She had forgotten to pack her damn blow dryer. She frowned as she dragged the brush through her damp hair and then wondered if there might be a dryer in the bathroom. It had seemed to be extremely well stocked.

She rose from the vanity stool, walked across to step into the bathroom, and froze as she realized the shower was running.

Who the hell could be in her bathroom at this hour?

She eased the door open, peeped in, and flushed when she saw that *he* was in her shower! The frosted glass was steamy, but there was no mistaking the tall, powerfully made male body that moved and turned under the hot spray.

Antonio Rodriguez was in her frigging shower!

She started to back out, but her curiosity stopped her, and she stared lustfully at him through the frosted glass. *My God—he was sooo beautiful!*

Her cheeks burned, and she felt like she had turned into a common Peeping Tom. However, she could not drag her wide eyes from that lean, hard-muscled figure. Her imagination went berserk as she noticed that his penis was standing at rigid attention.

Is that what men's penises did in the shower? Or only his?

Her mouth went dry. Her hands clenched into tight fists at her sides. Dear God—she had to fight the desire to walk across the floor, open the glass, and simply stare at him. And then she watched in thrall as his hand circled it and stroked. She heard his deep growl of intense pleasure and watched, mesmerized, as he pleased himself before her wide, hungry eyes. *Dear God—what she wouldn't give to know what that felt like inside of her body.*

And then he gave a deep groan of release, and she watched as he came hard and fast. She was so utterly engrossed in her Peeping Tom activities that she almost lost her balance trying to see him, falling against the door and making a clatter of noise. She gave a little yelp of shock.

She swallowed as he reached to turn off the water and jerked her head back out of the bathroom, closing the door quickly with an audible snap that he surely heard as well.

She hurried across the bedroom and into the living room, and then flopped onto the sofa with a little groan of frustration.

My God—not a word of what she had heard was true. It wasn't disgusting. It was—amazing!

What a damn waste. A man who looked like that—and he didn't like girls! She pulled one of the satin brocade covered throw pillows to her chest and buried her face against it. *This wasn't going to be any damn picnic.*

Tonio frowned at the clatter, and the little yelp, and then the sound of the bathroom door closing. He opened the glass door to look around. He caught a flash of shadow under the connecting door from the master bedroom and laughed. He must have been a shocking sight! She had probably been coming in to use the bathroom, and found him there jacking off in the shower. He chuckled softly as he imagined her seeing a man fondling his cock in the shower, and running like a scared rabbit. Well, if he had not been imagining her in there with him, he would have not been caught red handed. He grinned at the unintentional pun.

It might be a very good thing to have that talk with her tonight.

He dried off and pulled on his robe, tying it with a negligent tug of the heavy satin belt, and then walked across to her door, knocking on it lightly. "Christine? Are you still awake?"

When there was no answer, he opened the door slowly and glanced at the empty bed, invitingly opened and waiting. He frowned and headed across the room to the open door of the sitting room.

He stepped into the warm light from the chandelier and saw her huddled on the sofa like a frightened child, hugging a pillow to herself and gazing at him with large green eyes. He felt a tug somewhere below his navel, and pushed it down into his subconscious. The shower had been no help at all.

"I'm sorry if I startled you. I suppose I should have used one of the other guest room showers," he said quietly as he crossed the room and sank into the wing backed chair across from her. "I wanted to talk to you, anyway, and so this seems to be the best time."

His gaze slid over her flushed face and her tousled hair and he felt that odd clenching burn in his groin once again. He noted the flannel nightgown, and he had to stop himself from laughing. *He had been correct!*

When she replied, her voice was chilly. "No problem, but I could have settled for a different room. I certainly didn't need the red carpet treatment here. There was no need for you to give up your own rooms."

He drew a deep breath. He lifted one brow and said quietly, "I am sleeping in a connecting room at the present. You will be perfectly safe. I will not invade your privacy."

"I could have slept wherever it is that you're sleeping. In fact, I think we should trade now so that you can have your own room back," she breathed.

He frowned. "I expect you to remain where you are until other arrangements can be made. You are my—guest. It is definitely no hardship on me to sleep elsewhere. I am perfectly comfortable. Now, I feel it is time we discussed a few things, and since you are here under my roof, this seems the best time to do so."

She gazed at him, her eyes darting to his visible chest, then back to his face hurriedly. He saw a hot flush spread over her skin, and she swallowed convulsively, keeping her eyes glued to his face.

"So? Talk!"

He noted her discomfort and chalked it up to her dislike of males in general. Irritated for some reason, he made no effort to close his robe and went on. "I spoke with my sister this morning about my marriage. Needless to say, she is not happy with me. I expect her to arrive within the next couple of days, and I believe my cousin Luis will be arriving shortly thereafter. If

you are in this room, there will be no question about the marriage being real." His treacherous thoughts moved to the sweetly curved body clad in a threadbare terry robe over a flannel gown, and perversely, he wanted to see her in silk and satin.

"I am in the connecting room where my father's valet slept. It has its own entrance, but while visitors are here, I will be entering and leaving this suite through the main door to make it appear that we are sleeping in the same bed. It will make it far easier than having to explain." He shrugged and noted her wary frown.

"I realize that you would prefer other arrangements, but for the time being, these will have to do." Damn her for being what she was. "In addition to making it appear that we share a bed, it will be necessary, at least while my family is here, to at least *pretend* to be in love. It would help tremendously if you could look at me as if I were the object of adoration, and not abhorrence."

Her expression was wary as he searched her pink face. "It may be necessary for us to touch, perhaps to kiss. I think we can both manage to do that without any problem." His voice was matter of fact, and he thought he carried it off well enough. His heart was doing gymnastics. Her face was flushed, but she showed no sign of wanting to bolt for the door. Obviously, he didn't have the same affect on her as she had on him.

"I suppose I can manage, as long as *you* don't feel too uncomfortable." Her voice was muffled by the satin pillow.

He drew a long breath. *She must realize that he knew.* That made it easier still. He smiled. "I think we are both mature adults, and the fact that one of us is gay should not affect our ability to pretend that our relationship is real. I will find nothing repugnant about kissing you, if you have no objection to kissing me.

"I suppose that we should discuss how we are going to behave before they arrive. It will seem more natural if we treat each other like we are married—newly married, in fact."

She was twisting the hem of her nightgown with trembling hands, and he drew a slow breath. *She was terrified!* He hated the idea that he repulsed and frightened a woman.

Chris swallowed. *Kiss him? Pretend to be in love with him?* That wouldn't be hard to do. In fact, it would be far too damned easy! She wondered how she was going to survive the next few weeks without having a complete nervous breakdown. If that man didn't pull his frigging robe closed, she feared she would have a coronary.

She shrugged numbly. He was being very up-front about it, at least. "I have no objection. I am a fairly good actress, and I think I can carry it off." That should make him think any real reaction on her part when he kissed her was a simple act. She couldn't ever let him know how much he affected her! That would be a total disaster—one she had no desire to repeat.

Chris chewed her lower lip and remained where she sat, feeling rooted to the spot. If he so much as touched her right now, she would probably make a complete fool of herself.

He exhaled and said softly, "Come over here, please. I won't bite you."

"I'd rather not at the moment, thanks. You are half naked." She glanced at his bare chest pointedly.

He looked down at his bare chest and sighed. He rose to his feet, barely hiding his irritation, and pulled the robe closed, tying it more firmly. "I'm sorry. Is this better? Come here. You have to get used to this sometime if we are to be convincing."

She was trembling as she rose to her feet and allowed him to gently pull her into his arms, and as he held her there, she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and held it.

Tonio felt her stiffen up as he pulled her into his embrace, and he frowned. Was his touch so repugnant to her that she trembled like he was going to strangle her? He felt oddly frustrated by her most obvious dislike. It was a new feeling, to hold a woman in his arms and know she didn't want to be there. She stood like a wooden post.

"Would it hurt you to relax a little? You're as stiff as a board." *Just like my cock.*

He realized that he needed to be very careful here, so he eased away from her a few inches. "Perhaps it would make this easier if we danced."

"*What?*" Her gaze lifted to his face and she stared at him.

"Dance—you do dance, don't you? Most young women know how to dance. It would make it far easier if we were dancing, just for practice."

"Well, of course I dance! I just didn't realize *you* did."

Smiling, he left her and walked to the light switches on the wall and pressed the second switch. The lights dimmed slightly, and soft music poured from seemingly nowhere.

She gaped as he came back across to her and pulled her into his arms, and they began to move slowly with the music. She closed her eyes and bit her lip, and prayed that he wouldn't notice how much she was enjoying his touch.

As he moved her in a slow circle around the room, she realized that she was enjoying dancing for the first time in years, and it didn't matter that she was in her old ratty nightgown dancing with a gay man in a bathrobe—*she was dancing.*

She began to relax and to move dreamily with the beat of the music. The feel of him moving against her made her heart pound crazily and her thoughts desert her. *Oh, yes—she could so handle this.*

She swayed in his embrace, putting her arms up around his neck as he turned her in a deft change step past the sofa. His hands slipped about her waist and slowly move over her spine. Oh, it felt so damned good to be in a man's arms again, even if he were only trying to make her feel

less awkward. She leaned closer and pressed her cheek against his dressing gown and moved with him. *It felt wonderful!* To hell with trying not to offend him—she was in Heaven.

Tonio sensed that she was relaxing slowly, and as he felt her body press more naturally against his, he knew that she wasn't afraid anymore. He inhaled the soft, delicate scent of roses and freshly-bathed woman as his nose pressed into her hair, and he closed his eyes. It was a shame that she didn't like men. He felt an overpowering urge to kiss her, but refrained from doing so—not when she was just beginning to relax. The feel of her breasts pressed into his chest, her slim thighs brushing against his with each step, the feel of her warm breath on his throat as she practically cuddled into his embrace left his body throbbing with pain and lust. She *had* to be able to feel his erection, yet she didn't flinch from him.

He drew her closer and reveled in the warmth of her breath fanning his neck as he danced her slowly about the room. She moved like she was made for his arms. He swung her in a semicircle, dipped her back a little, and smiled down at her while she laughed breathlessly as he executed a rather complicated set of change steps—*extremely complicated, considering that he was wearing bedroom slippers.*

"You dance very well—who taught you?" he asked as the music ended.

They stopped beside the sofa, her face flushed with enjoyment, and his aroused body exhibiting far more enjoyment than he wanted it to. He prayed she would not look down.

She shrugged. "I taught myself. I watched old dancing movies hundreds of times, and I practiced with my girlfriends because none of the guys knew how to dance. I wanted to take lessons, but my folks thought they were a waste of time and money." She shoved her hair back with one hand, not seeming to notice that his arms were still possessively encircling her. Not seeming to notice his unrepentant erection poking menacingly against the material of his robe.

She was talking almost naturally, and he smiled quietly as she traced the piping on his robe with one finger as she spoke, as if she were speaking to an old friend rather than to a comparative stranger. *A stranger she happened to be married to.*

She didn't seem to mind him leaving his hands where they were, so he didn't move them away. "I suppose I have always loved dancing, but I was too tall for ballet, and ballroom dancing was strictly taboo among my friends—not cool at all," she grinned. "So I turned to movies—old movies on TV with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers. You name it. I watched it."

Tonio saw her green eyes move over his face quietly, as if she were memorizing every line, and he wondered if she thought him at all attractive. And as they slid over the sprinkling of dark hairs over his breastbone, he noted that they shifted uncomfortably away. He sighed and said quietly, "You don't like men very much, do you?"

She blinked up into his dark eyes. "Let's just say I haven't had very good luck with them. I'd say you had the same problem with women."

He gazed at her thoughtfully. *She was too damn perceptive for comfort.* But then, he was not attempting to hide anything from her—there was no need. His dark eyes touched her full lips for a long moment and he realized with a sense of revelation that he wanted her to kiss him. It was an oddly overpowering feeling—desperately wanting to be touched—to be made love to. He hadn't felt that way since...

"Touché," he stiffened suddenly, wondering why he was so damned defensive about it. After Dolores, he had only had one use for women, and that was strictly pleasure. He growled and stopped his headlong rush into doing something stupid. It was very good that she had reminded him.

Chris drew a shaky breath as he suddenly tensed, his white teeth flashing against his smoothly tanned complexion in a feral grimace. Her heart began to hammer uncomfortably against her ribs, and she wondered if he had this affect on the *men* he knew. She had thought for one wild, impossible moment that he meant to kiss her, but then it was gone. He drew away from her and said quietly, "You must be tired. It's way past your bedtime."

Her body sagged a little, and her thoughts wavered dangerously close to tears as he turned away toward the bathroom door.

"Oh, of course. Good night." Her voice sounded a trifle depressed even to her. She winced and forced a bright smile. "Thanks for the dance. It was fun."

Tonio heard that odd little catch in her tone, and he frowned. She sounded on the verge of tears. Then her tone changed, and she seemed fine. He hesitated at the bathroom door, wishing that she would ask him to stay longer and talk, but she didn't. He turned and walked through to the adjoining door and closed it quietly behind himself.

Why did he feel so damned disappointed? What had he expected? Had he really expected her to miraculously decide she wanted a man? Why was he even considering such a thing? It was an impossible liaison. If he made love to her, she might try to alter the agreement further. And he couldn't afford to get tied up with a woman who would not be in his life in another twenty four months.

He shook his head as he walked through the huge closet which used to house his parents' considerable wardrobe, but which now held his own less daunting array. He had asked Maria to make room for the clothes his wife would bring. Her small assortment barely took up a tiny space.

That flannel gown had to go! Perversely, he wanted to see her in a filmy, diaphanous creation that bared her deepest secrets to his eyes, and he smiled. Was it simply because he knew she didn't want him that he found her so damnably intriguing? He found himself curious—wondering if he could make her learn to want a man—*but then, had she ever had a man?* That was an interesting thought. *Could she be a virgin?* Then he laughed and shook his head. No woman who looked like her could be a virgin. Not at twenty-nine.

He stepped into the small bedroom and closed the door behind him. He dropped the robe onto the chair beside the door and padded to the bureau drawer where his pajamas were folded neatly, and he drew out a pajama bottom only. It was warm, and he felt no need for a shirt. As he pulled on the softly sensuous silk trousers, he thought of her flannel gown, and he laughed again. He needed to introduce her to silk.

* * * *

Chris drew a shaky breath. She had so desperately wanted to ask him to stay and talk awhile, but her courage had failed her. She wondered vaguely why she sometimes felt that he was waiting, expecting something from her. He seemed to look at her at times as if he found her attractive, yet that was ridiculous. But then, she knew of some bisexual men who also enjoyed an occasional female partner. *Wishful thinking, Chris. Be careful of what you wish for.*

Maybe she was just masculine enough to appeal to his tastes. Ugh!

She gave a short, dry laugh and went into the bedroom and dropped down onto the silken sheets. Oh, hell! It really was just wishful thinking on her part. Had her pride slipped so far into the dust that she wouldn't mind a fling with a good looking homosexual? She frowned. She was nearly thirty—not as young as she wished she was, and not as old as she felt at times. She had come pretty close to having sex a few times, but had always managed to get cold feet before it came to the nitty-gritty. She sighed and dragged the sheet up around her neck, feeling suddenly very old and extremely lonely.

And as she drifted into a restless sleep, she knew she would find him there again.

He was not standing looking out over the ocean. He was waiting beside the door to the stairwell, and he caught her and kissed her urgently the moment she stepped through. His hands were hot, moving over her bare flesh hungrily. Ravenously. He lifted her eagerly—pressed her back onto their bed of warm wet mist—his mouth sought her breasts, teased her nipples, nibbled her ribs. He was hurried, eager, and needing, and she was breathless with desire.

His hand slid seductively over her hip, delved heatedly between her thighs, and speared deep into her wet center without hesitation, and she reached out to capture his stiff cock between her shaking hands.

There was no gentle, leisurely mating. It was frenzied, hot, passionate, hurried. As if there might be no tomorrow.

Heat swept through her body. Aching, twisting need drove through her like a white-hot spear as she opened her thighs and urged his strident cock toward her aching pussy where his long fingers teased and swirled and dipped, but he simply laughed softly against her breast as he sucked her nipple deeper, harder.

He pressed his fingers deep again and again—his mouth devouring her lips and throat and breasts. He lifted his head to stare down into her eyes with a wicked smile. He slid down her body once more to take her with his mouth, his teeth, his tongue—swirling his hot tongue

around her aching swollen clitoris. He took it between his lips and suckled hungrily, and her hips lifted jerkily.

She wanted, needed, and craved his hot cock to fill her. Moaning, begging, writhing as she urged his throbbing erection toward her open thighs. Please—oh, please—do it. Make love to me.

But he laughed again at her abortive efforts, driving her wild with his mouth, hands, and tongue.

She panted as her body exploded once more—a mind splintering climax washed through her, but he had not given her what she so desperately wanted from him.

Could never give her what she so desperately wanted from him.

Chapter Twelve

Tonio lay awake in the pre-dawn darkness, his head throbbing with an agonizing pressure. He rolled over and slid from the bed, ignoring his robe and heading through to the bathroom. There was aspirin in the cabinet.

He switched on the light. The skylight gave inadequate light when the sun was not yet up. He opened the cabinet and swore softly. He must have moved the damned bottle into the bedside table when he had come home the other night. He frowned and wondered if the guest rooms had any aspirin.

He closed the sliding mirrored door and rubbed his temples slowly. He didn't want to disturb her again by wandering into the bedroom and rummaging through the drawer beside the bed.

He was about to turn back toward his door when the far door opened, and he saw her peer around the door sleepily, her red hair tousled from sleep as she rubbed her eyes in a childlike manner. The sight of her in the doorway with her feet bare and her face flushed from sleep made his body jerk with painful need. This did not help his pounding head.

"What on earth are you doing up at this ungodly hour?" she asked with a sleepy frown.

"I left the aspirin in your bedside table. Since you are awake, too, will you get it for me?" He felt like his head would explode.

Chris frowned at him across the expanse of marble tile. "Another headache?"

He nodded slowly, not wanting to move too vigorously.

"Come on in. I'll fix that," she said quietly.

He followed her back into the bedroom where she stood beside the bed and gestured for him to come over to stand beside her. He obeyed, wondering what on earth she had in mind.

"You can lie on the floor, or you can lie on the bed, on your belly," she said.

"You are going to play masseuse again?" he asked thickly, recalling how wonderfully relaxed her ministrations had left him last time. He lowered himself slowly to the expanse of carpet beside the bed. *He did not trust himself to lie on that bed—not with a woman who smelled like summer roses!*

"Yep." She lowered her body to the floor beside him, and then she amazed him by sitting astride his hips and pressing her palms into the small of his back—hard. He heard the vertebrae in his spine pop sickeningly, and then he felt utter relief as she worked her way up the full length of his back to his shoulders where she began to massage the kinks out again.

He realized with a wry smile that she was now astride his back, and the feel of her bare legs wrapped about his ribs gave him an erection that he couldn't possibly suppress! The heavenly sensation of her slim thighs hugging his body conjured hot images of his cock plunging deep into her as she writhed in his arms. He wanted nothing more than to roll over and lift her onto his aching shaft and take her hard—slide her clenching body down over his cock as she came for him.

He closed his eyes and calmed himself as she sent waves of gooseflesh over his skin with each painfully exquisite squeeze of those strong, slim hands. He heard a groan of sheer pleasure and realized it had come from his own throat as he drew a deep shuddering breath. She was gently massaging his scalp with her fingertips, and he was wickedly contemplating the way her thighs molded to him so nicely.

"That is marvelous," he said in a muffled tone. Good thing she could not possibly know he was not thinking of her hands when he made that heated statement, or she might be very shocked.

She didn't stop until his headache was gone, but in place of the maddening headache, he had another massive problem—he didn't dare get up.

She leaned back, rose from his back, and smoothed her rumpled flannel gown back down to cover her legs. "I hope that helped."

Tonio didn't want her to stop—and he didn't dare move. He wondered what she would do if he simply rolled over and let her see what she had done to him. Let her see the hot, thick erection that she had given him with her wonderful hands and the feel of her slim thighs astride him. *No. She would be irritated rather than interested.* He decided that wouldn't be such a good idea.

He focused his overheated mind on calming his body, forcing himself to relax and thinking of other things. He pinched the inside of his arm as hard as he could to cause enough pain to take his mind off of rolling her under him, and after a tense moment, he was able to rise from the floor without embarrassing himself and shocking her.

"It did. Thank you once again," he breathed. He saw her avert her gaze from his bare chest, and he sighed. She had managed to get him excited, and now he must return to his own bed and take care of his needs like a teenage boy might. He smiled thoughtfully at her as she stood so nervously beside his huge bed.

He decided that he liked red hair after all. At least, hair the color of a new copper penny. With those emerald eyes and her pale milky skin, she made a rather amazing picture to him at 5:15 in the morning, the glow of the rose-shaded bedside lamp illuminating her flushed cheeks. He had never seen a woman who looked like that in the morning—fresh and sleepy and delicious. *How would she look after a night of wicked lovemaking?*

He resisted an urge to run his fingertips through that silky red hair. "I'm sorry if I woke you."

Chris tried not to stare at the rippling, magnificent body and the wicked, smoky eyes with those winged, dark brows that looked like something out of a mythical tale. She tried not to notice the way he moved, or the way his teeth flashed white against his warm olive skin. She was very glad that he made no move to touch her. One touch and she was toast.

She would have a frigging difficult time trying to go back to sleep now. All she wanted him to do was leave. *Liar!* All she wanted him to do was step across the floor, grab her and toss her onto his bed, and pull her ratty gown off and ... *Dear Lord! Use your brain—not your libido!*

"That's okay. I'm up pretty early most days, anyway." Her reply sounded terse. She flushed and turned away to reach for her own robe. As she tugged it on over her gown and belted it, she said a little less abruptly, "What time do you usually get up?"

"About seven."

Chris glanced at her watch. "You probably could go back to bed and get another hour or so in."

"I'm awake now," he said, stretching luxuriantly. "But perhaps *you* could get another hour in."

She shook her head. "I'm usually showered and eating breakfast by half past five. When I heard you in the bathroom, I figured you might be looking for this." She reached to the bedside table and handed him the bottle of pain killers.

He gazed at her thoughtfully as he took the bottle from her hand. "Are you hungry?" "Famished." She smiled.

"Maria might have something in the fridge. She usually serves breakfast at 7:30, but I'm sure we can get you something."

"Got any corn flakes?"

"I seriously doubt it, but we can have her get some for future breakfasts." He grinned.

"Oh, well, maybe I'll settle for whatever she has down there," she shrugged, feeling suddenly very buoyant. "Now, if you'll go away, I'll get dressed, and then I'll find the kitchen."

He crossed the carpet seemingly regretfully. "Ten minutes."

"Ten minutes?"

"You have ten minutes. I'll meet you in the hallway in ten minutes," he replied.

"It takes me at least fifteen."

"Very well. Fifteen then."

When he was gone, she wondered if she were just being an idiot, or if he seemed to like her just a little after all. Maybe this wouldn't be quite so bad. *If he just wasn't so frigging good looking, this might be a decent two years, at that.* If she could be satisfied with those marvelous, wildly sexy dreams, she could enjoy him one way or another without scaring the hell out of him. She shook off the feeling of acting foolishly as she scrambled into her usual casual garb—a pair of loose old jeans and a rather baggy T-shirt.

She hurried into the bathroom, making certain he wasn't there, and she brushed her teeth, washed her face, and tore a brush through her unruly mop before pinning it back into a twist to keep it out of her face. She frowned at the way the T shirt hung, and made a quick knot on one hip which took up some of the slack. Maybe he was right; she did need some new things. She frowned at her face in the mirror, and decided not to waste five extra minutes on makeup. He was waiting, and he couldn't care less what she looked like.

* * * *

Tonio pulled his Polo shirt over his head and buckled his leather belt, grinning as he shoved his feet into a pair of gleaming western boots. He preferred to wear them when he was at home. He knew he would go into the hall to find her wearing the usual baggy jeans and T-shirt, and he wondered if it would be the one advertising the volunteer fireman's ball, or the one that said "*What are you looking at, dickface?*" across the bosom.

He shook his head as he combed his thick dark hair and ran a critical hand over his unshaven chin. To hell with shaving. She would be in the hall in a few minutes, and he didn't care. She couldn't care less what he looked like.

He realized that he was enjoying the thought of having an impromptu breakfast, although he seriously doubted that Maria would share his enjoyment. He had never met anyone who was awake so early in such a good mood.

He glanced at his watch and stepped out into the hallway just as she was stepping out of the other door, and they laughed as they closed their respective doors.

She noted that he had not shaven, but his looks didn't suffer one bit sporting a beard stubble. If anything, he looked even more ruggedly attractive, and her thoughts went a little haywire. She forced herself to remain calm and to say offhandedly, "I should have given you *twenty* minutes."

He ran a hand over his chin and grinned. "I decided I was hungry. I can shave this off later." He fell into step with her, linking his arm through hers as he looked down at her T-shirt and asked in a drawling tone, "You have *three*? I was hoping for the 'dickface' one again."

She laughed, and looked down at the bright apple green shirt she wore and shrugged. "Actually, I have four. I was afraid this one might be too bright."

"It certainly woke *me* up!" he replied as he noted how it accentuated that bright copper mop of curls, and he wondered suddenly why she had turned to other women. Had she been

hurt? Or did she really have no desire for a man? He shook off the feeling of curiosity. It would lead nowhere he wished to go. *Then, again—perhaps he desperately wished to go there.*

He escorted her down the hallway to the curved staircase that led past the second landing to the main entry. He noted her awe stricken look as her eyes swept the grand entry with its antique paneling and its huge crystal chandelier. He looked at it quietly, wondering why he felt no such joy in seeing it. Perhaps he had grown too jaded in his years of luxurious living. He wondered what she was thinking, but didn't have long to wait for her comment.

"My God! This is like living in a cathedral! You could house twenty families in this house." Her voice was hushed as she gazed up at the portrait of his father, who stared down sternly from the back of a fiery black stallion above the huge fireplace at the far end of the gallery which led back through the main part of the house beneath the twin curves of the old staircase. "Is that him? Your father? He looks like he was a real tyrant—no offense, I mean, but he has that look." She paused to stare up at the man on the horse. "That is one frigging huge portrait!"

"It's twelve feet high by eight feet wide. It's actually the *second* largest painting in the house," he replied in a quiet tone.

"There's one even bigger than that?" Her eyes slid to his face, and he nodded.

"My father took second place to no one but Christ Himself. There is a mural of the Crucifixion in the main gallery which is thirty feet long by twelve feet high." He gazed down at her wide eyed face.

"Where's the main gallery?"

"You'll see it sooner or later. Right now, I'm hungry." He couldn't keep his tone from sounding bored. He saw nothing impressive in this old place anymore.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you with all this talk. I'll shut up and keep my comments to myself," she said, glancing about the "small" gallery with its many portraits and art objects. "How far are we from the kitchen? About another mile or so?"

He realized how completely callous he had sounded, and he drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound abrupt. I have lived here too long to see these things through your eyes." He smiled wryly as she glanced up at him. "Familiarity breeds contempt, they say."

"How on earth can anyone be contemptuous of a house like this?" She sighed, gazing about at the immaculately clean, sparkling gallery with its tasteful antiques and its airy windows. "It reminds me of a few museums I've enjoyed."

He looked at the paintings that hung on the walls. "I used to love this place."

Chris turned her gaze back to his face. "Used to?"

Tonio shrugged. "When I was a boy, my mother would show me each painting, and tell me all about the person in it. She would tell me tales about the collections, and where they came from, and the adventures her ancestors undertook to bring such treasures back. It was a wonderland of the imagination in here with her beside me. My mother had a way of telling a story that left you breathless for the next one." His lips curved with a memory he didn't share. Then his smile faded, and he shrugged again. "But then I grew up."

"Too bad," she murmured quietly. He lifted his dark brows and glanced at her in question. "I mean, it's too bad that you still don't love this place. No one loses their imagination. They just forget where they put it."

"And you haven't lost yours?"

"No. I still have my little fantasies, and I still have my dreams. Even if they never come true, I never give up hoping."

Tucking her other hand about his arm and walking beside him in companionable silence.

Tonio found himself wondering what her "little fantasies" were. He decided he would ask. Anything to keep his mind off how the touch of her hands took his breath from him.

She laughed. "Oh, when I was about ten, I had this fantasy about a white knight on a huge silver stallion riding up and saving me from my 4th grade teacher. She was a real dragon. And when I was twelve, he was a black knight on a fiery black stallion. The colors changed, but never the dream."

He lifted one brow thoughtfully. Perhaps she would give him some indication of why she had turned from men to women. "So, your handsome knight never materialized?"

"Oh, I thought he had, once. But that was a very big mistake. I won't make another like that." Her voice sounded softly sad.

Tonio sensed pain beneath her quiet smile, but he instinctively knew she would never tell him what had caused it. He wondered if her knight in shining armor had become tarnished somehow, and perhaps that was the reason she preferred female company. He didn't ask. She didn't give him time.

Her gaze met his squarely. "What was your fantasy?" She shrugged at his surprise and quickly added, "Never mind—you are about to tell me you have no fantasies—that fantasies are for children and women."

He stared at her. She had taken the very words right out of his mouth. Her green eyes held his for a moment before she shrugged once more and gazed about her again. He felt as if she had reached into his mind somehow.

"You must miss her terribly," she breathed.

His thoughts whirled. "*Her?*" he asked tightly.

Her eyes turned to him again. "Your mother."

He drew a calming breath. Somehow she seemed to sense his pain, but she attributed it to another cause. "Yes." His tone, he realized, may have suggested irritation at her simple question.

She slowly released his arm. She folded her arms across her chest defensively and walked without saying anything more.

Tonio felt chilled. Had he offended her? Had he said something that had caused her to withdraw into herself again? He exhaled slowly. He liked the touch of her hand. It had made him feel comfortably warm. It had heated his blood. It had given him back his fantasies, for just those moments. He hadn't felt that way in years.

He glanced at her bowed red gold head, and he did something he would never have done had he thought about it first. He reached out and put his arm about her slim shoulders and drew her against his side.

The feel of her curves pressed into his side made him tighten hungrily. She shivered a little.

He forced his thoughts back into line. "Relax. I don't bite," he breathed to cover his own feelings. He didn't want to make her think he was making advances. Which he actually was. "Pretend I'm your black knight. He wouldn't hurt you." *But I might.*

She slid her arm shyly about his waist, and when she didn't recoil or move away, he sighed and thanked God for this small moment in time. Tonio felt her slim arm tighten about him, and he smiled slowly. Perhaps he could make her trust him just a little, at that.

He looked down at her copper curls as they pressed against his shoulder, and he wondered what she would do if he lifted her chin with one finger and bent to kiss her gently. Would he settle for a gentle kiss? Or would he demand more? Would she bolt like a frightened colt? He resisted the urge and instead walked in silence the rest of the way to the end of the gallery where the utility hall led to the kitchen. He savored the feel of her breast pressed into his ribs. *No. He wouldn't settle for a gentle kiss.*

The door to the hallway stood open and they passed though, neither of them speaking as he reached to flick the light switch on the wall. The kitchen was about twenty paces down the hall, and he paused before the green baize doors, listening to the sound of the little woman inside making preparations for the day's meals.

"If she throws anything, duck," he whispered. "She can be a tyrant in her own kitchen."

Chris giggled as he led her through the doors, and Maria glanced up to stare at them in surprise, her dark eyes slipping over her employer's casual garb and the flushed, bright-eyed woman as his side.

Maria lifted her brows and smiled broadly. "You are awake early. Did you wish breakfast in the small dining room?"

"We thought we would eat in here this morning. My wife wanted corn flakes. Do we have any?" Tonio smiled at the blushing woman beside him, and Maria clucked indignantly.

"Corn flakes? In this house? We do not! I can prepare you something in a few moments."

Chris giggled again, and Tonio grinned. "Very well. How about bacon and eggs? With toast and coffee—and in about ten minutes or less?"

Maria eyed him thoughtfully. She had not seen him smile in a very long time. He usually frowned. Maybe he had enjoyed a good, long lovemaking session last night—that would make any man smile. Her eyes slid over his unshaven jaw, and she shrugged. "If you say so."

"I'd be glad to help," Chris offered.

Maria smiled at her warmly. "Gracias, *Señora* Rodriguez, but that is my job. You go with your husband and enjoy yourself. I will fix it with no trouble."

Tonio lifted his dark brows. He had never seen Maria capitulate so easily or quickly. He saw the look in her dark, knowing eyes, and he flushed uncomfortably. She thought he had spent a long night in bed cavorting with his bride. He refrained from saying anything to dissuade her from thinking just that.

Instead, he drew Chris closer to him and kissed her forehead and said, "Yes, darling, let me show you the family dining room. It has a beautiful view of the gardens."

She stiffened slightly, apparently startled by his sudden display of affection, and then she relaxed. She reached up and touched his rough cheek with slow fingertips, her green gaze smiling into his. "I'd love that," she spoke in a softly husky tone that was enough to set his blood pounding through his body. She was quick on the uptake. He was pleased that she was playing along so flawlessly. It would be nice to pretend that this woman adored him.

Tonio swallowed carefully, his skin burning where her slim fingers had touched. The look in those emerald green eyes had made him wonder, for just that moment, if she had any idea how she affected him. Did she sense the sexual tension in him?

He decided to test the waters while she felt in the mood to experiment.

He lifted her chin with his forefinger and thumb and bent to kiss her mouth softly. A shiver of reaction went through her, and he wasn't sure if it were enjoyment, or repugnance. He calmed the sudden urge to deepen the kiss—to drive his tongue deep as he wanted to drive his cock into her. He felt the softly compliant pressure of her lips beneath his, and he turned his head slightly aslant of hers to better taste her hot sweetness. Her lips tightened, then softened as she slid her hand behind the nape of his neck and kissed him back for just that moment. His body

responded almost joyfully to her unspoken invitation. His tongue swept into her mouth—he sensed the shudder that went through her and wondered if he had taken too great a liberty.

He lifted his mouth with a sad grin. “Better not get *too* carried away,” he whispered as he brushed her forehead with his lips and turned to lead her into the small dining room.

Chris swallowed convulsively. It had been so damned easy to forget herself! Her cheeks flamed, and she averted her face so he couldn't see how embarrassed she was that she had responded so giddily to his kiss. Her body was hot and filled with liquid fire, and her heart was pounding wildly within her bosom as she tried desperately not to look like a complete idiot. He seemed not to notice her discomfiture, and she managed to drag her thoughts back into line after a few moments.

She allowed him to lead her to the French windows and show her the view, which she barely noticed since she was so aware of the lean hand resting on her shoulder and the subtle masculine aroma of the soap he favored. She drew a deep, calming breath, and decided to simply enjoy his little act. What could it hurt?

He must never know she was having difficulty maintaining her cool. He must simply think she was acting, as he was.

She leaned her head against his shoulder and slid her arms about his lean, muscular body and gazed at the lovely view. She grinned to herself as he seemed a little bit startled, and she decided that he deserved to feel a trifle uncomfortable, too.

Tonio felt her arms move about his body and felt her warm breath on the skin of his throat as she pressed her cheek against the hollow of his shoulder. He calmed himself as he realized he was becoming more than a little aroused by her sudden reversal, and he had to force his mind back to reality.

She was doing exactly what she had agreed to do. *She was pretending to be in love with him, and she was doing a damned excellent job.* He had to be very careful here not to allow himself to lose his tight control and carry her off to his bed. Although that thought was extremely tempting. As was the way she clung to him and gave him a taste of that delectable little body.

He closed his eyes and inhaled the fragrance of her gentle rose perfume, and he slowly pressed his lips to the soft halo of hair that came barely to his chin. He allowed his hand to move caressingly down from her shoulder to the curve of her spine and up her slim waist. He felt her nuzzle closer and thought that he heard her sigh softly, but it had to be his imagination playing tricks on his mind. *He could almost swear that she was responding to him like a normal woman might.*

Maria came bustling into the room, setting up the table and laying out their meal. Chris drew away quickly, her face filled with hot color. Their moment of tenuous closeness was at an end. He felt utter emptiness—disappointment. He seated her with perfunctory politeness. She nodded but avoided his eyes. It seemed as if it had never happened.

She seemed absorbed in her meal as she reached for her fork, and he wondered if she felt as awkward as he did. Tonio fought to keep his eyes off her as he ate his meal. He knew that if he looked at her, he would be unable to keep his mind on his plate and his hands off her body. He was aroused, and his senses were on the verge of an explosion. He couldn't understand his attraction to a woman whose aversion to his sex should make her completely unattractive to him. Yet his body was throbbing with incredible heat, and his thoughts were going in all the wrong directions.

He ate slowly, making himself look at his plate. His pulses were throbbing with the warm memory of her slender body pressed to his. The thought of her sweetly scented hair beneath his lips was enough to set him off again, and he had to struggle to maintain his calm. It had been a very long time since any woman had affected him so—*not since Dolores*.

The atmosphere was so tensely charged, he could hardly taste the delicious little meal. She ate mechanically, and he couldn't help but wonder if maybe she regretted having overplayed her part.

She finished her plate and set down her fork, raising her gaze to his impassive countenance. "Well, that was wonderful. I think I'll take a walk to wear it off now. Would you excuse me, please?"

Tonio didn't trust his voice. He nodded as she rose from the table. He made no move to rise politely and draw out her chair because he would have most likely shocked and frightened her with his painfully obvious arousal—although she deserved some small discomfort for having given it to him. He watched her walk stiffly from the room before he groaned and closed his eyes, swearing at himself beneath his breath for being such a damned fool. Blake had been right. *She was dangerous!*

He leaned away from the table and exhaled explosively. How on earth she could make him feel this way was beyond him. She looked like a field hand in those jeans and sneakers and that awful baggy shirt. Yet he was breathing like a man who had run a mile, and his rampant cock was shamelessly straining at his fly.

Tonio rose and threw down his linen napkin, his teeth clenched tightly together as he stalked out of the dining room and up the stairs to his little room and the icy cold water from his tap. He swore foully at himself as he took the stairs two at a time. He had very nearly done something he would regret. He had very nearly let her see the way she affected him.

He must stop this nonsense! He had to remember that this was all a convenient façade. Just a ruse to keep Luis and the lawyers at bay. *He was allowing her to get to him, and he couldn't afford to do that.* He had to remember that she was a woman who had no need of men—that he was a man who didn't need or want a real wife.

He had no intention of acting the fool here. Of course they had made a believable scene for Maria to watch. Of course the way she had moved against him had been excellent acting. Of course he had been affected by it. He had almost forgotten that it *was* an act. *And to be brutally honest, it was no longer an act on his part.*

He frowned at himself in the mirror above his little sink as he slammed the door behind him. He sloshed icy water over his face and allowed it to dribble down his neck, cooling his body. He thought about going into town later, to find a woman for one night. Then he shook his head. No. Luis might hear about that and question his "marriage."

He stared at his reflection and made a wry face.

"You have certainly gotten yourself into a mess here, Rodriguez, and you're going to have to deal with it for the next twenty-four months, so get used to it!"

But his body insisted on remaining hot and hard, until he closed his eyes and freed his cock from his tight pants and stroked himself to a very unsatisfactory yet impressive explosion that he quickly rinsed down the sink. The images of Chris naked in his arms—her sweet, hot mouth taking him in with a whimper of need—clinched the deal.

In less than ten hours, his sister would arrive, along with his cousin. He lathered his chin and started to shave off the stubble he had neglected earlier. Could he manage to convince them all she was the one he desired? Could she carry off her own part in such subterfuge?

He thought about her baggy shirts and the tattered jeans, and he smiled. Not in her current wardrobe. Not without some fast work by an expensive couturier. His sister thought she knew his tastes. Soft skin, lush hair, stunning clothes.

He shaved the underside of his chin carefully. He needed a professional here. Maybe if she looked more like the women who bored him to tears, he wouldn't be so goddamned attracted to her. He pursed his lips to shave the ridge of his jaw and decided that he would have to take quick action—regardless of her professed desires.

Chapter Thirteen

Chris blinked up at Jose when he appeared in the doorway of the library where she had been perusing the hundreds of interesting books on Mexican and Californian history. "Where are you supposed to take me?"

Jose smiled quietly. "To meet the *señor* at *Madame* Francoise's boutique and couturier, and your appointment is in less than forty-five minutes, *señora*." He nodded his head. "Don't worry about taking your purse. You will not need it."

* * * *

Chris had barely set foot inside the tiny but lavish outer foyer of the terribly exclusive little shop on Rodeo Drive when a diminutive dynamo of color appeared, clucking like a mother hen and walking about her with an assistant who jotted down quick notes as the little woman with rhinestone glasses looked Chris up and down critically. Jose introduced the dynamo as *Madame* Francoise. The woman eyed her as if she had just dropped out of the sky wearing beggars' rags. Chris glanced about for any sign of Antonio. He was nowhere to be found.

Madame snapped her fingers in exasperation, and then, less than ten minutes later, she found herself submerged in a tub of warm mud with a cucumber pack on her face and her hair wrapped in a towel, slathered in a silken oil that smelled like avocado. A manicurist was working on her nails and a pedicurist on her feet. She couldn't move her mouth. It was covered with a thick concoction that tasted like honey and cold cream!

She was frankly too amazed at this ritualistic manner of being transformed from a sow's ear into a silk purse to object. *It was weird but oddly refreshing*. The mud she lay in felt like it had menthol or eucalyptus in it. It tingled her skin, and she wrinkled her nose, feeling the facial masque cracking as she did so.

"No—don't move for another ten minutes!" the woman doing her nails chided.

"Mmm hmmm," she nodded with a wry smile that cracked a little more off.

An hour later she was in a sauna, receiving a soothing massage as she lay face down on a table, breathing deeply of the hot air. Then she was in a warm shower to scrub off the oil and the perspiration, and a few minutes after that, she was in a stylist's chair, facing a mirror, a pair of blue eyes gazing critically at her as the man determined what he could do with her unruly mop.

"You have beautiful coloring, but I think we can do with a toning rinse and a good cut. My God, girl, where have you been going? To 'Cutz R Us'?"

Chris broke into a giggle and couldn't stop, and he frowned at her as if she'd gone mad.

"How on earth did you guess?" She grinned.

"Never, never go there again!" he replied quite seriously as he laid her back and shampooed her hair. He then went to work on her with a critical scowl on his too-handsome face.

She found herself wondering if this were Antonio's lover, and then shoved that thought away quickly, finding it rather unpalatable. Another beautiful man—*and gay as could be! Damn!*

He worked on her for nearly an hour before he was satisfied, and then he took a blow dryer and styled her hair with deft swirls of his brush and a spritz or two of styling spray. He moved about her chair with graceful sways and dips that reminded her of a male ballet dancer.

When he swung her to face the mirror again, and she saw the stranger reflected in the wide gleaming glass, she blinked in shock.

"My God! Is that me?"

He regarded her critically and sighed. "I'm afraid you still need work, but we'll have to wait until it grows out a bit, and then we'll try again. I can only do so much with this length. Your ends were so badly split I had to cut a great deal off."

While he shook out the cape she had worn and brushed her shoulders to remove the extra fine red-gold hairs from the cut, she stared at herself with wide eyes, wondering if a good cut could really make so damn much of a difference. She couldn't believe she looked like that.

Her eyes slid over the glowing face and the deliciously curved swath of copper hair. The "toning rinse" had deepened the color a trifle and it gleamed with lustrous gold highlights. It was soft as a whisper and felt like silk where it touched her cheeks.

"You've done wonders!" she breathed numbly as he helped her up from the chair. His flashing smile was breathtaking. She smiled back and said softly, "I think I will give you a whopping tip for this!"

* * * *

Tonio was looking over materials for gowns when the tiny woman beside him said suddenly, "Ah! Here she is now!"

He straightened and turned to gesture her over, and his throat tightened and his body reacted oddly as his eyes fell on the results of two and a half hours of pampering and primping. He stared. His groin tightened and his gut clenched. If he had stupidly thought he would not be attracted to this woman after her makeover, he was *so* badly mistaken. He wanted the room empty and her on her back on the velvet lounge sofa—and ten hours of uninterrupted time.

She stepped through the green baize doors from the rear of the salon and smiled her thanks at the woman who was speaking to her. She turned to walk across the floor, wearing the plain blue wrap-around coverall the salon gave its customers to wear during treatments. He had seen his sister in them often enough. They were unattractive and utilitarian, and yet she looked

delectably desirable, and he found himself unable to drag his eyes from her as she strode toward him, her cheeks flushed and her hair looking incredibly beautiful.

He noted the way she moved, the sway of her hips, the set of her shoulders. He wondered why she had hidden all of this in those baggy jeans and that sadly dilapidated old T-shirt. Of course he had seen it, in spite of the camouflage, but for a woman to look ravishing in a cotton apron wrap? It seemed as if she could look good in anything from a sweatshirt to a burlap bag! He wondered numbly what she would look like in these gowns and the new clothing he was having made for her. *Or naked and moaning in his bed.*

She stopped beside him, and he watched as the woman measured her deftly for fit and then called in her seamstresses. They conferred over his selections, and then he was alone with his wife. He drew a slow breath. *His wife.* The idea was foreign sounding, yet it left him breathless. He fought his powerful urge to untie the closings of her blue wrap, and lick from her lips to her toes. To taste every beguiling inch of that succulent body. To hear her cries and moans...

His wife—two words which had merely seemed to be a burden before. *A wife who wanted no part of him as a man—who had no desire to please him or be with him.* He exhaled slowly as she sank onto the divan and reached for one of the small sandwiches on the refreshment tray. He had never really noticed her legs until now, long and slim, with excellent shape. Legs he would die to feel wrapped around his hips. Her feet were also slim and well shaped, and as she crossed her legs at the knee, and the wrapper fell away to expose a good length of her slim thigh.

He dragged his eyes away, and he said in a rough voice he hardly recognized, "You clean up well."

Chris blinked at him as she ate one of the delicious sandwiches. She swallowed her bite and said quietly, "I have the feeling anyone would look good after the kind of stuff they did to me back there. I was in mud up to my chin for twenty minutes while two very efficient manicurists made my hands look human for the first time in years." She showed him her hands gleefully. "And my God! You should see what they did to my face! I thought I wasn't going to be able to smile ever again." She shook her head and finished the sandwich, reaching for another hungrily. "These are great."

Before he could manage a coherent response, Madam Françoise was back with her entourage of seamstresses, all carrying bolts of materials, and for the next two hours, he was kept busy discussing a wardrobe for his rather bewildered wife. She was shown dozens of gowns and suits and dresses on models, and when he noticed her eyes lighting up over some particular item, he nodded to Madam F, and she wrote down the items without being obvious. Lingerie and nightgowns and shoes and sheer hosiery were ordered, and after all the primping and poking, she still was not done. There was still the man from Cartier with his case filled with baubles...

Chris stared at the amazing array of earrings, bracelets, necklaces, and rings the man had in his case, and she shook her head jerkily as Antonio told her to choose what she wanted. "I don't wear jewelry, *really!*"

"Nonsense. You must have a few things."

So he chose for her, picking out a set of emeralds and a set of pearls. She watched numbly as he selected a full set of rubies and several sets of diamonds and combination settings. *A few things? She wondered what he would consider a lot of things!*

He told the man to have the rings sized immediately and to send the items to the house. The look on the man's face told her that he had just made his entire month's profits on one customer.

When the man and his guard were gone, she hissed at her husband, "That wasn't at all necessary. I hate wearing stuff like that."

His dark gaze slipped over her flushed face slowly, and he lifted a brow again as he drawled, "I will not have my wife looking like I cannot afford to dress her well. You will learn to wear such things. What you do with them later is your business." He seemed to be irritated with her for not accepting his gifts with gratitude.

Chris swallowed hard. He had nearly snapped her head off. All she had wanted to do was tell him she didn't need to have thousands of dollars wasted on her. He seemed to take it personally. She decided not to try to save him any more money. To him, obviously, it was a drop in the bucket.

Her cheeks stung and her pride was singed. *To hell with him!* She could get used to luxury very quickly, but she just knew that she couldn't afford things like that after two years, and she had no desire to become addicted to such extravagances. Unless these were what the pre-nup referred to as "spousal gifts." If so, she would simply hoard them and sell them later. Like hell!

Tonio calmed his frustration at the sight of her expression. How could he maintain any semblance of indignation when she looked so utterly stricken? He forced back his anger and decided not to press her further. She simply did not wish to be under any obligation to him. He could understand that. He didn't like it, but he could understand it.

He waited for her to look at him, and when she didn't, he reached out to lift her chin gently with his hand. Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears, and he felt a pang of anger with himself for his thoughtlessness.

"Forgive me."

Chris swallowed hard, and managed a half smile. "No problem. I agreed to play this part, and I shouldn't keep fighting it. I'm sorry. I'll try to remember that we are trying to impress your family."

He felt a wild need to kiss her, and he fought it with difficulty. She certainly wouldn't like that. He smiled back and said softly, "Shall we call a truce?"

She nodded. "Truce."

"Excellent. Then you will wear the jewelry, and I'll stop behaving like a tyrant, agreed?"

"Agreed."

He drew a slow breath as her face lit with her smile, and she sniffed back her tears. *What could have happened to her to give her such an aversion to men?* Perhaps one day she would tell him. Perhaps one day she would feel free to whisper her secrets and her fears against his lips as he kissed her—as he made love to her sweetly—gently.

Chapter Fourteen

"And exactly where *is* my brother that he could not take a moment to pick me up from the airport?"

Señorita Adriana's frown made Maria bristle a little, but she managed to maintain a serene calm she hardly felt. She had grown used to the young *señora's* kindness. It was most refreshing after having had to deal with this spoiled young creature.

"He has taken his wife shopping," she said, smiling politely. "I will have Carlos take your bags up." Maria nodded to the houseboy, who jumped quickly to follow her unspoken orders.

Adriana's chin quivered as she seemed to fight for control. "Shopping? Did he not receive my message that I would be arriving this afternoon?"

Maria smiled again. "I do not know, *señorita*. Perhaps not. Otherwise, he would be here, no?"

"No, he would be somewhere else. I am certain he knows I am here, and he is avoiding me! I want to be told the moment he returns, is that understood?"

Maria didn't have time to respond before her employer's sister turned and stalked along the hallway to the elevator rather than taking the stairs.

Once the *señorita* was out of sight, Maria whirled and hurried to the phone. She dialed the number of the cell phone Jose carried at all times. When her husband answered, she said quickly, "The witch has arrived!"

* * * *

Tonio glanced up from the sales check he was signing, and lifted his brows questioningly as Jose stepped into the salon. "What is it?"

"Your sister has arrived, *señor*. She is *asking* for you."

"Thank you." Tonio drew a deep breath. It was time to face The Inquisition.

He glanced at his watch and decided that he had spent more than enough time here today. He signed the paper and handed it to Madam. F. "Would you tell my wife that we must be on our way? I believe she is tired. We can finish the fittings another day."

"Yes, sir. I'll get her right away."

* * * *

Chris watched as Jose placed her overflowing bag filled with new cosmetics and skin and hair care products in the trunk, and then walked around to open the rear door of the car. She slid into the seat ahead of Antonio and sank back into the thickly cushioned comfort wearily, wondering if rich, thoroughly spoiled women had to go through this much folderol every day. It could get to be a serious addiction.

She had just spent the better part of the entire day being “renovated” and dressed to the teeth, and now she was going to face a woman she knew would be looking her over with an extremely critical eye. She had to pass muster, and she wasn't certain she felt up to it. As she wondered why she had agreed to this ridiculous farce in the first place, Antonio's voice cut through her depression.

"My sister will be in a foul mood, no doubt. She had plans for me to marry her dearest friend. She will not dare treat you badly in my presence, so don't allow her to get you alone."

"I'll do my damndest," she replied. She had no desire to get pinned down by hostiles in unfriendly territory. She was going to have to avoid confrontations at all costs. She didn't have enough ammo to survive. She was going to have to fake enough things without having to do it sans tech support. She intended to keep him close by at all times.

"Quick, tell me what she likes best. Maybe I can sidetrack her."

"Money, clothes, jewelry..." He shrugged.

"Gee, all the things I know absolutely nothing about!" She frowned. "What about sports? Does she do anything?"

"If talking and shopping were competitive sports, she would be Olympic material," he replied dryly.

"I can see I'm way out of my depth here. I don't do either very well," she sighed.

Tonio smiled at her crestfallen expression. "Just be yourself. Who knows? She might like you." *He certainly did.*

His eyes moved slowly over her new green shantung silk suit and her delicately flushed cheeks. *Would his sister find his wife lacking?* Adriana had wanted him to wed her friend, but would she reject Christine without first giving her a chance? Adriana was cold and selfish at times, but not stupid. If Christine played her right, she could be managed easily enough. Would this young American woman have the sense to see it? He certainly hoped so. She seemed to have no trouble manipulating *him*.

"Adriana is self centered and young, but with the proper incentive, she can be quite engaging and charming."

Chris blinked at him. "Is that a hint?"

"If you want one, it is," he said, smiling wickedly. She swallowed hard.

"Shopping, huh?" she breathed. "I'll see what I can do."

* * * *

They had barely stepped into the main entry when Maria hurried from the hallway and said quickly, "Your sister is very upset, *señor*. She has a terrible headache and asked that you be sent to her room the moment you arrive."

He stiffened slightly, but he refrained from reacting badly. Instead he smiled and said, "My sister is welcome to rest in her room. I will see her at dinner. I trust she will be joining us."

Maria appeared to be hiding a smile as she turned and left.

"Shouldn't you go up and see if she's all right?" Chris asked.

"She is fine, and I stopped following her commands when she was nine. This is our home, not hers. She is our guest. We are not hers. If she wishes to speak to us, she knows how to find us."

Even as he said "our" and "we" he winced a little. He was really playing the part of doting husband to the hilt here ... or *was* he simply acting now?

She shrugged wearily, "I'm sort of tired. I'd like to lie down for a while if you don't mind."

He noted her pale skin and breathed, "I've kept you running since this morning, and it's nearly supper time. Of course you should rest. I'll take you up." *And crawl into bed with you.*

"I can find my way. There's no need for you to bother."

"It is no bother, besides, it would look better if we went up together, don't you think?"

Her reticence irritated him. But he kept his silence as he climbed the stairs to the third floor landing beside her.

As they stopped outside of the room, he said softly, "I will be using this door from now until she leaves. You understand, don't you?"

Chris nodded. "Sure—"

He suddenly swept her against his body with one arm and kissed her with a heated eagerness that melted her bones. His lips opened her mouth, his hot tongue darting inside to tangle with hers. She nearly lost her mind as her hands clung to his lapels and her hips arched into his. He was amazingly *aroused*.

She heard him murmur “Adriana” softly against her mouth, and she realized that he was simply putting on a show for the young woman who had just stepped out into the hallway a few paces down the corridor, across from them.

She closed her eyes as he gathered her so close, she could barely breathe. *Lord help her if he kissed like this very often!*

Chris slid her arms up around his neck and clung to him. If he had released her just then, she would have collapsed into a wad of jelly at his feet. She prayed that he would not realize that she was kissing him back so eagerly, but she couldn't help it. Her body felt like it was on fire, and she couldn't keep from responding naturally. Hungrily. Passionately. She wanted desperately to wrap herself around that stiff cock and make him wish he liked girls.

Adriana stared in mute shock at her brother standing in the open hallway, making a complete fool of himself over this—this *creature!* She frowned as her eyes trailed over her new sister-in-law, noting the well cut suit and the expensive shoes. *A red-head!* She made a wry face. He had never liked red-heads! He seemed oblivious to her presence as he appeared to be trying to undress his bride right there, outside their bedroom door. His hands were moving up under her jacket, and Adriana flushed dully at her brother's lack of circumspection.

She cleared her throat loudly, irritated by his complete absorption in his bride.

Tonio swallowed hard as he lifted his head from the lips beneath his, and he stared into Christine's flushed face in surprise. Either she was the finest actress on the face of the earth, or Christine had just responded to his kiss like a normal female! *His* body was reacting normally, as well, and he realized that she couldn't help but feel his steel-hard arousal. She didn't seem to mind as she stared back into his face.

"Adriana." He cleared his throat, lifting his eyes to his sister's face.

"So," the softly haughty voice breathed as his sister faced them in the hallway. "Are you going to just stand there panting like a bull in rut, or are you going to introduce your wife to your sister?"

Tonio frowned at his sister in warning. Lifting his brow in irritation, he said quietly, "Adriana, I was told you had a terrible headache, or I would have been up before."

"Liar." She turned her attention back to her and crossed her arms over her chest.

Chris calmed herself with difficulty. *Either she was going crazy, or Antonio was actually aroused!* It was understandable, she realized, that a kiss like that could get anyone horny. She was doing pretty well, herself.

She pressed her face into the front of his chest and drew a trembling breath, then lifted her head and turned to meet a pair of wide, exotically tilted brown eyes.

My God, his sister was as gorgeous as he was handsome! Chris managed an embarrassed smile while she smoothed her hair and her jacket, glad that he had taken his hands off her breasts before she had suffered a coronary! He certainly had wanted it to appear as if he wanted her, and he had been most convincing.

Chris decided that she had to do something drastic here. She spoke quickly.

"You must be Adriana! My God, Antonio, you told me she was attractive, *but she is absolutely breathtaking!*" She gasped and looked the woman up and down in apparent awe. "You didn't say she was stunningly gorgeous!"

Chris clasped her hands before her and glared at him. Then her eyes moved back to his sister, who appeared to be a trifle surprised. "I am so terribly sorry to hear you are feeling ill. Perhaps a glass of brandy would help. Has anyone ever told you that you have eyes like something out of the Arabian Nights?"

Adriana lifted one brow in a mannerism that reminded Chris of her brother, and she smiled slowly. "That sounds wonderful. My dear brother would never have offered."

Chris jumped in. "Of course he wouldn't. He's a man! Men never think women might enjoy a bracing drink! Do come in and we'll get acquainted better. My name is Christine, but of course, you already know that." She babbled inanely as she figured most society females would. It seemed to be working.

She lifted her gaze to her husband's face, and drew a shaky breath. Chris noted his sudden coolness and wondered if she had done something wrong again, or if he were simply regretting her exuberant response to his kiss earlier. Probably the latter. She concentrated on making Adriana feel welcome and at home, and she put all of her efforts into that objective.

Tonio stared as his wife slid her arm about his sister's waist and led her into the sitting room, and he tensed as he suddenly wondered if she found his sister more attractive than she found him!

A stab of something akin to jealousy ran through his gut, and he fought it back quickly. He was being ridiculous. But as he saw how Adriana was falling under the warm charm of his copper-haired little witch, he realized that he *was* jealous. He wanted to feel those hands on him—his body—his arm—his wrist.

His wife was making a pass at his sister! He felt like grabbing her and shaking her soundly and telling her that as long as she was married to him, she must behave properly. But he refrained and he walked stiffly to the bar, pouring three glasses of brandy. Fury radiated from him as he fought for control.

Tonio glared at the two women as they sat side by side on the sofa, talking about things that women liked to talk about. He barely paid any attention at all to their voices. His eyes rested on his wife's softly flushed face, and he noted the animation in her smile and in her eyes as she laughed and spoke with his beautiful young sister.

He swirled the golden liquid in his glass slowly and tried not to care that she seemed attracted to his sibling. His silly sister was unaware of the reason behind Chris' blatant flattery and her attentiveness. She was too self-absorbed to notice.

He drank the rest of his glassful and refilled it.

He wanted to take that red-haired little witch into his bed and strip her and...

He tossed back his second drink and refilled the glass again.

Chris noticed that he was glaring, and that he was drinking far more of the potent brandy than she had ever seen him drink before. She met his dark eyes and her throat went dry as she sensed that he was smolderingly angry.

She managed to remain calm and pleasant to his sister for a half an hour, and then yawned capaciously and apologized.

"Oh, heavens! I'm so sorry. I haven't gotten much sleep lately."

Adriana grinned wickedly at her. "I can imagine. We can finish our talk later. I want to hear all about how you met my dear brother. I cannot imagine how he found you. I must tell you, I expected someone utterly horrible."

Chris giggled and rose to walk her sister-in-law to the door. Once the girl left, she closed the door slowly, almost afraid to look at him. But when she turned around, he was not there. She exhaled in relief and figured he had gone through to his own little bedroom as soon as his sister had gone.

She walked slowly back across the sitting room to the bedroom door, and she stepped through, kicking her high heels off as she walked. With a groan of relief, she sank onto the edge of the bed and began to unbutton her jacket. *She felt utterly drained.* A hot shower would feel wonderful, but she didn't want to go into the bathroom where he might be.

She peeled off her clothes and was just unhooking her bra when his voice made her gasp and jerk around. She found him sitting in the wing backed chair across from the bed, watching her sullenly.

"My sister is an exceptionally lovely young woman," he said with a slight slurring of syllables. Was he drunk?

Chris grabbed her robe off the foot of the huge bed and pulled it across her body, her face bright red. "You could have cleared your damn throat or something to let me know you were still here," she hissed. "I don't make a practice of undressing for an audience."

He shrugged. "I hardly consider myself an audience."

"What are you mad at? You've been glaring at me all evening. *What have I done now?*"

He shrugged again, as if unable to trust his voice. "Do I seem 'mad'?"

She frowned, dragging her robe on quickly. "Yes." She pulled it closed and tied it with a sharp tug. "You looked as if you were ready to explode."

"Perhaps I was—*perhaps I am*," he breathed.

She eyed him nervously. "You drank a lot—you sound drunk!"

"Do I?" he smiled slowly in a manner that made her suddenly nervous.

"I think you should go lie down."

"I intend to." He rose from the chair and began to unbutton his shirt, and she drew a slow, shaking breath.

"Aren't you sleeping in the valet's room?" Her eyes clung hopelessly to his face until her will power deserted, and they roamed slowly down his fabulous body. He should be declared illegal in at least forty states!

"I won't be sleeping for awhile yet."

She swallowed hard. She stared as he dropped his shirt onto the chair and began to unbuckle his belt. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I don't *think*—I *know* what I'm doing. I'm going to go to bed with my *wife*." His voice had dropped to a husky growl.

Chris stared at him stupidly as he kicked off his gleaming black shoes and dropped his pants. "You can't!" she blurted.

He smiled at her shocked look as she clutched her robe closer. "You made me an offer when you kissed me—an offer I find extremely difficult to refuse."

"*Huh?*" She backed a step away as he bent to pull off one sock, then the other. He straightened, and she swallowed hard as he stood before her wearing nothing but a skimpy pair of silk boxers. "We were acting! Remember? You said you wanted me to pretend, right?" Panic welled in her throat, making it hard to speak. *If he so much as touched her, she was toast.*

"You were most convincing," he breathed as he began shoving his boxers off.

He saw her eyes widen in shock and he wondered if she would fight, or if she would weep. He didn't care which she did—all he knew was that he wanted her under him with her legs wide and welcoming.

Chris backed up quickly, averting her eyes from him as he dropped his underwear and stepped toward her. "Antonio! This wasn't part of the bargain! *You said we wouldn't be sleeping together.*"

He moved slowly like a sleek predator stalking its prey. "I changed my mind."

"You can't! I'm not—I mean—" She gasped as he reached out and caught the tie of her robe and dragged her across the carpet toward him.

He ignored her frightened protest. *She wanted his damned sister, so why didn't she want him?* He twisted the robe tie around his hand and jerked, and she was catapulted forward into his arms. The feel of her body against his made him shudder with need, and he shoved her robe open to allow his hands the freedom to slip under the terry cloth and over her bare waist and hips. The frothy panties and the lace bra posed no problem—he simply ripped them apart with a quick tug of his fingers.

She gave a cry of shock as he picked her up and carried her a couple of steps to the huge bed where he dropped her in an unceremonious heap, following her down.

Chris shoved at his hard-muscled chest as he crawled onto the bed and pinned her with his considerable weight, his naked flesh pressing hers into the soft mattress.

"Please—don't do this—*not like this,*" she whispered raggedly as he bent to press his mouth to the vein throbbing in the curve of her throat. She arched and whimpered.

"Would it be so very disgusting to make love to me?" he replied hoarsely, his anger rising again.

Chris shook her head jerkily, and he stopped, staring down into her now white face. "I never did this before." She breathed raggedly. "I'm scared. *You're scaring me!*" Tears coursed down her cheeks.

He stared down into her pale face and breathed, "*A virgin! Sweet Jesus!*"

He rolled off her and lay on his back, his arm flung across his eyes as he drew deep, ragged gulps of air. His voice was muffled as he said, "I'm sorry—I didn't realize." He swiped his hand over his face as if to clear the fog of passion.

She rolled over and sat up, dragging her robe closed with trembling hands, tears streaking down her cheeks as she swallowed and tried not to feel humiliated. He was drunk. Maybe she was just masculine enough to appeal to him. He obviously had expected a woman who had once been married to be a trifle more experienced.

She could not help looking at his gloriously nude body stretched out beside her. Her thoughts were muddled. Hot.

Sweet mother of God! He was utterly magnificent.

What would he do if she simply reached over and did for him what he most likely wanted? Would he be less upset? They were married, after all. It was not unheard of. A lot of people enjoyed things like that. Her heart pounded wildly at the thought of touching that stunning body. Of course, she had never even done *that* before, so she had no idea whatsoever of how to start—what to do. She drew a shaking breath. There was only one way to find out. And she itched to get her hands on that marvelous body—in *the flesh instead of in a dream*.

Tonio felt her trembling hand on his chest, and he inhaled deeply, opening his eyes to stare at her in astonishment as she leaned over him on the bed, her tear streaked cheeks still pale, her eyes wide with what seemed to be concern. He was about to sit up and tell her not to be concerned when she did the oddest thing, and he drew a deep, trembling breath as he realized what she meant to do! *Dios!*

Her slim hand ran down his taut belly, over the washboard of his abs to caress his raging cock slowly. "I want to help you," she whispered, "but I don't really know how to do this."

He swallowed convulsively as her hand sent hot and cold shivers along every nerve in his body, and he fought desperately to remain calm. Her slender fingers curled around his rigid shaft, and a shudder of need thrumming through him.

"You don't have to," he whispered hoarsely—and not at all convincingly as he closed his eyes with pleasure and bit his lower lip, lifting his hips to meet the tentative downward stroke of her sweet hand.

"I know." Her soft murmur made him shiver.

"It's been a long time," he rasped as he opened his eyes to meet hers.

He groaned and swallowed his words as she squeezed his cock shaft, and slid her other hand down to caress his balls. A stream of soft Spanish curses tumbled from his lips as he nearly lost his ability to think. His fists clenched large handfuls of the sheet to keep him from reaching out and dragging her beneath his raging body. He wanted to shout with joy, but he certainly didn't want to frighten her when she was trying to be kind to him.

He found his voice and whispered, "It won't break. You can squeeze harder."

"I have never done this..." she began, and he suddenly placed his large hand over hers.

He showed her how to pleasure him, and when she had the idea, he lay back to enjoy her slow, delightfully naïve ministrations. Once she began to lose her sense of embarrassment, she bent and kissed his taut abdomen softly, and he felt a raging tremor go through him. She must have heard his sharp intake of air, and the subsequent groan of pleasure, for she drew her tongue experimentally over his pulsing shaft.

Tonio kept his eyes closed as he felt her mouth and tongue, and he fought the urge to pull her astride him and show her that a man could give her as much pleasure as any woman could. He twined his fingers into her silken copper curls and gave a deep groan of raw need as she began

to do marvelous things to him—wonderful, delightful things that made it difficult not to tell her what he felt. He growled as her sweet mouth suckled his throbbing cock, as her hands moved urgently up and down his thick shaft to drive him mad with want.

Her tongue swirled, coaxed, licked, and sucked. His mind spun with the wonder of it as she urged him maddeningly toward a pinnacle of feeling he did not want to reach, for he didn't want this decadent delight to end. He caressed her shoulders and her back as she drove him upward, and as he began to breathe raggedly and feel as if he could not contain himself much longer, she again cupped and caressed his sensitive sac with delicious insistence.

His breathing grew labored and loud, and he realized that he was very close to reaching his peak. He stared at her as she devoured his throbbing cock, and he was completely amazed by her. She closed her eyes and ran her tongue along the sensitive underbelly of his erection, and he felt the trembling reaction as he could no longer keep from emptying himself.

He reached down and moved her away, rasping, "*I can't stop now!*"

"Don't stop then," she breathed as she coaxed him toward his climax.

He released with a deep growl of pleasure, and she watched his face as she continued to stroke and tantalize him. Her face filled with an odd expression of delight as he came for her.

When he lay quiet, his eyes closed and his breathing calmer, she asked softly, "Did that help?"

Tonio opened his glazed eyes and looked into her flushed, wide-eyed face. Help? *Sweet Jesus—had that helped?* He nodded slowly as he fought to keep from tearing her robe from her and making love to her the way he wanted to. "That helped, *mi querida.*"

She smiled tremulously and rose from the bed, and as she turned from his bed, he thought he caught the glitter of tears on her lashes. Tonio watched her walk into the bathroom, his body feeling languidly sated, yet his thoughts oddly compelled to do something for her. He had been foolish to think she would suddenly change, that she would suddenly fall into his arms and beg him to make love to her—man to woman.

He sat up slowly, and he wondered if she would trust him now. If he dared give her the same delirious pleasure she had just given him. *He wondered.*

Chris decided she wanted to be alone far worse than she wanted a shower. She walked through the huge closet to the small door beyond the bathroom, and she stepped into the smaller room, closing the door quietly behind her. With a soft sob of self-pity, she climbed onto the narrow bed and dragged the cotton sheets up around her throat, burying her tear-streaked face in the thin pillow.

And then she wept.

Her tears came in torrents, and she pressed her mouth to the pillow to keep her sobs from becoming audible. Curled into a little ball of misery, she clutched the covers to her as she wished she had never come here. She felt cheapened—utterly miserable. She had done something thinking it might make him realize she was a real person, and not just a doll to be dressed and decked out in finery. *All it had done was make her feel terribly cheated!*

She slowed her sobs and sighed, sniffing. What was the use of crying? No one gave a damn but her. She dragged the pillow over her head and then stiffened with a gasp as she realized she was not alone.

He was there, and despite her protest, he was gently pulling her across the little bed and into his embrace, drawing her head against his shoulder as he stroked her hair gently and murmured to her in Spanish. She shook her head and tried to pull free.

"I'm—all—right," she hiccupped unconvincingly.

He ignored her as he reclined against the headboard and held her cradled in his arms. She pressed her cheek over his strong heart, closing her eyes to enjoy the warmth of his bare skin beneath her hands and cheek. *God, but this felt so right.*

She sighed shakily as he stroked her hair away from her forehead and whispered in a deep, husky voice, telling her something she couldn't understand a word of—nor did she care. He could be telling her she smelled of vinegar pickle and it wouldn't have mattered. His voice was hypnotic, and she felt her body relaxing. Warmth curled through her, siphoning off the pain and the tears, leaving behind a peace so deep it almost frightened her.

Tonio had never been affected before by a woman's tears, but opening his door to find her weeping into his pillow had sharpened his anger at himself. He had upset her, and she was never going to forgive him. He had slid into the narrow little bed and had pulled her into his arms without thinking, and she had seemed to not mind, after that first moment. *And he had been completely lost.*

Now, as she lay with her cheek pressed over his heart and her slim fingers resting tantalizingly on his fevered flesh, gently teasing his hardened nipples, he had to fight the frantic desire to kiss her mouth, to demand a response from her as he made love to her. He knew only one thing—he wanted desperately to make her forget that she hated men. He wanted to make her want him, and to do that, he had to find out what *she* wanted and needed. It felt strange to feel that way—strange and foreign.

As he cradled her against his body, she seemed to relax and he was very careful not to do anything to upset her again. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips into her copper curls, inhaling deeply and willing her to accept his embrace without repugnance. Without fear. He made no move to touch her except to hold her. She made no attempt to avoid his touch, and he couldn't believe that she would allow him to hold her like this. He wanted so much more, but he had to be satisfied with this for now.

Chris swallowed hard and prayed that he wouldn't roll away from her, that he would hold her forever. She was afraid to breathe. She didn't make any sound at all. If he knew how she felt at this moment, he would never touch her again. And she didn't want him to know. She had to be very careful.

She found herself wanting to make him forget that he disliked females. To make him want *her*—but how? Perhaps it would be best to forget how he affected her and just be a friend to him. To forget he was so wonderfully attractive and to treat him as she would one of her old college pals. She sighed and snuggled closer into his firm chest. Perhaps that would be the best way to deal with this. *Sure—in a pig's eye.*

He felt her sigh, and he drew a shaking breath as she settled into a more comfortable position. He tried not to show his arousal. He concentrated fiercely on other things to maintain his calm. He was in the middle of mentally counting to 5,000 when she whispered in a muffled voice against his chest, "Do you think your sister believed that we are a couple?"

His sister—her mind was still on his sister. He bit the inside of his cheek and managed a gruff reply. "I believe she was quite taken with you. You won her over easily, far more easily than I expected." *Damn you.*

"I think she's rather nice, despite your warnings about her. But then, I'm a woman, and I don't think men look at women the way another woman does. If she were not your sister, I think you would find her quite interesting. She has a rather wry wit." Her breath fanned his skin and he swallowed hard, not wanting to move or flinch.

"I am far older than she is. We had nothing in common as children, and she was raised to be supremely selfish. She thinks the same of me." *Forget my damned sister—think about me!*

Chris didn't want to move away from him, but she didn't want to upset him by remaining glued to him like a limpet. She sat up slowly and averted her gaze from that lean, mouthwatering body as she said with a casualness she hardly felt, "Maybe it's time you both got past your old ideas, and got to know each other. I'm certain she would love to be more involved in your life, especially with both of your parents gone."

"She has never agreed with my lifestyle. She finds it unacceptable."

She drew a shaking breath and shrugged, pretending an interest in the silver-handled brushes on his bureau. "But she can't think your lifestyle is unacceptable now, can she?" *So his family had known of his alternative lifestyle.* That's probably why they would question whether or not he was really sleeping with his wife. She had to appear to be sharing his bed or they would not be convinced.

"So why not at least try?"

She glanced at his face, carefully keeping her eyes off the lean, powerful body on the narrow bed. He had pulled on a pair of trousers, but her memory served her well, and she felt warmth suffuse her cheeks despite her attempt to seem calm and unruffled.

She turned away with a sudden sense of urgency. "I think I'm going to take a shower and dress for supper."

It took all of his willpower not to open that steam-filled glass enclosure and join her in the shower. He walked through to the master bedroom and heard her voice call out as she saw his shadow pass the shower, "Since you ruined my underwear, would you please get me some new ones? And figure out something for me to wear to supper—I have no idea what the rich matron wears for an at-home affair."

He smiled grimly to himself as she proceeded to ignore his presence, although he stood for a long moment and gazed at her silhouette turning about beneath the steaming spray. He licked his lips and turned away, feeling a surge of renewed desire that threatened to make him do something very, very stupid.

He moved through into the bedroom and did as she asked, opening the bureau drawer and taking out another brand new set of delicate undergarments before looking over the array of items Jose had brought up and left on the table in the sitting room after Adriana had returned to her own rooms.

He found a floor length dinner dress that would do nicely and laid it across the foot of the bed. Then he went back through to the big closet and pulled out a dinner jacket and trousers, a fresh silk shirt and tie, and some clean under things. He hoped she would leave him some hot water.

Chris turned off the spray and peeped around the shower door, then reached for her terry robe which hung on the clothes horse beside the glass enclosure. She drew it on and stepped out, her feet sinking into the lush thick white rugs that were placed every few feet on the marble floor.

She reached for a towel and bent forward, rubbing her head vigorously to dry her hair enough to finish with the blow dryer. She jerked upright as his voice asked quietly from close behind her, "Did you use all of the hot water, *mi querida*?" She swallowed hard and wrapped the towel about her hair deftly.

"I don't think so." She shrugged, turning bright pink as he leaned past her to turn on the water, and step into the shower. His warm bare skin slid sensually against hers. *He had to stop wandering around nude!* As he closed the glass door, she asked, "What does that mean?"

"What does *what* mean?" he asked as he noted her still there through the frosted glass.

"That *kahreedah* word?"

He laughed softly as he turned to allow the hot water to pour down his back. "Not *kahreedah*." He then pronounced it slowly.

"Yeah?"

"It means 'my darling!'"

"Oh." She flushed again and then she realized that he would certainly have to call her something romantic in front of others, if they were newlyweds. "It sounds sort of sexy."

"The word?"

"No. The way you say it." She shivered.

"It's meant to convey that meaning," he breathed as he soaped his body, watching her standing beyond the glass.

"I thought so," she said, nodding, unwilling to turn away from the glass and the sight of him under the water. She swallowed hard and decided she had better go get her clothes on. He might think she was standing around like a lovesick puppy or something. *And he might be right.*

He saw her move away, and he smiled to himself. She was far less shy of him now. If he went slowly here, very carefully, he might manage to actually create an atmosphere of comfortable tolerance with her. Maybe even get her to repeat what they had done earlier. He hissed as his washcloth grazed his strident erection. His cock was standing at full attention again.

As he finished his shower, he wondered why he found her so tremendously attractive. Compared to Dolores Hidalgo, she was colorless—too thin. He frowned. Why could he not remember the shape of Dolores' mouth anymore? Instead he found the image of another pair of softly sweet lips filling his thoughts. Those sweet red lips opening to take him in—to suckle delightfully on his cock.

He heaved a deep breath and rinsed off under the slowly cooling spray. Perhaps the water should be cold! He was getting far more deeply involved here than he should be. *And he was enjoying it far too much.*

* * * *

Chris stared at her reflection in the long mirror of the dressing room door, her eyes wide and her mouth open. *My God! What a difference a dress made!* She stared in disbelief at the plunging vee of the extremely décolleté dress, and was glad he had selected a bra which was held very low by a satin-wrapped wire. The way her breasts were gently shoved upward and inward by the bra made her appear to be twice the size she was. *Cool.*

Pink color washed over her cheeks as she smoothed her hair and turned this way and that to see how the dress looked from different angles. *Wow!* She grinned at her reflection, and as she heard the door from the bathroom open, she turned quickly from the mirror, not wanting to appear self-absorbed.

He stepped through the door, his dinner clothes looking extremely expensive and definitely custom made to fit those broad shoulders and that lean body. She flushed as he returned her scrutiny, and then they both laughed. "You look lovely!" She grinned.

His eyes slid over the delightful cleavage the gown exposed, and he grinned back. "So do you."

He turned away and walked to the bureau to take out his gold watch.

She saw the way his eyes had moved over the dress, and for just one moment, she sensed that he definitely liked what he saw—but only for a moment. Then he was cold and aloof once more, turning away as if her conversation bored him. But as he did so, she noted with a sense of amazement that he was sexually aroused. A small trickle of excitement made her smile inwardly. *He was horny!* Her body tightened and she felt a sudden rush of wetness between her thighs. She bit her lip. So was she.

He had enjoyed what she had done for him earlier.

She had managed to give him what he thought no female could give, and that fact made her own blood begin to warm despite his obvious attempt to ignore her. She wondered vaguely how long it would take for him to see her as more than simply a means to an end.

She had two years. Anything might happen in that time. Perhaps, if she kept giving him pleasure, he might begin to need her. Then she realized how pathetic she sounded. She shook her head at her own silly thoughts.

This was leading nowhere! She was being foolish! She didn't want to destroy the feeling they had shared in that narrow little bed beyond the bathroom. She must be willing to accept that which he was willing and able to give. Her lips curved. But that wouldn't stop her from doing everything in her own power to become necessary to him. And when the two years were done, she would at least be able to look back and believe that she had, for a brief moment in time, made love to someone.

She drew a deep, slow breath as realization settled over her.

Was that what she had done? Made love to him?

Yes. It *had* been an act of love. She swallowed hard as she suddenly understood why it hurt her so to know that he would never feel anything for her. She was a fool. How easily she had fallen beneath his spell, just like Jimmy all over again! *No. Not at all like Jimmy.* She realized now that what she had felt for Jimmy was not love, but infatuation. She would never have offered Jimmy what she had so brazenly offered Antonio Rodriguez.

When she had pleased him, she had enjoyed watching the way he enjoyed it far more than she had worried about what she was doing. She lifted her chin and turned toward the door, sensing that he was waiting quietly for her to make the next move.

He watched the play of emotions on her face. Was she regretting her impulsive offer to please him? Obviously she had never done anything of the kind before. A virgin! *He could hardly believe that his bride was still a virgin!* He supposed that being a lesbian would preclude her

experimenting with men, but if she had never had a bad experience, then what had driven her to seek out her own sex for pleasures?

He drew a deep, shuddering breath as she stepped toward him across the Persian carpeting. Could it be that some women did not have to have a “bad experience” to turn to other women? He felt a slow burning begin to grow inside his stomach. The only way to keep from embarrassing or frightening her would be to send her back to her tiny apartment. But he couldn't do that—*not yet*.

He found it disconcerting that he didn't like that prospect at all. He knew only one thing; he would not be able to stop himself the next time, virgin or no virgin, and he had to make certain that there would be no future temptations.

Chapter Fifteen

Adriana was full of plans for a shopping trip the following afternoon, and Chris was thankful that she was not expected to respond except minimally. Antonio was doing his very best to be pleasant to his sibling which kept him preoccupied so that she could feast her eyes on his handsome profile without being observed.

She knew if he touched her again like he had touched her earlier this afternoon, she was not going to be able to keep from begging him to make love to her, and that would destroy their tentative, friendly relationship.

There was only one thing to do. She had to keep him at arm's length. No more lying in bed and snuggling with the man. No more obliging his needs. She could not trust herself to touch him that way again without making a fool of herself. Despite her earlier silliness about making him happy for the next two years, she knew that she could never do that again for him. She must be careful not to allow that kind of thing to happen again.

He turned and caught her gazing at him, and she smiled brightly, hoping that he would simply think she was paying attention to the conversation between him and his sister. And for just one fleeting second, she thought she saw a look—a hunger—in those dark eyes, and it left her body throbbing and her heart racing. She shoved the idea aside. Of course it was not that. It was simply her wishful fantasizing.

She picked up her glass of dry white wine and swallowed a couple of mouthfuls. The wine was very good. Very expensive. She swallowed another mouthful and felt decidedly less concerned about the future. She found Jose pouring a little more wine into the empty glass, and she smiled at him in thanks. She didn't usually drink wine, but tonight she made an exception. *It was really excellent wine!*

* * * *

Tonio gently slid his arms about the figure curled up on the satin-covered divan, and ignored his sister's amused comments about letting the poor girl get some sleep once in awhile. He gave Adriana a wicked smile over Chris' red gold head, and said softly, "I will try to keep myself in check tonight and allow her to rest."

He expertly swirled her long skirt over his arm as he readjusted the sleeping weight in his embrace and carried her toward the hallway and the curved staircase beyond. "Good night, Adriana. Sleep well."

Adriana opened the door for her brother as he carried his wife into their room, and she closed the door with a wry statement about giving Chris coffee instead of wine at their next meal.

She laughed softly to herself as she walked thoughtfully to her own door a few paces down the hallway. The girl was certainly no Maria Vargas, but she could see why her brother was so besotted with her. There was a winsome American charm about her, a slightly sad, reticent quality, which some men found maddening.

Too bad Maria had not thought of that. She sighed. Oh, well—she didn't really like Maria all that well, anyway. Maria had always been rather boring. But this new American sister-in-law might make her tight-fisted brother cut loose of some of his money for a few baubles tomorrow. She seemed quite well able to handle him.

She stepped inside her own room with pleasant anticipation of a long and serious shopping expedition. Not too early, though—she needed her beauty sleep.

Tonio removed his wife's shoes and dropped them beside the bed. He smiled as she curled into a little ball and snuggled into the pillow. "No, *mi querida*, you can't go to bed in that dress. It wouldn't take well to being used as a night gown." He shook his head as she murmured something unintelligible and burrowed deeper into the pillow. "I should have known that you don't drink, either." He sighed as he gently unfastened the diamond bracelet from her limp wrist and dropped it negligently onto the bedside table.

He watched her roll languidly over and heard her soft little murmur, and he swallowed hard. *Damn her!* She was totally unaware of how she affected him. *A real woman would have known!*

He shrugged out of his dinner jacket and draped it casually across the chair in the corner, and he unfastened his cuff links slowly, gazing at the woman as she slept. He crossed the carpet and dropped his cuff links into the wooden tray atop his bureau then crossed to the door and quietly flicked the privacy lock. He wanted no one coming into the room to find them sleeping in separate beds.

He unbuttoned his dress shirt and unfastened his belt and stepped from his trousers, dropping them onto his jacket. She rolled onto her side, and he shook his head.

"I had better get you out of that dress," he murmured, bending over to scoop her up and bring her to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. He unzipped the back of the dress and slid it off her arms, but before he could stand her up, she flopped over sideways and snuggled into the pillow again.

He gave an exasperated groan and finished removing his own shirt and his socks. He then pulled her upright and held her against his body as he eased the delicate material of her dress down into a silken puddle of azure about her nylon-clad ankles.

"You could help a little, you know," he chided softly as he eased her back down again and draped her dress atop his clothes. He eased her satin half slip off, and then licked his lips as he debated on the rest of her clothes. Perversely, he wanted to remove every stitch she wore and gaze at her, and so he rolled her over and unhooked the lacy bra, tossing it aside, as well. He

calmed himself with difficulty as he unhooked the delicate garters and eased off the sheer hose, and then finally the ridiculously scanty panties he had purchased for her just a few hours ago.

He was pulling the silk sheet up to cover her when her eyes fluttered open, and she whispered groggily, "Thank you."

Without thinking about what he was doing, he bent and gently pressed a kiss to her temple, and she smiled again.

"Mmmm," she murmured, and then he felt her slim hand trail over his thigh. Her eyes were closed. *Was it intentional?* Probably not—but then those delicious fingers dragged slowly over the bulging front of his briefs, and her eyes fluttered open again.

"Did I do that?" she whispered, her hand caressing him with delightful intent. He trembled with the intensity of his self control and wondered what she meant to do. His eyes closed as she breathed, "I can help you again, if you want me to."

His blood was singing in his ears. He was unable to move or speak. She stared up into his flushed face, and she smiled a sad little smile as if knowing how desperately he needed her. He put his hand over hers, telling her without words what he wanted. He dropped his briefs and stepped out of them.

She rose up slowly, the covers sliding away from that delicious body, and sat on the edge of the bed before him, her hands slowly caressing him as he stood there staring down into her eyes. He was breathing raggedly. He inhaled sharply as her mouth opened so delightfully and took him in. Her hot tongue swirled around his cock—laved his tight sac—left his cock to run deliciously over his trembling abs—then she dipped back down to take him into her sweet mouth once again.

Frozen by a sudden, white-hot bolt of lustful, intense pleasure, he braced his legs wide and closed his eyes. When he could open them again, he stared numbly down at her golden copper curls as she slowly, lovingly drove him wild with delight. Her lips enclosed his engorged, oh-so sensitive crown, and he shuddered as he watched her slowly take him deeper into her delicious mouth. One hand circled him and stroked with a steady, seductive rhythm. One hand cupped and caressed, then gently squeezed his balls. Her sweet tongue swirled and sucked.

He groaned with primal enjoyment as she deliciously repeated her actions of earlier in the afternoon, and he stood there trembling, unable to move from the spot as she drew him to the very pinnacle of delirium and continued to suck gently, draining him as he clutched her gold curls and tried hard to regain his composure and his breath.

When he realized that he was holding her head as if he could not let go, he flushed and regretfully moved a step back from the bed, staring down at her bent head, realizing that she was weeping softly. He watched her rise and go into the bathroom, and he fought to control the wild desire to go after her. What would she do if he simply walked in there and started making love to her? *Indeed. What?*

She rose from the bed and padded into the bathroom. She glared at her traitorous reflection angrily. She had promised herself she would not do that again, and she had ignored her own vow. *Wimp!* Why was she such a pushover? Here she stood, trembling with need and breathing hard, her body throbbing with a desire she had no way to ease, at least, not the way she wanted to be eased! Here she stood, the ever-virgin, actually thinking about begging a gay man to make love to her just so she could know what it felt like to make love to someone she desperately wanted!

Of course he would be repulsed, but to hell with *his* feelings! What about *hers* for a change? She dashed the tears from her eyes and said something foul to her reflection, and then nearly jumped out of her skin as she felt lean hands slip about her waist. Her body was pulled slowly back against his.

She closed her eyes and shivered as he ran his hands gently over her bare skin, caressing her thighs and then moving his hands upward over her trembling belly to her breasts. She kept her eyes closed, praying that he would not stop. She didn't care if he was just trying to return the favor. She would pretend that he wanted her.

His mouth caressed the vein along the side of her neck, and she moaned with delight as he gently drove her wild with desire. "Open your eyes. See what I am doing."

"What are you doing?" she asked as he slipped his hands slowly down her flat belly to the soft brush of red-gold curls, and she felt his long fingers slipping gently into her drenched slit. Her eyes sprang open.

She yelped in shock as he found her clitoris with caressing fingertips, and began to very slowly, but surely, bring her to the very brink of delirium. One long finger dipped exquisitely into her wet opening, causing her to nearly scream with pleasure.

He gently continued the sweet assault on her body as he watched her react so sensually in the mirror before them. Her wide green eyes were nearly glazed as they met his in the mirror. His muscular thigh pressed erotically between her trembling legs, and a shot of numbing pleasure went through her at the feel of his power pressing against her trembling buttocks.

"Oh. My. God! Don't stop!" she panted as he drove her wild with his caresses. She didn't care if she looked like a crazy woman. She didn't care if he thought her brash or wanton. She cared only that he was doing wonderful things to her, and she didn't want it to stop. His hands, his mouth, those talented fingers, and his voice all combined to increase the erotic tension as she swirled upward toward a shattering climax that she desperately needed—desperately wanted.

His voice whispered husky encouragements as she gasped and convulsed with the force of her orgasm. The fact that she didn't understand a single word made no difference to her.

He had done for her what she had done for him, and that meant that he cared—just a little. If not as a man for a woman, then as a friend for a friend.

She leaned against his body, trembling for several minutes afterward as her breathing calmed. Her eyes were closed, and she was unwilling to allow the heady feeling of being held in his embrace to go away. He slowly caressed her body with gentle hands, and she listened to his mesmerizing tones as he whispered to her in Spanish.

Tonio didn't want to take his hands off her. She had enjoyed his ministrations, and she was not repulsed by this intimacy. *This was good.* He felt the throbbing of her pulses, and knew that she had experienced a powerful orgasm. He smiled into the back of her soft hair and watched her face in the mirror as she panted rapidly, calming herself.

A few more times like this, and perhaps he could convince her to try making love in a more conventional manner. One that would bring them both to climax as one.

It was a novel feeling, wanting to convince a beautiful woman to make love to him. He had never had so much difficulty before. This one was a true challenge, and one that would provide a great deal of enjoyment in the bargain.

He saw her eyes flutter open after a few minutes, and noted the dull pink color that suffused her cheeks as she met his eyes in the mirror again.

He smiled slowly at her embarrassment, and he breathed softly, "You're welcome."

Chris stared at their reflections in the mirror—the tall, powerful man behind her in the glass, his arms still wrapped caressingly about her body, his hands still doing marvelous things to her. She blushed at the way they were so wantonly entwined.. She looked like some playboy centerfold, the way she was leaning back into his body—the way he was running his hands over her. The way her thighs were spread, one of his muscular thighs holding them apart to allow him to touch her so intimately. The feel of that semisolid cock pressed against her ass...

She wondered why he seemed to be unconcerned that he had just given her the first assisted orgasm she had ever experienced. To her, it was an earth-shattering thing. To him, it was a simple matter of knowing what to do, and how to do it. Her flushed cheeks made him smile, and she swallowed hard.

"That felt nice," she whispered huskily, unsure of exactly what to say. He seemed to be about to say something, but after a moment, he slowly let his hands slide away, and she felt suddenly cold.

Nice? Of course, she would not be as eager for a man's touch as for a woman's. He could settle for that tepid statement—for now. He allowed his hands to drop slowly to his sides, and watched the emotions play across her expressive face. For a moment, he thought he caught a fleeting sense of regret, but it was quickly covered as she inhaled deeply and slid away from him, reaching for the extra bathrobe that always hung behind the bathroom door. She slipped it over her body, and belted it. She turned to face him in the soft glow of the makeup lights about the vanity mirror.

"I'm sorry you had to do something you might have found repugnant." Her voice was breathless and shaking, as if she felt disgust at her own weakness.

Tonio saw her gaze touch his lean form, and saw the warm, hectic color flood her cheeks as she averted her eyes. He forced his voice to remain calm and somewhat composed. "Your body is certainly not repulsive in any way, although you may have found mine to be so."

She flushed again and shook her head. "Of course not!"

He nodded. "Then that's settled. Neither of us feels uncomfortable about the other's body." He ran his mouth gently over the top of her shoulder. "That should make it that much more comfortable to be in such close proximity. And if we should decide that we enjoyed what we did today for one another, neither of us should feel in the least bit self-conscious or embarrassed. After all, we are legally married, and there is nothing morally or ethically wrong with giving sexual pleasure to one another."

She swallowed hard. "Agreed," she breathed, tingling. She lifted her eyes to his face, and green eyes met dark eyes. "Thank you."

"I am the one who should be thanking you." He smiled gently. "What you did for me must have been most unpleasant for you."

She inhaled slowly. "Not really. It was just—new."

He watched the color flood her cheeks and wondered what she would do if he told her that he wanted her to touch him once again. But no. He didn't wish to press it. Twice in one day should suffice for any man.

"Good night, *mi querida*." He touched her cheek gently and bent to press a gentle kiss to the side of her temple. "And thank you."

Chris closed her eyes and inhaled slowly as he pressed his firm lips to her temple. Her involuntary shudder of enjoyment made her feel giddy. What would he do if she begged him to make *real* love to her? But no. She didn't wish to press the issue.

"Yes—good night."

And as he walked away and closed the connecting door, she felt hot and cold and giddy by turns, fighting to overcome the sudden mad desire to follow him and crawl into the narrow little bed with him for the night. To seduce him to want her.

He closed the door quietly. He had pressed too far. He had felt the shudder of revulsion go through her. He must move very slowly with her. He could not expect miracles. But one day, he smiled grimly, one day she would beg him to make love to her as a man makes love to a woman—beg him to seduce her, and he would most happily oblige.

Chapter Sixteen

The sound of his phone brought Tonio out of a very pleasant dream, and as he sat up and looked at the bedside clock, he swore softly.

He lifted the receiver and growled, "This had better be important!"

Blake's voice sounded strained. "My apologies for calling so late, but I thought you should know—the police just found Damien."

Tonio glanced at his watch. "You wouldn't be calling me at three in the morning just to tell me he has been apprehended." Tonio's instincts told him there was far more.

"He was found in a hotel room in Puerto Vallarta. Shot six times in the face!" Blake's voice was weary. "He's been dead about two days."

Tonio swallowed and drew a slow breath. "Do they know who?"

"The Mexican police are investigating. They found something at the scene—something that belongs to you."

Tonio frowned. "What, my money?"

"A custom, handmade nine mm semi-automatic registered in L.A. to Antonio Rodriguez."

Tonio almost dropped the receiver and managed to find his voice with great difficulty. "That's ridiculous! My nine mm is right here! Have you checked where the weapon was purchased to see who bought it?"

"I couldn't find out anything at all except what my contacts have told me. I intend to fly down and find out what I can. I thought you should know."

Tonio exhaled, nodding as if Blake could see him. "You were right to call. Thank you. I want every minute lead followed. This is some kind of setup."

"I'll get back to you the minute I have anything at all. In the meantime I want you to stay out of sight. I don't want the police picking you up for questioning until I get back. When I return, we will make a formal statement to the police. I just hope you have a water tight alibi."

Blake hung up, and Tonio set the phone down with slow deliberation. He rose from the bed and paced to his window, gazing down into the gardens below. In the back of his mind a small but familiar voice whispered, *only one who knows the family could have done this.*

He drew a deep breath and released it explosively. *"But who? Dammit, don't just give me part of the information—give me all of it!"* He hated it when his inner sense would not tell him everything. But he must not be impatient with it. He needed to give it more time.

He turned from the window and stalked back to his bed, too upset now to try to sleep. He reached for his robe and dragged it on, heading for the door to the hallway. He needed some fresh air.

* * * *

The sound of the outer door opening and closing quietly had brought her awake, and she sat up groggily, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. The bathroom door was open. Light streamed into the bedroom. "Antonio?" she whispered. "What is it?"

He turned from the bathroom door and drew a shuddering breath. The long walk in the gardens had done nothing to alleviate his frustration and anger.

He saw her sitting up in the middle of that huge bed and he paced slowly across to stand beside it. She looked adorable with her hair sticking up all around her head and her face flushed from sleep. He inhaled deeply and shifted his swelling cock to give it more room.

"I'm sorry if I woke you. I have been walking. Go back to sleep." She was wearing one of the new nightgowns. The deep blue one with little lace rosettes bound together by satin ribbon. It left nothing at all to his imagination.

He dragged his eyes from her soft breasts and turned back to go through the open bathroom door.

"Please—don't go," she said softly. He stopped and turned back to stare at her shadowy face in the darkness where the bathroom light did not reach. "Something's wrong. Please tell me."

She slid out of bed, oblivious to how little her nightgown covered of her body. Sweet Jesus, but he wanted her to be close to him—wanted her to comfort him.

As she walked across the carpet between them, his mind and his body felt oddly giddy and light, as if every nerve ending in his body responded to the delicious sway of her hips and the gentle bounce of her absolutely delightful breasts. He knew that if she touched him, he would be unable to stop himself from touching her.

"No, it's nothing!" His terse reply made her stop and blink at him. His face was completely in shadow, and she could not see the glowing desire in his eyes.

She froze where she stood, her breathing erratic. Without another word, she whirled and ran, racing to the outer door and flinging it open, running down the hall to the huge curved staircase.

He growled a muted oath and went after her. *Damn all women to hell! Why did she affect him so?* He followed her along the wide hallway and saw the flutter of her nightgown in the moonlight from one of the windows.

"Christine!" he hissed as loudly as he dared without wishing to wake the whole house.

She was halfway down the grand staircase, and he was still at the top. When she reached the bottom and started to run, he vaulted easily over the stair rail, dropping lightly into a feral crouch only a pace in front of her. She barely stopped in time to keep from colliding with him full force as he rose to his full height before her.

He caught her and jerked her against him with enough force to knock the wind from her. She opened her mouth to cry out in fear only to have her scream stopped in her throat as he caught her mouth almost savagely with his own. He crushed her to him, at first in anger and frustration and then in desperation. His body was afire with need of her. His mind was hot and hazy with lust.

He felt her stiffen and struggle, and then he changed the kiss, opened her lips urgently and devoured her hungrily, his tongue stroking her lips and her delicately questing little tongue, his thoughts and his body melting into a fiery mass of molten lust. He felt the body in his arms become pliant, felt it clinging to him as he lost himself in her kiss, their tongues tangling in heated passion.

She felt his arousal, felt the pounding of his heart through the thin lace of her bodice, felt his hands easily untying the ribbons that held her gown on her body, and then she felt only a wild, singing thrill, a desperate longing to make him her own and to be his alone.

As he dropped her fragile lace gown to the carpeting of the main gallery floor, she wound her arms upward about his neck and sobbed against his lips, tears running down her cheeks for she knew that she wanted nothing more than to feel his body melding with her own. To feel him buried deep inside of her. Filling her. Stretching her. She shuddered with the ravening want of him.

He felt the warm expanse of bare skin under his hands, and he trembled with his own pent up need. He shrugged off his dressing gown and lifted her from her feet, carrying her as easily as if she weighed ounces rather than a solid, athletic hundred and twenty pounds. She whimpered against his lips and clung to him, and he realized that she was definitely not behaving like a woman who preferred other females. Although he sensed her complete reciprocation, it didn't occur to him that she wanted him—as a woman wants a man.

Encouraged by the lack of rejection, he caressed her arched body, coaxing her to respond with wild abandon to his needs, and he knew instinctively that she would not stop him. He carried her along the gallery to one of the velvet cushioned sofas which stood against the gallery wall, and he lowered her gently to the soft velvet, his body raging.

He gently pressed two lean fingers into her untried channel and felt her stiffen and gasp. He opened her body with shallow, sweet strokes of those long fingers, making her moan and rise

to meet his hand with each probing insertion. His thumb circled the hot little nub of her clitoris as he readied her to receive him. He felt the sweet wetness as she grew hot and slick for him, and he moved his hips between her thighs, pressing the aching sensitive tip of his engorged cock slowly into her tight, delicious center, but his thicker shaft could go no further without deflowering her. *She most certainly was a virgin!*

He kissed her throat, her breasts, her face. He gentled her body with coaxing hands as he kissed her hungrily and held back, not pressing deeper. He dipped his head to taste those delectable breasts, tugging at her puffy nipples as she whimpered with desire. He felt her shudder, felt her press upward to welcome him, felt the trembling of her body as he moved ever so gently over her aroused clitoris, gently teasing and stretching her hymen without pressing through the delicate membrane which kept him from full enjoyment of her body. His cock moved with tantalizing pressure over her sweet hot bud, only the very sensitive tip teased her tight entrance.

She felt him against her entrance with a slow, throbbing pressure, and when he stopped without inflicting the painful tearing she had expected, she began to tremble. His expert caresses made her forget that he was only a fraction of an inch from removing her virginity forever. All she felt was his mouth—his hands—his fevered body seeking to finish its quest. His velvety cock slid over her sensitive female folds—just barely teasing the entrance of her aching sheath. The exquisite sensation of his thick rigid shaft moving slowly and gently over her wet, slick folds, back and forth over her clit, left her gasping for breath and aching to be filled. *Why did he not fill her? Just like in her dream—he denied her that pleasure.*

As she felt him moving against her clitoris—thrusting, teasing so gently, a tingling delight began to warm her blood, and she knew that she would feel very little beyond this heady delight when he chose to consummate the act.

She clung to him and wrapped her legs about his body as he whispered thickly, “Am I hurting you?”

She couldn't speak, she could not even shake her head. All she could do was cling to him, gasping for breath like a woman who had just run ten miles. A small whimper of need was all the answer she could give.

She buried her face in the curve of his neck and shuddered with the intensity of the orgasm that shook her entire being. She gave a little gurgling cry of amazement at how quickly it happened, and her nails dug into his skin as he murmured soft encouragement in Spanish beside her ear.

Tonio knew what was happening, and he was fighting to remain in control of his own raging body. He felt her shudder in ecstasy as he slowly caressed her and kissed her throat and breasts. He drew deep, careful breaths. He had not yet taken her virginity. *She would have to beg him to do that.*

He calmed himself with great difficulty and carefully withdrew from her sweet folds without completing the act. He closed his eyes as he buried his lips in the soft golden curls beside her temple, and he whispered, “Did I hurt you?”

Chris felt him withdraw, and knew why he had not thrust inside her. He was doing this only to satisfy her. *He did not really want her.* He had merely wanted to see to her needs. He would never feel the hot desire to ejaculate inside a woman. But he had given her intense pleasure.

She ran her hands over the perspiring flesh of his chest and shoulders, unwilling to stop touching him whether he wanted her to or not. "No," she breathed.

"I should not have taken the liberties I just took. It wasn't my choice to make. I hope that you aren't too distressed about this. It won't happen again." He spoke in a muffled tone against her hair, and she closed her eyes, a large tear sliding down her cheek. *He had taken her very first taste of delirious coital pleasure, and had turned it into something ugly and cheap. The frigging jerk!*

She pushed at his shoulders, and he sat back, allowing her to sit up. He said nothing more as she rose and walked numbly to where she could see the faint glimmer of satin ribbons on the darkened carpeting of the gallery floor. She dragged her lace gown about her naked body and walked stiffly up the curved staircase to her bedroom, and as she closed the door behind her, she twisted the lock with a decisive snap. He could sleep in the damned hall for all she cared.

Tonio had left the outer door to the valet's quarters unlocked, thank God. He stepped inside and leaned on the door, calming his throbbing body. Blake had been right about a number of things. Having her under his roof would make it damned difficult to maintain his composure. He had very nearly consummated their marriage tonight—*a tentatively disastrous move!*

She hadn't fought him very hard, perhaps out of pity for him. He swore softly as he moved toward his narrow, spartan bed, thinking of the woman lying in his huge, silken bed. He lay down angrily, feeling as if he were being pulled in half by wild horses. Dealing with a murder accusation was going to be far easier than dealing with his own stupidity.

* * * *

She awoke feeling lethargic and a trifle sore. As she recalled the happenings of last night, she blushed hotly and wondered how much more of this she could take before going crazy. She could see that Antonio Rodriguez was a man with a definitely large sexual appetite, and she was learning that she was no better. How was she going to face him this morning, knowing that she had allowed him to go so far just to please her?

And what about pregnancy?

She was not foolish enough to think that simply because the man did not penetrate and ejaculate that there was no risk of pregnancy. If he had leaked even one tiny drop of semen when he had gently delved into her folds, rubbing over her entrance and clitoris, there would be a tiny possibility.

She'd had a friend in college who had gotten pregnant, despite claiming that her fiancée had never once finished the act with her. She ran one hand slowly over her belly, and wondered

how she would explain to a doctor how she had conceived when she was still a virgin. She shook her head with an unamused laugh.

Then the thought of having his child made her draw a deep breath. That damned prenuptial agreement! If she were stupid enough to allow herself to become pregnant playing these little games, he would never allow her to keep the child. Her throat went dry. To give birth and then not be able to have her child in her arms? *It was unthinkable! No! No children!*

She mustn't allow it to happen again—*ever!*

She rose from the bed and padded into the bathroom, after making certain it was vacant. She went to the other door and locked it before using the toilet and taking a hot shower, and only when she was fully dressed did she unlock the connecting door again.

It was just a little past eight when she emerged from her door, and glanced about to see if there was anyone else awake. Adriana was likely still sound asleep, and there was not a soul in the corridor. She made her way quietly down to the gallery and back toward the kitchen. There was no one around. As she passed the velvet settee where she had very nearly lost her virginity, she blushed hotly, but couldn't help but run her fingertips over the velvet surface of the arm before moving on.

Maria was in the kitchen. She beamed when Chris stepped into the cheery room. "Good morning, *señora!* The *señor* came in very early. He told me you were very tired and that I should not wake you. Are you hungry?"

She nodded and sank onto a stool beside the butcher block in the center of the kitchen. "I'm famished!" Her cheeks were still warm from her memories of last night, and Maria was left to think her own thoughts about that blush. As she ate the breakfast that was placed before her, she avoided looking Maria in the eye.

The food was delicious, but after a bite or two, she found herself staring at her plate. The thoughts that flitted treacherously through her mind were more interesting. *He had actually made love to her last night, despite the method.* The way he had so gently brought her to that soul-shattering climax had been utterly thrilling. He had stopped short of actually penetrating her, but it might be only a matter of time before he would.

She drew a ragged breath and shook off the burning desire to be in that exact same position again tonight. She wondered at her own stupidity. She was no longer hungry. Not for food, anyway. As she thought of spending two years married to a man who could never really love her, despite his willingness to indulge her sexual needs, she felt ill. She put down her napkin and rose from the table, wanting to find a quiet place and cry.

Maria watched her rise from the stool, leaving her meal half finished. "Is there something wrong with your food, *señora?*" she asked worriedly.

Chris shook her head quickly. “No! It was delicious! I—I’m just feeling a bit queasy—that’s all.” And even as she said it, she winced. Maria would likely think she was suffering from morning sickness. She flushed and avoided looking at her as she left the kitchen.

She decided to take a long walk outside in the morning air. Maybe she could talk some sense into herself.

She headed for the French windows that led out into the private garden that she had seen from her window earlier. It would be quiet. She would be totally alone to think this through and regain control of her runaway emotions.

Chapter Seventeen

Tonio pressed the heavy bar back upward for the last time, hooking it over the weight bench's brace. He sat up slowly and swore beneath his breath. Even his hard workout had not been able to erase his discomfort. He still was suffering from the effects of having dreamt about her all night long. He had awakened early, his body running at fever pitch from a dream so vivid it had caused him to ejaculate in his tangled sheets like a horny teenage boy.

Disgusted with his own lack of control over his body, he had put on sweats and running shoes and gone out. He had run five miles and then had come down to the private gymnasium he had built beside the garden.

He glanced at his watch and then ran the back of his wrist across his dripping face. It was nearly 8:30. He had been trying to wear off his excess energy for nearly three hours!

He was getting hungry. The light breakfast Maria had given him was long gone. He stood up and groaned as his muscles protested the hard work. He was growing fat and lazy! He had not had such a workout in a very long time. He reached for the towel that hung over the weight bar and mopped up the sweat and then draped it about his neck, considering going for a swim before eating.

The pool was private and secluded. It would be hours before Adriana was up. A quiet swim seemed completely inviting. He dropped his sweats and kicked off his shoes where he stood and stepped out of the sliding glass doors to the pool patio, plunging into the warm water and enjoying the feel of it on his hot body. He swam quickly to the end of the pool and turned back for another lap before rolling over onto his back and floating lazily for a moment.

The sound of a body diving into the pool made her jerk her head to see who was swimming at this early hour. Her eyes widened as she saw Antonio swimming—*nude!* She didn't want to let him see her there, sitting in the pool chair beside the garden wall. She tried to make herself as small as possible as he turned and swam back, but when he rolled onto his back and floated lazily with his eyes closed, she couldn't help but stare at him. He was utterly marvelous!

He had amazed her last night when he had actually dropped nearly ten feet from the second floor landing to cut off her headlong retreat, and now she was feasting her eyes on his amazingly perfect body as he floated so quietly, unaware of being spied upon. *Oh, how she wanted to feel that body against hers once more.*

He slowly opened his eyes and looked straight at her, and she huddled in the chair, praying he wouldn't think she was spying. He smiled as she blushed furiously.

"Join me—the water is wonderful."

Chris gasped and averted her gaze instantly. She rose from the chair and clasped her hands in front of her like a guilty child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "I didn't mean to spy on

you. I came out here because I wanted to be alone—to think—I had no idea you were going for a swim."

He flung the water from his dark hair with a casual flick of his head, and ran his lean hands over his scalp to push the hair back from his face. He swam to the ladder at the deep end of the pool and climbed out to stand gloriously naked before her, seeming to watch her face for a reaction. She avoided looking at him below the neck, and he seemed to be fighting to keep from laughing at her red face.

"Take your clothes off. No one will see you but me, and I've already seen most of you."

Chris swallowed hard. "No, thank you. I never swim nude."

"Why not? There is no suit to hang to dry, no eyes to watch you but mine, and certainly you aren't embarrassed to be seen by me, *are you?* Not after last night." His dark eyes teased her. "You want me to help?"

"Certainly not!"

She gasped as he reached out to unbutton her blouse, and in jerking away so quickly, she lost her balance and toppled backward into the water, going under a couple of feet before bobbing to the surface, spluttering and coughing. She dashed the water from her eyes and looked at where he had been standing, and then realized that he was in the water beside her, one arm locked about her body as he kept her on the surface.

"You really should have undressed first. You've undoubtedly ruined that lovely silk blouse," he chided with an amazingly sexy grin.

She looked down at the white silk that was plastered to her breasts like a second skin and flushed. He was treading water as she struggled to pull free of his arms. When he released her, she sank, and he pulled her up again, this time face to face as he shook his head and laughed aloud.

"If you don't know how to swim, why did you jump into the pool?"

"*Let me go!*" she snarled.

"And watch you drown before my eyes? That would be very unkind of me." He laughed, and she grew even angrier.

"I am not going to drown, dammit! I can swim quite well, thank you! You just startled me when you let go so suddenly!" She wiped her face with her hands to remove the streaming water, not wanting to feel all that wonderful naked flesh pressed to hers in the clear water of the pool.

"Now that you are here, you might as well stay and swim awhile, but I'm afraid you'll have to take off the blouse and slacks—and the shoes," he breathed against her temple.

"Oh! Let me go, dammit!" She shoved futilely at his bare chest and realized that it was going to be a losing battle unless she could get back onto dry land. "How can I take off my clothes here in the water?" she added hopefully.

"No problem," he murmured in a soft, silky tone.

She gasped as he dragged the wet blouse up over her head, tossing it onto the patio. She wore no bra, and as her bare breasts pressed against his wet skin, she shivered uncontrollably, her nipples drawing into tight little buds.

"Cold?" He grinned.

She tried to put some distance between them, her hands pressed against his chest. "No! Would you please let me get out of the pool?" she begged weakly, afraid of losing all of the resolve she had worked up in the last half-hour.

He was unzipping her slacks, and she tried to break free, only to have him drag her under the water to finish undressing her. When they surfaced, she spluttered for air and coughed, glaring at him as he tossed her soggy pants after the blouse. All she wore now were her fragile lace panties and one shoe. Her pant leg must have dragged the other shoe off.

"You want to do the rest alone, or do you prefer my help?" he asked.

Chris drew a shuddery breath, her thoughts and her body chemistry running in all the wrong directions. Why was he acting this way with her? A gay man did not behave like this with a woman! He was treating her almost like a—*a lover!* Her mind was telling her to be very careful while her body was telling her to take the rest of her clothes off and take advantage of his change of heart.

He was holding her firmly to his body as he treaded water, and she could feel every flex of those muscles—every tiny movement—every throb of his pulse—every breath fanning her cheek.

She gazed into his face as she caught her breath and calmed herself somewhat. After a moment, she asked softly, "I understand that you want to make this believable for everyone, but do you know how difficult you are making this for me?"

He drew a deep breath, his eyes slipping over her face, as she looked so pleadingly back at him. He shrugged in a casual gesture. "I thought you wanted me to behave in a friendly manner. Perhaps I misunderstood?"

She suddenly found the entire scene ludicrously funny, and she couldn't keep herself from laughing. "This is acting '*friendly*'? Antonio, don't you think that behaving like friends might be easier if we weren't both naked?"

He smiled back. "You have something on. We aren't *both* naked." His dark eyes glittered wickedly.

"I would hardly call one tennis shoe and a pair of lace panties *having something on*," she replied tartly. "Now please let me get out of the water and get my clothes back on?"

Tonio sighed. "If that's what you wish." He shrugged with a nonchalance he didn't feel and swam away from her, not wanting to appear too upset by her lack of enjoyment of his closeness.

He must give her time. He had a great deal of time. Two years. Two years was long enough to get past her reticence.

Last night must have been a moment of weakness. She had simply needed someone to satisfy her desires, and he had been better than going without. Today, he was a man, and she was not interested. But there would be many more nights over the next two years. He would not give up on her. He would give in to her this time, but next time she would not win so easily.

He watched her swim to the edge of the pool to climb out, and he was about to pull himself out of the water on the opposite side of the pool when a masculine voice said, "How delightful! I see you have wasted no time in finding a most distracting paramour, Tonio!"

Chris' eyes jerked upward and she quickly sank back into the water, shoving her hair back from her face as her wide gaze met the dark, interested stare of Luis Rodriguez, Antonio's cousin.

She barely realized that a naked body was suddenly against hers—hands were moving her behind him in the water as her husband moved between her and the intruder.

"Luis, you are up and about early. I didn't expect you to be out of bed before noon after your long trip." Tonio's voice was deceptively calm and polite.

"And miss your newest little playmate? Does your new bride know about this one? I think not!"

The leer on his handsome face made Chris shudder and she clutched the solid body in the water before her. She leaned her flushed cheek against his wet shoulder while her breasts pressed into the solid muscles of his back. The tremor that passed through him told her he was uncomfortable being so close against her nude body, but she had no intention of letting that creep see her naked in the water—she would stay right here, *thank you very much!*

Luis Rodriguez saw the grin that flashed across his cousin's face at his jibe, and he frowned. "And where is your lovely new wife? Resting after a day-long shopping trip into Beverly Hills?"

Tonio could barely keep his thoughts on his cousin as the woman behind him pressed shamelessly against his body, driving his senses wild. He laughed without amusement and said, "Hardly—she detests shopping."

Luis smiled wickedly. "Are you not going to introduce us? Your *amor* looks like she is getting cold."

"No. Now go away, cousin, before I take grave exception to your prying eyes and remove them from your head." The grim smile he gave the man left Luis in no doubt that he was unwanted.

"I have never known Maria Vargas to dislike shopping, cousin, but I will go to the house and wake her. I am sure she will be interested to see her newlywed husband frolicking in the pool with his *puta*."

Tonio's smile became even less welcoming. "Yes, you go and do that, cousin."

Chris waited only long enough to make sure the unctuous creep was out of view before she launched herself out of the pool and fled to the dressing room with her wet clothes in her arms. *To hell with the lost shoe*. She would find that later!

She shut the door firmly and reached for one of the white terry robes that hung in each of the well-appointed dressing rooms around the pool. She had dragged off her sopping panties and was shrugging into the robe when Antonio opened the door and stepped inside, his own body still nude and dripping from the pool.

"There's only one robe!" she said quickly, averting her eyes from the amazing sight of her husband standing there in the dimness with a throbbing, marvelous erection.

"I don't need a robe," he whispered huskily. She watched as he opened a small drawer beside the Roman couch that was in the center of the large dressing room and peeled back the foil wrapper of a condom, quickly and efficiently rolling it onto his sinfully erect body.

"How—*convenient*," she breathed shakily, realizing that he was donning it for her benefit. *That meant that he fully intended to finish what he started*. Excitement shot through her body.

"My guests often spend a great deal of time out beside the pool." She shivered as his lowered voice caressed her senses.

He shoved the robe back from her shoulders to fall in a heap around her ankles. As he bent to draw her nipple into his mouth, she gasped and arched against his mouth as he ran his hands over her back and down to lift her left leg, pulling her wet center against his stiff shaft.

"Antonio," she moaned, her thoughts suddenly deserting her. She threw her head back with a sigh of sheer pleasure as he gently fitted his throbbing shaft to her wet entrance and moved his hips slightly to take himself to the very rim of her maidenhead once more. His lean fingertips moved over her aching clit, sending her thoughts spinning and her body into orbit with a sudden, explosive orgasm that made her forget her own name.

He startled her by pressing her back against the draperies that covered the walls behind them, lifting her right leg and wrapping it about his hips and shifting his mouth to her other taut nipple, drawing deeply as she gasped and clung to him weakly. His hands continued to work their magic on her as she climaxed once more, clinging to him with trembling arms.

"You shouldn't be doing this," she whispered hoarsely against his hair as she felt him shove against her, straining the deceptively strong membrane that was her virginity.

"It needs to be done," he whispered as he lifted his mouth from her breast to gaze into her flushed face. "Just once. A married woman cannot remain a virgin."

She realized his meaning, and she swallowed hard. One quick thrust, and he could legally say they were married in every way. One quick thrust, and she would be set gently down, and left to her own devices. *Her virginity in exchange for security.* She barely stopped herself from laughing hysterically. It sounded—so Victorian!

He pressed his mouth to hers slowly, beginning the kiss gently, his teeth teasing her lower lip, not knowing what to expect. He was going to be inside her body, and she was not rejecting him. He felt her trembling desire. He knew now that he was able to excite her—to give her pleasure, and that thought inflamed his need. The kiss changed, his tongue sweeping into her sweet mouth, and she whimpered against his lips.

"Yes—please!"

He barely heard the reply, but his body reacted instantly. "It will only hurt for a moment, I promise." He tugged her quickly to himself as he drove his cock deep into her tight depths, feeling her give way as she arched and gave a small yelp of shock. He didn't attempt to move her until she stopped gasping and closed her eyes with relief.

"Are you all right, *mi querida*?" His voice was a whisper against her hair.

She nodded, her breathing ragged as he remained buried to his root in her trembling body. The feel of him fully inside her made her breathless with some unspoken need, and as the tearing pain abated, she moaned and moved against him, telling him with her body that she was not going to pull away from him. *Oh, he felt so huge—so hard—so wonderful inside of her.*

So this was what making love was like? Her body shivered as her nipples received his full attention. He sucked hard, his mouth tugging at the tight peaks one after the other as he slowly flexed his hips to drive his cock deep and then pull almost all the way out—only to repeat the delicious movement. She whimpered.

Tonio closed his eyes as he felt her rock her pelvis slightly, and he groaned. "Am I causing you pain?"

"No." Her whisper was soft and shaky.

"Tell me if I hurt you," he whispered back as she clung to him, thrilling to the ragged breaths she drew as she began to rise toward her orgasm. He marveled at her eagerness.

He touched her swollen clit with gentle circular movements of his free hand as she gasped and arched and bit his shoulder. She was like a small wild creature, unable to think or resist as he

felt another trembling climax course through her as her pussy clenched around his shaft. *Oh, how delicious she felt, clamped so tight around his cock—writhing and exciting him beyond belief.*

His shock at her eager acceptance of his body in hers left him breathless. He felt his seed rising within him—felt the hardened, delicious nipples rubbing against his chest, and he wanted to finish this properly. He glanced at the Roman couch that was in the dressing room, and he carefully lowered her to the soft cushions, fitting his body into hers once again with exquisite gentleness as he bent to worship those delectable breasts once more.

She moaned and arched, giving him full access to her delights as he continued his slow, steamy seduction. His thick shaft caressed every sweet, hot crevice and valley inside her tight, wet sheath as he continued to touch and gently manipulate her throbbing nub. He heard her whimpers of pleasure, and felt her tighten about him as she orgasmed once again.

He refused to give in to his own selfish need to finish with rapid, hungry thrusts. Instead, he moved slowly in and out of her newly opened body, shuddering with pleasure as she opened so deliciously beneath his gently pumping hips. She dug her heels into the couch and lifted into each driving penetration, and he thought he would go mad with the desire to fill her.

He felt her next trembling orgasm, felt the tightening of her walls about him, felt her teeth biting his shoulder once again as she muffled her cry of delight. And still he didn't stop. He urged her to yet another throbbing climax, and then to another. And only after she clung weakly to his body, trembling with frantic reaction, did he begin to plunge harder with eager abandon, his body rising to a fever pitch as he drove deep into her in his hot desire, emptying inside her like a flood washing over a thirsty plain.

Chapter Eighteen

Chris couldn't believe that she had just had a man make love to her—*frenzied, delicious, passionate sex had just occurred!* She clung to the sweat-sheathed body of her husband, and in her mind she mulled in shocked silence the change of events that had just made her a complete female.

Had Antonio simply decided that he must do the “deed” and deflower his bride in case his cousin demanded physical proof of their marriage? How medieval! Or had he needed sexual release so desperately that he had overcome his abhorrence of a female body and had used her for his pleasure? Either way, her body throbbed with the feel of his still swollen cock buried deep inside her, and the knowledge that no matter what the motive was, she would never be the same again.

She calmed her breathing and allowed her mouth to caress the salty, perspiring skin of his shoulder, and smiled as she felt the tremor of reaction go through him. “Thank you,” she whispered softly as he lifted away and gazed down into her pink face.

“For what?” he breathed raggedly.

“For this—and for everything else you have done for me.” Her voice sounded small and shaky even to her own ears.

“Are you thanking me for taking your virginity?” Tonio drew a deep. “Or are you thanking me for giving you pleasure?”

Chris realized that she had come disastrously close to admitting that she was crazily in love with the man, and she swallowed hard. She felt suddenly stupid and very much ashamed of her weakness—the weakness that had allowed her to hope. *He would never see her as anything more than a tool.*

“I think we should get dressed before someone comes. Your odious cousin might pop his head in here any moment now to see if your whore has done her job.” She started to shove him away, but found herself suddenly sitting astride his hips as he sank back into the cushions of the couch.

How he had so easily reversed their positions amazed her, but as his eyes moved over her naked body, and his hands slowly slid over every inch of pool-damp skin they came into contact with, her resolve to get dressed was lost. *What had come over him?* Why was he pretending that he was enjoying her body when she knew that he was not? Perhaps he was hoping his cousin peeped into the room.

“I did warn him, didn't I? I doubt that he will come back if he values his life.” His voice was rough, and she stared down into those dark eyes wondering what he was thinking. He

seemed to be breathing raggedly still, and she realized that he was slowly rocking her hips back and forth with his lean hands as she closed her eyes and groaned with renewed enjoyment.

"We shouldn't—be—doing..." She gasped as she felt herself spiraling upward once more toward heaven.

"Antonio!" The word tore from her with a moan as she threw her head back and gave a little gurgling cry of pleasure, feeling another mind-bending orgasm rock her entire being.

He knew that he should stop now, before he lost control of himself again. He had wanted to make her want him, but all he had succeeded in doing was making himself want *her* even more desperately.

This was crazy!

But she was so utterly desirable. And he had grown to greatly enjoy this teasing, exciting lovemaking. Why not take her? She was his wife. Why should he not take pleasure in her?

Why not, indeed? The realization struck him like a fist. *He had just consummated a marriage that was meant to be a strict convenience.* He had taken her virginity to assuage his own need, and now he was further accommodating his own selfish desire. Using her.

He was a stupid, fucking asshole!

With a groan of anger at his sheer stupidity, he lifted her from him and rolled off the sofa, rising to his feet and calming his raging body with great difficulty.

He shook his head. "Forgive me. I should never have done this, Christine." He ran a shaking hand through his wet hair. "Try to forget it even happened."

He turned and left the dressing room, plunging into the pool and swimming rapidly to the other end. He climbed out of the silken water and stalked angrily back into the house through the open French doors of the gymnasium.

Chris lay there, staring at the closed door, her mind lost in a whirl of doubt and pain. For a few wonderful minutes, he had lifted her into Heaven, and then he had plunged her straight into Hell.

She sat up slowly, tears flowing unchecked down her face as she realized that he had unwittingly allowed his unbridled passion to make him seek relief with someone he could never truly care about, and he had been unable to finish, looking her straight in the face. *He had taken a woman, and was disgusted with himself.*

He had used protection, so she was in no physical danger. But how could she possibly go on with this farce, after what had just happened between them?

She sank onto the wet velvet cushions and buried her face in her hands. She wiped the tears from her swollen eyes with the sleeve of the white robe, and she coughed. He had not been excited one little bit by their moment of thrusting, hot passion. He was simply embarrassed by it. He had probably done it because she had so wantonly shown her need of him.

He felt sorry for her.

She reached for her wet things where she had dropped them on the carpet. Amazed and confused, she tried to focus on what had just happened. He had been excited—had enjoyed sex with her.

Perhaps it would be best to try to avoid him entirely. But no—that was impossible, since they still had to keep up an appearance of being madly involved. They were both trapped. Neither of them really had a choice now. He had to be married, and unless he was married, she was still broke and homeless.

She realized dully that she was bleeding a little from the loss of her virginity, and she quickly pulled her soaking wet undies on so that she would not embarrass herself.

She needed to be alone for awhile.

She reached the door to their room and was fumbling with the knob, trying to juggle her wet clothes without dropping them on the costly Persian carpeting of the hallway when Luis Rodriguez was suddenly behind her, standing way too close. She jerked around and pressed flat back against the door, her eyes wide with embarrassment—and no small measure of anger as his eyes moved freely over her mussed, bedraggled appearance, lingering on the agitated rise and fall of her breasts beneath the white robe.

"Mr. Rodriguez," she breathed tightly, nodding politely. "I'm afraid Antonio is still at the pool. If you will excuse me, I need to change."

The woman standing before him was certainly not what he had expected. Tonio had pulled a rabbit out of the hat with this one.

Luis stared at her thoughtfully for a long moment, sensing the trembling in her slender body—a response to his nearness. He knew that the faux pas he had made by the pool would hardly be overlooked, unless he could turn it to his own advantage, of course.

"I beg pardon, little cousin, for my poor attempt at a jest beside the pool, but I could not believe that Tonio could have found himself such a lovely and enchanting wife in less than a week. Will you accept my humblest apology for my inability to believe that an exquisite creature such as yourself could possibly find my too-stern cousin attractive?"

He smiled, knowing the effect his handsome face had on women. He gazed into those emerald eyes and inhaled the smell of wet, recently-loved woman. Adriana had not told him she was so attractive. No wonder his cousin had taken advantage of the pool for a quick tryst with his new bride.

He drew a deep, careful breath and began to think of pleasant ways he could make her want to leave his cousin, and thereby negate the marriage and the will. Perhaps he could lure her into a liaison of sorts, perhaps seduce her into an affair. She was extremely attractive, and he was never averse to a pleasant sexual dalliance.

Chris sensed what his mind was on and she recoiled instinctively from his oily, too-handsome looks. "I really need to shower and change for dinner, Mr. Rodriguez. Please wait for Antonio in the library. He should be coming up any moment now."

The man ignored her and reached past her to turn the knob of her door, and she almost fell back into the room, amazed at his audacity. He simply stepped past her into the huge master suite without waiting for an invitation. She stared incredulously at him as he turned in the center of her Aubusson carpet and smiled knowingly at her.

Her anger rose to the surface and she said in an acid-tinged, agitated tone, "Mr. Rodriguez, please leave my room, or I will not hesitate to throw something at you! I have had quite enough of bull headed, stubborn males who think they are God's gift to women! You and my husband can take your personal differences out on each other, *but leave me the hell out of this!*"

She saw the man's eyes crinkle in amusement, and she did the first thing that came to mind. She reached out and grabbed a heavy brass dish and winged it across the room at his wickedly smiling face, effectively changing his smirk to a look of total horror as he dodged the missile and swore aloud in shock. The dish struck a brass candelabra on the coffee table and carried it to the floor with a loud crash.

Her eyes were like liquid green fire as she reached for the other metal item on the table top, and Luis said, "I am going—although I know you do not really want me to." He dodged the second object and cursed as he moved rapidly out the door and down the hallway past Maria, who was coming up the stairs at a run to see what was happening.

Chris dropped numbly onto the arm of the antique sofa that graced the outer sitting room of the suite and stared at the broken vase that the second missile had demolished, feeling completely foolish. As Maria came rushing into the room, Chris burst into tears, and the little woman had her hands full trying to find out what had just happened.

"Did that horrible man do something to you, *señora*? I will have my Jose horse whip him if he so much as touched you! I will call the *señor*!"

But that was unnecessary. He appeared out of nowhere and slipped to his knees beside his weeping wife, his face white and angry.

"What happened?" he asked tightly, holding back the anger that was on the verge of spilling. "I saw my cousin coming down the stairs. What did he say to you? Did he touch you in any way?"

Maria hurried away to clear up the broken pottery shards and set things right again. Chris just shook her head and turned her face from Antonio, not wanting him to see her crying like an idiot.

"He is a completely pompous ass! I tried to brain him with a couple of your brass ornaments," she sniffed, running the white sleeve over her face and blinking away the tears, "but I missed!"

Tonio glanced around at Adriana, who was standing in the doorway in her negligee, her eyes moving from his weeping wife to his face. "Did you beat her, you swine?"

He frowned. "No, but I am in the mood to beat *someone*, so don't give me any ideas!" His eyes swiveled back to his wife, and he knew exactly what had caused her agitation and the loss of her temper with Luis.

He drew a shuddering breath. He had been a damned fool to go so far at the pool earlier. He had caused her embarrassment and had very likely pushed her even further away with his greedy need of her. She had let him make love to her because she wanted to help him, and he had taken it too far.

Chris dried her wet cheeks and turned to gaze at him. "I'm fine. I just threw a big plate and a bowl at your cousin. I hope he won't take it too personally."

Tonio stared into her tear-streaked face for a moment, and then burst into laughter, enjoying the idea of his wife trying to brain his worthless cousin. "Too bad you didn't hit him! He was totally unscathed as I passed him on the stairs."

Adriana frowned. "Well, as long you two have stopped tearing apart the house, I can go back to bed for another hour before dinner!"

Chris looked up at her and said sheepishly, "I apologize if I woke you from your nap. I'll try not to demolish anything more until after supper."

Maria scurried from the room, picking up the *señora's* wet things as she went. "You should get into something warm and dry, *señora*. You will catch your death!"

Adriana went back into her own room, and when they were completely alone, Tonio closed the door to the suite and snapped the privacy lock. Chris bit her lower lip and looked up into his unsmiling face. "I will pay you back for the vase I broke. Was it very expensive?"

"Only about \$40,000.00—a one-of-a-kind Fourth Dynasty glazed faience."

Her eyes widened in horror. "Oh. I'm so sorry! You can take it out of the money you plan to give me when this marriage is over."

His face was unreadable as he shook his head slowly. "I don't need money, Christine. But you do have something that I want—if you would care to barter."

Chapter Nineteen

"What can I possibly have that would pay you back for that antique vase?"

He slowly pushed the damp tangles of hair back from her flushed face, and fought to control the urge to take her right there. "I enjoyed very much what you did for me the first time that you shared my bed. It was very pleasant. I'd happily forget the vase if you would do that for me from time to time, when I need it."

She covered her chest with her arms and stared up into his face uncertainly. "You mean, would I mind giving you a blow job from time to time—just another of my wifely duties?"

Tonio winced at her choice of words, but yes, that was exactly what he was asking. "It would be a great personal favor to me, and I would, of course, be most happy to oblige you when the need arises, as well. A simple agreement to help us pass the next twenty-four months without more of what happened in the pool dressing room this morning. I know that I was out of line. I apologize once again."

Her voice sounded flat as she replied, "It would be no problem for me. As long as *you* don't mind."

Tonio drew a slow, deep breath, and tried desperately to calm his body's heat. "I don't mind at all. I would feel that I was leaving you with nothing while you were being so very kind to me."

"Fine—then it's good to know *that* is settled!" She turned away and walked toward the door that led into the huge bathroom. "Now I can take a shower and we can forget all about what happened this morning—as if it never happened." Her voice was shaking. "Please excuse me."

Tonio stared after her as she stepped inside the bathroom and closed the door. She was offering all that she was capable of. And that would have to suffice. He had made one disastrous mistake in deflowering her. He did not intend to make another by becoming even more attracted to her.

He walked to the French windows that overlooked the gardens and brooded about his throbbing body, forcing himself not to walk through that door and join her in the huge whirlpool tub. But even as his mind told him that it was not a good idea, his treacherous body yearned to repeat his disastrous mistake, again and again! He drew a shaking breath and stepped to the door of the bathroom, and opened it.

Chris was sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, sobbing helplessly into her hands, her shoulders heaving in an effort to keep the sobs silent. He stared at her for a moment before deciding that he must not allow this woman to be afraid of him, or regret the decision she had made to marry him. He moved slowly into the room, closing the door with a little click as he waited for her to look at him.

She heard the door close and her head jerked up to see him standing there, and she dashed the tears from her cheeks with trembling fingertips and the end of the robe's plush tie. "I—I'm sorry about that. I think everything has just been happening too fast for me," she hiccupped and tried to smile, but failed miserably.

Tonio felt himself respond to her tear-streaked, pale beauty in a manner that must have been visible to the entire world, and saw the way her wide green eyes dropped to the front of his trousers.

"I think we need to talk." His words sounded strained even to his own ears, and he saw the tears begin again.

"I know."

He frowned at the faint blush that rose in her cheeks as she lifted her eyes back to his face. He moved slowly across the floor between them and sank to his haunches beside her where she was perched like a bird ready to take flight. He caught her fingers and drew them to his lips. He felt the little jerk of shock but held them firmly as he ran his lips over the knuckles of one slim hand.

"I know that I have taken advantage of your kindness, and I understand how you feel about what has happened between us, but I also think that you took as much pleasure in our lovemaking as I did. Or am I mistaken again?"

She stared and swallowed hard. She drew a deep, shaky breath, and she smiled slowly, seeming oddly breathless.

He calmed the need to sweep her off the toilet seat and carry her to the tub. He inhaled carefully before continuing. "So, even though one of us has chosen a different lifestyle, it would appear that we are a pleasurable match sexually, don't you agree?"

She swallowed again. "What *exactly* are you trying to tell me, Antonio?" Her voice was so soft he almost didn't hear her.

"I am telling you, little one, that there is nothing to fear from me. I know that we have—different tastes in sex partners, but that should not make us enemies. I find you an enjoyable companion in my bed, but I will not abuse your trust." His eyes moved over her flushed face, noting the wince of pain that crossed her pale features.

He drew a slow breath to maintain his calm, and without using his brain, he whispered hoarsely, "If you ever want anything at all from me, I am willing to give it—*anything* at all."

She drew her fingers slowly from his grasp, and she tugged the robe closer about her chest, her eyes avoiding his. "I understand completely. Now, if you will go away, I will take my bath."

Tonio frowned. *Had he completely misread her?* He rose to his full height and shrugged, a trifle miffed that she had outright rejected his offer, which he felt was rather generous, seeing that he was not all that bad in bed.

"Very well. I'll see you downstairs when you've finished."

She waited until she heard the soft click of the bathroom door closing before she rose and dropped her robe to the marble floor. She stepped into the swirling tub with her thoughts and her body completely at odds. The hot, bubbling water rose to her chin, and she closed her eyes and wondered if she was going to be able to keep her head screwed on straight for the next two years, or if she was going to embarrass herself completely by crawling to him and begging him to ease her needs with another magnanimous gesture.

What a mess she had jumped into. She let her mind and body float in the wonderful water, and after a few minutes, she managed to calm her anger at her own stupidity as well as her pain at having a husband who saw her as nothing more than a bump in the road on his way to his family fortune.

* * * *

She stepped out into the hallway, refreshed and feeling more herself after a long soak and a short nap on her luxurious bed. After that lovely soak, she just might be able to face him once again. She'd given herself a serious talking-to, and had decided that she would accept what he offered and walk away feeling no remorse at the end of this brief time. She would play her part and let him play his, avoiding, of course, any more physical contact than was necessary to fulfill the contract. Looking at her reflection in the mirror she frowned and repeated to herself, "*I will get through these two years—I will get through these two years.*"

The knee length cream silk sundress was gloriously soft against her skin, and she'd drawn her copper mop up away from her face into a perky, absurdly youthful ponytail. A pair of cream leather pumps completed the ensemble. She had opted to leave the lovely pearl necklace that was bought to go with the dress in its velvet jewel box.

She was approaching the top of the grand staircase when a door to her right opened, and Luis stepped out, his eyes sweeping over her quickly before he lowered his dark gaze and hurried down the stairs. She half expected him to say something rude, but he still seemed to be afraid she would throw something else at him, and that thought made her smile.

She heard male voices at the bottom of the staircase, and Luis' raised, angry tones. By the time she had reached the first stair, the only person standing at the foot of the staircase was Antonio. Drawing a deep breath before starting down, she moved as gracefully and as nonchalantly as possible.

As she paused, her eyes wide and amazingly green, he gazed up at her, unable to speak. His thoughts were dangerously focused on her slim legs and delightfully self-conscious movements and the way her soft breasts bounced sweetly with each step she took. Tonio waited, feasting his eyes on her as she came down the stairs, and as he reached to take her hand when she

stepped off the final stair, he saw the lovely blush that suffused her cheeks, and his body responded with a white-hot jolt of lust that made him aware that he was treading on thin ice here. Yet the hand that rested in his did not withdraw instantly. When she smiled up at him wryly, he realized that she did not appear to be frightened, nor did she seem to find his touch repulsive.

"I felt a bit silly coming down that huge staircase like Cinderella entering the ball. You look handsome tonight. I didn't expect you to dress up so much. Should I go back and put something else on? Is this okay for a family dinner with your sister and cousin?" Her voice trembled as she gushed out her thoughts in an endearing, childlike manner, and Tonio tried not to grin down into her worried face.

"You look exquisite, *mi querida*. It would simply be gilding the lily."

She stared up into that dark gaze and wondered why it seemed that he was purring like some big jungle cat. She shook off the feeling and allowed him to tuck her hand through his arm as he led her down the hall toward the library. When they stepped into the huge room with thousands of wonderful books lining hundreds of shelves around the semi-circular inner walls, she almost tripped over her own feet. His hand was instantly pulling her safely against his solid chest, and she felt a rush of sheer animal lust shoot through her. Dear God! She closed her eyes, swallowed hard and then laughed tightly.

"I'll have to remember that thick carpeting! I almost fell flat on my face there."

"I will never let you fall, Christine." His voice was oddly deep, and when she lifted her eyes to his face, she realized that his hot gaze was on her mouth.

Her senses screamed for him to kiss her, but her brain told her to turn her face away quickly. Her senses won. As his mouth touched hers slowly, tentatively, she trembled and sagged against him, and he drew her closer.

"How touching." Luis' dry tones came from the depths of a deep chair that partially camouflaged him from the doorway where they stood locked in that searching, gentle kiss.

She sprang away, and Tonio turned his head slowly, his eyes sending a warning to his cousin, who was now rising and setting down the book he had been reading.

"I didn't think you enjoyed books, or we would have chosen a more private place to steal a kiss, cousin." His voice was deep and quiet, and his cousin let his eyes slip over them, still holding a calculating look in their depths.

"Well, then I will find some other pursuit to occupy me until supper. *Señora*." He bowed formally to Chris, and then left them alone.

When he was out of sight, Chris turned her gaze to the thick carpeting and tried not to feel too disappointed that Tonio had simply seen his cousin there, and had been putting on a show for him. "Well, you timed that well." Her tone was perky and she managed a friendly smile.

Tonio gazed down at her flushed cheeks, and wondered if she had she seen Luis there. Was that why she had responded so naturally and so delightfully to his kiss a moment ago? No. Luis had been virtually invisible from where they stood, until he had leaned forward and had spoken.

He slowly closed the library door and decided that he wanted to see if her response would be different now that there was no audience.

She blinked up into his face as he bent once more to kiss her, and her eyes dropped closed as she held her breath at the gentle coaxing of his mouth on hers. His hands slowly moved from her shoulders to her waist, and then she was tight against his body, melting into the heat of his touch as he slowly, carefully deepened the kiss. He kissed her without pressing for more for several minutes, and when he lifted his lips from hers and smiled into her glazed eyes, he murmured softly, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For allowing me the enjoyment of your kiss."

"Anytime." She swallowed as if to ease the tightness in her throat. He grinned slowly, and she grinned back. "Is that why you lured me in here? Just to steal a smooch?"

"Not entirely. I wanted to show you something." He led her around the armchair that Luis had been using, across the costly Persian carpet to the fireplace that graced half of the flat outer wall of the library. Windows completed the rest of the outer wall.

She followed, stopping as he reached out to feel along the stone edge of the huge fireplace with one lean hand. She gasped aloud as his fingers caught the latch he sought and the back side of the empty fire grate slid silently away to reveal a space behind the fireplace.

"A real secret passageway?" she whispered.

He smiled at her, and in a quiet voice explained that the fireplaces in the lower part of the house had long been used by his grandfather's servants to move quickly from one area of the house to another. Real fires had not been set in them for many years. The gas logs were less filthy than log fires and caused less smoke damage to the walls and ceilings. No one but Maria, Jose, and he knew that the passageways existed now. His sister and his cousin were unaware of them.

"Why are you telling me about them if they are completely secret?"

He smiled and shrugged. "You might need to use them at some future point, *mi querida*. Being the wife of a very wealthy man has its own dangers. Let me show you how to open them from the inside."

She swallowed hard and bent to follow him through the empty grate, stepping over the gas log and stopping beside him on a solid stone step just inside the back of the fireplace. He

flipped a switch on the wall near them and the panel of manufactured stone slid silently closed again. He flicked another switch and dim lights illuminated the small space.

"That switch opens the panel? So where does this actually lead?" She looked about at the narrow passage that was just wide enough for one large man to stand in without his shoulders brushing the walls on either side.

"Come on. I'll show you." He took her hand in his and started moving quietly along the stone floor.

"This is unreal! Like one of those old time movies," she breathed as she followed him along, enjoying the warmth of his strong hand holding hers.

"Shhh. We are close to the main dining room, and we don't want to make any noise." He stopped and turned to her in the dimly lit passageway, and she looked up into his shadowy face.

"Antonio." She swallowed hard as he pulled her into his arms and bent to kiss her once more. But her small protest was lost in the delicious heat of a kiss that left little to her imagination ... he was so close she could feel that he was excited sexually.

He startled her by placing his hand on her back, just below her waist, and pressing her against his straining body. His other hand slid up her ribs to caress her breast through the soft silk of her dress, and she moaned and sagged into him.

"I can't continue to pretend that you don't excite me, *mi querida*. I am sorry if this is repulsive to you, but I cannot go through two years of being with you and not make love to you—one way or another."

His voice was a rasp of barely restrained desire, and she found her own voice with difficulty. "But I..."

His fingertips stopped her words. He had to say what needed to be said. He could not allow her to distract him.

"I don't care if you prefer other women to a man. I am not asking you to love me, if you can't, little one, but don't deny me this. I will never manage to survive without it." His mouth touched her jaw line and drew a hot trail up to her temple.

She stiffened in his arms. "Excuse me? And just what exactly makes you believe I prefer women to men?" Her voice was a shocked rasp. She jerked away from his caress and stared up at him incredulously.

Tonio stared down into her angry, pink-cheeked face, and his thoughts deserted him. "But—you were married to a gay man—I assumed..."

"You checked my background, I see," she said, her voice rising.

He placed his fingertips over her mouth gently, shaking his head. "Hush, *mi querida*. If I have assumed incorrectly, I am the most grateful man on the face of the earth."

His voice was low and vibrant as he took her face between his lean hands and kissed her slowly and thoroughly, his tongue stroking hers hungrily. He stopped kissing her long enough to whisper, "I thought that I would never again find anyone I could enjoy being with—that I would desire as I desire you."

She realized that she was clinging to him, her body straining to feel every inch of his. She wanted to feel his body inside hers again—feel his mouth on her breasts. "Serves you right for snooping into my private past," she whispered. "I guess I am as stupid as you were. I thought *you* were gay and had to prove to someone that you weren't."

"You thought..." His mouth dropped open comically, and she couldn't suppress a gurgle of amusement. "What on earth made you think that?"

Chris swallowed hard and shrugged in embarrassment. "I ... I thought that was the reason you *had* to get married. A man who looks like you—as rich as you—certainly wouldn't be desperate enough to offer someone like me a—real marriage." Her eyes moved over his face in wonder. "At least, that's why Jimmy needed to find a wife, and he was gorgeous, too."

Tonio stared down at her in mute shock. *She had thought him to be gay?* She actually had thought—and then he growled at her, realizing what she was telling him. *Dios!* He wanted to take her right here in the passageway—strip her bare and drive his cock deep, but this was not the right place.

He had been foolish enough to think her gay when she so obviously was not. He was desperate to have her body, but in a warm, soft bed, not in a chilly passageway between the rooms of his house, although he wondered how decadently delicious it would feel, with her legs wrapped about his hips as he pressed her back against the cold brick.

He bent to capture her hot, sweet mouth once again, and when she wrapped her arms about his neck so delightfully, he drew back and whispered hoarsely, "*Dios*, but I want you. Right now. Right here."

"Yes! You have no idea how I've wanted to hear that from you."

He slid his hand up under the buttery soft material of her thin dress and felt gooseflesh on her thigh—she was freezing! He kissed her hungrily then whispered roughly against her lips, "Come—you will be an icicle if I undress you here, and I prefer you hot."

She hurried along behind his long strides as he made his way rapidly to another sliding panel. They stepped out into the master study. It was blessedly warm! They were completely alone, and he locked the door and drew the drapes. She shivered when he turned to rake his dark gaze over her. He walked sinuously toward her, unbuttoning his shirt and tugging the tie from his collar, his eyes moving over her in a manner that left nothing to her imagination. *My God! Was*

this how it felt to be wanted desperately by a man? Yes—please! Now she truly understood what it meant to be devoured by a man's eyes.

"Would you prefer to undress yourself or were you waiting for me to help you?" His voice was a husky rasp of desire, and she shivered again.

"I don't think I could move if I wanted to." She shook her head numbly, watching as he shrugged out of his dinner jacket and shirt and dropped them both in a heap on the floor.

Tonio saw the way her eyes widened at the sight of his naked flesh, and he felt heat unfurl within his chest, then leap to his groin. He drew her close and unzipped the back of her dress, allowing it to slip down to pool about her ankles. She wore only a half slip, her white lace panties, and a strapless bra beneath the sundress. He took his time in removing them one by one, watching the delightful play of emotions racing over her face with each calculated, seductive touch. His lips followed his hands as he caressed every inch of her. He had taken her virginity without considering her needs, and now he would make amends by making love to her properly, letting her know what it was to be desired and cherished.

Chris closed her eyes and inhaled deeply as he bent to savor her right breast, his hands slowly shoving her panties down to join her slip and dress on the floor. "*Oh—my—God!*" she whimpered as he drew hungrily on her erect nipple, then bent to pick her up off her feet and carry her to the antique divan that faced the fireplace they had entered through. As he lowered her to the lush velvet and eased his body slowly between her trembling thighs, he smiled at her blush.

He ran his hands slowly over every inch of skin that was within reach, and when he lifted her hips gently and slid slowly down to taste her, she closed her eyes and threw back her head, biting her lip as he slowly dipped his hot tongue into her throbbing body.

"You taste like nectar," he growled against her. His mouth opened to kiss her folds deeply, and he drew her clitoris into his mouth, his hot tongue swirling and laving and possessing her tiny organ as if he found it the most succulent morsel on earth. His teeth gently teased it, sending her into a spiraling orgasm that forced her hips up to meet each delightful suckling pressure of his tongue and lips.

She panted and clutched his dark hair with shaking fists until she could take no more of the trembling, exquisite pleasure and shoved weakly at his head. "No more—you will kill me!"

He moved slowly up her body, licking and kissing every inch of her that he could reach until his steel-hard shaft was nudging slowly into her delightfully slick entrance.

His fingers slid into her pussy, and he hissed to find her so hot—so amazingly ready for him. He turned his avid attention to her puffy nipples, first one—then the other. He removed his long fingers and replaced them with his silk-over-steel cock, plunging into her with a hard, breathless stroke that had her clawing his bare back in moaning pleasure.

Her hips jerked up to meet him, and he groaned as he rode her, his body filling hers, rocking into her tight sheath with an exquisite insistence, until he was buried completely in her wet heat. He kissed her throat, his breathing ragged and his thrusts slow and deep.

She arched upward to take him in. The feel of being deep inside her body left him breathless with hot, aching need, but he refused to take his pleasure before he felt her convulse around him in her own orgasm.

"It's all right, you don't have to hold back. We have all the time in the world to try again," she gasped with each deep, wonderful stroke.

Tonio lifted away to stare down into her flushed face, looking into her half closed eyes, and relishing the heady pleasure of her body cradling his so deliciously. "And leave you with nothing, *mi querida*? No. I think not!"

He rolled onto his back, with her astride him, rising up to devour one swollen nipple, then the other. He slid his hand between their bodies and ran his lean fingers over her throbbing clit, feeling her gasp and arch. As her body rose in a shattering orgasm, he released his own ejaculation, and they clung together in a dizzying spiral of sensation until they subsided in each other's arms, with her lying on top of him, his cock still buried to the root in her.

After a long moment, she whispered, "I think I've died and gone to Heaven."

* * * *

They walked into the dining room arm in arm. Adriana turned away from the wet bar at the far end of the room and walked toward them, she quipped, "Honestly, Tonio! The least you could do is come to meals promptly! You have all night to make love. I'm starving! And you promised me an afternoon of unbridled spending!"

Chris blushed hotly, and Tonio squeezed her closer against his side. "You are embarrassing my bride, Adriana. Next time, simply start the meal without us. Some things are far more appetizing than mere food."

His sister laughed and shook her head. "I think that you have found your match, dear brother. Your bride looks totally happy to have been misused so before her midday meal."

Chris met her sister-in-law's teasing glance and laughed, "I'm hungry! It's time to eat."

Cousin Luis was not at table, thank God. As she sank into her chair, she felt relieved that she would not be subjected to his snide comments. She found herself wondering about the uncousinlike animosity between the men. She might ask Antonio what had caused it someday..but at the moment, she was not going to worry about the jerk. Let him starve.

Maria served a delicious meal, but Chris tasted little, her eyes on her husband, and her thoughts on the hour spent in his arms just before lunch. His bantering conversation with his

sister was light and entertaining, despite the way his dark gaze moved over her from time to time, making her fully aware of the promises of the night to come.

She wondered how she had fallen into such a strange and delicious set of circumstances. A couple of weeks ago she had been virtually homeless. She had been lonely and frightened, with nothing. Tonight, she was wildly anticipating making love to a man so beautiful the sight of him made her weak and faint. *And the man was her husband.* If he wanted her this much now, what would the next twenty-four months bring? He did not love her yet. Maybe she could help him to learn to love her over the next two years. *Because she was already madly, crazily in love with him.*

She rose dreamily at the end of the meal, and linking her arm through his, she walked with him, enjoying just listening to his voice as he laughed with his sibling. She managed to interject a word here and there as necessary, but as they climbed the curving stairs, her mind was not on conversation. She flushed to think exactly what it was on.

Adriana left them at the top of the stairs and went to her own room, warning Chris to not be so silly as to allow her new husband to have whatever he wanted, anytime he wanted it. And as the warm flush rose in her cheeks, she turned her eyes up to find Tonio's dark gaze probing her bemused expression.

"Ignore her, *mi amor*. I find myself craving a siesta with a beautiful woman."

"We're sleeping together then? No more pretense?" she whispered, her voice tight.

"No more pretense. Do we truly have to take my sister shopping now? I can think of many things I would much rather be doing."

* * * *

Adriana was happily chattering about the fabulous bargains she had found as Tonio nodded and ignored her. He could barely contain his heated need to be alone with his wife as the object of his lust laughed and allowed him to carry the bags up the stairs to their rooms. He was so hard, he could barely walk without exposing his erection, and they still had dinner to get through.

He carried Adriana's purchases into her room, and then herded his laughing wife the short distance to their own rooms.

He opened the door to the master suite and swept her from the floor into his arms with a growl of pleasure. He carried her into the room and kicked the door closed behind them. She ran her hands down his chest as he set her on her feet and unzipped the cream silk for the second time that day. Her hands were teasing his nipples under his shirt. Did the woman not realize what she was doing? Or was it intentional? He wanted to throw her over his shoulder and carry her to his bed.

"You don't have to do this again, if you are tired. I'll just get ready for dinner." Her eyes were softly inviting, making him almost forget his own name.

He shook his head slowly. "You won't escape so easily, little dove. You drove me to distraction all afternoon, and you must pay the penalty for looking so delicious."

She laughed in embarrassment as he removed every stitch she wore and then guided her hands to his buttons. "Are you horny again?" she whispered huskily, avoiding his eyes as she unbuckled his belt.

"Insatiably, completely, wonderfully horny. And you are wasting precious time making light conversation, little one, when that wonderful mouth could be so much more enjoyably used."

He stopped her words with a searing, soul shattering kiss that made her forget what she was doing altogether. Tongues dancing, they both fumbled with his clothes, unwilling to end the kiss, and when he pulled her body against his and lifted her left thigh up and wound it around his hip, she gave a soft whimper of enjoyment, feeling his unyielding shaft so deliciously hard between them.

He lifted her and guided himself into her wet, tight folds, and she wrapped her other leg about him as he drew her slowly over his throbbing cock until she was pressed hard against his pelvis. His eyes were half-closed in his enjoyment of the feel of her body enfolding his.

"You are so perfect, *mi querida*—so delightful. I want to stay like this until the end of time." He kissed her mouth hungrily and moved his hips to give them both exquisite pleasure. He lifted her slowly up then lowered her down to fill her once again.

She clung to his wide shoulders, sobbing in delight with every slow, deep thrust. His strong tongue plunged into her mouth as if he could not get enough of her. She wrapped her legs about his lean body and moaned softly when he tried to draw away to catch his breath. "You are as voracious as I, my little lover. Too bad that we are both gay, *eh?*"

She choked with laughter and then with passion as she felt every part of her body explode with the earth shattering delight of a massive orgasm that left her panting and clinging weakly to his neck. "Oh, my! Don't stop yet—please don't stop!"

"I have no plans to stop, ever," he groaned as he filled her with his exquisitely hot ejaculation. And he didn't stop. He held her body impaled on his own and carried her to the huge bed where he sank onto the mattress and lay back, watching her as she sat astride him, panting and rocking to continue the soul shattering pleasure.

She sat erect on him, feeling the wonderful solid length of him moving deep within her with every slow surge of her body against his. She placed her hands on his copper nipples and caressed them as she said softly, "How does this feel?"

He closed his eyes and replied raggedly, "Marvelous. You are a tease, *mi querida*."

"You like to touch mine. I want to touch yours."

"I like to touch yours like this." He sat up and caught a nipple in his mouth, drawing hungrily at it like a starving babe. He nibbled, suckled, licked, and kissed each nipple lovingly.

She arched into his mouth with a little moan, and then she caught his face in both hands and whispered huskily, "I want to do that to you."

He fell back and she bent to draw his flat copper nipple into her mouth, licking and sucking it. His wet cock slid out of her as she drove him wild with her lips and tongue, until he growled and groaned, "You're going to miss out if you don't let me back in, *mi querida!*"

She laughed as she rose over him once more, allowing his shaking hands to guide his hot, thick cock back into her body. She sank over him with a little muffled whimper of pleasure. His sweat-slick body trembled and arched, and she felt his spurting, hot explosion deep inside her once again. She threw back her head and bit her lip to stifle the molten delight of her own orgasm.

Several minutes later, when she was again able to speak, she whispered, "You like that, too, don't you?"

"Immensely, *mi querida*. I fear that when they find us tomorrow we will have died of pleasure, and they will have to bury us joined together just like this."

She giggled helplessly as he moved her hips slowly forward and back, his half-closed eyes on her flushed face. He began to breathe raggedly once more, and she closed her eyes and surrendered sensuously to each deep, loving thrust. His hands slid from her hips to her ass, and she gasped as his lean fingers slid into the crease of her buttocks, and slowly caressed a place that was amazingly sensitized—and amazingly erotic, despite her prejudices. She stared down into his face and gave a little yelp of shock.

"Shhh. I won't hurt you. There are many erogenous zones on a woman's body, and I plan to introduce them all to you." His dark eyes were wicked as he gently inserted a long finger into her body where no man had gone before.

The power of her sudden and mind-bending orgasm left her in no doubt that he had certainly discovered one of her many erogenous zones, and the embarrassment was replaced by a groaning, wanton reaction she would never have believed possible.

"*Dear God!*" she choked as he removed his finger and stroked her back gently.

"I hoped you might like it." His voice had a rasp of pleasure in his throat as he stiffened and gave a growl of release, and she joined him once more as she convulsed in another shuddering climax.

She lay on his trembling body, neither one of them able to move a muscle from sated weariness.

Adriana would not mind having supper alone—would she? He had no intention of letting his wife leave their bed for the rest of the evening.

Chapter Twenty

It was far too early to wake up when she felt the edge of the mattress dip beneath a heavy weight, and realized that Antonio was rising and walking to answer the phone on the *escritoire* across the room. She yawned and stretched and rolled over to watch his beautifully muscled body as he lifted the handset and answered quietly.

"Rodriguez here."

"Judge Burbidge just signed a warrant for your arrest on murder charges. You need to be *unavailable* for awhile." A stranger's voice was at the other end of the line.

"*Who is this?*" Tonio's frown deepened.

"A friend. Just thought you should know." The line went dead.

He wasted no time as he dialed Blake's cell. Blake answered instantly.

"I just got an interesting call. You know anything about a federal warrant being issued?"

"No, but I've been expecting it. How did *you* find out?" Blake's voice was tense.

"I just had an anonymous call. Couldn't recognize the voice—he just dropped the bomb, then hung up." Tonio ran a distracted hand through his dark hair.

"I'll check it out. Be back with you shortly."

As Tonio set the phone back in its cradle, he turned to glance at Chris and felt a tight hand clamp around his heart. She was so lovely—and so completely vulnerable to the machinations of whomever it was who was attempting to frame him.

She stared at him and she sat up slowly, forgetting to drag the sheet up to conceal her naked body. "Antonio? What's wrong?"

He shook his head and carried the cordless handset to place it beside the bed. "Nothing. Just some legal matters." He had never been able to carry off an outright lie. The look on her face told him he had not succeeded this time, either.

"You just went white as a sheet! This can't be some everyday thing, Antonio. What's going on?" She was alarmed by his expression.

Before he could answer her, the phone rang again and he jerked it up, pressing the talk button. "Blake?"

"I called Henderson. No warrant as of this minute, but the DA has asked Alton Burbidge over at the Federal Building to have you picked up for questioning. That was yesterday afternoon. It's way too early today to even get through to anyone. I have Henderson's cell phone number. He owes me a few favors. He thinks a warrant *will* be issued this morning."

"What about Wilhoit? Can he do anything?" Tonio drew a shaky breath. This was getting out of hand fast.

"I doubt it. He won't be able to interfere with a Federal Court extradition order. The Mexican authorities are pushing this one, Mr. Rodriguez. They want extradition, and they won't be looking too closely for evidence beyond what they have already."

"A motive and a murder weapon."

"In a nutshell."

"Any suggestions?" Tonio asked quietly.

"Don't answer your door?"

Tonio smiled grimly. "I don't think that's much help."

"Look, I've got a PI on this one down there. If they do haul you in for questioning, I'll be there with you. Just don't leave L.A. until this mess has been cleared up. I have some friends in the Justice Department, and I'll put out some feelers. I'm still trying to locate the maker of the gmm, but the Mexican police aren't allowing anyone to actually see the evidence. That makes it harder. But I have some money out on the street, and money talks big there."

"I appreciate all that you are doing." He hung up slowly and raised his eyes to her pale face. He sank down onto the edge of the mattress, and her hand slid over his bare shoulder to rest on his chest. A feeling of emptiness nearly overwhelmed him.

After all these years of self-inflicted loneliness, he had found her. And now, because of the very reason he had looked for her, he might lose her—forever.

He drew a shuddering breath and reached for her, dragging her into his arms and burying his lips in her fragrant skin. "I need you, *mi querida*. Please don't ask questions now. Just let me know that you're mine."

His voice was a raw rasp as he rolled over her onto the bed and dragged her across his chest to kiss her almost desperately. His hands were moving over her as if he might never touch her again.

Chris lifted to sit astride his hips, and guided his throbbing cock into her body. Their eyes locked and held as she slowly sank over him, letting his solid, thick length slowly fill her. She bit her lower lip and moved to pleasure both of them.

"You are so beautiful, *mi querida*. I fear that you aren't real, but a dream," his voice caught in his throat as he reached to touch her breast with a sense of awe as she arched and inhaled deeply at the feel of him buried within her. "I will always carry this sight in my thoughts. This incredible pleasure." He was afraid—terrified—of losing the one thing that meant anything in his barren, cold existence. He wanted to drive himself to the very depths of her soul and hide there. *God, but he adored this woman!*

Chris swallowed hard. It was almost as if he were saying goodbye. She bent forward to allow him to take her tight nipple into his mouth and suckle hungrily, and her eyes closed with the heady delight of his mouth. His hands slipped over her bare flesh adoringly, and she thrust her hips slowly against his body as she reveled in his touch. He was magnificent, silken steel—rampant, and beautiful, and he felt so good as he flexed his hips to drive himself even deeper. Her thoughts scattered and her body took flight. Their bodies surged and melded.

"Antonio!" she cried as she arched and felt the first marvelous orgasm shred her senses.

He caught her hips with both hands and slowly continued to rock her on his shaft, capturing her mouth like a starving man as he drove his strong tongue deep with every stroke of her body on his.

"Oh, lord, you are so hard," she moaned against his lips as she picked up the rhythm once more and reached behind her to cup and gently squeeze his sac.

"If you keep that up, I won't last long," he growled as she caressed him so sweetly.

His hand slipped between their bodies to pinch and press her clitoris with each sweet stroke of her hips against him. He stared up into her flushed face as she threw back her head and climaxed, her sheath clamping tightly about his cock as he fought the desperate need to explode. He wanted this to go on forever. He adored the way she looked as she climaxed. It was incredibly sexy to see her riding him so wantonly—to feel her take every inch of his length and demand to be sated like some wicked sex goddess!

His hands cupped and gently crushed her lush breasts, and when she was able to continue the movement of her hips once more, he urged her on with whispered words of adoration he had never thought to repeat to any woman again. He clenched his teeth against the rising of his own pleasure and finally lost the battle as he pulled her tight against him and arched upward to come hard and hot inside her incredibly responsive body.

Tonio closed his eyes and treasured the feel of their bodies still joined, inhaling her delicious scent as he trailed one hand slowly down her belly to touch where they were still melded into one. He felt her tremble as he dragged his hand over her wet, delightfully responsive sex and over his wet, still fairly solid shaft where it remained embedded in her.

"I love the feel of your body cradling mine—would it be selfish of me to ask for this to continue?"

She lifted her head and smiled down into his flushed face. "I was hoping you'd ask that." And she kissed him slowly, feeling his lips open beneath hers to beg for her tongue. She slid hers shyly into his mouth, and he sucked it deep, groaning against her lips as he grew hard and hot again inside her.

"Oooohhh, God!" she moaned as he sat up and pulled her legs to lock them around his hips.

He slid to the edge of the mattress and rose from the bed to press her back into the thick velvet draperies beside the windows, his strong hands cradling her lush curves as he stroked hungrily and deeply while she threw her head back and bit her lip to prevent a scream of pleasure. Her climax clamped her tight about his cock as he kissed her throat and ran his teeth over the throbbing vein in her neck.

His urgency amazed her, and she felt him come again, but he didn't stop, simply shuddering as he gave a growl of brutal pleasure before sinking back onto the bed and begging her to allow him to remain inside her while they both trembled and subsided, clinging to each other with shuddering delight.

She was shocked at his desperate need of her.

As the cobwebs of passion began to clear slowly from her bemused thoughts, she wondered numbly what the news had been that precipitated this marvelous explosion of lust on his part. She lifted herself from his chest and held herself over him as he stared up into her face, his eyes trailing hungrily over her breasts, her face, her hair, as if he were memorizing her.

"Antonio—why do I get the feeling that you are *not* telling me something important?"

Tonio closed his eyes and drew a deep, calming breath. "Because this may well be the last moment we have together for awhile, my darling."

She stared down into his face, and as his dark eyes opened to fire her blood once more, she whispered shakily, "You don't want our marriage anymore?"

Pain filled his eyes. "*Dios*, Christine—I will never let you go. But soon I may well be under arrest for the murder of Clarence Damien, and I don't think they will let me out until the situation is resolved."

Chris jerked back to stare in shock. He sat up and gently lifted her off his lap to slide from the bed and rise to run a shaking hand through his thick black hair. She dragged the crumpled sheet up to her chin in a protective reflex. "You—*killed* him?"

His eyes darkened at her look of fear. "No—but whoever did wishes it to appear so." He explained what had happened while Chris stared at him numbly. He waited for a moment after he finished talking, as if wondering how she would react.

She was out of the bed and clinging to his body before he could even think, and he inhaled deeply at the feel of her plastered to him, her sweet curves molded to him like she had been created for his delight.

He closed his eyes and laid his cheek against her bright copper curls, his arms wrapping her close as she gasped, "Oh, God! Who could have done it? Why implicate *you*?"

"I have several ideas about that, little love, but until I have proof, I need you to promise me that you will remain in this house and be safe if I must leave you for awhile."

"I won't let them take you! I—I'll..." She gulped as she lifted her face to meet his gaze.

"No one will be able to stop them from arresting me if they feel I am guilty. I will have to go, *mi querida*. I will have no choice but to cooperate."

Chris reached up to drag his head down and buried her face against his throbbing pulse in his throat. "I just got you! They can't take you away now! We can run away! Hide!"

His soft, rumbling laugh made her frown up at him as he gently caught her face between his hands and caressed her tear streaked cheeks with his thumbs. "I am ecstatic that you will miss me, *mi amor*, but I do not plan to let them convict me of murder."

"To hell with them! Let's go to Brazil! No one can get to you there!"

He turned her mouth up to his as he took her lips with slow, sensual enjoyment. He felt her hands moving so enticingly over his bare flesh as she pulled at his hips to press against her soft belly, her fingers digging into the muscles of his ass to keep him close.

He drew back to say huskily, "You will have me back in bed if you keep that up, Christine Rodriguez, and if you tease me more, you will be *so* unable to walk after I'm done with you, you won't be able to stop them from dragging me off in cuffs..."

"I adore you when you talk dirty to me, Antonio," she said, her voice a sigh against his skin.

He swept her up against his chest and carried her the three steps to their bed, growling deep in his throat at the look in her eyes as she dragged him down on top of her, not allowing him a moment to ready himself for her fevered onslaught. Her eager hands circled his cock and led him to her heat as she whispered huskily, "No pressure—just don't stop until I tell you it's okay."

He thrilled to her voracious desire for him as he obeyed and buried his body in hers, taking her wildly, almost savagely, as she urged him with little gasping whimpers of need that made it impossible to not do exactly as she demanded. He was amazed and enthralled by her ability to make him crazy with lust and to keep him hot and thrusting again and again. He felt her body clamp tightly about him as she hit her orgasm, and he bit the side of her throat gently as he dragged her hips up a bit and took her with a hiss of pure ecstasy.

He had never felt so wild to have a woman, as he felt in her arms. He heard her begging him to come for her as she hit another shattering climax, and he desperately wanted to oblige her, but he was unwilling to do so without first driving her to another, then another, and exulting in her passion beneath his hungry body.

When he came, he was so overcome by her acceptance and her need for him, he could not move away from her. Her greedy little body clamped him tight inside her as she kissed and licked his throat and skin like a sated kitten, almost purring in her delight with him.

"You are completely addictive, Antonio, and I can't seem to get enough of you."

He shuddered as she gently dragged her nails over his flat copper nipples and whispered huskily, "You have created a monster nymphomaniac, and they may end up having to drag us off locked together like this because I don't think I ever want to get out of this bed."

* * * *

She awoke hours later to find herself alone in their ruffled bed, and she closed her eyes to inhale the scent of him on her sheets. After a long moment, and the recollection of her completely wanton assault on his gorgeous body earlier, she rolled up and out of bed and grabbed fresh underwear as she padded into the bathroom to have a desperately needed shower.

She was amazed and shocked at her wicked enjoyment of him. It was hard to believe that she could go from prudish, uptight virgin to rampant sex maniac in just two days, but somehow it had happened, and just as she was realizing her porn-star potential, she was in danger of losing the man she had come to need more than life itself!

She closed her eyes and allowed the hot spray to wash away her aches from the wildly untrammelled sexual orgy she had ordered up just a few hours ago, and she wondered if he was as sore and as completely relaxed as she was right now. Probably not. But she would not be surprised if he were limping from the abandoned way she had abused his willing, thrilling body. He was amazingly delicious. In all her wildest dreams, she had never imagined that she would be married to a hot god with an appetite for pleasuring a woman without concern for his own satisfaction.

He had seemed to enjoy watching her as she had thrilled to his lovemaking, and his eager willingness to do anything she asked was amazing to her. She had been so nervous about asking him to indulge a couple of her darkest fantasies that she had stammered when she had managed to ask, but the dark glitter in those amazing eyes and the wicked smile that had curved his lips had left her breathless. She had heard so many horror stories from friends about how their men had been so selfish in bed; she had hardly been able to believe her luck in the draw!

Her thoughts of seduction and pleasure were slowly replaced with the thought of possibly seeing him taken away in cuffs, and she found herself plotting ways to save him—all of which were useless and dumb, naturally.

She dried herself with the thick towel and then wrapped it about her hair before she padded back into the bedroom—to find Luis Rodriguez lounging across her open bed, his eyes feverish in their intensity. She gave a cry of shock and dragged the towel off her hair to throw it about her naked body!

"What the hell do you think you're doing walking into our bedroom and acting like you own the place?" she hissed as he lifted one dark brow and let his hot gaze drift down to her bare feet and back up. "Get the hell out of here before I scream for Antonio!"

Luis drew a deep breath, his groin swelling at the rewarding sight of his cousin's new bride sauntering out of her bathroom naked, totally unaware of his presence. The look in her wide green eyes left him breathless as she gave a shriek of shock and covered herself instantly. *Incredible.*

"I'm afraid that would be a useless gesture, *little cousin*. Your *husband* is being taken away by the police even as we speak." He rose casually from her mattress and crossed toward her where she stood rooted to the spot, staring in sudden horror at him. "You needn't pretend you are worried about him for *my* benefit. I know why he married you and why you married him. You can stop the pretense now. It is all for nothing."

She stared at him numbly as he stepped across the floor toward her. "Get out of my bedroom, Luis!"

"You know, that little agreement you have with him is no good anymore. He is bankrupt. He cannot afford to pay you what he has agreed to, Christine. You would do far better to let me take care of you. I will have the rest of his wealth soon enough."

Chris blinked at the way the man behaved—as if he assumed that she would instantly fall into his arms since Antonio was supposedly penniless and being arrested.

She stiffened and inhaled shakily. "Get out! If you take one more step further, I'll—I'll brain you!" Her free hand went for the vase of flowers beside her.

His smile was frightening. "You would most likely have to let go of that towel to attack me, little spitfire. Which would greatly please me."

"Get out! *Now!*" Her voice rose and she tensed to throw.

"Luis! How dare you come into my brother's house and frighten my sister-in-law!" Adriana's voice rose behind him, and the man turned to smile at his cousin triumphantly.

"Ah, Tonio's two staunch little defenders! Dear cousin, I hate to tell you the bad news, but your brother has committed a murder—and shortly, I will have the power to not only *frighten* her, but to evict her—and you, as well." His eyes swiveled back to Chris. "Of course, if she chooses to remain as my *guest*, I'm certain that we can work *something* out that will benefit both of us."

Adriana's face went white. "How *dare* you stand there threatening me! This is my home! My brother is innocent of any crime! If you don't leave right now, I will call Jose to throw you out!"

Chris wondered what made Luis so certain that he would soon have full control of Antonio's home. An ugly feeling crawled along her nerves as she lifted the vase higher. "Call him, Adriana—because if Jose doesn't throw this leech out, I will end up breaking this vase over his damned head."

Luis laughed softly, and raised his hands in a gesture of mock surrender. "Have it as you wish for now, dear ladies, but soon, I will stake my legal claim to this house and all of the Rodriguez properties when my cousin is sent to prison for murder." His eyes roved over Chris' wet skin in a manner that made her want to vomit.

The man sauntered out of the room, and Chris sagged back against the wall behind her, the vase and its contents dropping to the carpet and spilling around her feet. She sank down the wall to stare up at her sister-in-law in shock. Adriana was suddenly there draping her bathrobe over her naked body as she covered her face with her hands and sobbed in fear for Antonio.

"Luis is beyond foul! The nerve! How he thinks he can treat us this way is beyond me." Adriana's voice was low and furious, and as she urged Chris to her wobbly feet, she wrapped an arm about her shoulders and began a tirade in Spanish that most likely contained every foul epithet the girl knew.

Chris was barely able to grip the clothes she had laid out with her trembling fingers, and Adriana petted her wet hair gently as the girl said bracingly, "If that son of a dog thinks he can frighten you and get away with it, he is very wrong."

As Adriana turned away to give her some privacy without leaving her alone, Chris dressed with shaking legs and trembling hands and managed to gather her scattered thoughts somewhat. When she sank onto the seat at her dressing table and dragged a comb through her hair, Adriana patted her on the shoulder and reached for the phone beside the bed. Chris had no idea who on earth she was calling, but Adriana spoke in an imperative manner to whoever answered, and then a moment later, she said, "Manuel! Thank God you are home! I need your help!"

Chapter Twenty-One

Blake frowned at Tonio as the man rubbed his wrists where the tight cuffs had bitten into his skin. "I couldn't get them to set bail for you. But I did manage to get them to hold off on an immediate extradition. We have three days. Wilhoit is using every bit of influence he can to get Burbidge to give us more time to get together evidence that will prove you innocent beyond a shadow of a doubt. If they drag you back to Mexico for a trial, we can't protect you from being manhandled or railroaded."

Tonio nodded. "I want you to hire protection for my wife and sister. Luis will be in seventh heaven over this, and I don't trust him not to do harm to them. I want extra security for both of them."

"You will need to sign over a power of attorney to me to keep your cousin at bay. Your cousin has asked the Ninth Circuit Court to give him power of attorney over your holdings until the trial. Wilhoit has put a hold on that one, but that man is like a barracuda."

"I will sign over power of attorney to my wife on this one." Tonio ignored Blake's startled look. "Tell Wilhoit I want that done immediately." He smiled quietly. "I would trust her with my life, Blake."

The attorney frowned oddly at him. "You may be doing exactly that, Mr. Rodriguez."

"If she is in control, Luis will not dare hurt her without it looking like he did it."

"Of course." Blake called the guard and left the conference room to make a phone call. Tonio nodded at the guard and followed him back to his cell. He could only pray that Luis wouldn't try anything desperate before he could get everything into place.

He ground his teeth to think that Chris was at that bastard's mercy in any way. And Adriana had all the good sense of a flea! She would be virtually worthless to help Chris here. *God help both of them if Luis thought he was in control!*

* * * *

Manuel Guerra glared expectantly at the *Ministerio Publico*, and his own attorney sank into the chair opposite him as the official swallowed hard and began to sweat. "Now, exactly what evidence do you have, my friend, that leads you to believe that my fiancée's brother has committed this heinous crime?"

Hector Fuentes tugged at his collar and drew a careful breath. "Charges were brought against *Señor* Rodriguez by the PJF. The evidence is under tight security. I cannot say more."

Manuel smiled quietly. "My friend, who put you into this office? Who has always taken good care of you and your cousins? Do you think you would still have this power if I were to

withdraw my support?" The man leaned back negligently in the leather chair, eyeing his immaculate nails in a bored fashion.

Señor Fuentes swallowed hard. The attorney beside Manuel opened his case and withdrew a packet. He slid it across the desk toward the official, who stared at it for a moment before sliding it into his desk drawer, unopened. The man cleared his throat.

"I have no control of what my officers do when I am not there. It is nearly time for Victor to go off duty. The officer in charge of evidence on the night shift is seldom on time. He is always a half hour late." The official shrugged eloquently. "Such a lack of concern for propriety. But there, I suppose I should severely warn him in future."

The attorney rose from the chair and said, "I have business elsewhere, *Señor* Guerra. I hope you will not need me further?"

Manuel nodded. "Go, Gerardo. I won't need you any more tonight." Then his eyes returned to the official's face. He smiled affably and said, "You are a good man, Hector. That is why I pay so much for police protection, eh? Where would we find another who would take care of us half so well?"

Fuentes looked slightly uncomfortable, but tried hard not to show it as he rose and took Guerra's outstretched hand in a firm clasp. "*Buenos noches, Señor Guerra.*"

Manuel growled under his breath as he walked from the building and watched as his attorney spoke with two men before climbing into his limo and leaving the compound. Without a backward glance, Manuel saw the men vanish into the next building in the compound. He glanced at his Rolex as he stepped into the passenger seat of his own car, and his driver closed the door.

The things he had to do sometimes to satisfy that little vixen! If she didn't come to heel after this, he would have to fly north and drag her back by her lovely hair. She would not be able to avoid him much longer. This was the last favor he did without having the right to full repayment, with her body beneath his and her cries in his ear.

He flicked his cell phone open and pressed the speed dial number for Gerardo. "I want that marriage agreement drawn up first thing tomorrow. There will be no further delays. And as soon as the banns can be published, I expect to be wed. See to it."

He smiled grimly as he thought of Adriana Rodriguez-Hidalgo clinging to his body as she repaid every one of the favors he had granted her over the past three years. If she was foolish enough to think he would continue to wait for her, she was in for a very big surprise. Tonio had already given him his blessing, and the maddening woman who had evaded him since he had first asked for her hand would not get away this time. He intended to wed and bed her before she could try to escape again.

* * * *

Chris lifted the phone from its cradle and forced herself to speak. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Rodriguez, this is Roland Blake, your husband's attorney. I will be at your home in about ten minutes. I have some papers Mr. Rodriguez wants you to sign if you don't mind?"

"Of course, Mr. Blake. I was hoping that someone would bring me news about Antonio. I've called the police station and the jail, but they won't let me talk to him."

"I've just come from visiting with him. I'll see to it that you can see him as soon as is humanly possible."

Chris hung up with a frown. He had sounded very odd. She shook off the feeling of impending danger, and decided that she was getting way too paranoid here. Her husband trusted Blake, and so would she. She hurried to Adriana's rooms and knocked lightly. When the girl didn't open the door, she knocked harder. "Adriana—are you awake?"

When the door opened, Adriana looked like she'd just awakened, and she yawned and ruffled her thick, silky hair. "What time is it?"

"It's nearly noon. Antonio's attorney is on his way. He wants to talk with me, and I wanted to let you know that I will be gone for a couple of hours this afternoon. I think you should be safe enough with the security men in the house, but I didn't want you to go looking for me and not find me."

The girl groaned irritably and closed the door in her face. Chris shook her head. Adriana was definitely used to keeping late hours and late mornings. Maybe that was the way all rich women were. If you didn't have to get up to go to a job, you could stay up all night and sleep till noon if you wanted.

The man at the end of the hallway glanced up from where he sat reading a magazine, and she nodded to him. "Good morning, Mr. Connor." He didn't respond, but went back to his magazine sullenly. He and two others had arrived last night, had spoken to Maria and Jose, and had immediately taken up stations at the main entry as well as in the upstairs and downstairs hallways of the house. She tried not to notice the bulge where the man's automatic was tucked under his armpit in a side holster.

As she turned to go back toward her room, Maria came out of the elevator and carried a lunch tray to the desk beside him, and Chris smiled at her.

Maria approached Chris with a concerned look on her face. "Señora, you did not eat breakfast, and your lunch sits untouched, as well. You will make yourself ill if you do not eat."

Chris shrugged. "I really have no appetite. I am just so worried. And having an army of scary looking bodyguards here isn't helping. Mr. Blake is going to get me in to see Antonio as soon as possible."

The tiny woman smiled at her and said softly, "Do you think the señor would want you fainting away from lack of nourishment when you go to visit him? He will think I am not doing my job."

Chris managed a smile. "I'll eat what's on my lunch tray, Maria. And don't fret—I love cold chicken."

She returned to her room and walked to the little breakfast set beside the fireplace. Forcing herself to eat, she cleared the covered plate and drank the milk without tasting it.

Her phone rang, and she answered.

"Señor Blake is in the library, señora."

"Thank you, Jose. I'll be down in a moment."

Blake glanced up as she stepped into the room, and he cleared his throat. "Mrs. Rodriguez."

"Mr. Blake." She smiled and nodded and gestured for him to have a seat on the sofa opposite hers. He sat and opened his case to pull out several sheaves of paper. "When can I see Antonio?"

"Your husband has ordered me to have your pre nup altered slightly while he is working his way through this legal mess. I will need your signature here—and here." He handed her a pen and indicated the lines she should sign. "And I will try to have a visit set up for you this afternoon, at 3:30."

Chris swallowed and then read the document thoroughly before she signed. She frowned and looked at the attorney. "What is this? Slightly altered? This looks like an annulment."

Blake lifted his brows. "Er, yes. He felt that, under the circumstances, it would be wiser to remove some of the restrictions from the pre-nup in order to expedite the annulment."

She blinked and re-read the document. Her heart was pounding wildly in her ears. "This says that the pre-nup is null and void. What does that mean, Mr. Blake?"

He cleared his throat. He seemed very nervous for some reason. "It means that he no longer expects you to abide by the existing agreement. An annulment has been arranged, negating the 24-month requirement. He has authorized me to deposit in your bank account the sum of the originally agreed-upon \$250,000.00 he offered you if and when the marriage ended, and he has stipulated that you are free to return to your apartment."

Chris looked at him in horror. "He can't! I mean, *I* can't! No, please. I can't do this!"

Blake forced a smile. "Of course, he will expect me to appoint a new business manager in place of Mr. Damien, but all in all, he is entrusting his estates and money to me, Mrs. Rodriguez."

You will be a free woman in less than a week. This is the way it must be to prevent his cousin from getting a court order to gain control." He met her green gaze and held the pen out once more.

She inhaled deeply and prayed she wasn't going to pass out. If Antonio wanted her out of danger he didn't have to go to such lengths. He had filed for an annulment? Her stomach felt like she'd swallowed acid.

She flushed with anger. "I suppose I have no choice then. I certainly don't want that leech to take any more of his money away. You know, the jerk tried to tell us that he was already in control of Antonio's affairs and he had the legal right to evict us!"

Blake stiffened and frowned. "When did he say this?" His voice sounded strange.

"Yesterday, right after Antonio was arrested. He walked into my bedroom and made out like he was king of the world. He even insinuated that he had already taken a considerable amount of money from Antonio! I got the feeling he might have been behind Clarence Damien in some way. I might have just been paranoid, but I thought I'd ask Antonio when I see him."

The look on Blake's face made her draw a deep breath. Something was definitely not kosher here, but she decided not to show she had noticed. That feeling of danger began to rise in her once more.

Something in the attorney's demeanor clawed at her as she signed the papers and turned to hand them back to the man. She suddenly had a clammy feeling on the back of her neck.

Blake quickly reached for the papers to tuck them back into his briefcase, and his eyes looked guarded. Chris inhaled slowly. Something seemed oddly not right. Her inner sense was telling her that something was definitely *wrong*.

"Oh, I really would appreciate a copy of these documents, Mr. Blake." She did not release the papers he was tugging on, keeping a tight grip on them.

He smiled tightly and nodded. "Of course. I'll have copies made as soon as I return to the office."

For some reason she couldn't quite put a finger on, Chris didn't think that those papers were written at her husband's request. "We have a copy machine in the office. I would really appreciate a copy before you leave, if you don't mind."

The way the man's eyes avoided hers made her uneasy. The way he had frozen up when she had mentioned the way Luis Rodriguez had talked to her and Adriana, she had the terrible feeling that Blake was aware of a lot more about the missing money than anyone could possibly guess. He seemed wary and nervous.

Chris buzzed Jose's extension on the intercom. "Jose, can you come to the library for a moment?"

"Yes, *señora*."

She smiled at Blake and said as calmly as she could, "I really don't understand all this legal stuff, and I was always told to get copies of anything I signed."

When Jose came into the library, Chris said, "Please take these papers Mr. Blake just had me sign and copy them, Jose. I would appreciate it so much!" Then she smiled at Jose and said, "Please lock the copies in the wall safe, Jose. They are very important, and I don't have the combination."

"Yes, *señora*."

Blake had no choice but to release his death grip on the sheaf of papers from his case to Jose, who nodded quietly and headed for the office across the hall. Chris smiled at him and engaged him in polite conversation until the man returned and handed Blake a sheaf of papers.

Jose glanced at her and nodded without comment. He stepped back into the darkened office and remained out of sight until the attorney had left the house. When he was gone, he stepped back into the library.

"Is there something wrong, *señora*? I assumed when you told me to put these in the safe, that there was something gravely wrong. We have no wall safe."

Chris reached for the papers he held in his hands, and smiled shakily at him as she saw that they were the originals. He had handed the photocopies to Blake. "You are a very intuitive man, Jose. I hoped you would catch that." She smiled at him and hurried upstairs to shove the documents safely under the king-sized mattress on her bed.

Chris picked up the phone and dialed Judge Wilhoit's office. His secretary answered. He was in court. She left him a message that she needed to meet with him when court ended for the day. She told his secretary that she would arrive around 5:15, since she was going to be just down the street visiting with Antonio at 3:30. Then she sat down to think over what Luis had said and figure out how he had seemed to know about the pre-nup when nobody but she, her husband, and Blake had known about it. Her thoughts wavered. Blake had to be working with Luis—and Clarence Damien. It wasn't Antonio who wanted her out of the way and no longer married. It was his attorney. Deep in her gut, she knew it. *But how could she prove it?*

* * * *

Blake swore foully as he slipped behind the wheel of his Mercedes. That fucking asshole had nearly blown it! Rodriguez was nothing but a liability now. The bastard had practically blurted everything out because he was hot for his cousin's lesbian wife! He was no longer a safe bet here.

As he started the car and drove away, he decided that it was time for him to dump the excess baggage and make certain no one would ever tie him in with Damien or Rodriguez.

He was tired of having to take all the risks and do all the dirty work while that jerk-off cousin of Rodriguez's thought he was in the driver's seat. He had worked too long and too hard for everything to go up in smoke now. And the little queer bride was far too fucking sharp to count out. He would have to have Connor take care of her. Make it look like Luis had done it.

He smiled grimly as he thought about Rodriguez rotting in a Mexican prison while his loyal and trustworthy attorney was the only person left who could handle the Rodriguez estates and properties.

He had quietly managed to siphon off more than three million bucks over the last few years. And no one was the wiser now that Damien was out of the picture. It had been easy, hiring a crooked business manager and making him think that Luis Rodriguez had actually hired him. Then transferring money from Damien through Luis and on to his personal account in the Caymans.

Luis Rodriguez was stupid enough to think the half million he had gained was all the money that had been taken. But that was chump change compared to what money was tucked away in his accounts offshore. It had taken him ten years of working at it covertly, but he had bilked the old man out of enough to keep him in high style for the rest of his life. And after he gained full control, he could milk the estate legally and no one would ever be the wiser.

He pulled out of the estate lane onto the highway and reached for his cell phone. "Connor? Mrs. R. is thinking she needs to visit her husband this afternoon. It would be better if she didn't get there. It would be even better if the whole mess went up in smoke. You know what to do. Let me know when it's done."

* * * *

Jose picked up the house phone. "Si, señora?"

"Jose, I would appreciate it if you would do me a great favor?" Chris said quietly.

"I will come up at once." She replaced the receiver, but not until after she heard a soft click that told her that another ear had been on the hallway extension upstairs. *Someone in the house was eavesdropping.*

Chris was pacing her bedroom floor when he knocked, and she opened her door and smiled at him quietly for the benefit of the man seated a few steps down the hall beside the third floor gallery window.

"Jose, I was cleaning up the closets, and I would appreciate it if you would move this big trunk downstairs to the storage in the cellar. It's only my old clothes and some of my books, but it's pretty heavy. I couldn't possibly move it myself. There isn't enough room in my closet with all the new things I have." She pulled him into the room and allowed the door to swing mostly shut, continuing her calm request as she led him across the room to where she had a trunk beside the bed.

Once they were out of easy earshot of the door, she handed him a sheaf of papers and whispered urgently, "Please get these to Judge Wilhoit immediately. There's a letter in there. I believe I have an idea who really did murder Mr. Damien." Her eyes held his. "I want you to send the girls and Maria away to somewhere safe until we're certain it's safe to come home. I might be paranoid, but I prefer to have you all safe."

"What about you, *señora*? I have orders to see to your safety." Jose's dark eyes were worried.

She decided it would be better that Jose not know her suspicions, or he might be in danger, too. "I should be safe enough for the moment." Her worried eyes met his, and he nodded quickly, folding the papers and tucking them under his jacket into his belt.

She resumed speaking normally as he dragged the heavy trunk across the floor, and she opened the door as he hefted it out into the corridor. "And please tell Maria that I would like her to serve dinner at six? I will be home early." She didn't know who she could trust at the moment, but she wanted to make sure it didn't appear that she was aware of anything.

"*Sí, señora.*" Jose dragged the heavy trunk down the hall to the service elevator, and pressed the button, noting from the corner of his eye that the man in the hallway checked his watch and pressed his finger to the ear bud he wore. He felt a frisson of concern run along every nerve in his body. He sensed that they were *all* in terrible danger.

He dragged the trunk into the elevator and pressed the button for the cellar.

It was time. Connor set his magazine aside and beeped Ligner in the front hallway. "You and Ferrano clear out. Lock the place up tight when you go. Nobody comes in or goes out. Keep an eye on the old man and the cook. I'll take care of the two women." He adjusted his jacket and rose from the chair, walking toward the red-head's door.

It shouldn't be hard to take care of the red-head and the sweet Mexican tamale. The tamale was still in her bed sleeping the day away, and the red-head was completely alone now. He smiled as he considered having a little fun before he finished the red-head. She had a sweet little ass.

Chris blinked as her door opened, and instead of Adriana standing there, she found the man who was assigned to be her security standing there. "Mr. Connor—is there something wrong?" She glanced at her watch, but she instinctively knew he wasn't there to drive her to the jail. She tried not to panic as he stepped inside her room and slid his automatic from his shoulder holster. "What's going on, Mr. Connor?" Her voice sounded admirably calm even to her.

Her face drained of blood at the sight of his gleaming chrome Glock.

He inhaled deeply and said softly, "Just doing what I've been paid to do, sweet thing. I'm supposed to take you somewhere quiet and keep you there. Now you don't want to make any noise that'll wake up your sister-in-law. You don't want her to get hurt, do you?" He sauntered confidently across the thick carpet to grin down at her.

Chris' thoughts swirled, and then fought to focus. Dear God! Why hadn't she realized until now that Blake had hired the security men for the house? *How could she have been so stupid?*

Panic reared its nasty head, but she realized she couldn't let it get the best of her. Her adrenaline pumped. Her mind focused on the weapon aimed at her chest. Take her somewhere quiet? No way. He had been told to kill her. That she was very sure of. But he couldn't just shoot her. That would be too obvious.

"You aren't going to hurt me, are you?" She had to make him believe she was helpless and frozen by fear. "Please don't hurt me," she breathed shakily as she frantically tried to think of something that would get her out of this mess ... anything!

The man ran his hand down her arm and grinned at her. Her stomach rolled as he pulled her against him and breathed against her ear, "It might go easier if you were nice to me, sweet thing."

She gritted her teeth and fought for control of her panic. She turned her head away from his searching mouth and saw her bedroom door inching open. Adriana opened the door wider, a look of shocked horror on her face. Chris had to keep Connor from seeing the woman.

"Don't hurt me ... I won't scream. Just put that gun down. It could go off."

Connor laughed in an unpleasant way, and waved the weapon under her nose. "If I put it down, what'll you do for me, babe?"

She tried to look sultry, but was certain she was failing miserably. Adriana was sneaking up behind the man with the same vase she had wanted to use on Luis, and Chris' heart sank. *Oh, run you twit!*

Seeing that her sister-in-law was swinging the damn vase, Chris did the only thing she could think of. She made a grab for the gun and tried to drag it downward and away from her body before the vase made contact.

She heard the impact, and felt the spray of water as the heavy vase shattered over his skull, just as he cursed and pulled the trigger in reflex.

She felt a sharp burning pain in the back of her calf. Things seemed to happen in slow motion as the heavy man crumpled and dragged her to the carpet with him. Shock and adrenalin gave her enough strength to shove his inert form off her, and crawl toward his weapon a couple of feet away on the carpet.

She grabbed the gun and struggled to her feet just as Adriana rushed to her and stopped, a shriek of horror escaping her throat. "You are bleeding!"

Chris grabbed her and dragged her back out the door. "Shut up and run! Get to the library! Don't stop! Don't look back!" Her voice was a hiss of pain.

The girl obeyed, easily outdistancing Chris, who was limping and trying not to collapse. Chris barely made it to the library, and the women shoved the door shut behind them, bracing a chair under the doorknob. Adriana was still in her bathrobe over a satin nightgown, her eyes were wide with shock as she stared at her sister-in-law, whose hands were now covered in blood, and who held a wicked looking weapon in one hand.

"Quick—and stop making noise!" Chris swore with the pain as she limped to the fireplace and found the secret latch to the door at the back of the stone opening. Adriana gasped as the panel at the rear of the fireplace slid aside and revealed the passage that Antonio had showed Chris just a few days earlier.

Chris dragged Adriana's bathrobe belt out of its loops and shoved her toward the opening. "No questions. Just shut up if you want to get out of here alive. Go!" She kept her strained voice low.

Chris wrapped the tie of Adriana's bathrobe around the bleeding wound in her calf and almost fainted at the agony. She didn't want to leave a blood trail to the fireplace. She dragged off her blood-stained cardigan and then threw a statue made of metal through the mullioned glass of the library window to make it seem like they had crawled out into the garden.

She broke out more glass and then tossed the sweater out of the hole to the ground below. She quickly followed her sister-in-law into the fireplace and hit the switch on the other side just before she heard a commotion in the hallway outside the library door. The pounding and the splintering of the thick oak door receded behind them as she moved them deep into the corridor beyond the fireplace toward safety.

Limping and biting her lip to keep silent, she hurried Adriana as quickly as she could along the dark corridor without hitting any of the light switches, just in case some light might escape. Adriana didn't utter a peep as she felt her way along behind Chris until they reached the spot that led into the downstairs study, where Antonio had introduced her to passion that she'd never dreamed existed. Then she sank down onto the cold stone and thought she would faint from the pain.

Adriana dropped to her knees beside Chris and clutched her arm tightly as she sobbed softly into Chris' shoulder. "When I came to your room, I thought that man was kissing you! Then you said that about the gun ... and I just..." Her whisper was a series of disjointed words.

"Shhh. I should be yelling at you for endangering yourself ... but thanks. Stay quiet—we'll be okay," Chris whispered weakly. "They might hear us." The pain was making her sick to her stomach. She fought to remain alert. Conscious.

The girl nodded and clung to her, and they waited.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jose ushered his daughters and his wife through the chill tunnel from the lower garage to the well-hidden opening near the entrance to the grounds. He kissed Maria fiercely and hissed for them to run to the neighboring home about a mile down the canyon.

He handed her his cell phone and the sheaf of papers. "Hurry, and don't let anyone see you. Stay in the bushes and don't stop! Call the police, *mi amor!* Tell them there is trouble—and people with guns. I cannot leave the *señora* and *señorita* Adriana without protection!"

He was watching them scurry into the woods that concealed the tunnel exit when he heard the gunshot. Maria gave a little shriek of terror and herded the girls as quickly as she could, and he whirled to race back along the tunnel. Fear for his family ate at him, but he could not leave with them. He ran as he had never run before, his heart in his throat, and prayed that he would not find two dead bodies when he arrived.

The tunnel led him back to the garage, and he checked to make sure that no one was there before he burst out into a possible trap. There was no sign of the man who had been stationed at entrance.

Hurrying through the lower level of the five car garage, past the town car and the motorcycle and the Jaguar, he eased his way into the kitchen, glancing about quickly. It was empty, but he could hear angry shouts in the corridor beyond the dining room.

He heard shouts and pounding, and realized that for some reason the men were trying to break into one of the downstairs rooms. He listened and then slipped across the kitchen to the stairs that led to the cellar and quickly stepped in and bolted the stairwell door behind him to prevent anyone from following. He listened to the muffled splintering of wood as he made his way along the dark corridor that led between the downstairs rooms, rather than heading down to the cellar. He could reach the rooms where the men were and see if they had the *señora*.

As he felt his way along in the dark, unwilling to turn on the lights, he thought for a moment that he could hear the quiet sobs of a woman. And he stopped dead, waiting for the sound again. Dared he hope?

* * * *

Connor swore furiously as he ran across the blood-spattered carpeting to the broken window and jerked aside the drapes to stare down the five feet from the window to the flower bed below, where a bloodied woman's sweater was caught in the branches of a shrub. His eyes sought footprints in the soft soil. There were none. The bitch hadn't jumped out, even though she had tried to make them think she had.

He raised a hand for Ferrano to be silent as he probed the rest of the drapes and behind the furniture. She had to be either still in the room or to have sneaked out the other door. There was a door on the far side of the library leading into another part of the house.

Once he had made sure she wasn't in the library, he nodded for his companion to check the other door. It was locked from the other side.

"You and Ligner go around through the entryway and check what room that goes to. She hasn't come through the hall or we'd have seen her. If she gets out of the house, this gig is completely fucked, and we're out a half mil."

Ligner headed out the door as Ferrano nodded and drew his .38. "She won't get past us. All the exit doors are locked up tight. She's still in the house." His face was a mask of fury. He wasn't going to let any flighty little bitch lose him that kind of money. "You check the closets and kitchen again."

Connor was bleeding profusely from a gash over his left eye where a piece of the heavy ceramic vase had lodged. He had also lost his Glock to that fucking little bitch! He wanted to do more than kill her. He wanted to torture her. He swiped the blood from his face and swore foully.

They found the study empty. There was no door leading out. Ferran pulled his cell out and flipped it open.

* * * *

"What?" Blake answered tersely.

"Connor fucked up. She neutralized him and took off. We're still looking. She can't have gotten out of the house. It's locked down tight. She's hiding somewhere. Looks like Connor shot her—there's blood everywhere."

Blake swore angrily. *Fucking stupid assholes!* He bit his lip and closed his eyes. "Torch the place. That'll take care of the bodies and the evidence, and it'll clean up the mess Connor made. Make sure no one gets out. Then you three get the hell out of there and wait for me to contact you."

Blake cursed foully as he snapped his phone shut. This just kept getting more fucked up with each minute that passed. He had wanted to keep that house. Burning it to the ground because some stupid asshole couldn't do his job right was a pain in the ass. But he had the rest of the properties. One less house wouldn't be a problem, and there *was* the insurance. *Which he would collect on behalf of the owner.*

He hung up and drew a deep breath. Yeah. A fire would make everything far easier.

* * * *

Chris clung to Adriana in the dark and cradled the girl's head against her shoulder. "Shhh—we're safe. You'll be okay. They won't find us here." Her voice was a ragged whisper.

Adriana was going to get them both killed if she kept sobbing aloud. Chris debated on trying to crawl further along the dark corridor, but she just didn't have the strength. The wound in her calf was still bleeding despite the pressure of the wrapping, and she felt light headed from loss of blood. She wasn't even sure if there was any way out, except through the fireplaces. And the men were still out there waiting for them to come out of hiding. If she didn't get out soon, she would likely just bleed to death right here. But if Adriana kept quiet, *she* would be safe enough.

How the hell had she missed that one? She should have seen it coming! *Blake had hired the men!* She had been stupid to think that they weren't a part of the plot. She was fiercely glad that she'd told Jose to get his family off the property. She could only hope he had managed to do it, and that the papers and her letter would be in Judge Wilhoit's hands.

Her head was spinning.

Was that smoke? Had someone lit the fireplace?

She felt too weak to hold up her head. Adriana gave a moan of terror and buried her face against Chris again. "They are setting fire to the house! We are trapped!"

"Shhh—the fire can't burn concrete and brick. You are going to be okay." She felt her consciousness slipping away, and as smoke began to make it very hard to breathe, she lost track of everything.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jose smelled smoke and knew what was happening. He worked his way as quickly as he could toward the sound of voices. His foot struck something heavy and soft, and he nearly fell over the body that was stretched across the corridor.

He heard Adriana's shriek of shock and dropped instantly to his haunches to reach out to the woman. His hands caught her mouth and he hissed, "Hush! Where is the *señora*?"

"Jose! She is right here! She has been shot! What are we going to do?"

His hands found the limp body, and he prayed silently as he felt for a pulse. He swallowed hard as he found it—but it was weak. He dragged the unconscious woman from the floor into his arms. "Hold onto my jacket. Don't stop and don't make a sound, no matter what. *Usted entiende?*"

He didn't wait for a reply. He felt the *señorita* clutch his coat and he made his way swiftly back the way he had come, trying to keep from inhaling too much smoke. Adriana was choking and he whispered, "Cover your mouth with your robe." She obeyed quickly.

As the smoke filled the corridor and heat began to weaken them, he reached the cellar stairwell and the locked door to the kitchen. He placed a hand on the door to see if it was hot, then he carefully unlocked it and shoved it open. They almost fell into the kitchen. The fire was licking at the walls around the swinging door to the dining room. He shoved Adriana ahead of him toward the garage exit, and when they reached it, he felt that door for heat.

Adriana stared in shock at Chris' blood soaked, limp form in his arms, and she sobbed, "Is she dead?"

"Not yet, *señorita*! Now move! *Rápidamente!*"

Adriana didn't question his terse command. She shoved the door open and stumbled down the four steps to the narrow hallway leading to the underground garage. Her hands sought the key rack in the darkness. "The car keys are gone!" Her voice was tight.

"They were taking no chances on anyone driving out. We must run, little one! Keep low and head straight around the back of the town car toward the west wall. There is a metal half door that leads to a tunnel. Go and no matter what you hear or see—*do not stop!*"

She nodded jerkily, and as Jose opened the door and bent low with his limp burden, Adriana hurried after him.

They were nearly to the half door when a man's voice shouted out, and a bullet slammed into the wall above their heads. Adriana shrieked and ran like a frightened deer, flinging the half door wide as she scurried through. Jose dived in behind her and dropped his tender burden to the

floor as he whirled to drag the four-foot metal door closed and bar it. He heard the man cursing on the other side and a couple of bullets slammed into the metal. Adriana screamed and fainted.

"Leave them! This fucking place is going up like tinder! They'll roast in there! That door is metal. It's probably just a storage room. Shove that table against the door and let's get the hell out of the place before the cops come." Ligner was furious.

Ferrano nodded. "Screw Blake if he thinks I'm taking a dive on this one! They saw my face! They saw yours!"

"They won't make it out alive! If the heat doesn't roast them, the smoke will do it! Let's go!" Connor growled, sneering at the metal door. At least there was some satisfaction in knowing the bitch would roast like a fucking pig.

Jose rose shakily to his feet, hefting the limp woman in his arms. The *señorita* would wake soon, but if he didn't get the *señora* to medical help, she might not wake at all. He hurried along, praying that he was not too late even now.

Leaving the *señorita* where she lay, he carried the *señora* to the far end of the tunnel and listened carefully for the sound of footsteps, voices, or a car. When he heard the sound of sirens, he closed his eyes and thanked the Virgin for the safety of his family—Maria had summoned the police!

He waited for a few seconds, until the sirens were very near, and then he stepped out of the overhanging shrubs and waved down the police car that was coming toward him. He sagged to his knees, coughing. Another police car and a fire truck came flying toward estate entry.

A silver Mercedes flew out the gates, and Jose waved for the second police car to catch them, yelling and gesticulating. As the police car accelerated and followed the Mercedes, he waved at the policeman climbing out of the first black and white and shouted over the sirens, "Ambulance! A woman has been shot!"

* * * *

The pain was just a dull throb now. Her body felt heavy and numb. Her lungs burned. She tried very hard to lift her head, but her muscles refused to cooperate.

"Adriana?" Her voice was scratchy. God, but she was thirsty. She opened her eyes slowly and blinked in confusion at the textured ceiling tiles. The passageway looked so different in the light. She hadn't noticed the ceiling tiles before.

She tried to lift her hand to her face to see what was sticking up her nose, but her hand was tangled in a bunch of tubing. She frowned and stared at the tape that held an IV catheter in her wrist, and then her eyes shifted to the heart and lung monitor that was recording her pulse rate and oxygen sat levels.

How had she gotten out of the passageway? Had Adriana dragged her out of the burning house?

She touched the cannula that fed oxygen into her nose, and she ran her dry tongue over her chapped lips. Water would be good right now. She tugged the tubing from her nostrils and moaned. A voice came from somewhere out of her line of sight, and hands replaced the cannula on her face.

"You need to leave the oxygen on, Mrs. Rodriguez. You are suffering from smoke inhalation."

"Um—thirsty," she croaked.

"We're giving you Lactated Ringer's and glucose. Doctor Drake will be in to review your charts, and we'll see if we can let you have a drink."

"Ice cubes?" she whispered.

"I'll get Doctor Drake."

Chris closed her eyes and tried to clear her sore throat. When she opened them a minute later, a man with blue eyes and silver hair was leaning over her, checking her pupils and holding up fingers for her to count. "How many?"

"Three and your thumb—and I want some goddamned water! My throat is burning, okay?"

"Do you know where you are?"

"I'd say I'm in the hospital. Do I win a glass of water?"

"Do you know what day this is?"

"I know what day it was when I passed out—so tell me how long I've been out, and I'll tell you what the frigging date is. *Water?*"

Dr. Drake nodded to the nurse. "Bring her some water."

"Very good. And I really want to know if Adriana is all right." Chris cleared her throat again, struggling to sit up.

"You need to rest—I'll lift the head of your bed. Miss Rodriguez is fine. She's in far better shape than you. How did you get that bullet wound?" The doctor was speaking quietly, writing on the clipboard.

"Some fucking asshole shot me. Look—I need to talk to the police—to Judge James Wilhoit—somebody tried to kill us!"

"The police are waiting to talk to you, but I need to make sure you are all right, Mrs. Rodriguez, before I let them in." He wrote more on her chart as the nurse helped her sip some cool water through a bendy straw.

"We dressed and stitched the flesh wound on your left leg—it was fairly clean—the bullet missed the bone and had passed through. We gave you tetanus and a dose of IV antibiotics. You are being treated for smoke inhalation and dehydration. We gave you something for the pain." He glanced up at her as she sank back into her pillow, sighing.

"If you feel up to it, I can let the police in to talk with you now."

* * * *

Detective Steven Gregory smiled at her as the police stenographer tucked her tape recorder back into the bag she carried with her laptop. He shook his head. "We have an APB out for Roland Blake. The men in the Mercedes gave our pursuit cars the slip. They found the car abandoned by the Anaheim Amtrak station, but with the composites you, Mr. Alvarado, and Miss Rodriguez gave us, we have enough info to find them. They weren't security agents. There is no record of any of them in the state. We are watching every station and airport in a five state area and on the border. We'll be in touch as soon as we have anything more to tell you."

Chris swallowed hard. "What about Luis Rodriguez? I'm sure he was involved."

"He has an alibi, Mrs. Rodriguez. We have nothing but hearsay evidence to hold him on."

"I want to see my husband, detective." Her head was aching.

Gregory rose from the chair beside her bed. "I think that can be arranged. I'm pretty sure you already have a couple of visitors chomping at the bit to see you, so we won't take any more of your time. Thank you, Mrs. Rodriguez. We'll be in touch."

As the detective and the police stenographer left her room, Adriana, Jose, and Maria came tumbling in, all talking at once, until the nurse said firmly, "If she gets too agitated, I'll have to ask all of you to leave."

Chris swallowed hard and hugged Adriana and Maria, and clasped Jose's shaking hands. "I'm so happy you are all okay! I was so worried..." her voice trembled wearily to a halt, and she fought tears.

"I was terrified! I thought we would both die," Adriana whispered, tears streaking down her cheeks.

Chris shook her head. "I told you we would be fine." Her green eyes slid to Jose's pale face, and she whispered, "I know it was you who found us—and I want to thank you—and you, Maria. God bless both of you. Antonio doesn't know how lucky he is to have you."

Maria was fighting tears. Jose swallowed convulsively and gripped her hand tightly. "The police will find those men, *señora*—and they will find Roland Blake. And God help them when they do!" he said, his voice was tight with fury.

Chris managed a watery smile. "Have you seen my husband yet?"

Jose drew a deep breath. "He is well and very anxious for word that you are in no danger. I am going directly to him from the hospital. I only waited to see you and assure myself that you were safe."

She nodded and closed her eyes wearily. "Please tell him—" her voice choked. She ran the back of her bandaged arm over her eyes and whispered, "Tell him that his secret saved our lives."

Jose nodded gravely and bent to kiss her hand before taking Maria and Adriana by the shoulders and escorting them from the room. The nurse checked her IV and then injected something into the IV that made her lose track of everything.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Tonio glanced up as Manuel Guerra stepped into the visiting room beyond the glass barrier and sank onto the chair opposite him. The man shrugged his wide shoulders beneath the Armani suit jacket and smiled at his old friend through the thick glass, picking up the receiver on his side of the partition.

Tonio picked up and said, "What the hell are you doing here? I thought you were in Mexico City on business."

Guerra shook his head and sighed. "I am here to do what I am able to help you rebuild. The house was not a total loss. It appears that only three rooms were very badly damaged by the fire, and workmen are already on site. By the time you get out of here, they should have completed the repairs and made it habitable again."

Tonio noted the gleam in his friend's eyes and asked quietly, "And my sister?"

Guerra grinned broadly and flashed his white teeth wickedly. "Already unhappily set up in my place in Coldwater Canyon. She fought the idea, but I managed to explain to her that it was in her own best interests—after all, she owes me enough favors that I expect she will agree to marry me shortly. I may, however, need a prod from you. Agreed?"

"Agreed. What news of the charges against me?"

"What charges?" Manuel grinned even more broadly.

Tonio's heart pounded wildly in his chest. "Then why the hell am I still in here?" he grated.

"Oh, I expect it just takes time for the paperwork to be completed. In the meantime, I have a car waiting outside the jail and will be happy to take you anywhere you wish." He glanced at his watch. "I would say the guard should be on his way to retrieve you right now." His dark eyes crinkled. "And if you insist that your sister marries me, all the favors I have done for you will be erased—eh, *amigo*?"

* * * *

Chris frowned at the nurse who was removing her IV's and cleaning the adhesive off her arms. "When can I go home?"

"As soon as the doctor releases you." The woman smiled at her as she rolled the IV stand away and removed the heart monitors from Chris' chest, ribs, and shoulder. "I expect him to come in as soon as we are done here." She gently rubbed some adhesive remover over the red areas on Chris' skin.

"Are you ready to go home, Mrs. Rodriguez?" the intern asked as he stepped inside the room and jotted release orders on her chart. His brown eyes twinkled at the look on her face. "You have been given a clean bill of health. The nurse will give you the instructions on wound care. I expect you to visit us in a week to remove the stitches that haven't dissolved away."

Chris was angry and frustrated. But not with her care or the hospital staff. She was angry that she had been unable to see Antonio for these past three days, and that his home had been burned to the ground by men who were still on the loose. Men who might come back and try to finish the job they had started.

Detective Gregory had not answered her calls, nor had Judge Wilhoit. Her husband was still in jail—if *they hadn't already shipped him off to Mexico for trial!* Not knowing was a thousand times worse than bad news could ever be. Adriana had come to visit twice with Maria and Jose, but they seemed to have no news about Antonio.

Her calls to the metro lockup had been fruitless. *She wanted information. And by God, she was going to get some!*

After the doctor and nurse had left her to dress and prepare to go down to admissions and check out, she limped over to the narrow closet where her clothing had been placed and thanked Maria and Adriana mentally for thinking to bring something for her to wear when she checked out. As she thought of all the wonderful things Antonio had bought her going up in that fire, she sank onto the chair beside the narrow bed and wept.

Not for the loss of a few clothes—and not for the loss of the things that he had given her. She wept for the loss of the man she had fallen crazily in love with. The man who might be forever lost to her in some dank Mexican prison because of the greed of his attorney and his cousin. *And both of those bastards were still out there—waiting!*

She dressed mechanically, favoring her bandaged leg as she stepped into the trim skirt that Adriana had brought her. She tucked in the cotton blouse and slipped her bare feet into the shoes she'd been wearing when they'd been forced to run for their lives. She winced at the blood that remained on the back of the left shoe. She drew a deep breath and wondered if Jose was going to come to pick her up and take her to her apartment in Torrance, or if other transportation had to be arranged. She was immersed in a whirl of confused, strained thoughts when a tap on the nearly-closed door brought her around.

"I'm dressed," she said wearily.

The sight of Jose smiling at her from the door made her heart leap and her smile reappear, and she barely managed to keep from flying at him and grabbing him in a hard hug. She doubted that he would appreciate her enthusiasm.

Instead, she said happily, "I was wondering if I would get a chance to see you again. I so badly wanted to tell you how much I have appreciated your friendship and help."

Jose's brown eyes widened, and then his brows drew into a line of confusion. He returned her smile and took her small plastic bag containing the items the hospital had supplied her with, and he held the door for her. A nurse waited with the inevitable wheelchair.

"You are all checked out, and I will take you down to the loading portico, Mrs. Rodriguez." The nurse smiled broadly at her, and she sank into the wheelchair for her free ride.

As Jose paced beside the chair, she couldn't help reaching up and catching his calloused hand and hanging on as if her life depended on it. She desperately needed to feel connected to somebody right now. Somebody who was close to Antonio.

Jose felt her fingers slip into his and grip with surprising strength for a woman, and he blinked in surprise, barely containing his jerk of shock. She was so pale and so frightened looking; he merely closed his fingers over her slim hand and decided that his *señora* needed comfort. He would not deny her such a small comfort; although, he was sure his employer would think it very forward of him to hold his wife's hand so openly. Her touch made him feel very humble. This woman was very special, indeed, to even consider accepting comfort from a paid servant.

Once outside the hospital, Jose gently disengaged her grasp and hurried to open the rear door of the limo, and as she sank into the lush seat, he smiled and said softly, "Everything will be fine, *señora*—I promise." He then placed her small bag into the trunk, and slid behind the wheel. As he started the engine, the privacy glass slid down, and he smiled again.

"Have you spoken with my husband, Jose? Is he all right?"

"The *señor* is in good health. He wishes me to tell you that he will see you very soon."

Chris sighed and leaned back against the lush leather, closing her eyes. "Then he isn't in Mexico?"

"No, *señora*."

"Thank God," she breathed wearily. At least she could see him—talk to him—even if it was through inch thick glass at the Metro Lockup. A quick stop at her apartment, a change of clothes, she had left a couple of old things in her closet, and she would be on her way to see Antonio.

She rubbed her temples gently and allowed the heavenly cushioned ride of the limo to lull her as the car flew homeward. She was too tired to bother making conversation. She hoped Jose understood. So damn much had happened. The terror and the shock of the past few days had taken their toll.

So had the damn sedative the nurse had given her by mouth an hour before she had checked out. The soft seat and the gentle movement of the superbly sprung vehicle put her into the first really sound sleep she'd had since she'd been shot by that prick, Connor. She sank into a blessed oblivion, feeling safe and relaxed for the first time in days.

* * * *

"We found Blake trying to board a private jet to Rio de Janeiro. He put the finger on your cousin, of course, so we have a warrant out on Luis Rodriguez. We have a team going over Blake's apartment and his office, and we have an international warrant for search and seizure to get us into your cousin's place in Mexico City as well. The Mexican authorities are working closely with us. Odd—they usually don't."

The District Attorney and Police Chief Fredericks had wasted not a moment of time in setting things into motion once the charges against him had been dropped, and he was released from custody. As Tonio signed a formal complaint against Luis and Blake in the DA's office, he was more concerned with personal things than with the apprehension of his cousin. Luis was probably hiding out somewhere in Mexico, fairly safe from the police, since he had plenty of money to buy the local police off with. He would be surprised if the man showed his face north of the border again. But then, Luis *was* capable of even that kind of stupidity.

He was eager to leave them to their work—eager to get to his home—to his wife. Jose was picking her up at the hospital while he was stuck here, going through the necessary paperwork to put his cousin and his attorney behind bars for a long time. He would have much preferred doing that task himself, but he had been trapped by legalities into spending the last several hours in the DA's office, making statements and filing charges.

As the two men shook his hand and apologized for the anxiety and the embarrassment he had undergone while in custody, Tonio was heatedly imagining his wife's arms wrapped around his shoulders—her legs wrapped around his hips—his mouth devouring her sweet lips and breasts.

By the time he was behind the wheel of the sleek Jaguar that Jose had dropped off for his use several hours ago, he was as hard as a damn steel pole and so close to bursting he could barely breathe. He peeled out of the police parking ramp and barely managed to keep his speed at an even eighty on the freeway, even though the Jag was capable of over one-twenty. The last thing he wanted was a state cop to haul him over for reckless driving.

Even though the trip took him less than an hour, he felt as if he'd been driving for days when he pulled into the long private drive that led to the house. If Jose was right, three crews of workmen had spent the past several days putting the place back to order after the fire, and he would not even notice that the house his grandfather had built in 1940 had suffered any sort of mishap.

The sight of the limo parking under the side portico made his heart nearly leap from his chest. He jumped from the Jag and bounded to the limo just as Jose was opening the rear door, and he slipped past the man to see his wife—sleeping like a drained out kitten on the thick leather cushions.

"I'll take her up," he breathed raggedly, and Jose backed away, smiling broadly as his employer gently swept the woman from the seat into his arms. He whirled to carry her past a worried Maria into the house and straight to the service elevator.

As Jose closed the door and drew the small plastic bag from the trunk, he grinned at his wife and said wryly, "I think they will not be so interested in dinner, *mi amor*. And I am thinking that neither am I." He wrapped one arm around his tiny wife's shoulders and kissed her hard on the lips, much to her delight and shock. "The girls are staying with your sister, are they not?"

Maria blushed warmly and slapped at his chest. "You are being silly! We are too old for such silliness."

He dropped the plastic bag and swung his wife from her feet. She gave a squeal and he kissed her soundly before lifting his head. "Life is too short, and you are too beautiful for me to believe I am too old to indulge both of us when we have the chance."

Maria caught his face between her hands and smiled wickedly into his eyes. "Well, what are you waiting for? You think I have all day to wait for you to make love to me?"

With a growl, he laughed and carried her quickly up the outer stairs to the four-bedroom apartment above the garage, his mind on more pleasant things than putting the cars away. They would still be there in an hour—or two.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chris stretched and winced at the pain in her calf, which was much less bothersome now. The sedative had left her relaxed and sleepy. Jose must have carried her into her apartment and settled her onto her bed before leaving and locking up. She snuggled into the soft comforter and ran her palms over the fluffy pillows.

Scented with rose. Hmmm. She inhaled deeply—then opened her eyes with shock.

This wasn't the bed in her little apartment! This was the comforter and pillow from her bed in Antonio's home!

She sat up groggily and blinked down at her naked body. Oh, shit! Had Jose undressed her? No. Surely it would have been Maria—right?

She ruffled her tousled hair with both hands and decided she must be dreaming. This house had burned down. But there was the fireplace—and the huge painting—and—she nearly shrieked as a warm, masculine hand slid over her hip to rest in a very familiar manner on her belly, dragging her back down against the thick, heavenly comforter. *Who...?*

"I thought you would sleep all night, *mi querida*," his rough voice close above her made her jerk to stare up incredulously into his handsome face. "And I tried very hard not to awaken you and force myself on you."

She launched herself into his arms so fast, he fell over backward on the bed, and she was devouring him like a starving woman finding a succulent feast. He laughed appreciatively as she straddled his hips and pressed her sweet, hot wetness against his throbbing cock as her mouth opened and her tongue swept against his. She was incredible—delicious—stunningly delightful as she kissed his throat, his chest, and on downward to his tight stomach. When her mouth devoured his raging cock, he gave a cry of exultation and lifted his knees and arched upward.

He struggled to avoid coming instantly. He wanted to enjoy this all night. He groaned and whispered hoarsely, "Turn around, *mi amor*—give me your delectable ass." He dragged her body over himself, turning her to face his feet while he settled her astride his face so that he could taste and tease her sweet pussy while she devoured him.

Chris gasped aloud and realized what he meant to do, and after one shocked, indecisive moment, she relaxed and allowed him to suckle and lick her so deliciously while she cupped his tight sac with one hand and stroked his full, hard shaft. Her mouth drove down over his cock, her tongue swirling and sucking hard. *What they were doing felt sublimely wicked.*

His deep growl of intense enjoyment matched hers, and she wondered if too much pleasure could kill a person. Her orgasm was almost instantaneous, but he continued to lave and devour her as she nibbled, suckled, licked and swirled her mouth and tongue around his velvet

smooth, steel-hard shaft. She wanted to feel him buried deep in her body, but she would not deny him this moment.

She clutched his tight ass in both hands and took him as deep as she could and heard his cry of delight, just before he grabbed her and hauled her upright to straddle him. A moment later, he was deep inside her, sitting up at her back and caressing her breasts and clit as she bounced wildly on his lap, feeling his explosion just as she climaxed again with a scream of pleasure. The pain in her calf was barely noticeable as she came apart.

Tonio wanted more—more of her—more of the sheer pleasure she gave him. She had amazed him when she had gone down on him without being asked. And even now, buried to his root inside her sweet hot body, he wanted to go on and on. He nibbled the line of her shoulder, his fingertips delving gently into the copper curls that were drenched from his lovemaking. He touched where they were joined, and felt her arch back against him. He swore she was purring.

Her hands slid over his hard forearms, and she whispered shakily, "I missed you so much—I thought I had lost you forever."

"Not on your life, woman. You'll never be rid of me. No matter how hard you try," he growled as he kissed the nape of her neck beneath her tousled hair, and he licked her spine slowly. He wanted to taste every inch of her—touch every sweet place in her that cradled his still solid cock. He wanted to stay buried deep inside her forever. He felt his semen covering his hand as he teased and tantalized her to yet another climax in his arms, and he thrilled to the sound of her whimpers of delight.

When her sweet tight sheath clamped hard around him, he carefully rolled her over onto her belly on the bed and lifted her, stuffing several pillows under her ribs and belly to keep her weight off her injured leg as he centered himself, kneeling behind her. He didn't pull out. He drove hard and deep again and again, and she cried out as she reached back to grab his thighs, pulling him as close as she could as he rocked in and out so deliciously. His hands gently worshipped her breasts, then slid back to delve into her gold bush, seeking her eager clitoris again.

Chris wanted to feel every magnificent inch of him—wanted to hold him deep all night, but as she climaxed again, she realized that her body was too weary to accomplish such a feat, no matter how desperate she was to have him. He drove deep two more times, groaning as he came once more, and then they simply sank wearily to the comforter, unable to move.

He rolled away and dragged her body into the curve of his, and she shivered as she snuggled into his chest. There were so many things she wanted to say, yet she couldn't say a word. She pressed her lips to his sweat-sheathed skin and inhaled the musky scent of their lovemaking. He was here—and he wanted her. He had just proved that to her.

Tonio held her until they both calmed, and then he whispered softly against her hair, "Is your leg hurting?"

She shook her head jerkily. "Not much. In fact, I forgot it hurt until you just reminded me." Her voice was a warm breath against his skin.

"I endangered your life."

She reached up to press her fingertips over his mouth, stopping his words. "Luis and Roland Blake endangered my life—not you."

"I pulled you into this. If I had not asked you to do this, you would never have been shot—terrorized," he rasped against the tips of her fingers.

She shook her head slowly. "If you had not asked me to do this, I would never have found that being with you meant more to me than my own life."

Tonio pulled back to stare down into her tear-streaked face. "What—are you saying?"

She swallowed hard, fear nearly keeping her from blurting out what she felt—fear that he would turn away in disgust if she admitted to him how she felt. The dark question in his gaze left her feeling oddly weak and hot.

She had to tell him, even if he walked away and she never saw him again. After nearly losing him, she couldn't bear to not say it.

"I know you don't want to hear this," she whispered shakily. "And I genuinely never meant to fall in love with you ... but I couldn't help it."

Her eyes slid down his bare chest to the ridges of his taut abs. She felt the shudder go through him and winced as she realized that he found her statement repulsive. He had wanted to make certain she didn't get too deeply involved in his life, and she had failed him.

"I'm so sorry, Antonio—but I needed this one last time. I promise I won't try to keep you with me after the two years are up. And it's sort of redundant, living together, now that your cousin can no longer inherit the estate. So I will just go back to my apartment, and you don't have to worry."

He stared down at her. She knew he was shocked—possibly appalled by what she had told him. She sighed and tried to disengage herself from his loose embrace. "Please let me go. I know this is a shock to you. I'll sleep in one of the guest rooms and leave in the morning." Her voice was tight with pain.

Tonio came to his senses slowly, hardly able to believe what he had just heard. He had known that she loved his lovemaking—that she was delightfully responsive in his arms, but he had never dared hope that she would learn to love him—not after the pain and disappointment of her first marriage.

The realization hit him in the gut like a fist. She was sliding out of his arms—out of his bed. He shook his thoughts back to sanity and dragged her back into his embrace with a growl of determination.

"You think you can just say something like that to me and then walk away?" He rolled her under him, pressing her down into the comforter.

"I'm sorry! I shouldn't have said anything!" she sobbed, shoving at his chest.

"Then perhaps I should exact punishment for such outspokenness, eh, *mi amor*?" he growled, his mouth sliding over the curve of her throat as he cupped her rounded ass in both hands and eased his cock slowly back into her tight, succulently wet pussy. Her response was swift and heated, and he laughed exultantly as he drove himself deep into her sweetness. "Perhaps I should keep you a prisoner in my bed until you beg me to keep you after the twenty-four months have passed."

Chris arched into his deep, earth-shattering thrusts, and her nails dug into his back as he caught her mouth and kissed her passionately until she was breathless with need and aching to give him anything he wanted. She could deny him nothing. How he could manage to make love to her again, after falling into a weary heap such a short time ago, amazed her.

"Antonio—did you hear me?" she gasped. "You didn't want a woman who would fall in love with you! You said..." Her body ignited, bursting into a million sparkles of orgasmic delight, cutting off her frenzied warning. And her head spun with the pleasure as he continued his marvelous assault on her body until he joined her in shared bliss once again.

Tonio lifted his head and held her glazed stare. "I heard, *mi querida*, but if you think to frighten me away by saying that you love me, you can forget it. It was too late for me the moment you gave me that completely decadent massage. I was lost the moment you wrapped those delicious thighs around me and made me nearly lose my mind with need."

Chris blinked at him as if she hadn't heard right. "You *mean*—you can tolerate me loving you as long as we have great sex?"

His dark eyes glowed wickedly. "I *mean*—I tried very hard not to fall in love with my little lesbian wife, but that battle was lost the night you made such innocently sweet love to me when you still thought me a gay man. You were completely adorable—breathtaking, and it took every ounce of strength I possessed not to take your virginity that night."

She swallowed hard. "*You*—fell in—love with *me*?" Her mind fought to grasp his words. And then she smiled up at him. "But I fell in love with you first."

"Do you want to argue? Or do you want to shut up and let me make love to you again?" His mouth moved possessively over her shoulder, down to nibble and suckle her tight nipple.

Arching luxuriantly against his mouth, Chris reached to stroke his wet, semi-solid shaft back to life. "You admit that I fell in love with you first?" she whispered raggedly, guiding him toward her slick, hot pussy.

His voice was a hoarse rasp as he pulled her thighs about his hips and drove deep into her once again. "*Dios!* Yes! I would admit to anything to have you once more."

Epilogue

"If not for you, I would never have managed to finally snare my wild little hellcat." Manuel Guerra laughed down into Chris' green eyes. "For that, I thank you." He bent and kissed her cheek gently.

Manuel clasped hands with Tonio and grinned. "And thank *you*, my friend."

Tonio pulled his wife into his arms possessively and watched the man slide into the waiting limo that would whisk his sister and her new husband to the airport for their honeymoon in Barbados.

He leaned close to her ear and whispered huskily, "And now that we are alone again, what do you think we can possibly do to escape the utter boredom of not having Adriana underfoot?"

She leaned back into his hard chest and sighed softly. "I can think of many things, but we are due in court in two weeks, and that doesn't leave us *nearly* enough time to enjoy ourselves before we have to go testify against your cousin."

Tonio nuzzled her nape and planted a hot kiss on the side of her neck, making her shudder with reaction. "Perhaps we could just indulge in a little gay/lesbian sex? We can simply drop our drawers and play awhile."

She reached behind her to caress his swollen cock beneath his slacks. He groaned and pressed his body harder into her hand. "It *is* less messy," she conceded, closing her eyes as his hands slid down her belly to caress the front of her jeans.

"But then, we *do* have to change clothes for court anyway," he breathed as he drew her into the house and turned toward the stairs.

"And of course, we still have to shower," she kissed his chin.

"Ah. In that case, why not just get naked and very messy?" He swung her into his arms and carried her up the stairs to the third landing, then down the hall to their bedroom.

"You have the most marvelous ideas," she whispered as she pulled his head down and kissed him senseless.

The End

About the Author

I started writing horror and sci-fi stories at age eight (if you want to call a 25-page attempt a book!) At age fourteen, I became aware that Romance was the breath of life—lovely, subtle and delicious. So I began to write in earnest, putting each book or short story away carefully—hoping that someday I would find my books on the best-seller lists, along with Barbara Cartland and E. M. Hull. But life has a way of setting back dreams and plans, and for many years, I found myself engulfed in living life. School—marriage—three beautiful kids—and a career helping people in a job I loved.

But I never gave up on my books, and I decided that it was finally time to toss my hat over the windmill! What was there to lose? I looked through my collected works and spruced one up for the 21st Century, and I somehow found the courage to try. I swallowed my insecurity and fear. I found a great publisher, submitted my novel—and—here I go!

Just goes to show that you should never give up on your dreams! Sometimes the Magic truly works!

You can find Fran Lee on the web at: www.franleeromance.com

Fran loves to hear from readers. You can contact her by e-mail at: fran.lee.romance@gmail.com

Also available from Resplendence Publishing

***Beauty and the Beast: A Ladies of Legend Novella* by Janet Eaves**

Special Agent Polly Chapman has multiple identities ... She is known to many as a savior. To others she is a killing machine. But all who know her, or think they know her, believe her untouchable.

Until she's injured.

Now the man sent to piece her back together when "The Agency" considers her broken has only two choices—Catcher Stevens must fix her, or kill her.

***Harvest Moon: A Ladies of Legend Novella* by Janet Eaves**

After her sadistic husband is dead, Winifred Butler believes herself finally free of his horror. But he continues to torment her from the grave as his secrets and lies, treason and terror, bring Agent Tom Green to her door. She is as determined to keep her past a secret as Tom is committed to bringing her secrets to light. Only one of them can win. So both must fight the attraction to the other, knowing they have everything to lose...

***Murder on the Mountain: A Ladies of Legend Novel* by Maddie James**

In the two long years since her Tennessee state trooper husband's murder, Kate Carpenter thinks she's coped with his death, although everyone in Legend, Tennessee tells her she hasn't. She can't see what the problem is, really. She has her parents, and her best friend Patti Jo, and her students. What else could a twenty-nine year old woman want?

A man, Patti Jo keeps telling her.

Sent to Kate's classroom on an investigation, ATF Special Agent Mike Lehmann uses his drug prevention training as his cover. His mission? To find out what Kate knows about her husband's "death." Recent reports indicate he is alive and that he faked his death because of his involvement in a drug-running operation. Mike's task is to expose Carpenter, and if she's involved, Kate.

And he'll stop at nothing to get the answers he seeks.

Handcuffs and Lace

Resplendence Publishing's Erotic Romance Line of Law Enforcement Themed Stories

***Ticket Me More* by Tia Fanning**

Hailed by the bridal flower world as an artistic genius, Meli works long nights making bouquets for women lucky enough to find love, while she herself lives a life of solitude. She yearns to share her heart and body with someone other than Bob, her Battery Operated Boyfriend, but acute shyness keeps her from engaging the “living” world.

However, Meli's quiet and predictable existence takes an unexpected turn when she is pulled over and ticketed by the most gorgeous cop she has ever encountered—Officer Michael Johnson. Though he does not seem to notice her as anything more than a traffic violation, Meli makes plans to overcome her timid nature and seize the police officer's attention ... using any speed necessary.

***Cuff Me Lacy* by Demi Alex**

Three months is way too long to wait for some simple, low-down, straight forward sex. It's not like Officer Chrissie Hansen is asking for prince charming to offer her the love of a lifetime. All she wants is a good orgasm that she doesn't have to work for alone.

At least with “The Bull”, she knows what to expect. But when Patrick MacClick returns to her life and tempts her with new options, she discovers that lace can imprison a heart better than handcuffs can.

***Search Me Baby, One More Time* by Melinda Barron**

Wren Thornberry's life isn't going according to plan. She let her father talk her out of marrying Bryan Stockard, the man she loves, and moved halfway around the world. Now she's back home in Texas, babysitting her grandmother while grandma and her boy-toy work through their list of sexual exploits, making themselves the talk of the town.

But what Wren doesn't know is that things in her hometown are about to heat up even more, and it will have nothing to do with her grandmother. It seems that Bryan Stockard is still around, he wants to get back into Wren's life—by any means necessary, and now he has just the tools to do it: A police uniform, handcuffs, and the authority to make Wren ... *assume the position*.

***What the Cuff?* by Celia Kyle**

God really should have reconsidered making werewolves. That, or Lyssa needed to get better taste in men and stay away from those with wandering eyes ... and other things. Drunk as a wolf, she stumbles to her best friend's house to sleep off her whiskey induced haze and wakes to ... cuffs?

Caleb sees his chance and takes it. His buddies on the force ribbed him but good for buying silver plated cuffs. But with a werewolf in his bed, the woman he's yearned for since they were teens, he wasn't taking any chances. Lyssa was his. She just didn't know it yet.

***Going Commando* by Catherine Chernow**

Bounty hunter Shyra Lawrence listens to her favorite radio station one morning—where the DJ's are discussing 'going commando'—a.k.a, wearing no undies. She's captivated by their conversation, and decides to shed her panties in favor of 'going commando' and the freedom that wearing no underwear brings. Enthusiastic Shyra sends an email to her best friend, Donna, detailing the delights of panty-freedom, but unbeknownst to Shyra, she's hit the 'send' key ... to the wrong email addy!

When Derek Grayson opens his emails that morning, he discovers that his #1 employee and top bounty hunter, Shyra Lawrence, has sent him an erotic, enticing message about 'going commando.' Derek has always been polite, professional, and so damned attracted to Shyra that it's almost painful! Working day in and day out with voluptuous Shyra has sent Derek's hormones into overdrive on more than one occasion.

Now, Shyra's shed her panties and Derek's got all he can do to contain his lust when she announces that she's... GOING COMMANDO

***Handcuffs and Lies* by Bronwyn Green**

Sometimes promises to friends are the hardest to keep. Undercover police officer, Michael Tanner, promised his dying partner that he'd take care of the man's little sister. Trouble is, after her brother's death, Doctor Tori Spinelli wants nothing to do with Michael-or any other cop for that matter.

Tori has always fought against overprotective men and deception. Forced into protective custody with Michael, she's now faced with both in the same package. Despite their differences, Tori falls in love with him, but how can she trust a man who lies for a living?

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